



Comments on the "In Adam/In Christ" Motifs

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A brief but careful study of the way the concept of being in Adam and in Christ is used in the Bible, and how it can be understood harmoniously with the other teachings of the Scriptures.

"In Adam"

A study of the way the 1888 Study Committee understands the phrase "in Adam" reveals that its meaning is far from clear. They seem to believe that the meaning of the phrase is so obvious that it is absolutely easy to grasp. In Christian theology the relationship between the sin of Adam and the sinful condition of his descendants has been explained in several different ways. One of them has been through the use of the phrase "in Adam." This is the way Augustin understood it. All of Adam's descendants were in him and when he sinned they also sinned with Adam. The sin of Adam was in a realistic form their own sin. At times that seems to be the way the 1888 Study Committee understands the phrase.

The first argument used to support that view is found in Gen 2:7. There we read that God "breathed into his [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life." The Hebrew term translated "life" is *chay*, but is used here in the plural, *chayyim*, "lives." From that fact it is concluded that when God created Adam he placed in him the lives of all his descendants. They were in some literal or real way in Adam. The problem with this particular argument is that the Hebrew word *chay*, "life," is practically always used in the Hebrew Bible in the plural in the sense of "life," not "lives." In other words, even though the noun is plural in form it is singular in meaning. It simply means "life," "lifetime," "lifespan." Let me give you a few examples. In Hebrew the name of the tree that was in the middle of the garden was the "tree of lives" (Gen 2:9). That does not mean that in it there were other trees, but simply that it was a tree that could preserve life. We also read about the days of the "lives of the serpent" (3:14). Does that mean that this serpent was infused with the life of all other serpents? Of course not. The "lives" of Jacob was 147 years (47:28). The word simply mean "life, lifespan;" it is a plural invariable noun. The reason Hebrew uses the plural "lives" when referring to "life" is probably because it is an abstract noun and there is a tendency in the Hebrew language to employ the plural form for abstract nouns. That type of noun does not designate a concrete object that one could get hold of with the hand, but a reality that manifests itself in a diversity of ways (children, adults, animals, birds).^[1] We find the same in the case of the Hebrew word for knowledge that is very often plural even though in use is singular (*de^cah*, sing.; *de^coth*, pl., 1 Sam 2:3; Job 36:4). Therefore, the use of the plural in Gen 2:7 carries no theological weight; it is simply a characteristic of the original language.

The second argument used to show that every human being was "in Adam" when he sinned is taken from Heb 7:9-10: "And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him." The argument is that when Abraham gave the tithe to Melchizedek, Levi was also giving him tithes because he was already present in Abraham. Of course this argument proves too much. It would mean that "all actions of all progenitors would have to be ascribed to each of their descendants, which is nearly absurd."^[2] Is that what Paul is saying?

If we look at the text carefully we would realize that Paul is not saying what some believe he is teaching. Notice how the text begins: "So to speak." The Greek phrase *hos epos eipein*, means "one might almost say" and was used in Greek literature to qualify a too absolute expression, to de-emphasize what was being said. Paul is recognizing that when Abraham gave the tithe Levi was not actually giving the tithe, but he uses the incident to illustrate a theological point. The solidarity between father and son was so strong in Hebrew thinking that Paul uses it in his argument. If Melchizedek is superior to Abraham, the father of Levi, then he is also superior to Levi, who was a descendent of Abraham, and had not yet been born. The phrase "be in/come out of the loins of Abraham" simply means "to be the son of" or "to have Abraham as one's ancestor" as shown in 7:5, where it is said concerning the rest of the Israelites, the brothers of Levi, that they "have come out of the loins of Abraham." Abraham represented his descendants and what he did had an impact on the theological understanding of the relationship between the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Melchizedek. It is improper to try to get out of the passage more than it says. Paul is very aware of the fact that this is an illustration, hence his hesitancy expressed in the phrase "so to speak." The hesitation may be due, in part at least, to the fact that, by analogous logic, Jesus could be said to have paid a tithe to Melchizedek.^[3] It is true that Jesus was divine, but as a human being he was also a descendant of David and ultimately of Abraham (Rom 9:5).

The idea that every human being was in Adam when he sinned is confusing and may lead to serious theological problems. In what sense was everybody in Adam? Obviously not in a physical sense because Adam was one single body. Once we rule out that possibility there are not many other options left. Our presence in Adam has, then, to be defined by the 1888 Study Committee as trans-physical. But in what sense was it trans-physical? They do not provide an answer to that question.

The realistic view of the phrase "in Adam" creates a serious theological problem for those who take biblical anthropology seriously. According to the Bible every person is an indivisible self-conscious unity of life. The concreteness and individuality of a human being makes it impossible for him or her to exist or be present in any form or shape in another human being. Biblical anthropology makes it impossible for persons to merge their personalities in a mystical way into each other. There is nothing in a person, inside the body, that pre-existed the bodily existence of that particular individual. To argue that I was in Adam before I came into existence in my present bodily form is to imply that I, or something of me, existed in Adam independent of my body and my present existence. This in principle is Greek anthropological dualism. The pre-existence of the soul is a pagan and not a biblical idea. The 1888 Study Committee has not clearly stated what they mean by their realistic understanding of the phrase "in Adam."

If what they mean is that the "seed" of our lives was in Adam, that is to say, that we are his descendants, then, they are closer to truth. But the problem is, that is not what they mean. The idea of the "seed" is not good enough for them because for them the phrase "in Adam" means that when he sinned we sinned in him and that his sin is my sin. I am responsible for the sin of Adam because it was my sin. The fundamental issue is the one of individual responsibility. Only *individuals who actually exist* are responsible for their own sins and in some cases for the sins of others. A seed is not a morally responsible agent; not even the "seed" of a human being. It appears to me that the meaning of the phrase "in Adam" in the thinking of the members of the 1888 Study Committee remains elusive.

To complicate things even more the 1888 Study Committee uses together with the previous view another different one in their attempt to explain the connection between the sin of Adam and the sin of humanity. This second approach, which is not unique to

them but somewhat common in the history of theology, is called the imputation of Adam's sin. According to this view, it was Adam who sinned but because of the solidarity between Adam and his descendants his sin was imputed to all of them. Because his sin was imputed to all of us we inherit corruption. Before anyone is conceived the transgression of Adam is charged against him or her and the person is condemned and sentenced to death. This is different from the realistic understanding of our presence in Adam. Yet, the 1888 Study Committee uses both understandings or views to explain our connection to the sin of Adam. They do not seem to be aware of the fact that the two views are mutually exclusive. If we were in Adam when he sinned, his sin is our sin, we sinned in him. Hence there is no need to impute it to us because it is actually our sin. They have to decide which theory they will promulgate. The imputation theory is foreign to the Bible. Romans 5:12-21 does not teach that Adam's sin was imputed to us. On the contrary the passage makes Adam responsible for his own sin; his descendants receive the fatal result of his transgression. Paul argues that way because of the biblical teaching of human solidarity, and not on the ground of imputation. Adam's descendants did not sin in the likeness of his sin.

"In Christ"

Concerning the use of the phrase "in Christ," its understanding is determined by those who promote the views of the 1888 Study Committee in terms of the meaning of the phrase "in Adam." Christ is the second Adam and consequently the sin of Adam is undone by the new Adam. Since the whole human race was in Adam when he sinned, now the whole human race was in Christ when he died on the cross. In Adam we were all made sinners; in Christ we were all, the totality of the human race, legally saved and justified. There are several problems with this view.

First, such understanding of the phrase "in Christ" is not biblical. This phrase is used many times in the NT and it always refers to the strong union that exists between believers and Christ. It never describes the condition of unbelievers and much less of the whole world of sinners. Only those who through faith in Jesus have been incorporated into him are in Christ. A careful study of that phrase in the writings of Paul has concluded, "that 'in Christ' is to be understood more in terms of a marriage relationship than of a legal status arising from the decision of a law court, even God's court. It is an experiential reality referring to the most intimate union possible between the risen Christ and the believer. Because the believer is united with the living Lord through the indwelling of His Spirit, he or she is made a part of the saving events of Christ's death and resurrection and included in the body of Christ, the Church. As a result, the believer personally receives all the blessings of salvation that flow from Christ and exist in the fellowship of believers."^[4]

Second, not everybody was at the same time in Christ at the cross, as that theory teaches. Paul wrote, "Greet Andronicus and Junias . . . they were in Christ before I was" (Rom 16:7). In order to be in Christ we have to make a personal decision. In fact the phrase "in Christ" is often used as an equivalent to the noun "Christian" (1 Cor 3:1). It is clear that Paul did not know anything about a legal universal justification according to which every human being was simultaneously present in Christ at the moment he died on the cross.

Third, and more important, if we were in Christ when he died for our sins, paying the penalty for our sins, then we died in him. He did not die for me! I actually died on the cross for my own sins! I was not saved through Jesus; I saved myself through Jesus! Since I was in Jesus, he was not my substitute, my sin was not transferred to him. I took my own sin to the cross in Jesus! Of course that is not what they mean, but that is what they are actually saying. If I was in Adam when he sinned and if his sin is in fact my sin by virtue of the fact that I was in him, then I have to conclude that since I was also in Christ when he was saving me I saved myself through him.

It is clear that a misunderstanding of the phrases "in Adam/in Christ" has created some very serious theological problems for the 1888 Study Committee. To claim that we have misunderstood them is not enough. It appears to me that the problem is not that we have misunderstood them but that they are not clear in their own thinking concerning the meaning of those two phrases. They infused them with ideas that are not biblical and the result has been confusion. It is necessary to return to the biblical understanding of those important expressions in order to avoid potential heresies. If that is done the concept of a universal legal justification would be found to lack biblical support.

Note: Solidarity in the OT

It is unquestionable that social solidarity is strongly present in the Bible. In Western culture the emphasis is placed on the value of the individual and consequently it is a very individualistic culture. In the OT the individual and his or her value is fully acknowledged but the role of the group in determining the identity of the individual is stressed. Again, this is not necessarily foreign to our culture as indicated by the emphasis put today on nationalism. Yet, that solidarity is more intense in the Bible.

However, biblical solidarity is not based on the idea that Hebrew psychology is fundamentally different from Western psychology. Liberal scholars used to argue that the Hebrew mind was unable clearly to distinguish between the individual and the group. It was often taught that the distinction between the individual and the group was in the Hebrew mentality very fluid, moving perhaps imperceptibly from the individual to the group and from the group to the individual. The group, it was said, was present in some psychological or realistic way in the individual to the extent that what the individual did was done by the group. This is an extreme understanding of Hebrew solidarity. It is true that in certain occasions in the Bible the action of an individual affected the totality of the group (e.g., the sin of the high priest). But the reason was not that the group, each one of his members, was "in" the leader. He represented them and his actions had an impact on them.

A reading of the OT reveals that the strong bond of solidarity present in the Israelite society was based on several important factors that they as a people had in common. First, they had a common God, their Creator and Redeemer who entered into a covenant relationship with all of them. Second, they had a common religious experience and system of worship. They were redeemed from Egypt and gratefully acknowledged that act of divine love by setting up—following God's instructions—a common system of worship to their God. Thirdly, they had a common human ancestor. Their existence as a conglomerate of tribes and later as a nation was a fulfillment of the promises that God made to Abraham to make out of him a great nation (Gen 12:1-3). They were the descendants of one father, the patriarch Abraham. Fourth, they had a common future. To them God promised the land of Israel and beyond that the role of a priestly nation among the nations of the earth. All the nations of the earth will finally come and worship with them the only true God. This was going to happen through the priestly, sacrificial, and kingly work of the coming Messiah.

Those common elements provided the social and religious ground for the OT concept of social and religious solidarity. We do not need to postulate a strange understanding of the psychology of the Hebrew mind according to which it was at times unable to distinguish between the individual and the group. Any mystical understanding of the presence of a group, a group that did not yet exist, in the person of an ancestor, and that participated in the actions of the ancestor, is not only absent from the Bible but it is also a rejection of the biblical understanding of human nature and brings us dangerously closely to pagan dualism.

[1]. See, Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbraun, 1990), p. 120: "An abstract noun is frequently expressed by a plural, which may have originally signified the diverse manifestations of a quality or state".

[2]. Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 115.

[3]. Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1989), p. 197.

[4]. Ivan T. Blazen, *A Call to Ministry: Receiving the Stamp of the Cross* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1998), p. 67.



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Date:

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