

“Marie Noonan Sabin has written a book that fills a gap in Teilhard Studies, that is, the place of Scripture in his evolutionary paradigm. By bringing together Teilhard’s emergence of the ultrahuman and wisdom literature she draws out, in a beautiful and deep way, the consonance between Teilhard’s Christic vision and the scriptural vision of human becoming. Contrary to some of his critics, Sabin affirms that Teilhard’s insights were deeply biblical and Christian. I highly recommend this book for those interested in a biblical exegesis of Teilhard’s incarnational vision.”

—Ilia Delio, OSF
Josephine C. Connelly Endowed Chair in Theology
Villanova University

“Marie Sabin insightfully employs aspects of Teilhard’s concept of developing human consciousness to interpret biblical texts. She does not claim that ‘Teilhardian’ themes lie nascent with the texts themselves, but that Teilhard’s interpretive lenses open up a ‘surplus of meaning.’ For example, the notion of an evolving creation throws light on the mystery of human suffering in Job; the idea of unifying consciousness enhances the New Testament understanding of human divinization. His way of reading opens the Bible in intriguing ways.”

—Dianne Bergant, CSA
Professor Emerita of Old Testament Studies
Catholic Theological Union

Evolving Humanity and Biblical Wisdom

*Reading Scripture through the Lens
of Teilhard de Chardin*

Marie Noonan Sabin



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Introduction

Is Humanity Still Evolving?

In April 2017 the cover of the *National Geographic* showed a series of faces from ape to human to something not yet seen; it was titled “The Next Human.” Inside, in an article titled “Beyond Human,” D. T. Max states matter-of-factly:

Until recently it was thought that our species had stopped evolving far in the past. Our ability to peer inside the human genome has shown that in fact our biology continues to change to suit particular environments. (45)

In particular, he quotes the work of Ray Kurzweil in *The Singularity Is Near* (New York: Viking Press, 2005): “We will transcend all of the limitations of our biology. That is what it means to be human—to extend who we are” (48). In the bulk of the article Max focuses on what human beings can do (and have already done) to use technology to extend human capabilities. He discusses machines that compensate for human defects and genetic engineering that can alter animals and insects so that they can no longer host the bacteria that cause human disease. He speculates about the future possibilities of customizing an embryo. In doing so, he notes the ethical dilemma it raises, citing the questions of bioethicist Linda MacDonald Glenn: “What becomes the new norm as we try to improve ourselves? . . . You might enhance people to make them smarter, but does smarter equal better or happier?” (59).

Teilhard de Chardin would have found this discussion unsurprising. Sixty years ago he was arguing that “when observed through a sufficient depth of time (millions of years) Life can be seen to move. Not only does it move but it advances in a definite direction. In any period of ten million years Life practically grows a new skin.”¹

This “new skin” Teilhard names as “the *cerebralization* of living creatures.” He points out:

Research shows that from the lowest to the highest level of the organic world there is a persistent and clearly defined thrust of animal forms towards species with more sensitive and elaborate nervous systems. . . . There is an amphibian phase of the brain, a reptile phase, a mammal phase. . . . What else can this mean except that, as shown by the nervous systems, there is an emotional heightening, a rising tide of consciousness.²

Teilhard then asks where humanity—as a species—is to be located in respect to this general evolution in consciousness. His response:

If, as I maintain, the movement of the cosmos towards the highest degree of consciousness is not an optical illusion, but represents the essence of biological evolution, then, in the curve traced by [biological] Life, Humankind is unquestionably situated at the topmost point. . . . Does not the birth of Thought stand out as a critical point through which all striving of previous ages passes and is consummated—the critical point . . . when, by force of concentration, it ends by reflecting upon itself?³

1. *The Future of Man*, trans. Norman Denney (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 64–65.

2. *Future of Man*, 65.

3. *Future of Man*, 67.

Teilhard sums up the implications of his observations as follows:

Progress = growth of consciousness

Growth of consciousness = effect of organization⁴

Distinguishing between an individual human being and collective humanity, Teilhard finds no perceptible progress in the first but unmistakable advances in the second, all of them manifest in terms of greater and greater organization:

Economic concentration, manifest in the unification of the earth's energies.

Intellectual concentration, manifest in the unification of knowledge in a coherent system (science).

Social concentration, manifest in a unification of the human mass as a thinking whole.⁵

One can only imagine how Teilhard would feel proven right by how we are moving today: towards a global economy, global concern for the climate, global exchanges of knowledge, and a global system of communication. Yet he also felt in 1941 that humanity was at a critical crossroads. Confronted by the horrors of World War II, he asked, "Have we not reached a dead-end? Can we talk seriously of a future for Humankind?"⁶ If he asked that question then, how much more might he ask it now?

Even so, I am sure that now, as then, he would answer in a positive way. He would do so, first, on the basis of recent advances in human thought, in particular the growing human acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of all things: Human well-being with the well-being of plants and animals and the Earth as a

4. *Future of Man*, 69.

5. *Future of Man*.

6. *Future of Man*, 70.

whole, and, most of all, the well-being of one group of human beings with all the others on the planet. Teilhard died before the development of the internet. He would surely have seen it as a confirmation of his vision of the development of the collective human brain and the global convergence of human thought.

His enthusiasm for every aspect of human development made him a humanist in the full sense of the word. And that robust humanism affected his deep religious faith, causing him to perceive an essential unity between science and religion in a period when others saw only a divide. He summed up the key question of that divide as follows: “Are we to disdain the world and put it behind us, or live in it in order to master and perfect it?”⁷ For his own part, he envisioned and urged their merger:

Faith in God and faith in the World: these two springs of energy, each the source of a magnificent spiritual impulse, must certainly be capable of effectively uniting in such a way as to produce a resulting upward movement.⁸

Teilhard saw that if the religious believer accepted this idea of evolution, “there would follow a radical incorporation of terrestrial values in the most fundamental concepts of his Faith.” The most significant of these concepts would be that of charity:

The love of God expresses and crowns the basic affinity which, from the beginning of Time and Space, has drawn together and concentrated the “spiritualizable” elements of the Universe. To love God and our neighbor is not merely an act of worship and compassion superimposed on other individual preoccupations. For the Christian, if he be truly Christian, it is Life itself.⁹

7. *Future of Man*, 77.

8. *Future of Man*.

9. *Future of Man*, 79.

It is the conjunction of Science's idea of biological growth in spiritual energy with Religion's idea of spiritual growth in spiritual energy that formed Teilhard's vision:

The sense of the earth opening and exploding upwards into God, and the sense of God taking root and finding nourishment downwards into Earth. A personal, transcendent God and an evolving Universe no longer forming two hostile centers of attraction, but entering into hierarchic conjunction to raise the human mass on a single tide.¹⁰

Teilhard speaks specifically out of his own Christian faith. For him, Christ represented the supreme breakthrough and model of human evolution. But he did not exclude others from arriving at this "higher level of consciousness":

Whether Christian or non-Christian, the people inspired by this particular conviction [that is, of the spiritual evolution of humanity toward oneness], constitute a homogenous category. Though they may be situated at two extreme wings of Humankind on earth [that is, Science and Religion], they can advance unequivocally side by side because their attitudes, far from being mutually exclusive, are virtually an extension one of the other and ask only to be completed.¹¹

The Biblical Roots of Teilhard's Vision

Although Teilhard does not take the Bible as his starting point, his perspective nonetheless contains a mystical vision rooted in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. I would like to take note of

10. *Future of Man*, 80.

11. *Future of Man*. Thomas Merton praised Teilhard for the "effort to reconvert the scientific view of the cosmos into a wisdom." See Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 147n75.

some of the scriptural passages behind it—especially his mystical work, *The Divine Milieu*.

Among those of first importance is Jacob's dream. After Jacob had received his father's blessing and journeys to find a wife, he rests for the night. Then "he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." What happens next is what catches Teilhard's attention:

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" (Gen 28:16-17)

Teilhard interprets this passage to mean that the material world in which we live is sacred. Matter is holy. The world of matter is "the house of God" and "the gate of heaven." It is "the divine milieu":

As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world, which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place, and we did not know it.¹²

For Teilhard, Jacob's insight is basic to being fully human; we need to perceive that "God reveals himself everywhere."¹³ For Teilhard, this way of seeing is not reserved for special moments of grace, or restricted to special places, persons, actions, or prayers. It is simply the way human beings are meant to understand everything in their lives. Teilhard speaks of this as "divinization"—that is, a way of perceiving, and making, all things human to be holy.

12. *The Divine Milieu*, trans. William Collins (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 83–84.

13. *Divine Milieu*, 85.

He believed that “transfiguration” is how every human person is meant to grow towards God. He sees the transformation or transfiguration of matter into spirit, or the human into the divine, or the natural into the supernatural, as the end point or omega of human evolution. Human endeavors, human interests, human loves, and even human losses are to be embraced wholeheartedly because they are the way to God. Ultimately, God will transform—transfigure—every aspect of our humanity into divine Being. Teilhard sees the common contrast between spirit and matter or soul and body as a “crude illusion.” He speaks instead of “holy matter” and advises that that it not be regarded as a “burden” to be shunned but instead prized as a means of growth. Created things, he says, are not obstacles to the divine but “footholds” by which we ascend to God.¹⁴

Central to Teilhard’s understanding of this process of human transformation is the reality of divine being manifest in the human Christ. “Let us examine step by step,” he says, “how we can validate to ourselves this prodigious identification of the Son of Man and the divine milieu.”¹⁵ It is worth noting that he uses “Son of Man” not as a title signifying divinity but as a term emphasizing Christ’s humanity.¹⁶ It is the coexistence of divinity and humanity that seizes him: it is a “prodigious identification.” Accepting its reality in Christ means, for Teilhard, accepting its possibility for everyone:

Under what form, and with what end in view, has the Creator given us, and still preserves in us, the gift of participated being? Under the form of an essential aspiration towards him—and with a view to the unhopèd-for cleaving which is to make us one and the same complex thing with

14. *Divine Milieu*, 75–77.

15. *Divine Milieu*, 94.

16. Because I believe that when the evangelists use the term, they, too, had its Hebrew meaning in mind—that is, “son of Adam” or “human being”—I have purposefully *not* capitalized the phrase throughout this book.

him. The action by which God maintains us in the field of his presence is *a unitive transformation*.¹⁷

In support of this perspective, Teilhard calls on Paul and John:

What is the supreme and complex reality for which the divine operation molds us? It is revealed to us by St. Paul and St. John. It is the quantitative repletion and the qualitative consummation of all things: it is the mysterious Pleroma [the Fullness], in which the substantial one, and the created many, fuse without confusion in a whole which, without adding anything essential to God, will nevertheless be a sort of triumph and generalization of being.¹⁸

The reference to the “Pleroma” suggests that Teilhard was thinking of the Pauline Letter to the Colossians and the Prologue of John’s gospel. From Colossians, he must have had in mind the passage that speaks of Christ as “the image of the invisible God” and continues, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:15, 19). From John, the allusion is to the end of the Prologue: “From his fullness we have all received, grace from grace” (John 1:16). The idea of Christ as the *fullness* of Creation blended in Teilhard’s mind with his scientific understanding of how the universe is expanding, and humanity is evolving, towards fullness of Being.

Teilhard saw the fullness of Christ as the omega point of evolution, and each person as a cocreator in this evolutionary process. He believed that each person

must build—starting with the natural territory of his own self—a work, an opus, into which something enters from all the elements of the earth. He makes his own soul throughout all his earthly days; and at the same time he collaborates in another work, another opus which infinitely transcends, while at the same time it narrowly determines, the perspec-

17. *Divine Milieu*, 94–95.

18. *Divine Milieu*, 95.

tives of his individual achievement: the completing of the world. . . . Through our efforts to put spiritual form into our own lives, the world slowly accumulates, starting with the whole of matter, that which will make of it the Heavenly Jerusalem or the New Earth.¹⁹

Teilhard sees human beings completing not only the first creation but also what he deems the second creation, the incarnation of Christ—which, for him, represents the full integration of matter with spirit, humanity with divinity. He says, “With each one of our *works*, we labor—in individual separation, but no less really—to build the Pleroma, that is to say, we bring to Christ a little fulfillment.”²⁰

“Bringing Christ to fulfillment” means, for Teilhard, a two-way process: it involves both the divinization of the human and humanization of the divine. It is his firm insistence on the union of these two dimensions that distinguishes Teilhard’s spirituality from more conventional forms. He does not advocate either renouncing the world or staying apart from it. He sees involvement in the world, in matter, in human things, as part of the work of God. Teilhard sees all things human as part of the evolutionary process that leads to God through God’s power of transformation.

For Teilhard what matters is the capacity to see the divine in the human, just as the disciples did in the moment of Christ’s transfiguration. He believes that the perception of God’s presence in every person is what will make universal charity possible in the world, and that state of universal charity is the omega of evolution:

The only subject ultimately capable of mystical transfiguration is the whole group of mankind forming a single body and a single soul in charity.²¹

19. *Divine Milieu*, 24.

20. *Divine Milieu*, 26.

21. *Divine Milieu*, 121.

It is this universal love of others, based on the perception of the divine presence in them, that defines for Teilhard the meaning of Christ's "Second Coming."

Teilhard thinks that the attitude of "expectation"—that is, of hope—is "perhaps the supreme Christian function and the most distinctive characteristic of our religion."²² And he thinks this hope must be for humanity as a whole, not just one segment of it:

The Israelites were constantly expectant, and the first Christians, too. . . . The Messiah, who appeared for a moment in our midst, only allowed himself to be seen and touched for a moment before vanishing once again, more luminous and ineffable than ever, into the depths of the future. He came. Yet now we must expect him—no longer a small chosen group among us, but all men—once again, and more than ever.²³

These are some of the key passages that reveal the scriptural roots of Teilhard's perspective. From the Old Testament, Teilhard refers directly to Jacob and Job and seems to have Isaiah in the back of his mind. From the New Testament, he quotes frequently from Paul and sometimes from John, and he alludes broadly to the other gospels. Central to his thought is the transfiguration of Christ, which he sees as predictive for all humanity. He understands both the cross and Christ's "second coming" in the light of the transfiguration. His ultimate emphasis is on the need for a different way of seeing: a way of seeing human achievement, human suffering, and human expectation; a way of mystical insight that he finds in Scripture and melds with the science of evolution. Teilhard closes the gap between science and religion because, in his view, each points to one and the same ending.

22. *Divine Milieu*, 130.

23. *Divine Milieu*.

The Aim of This Book

As one focused on a way of seeing, Teilhard is essentially concerned with human wisdom. In the chapters that follow, I select biblical passages connected with wisdom and undertake to read them through Teilhard's evolutionary lens. I have found new meaning in them by going back to them in the light of his view of spiritual evolution. That is hardly surprising. Every generation brings its current cosmology to its religious understanding and, as cosmology has changed so has scriptural interpretation. Shifts in science have helped keep the biblical word a living word.

I begin with Job, considering not only his question—"Where shall Wisdom be found?"—but also the existential angst that prompted it: If God is just and Job is innocent, why should Job suffer? I argue that the wisdom the work has to offer is linked both to the nature of an evolving creation and to an evolving idea of God. In another chapter I try to show how some early texts, dated just before and after the first century, fostered the idea of human beings breaking through the conventional limits of humanity to share in the life of divinity. They do not, of course, speak of this as "evolution," but the idea is implicit. The following chapter deals with the sanctification of God's Word and the personification of divine Wisdom in Judaism. Here again I find an evolutionary process at work: first, because God's Word is assigned mystical properties in Judaism; second, because Wisdom is imagined as a woman who cocreates with God; and third, because the characteristics of both this mystical Word and personified Wisdom are later embodied in the Christ envisioned in both the gospels and the Creed.

As a further exploration of how much the Christian tradition is imbued with Jewish, mystical notions of divine and embodied Wisdom, I consider how Christ is described as Wisdom and how Wisdom language provides a mystical dimension to each gospel: riddling proverb and parable in Mark, God's word "re-actualized" in Matthew, God's Wisdom as God's "Holy Spirit" in Luke, and

God's Wisdom (or Word) made flesh in the mystical speech of John. Last of all, I explore the extent to which the gospels summon their readers to evolve into a Word of God themselves—that is, to the mystical transformation of becoming, as it were, *flesh made Word*. In that connection, I look at the various ways the gospels are unfinished and create the expectation of something more to come.

In conclusion, I reflect on how these Scriptures reveal and support the idea of evolving humanity, but with an important twist. Reading the Scriptures through Teilhard's lens poses a new way of seeing the relationship between "the spirit" and "the world." In past ages, biblical expressions of sharing in divinity have been understood to mean withdrawal from the world; in Teilhard's perspective, they point, instead, towards wholehearted engagement. In particular, he fosters the kind of engagement that comes with empathy. Teilhard envisioned all humanity coming together in a unifying consciousness that he called "Christ-consciousness." He had a vision of a "re-born Christianity . . . capable of becoming the Religion of Evolution."²⁴ In that vision he saw all people coming together in a global, empathetic understanding and love.

24. *The Heart of Matter*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 99.

1

Job and the Evolution of God

**“All around us, and within our own selves,
God is in the process of ‘changing,’ as the result
of the coincidence of his magnetic power and our
own thought.”¹**

Among the many horrifying images of Elie Wiesel’s *Night* is the hanging of a young child in the Nazi camp. Forced to watch, one of the inmates cries out, “Where is merciful God? Where is He?” As the child lingers between life and death, the same man asks again, “For God’s sake, where is God?” And Wiesel hears a voice within him, saying, “Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows.”² The answer is both enigmatic and profound. The book of *Job* raises the same question and insinuates the same response.

The name *Job* has been variously interpreted to mean “enemy” or “Where [is] the father?” The sharp disparity between these two meanings is the result of different

1. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 53.

2. *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 64–65.

choices of Hebrew vowels that are not present in the ancient text and so have to be inserted by the reader. Readers who see Job's plight as evidence that God has attacked him as though he were an enemy, or who note that Job at times comes to think of God as an enemy, choose the first meaning. Those who choose the second perceive Job's central question to be an existential exploration of what it means to regard God as a father—the *Yahweh* that ancient Jewish prayers proclaim.

It is possible to see some justification for both. In fact, it might be argued that the deep texture of the work lies in its ambiguity, its allowance for shifting points of view. Multiple ways in which human beings have tended to conceptualize God are dramatized by the author, from the simplistic, folktale God of the opening, through the conventional and limited arguments of Job's comforters, to the complex and mysterious God of the ending. Through it all, Job's anguish and the questions that arise from it probe the viability of each stance. Is God an enemy to Job, or a caring father? Or does Job's perception of God evolve from one to the other?

Once dated early in the Hebrew canon, the book of Job is now assigned to postexilic times—sixth to fifth century BCE—when, as in post-Holocaust times, the question of God's presence became paramount. This dating is confirmed by the numerous parallels and allusions to the Psalms, in particular postexilic psalms of lament.

The very structure of the book of Job loosely follows the structure of a lament psalm, as outlined by Walter Brueggemann.³ In Brueggemann's analysis, the lament psalm often starts in one emotional place and ends in another: it moves from a state of dislocation to reorientation. So, for example, Psalm 22 begins with an expression of despair—"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"—yet ends on a note of praise and proclamation of God's saving power. Somewhere in the middle, there is a cry for help on the part of the psalmist and then a hiatus, a space that

3. *Praying the Psalms* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 8–11, 23–24.

allows for the action of grace. In the case of Psalm 22, the cry for help occurs in verses 19-21a:

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!

This cry for help also contains an implicit expression of faith that God *can* and *will* help. A hiatus follows; there is no narrative to bridge the gap between that cry and the next words of the psalmist. Abruptly we hear the psalmist saying, “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me” (21b). Grace has intervened. God appears present once more and the psalmist praises him (22-31).

In the same way, the book of Job begins with Job’s lament—one that, in this case, carries on for many chapters, with varying expressions of despair. Nonetheless, at the end of chapter 19, Job gives voice to a remarkable expression of faith:

For I know that my Vindicator lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another. (19:25-27)⁴

The Hebrew text of these verses is difficult and uncertain in places, but what comes through clearly is the speaker’s faith in a God who is ultimately just and whom Job will ultimately see. His faith in being able to see God is repeated three times, and this form

4. This follows the NRSV translation with the exception of “Vindicator.” The NRSV gives “Redeemer” as first choice and then (inexplicably) notes that “Vindicator” would be better. “Vindicator” is also the choice of *The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, with Michael Fishbane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

of faith is significant in a work that wrestles with the question of how God relates to human beings. This passage performs the same function as verses 19–21a in Psalm 22. What follows in the book of Job, however, is not an immediate hiatus but many more chapters of Job’s complaint and false solutions given by his so-called comforters. Finally, some nineteen chapters later, God does respond to Job’s act of faith and appears to him (chap. 38). At the very end of the work, Job acknowledges this direct experience: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (42:5).

This brief overview of the structure of the book of Job does not take into account the speeches of Elihu in chapters 32–37 (which many consider a later addition), the inconsistencies in Job’s varying expressions of trust and despair, or the significance of the prose frame for his story. But it is enough, I hope, to suggest that this long, complex, and unwieldy book does bear some structural relationship to the psalms of lament and contains, as they do, a drama of faith that starts in one place and ends in another.

The book of Job is also indebted to the Psalms for much of its content. The psalms of lament comprise one-third of the psalter, and the situation of undeserved misery and near despair in which Job finds himself has many parallels. Psalm 17, for example, contains the same plea for justice and vindication—“Hear a just cause, O LORD, . . . From you let my vindication come” (vv. 1–2)—and the same demand that God respond to the speaker:

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God (v. 6)

I shall behold your face in righteousness;
I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness. (v. 15)

Psalm 26, like both Psalm 17 and Job, insists on the innocence of the sufferer: “Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity” (v. 1).

Psalm 31 indicates that the speaker suffers the same kind of social alienation as Job:

My life is spent with sorrow . . .
I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
 a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances. (vv. 10-11)

Psalm 42 (vv. 3, 10) twice repeats the phrase “Where is your God?” In context, this question is part of the ridicule of the psalmist’s enemies. The echo here suggests that in Job’s case, as in that of the psalmist, God’s reputation is at stake in Job’s final outcome.

Occasionally, the psalmist—again like Job in certain places—accuses God of being the enemy. In Psalm 22 the speaker says to God, “You lay me in the dust of death” (v. 15), and in Psalm 102:

All day long my enemies taunt me . . .
For I eat ashes like bread,
 and mingle tears with my drink,
because of your indignation and anger;
 for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside. (vv. 8-10)

In many other psalms, God may not be exactly the enemy but is surely hiding his face. In Psalm 69:17, for example, the psalmist implores God, “Do not hide your face from your servant,” and in Psalm 143:7, he says, “Do not hide your face from me, or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.” Job’s insistence that he see God’s face thus takes its place among a long legacy of similar pleas.

In a number of lament psalms, the speaker takes comfort in thinking about God’s power in creation; by implication he is reassuring himself that the God who created everything has the power to save him. So, for example, the psalmist in Psalm 77 reflects:

You are the God who works wonders . . .
When the waters saw you, they were afraid . . .
The clouds poured out water . . .
The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind . . .
Your way was through the sea . . . (vv. 14-19)

And the speaker of Psalm 102 proclaims, “Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands” (v. 25). In the book of Job, it is God who, when he finally shows his face and speaks to Job (chap. 38), reminds him of God’s creative power. The passage functions like the ones in the psalms; it serves to remind Job that his situation is not hopeless because God is not helpless. God who tamed the Behemoth and Leviathan (chaps. 40 and 41) can also overcome the evil that Job suffers.

There are so many parallels between these psalms of lament and the speeches of Job, it is hard to know whether Job is intentionally quoting or alluding to them or is simply tapping into the psyche of a people covenanted to God, who are bewildered to find themselves defeated by an enemy and exiled from their home. But in a couple of instances, it is clear that Job is deliberately parodying a psalm that expresses trust in God’s goodness. The first of these occurs in chapter 7, where Job twists the tenor and meaning of Psalm 8. Psalm 8 is full of wonder and praise for God’s concern for human beings:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor. (vv. 3-5)⁵

Job turns that into sarcasm:

What are human beings, that you make much of them,
that you set your mind on them? . . .
Will you not look away from me for a while,
let me alone until I swallow my spittle?
If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? (7:17-20)

5. The phrase now translated “human beings” and “mortals” is *ben ’adam* in Hebrew, which means “son of Adam”—that is, “son of man” or human being. I prefer this translation because I think it lies behind Christ’s self-reference as “son of man.”

Three chapters later, Job plays with the same theme of God's closeness to human beings. In Psalm 139 the speaker expresses gratitude for God's intimate involvement in his life:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up . . .
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works. (vv. 1-2; 13b-14)

Job in his despair, however, sees God in almost opposite terms:

Your hands fashioned and made me;
and now you turn and destroy me.
Remember that you fashioned me like clay;
and will you turn me to dust again? (10:8-9)

Both Job and the Psalms are difficult to date, but the parallels and parodies make it reasonable to suppose that the book of Job came after a number of the psalms and that the author consciously drew on them to express the feelings of one who suffers evil in spite of his own faithfulness to God and to goodness. As in the psalms, Job's lament is expressed in the first person but could well represent the exiled Israelite community trying to understand how God could have allowed it to suffer so much loss.

To the extent that Job's pain may be seen as paradigmatic of Israel's history, it is not surprising to find parallels as well between Job and both Jeremiah and Isaiah. Job's cursing of the day he was born, for example, is similar to that of Jeremiah. In chapter 3, Job laments his birth: "Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived'" (3:3). In similar terms, Jeremiah cries out: "Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, 'A child is born to you, a son'" (20:14-15). Job and Jeremiah also both complain about violence being done against them. Job protests to God, "Even when I cry out 'Violence!' I am not answered" (19:7a).

In different language but with similar emotion, Jeremiah says, “For I hear the many whispering: ‘Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!’” (20:10). In terms of his general or paradigmatic situation, Job is not unlike Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, the righteous man whose marred appearance causes him to be “despised and rejected by others” (Isa 53:3) but whose suffering is undeserved. Both the Servant and Job speak about being spit upon (Isa 50:6b; Job 30:10). Yet Isaiah’s Servant never complains about his fate, while Job protests his innocence again and again.

In fact, it is Job’s refusal to accept his situation that constitutes the meat of the book and the essence of his faith. Job faces head-on the conventional pieties about human suffering (conventional as much now as then): if God is both all-powerful and all-good, then human beings who suffer must deserve it. The inverse of the argument is that if the innocent suffer, then God is either not all-powerful or not all-good. Job, however, refuses to accept the seeming logic of this syllogism. He insists that, contradictory as it may seem, all three things are true: God is good, God is in charge, and Job is innocent. He does not try to explain how this can be; in fact, much of his lament is asking why. Yet he never wavers in his faith in a caring God. Most remarkable of all, he believes that he will see God’s face and that God will speak to him. This idea of God is not shared by the other figures in the narrative who, in various ways, suggest that God is distant from human beings and far too remote to talk with them.

If one focuses solely on the contentions of Job’s would-be comforters, the book of Job presents a seemingly endless repetition of dreary insistence that everyone deserves what he or she gets. But if one considers the larger narrative, one sees that when God finally does appear and speaks to Job, then Job’s idea of God is vindicated, just as Job predicted. When God appears, he says to Eliphaz: “My wrath is kindled against you and your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7). So, first appearances to the contrary, the book of Job, like the lament psalm, does contain a dramatic movement and an intervention of grace.

It is the elements of that drama I would like to consider next, for it seems to me they represent a shift—even an evolution—in human understanding of God. In particular, I would argue that the work as a whole, through its many and varying arguments about God, moves from seeing God as distant from human beings to knowing God as close and intimately involved in human life.

The prose opening imagines God as emotionally detached from human life. God may boast of Job's faithfulness but is so distanced from Job's well-being that God is willing to place a wager on Job's happiness. The arguments of Job's friends also stress God's remoteness from human feeling. Eliphaz, the first among them to speak, expresses the conventional wisdom that good people prosper while evil ones suffer:

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.
By the breath of God they perish. (4:7-9)

It is the same wisdom that is expressed throughout Proverbs and in Psalm 1, among other places. And it is hardly out of date: how many today, consciously or subconsciously, believe that if they are prosperous, they have earned it, while those who are miserable must have brought it on themselves?

Bildad, the second comforter, continues the argument by stressing God's justice:

Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?
If your children sinned against him
he delivered them into the power of their transgression. (8:3-4)

Zophar, the third friend to speak, assures Job that his demand for intimacy with God is wishful thinking and an act of hubris:

Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
It is higher than heaven—what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know? (11:7-8)

Zophar urges Job simply to change his misfortune by changing himself: “If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away. . . . You will lie down, and no one will make you afraid” (11:14, 19).

Job, however, will not accept this solution because he knows he does not deserve his pain. So he rejects Zophar’s advice as insulting and beside the point:

What you know, I also know;
I am not inferior to you.
But I would speak to the Almighty,
and I desire to argue my case with God. (13:2-3)

That insistence on arguing with God—and the belief that God does talk with human beings—is the core of Job’s faith. Job clings to this view of God’s relationship with him, no matter what—even though God should “slay” him, even if others see him as impious:

See, he will kill me; I have no hope;
But I will defend my ways to his face.
This will be my salvation,
that the godless shall not come before him. (13:15-16)

It is a bold assertion. Even further, Job imagines what a dialogue with God might be like; he assumes God’s love for him:

You would call, and I would answer you.
you would long for the work of your hands.
For then you would not number my steps,
you would not keep watch over my sin;
my transgression would be sealed up in a bag,
and you would cover over my iniquity. (14:15-17)

Eliphaz finds Job's vision unacceptable: "But you are doing away with the fear of God. . . . Your own mouth condemns you, and not I" (15:4, 6). His perspective sends Job back to despair, and he not only speaks of his "miserable comforters" (16:2) but he sees God also as his enemy: "God gives me up to the ungodly, and casts me into the hands of the wicked" (16:11). Bildad and Job then exchange accusations. Bildad begins, "How long will you hunt for words? . . . Why are we counted as cattle?" (18:2-3), and Job retorts, "How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?" (19:2). In Job's eyes, the torment of his supposed friends melds with God's attitude towards him:

He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,
he has uprooted my hope like a tree.
He has kindled his wrath against me,
and counts me as his adversary. (19:10-11)

Job then recounts his alienation from family, close friends, servants, even his wife and young children (19:13-18), and everyone he is closest to:

All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I loved have turned against me.
My bones cling to my skin and to my flesh,
and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth. (19:19-20)

His cry for help that follows seems to appeal to friends that no longer exist:

Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me! (19:21)

Yet at that very lowest point of complete abandonment, Job utters his greatest act of faith: "For I know that my Vindicator lives . . . and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God" (19:25-26).

8

“The Flesh Made Word”

Humanity Evolving Towards a Unifying Consciousness?

John had a mystical vision of the future disciples of Christ as collectively forming Christ’s second coming into the world. It is a vision similar to that of Teilhard de Chardin. John’s vision was rooted in the science and literary expression of an ancient world. Teilhard’s vision speaks the language of our own time. I invite the reader to review with me salient aspects of Teilhard’s vision of human evolution and then, with that as a framework, to revisit the biblical wisdom of this book.

The Vision of Teilhard

Teilhard saw human evolution as a slow process of growth in consciousness. The kind of gradual expansion of awareness that every person undergoes, to one extent or another, in the course of a normal lifetime, Teilhard saw writ large in the gradual maturing of humanity over centuries of time. Since this growth takes place over millions or billions of years, its pace is too infinitesimal for any single human generation to notice; Teilhard projected it on the dual basis of

his scientific understanding of evolution in general and his religious understanding of the human vocation to grow in the Spirit. He uses both the language of Science and the language of Religion to express his vision, yet wanting to get away from—or beyond—the conventional understandings of either field, he also coined words and invented unusual phrases. He speaks, for example, of the human being moving towards the “Ultra-Human” as a way to suggest human beings stretching—not beyond their real limits, but beyond their conventional expectations. Or he speaks of God “incorporating” the human being, and the human being “completing” God, in order to express his view that, when the divine and the human merge, the result is mutual transformation. He saw that the meaning of “God” is transformed by the human perception of God’s caring involvement in human experience. He believed human beings may be said to “complete” God to the extent that they reflect God—that is, to the extent of their “divinization.”

Teilhard elevated the feminine aspect of the divine because he perceived “the eternal feminine” as the “unitive” element in the universe—that is, as the disposition to attract, and be attracted to, the Other. In that relationship of mutual attraction he found the creative energy of the universe—a creative energy scientifically evident in the realm of physics, chemistry, and biology, psychologically evident in the realm of human love, and mystically evident in the realm of divine love. He saw scientific truth as analogy for the spiritual: in each instance, attraction leading to union, and union to a new creation. With Dante, he saw Love as “the force that moves the sun and the other stars.”

Moving from scientific to mystical experience, Teilhard came to see that attracting and sustaining divine Love everywhere, in every thing and every aspect of human life. Through his work he tried to raise human consciousness of this divine love, which he perceived not only as a sphere enveloping human existence (“the divine milieu”) but also as a magnet, calling humanity into a di-

vinely transformed future ("the Noosphere").¹ He saw it as a future in which human beings would collectively merge with, and reflect, that divine love, so that All would be One.

Teilhard's Vision in Biblical Wisdom

Does Scripture contain anything of Teilhard's mystical vision of human evolution? I invite the reader to revisit the sacred literature of this book and reflect with me on the different expressions of evolving humanity in the gospels, the Creed, the writings of Paul, Ascent literature, and the Jewish Wisdom writings—not least, in the wisdom of Job.

In the Gospels

In the Western church, it is conventional to focus almost exclusively on the incarnational aspects of the gospels—the way in which their narratives dramatize the Word or Wisdom of God made flesh. But in the Eastern church, it is equally important to notice the way in which they teach the reverse—that is, the call to human beings to become, individually and collectively, living embodiments of God's Word. In this perspective, the gospels are not simply contemplative, detached views of what Wisdom looks like in the person of Christ. They are also kinetic, urging their readers to become like Christ—that is, preaching how weak and vulnerable flesh can, and should, be transformed by God's Wisdom. The other side of incarnation is divinization. Or to put it another way, *the Word made flesh* implies *the flesh made Word*. This call to transformed humanity appears in each gospel in a characteristically different way.

John's Prologue states that the incarnation of the Word "gave power" to others "to become children of God" (1:12). What that

1. Teilhard invented the word "Noosphere" by combining the word "sphere" with the Greek word for "mind" or "intellect" (*nous*) in order to convey his thesis that the human species is designed to evolve in a spiritual, not a physical, way. See *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 180–84.

might look like is modeled in John's gospel by Jesus, who is constantly mindful that he is the son of God. That mindfulness does not lead to lording it over others but quite the contrary: to the washing of their feet. This action in John provides a concrete image for the instruction Jesus gives to his disciples in the other gospels to become servants to others (Mark 10:42-45; Matt 20:25-28; Luke 22:24-27). Such an act transcends the normal human instinct to control rather than to serve. John indicates such a transformation can come only through the receiving of the Spirit—that is, God's Wisdom (16:13; 14:26). In John, receiving God's Spirit means receiving God's peace and, with it, the power to bring peace, to forgive (14:27; 20:21-23). Serving, forgiving, and bringing peace to others are signs of human transformation. They indicate an enhanced consciousness of God's presence in human life. And in John, Jesus promises those who follow him will be able to do what he has done and even "greater works than these" (14:12).

Luke shows the Spirit as the primary agent of human change. Reception of the Spirit comes through the asking. As Jesus says in Luke: "How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (11:13). At the same time, reception of the Spirit involves the willingness to be changed by the Spirit. The openness to being transformed in a way beyond one's imagining, is modeled by Mary's *fiat* (1:38), "How can this be?" she asks at first. And yet responds, "Let it be with me according to your word."

In Matthew, the vision of human lives transformed by God's grace appears most vividly in the Beatitudes (5:3-12). Matthew also shows, through the parables of the Weeds (13:24-30), the Lost Sheep (18:2-14), and the Laborers in the Vineyard (20:1-16), what is involved in taking on God's view of things. Compassion for each human person transforms human attitudes: the weeds are allowed to grow; the solitary sheep is sought; the late worker in the vineyard is paid as much as those who came early. This transformed vision allows one to discern the divine presence in the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matt 25:3-46).

In Mark, the vision of human transformation is embodied in the way he describes the person of Jesus. Like God's Word in

Scripture, Jesus' identity is a secret that has to be discovered. It is revealed to three men when he is "transfigured before them" and declared to be God's "beloved" (9:2, 7). It is revealed to a Roman soldier when he sees Jesus in death (15:39). It is revealed to three women who find his tomb empty and come to understand that he has been raised (16:6). In this final moment, the ecstasy experienced throughout Mark's gospel—the ecstasy of those who witness the various miracles that transform human lives—is brought to a climax. The tomb is empty; death is no longer to be feared. The women are "possessed" by an expanded consciousness of human destiny.

Every gospel leaves that destiny in some sense unfinished, still to be fully realized in the future.

In the Creed

Christians tend to think of the gospels as the presentation of definitive facts and moral teachings; indeed, we often speak of "the Gospel message." Yet a careful hearing or reading of the gospels, as we have just seen, shows that far from presenting a closed set of facts or a finished story, the gospels invite their readers into an ongoing drama, an unfinished process. If we read the Creed in its full, original context, we will find that it does the same.

First of all, the Creed expresses belief in God making all things "visible and invisible." What is meant by the "invisible" is left undefined; the words simply imply faith in a spiritual world that is also part of the human experience. The vagueness of the designation is also openness; the human grasp of what is invisible is left open to continuing expansion.

Second, the description of Christ is largely and consciously taken, as we have seen, from the language of Wisdom in Proverbs 8. The "only begotten son of God" echoes Wisdom describing herself as one whom God "begot." The phrase, "born of the Father before all ages," recalls Wisdom saying that she was beside God at the first moment of Creation; "through him all things were made" echoes Wisdom saying she was there "as a master artisan." The Creed says that Christ "came down from heaven" for the sake

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