The Dignity of the Human: Imago Dei

James H. Charlesworth

Professor of New Testament Language and Literature
Princeton Theological Seminary

Inaugural Truman G. Madsen Lecture on Eternal Man
Brigham Young University
December 2, 2008
The Dignity of the Human: Imago Dei

Introduction

Our country is in a crisis. The economic barrel has a rotten bottom. We have all seen valuables fall through it, lose their value, and become worthless. Within the search for what makes values valuable, we face many questions. Why have so many lost so much? Surely among the causes of the economic collapse are a preoccupation with mammon, greed, devotion to materialism, and especially a misperception of the human.

Far too often in our society the human has been degraded and drained of values. Frequently many today feel or are told, either explicitly or implicitly, that they are unworthy and failing. Many devout Christians are counseled to repeat ad nauseam: “mea culpa.” They are told to ingest the confession “I am unworthy.”

Such admonition may be warranted in some cases. But, used generally, the confession “mea culpa” breaks the spirits of those who are trying to follow Jesus and fail to hear Jesus’ invitation: “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (RSV, John 16:24). Our Bibles and related literatures and especially Jesus’ message invite us to perceive the dignity of the human. Adam is the joyous pinnacle of God’s creation.

Truman G. Madsen, the former distinguished occupant of the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding at BYU, has been my friend for decades. I spoke to hundreds of his students at the BYU Jerusalem Center in East Jerusalem when he was the director, and I have been with him numerous times when I have spoken here at BYU. He is a man of deep thought and pristine integrity. He is clearly surrounded by many luminaries here in Utah. I will never forget his wife, Ann, whom he always treats with impressive respect, telling me that she was confused before she introduced me to the incomparable Hugh W. Nibley in their home. I recall her saying: “Do I lead Muhammed to the mountain, and, if so, which one is Muhammed?” Obviously, I was stunned to be compared with a scholar who a close friend, a Harvard professor, claimed was absurdly brilliant. Let me say now that Truman and Ann have been cherished friends, and they are sparkling jewels in BYU’s illustrious crown. I am grateful and honored to be invited to present the first Truman G. Madsen Lecture. Surely
James H. Charlesworth

he and Ann will appreciate the importance of perceiving the dignity, even divinity, of the human. Yet we must always remember that human dignity and divinity are only conceivable because of God’s grace. Perceiving human divinity requires conceiving God’s absolute sovereignty.

The historical Jesus has been my passion for most of my scholarly life. In 1980 I coined the term “Jesus research” to denote a new phase in the study of the historical Jesus. In my own study I have often perceived Jesus taking sides with His fellow Jews who were disenfranchised and treated with disrespect. Jesus called for human dignity. He shared with all His followers the name He used when calling on God: Abba, Father. As Truman G. Madsen showed, names are not mere labels; in antiquity, especially in Second Temple Judaism, God’s name had awesome power. Jesus’ life and message were devoted to restoring the worth of the human by helping all to realize that God loved them infinitely (cf. Matthew 10:19–31).

At the conclusion of the most important Dead Sea Scroll, Rule of the Community, we find a low estimate of the human:

What, indeed, is the son of Adam among your wondrous works?

Born of a woman, how can he dwell before you, he whose kneading (is) from dust and whose corpse (is) food for maggots? He is (but) a discharge, (mere)

...pinched-off clay whose urge is for the dust. What can clay and that which is shaped (by) hand dispute; and what counsel does it comprehend? [1QS 11.20–22]¹

The low evaluation of the human is also reflected in early Greek thought. For example, influenced by the Eleatics, Leucippus (5th century BCE) and Democritus (460–457 BCE) concluded that the human, as real being, is merely a chance conglomerate of atoms (atomous), the solid, invisible, and indivisible particles in nature. Democritus thought the soul is also made up of atoms, but these are round and fine. The soul and the body perish. Although Democritus is one of the most prolific ancient authors, only fragments of his ethical works remain. It is easy to see why human evolutionary thought, aided by revelation, left behind perceptions of the human as “hooked atoms becoming entangled” (tòn agkistroeidôn atomôn sumpeplegmenon).⁴ In atomism there is no room for a gracious and loving God or for revelation; and human dignity is inextricably bound with both. Far more precise and perceptive than the atomists’ cosmology is Joseph Smith’s claim that in all elements and in our refined spirits “dwells all the glory.”⁵

The purpose of this lecture, in honor of Truman Madsen, a distinguished philosopher and theologian who has been a close colleague for over thirty years, is to shift the focus from human depravity to human divinity. The guiding light will
be provided by the ancient scriptures. In them we find more than speculation; we confront revelation. Those who have ears to hear spiritual words will hear God’s affirmation of the dignity of the human.

In this lecture, I will focus on seven issues: (1) positing the equality of all humans, (2) clarifying that the cor malum (the evil heart) is not to be confused with the yetzer ha-ra (the evil inclination), (3) exposing the historical truth that scripture indicates humans are clothed in dignity, (4) recognizing the fundamental importance of beginning with human dignity in bioethical research and medical practice, (5) displaying in a new light the biblical truth that humans are created imago dei (in the image of God), (6) exploring the scriptural injunction that humans are categorized as divine, and (7) concluding with a grand inclusio to show the oneness of all humans.

I. Equality of All Humans

We begin with a perception of the equality of all humans. According to the account of creation in Genesis, the human was Adam; that is, Adam was both male and female. The ish, “male,” and the isha, “female,” came from one being: Adam.

As is well known, the story of human development continued. The process in human advancement was gradual and painful. “In the beginning all men were created equal,” said the rogue priest named John Ball at Blackheath, outside London, on June 12, 1381. ⁶ Ball uttered these comments during the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. The peasants had been severely overtaxed to make up for the taxes that would have been paid by those who perished in the Black Death when England’s population fell from almost six million to about three million. Ball’s words were quoted, without notation, in Congress on July 4, 1776, by the authors of “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America”: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” The equality of all humans is grounded in the originating acts of One Creator.

II. The Cor Malum (the Evil Heart) Is Not to Be Confused with the Yetzer Ha-Ra (the Evil Inclination)

Philosophers and theologians have focused on the problems in human history and the reason for evil actions. Sometimes a thinker attributes the evil in the world to the cor malum (the evil heart). Other great minds choose to focus on the yetzer ha-ra (the evil inclination).

One of the most brilliant human literary achievements is 4 Ezra. This apocalypse was written by a Jew who was emotionally distraught over the burning of the Temple, God’s House, by the Romans in 70 CE. He sought to explain human failures to be obedient to God by contemplating the cor malum; that is, each human inherits from Adam a malignant heart. Perceiving the loss of the Holy City and the Temple, this Ezra, with the smoke of a burning city seemingly entrenched in his nostrils,
bewails (with words that have echoed in my mind for decades): “O Adam, what have you done? (O tu quid fecisti Adam?) For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants.”

Ezra knows of “an evil heart (cor malum) . . . which has alienated us from God.” The height of ancient Jewish reflections on theodicy are contained in this apocalypse; the seer’s questioning is so profound that the Archangel, Uriel, must confess his ignorance, telling Ezra: “I do not know” (sed nescio). If archangels must confess ignorance, it is evident that knowledge will depend not on human achievement but on human reception of revelation.

Much more prevalent in Jewish thought is the concept that God gave the human inclinations for good or evil and that each one has a choice. For instance, the Book Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, composed around 150 BCE, emphasizes free choice. God created the human with free choice (see Sirach 15). God is not responsible for evil or sin, because the Lord “does not do what he hates (ha gar emisēsen, ou poiēseis)” (NRSV, Sirach 15:11). The “evil thought” (cogitamentum malum) is also known to the author of 4 Ezra, and it seems to be a tradition he inherited to explain why many are led astray from life to death, but the tradition does not represent his own position that is found in his concept of cor malum.

God created humans with an “inclination” (יצר). This noun indicates the humans’ power to make free choices for which they are responsible. The inclination is not a supernatural cosmic force like the Angel of Darkness of the Rule of the Community; as John J. Collins states in Jewish Wisdom, the inclination depends on human violation. As Sirach, the wise Jerusalem sage, perceived in the second century BCE, God is powerful, but he allows humans the ability to choose their own ways in life. The concept of an evil inclination is developed in Rabbinics.

Let us agree now that the cor malum (the evil heart) reflects misperception and that it should not be categorized with the yetzer ha-ra (the evil inclination). A much more appealing explanation of human failure and sin is found in an apocalypse written shortly after 4 Ezra. In 2 Baruch, most likely in response to Ezra’s explanation of the cor malum, we hear Baruch’s perspicacity: “Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become our own Adam.” Truman Madsen rightly follows the insight of the Baruch-Jeremiah tradition: “The fall did not destroy individual freedom, initiative, or accountability. It did not impose sinfulness—or absolute depravity—upon Adam or upon any or all of his children.” Each of us is responsible for hearing God’s call and for responding to receive salvation and redemption.

III. Humans Are Clothed in Dignity

Far too often our dignity is maligned. When we suffer abuse or misfortune or
rejection, we are not alone. We have texts based on traditions that clarify that for three millennia those faithful to God have been ridiculed, abused, and martyred. Closer to our own times are words that have not yet been heard. Let us pause and listen to the words of the granddaughter of a slave: “Neither the slavers’ whip nor the lynchers’ rope nor the bayonet could kill our black belief. In our hunger we beheld the welcome table and in our nakedness the glory of a long white robe. We have been believers in the new Jerusalem.” These words seeped out of the symbolic conceptual world of Margaret Walker (1915–1998). While slaves may have felt naked, they could by faith conceptualize wearing “a long white robe.” That means they were clothed in dignity.

Our Bible and the extended scriptures reveal that dignity is innate in each of us. Dignity is an inheritance. In an unpublished paper, Martin Luther King, Jr., emphasized that dignity will exist as long as one lives and fights for human rights. For King, dignity is a movement. King’s essay on “Dignity” is preserved in the Stanford University King archives; it was found by Dr. Yolanda Pierce of Princeton Theological Seminary. King’s thoughts help us grasp the sociological importance of perceiving that we humans are clothed in dignity.

IV. Human Dignity and Bioethics

I now move into bioethics, which is an area that must be broached today as we evaluate the status of the human. In proceeding, I must confess that while I have devoted my life to mastering the Dead Sea Scrolls, the biblical apocryphal works, and the biblical texts, I am a mere novice in the study of bioethics. Should the concept of human dignity operate within the study of bioethics?

Ruth Macklin is a premier American medical ethicist. She eschews the concept of dignity as presented by the president’s bioethics commission and found, for example, in Human Cloning and Human Dignity. She finds the concept of “human dignity” too subjective and unnecessary. Macklin argues that medical ethics should be based on autonomy; that is, a respect for the autonomy of persons. She contends: “Dignity is a useless concept in medical ethics and can be eliminated without any loss of content.” She laments the lack of a precise definition of “human dignity” in the president’s council report, preferring the one published by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics in the United Kingdom: “One is a person whose actions, thoughts and concerns are worthy of intrinsic respect, because they have been chosen, organised and guided in a way which makes sense from a distinctively individual point of view.” Although she prefers this definition, Macklin rejects “dignity” as a concept for treating patients, claiming that dignity causes confusion in practice and method. I cannot agree that autonomy is a clear concept and that “dignity” should and can be reduced to “autonomy.”
Persons at “the edges of life,” to borrow a phrase from Paul Ramsey,\textsuperscript{21} such as the unborn, newborn, comatose, and elderly with Alzheimer’s, remain vulnerable with only autonomy as a shield against abuse. Without the concept of dignity in medical research and practice, we will see more abuses as in the notorious 40-year-old Tuskegee Syphilis Study. In this study 399 African-American men were caught up in lies: 28 of them died of syphilis, 100 died of related complications, and over 40 wives and 19 children also suffered.\textsuperscript{22} Such experiments were going on in the USA while the Nazis were experimenting on humans as if they were worthless animals, a practice that was exposed (horrifically) and condemned by the 1946 Nuremberg War Crime Trials. We all should be aware of the differences here being explored. We should memorize the first element of the ten-point code of ethics that concluded the Nuremberg tribunal: “The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential.”\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, laws protect the innocent and weak; thus, laws must protect the dignity of those who are not capable of issuing a voluntary consent. Cloning a full human being must not be condoned; with cloning there would be no more dignity and no more morality.\textsuperscript{24} Medical ethics must not seek to prolong life beyond accepted limits; death and finality make life precious and meaningful.

The last few decades have seen a struggle between virtue and principle-based bioethics. If some experts fear that dignity has theological or religious overtones, then we should make it clear that theology is fundamental in perceiving human dignity and that in theological reflection and research there are controls against abuse and misperception.

We have seen that dignity has a long and illustrious history in the sacred traditions that have defined American culture and Americans who are sick. These traditions help define the moral life. In recent decades, dignity is often described as respect for persons (as in the 1979 Belmont Report).\textsuperscript{25} Human dignity helps define ethics in biology and medical practice; it is also evocative of some of the defining insights found in the \textit{humana vitae} of the Pope and is reflected in the natural law theory. Medical ethics should be informed of the sacred traditions and the importance of dignity in human living and dying. The human is not one of the animals; the human has dignity and divinity. If medical moralists affirm human dignity and that special awareness in humans of the sacred, what Rudolf Otto in \textit{Idea of the Holy} (1917) called the “numinous,” then human healing will be attuned to that “deep innate sensitivity to something sacred” that leads, as Madsen sees, to “responses of wonder, awe, and reverence.”\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{V. Humans Are Created \textit{Imago Dei}}

According to the first book in the Bible, Genesis, God created the human in the likeness of God. Recall Genesis 1:26:
“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind [אדם] in our image [בצלמנו], according to our likeness’” (NRSV). The author continues: “So God created humankind in his image [בצלמו], in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (NRSV, Genesis 1:27). Here we find the earliest biblical reference to the human as God’s “image.” The authors and editors of Genesis repeatedly emphasize a fundamental truth: “In his own image God made humankind” (NRSV, Genesis 9:6).

What does it mean that the human is in “God’s image (tslm)”? That opaque claim or revelation seems to mean that humans are like God in some uncertain way. We must not be misled by the modern meaning of tslm; today that noun means the image taken by a camera. The perceptive and learned Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch helps us comprehend the meaning of that easily misunderstood noun, tslm. He translated Genesis 1:26 as follows: “And God spake: Let Us make Adam (a representative) in a form worthy of Us as is commensurate with being in Our likeness.” Hirsch notes that tslm denotes “the outer covering, the bodily form.” It also signifies “all the compassion and love, the truth and equity and holiness of the Divine Rule.” Hirsch continued: “The bodily form of [the human] already proclaims him as the representative of God, as the divine on earth.” The human has “the calling of being ‘godlike.’” The mission of the human is “towards the holiness of God.”

Humans represent God on earth, and they share with God certain qualities, such as goodness, spirituality, and divinity. When humans are morally perfect, they are like God; but that is possible only with God’s help.

In Western theology, the concept of the “image of God” is known as *imago dei*. About the time the canonical Gospels were composed, an early Jewish author, perhaps in a Hebrew original, highlighted the tradition that the human was created “in the image of God.” In Vita Adae et Evae—the Life of Adam and Eve—the term imaginem dei, “the image of God,” appears three times in chapters 13 through 15; one of these times the term is imaginem dei Jehova, “The image of God, Yahweh” (14:2). Another declaration is heard from God: “Behold, Adam! I have made you in our image and likeness [et dixit dominus deus: ecce Adam, feci te ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram]” (13:3).

In that same century, the century of Hillel and Jesus, and most likely about the same time, the author of 4 Ezra revealed he knew that the human was formed by God and “called your own image (et tua imago nominatus).” The author of this masterpiece knew that the human “is made like” God, and all things were created for the human.

In the eighteenth century, those living in the North American colonies suffered greatly by the insults and inhumanity suffered because of the insensitivities of King George III. Did no one in Great Britain note the suffering over here? Did
no one observe that the *imago dei* of those in the colonies was being tortured? Yes; listen to Robert Burns’ “Ode for General Washington’s Birthday”:

*See gathering thousands, while I sing,*  
*A broken chain, exulting, bring*  
*And dash it in a tyrant’s face,*  
*And dare him to his very beard,*  
*And tell him he no more is fear’d,*  
*No more the despot of Columbia’s race!*  
*A tyrant’s proudest insults brav’d,*  
*They shout a People freed! They hail an Empire sav’d!*  
*Where is man’s godlike form?*  
*Where is that brow erect and bold,*  
*That eye that can unmov’d behold*  
*The wildest rage, the loudest storm*  
*That e’er created Fury dared to raise?*  
*Art thou of man’s Imperial line?*  
*Dost boast that countenance divine?*  
*Each skulking feature answers: No!*  
*But come, ye sons of Liberty,*  
*Columbia’s offspring, brave as free,*  
*In danger’s hour still flaming in the van,*  
*Ye know, and dare maintain, The Royalty of Man!*  

It is invigorating to see Burns’ perspicacity apparent as he salutes the dignity of the human as the American patriots resist the tyrants who deny others’ “godlike form.”

### VI. Humans Defined as Divine

Some biblical texts move beyond the concept of *imago dei* and suggest that the human is even divine. Note, for example, that Psalm 8 contains these thoughts:

*You have made them* [human beings] *a little lower than God* [אלהים],  
*and crowned them with glory and honour.*  
*[NRSV, Psalm 8:5]*

Some translators shun the obvious meaning of the Hebrew and prefer to suggest the author meant to indicate that humans are “a little lower than the angels” (KJV) or made “a little less than divine” (Tanakh). The Hebrew text and meaning is clear; while in Middle Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic, and Mande an the noun may denote angels or even demons, in the time of Israel this noun, *’elôhîm*, meant “God.” Professor Madsen insightfully rejects Nietzsche’s claim that humans were created a little lower than the worms and also the misinterpretation of Psalm 8, rightly stressing: “We were made and intended to become a little lower than the *’elôhîm*, or gods.”

The divinity of humans is crystal clear and was often lost in less accurate renderings of the Hebrew. Humans are worthy of being crowned with glory and honor because they are only “a little lower than God.” Surely we should lift up for reflection the following insight or claim: “The glory of God is intelligence.”

Our interpretation of Psalm 8 is supported by another comment in the Psalms. In Psalm 82 we find the following:

*I say, “You are gods* [אלהים],
Humans are not only like God; they are gods, according to this text and tradition. But there is a catch; the verse continues:

“Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.” [NRSV, Psalm 82:7]

Humans are gods, but they “shall die.” What context or somatic lexicon or sociology of language helps us to comprehend the meaning of this verse?

Has this difficult verse appeared in later texts? Yes, it is quoted by Jesus, according to the Fourth Evangelist. Recall the following passage:

Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’?

If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken),

do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world: ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God?’” [RSV, John 10:34–36]

It is best not to ignore or overinterpret such challenging claims and concepts; suffice it now for us to perceive that the human is special in God’s sight and in God’s scriptures; indeed, the human is divine, even a god. The ancient psalms are even lifted up by Jesus, according to the Fourth Evangelist, to highlight the dignity and divinity of the human.

VII. Human Oneness

We are all the same in the sight of God. We have one Creator. As Paul said, we are all one in Christ Jesus. Jew and Gentile, Mormon and Methodist, male and female, black and white—we are all one. All cultural distinctions erode in the face of the awesomeness of creation, the mystery of black holes, and the continuing search for the invisible particles or waves that combine to produce, with God’s grace and power, a human being. As we reflect on our dignity and divinity, we must remember that the imago dei is never affected by sin or by any handicap.

That truth is often brought home to us by a story. A soldier finally was able to come home from Vietnam. When he arrived in San Francisco, he called his parents. He is reputed to have said: “Mom and Dad, I’m coming home, but I’ve a favor to ask. I have a friend I’d like to bring home with me.”

His parents assured him that they would love to meet him.

The son continued: “There’s something you should know. He was hurt pretty badly in the fighting. He stepped on a land mine and lost an arm and a leg. He has nowhere else to go, and I want him to come live with us.”

His parents reassured him that they would help find him somewhere to live.
The son advised: “No, Mom and Dad, I want him to live with us.”

The parents replied that this burden was too much to ask: “Someone with such a handicap would be a terrible burden on us. We have our lives to live, and we can’t let something like this interfere with our lives. We think you should just come home and forget about this guy. He’ll find a way to live on his own.”

The son hung up the phone.

Later the parents were informed by the police that their son had been found crumpled in an ugly heap beneath a tall building. When the parents identified their son, they observed his body. He had lost an arm and a leg in the war. He was the one “with such a handicap.” He was the “something” they “should know.” He was the one who had “nowhere else to go.” He was the one who had lost a leg, an arm, and a home. He ended his life knowing he could not burden his parents. A young person who had given much for his country and suffered severely died believing that those who brought him into the world failed to recognize that he was still bearing imago dei, “the image of God.”

John Wesley is famous for referring to a spiritual experience that changed his life. On May 24, 1738, Wesley recorded that he felt his heart “strangely warmed.” Many savants assume Wesley was using a metaphor. He was trying to put into words what he had experienced. During his time, spiritual greats claimed that they felt a fire within them. The heat was caused by the indwelling of God’s power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. A similar experience of feeling the “enervating and energizing” power of God or the Holy Spirit was shared by Wesley T. Benson with Truman Madsen.³³

Today Methodists are asked if they are going on to perfection. If possible, we answer. We say that with God's help we are striving to go on to perfection. When other Christians laugh at us and claim we are misled, we are prone to reply: “Well, then where are you going?” Methodists believe that moving on to perfection is possible when humans have exhausted their efforts and admit they have fallen far short. Then God provides what is missing by divine grace. Methodists call God's intervention on our behalf “prevenient grace.” As William J. Abraham has written lately in *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*:

*Can we really set limits to what God can do to eradicate sin this side of death? Wesley was convinced that this kind of pessimism fell short of what God had done when he inaugurated his kingdom in Jesus Christ. We really can have victory over moral evil in this life, not by our efforts but by divine grace.*³⁴

That is, God supplies what we lack to obtain perfection. It is not clear if this perfection is possible on earth or only in our postmortem existence, but it is certain that Jesus, according to Matthew, exhorted: “Be perfect . . . as your heavenly
Father is perfect” (NRSV, Matthew 5:48). Gracious; is that really possible?

To make the complex more comprehensible, let me use an analogy. If you were out in the bay but the boat sank, and you swam toward a distant dock but collapsed, unable to complete the swim, you would sink and drown. But if someone on the dock casts a rope that is a lifeline, then you can be pulled to safety. The rope is like prevenient grace. It is unwarranted, it is unearned; but you know that you are saved once you feel your feet on the wood of the dock.

Truman G. Madsen brings such reflections within the world of Mormon theology. In Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism, he writes:

For Joseph Smith, the person, whatever his acts, must be changed into a condition variously described as sanctified, perfected, glorified. The ethical life is requisite but not sufficient for the realization of holiness. The envisioned end is not only the changing of behavior. It is changing the behaver.35

Such wisdom is heard from a crowd of witnesses and from many corners where God has been experienced. Moving back behind Truman Madsen, Joseph Smith, and John Wesley, we come to Paul, who said: “Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” (RSV, 2 Corinthians 5:17). We become a kainê ktisis, “a new creation.” God wills for us to be created anew; God wishes for us to receive the immortality we lost in Eden. As S. Kierkegaard pointed out, we must will to accept God’s gift fully and perfectly, since purity of heart is to will one thing.

We have seen a consistent adherence, in many diverse texts, to holding in tension both the human’s frailty and the human’s divinity. When confronting truths that transcend human conceptuality, great minds sometimes succumb to juxtaposing opposites like divine determinism and human freedom.36 This rhetorical form appears in Deuteronomy 29–32.37 The contrarieties that characterize the Gospel of John also are not to be edited out—both Jesus’ utter dependence on God and Jesus’ unity with God are held in tension by the Fourth Evangelist; this is the way the human transcends categories that are too terrestrial.38 Human cognition is not lived out in the either-or of life; it is phenomenologically lived in the both-and of human finitude; that is, by stating and affirming opposites we clash categories and transcend the blindness inherited in language that has evolved for over three million years, mostly by gatherers and hunters. Reflecting on what I have perceived reminds me that I have again merely paraphrased Madsen and “the Prophet” who understood that “by contrarieties . . . truth is made manifest.”39

Conclusion

Perceiving the dignity and divinity of the human must not be misunderstood. It is not Feuerbach’s divinization
of the human. It is not removing belief in God with a belief in man. The dignity and divinity of the human begins and is permanently grounded in God—a profound experience of God—and a deep belief in God’s continuous movement toward and uplifting of the human. It is a perception revealed in scripture and affirmed by Jesus Christ.

Such experiences are not limited to but are often realized in “the art of music.” As Hans Küng points out: “The art of music is the most spiritual of all symbols for that ‘mystical sanctuary of our religion,’ the divine itself.” Küng rightly comprehends that the boundary between music, “the most abstract of all arts,” and religion, is “wafer-thin.” We can experience how music can speak and “in the end say something inexpressible, unspeakable.” In “the midst of music the ‘ineffable mystery’” can appear. And in the mystery is revealed the divinity of humanity.

Recognizing our dignity and our divinity, let us help all to find a home. With the election of a president who represents all Americans and with the hope of a truly “United” States of America, let us open our homes with a perception of our human divinity. Reflecting on Jesus from Nazareth, we learn that love is unconditional. We are to love our enemies; that is to be taken literally. It means God’s creatures are to be loved, even those who are considered unlovable. All humans are worthy of being clothed in dignity; after all, all of us are created *imago dei*. Ephrem Syrus shared a thought for us to contemplate:

*Blessed is he who always retains in himself remembrance of God, for such a person on earth is like a heavenly angel, constantly celebrating the Lord with fear and love.*

The portrayal of the human as divine and in the form of an angel is well known and ancient, appearing in 2 Enoch, the Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan, the Apocalypse of Sethel, the Prayer of Joseph, the Prayer of Jacob, the History of the Rechabites, and the Testament of Solomon.

We have finished our journey for now, perceiving how anthropology is grounded in biblical theology. The dimensions of this lecture in honor of Truman Madsen are adumbrated in Joseph Smith’s words: “If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.” For spiritually advanced *viator* i, anthropology becomes pellucid only within theology.

Our forays into sacred traditions and spiritual reflections about human nature are in their infancy. There will be unfinished tasks when all of us have crossed the bar.

In conclusion, humans approximate truth by crafting and refining questions that have dogged them for about three million years. The best answers often appear as the most refined questions:
The Dignity of the Human: Imago Dei

What is the human אָדָם that You have remembered him? And what is the son of man בֶן-אָדָם that You have noted him? [Psalm 8:4]¹⁶

Indeed, as in all our introspective probing, our “primary gesture is toward inner echoes, toward, as it were, the nerve- endings of the spirit.”⁴⁵

Notes


4. For the Greek translation, see Kirk and Raven, The Presocratic Philosophers, 410.


10. In OTP, 1:531 (4 Ezra 4:52).
12. Also see OTP, 1:538 (4 Ezra 7:35).
16. Margaret Walker, “We Have Been Believers” (1942); emphasis added.
17. In this section, I am indebted to my colleague, Professor Abigail Rian Evans.


33. See the excerpt of a letter from Wesley Taft Benson to Truman Madsen (6 November 1965) in Madsen, Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 353, note 22.


36. See Menachem Elon, Human Dignity and Freedom in the Jewish Heritage, Proceedings of the President’s Study Group on the Bible and Sources of Judaism (Jerusalem: The Presidential Residence, 1995 [in Hebrew]).


39. See Madsen, Eternal Man, ix; also Joseph Smith, Opinion, Times and Seasons 3, no. 21 (1 September 1842): 901.


46. Charlesworth translation.