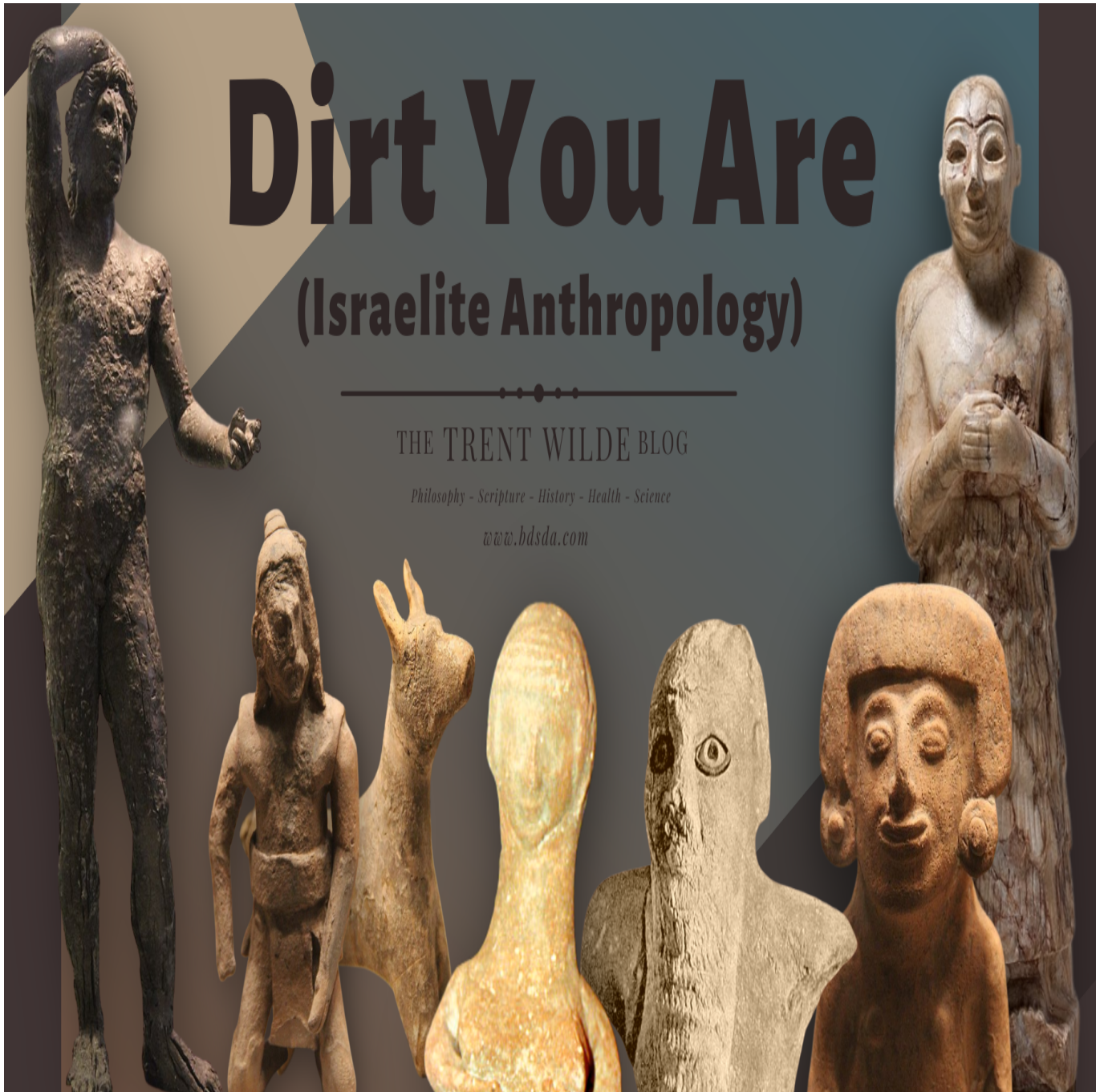


Dirt You Are (Israelite Anthropology)

Description



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It's time to disclose that popular theology

goes hand in hand with Israelite anthropology;
it throws the ole soul into sheol. The new one they say is ethereal.
Can't hear it; it's an immaterial spirit. Everywhere is nowhere near it.

But Hebrews saw a body of dirt
Though once inert, a breath brought life, then husband and wife.
Pretty soon begetting was getting rife. (Witty tune, not for abetting strife.)

A wise man said we're mammals; this is knowledge, not trammels.
What is human nature?
To dirt we revert.
Don't animadvert.
It's not my nomenclature.
Israelite writers wrote it.
Materialist anthropology, please note it.

As you could probably tell from the opening poem, we're talking about Israelite anthropology; that is, the ancient Israelite understanding of human nature. Right off the bat, I should say that not all Israelites thought precisely the same thing. Yet, there is a view that stands out as dominant in their surviving literature.

First, understanding is almost always, if not always, aided by contrasts. So, we'll use the dominant anthropology of popular theology today as a point of comparison. Generally speaking, most religious people have a dualistic theory of human nature. Our body is acknowledged to be physical, but our mind, including intellect, feelings, emotions, consciousness, etc. is typically thought to be non-physical and to be attributable only to a non-physical "soul" or "spirit." And this non-physical aspect is regarded as the "true self." After all, it's thought to be the only part that can think and have consciousness, including self-consciousness; in other words, our sense of self. Since the soul is believed to be non-physical, it's quite naturally regarded as indestructible since it has no parts that could be disassembled. The death of the body is thus thought to have no impact on the continued existence of the soul. And hence, when someone dies, people often speak of that person as being in heaven or hell even while their body is in a casket or in the ground. Again, this is because the "true self" is thought to be the soul while the body was simply the temporary dwelling of the soul.

Ancient Israelites did not have this view, and neither did Jesus or his earliest followers. We'll read and talk about few passages to illustrate what they believed, restricting ourselves, at least in this episode, to texts in the Hebrew bible.

First, let's quote from Genesis 2:7, which describes the Israelite God, Yahweh, making a human. Here's what it says,

And Yahwéh of *the* deities formed the human
– dirt from the ground –
and he blew into his nostrils
respiration of life
And the human became a living body.
– Genesis. 2:7 (NABT)

Okay, a few quick observations. Notice, it doesn't say that Yahweh formed the *body* of a human or the *body* for the human. It says that he formed **the human**. The human here actually **is** the formed dirt. Notice also, that it isn't dirt *plus* an immaterial spirit or soul that constitutes the human; it is simply the organized dirt. Once formed, the human wasn't immediately alive, so Yahweh blew into his nostrils, and he started breathing. The fact that he blew it into his nostrils should make it clear that it's talking about literal breath, not some spiritual essence or anything like that.

One more point, the last part of the verse says that the human became a living body. The word here translated "body" is *nefesh*. It is the word that most translations translate as "soul," albeit selectively. But this word absolutely does not mean anything like the modern concept of soul. Originally, it actually just meant "throat." For example,

They afflicted in fetters his feet.
Into iron went his throat.
– Psalm 105:18 (NABT)

Or

All the labor of the human is for his mouth,
And yet the throat will not be filled.
– Ecclesiastes 6:7 (NABT)

Obviously, the word *nefesh* in these passages actually means throat. It can't mean an immaterial mind or anything like that. Can you bind an immaterial mind with iron or fill it with food?

Nefesh was also used in poetic expressions referring to acts of speaking. For example, when Isaac was getting old, he told Esau to make him food, and he said he would eat it and then said, "my throat will bless you before I die" (Genesis 27:4). Obviously, this is equivalent to saying "I will bless you before I die." So, you can see how the equivalence of expressions like "my throat said" and "I said" could lead to the word for throat gradually extending its semantic range to also include the whole person – the self. And since Israelites had a materialistic notion of human nature, "the whole person" is equivalent to "the body." And that is exactly what *nefesh* came to mean. There are lots of examples of this, like Genesis 1:20 which says, "Let the waters swarm with a swarm of living bodies;" that is, fish and other aquatic animals. Again, the word for "bodies" here is *nefesh* – the word popularly (and incorrectly) translated "soul" in a whole bunch of other places. Another telling reference is in Numbers 6 in the laws regarding Nazarite vows. One of the things it says is this:

All the days of his separation to Yahwéh, he must not go over a dead body.
– Numbers 6:6 (NABT)

The word “body” here is *nefesh*. Again, this is the word that most translations render as “soul.” But notice... This is a **dead *nefesh* – a dead body** – clearly not an immaterial, immortal essence of a person. Ancient Israelites didn’t think that the true self is a non-physical entity that inhabits a body; they understood the true self to **be** the body. Again, in Genesis 2:7, the human **is** dirt from the ground formed into a body and, when respiration was instigated, the human became a *living* body.

A little later in the same story, after the human ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, Yahweh said to him,

In the sweat of your nostrils you will eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for from it you were taken.
For dirt you are
and to dirt you will return.
– Genesis 3:19 (NABT)

Again, the human **is** dirt. The human isn’t an immaterial entity temporarily inhabiting dirt. The view of human nature presented in this text is thoroughly materialistic. Humans are organized matter, particularly, organized dirt. And, if you think about it, this is a very empirical view of human nature. In reality, when someone dies, they decompose and indeed do turn into dirt. Ancient Israelites would know this from their own observations. And just to cover all bases, they really did apply this understanding of human nature to all humans, not just the one that Yahweh formed in Genesis 2. Psalm 103:14 says

For he has known our form;
he has remembered that we are dirt.
– Psalm 103:14 (NABT)

There’s a lot more that could be quoted and a lot more that could be said even about what I quoted here, but we’ll just do one more passage. This is Ecclesiastes 3:18-20

And I, I said in my heart on the matter of the sons of the humans, “The deities choose them in order to show them that they are themselves mammals.
For what befalls the sons of the humans and what befalls the mammals, what befalls them is one. As the death of this, so the death of that. And one breath is for all. And the advantage of the humans over the mammals is nothing, for all are vapor!
All go to one place. All are from the dirt and all return to the dirt.”
– Ecclesiastes 3:18-20 (NABT)

Clearly, this text also presents us with a materialistic anthropology. Humans are not presented as dual beings, but as unitary beings made of material stuff. We are said to be no different than mammals. And yeah, as you just heard, the text overtly says that we humans are ourselves mammals! We and all the other mammals breathe the same breath and die the same death. We are from the same dirt, and we return to the same dirt.

So again,

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To dirt we revert.
Don't animadvert.
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On another note, there a few things I want to mention to y'all.

First, all passages quoted here are from my own translation, which I'm calling *Not A Bible Translation* since, well, it's not a bible translation... I'll doubtless be talking about that more in future posts.

There's something else I want to mention that has to do with an upcoming Zoom series. If you're reading this after October 19, 2022, it'll be too late for the live series, but recordings of it should be on YouTube ([here](#)).

Okay, so the day this post is being published (September 28, 2022) is the new moon of the 7th Hebrew month, which is an Israelite feast day known as the Memorial of Blasting, understood as commemorating the blasting of trumpets in Israel's wilderness wanderings. Ten days from now will be the Day of Atonement (Oct. 7) and then five days after that begins the 8-day Feast of Tabernacles (Oct. 12-19). During the Feast of Tabernacles, I and a few other Branch Davidians will be hosting a series of Zoom meetings on a topic related to what we covered in this post. To be more specific, it's on the Personality of God (see [our tag](#)) as a pillar doctrine of early Seventh-day Adventism. Whether you're SDA or not, you should find it pretty interesting. It will explain a very old, yet little-known view of the nature of God. Anyway, the meetings will be held from October 11-18 at 8 p.m. Eastern Time each night. See the image below for full details and a link for joining the meetings.

As a lead-up to the series, for the next ten days, that is, from now up till the Day of Atonement, I'll be posting short blog posts and podcasts on subjects that'll help orient you for [the Personality of God series](#).

Cheers!

UPDATE: The above-mentioned meetings are now finished. You can watch the recordings and find out more about the series [HERE](#).