3
Theomorphism

At this point, it is important to note how the problem of direction of transference within a metaphor impacts anthropomorphic language. Whilst the theories of Lakoff and Grady propose a transference from the source to the target domain, in biblical anthropomorphic language it becomes difficult to discern which is which. The traditional approach involved a transfer of human concepts to the divine, often resulting in either a mundane univocity, or a need for accommodating the language to the point of rendering it equivocal with respect to the divine. But, as we have seen, this need not be the case. In this chapter, we turn to a point of biblical theology to inform our linguistic approach to the process of interpreting biblical metaphors. We shall examine the biblical basis for this claim, the divine-human relationship itself, the nature of primary and secondary senses of a term, and how this informs our method for interpreting human language when applied to God.

In his magisterial theology, Gerhard von Rad observes a critical concept concerning the direction of allusion in metaphors within the Hebrew Bible. He says,

> Israel conceived even Jahweh himself as having human form. But the way of putting it which we use runs in precisely the wrong direction according to Old Testament ideas, for, according to the ideas of Jahwism, it cannot be said that Israel regarded God anthropomorphically, but the reverse, that she considered man as theomorphic.[1]

Oddly, the implications of this idea, though picked up by several subsequent writers, such as Abraham Heschel and Brevard Childs, have rarely been carried through in Old Testament theology or the philosophy of religious language. They are at least two-fold, respecting humanity and deity.

1. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 145.

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With the former, as has been observed, humans are derived from and defined in terms of the divine. "Rather than accommodating God to the level of the human or raising human characteristics to the nth degree, the human is seen to be fashioned in the likeness of God. Hence, the human is seen in theomorphic terms, rather than God in anthropomorphic terms."[2]

As to the latter, the fact that man is described in *theomorphic* language, has repercussions for understanding the actions and traits ascribed to God. Centuries earlier, Aquinas noted, "Our knowledge of God is derived from the perfections which flow from him to creatures, which perfections are in God in a more eminent way than in creatures."[3] For example, as Abraham Heschel notes, "God's unconditional concern for justice is not an anthropomorphism. Rather, man's concern for justice is a theomorphism. Human reason, a feeble reflection, reminder, and intimation of the infinite wisdom deciphered in God's creation, is not the form after which our concept of God's wisdom is modeled."[4] Thus, the fact that humans are created as the image of God, provides an ontological basis for understanding a transcendent and otherwise incomprehensible being. This, however, leaves us with the question of how to understand divine attributes and in turn, human ones. In the next section, we take a look at the relationship between how God and humans are described in the Bible.

Natural Versus Supernatural Traits

Instead of extrapolating from known human nature, i.e., casting God as human-like but to the nth degree,[5] humans are described as essentially, very God-like (Gen 1:26; 3:22; 11:6; Pss 8:5; 82:6). The differences stem initially from their created status, as they are not everlasting or imbued with the same creative powers as God. However, many of the differences are primarily reflections of human transgression against the divine.[6]

2. Ibid., 11.

3. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.q.1 3a. 3.

4. Heschel, *The Prophets, II*, 51–52.

5. The *via eminentia*, seeks to understand divine virtues as primary, and not derived from their human namesakes.

6. This is not to impute human finitude and brokenness to God, for God is also described as never sinning (Deut 32:4) and often in infinite terms (e.g., the everlasting God, Gen 21:33).

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Humans abilities are curtailed, in terms of lifespan, language, and access to the divine, and thus become even further limited in scope and authority.[7]

While God's traits may not derive from human characteristics, they need not mute "anthropomorphic" expressions of Him and His activity either. He is bound neither by the finite human usage of these terms nor His infinite nature, for He is free to act in any manner—divine or human—as he desires. Not only should He not be limited by human uses of these terms, but neither should our idea of the difference between God and man be based on a *human* idea of perfection.[8] Heschel acknowledges, "Sight, because of its being a faculty of man, is not to be denied to God. Yet, there is an absolute difference between the sight and the thought of God and the sight and the thought of man," which essentially gives, "new meaning to borrowed words. The prophets had to use anthropomorphic language in order to convey His nonanthropomorphic Being."[9] In other words, human

7. Humanity was barred from the intimate fellowship with God in the garden (3:22–23), had their lifespan curtailed (Gen 6:3), and became "confused" (Heb. *bālal*) in their languages. All of these things happened in response to sin, but reflect the innate power residing in humanity which needed to be curbed lest it be used to bring about even greater destruction and independence from God. Some of the results of the sin affect humanities' relationship with creation as well as the Creator. Consider, for example, what Adam might have been able to do agriculturally, before the ground was "cursed" on account of his "fall" (Gen 3:17). Cain too, was cursed such that the ground would no longer yield its fruit to him (Gen 4:12).

8. However, this does not mean God is not perfect at all as His work and His law are said to be so (*tammîm*), implying their source is as well. My thanks to Professor Gordon Wenham for this insight. Heschel's point here is to note that the conception of perfection often predicated of God (i.e., that He does not "act" or "feel") is not necessarily a biblical one. For example, Thomas Weinandy generally argues that God is "Pure Act." Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* That is, His *esse* and *essentia*, or Being and Essence are one and the same, as opposed to humans, whose being is different from their relations/actions. God *is* one pure act of love towards the world which is mitigated by human stances toward Him. If they rebel, they experience that love as wrath, if they obey, as blessing. This model becomes problematic, however, with issues of mercy, where a human deserves wrath, but God expresses mercy instead. The experience of God by the human in these cases is not dictated by the human's stance, but by God's sovereign choice. This choice is not automatic, however, for He does not show mercy *carte blanche*. Rather, He says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show compassion upon whom I will show compassion" (Exod 33:19). Hence, the model of divine perfection entailing divine simplicity (that God has no parts) seems to contradict the presentation of His actions in Scripture, where they are not shaped solely by human action. Furthermore, it seems illogical to us to construe attributes such as goodness, justice, love, etc., as the same, or that the divine Being is the same as His acting, and hence we opt for a model we find more consonant with His representation in the biblical texts—that He is an Agent distinct from His individual acts.

9. Heschel, *The Prophets, II*, 56.

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faculties are not necessarily inapplicable to the divine. Rather, the divine attribute is distinct from the human. However, as we shall see, there is more continuity than Heschel indicates in the idea of transferability of these characteristics.

Notably, God is not being defined in human terms, but giving new meaning to the terms themselves. It is not that God cannot see, because that is a human thing to do, but rather that He sees in a more profound way—and one in which He can enable humans to do as well. For these purposes then, it is better to distinguish between "natural" and "supernatural" senses of anthropomorphic metaphors such as "seeing," rather than "divine" and "human." Though God may not see as a man sees (Job 10:4; 1 Sam 16:7), this doesn't mean He abdicates the act of seeing altogether in light of an infinite attribute such as omniscience. His seeing is more than a facade of "personality" on a faceless philosophical entity. Rather, acts such as "seeing" are His prerogative[10] and the intentional exercising of His faculties in relationship to mankind. They are also commensurate with His nature as a God who sees and hears (Gen 16:11, 13; 22:14). As Goldingay observed, the very acts of hearing or seeing, more than simple information gathering, can indicate a desire for relationship and often carry real theological implications such as the burden of knowledge in a covenantal relationship.

Childs explores the effects of theomorphism by engaging Terrence Fretheim's *The Suffering of God*, who

> makes the case for understanding a biblical metaphor as not merely emotive language, but "reality depicting" (7) . . . Fretheim offers as a hermeneutical guide for interpreting the anthropomorphic metaphors the establishing of a balance between the depiction of God within Israel's story and generalizations which the community made in rendering coherence to its tradition. The goal is to prevent the reading of the imagery against the metaphorical grain (8).[11]

In other words, the assertions of the text are tempered, but neither nullified nor muted by the community of faith in which it is received.

10. I am physically stronger than my son, (at this writing!), but that does not mean I must use all of my strength when I wrestle with him. Similarly, God may choose to perform actions that are not reflective of the extent of His abilities, and may do so for His express purposes. These self-limited acts should not then be ruled out of the realm of interpretation within a biblical narrative.

11. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 356.

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Childs sees this approach as analogous to his own, but differs from some of Fretheim's applications.

> Fretheim assumes that a biblical metaphor always arises from the projection of human experience to a depiction of the divine. If the enterprise involved was one of describing the development of language in general, perhaps Fretheim's position could be partially defended, but the theological problem of understanding the function of metaphor within the Bible is far more complex. . . . From the perspective of the Bible God's identity is primary and human response is secondary. It is a truism of the history-of-religions that man forms God in his own image. However, according to Israel's scriptures this is blasphemy. God, not man, is the only creator.[12]

The primary nature of God in the Old Testament demands that ideas such as justice, love, mercy, grace, compassion, forgiveness, etc., are not transferred from the human realm, but defined by the divine realm. Picking up this theme, Aquinas says,

> We have to consider two things, therefore, in the words we use to attribute perfections to God, firstly the perfections themselves that are signified—goodness, life, and the like—and secondly the way in which they are signified. So far as the perfections signified are concerned the words are used literally of God, and in fact more appropriately than they are of creatures, for these perfections belong primarily to God and only secondarily to others.[13]

But, we are compelled to ask, how can this be? Are not the biblical words human words? Childs explains, "The point is that the Bible functions in such a way that such terms as 'father' and 'king' gain their theological content from the character of God, who continues to be worshipped in the conventions of language which believers have always understood as inadequate for rendering the full divine reality."[14] Childs acknowledges that the content of theological predicates is ultimately derived from the divine rather than the human realm, which in turn renders the usual connotations of these terms according to human usage inadequate. Von Rad adds,

> The meaning of the many human descriptions of God in the Old Testament is not to bring God from afar to a level like that

12. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 356–57.
13. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 13.3, trans. Herbert McCabe. See also 1a, 13.6.
14. Childs, "Canonical Context," 40.

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> of a man. The human likeness is not a humanization. And these descriptions were never thought of that way except in unfair polemic. Rather they are to make God accessible to man. . . . They present God as a person. They avoid the error of making God a static, unconcerned, abstract idea, or an inflexible principle. God is person, full of will, to be found in active discussion, prepared for his communication, open to the impact of human sin and supplication of human prayer and the weeping over human guilt; in a word, God is a living God (L. Köhler, Theologie des A.T., 6.).[15]

Von Rad sees these terms as simply conveying God's personhood and thereby making him more accessible to His worshipers. Bruce Baloian seems to concur, saying,

> The ascription of passion or human characteristics to God allowed Israel to authenticate human existence. The texts that describe his action or passion demonstrate his intense involvement in the world of human beings (1 Sam 25:29) and therefore the validation of human experience in history. They also imbue the human person with significance. They indicate that Israel perceived meaning and intentionality in their personal existence because foundational to reality was a sentient, willing, passionate, and relationally-accessible Person.[16]

However, there are a few problems with this view. Firstly, how can human beings "validate" their own existence? If they first attribute human characteristics to God and then compare their lives to Him, have they not made themselves their own measure? Despite Baloian's attempts to incorporate a real experience of God as the basis of Israelite theology, he ends up leaving God, the non-human Being, effectively out of the equation. However, if one eliminates the term "human characteristics," Baloian's points retain some merit. Human existence is authenticated, given validation and significance, meaning and intentionality, based on its relationship with its Creator. But according to the biblical view, God *precedes* human existence, experience, and description (Gen 1:26–27). As Ulrich Mauser suggests, due to humanity's creation in[17] the image of God, this defined human life as well. "The priestly writers perceived in Israel's cult and demeanor the

15. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 114.

16. Baloian, "Anthropomorphism."

17. With D. J. A. Clines, we prefer the translation "*as* the image of God," treating the preposition as a *bet essentiae*. See Clines, "The Image of God in Man." However, Mauser uses both the expressions "in" and "as" the image.

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historical and concrete actualization of the destiny given to human life from its origin in God. The image of God is, then, not a description of the given of human nature in and of itself, but an outflow of the conscious and life-shaping bond to God."[18] God's identifying characteristics anticipate and thus define human existence. God can only validate that which He defines.

Secondly, in ascribing the effect of these metaphorical terms as a stand-in for the "personhood" or "accessibility" of the divine, both Childs and von Rad seem to found their explanations upon reductionist views of metaphor. However, as we demonstrated earlier, metaphors by nature are *irreducible*. Thus, these metaphors must function more significantly than painting a human mask on God (though the ascription of personality itself is also made implicit).

It seems then, that those divine actions which have human counterparts can function paradigmatically for them. For example, as Heschel argues, "The statements about pathos are not a compromise—ways of accommodating higher meanings to the lower level of human understanding. They are rather the accommodation of words to higher meanings."[19] Not only are these things not derived from the human realm, but, "The conception of selfless pathos, synthesizing morality as a supreme, impartial demand and as the object of personal preoccupation and ultimate concern, consists of human ingredients and a superhuman *Gestalt*. Absolute selflessness and mysteriously undeserved love are more akin to the divine than to the human. And if these are characteristics of human nature, then man is endowed with attributes of the divine."[20] As Heschel observes, the things said of God simply are not true of humankind generally. And yet, they are within the scope of possibility. Humans can conceive of such uncharacteristically-human attributes as compassion and justice, even if they do not practice them personally.

Biblical Distinctions between God and Humanity

However, the objection is often raised in discussions of anthropomorphic language, that divine actions are categorically different from human ones. To justify this view, several passages are often cited which emphasize not simply the transcendent nature of God, but the specific areas in which

18. Mauser, "God in Human Form," 93.
19. Heschel, *The Prophets, II*, 51.
20. Ibid.

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He differs from humanity. Based on these passages, it is then concluded that anthropomorphic expressions cannot be literally true, and so other means are sought to explain their presence in the text. However, rather than dismissing the truth-value of anthropomorphic metaphors, a closer look at the *nature* of the differences between God and man being highlighted lends insight into what sort of assertions anthropomorphisms can make about God.

In Hos 11:7–9, Yahweh's people are insistent on turning from Him, but instead of responding to their sin by His wrath, His compassion takes over.

> So My people are bent on turning from Me. Though they call them to *the One* on high, None at all exalts *Him.* How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned over within Me, All My compassions are kindled. I will not execute My fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, And I will not come in wrath.

Here, we see that though God is different from humans, the difference being highlighted in this passage is not in terms of superhuman ability, but *choice*. God is unlike humans in His decision to show compassion where wrath was due. As their independence from their Creator severs them from the ground of their own worth, humans are left to uphold or establish it on their own. Thus an injustice perceived against them typically demands a defense of their offended honor. However, the nature of the difference is not that between the created vs. the Uncreated, but a voluntary and *humanly* conceivable choice. As Eduard LaB. Cherbonnier says, "This difference between God and man is not a difference 'in principle.' It is merely *de facto*—a difference which God means eventually to overcome."[21]

Similarly, compare also the ways and thoughts of the wicked and of God in Isa 55:7–9.

> Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly

21. Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," 188. Though Cherbonnier may use this in service of Mormon theology, where men are seen to become gods, he does not do so in this article. The biblical texts never claim divinity as an end for humanity, but rather ridicule such folly (cf. Isa 14:14–15). Nevertheless, they do adjure people to be *like* God in character (Lev 11:44–45, 19:2, 20:7, 26, etc.).

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> pardon. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts."

Though God's ways and thoughts are higher than those of the wicked, the implication is that the wicked should turn from their ways and adopt His. In other words, the difference between the divine nature and human in this particular instance is in moral character, not ontology. It is humanity's sinful character which causes them to react with wrath at offenses, but it was certainly within the realm of possibility for them to do other than they do, for they are held responsible for such sinful reactions. That is, they are accounted wicked not on their created ontological status, but upon their (mis)use of their faculties. Hence, the difference highlighted here is not simply one which derives from the transcendent nature of God, but upon mankind's choice to follow their own selfish ways over God's—a choice that can be reversed.

In fact, we see that God can enable men to have His compassion (Gen 43:14; 1 Kgs 8:50; 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 1:11; Pss 72:13, cf. vs 1; 119:77; Jer 42:12; Dan 1:9). Compassion is one of Yahweh's self-defined attributes (Exod 33:19), and His compassion seems to be the source of that of others. Though people may have compassion on their children (Isa 49:15, Ps 103:13), they are unable to have this on their enemies, save by God's intervention. It has the unique quality of being undeserved (Hos 2:23). Humans, however are still expected to show compassion (Zech 7:9).[22] Hence, divine compassion, though it originates in God, is not a concept to which humans have no access, nor something that they cannot understand, at least in part, except via the limitations of human language. Rather, it is something expected of them. The difference is that humans do not *naturally* practice compassion in the manner in which Yahweh does. However, He can enable them to do so.

Similar things can be said of verses that have been used to claim intractable differences between God and humans. Isaiah 31:3 says,

> Now the Egyptians are men and not God, And their horses are flesh and not spirit; So the LORD will stretch out His hand, and he who helps will stumble and he who is helped will fall, and all of them will come to an end together.

22. Micah 6:8 and Job 6:14 both demonstrate that compassion was expected of humans.

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This verse clearly differentiates between the power of God and humans (and horses, for that matter) to deliver, attributing this to the distinction between spiritual and corporeal beings. Isa 40:18 also speaks of the difference in power between God and man (cf. 40:25–26), but also of His omniscience (22, 27) and his imperviousness to fatigue (28).

However, just as God does not grow tired or weary, He may also become the source of this same strength for humans who trust in Him (vv. 28–31). Once again, we find the nature of the difference between divine and human terms is not a simple case of the transcendent vs. the immanent. Though some attributes definitely lie in that category (such as God's creation and rule over the universe) others (such as strength, will, wisdom, endurance, etc.) are qualities that God and humans share in ways that, though significantly different, are directly comparable and occasionally transferable. For example, though God's supernatural immunity from fatigue differs from humanity's natural susceptibility, according to Isa 40:28–31, humans can actually be infused by God's own power to endure.

It should be noted, of course, that humans are not *naturally* or *intrinsically* endowed with divine attributes. Their manifestation only comes from a symptotic participation in the divine, where God enables humans to act with His endurance, or His wisdom, or to see as He does, and yet humans never "become" divine themselves.[23] In addition to their dependency upon this symbiotic[24] relationship, humans also differ from God in other ways. As Cherbonnier says, "At two decisive points the Creator-God establishes his superiority over all creation, mankind included. First, He can do things that mere man can never do. He alone can confer existence. . . . Secondly, the superiority of the Creator to his creatures consists of his 'eternity.'[25] He can live forever, while they need not. They exist

23. Cf. Isa 40:28–31; Exod 31:3; and I Sam 16:7; Num 22:31; 2 Kgs 6:17, etc. There is a common theological distinction between partaking in the divine *nature,* as opposed to the divine *essence*. Biblically speaking, humans can partake in the former, thus exhibiting traits of the divine, but not the latter, in which they themselves would become deities (cf. Deut 4:35, 39; Isa 45:5, 14, 21, 22; Heb 6:4; 1 Pet 1:4).

24. More specifically, we mean a commensally symbiotic relationship as opposed to a mutually symbiotic one. This is a relationship in which one party benefits, but the other party is neither harmed nor in need of this relationship, as when a bird lives in a tree. Similarly, humans would greatly benefit from divine empowering, but God is not in need of this arrangement.

25. One wonders if Cherbonnier means here "everlastingness." Eternity usually implies a state of timelessness, whereas "everlasting" indicates activity in time, and yet spanning the duration of time. See Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality," and his "God Everlasting."

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only at his pleasure. . . . In short, the relation of the Creator to his creation is not that of logical disjunction, but the 'existential' relation of sovereignty."[26] However, despite the differences, God participates in categories of being and acting which are common to humans, and thus is not logically ruled out of these types of descriptions. Rather, He is sovereign over these areas, defining them by His own being rather than by human terms.

Summary

The point of this discussion is not to imply that the biblical texts equate humanity and God, for clearly, they take pains to distinguish the two. Rather, it is to elucidate the nature of this difference that turns out not to be homogeneous across all categories. Whereas God's creation and control of the universe is incomparable to man's power, and remains in a category all its own, (creation *ex nihilo,* etc.), no one claims that this is an anthropomorphic description. However, many other abilities predicated of God are either expected of humanity, and thus at least conceivable along the same lines, or are transferable from God to humanity.

This highlights the directional difference of von Rad's idea of theomorphism. Though some traits are unique to God, many are seen as *potentially* available to humans. The point of this is to say that for any given attribute ascribed to God in the Bible, it is important not to consider it as empty or fallacious talk simply because it seems anthropomorphic, but to compare how it is being used in its context and the manner and degree to which it becomes paradigmatic of the human application of the term. While God remains divine, humans reported to have encountered Him are often changed to become more like Him.[27]

We have established that *ontologically speaking,* the direction of transfer of meaning actually goes from the divine to the human. We have also seen that many terms are used of both God and humans, and yet not only in their respective modes. Sometimes humans are enabled to function beyond their own "natural" capabilities, both morally and otherwise. Similarly, God can be said to act in a manner less than His "supernatural"

26. Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," 203.

27. When humans are divinely "enabled," they nevertheless do not become "divine." Note all of the character flaws in those said to have been so empowered: e.g., Noah's drunkenness, Abraham's lying, Jacob's deception, Moses' dishonoring of Yahweh, David's adultery, Solomon's idolatry, Elijah's cowardice, etc. Though there are a few characters whose flaws seem to go unmentioned (Samuel, Daniel, etc.), there is never a clear implication that any of these characters attained divinity.

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capability would involve, if He decides the situation so warrants. This is a far cry from humans projecting their own traits upon the divine. However, as human language is developed around human usage of terms, what we still need to know is how to discern the sense of the divine which in turn sets the bar for humanity. To do this, we consider primary and derivative senses of terms.

Primary and Derivative Senses

To better understand the relationship between a term used for God and humans, Roger White talks of primary and derivative senses. He defines a primary sense as the sense presupposed by other senses. "When we say one sense is primary and another secondary, we are saying that to explain the secondary sense one must necessarily bring into one's account the notion signified by the word in the primary sense."[28] Hence, to comprehend what it means for humans to be "good," we must first understand what it means for God to be good.

White illustrates, "So that one could not explain the notion of a healthy climate without bringing in the notion of what it was for a man to be healthy: a healthy climate is precisely one which promotes health in an animal."[29] That is, rather than mere predications that can be applied in a more or less eminent manner to an object, White is arguing that a primary sense is *integral* to understanding the secondary sense. In our case, the biblical text would be arguing that understanding divine sight is in some way *integral* to the understanding of human sight.

White says,

> I argued that, contrary to many of our immediate intuitions, the primary sense of a large number of the words we use predicatively is not to be found in their use in making predications about everyday empirical objects, but rather in their use to allude to an idea or standard of comparison to which those objects in some way approximate. I suggested that this was in particular true of almost all the words at stake in the doctrine of the divine attributes, and further that there it was true that it was by no means a necessary condition of our having understood

28. Roger White, "Notes on Analogical Predication," 201.
29. Ibid.

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> the sense of the word that we should be able to spell out what in fact such an ideal would be like.[30]

Though this sounds like a neo-Platonic sense of ideal "forms," White distinguishes the two. He describes the problem with Plato's system saying,

> In his later dialogues, Plato was himself to see many of the grave difficulties involved in positing an ideal object that was φ and nothing but φ, but did not take the further step of seeing that his quest for a point of comparison by means of which we could see whether everyday objects did or did not approximate to being φ was not a quest for an object that was perfectly φ, but for an account of the primary sense of a word where in that primary sense it was not in the first instance predicated directly of anything at all, not even an ideal form.[31]

As an example, White takes the idea of kingship. In comparing notions of it within Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, he notes that human power is often lauded for eschewing morals in order to attain one's goal (The end justifies the means?). In contrast, Christ's kingship refuses this dodge of ethical issues and, taking the authorities head on, He suffers at their hands in order to bring about a new type of rule. "He [Jesus] established His solidarity with all despairing, sinning, lonely men, with all human failure, by refusing to acknowledge the absolute nature of the need to evade their condition if possible, but to relativize it to the will of Him who sent Him."[32] Hence, when we speak of Kingship, we speak of Christ's as its primary sense. White explains,

> It is in this strange overcoming of death, darkness, things which are not—by not evading them, but undergoing them in their full depths, that He establishes His Kingdom. And when we say neither Caesar, Pilate, Caiaphas, nor Ivan, nor their masters, death and violence, are Lords, but Jesus alone is Lord, we, however dimly we perceive what we are saying, affirm a finality to His kingship, which makes it appropriate for us to reserve the word "King" for Him and Him who sent Him, alone, and if we continue to use the word 'king' of the kings among the Gentiles, we see that we are now constrained to say that it is this latter sense of kingship which is the derivative one—that this kingship is only the regency for the conditions and constraints of this world

30. Ibid., 221–22.

31. Ibid., 223.

32. Ibid., 220.

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> that they treated as absolute, but which He treated with sovereign disdain by comparison with the will of His Father.[33]

This view is in accord with Barth's idea of the need for divine revelation in order to know not only God, but ourselves in relationship to Him. "Barth transforms our apprehension of an entire complex of theological questions by simply challenging the assumption that we know what being φ really is in independence of divine revelation, to learn there what truly constitutes being φ, being prepared to take this to extremes that may appear paradoxical and yet which can almost invariably be given a good and profound sense."[34] In fact, "Barth has argued with great subtlety in his doctrine of the Image of God in man for the theological possibility of our language containing words that in their full sense may only be used to describe God."[35] What this means is that, although human language initially gains its meaning from human usage, it is only fully comprehended when its divine referents are understood.

There remain two considerations. First of all, even if we grant divine epithets primary status, are they not still couched in human language? How is it that we can know the primary and thus the secondary aspects of any given predicate? Initially, of course, we only know the meaning of a given predicate within its context of human usage. When speaking of divine attributes, however, there is, of necessity, a lexical and epistemological gap. This is where Stern's approach to *de re* metaphors is helpful. When we cannot define something, the most we can do is to point to it, which is what Stern enables us to do. His "metaphorical character" does not define these attributes of God, but allows us to refer to them in an ambiguous state. Thus, instead of developing a definition of some divine attribute that can be applied in all instances, his metaphorical "character," allows us to "point" at this "primary" sense of the term without defining it for each of its instantiations. However, he takes us further by allowing us to flesh out the content of these metaphors, in a given context. Hence, we can speak more definitively of God's seeing *within* the Noah narrative, or the creation narrative (chap 1), or the Sodom pericope. It is in this manner that the secondary sense of the term is then linked to the primary *within* its own context of use.

This is not odd in itself, for human usage of a term is contextually-determined as well. If I see a "cat," we only know what these words

33. Ibid., 220–21.
34. Ibid., 224.
35. Ibid., 225.

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essentially entail by knowing the context. If I'm in a pet store, it may refer to the calico I'm intending to buy, but if I'm at a jazz club, it could refer to the saxophonist leading the band. Similarly, we are able to determine the nature of divine attributes as primary, only within their context of use.

The additional step we need to take, however, is to compare the contextualized usage of the divine action/attribute with that of the human in the same context. It is here where the hermeneutical circle is completed. Beginning with human language understood in human contexts, we move to divine referents by means of *de re* metaphors which point at the action/attribute. These are further delineated within a particular context. This contextualized usage is used as a sample or instantiation of the primary sense of the term. This divine usage is then reflected back upon typical human usage in a paradigmatic relationship, lending new perspective to the human term. Thus, by virtue of God's appropriation of human language in His self-revelation in the Scriptures, we are able to begin with humanly understood terms to gain a limited and contextually-bound comprehension of these terms applied to the divine realm.

The second consideration is that in this book, we are not dealing with "attributes." Rather, what Barth and Aquinas, according to White, do with the "perfections," we are doing with "actions" of God. These too, take their primary sense in God and secondary in humanity, according to the concept of the image of God.

Perhaps we can clarify this idea of theomorphic description by saying that the biblical writers attempted not to define God in human terms, but to define humanity on divine terms. That is, as human beings are the images of God (Gen 1:28, 9:6), they are not their own measure. Rather, their actions and character are wholly defined in terms of how they reflect God's actions and character (e.g., "Be holy for I am holy," Lev. 11:44, 19:2, 20:7, 26).

In fact, the biblical writers did not define God at all, leaving much of the *mysterium tremendum* all the more evident. They did not describe the mechanics of how God does things, like seeing across cosmic distances, but merely stated that He does. How could such an undefined notion become paradigmatic for humans as His images? Paul Ricoeur helpfully observes that in denoting something metaphorically, one actually, in part, reverses the denotation.

> For a painted figure to possess greyness is to say that it is an *example* of greyness; but to say that this, here, is an example of greyness is to say that greyness *as such* applies to . . . this

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> thing, hence denotes it. Accordingly the denotation relation is reversed. The picture denotes what it describes; but the colour grey is denoted by the predicate "grey." If, then, to possess is to exemplify, possession differs from reference only as to its direction. The term symmetrical in this context to "label" is "sample" (for instance, a sample of fabric). The sample "possesses" the characteristics (colour, texture, etc.) designated by the label. It is denoted by that which it exemplifies; . . . predicates are labels in verbal systems.[36]

Though the biblical text does not often explicitly define its predications of God, it overflows with samples. These are what we have to understand the attributes and actions of God, and thus measure those of humanity.

God's Sight

For purposes of illustration, to say "God sees" is to predicate something of him, but also to give an example, or in Ricoeur's terms, a sample, of that very predicate. Thus, in stating that God sees, we do more than claim something of God, we claim something of "seeing." Many of these are acts that only God is able to do. With seeing, for instance, the description is not meant to make a rough approximation of God's activity using inadequate and inappropriate analogies through finite human language, but to refine the concept itself in terms of divine exemplification. Rather than defining God's sight, detailing how it functions and delimiting its parameters, these expressions effectively sample it by its usage. This usage can vary from context to context, alternately as value judgments (Gen 1:4ff.; 16:13), ethical ones (Gen 11, 18), the perception of inner realities (Gen 22; 1 Sam 16), spiritual ones (2 Kgs 6:17), legal witnessing (Gen 18:21, cf. Isa 43:10; 44:8), displaying compassion (Gen 29; Exod 2:23–25; 3:7–9), or seeing the future (Isa 44). These categories are not merely human ones taken superlatively, but distinctly divine in their scope, object, and effect. And yet, it remains possible for these applications to be imbued to the human.

Let us look at some of these "samples" of divine sight and their implications for human sight. We will initially look at 1 Sam 16:7, examining the explicit nature of the difference between divine and human sight, as well as the implied transference of these abilities. Next we will look at

36. Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 234.

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Num 22:31 and 2 Kgs 6:1, exploring a spiritual sense of divine sight. These are distinct in that human sight is augmented here by the divine.

According to the heart (1 Samuel 16:7)

Though God is able to "see" things humans cannot see on their own, He often sees things they simply don't choose to see. 1 Samuel 16:7b says,

> God *sees* not as man sees, for man looks according to the eyes,
> but the LORD looks according to the heart.[37]

This does not merely denote the difference in the object of the sight,[38] but in the mode of seeing—"according to the heart." More important for our discussion is the first part of the verse, in which the LORD commands Samuel, "Do not look (אַל־תַּבֵּט) at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him." Though in verse 6, Samuel had seen (*rāʾâ*) the stature of David's elder brother Eliab and mistaken it for God's anointing, even David is described in glowing terms (v. 12). Yet, it is a man after God's own heart whom Samuel is to see and anoint (1 Sam 13:14).[39] Thus, divine sight is not merely human sight *par excellence*, for no amount of visual examination of a person's appearance will allow proper judgments of one's character and destiny.

We find here that though God doesn't see as man does, man occasionally sees (at least partially) as God does. Notably, Samuel is called upon to use his sight differently. He is to choose not on the basis of appearance, but regardless of it, as both candidates mentioned held impressive physical features. Rather, he was to depend on God's sight (cf. v. 12 with v. 7).

Thus, divine sight is not exclusively a transcendent phenomenon, but something that humans are to image. Neither God nor man physically looks upon the incorporeal entity of the "heart," but both are to judge

37. The mode of sight is emphasized in the Hebrew by placing the ל preposition before eyes and heart. Thus, it actually says that man looks *according to the eyes* (הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לָעֵינַיִם) but the LORD sees *according to the heart* (וַיהוָה יִרְאֶה לַלֵּבָב).

38. NIV, NASB, translate "man looks . . . *at* the outward appearance," whereas KJV, RSV, ESV have "*on* the outward appearance."

39. 1 Samuel 13:14 "But now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."(NASB, 1995) Note that the Hebrew says, (בִּקֵּשׁ יְהוָה לוֹ אִישׁ כִּלְבָבוֹ), literally, "The LORD *sought* for Himself a man *according to His heart*." Though the verb is different, it only represents a pointed search for the man to be Israel's next king, whose results are revealed in 16:7.

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according[40] to it. This "sight" is metaphorical for both humans and God, in that it refers to discernment and not merely visual recognition. And yet, as both human and divine "seeing" require acts of giving attention toward an object, weighing characters and attitudes, and ultimately, making a judgment, they represent historical, real-world actions.

Spiritual perception (Numbers 22:31; 2 Kings 6:17)

The episode in 1 Sam 16 does not explicitly say Samuel saw with God's eyes, but only that his use of typical human sight was condemned and further judgment instructed to be made upon other bases. However, other pericopes shed more light on this phenomenon. In Num 22:31, the LORD is said to have opened Balaam's eyes to see the angel who was about to kill him, and whom the donkey he was riding had seen. It was not that the angel appeared (niph. of *rā'ā*), but that LORD affects Balaam's ability to perceive. Likewise, He "opens" (*pātaḥ*) the donkey's mouth and she tells Balaam what she had seen. Balaam's eyes are then "uncovered" (*gālâ*) by the LORD, and he admits that he had sinned—"because *he did not know* the angel was standing to meet him." Apparently this lack of knowledge, resulting from the lack of perception, along with his resultant beating of the donkey, consisted of an offense against God. And yet it is only the change in Balaam's perception that makes him aware of all this. Balaam is empowered (his eyes "opened") to become aware of the spiritual reality of the situation and not just the physical one.

Similarly, in 2 Kings 6:17, we see a case where sight is given a paradigm in the biblical text through God's appropriation of it. Elisha asks that the eyes of his servant be opened. He is then enabled by the LORD to see the chariot armies of God all around him:

> And *the LORD opened the youth's eyes*, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha." (emphasis mine)

The salient feature here is that Elisha had already seen this reality, as he already knew that there were more warriors with them, in this case spiritual ones, than in the enemy camp. (v. 16) Ironically, the next verse (v. 18) has him asking God to strike the enemy armies with blindness. This is not necessarily physical blindness, but lack of discernment, since Elisha

40. The Hebrew preposition ל is used in this case to indicate "according to." If the instrument of sight had been indicated, the preposition would have been ב "with" the eyes. (Cf. Ps 91:8, Isa 52:8, etc.)

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proceeds to lead them to the king whom they are seeking, only into the midst of the city, and thus into his power. It is this that they realize when they are "unblinded" (v. 20).

So, in both the episodes with Balaam and Elisha, we see God enabling and disabling sight. This, however, is not normal vision, but a recognition of the presence of spiritual beings and the true identity of physical ones. It is metaphorical in that it is not the typical use of sight, (their eyes had to be "opened"), but appears to be reflective of a reality within the text (recognition of the angels or hosts).

Not only these rather unusual episodes, but many more speak of Yahweh causing people to see or to be blind, including His own people. This becomes a major theme in Isaiah, where God commissions Isaiah saying,

> Go, and tell this people: "Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand." Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed. (Isa 6:9–10)

This is in order for the people not to respond to God in order that they may receive their punishment. This too, is not a physical blindness or deafness, but one concerning the perception of spiritual truth.[41]

From these examples, we see that divine sight is not derived from human, but something that has its own qualities. It involves perception of spiritual realities such as angels and God Himself, as well as intangible things such as the character of people. One could argue that this is simply applying a human term to what God is doing, except for the fact that humans are then enabled, and sometimes expected, to do this same action. It is a metaphorical usage, then, not in the sense of applying a human term to the divine, but in applying one typically used of the physical realm to that of the spiritual for both God and humans.

Metaphor *De Re*

What we propose is that this "divine sight" is a phenomenon, a way of interacting with creation, entirely distinct from normal sight, which takes

41. Cf. Deuteronomy 28:29, 31, 32, 34. Here the curse for idolatry is that the Israelites will, "grope as a blind man at noon" and yet they will be driven mad, "by what they see." The blindness caused by the curse is spiritual, not physical.

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upon many different forms.[42] As humans have no term for this, for it is not natural for them, the metaphor of sight is being used in a catachretical manner, to fill the lexical gap. This is where Stern's *de re*[43] metaphors are helpful. He distinguishes between referring *de dicto* and *de re* where the former is a reference using, "a purely conceptualized individuating representation, where we express it by using vocabulary in our linguistic, or conceptual, repertoire that is determinately true or false of arbitrary things without depending on features of its context of application."[44] *De Re*, on the other hand, is a reference that expresses a, "property only by way of a sample that we demonstrate in context or by way of applying the property to a particular object in a context, without knowing, and perhaps even without there being in the language, a label or concept for that property."[45] It refers, in the manner of a demonstrative, without defining the referent semantically. Sight, as a metaphor, has a metaphorical character which, combined with its content in a given context, determines its meaning. With Samuel, in the context of anointing a king, divine sight refers to a specific ability to read the character of a person. This is especially pertinent considering the fact that Saul, the former and failed king, had been described as,

> a choice and handsome *man*, and there was not a more handsome person than he among the sons of Israel; from his shoulders and up he was taller than any of the people. (1 Kgs 9:2)

Obviously, an impressive physical appearance did not make for a good king. Furthermore, the eventual king, David, is actually described as no less attractive.

> Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." (1 Sam 16:12b)

Hence, physical appearance could not *distinguish* between the faithful and unfaithful kings.

In the context of Elisha facing an enemy army, this sight takes on the meaning of perceiving the spiritual realities, in this case (angelic?) armies.

42. In the examples just mentioned, 1 Sam 16:7 referred more to a discernment, whereas 2 Kings and Numbers to an apprehension of the presence of spiritual beings.

43. A term he borrows from Tyler Burge, "Belief De Re." *Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977) 338–62.

44. Stern, *Metaphor in Context*, 188.

45. Ibid.

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Similarly, with a wayward prophet like Balaam, this ability can also be used to perceive spiritual beings coming against oneself. When confronting the idolatrous audience of the prophet Isaiah, this sight can mean a discernment of truth and the divine will, or lack thereof. In each case, the exact mechanics of such sight are left unspecified, except that God Himself enables or disables it. In terms of metaphor theories, this means the entailments of sight involving their mechanics are backgrounded or hidden, whereas other aspects—such as their objects and sources—are foregrounded. What Stern helps us see is that this metaphor of divine sight, though generally undefined, is delimited by the character of the metaphor, and thus semantically determined in each individual context.

Conclusion

In sum, biblical anthropomorphisms are metaphorical, but not strictly derived from the human arena. Because humans are created as the image of God, there is an ontological basis for their descriptors to refer and refer accurately to God. They describe God in a supernatural sense of these terms, and yet one in which humans have potential to access. Thus, it is misleading to speak of these attributes and actions as drawn from the human realm and somewhat naively applied to God. Rather, the concepts, originally understood from their employment in the human realm, are applied to God *metaphorically* in such a way as to "point" to the divine attribute or action, without fully defining it. Their meaning is then further delineated according to its contextualized usage or sampling (Ricoeur). This then becomes paradigmatic for human behavior, *in that context*, and sheds new light on how human behavior is then seen (e.g., kingship). Biblically speaking, these concepts originate in the divine sphere and are occasionally applied to humans.

For human beings to be defined in terms of God means that the traits used to describe them do double duty. We found that the differences between humans and God as described in the more definitive statements in the Bible (e.g., 1 Sam 16:7) were not usually found to be that of the transcendent versus the immanent. Rather, they were matters of character and choice, which lent to the idea that in certain cases, both humans and God could potentially act in similar manners. This said, there are verbs and attributes assigned to God in the Bible for which there is no human counterpart, but these do not consist of anthropomorphisms (or theomorphisms for that matter). What we do find in the terms that are predicated

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of both God and humans is that often, there is a natural and supernatural sense of the term. These can, at times, be used of either humans or God, though with special limitations. For example, humans are not able to function supernaturally unassisted. And yet this assistance is offered. Conversely, God can function in "natural" ways if He so chooses. Often here, though, the mechanics of these "natural" functions are different for God than for corporeal humans, and yet they function similarly *within* the narrative.

What this means, however, is that as these traits are not derived from their human counterparts, they cannot be defined once and for all, but must be defined according to their context. Hence, by appealing to Stern's approach, we are able to point to the attribute, or in our case, action, using the metaphor, but cannot spell out its meaning except in individual contexts. When these are examined, we are then able to outline the entailments that this action has in this particular instance. In so doing, we are also able to reflect back upon the human traits in the passage, noting their similarities and differences with respect to the divine. In this manner, the biblical narratives do not define God in terms of humanity, but seek to redefine, or at least reevaluate humanity, in terms of the One in whose image, it claims, they are made.

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