



How God Describes God

The Use of Anthropomorphisms in Scripture

by Tim Kelley

I was driving along the other day, listening to the radio and observing the scenery, then realized I had gone too far, so I asked “how do I get to John’s Grill from here? Her soft voice asked, “Which John’s Grill? The one on 4th Street or the one at Crossroads Mall?. I responded “Crossroads Mall”. She gingerly replied “Look here and I’ll show you the way”. So I looked and her finger pointed to our current location on the map. She hesitated for a moment, her brain obviously churning over all the possible routes, then offered two routes - a shorter route and a faster route. I asked her to choose the fastest route, so she drew a blue line on the map marking our route and said to turn right at the next intersection. As we went along, she would turn the map with each turn so that the map would always correspond with our route. While gazing off at the mountains in the distance, I again missed a turn and she instructed me - in a somewhat stern voice - to make a U-turn to get back on course. As we neared our destination, she seemed relieved that we were almost there and exclaimed “We have arrived! John’s Grill is on the right”.

To whom was I talking - my wife, my daughter, a job associate, or my GPS?

Of course, any of these could be the right answer, but 20 years ago, that would have not been the case. 20 years ago, only a human had a brain, fingers, a voice with differing inflections, the ability to figure out multiple solutions to a problem, then give you a choice as to which one to use, the ability to “turn” a map, and the ability to determine your location.

What I’ve just illustrated is an example of a literary device called “anthropomorphism”. According to the Oxford Dictionary¹, anthropomorphism is

“The attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a deity, animal, or object”.

The word “anthropomorphism” is derived from the two Greek words “anthropos” which means “man”, and “morphe” which means “form”. So anthropomorphism is when you apply man-like forms to anything other than humans. Words that are closely associated are “anthropopathism”² that means to assign human feelings to a non-human, and “anthropopraxis”³ which means to assign human activities to a non-human. Both of these words are generally encapsulated in the word “anthropomorphism”.

In our example, the GPS - an inanimate object - has human characteristics that were inconceivable a generation ago. The GPS can show us a finger, yet it doesn’t have muscles or blood. It has a “brain” but it’s an electronic processor that is very limited in what it can do in comparison to a human brain. It has an almost human voice, yet it doesn’t have vocal cords. We apply to it all these “human” features knowing that it is no-where near human. Why? Because for the reader or hearer, it’s more clear to describe the image on the screen as a “finger” than it is to describe it as “a 3/16” long by 1/16” wide digitally controlled cluster of light emitting diodes”. Thus, the use of this literary device provides the reader - in one or two words - a much clearer image of what the writer is trying to convey than what could be said in a number of other words.

Another advantage of using anthropomorphism is that it makes the object more “personal” to us. That’s why ships are called “she” (giving it a sex) and why we give our pets - and sometimes our car - a name. During World War II, it was quite common for pilots to give their fighter planes and bombers a name because it gave a sense of personality to the airplane . . . sort of like “we’re looking out for each other”.

¹ http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/anthropomorphism

² Anthrope = man; pathos = suffering (old English) or feeling

³ Anthrope = man; praxis = practice

Though in my example, I've applied anthropomorphism to an inanimate object, it's most commonly used in regards to deities . . . gods, both the pagan gods of the nations as well as the true God - the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Bible is full of anthropomorphic statements. God is said to have eyes, a nose, mouth, breath, voice, and other human characteristics that you would not normally attribute to the omnipresent God of the universe. We're all aware of them and have read them hundreds of times. So why is this important for us to study them? Does it really matter that we are aware of the hundreds of anthropomorphic likenesses written in the scripture? Yes it does, because to some - especially Judaism⁴, applying human characteristics to the omnipotent God is considered a form of idolatry. Thus, if we honor a god who appears to have human attributes, we are in their minds - idolaters.

In this study, I want to show that God oftentimes used anthropomorphic terms to describe himself. We'll see a number of examples, then look at what Jewish writers have to say about this literary device. We'll see what Judaism has done to "correct" the scriptures when it was used, and finally, we'll see how Jewish thinking in regards to giving human attributes to God causes them problems when it comes to the "deity" of Yeshua.

Please note that this study is not intended to be a statement of God's nature, simply an illustration of how God describes Himself and how Judaism has a problem working with it.

How Does God Describe Himself?

What is God? It's quite clear in scripture that YHVH set's Himself apart from mortal man. He is "holy" - "qadosh" - "set apart", yet He wants us to be like him, not Him like us -

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 11:45** 'For I *am* the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I *am* holy.

But God is omnipotent - all powerful - but we're not. God is omnipresent⁵ - but we're not. God is omniscient - all knowing - but we're not. God is an invisible spirit, but we're not! We cannot imagine a being that can be everywhere, but yet can dwell in a tent. We can't imagine a being that knows everything, but did not know where Adam and Eve had hid themselves.

How do you describe a God that is beyond description? Isaiah says of Him -

^{ESV} **Isaiah 40:28** Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

Job says that God's ways are beyond finding out -

^{NKJ} **Job 5:9** Who does great things, and unsearchable, Marvelous things without number.

David says His greatness is beyond comprehension -

^{NKJ} **Psalms 145:3** Great *is* the LORD, and greatly to be praised; And His greatness *is* unsearchable.

Quite literally, the scriptures convey the thought that it's impossible for us to understand the greatness, the awesomeness of God. Yet the scriptures also point out that our God is a God who wants to dwell with His people -

^{NKJ} **Exodus 29:45** "I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God.

⁴ A reference to the religion commonly referred to as "Judaism" and specifically those of that religion that subscribe to the principle of faith that states that God is incorporeal, i.e. - without body or form

⁵ Psalm 139:7-10

Not only does He want to dwell with us, He wants to marry us. He wants to be our husband and we be His wife -

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 54:5** For your Maker *is* your husband, The LORD of hosts *is* His name; And your Redeemer *is* the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth.

How can we learn to be like a God that is beyond comprehension, yet wants to be so close? We can't - unless God shows Himself to us in terms we can understand. If we cannot see Him as he is, He has to liken himself to us - since we cannot ascend to Him, He has to descend to us. In other words, if God wants us to learn about Him and His desire for us, He's got to teach us those things in terms we can understand. That's where anthropomorphisms come in.

Examples of Anthropomorphisms

Let's look at some of the many anthropomorphisms found in the scripture, starting with those that apply to the human physique -

^{NKJ} **Exodus 3:20** "So I will stretch out My **hand** and strike Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in its midst; and after that he will let you go.

^{NKJ} **Psalms 89:20** I have found My servant David; With My holy oil I have anointed him, with whom My **hand** shall be established; Also My **arm** shall strengthen him.

^{NKJ} **2 Samuel 22:16** Then the channels of the sea were seen, The foundations of the world were uncovered, At the rebuke of the LORD, At the blast of the **breath** of His **nostrils**.

^{NKJ} **2 Kings 19:16** "Incline Your **ear**, O LORD, and hear; open Your **eyes**, O LORD, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 33:20** But He said, "You cannot see **My face**; for no man shall see Me, and live."

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 4:30** "When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the LORD your God and obey His **voice**

^{NKJ} **Numbers 6:25** The LORD make His **face** shine upon you, And be gracious to you;

Not only does YHVH describe himself by the use of the human physique, He also appears to perform actions that are human, for instance -

^{NKJ} **Genesis 1:3** Then God **said**, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

^{NKJ} **Genesis 3:8** And they heard the sound of the LORD God **walking** in the garden in the cool of the day . . .

^{NKJ} **Genesis 9:14-15** "It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud and I will **remember** My covenant which *is* between Me and you . . .

^{NKJ} **Exodus 2:24** So God **heard** their groaning, and God **remembered** His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

^{NKJ} **2 Chronicles 12:7** Now when the LORD **saw** that they humbled themselves, the word of the LORD came to Shemaiah, saying, "They have humbled themselves;

^{NKJ} **Psalms 139:5** (O LORD) You have hedged me behind and before, And **laid Your hand** upon me.

God also describes Himself through the use of human emotion -

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 59:15** So truth fails, And he *who* departs from evil makes himself a prey. Then the LORD saw *it*, and it **displeased** Him That *there was* no justice.

NKJ **Exodus 20:5** you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am a jealous* God . . .

NKJ **Psalm 37:13** The Lord **laughs** at him, For He sees that his day is coming.

NKJ **Judges 2:18** And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to **pity** by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them.

NKJ **Deuteronomy 1:37** "The LORD was also **angry** with me for your sakes, saying, 'Even you shall not go in there

NKJ **Psalm 5:5** The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You **hate** all workers of iniquity.

NKJ **Isaiah 61:8** "For I, the LORD, **love** justice; I **hate** robbery for burnt offering; I will direct their work in truth, And will make with them an everlasting covenant.

These are just a sampling of the numerous times God describes himself in human terms. You can add to these the times God refers to Himself as a husband to Israel, thus putting Himself even more on the same level as a human being -

NKJ **Jeremiah 3:14** "Return, O backsliding children," says the LORD; "for **I am married to you**. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.

From these examples we can clearly see that YHVH has no problem defining himself in human terms, but does that mean that He is human . . . or even part human? Absolutely not. He is the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, spirit God. With His spirit dwelling in us, we may be part Him, but He's not part us. By using human terms to describe Himself, God lets us know that He is really involved in our world and in our lives. Because we experience jealousy when the one we love turns to another, we can feel how He feels when we turn away from Him. Because we see our earthly father's face shine when we please him, we can know that God's "face" shines when we please our Heavenly Father.

Is it then wrong to think of God in Human terms? After all, doesn't the scripture say that Adam was made in the "image of God"?

NKJ **Genesis 1:26-27** Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness " ²⁷ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

If Adam and Eve were made in the image of God, could it not be said that the anthropomorphisms of the Bible are not representations of God using human characteristics, but are representations of God using Godly characteristics? In other words, since God shared His likeness with mankind, the likeness is still His, and thus God is actually describing Himself in terms that apply first to Him, and secondarily to us.

Though this might seem like a reasonable concept, it doesn't set well with Judaism. Today's Judaism strictly forbids representing God in human form. According to the Encyclopedia Judaica:

" . . . it is accepted as a major axiom of Judaism, from the biblical period onward, that no material representation of the Deity is possible or permissible.⁶

We can understand that, but do we agree with that? God commands us in the Torah to not make any representations of Him⁷, but does God forbid himself from making representations of himself? After all, did

⁶ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0002_0_01141.html; Anthropomorphism

⁷ Exodus 20:4; Deut. 4:15-19; Deut. 5:8-9

he not appear to the Israelites as a cloud by day and a fire by night? Was that not a physical representation of the God of Israel?⁸

On the “Judaism 101” web site under the heading “The Nature of God”, it goes a little further⁹ -

“Although many places in scripture and Talmud speak of various parts of G-d's body (the Hand of G-d, G-d's wings, etc.) or speak of G-d in anthropomorphic terms (G-d walking in the garden of Eden, G-d laying tefillin, etc.), Judaism firmly maintains that G-d has no body. Any reference to G-d's body is simply a figure of speech, a means of making G-d's actions more comprehensible to beings living in a material world. Much of Rambam's Guide for the Perplexed is devoted to explaining each of these anthropomorphic references and proving that they should be understood figuratively.

We are forbidden to represent G-d in a physical form. That is considered idolatry. The sin of the Golden Calf incident was not that the people chose another deity, but that they tried to represent G-d in a physical form.”

I can agree with that last part - the golden calf was an attempt to represent God in a physical way, but that is what they did, not what God did. But is God forbidden to represent himself by a voice, or by a hand? If God cannot speak with a human voice, who then spoke to the Israelites on Mount Sinai? Was that voice simply a “figure of speech”? If so, then is his “love” for us simply a “figure of speech” as well?

Could it be that Judaism has painted itself into a corner? Yes - I believe it has. The Encyclopedia Judaica continues¹⁰ -

“Ultimately, every religious expression is caught in the dilemma between, on the one hand, the theological desire to emphasize the absolute and transcendental nature of the Divine, thereby relinquishing its vitality and immediate reality and relevance, and on the other hand, the religious need to conceive of the Deity and man's contact with Him in some vital and meaningful way. Jewish tradition has usually shown preference for the second tendency, and there is a marked readiness to speak of God in a very concrete and vital manner and not to recoil from the dangers involved in the use of apparent anthropomorphisms.”

Even though Judaism forbids the representation of God in a physical form, they prefer to make such relationships if it helps express God in a meaningful way. They realize that if humans cannot identify with God in ways they can understand and comprehend, they can have no meaningful relationship with Him. Thus we find throughout the history of Judaism an attempt to “dehumanize” God in some areas, but “humanize” him in others. In the Septuagint there are a number of examples of their “dehumanizing” attempts. Take, for instance, the scripture where God said He intended to “dwell” with Israel. In the JPS Tenakh¹¹ (as well as most Christian Bibles), this verse (Exodus 29:45) is translated this way -

^{JPS} **Exodus 29:45** And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God.

But in the Septuagint, it's translated -

^{LXE} **Exodus 29:45** And I will be called upon among the children of Israel, and will be their God.

The writers of the LXX have made a clear attempt to dehumanize YHVH. Another example is in Isaiah 54:5. In this passage the LXX totally disregards the Hebrew word “ba'al” which always implies a husband or marital relationship. Here's the verse in the JPS -

⁸ Exodus 13:21 - the Hebrew indicates that God actually “walked” before them.

⁹ <http://www.jewfaq.org/m/g-d.htm>

¹⁰ Ibid 6; heading “In the Bible”; emphasis mine

¹¹ Jewish Publication Society, Bible Works edition

^{JPS} **Isaiah 54:5** For thy Maker is thy husband, the LORD of hosts is His name; and the Holy One of Israel is thy Redeemer, the God of the whole earth shall He be called.

But the LXX translation reads like this -

^{LXE} **Isaiah 54:5** For *it is* the Lord that made thee; the Lord of hosts is his name: and he that delivered thee, he is the God of Israel, *and* shall be called so by the whole earth.

Obviously, these 2nd century BC writers deemed it irresponsible or demeaning to consider that the creator of the universe might have a relationship with His people, and thus changed the text to support their ideology. But they were not alone.

The Masoretic Text is the basis for “Old Testament” portion of most “Protestant” Bibles. Between the 7th and 10th centuries CE, a group of Jews known as the Masorites are credited with copying and editing the currently available Biblical texts to create what might be called a “standard” text for all Judaism. As part of their editing process, the Masorites added certain details such as vowel points, pronunciation marks, and stress accents. In addition, they changed certain parts of the text where they believed previous copyists may have made a mistake or altered the text. Trying not to be deceptive, they noted all their changes, along with the original reading of the text, and called it an “Emendation”¹² of the Sofarim” or alterations by previous scribes. How did they determine if a mistake had been made? We’re not sure. It could have simply been that the “primitive” text did not agree with their ideology. Bottom line - we don’t know if the “primitive” text is correct or if the Masorite’s changes are correct. Never-the-less, our Bibles contain the 7th to 10th century CE Masorite’s changes, not the “primitive” or what may have been the original text.

These notations were written in the top, bottom, and side margins of the text in what’s called the “masorah”. A list of 18 notations have been compiled and can be found in the appendix of the “Companion Bible” by E.W. Bullinger¹³. According to Bullinger, all the 18 alterations (the emendations) to what the scribes thought were the original text were made before the 1st century. One example of the Masorites changes is in the story of the angels visiting Abraham. Here’s the Masoretic version using the JPS Tenakh, published by the Jewish Publication Society -

^{JPS} **Genesis 18:22** And the men turned from thence, and went toward Sodom; but Abraham stood yet before the LORD.

In this verse, it appears that Abraham’s visitors had headed toward Sodom and Abraham was standing in front of YHVH to ask for clarification. But the original “primitive” text it states it a different way.

Genesis 18:22 And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but YHVH stood yet before the Abraham.

In the eastern cultures, and in many western cultures, the lesser person stands before the greater person. That’s why the scripture says -

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 19:32** ' You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I *am* the LORD.

This is a matter of honor, and in the eyes of the Masorites, Abraham would not be honoring YHVH if YHVH stood before Abraham. In other words, YHVH standing before Abraham made YHVH too “human”.

Another is David’s response when Shimei was cursing him while fleeing from Absalom. In the Masoretic text it says -

¹² alteration to the text

¹³ Companion Bible; E.W. Bullinger; 1922; Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI.; appendix 33

^{JPS} **2 Samuel 16:12** It may be that the LORD will look on mine eye, and that the LORD will requite me good for his cursing of me this day.'

But in the “primitive” text, it reads -

2 Samuel 16:12 YHVH will behold with His eye, and that the LORD will requite me good for his cursing of me this day.'

Obviously, for God to have eyes was too anthropomorphic for the Masorites, thus they shielded Him by changing the text. If one were to study all 18 emendations listed by Bullinger, they would find that the majority of them were for the purpose of shielding God from expressing Himself with human attributes. Yet in spite of their desire to “shield” God from looking too “human” or for doing human things, many Jewish writings show that they themselves sometimes portrayed God in human terms. Again, quoting from the Encyclopedia Judaica ¹⁴ -

“At times the rabbis resort to anthropomorphic language in order to drive home a moral lesson. Thus God's "descent" on Mount Sinai¹⁵ is used for the following exhortation: "Let a man always learn from his Creator, for here the Holy One blessed be He forsook all of the mountains and high hills and caused His presence to rest on the lowly Mt. Sinai" (Sot. 5a). Similarly, on the third day after the circumcision of Abraham, "the Holy One blessed be He said to the ministering angels: Let us go down and visit the sick man.””

Thus even the Jews recognize the futility in trying to describe a relationship between the omnipotent God and His people without using human likenesses. There are many other examples of God being shown to have human characteristics in the Talmud, the Targums, and other Jewish writings. We can therefore conclude that Judaism - though it holds as dogma that God must not be described in human terms - does not always practice what it preaches.

How does this affect Judaism's understanding of the Messiah? Though Judaism gives a number of reasons why they deny that Yeshua is the Messiah, one of those reasons is that He stated that He was the “son of God”. In their mind that was blasphemy because it ascribe human attributes to the Creator God. Having sons is the product of human activity, and even though the Tnakh gives numerous examples of where He did things that were “human”, God would never do anything that would produce a son . . . and even if God did somehow have a son, that son could not be standing before them in human form.

It's quite clear - Judaism is not in agreement with God in the matter of anthropomorphism. Though, down through the ages, they have taken great strides to separate God from anything that might portray Him with a physical body - even to the point of altering the sacred texts - they themselves succumb to the realization that humans cannot begin to understand God without thinking of Him in a human way. Since they know that, and since we know that, could it not be possible that God knows it as well and thus at some time in universal history, decided to reveal Himself to mankind with all the thoughts, actions, and various human parts He had previously mentioned combined in one being? Could that be possible? Maybe God hinted at that possibility when His words were projected from what looked like a burning bush and he said -

אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה

"ehya - asher - ehya"

“I will be what I will be”

Shalom Alecheim

¹⁴ Ibid 6; heading “Aggadic Literature”

¹⁵ Exodus 19:18