A Human-Shaped God

Theology of an Embodied God

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Acknowledgments

I've worked on this book for at least ten years, from the initial idea to outlining the chapters, to compiling a proposal, to landing a publisher, and, finally, to writing the thing.

The idea began when I read Benjamin D. Sommer's incredible monograph, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Sommer introduced me to a new way of imagining God. In many ways, this book is my attempt to apply Sommer's insights to Christian theology.

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My incredible daughter, Grey, was born about the time I had the idea for this book. She has given me so much joy as I have written it. One of the reasons I wrote this book is because I am convinced that for the dominant streams of North American Christianity to have any appeal and meaning for my daughter's generation, they must radically change the ways they view God. This book is a very small contribution to that effort, but hopefully for at least a few people it is a meaningful one.

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Finally, I dedicate this book to my brother, Andrew. A few years ago he was lying on his bed resting after we returned from one of his chemo treatments. He turned to me and asked about my book. He wanted to know all about it, what it was about, how far along I was, if I had landed a publisher yet. After I explained the general idea, he told me, "The world needs this book." He did not live to see it published, but I like to think that he is glad this book is now in your hands.

A Short Note to the Reader

Back in the early aughts a group of activists fought plans to build Europe's largest wind farm in the Brindled Moor on Lewis and Harris, the largest island of Scotland's Outer Hebrides.[1] The energy company behind this plan, along with most of Britain's urban population, viewed the moor as a wasteland, a wilderness, a *terra nullius*. They assumed it was empty of life, a barren space of nothing. Those supporting the wind farm wanted to turn this nothing into something, convert its barrenness into electrons. Doing so would obliterate the ecosystems and topography of the moor. But the activists opposing the wind farm had a difficult task. It's hard to save something that people believe is nothing.

The protesters found encouragement in the observation of American geographer Yi Fu Tuan, "It is precisely what is invisible in the land that makes what is merely empty space to one person, a place to another."[2] This was the dilemma the protesters faced. The land wasn't invisible to them, but it was to outsiders. The opponents of the wind farm were mostly locals who knew the moor intimately. They understood that it teems with life, that it is filled with intricate plant and animal systems. In their minds it is anything but barren.

The protesters realized the reason the moor was alive to them and dead to city folks was because urban dwellers lack the vocabulary to understand it. Even people who visited the moor and walked through it for the first time would exclaim, "It's nothing but heather!" They had no idea what bog myrtle was, much less tormentil, milkworts, and sphagnum mosses. It was right under their feet but they couldn't see it. They had no words for what was in front of their eyes. The only terms they could associate with the moor were "vast," "dark," and "empty." Paucity of words made them blind.

One of the leaders of the task force working to prevent the development wrote, "What is required is a new nomenclature of landscape and how we

1. This story is taken from Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), 27–32.

2. This is Barry Lopez's summary of Yi-Fu Tuan's thoughts, as cited by Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 29.

relate to it, so that conservation becomes a natural form of human awareness, and so that it ceases to be under-written and under-appreciated and thus readily vulnerable to desecration."[3] And so he compiled what he called a counter-desecration phrasebook. It was a list of words with definitions that provide the vocabulary one needs to understand the moor in its fullness and beauty.

Deficient vocabulary affects other relationships in addition to our interaction with the natural world. Painter and writer John Berger observes, "Much of what happens to us in life is nameless because our vocabulary is too poor."[4] And as we've seen, if something is nameless it is often invisible. I have come to believe that our theological discourse suffers from this. The lexicons we use to describe God have many gaps and, accordingly, much of who God is is invisible to us. We might be tempted to believe, however, that our theologies already have rich and deep sets of terms at their disposal. This is partially true.

Theological vocabularies serve a great purpose in giving us "swift, non-laborious, and non-repetitive access" to the content of the Bible.[5] The messages of Scripture are easier to remember when we have specific terms to explain them. We can more easily understand who and what God is when we have a list of adjectives at the ready.[6] But none of our vocabularies comprehensively describe the divine. For instance, theologies that describe a god who knows everything that happens, is at every place at the same time, is constant and unchanging, and does not ultimately have material form describe a god that is very different from the kind of god who inhabits many parts of the Old Testament. On the other hand, theologies that picture a god who is constantly changing and developing don't seem to match the vision of Hebrews 13:8, which pictures Christ as the same "yesterday and today and forever."

As beneficial as theological vocabularies are, they also hem us in and constrain our capacity for imaginative thought.[7] The act of defining God necessarily states what God isn't. It draws a boundary around the ideas that are permissible for us to have about the divine. This was one of the reasons early theologians compiled lists of attributes for God: to prevent the pious from

3. Alec Findley, cited by Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 31.

4. *Confabulations* (London: Penguin, 2016), 107.

5. John Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," *Anglican Theological Review* 90:4 (2008): 750.

6. However, see Kwame Bediako's valuable observation that the desire to produce a detailed, literary theology runs the risk of underappreciating or even denigrating oral and grassroots theologies. *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 17–18.

7. Part of this constraint is purposeful. If theological reflection remains abstract and ethereal instead of concrete and embodied, the systems of power have a far greater chance of staying in place. Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systematic Evil* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 11–30.

becoming heretics.[8] Theological terms form protective walls that keep our thoughts within prescribed limits.[9] Perhaps in some ways this is good, but an unintended consequence is that our theological constructs often prevent us from reading Scripture well. Theological vocabularies can become thin and ill-fitting when they meet certain passages. The Bible becomes for us a dead space like the Brindled Moor to outsiders. We mine the Old Testament for principles and truths but fail to wrestle with its stories. We eschew its complicated and multitextured presentation of God in favor of more uniform understandings. Ancient authors embedded certain ideas about God in the pages of the Old Testament that we are not able to see. We have been blinded and blinkered by the theologies that were intended to be our aids.[10] Those of us who wish to think about the God of the Old Testament need a counter-desecration phrasebook of our own.

Perhaps this isn't true for all of us. It's a general pattern I've observed and judged to be common. You might see yourself as like the locals of the Brindled Moor, able to clearly understand the God of the Old Testament because you already possess a thick vocabulary. But in the course of compiling a dictionary for their home, the locals of Brindled Moor discovered the ways in which people from other places described *their* geographies. The lexicons of Devon and the Lake District, Gaelic phrases and expressions from Cornwall helped the residents of the Brindled Moor more deeply understand their environment. As expansive as our dictionaries might be, there are always more words to learn.

I am not capable of providing anywhere near a complete vocabulary for theological life. What I hope to do with this book is open space in our imaginations so that we can more fully appreciate the discussions of God within the Old Testament. This book is not a glossary per se. It is, rather, a reflection upon some of the Old Testament passages that are typically regarded as anthropomorphic. In the course of reading these reflections I hope your vocabulary for God expands, becomes wider and richer.

8. We should note the power dynamics inherent in labeling some position as heretical and the people who hold them heretics. Marcella Althaus-Reid terms this practice colonial theology, in *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 133–71. Colonial theology is a type of theological reflection that tries to conquer other viewpoints and make them submit to one's hegemony. Like Althaus-Reid, I think we need to find new pathways to think about God and revisit those which colonial theologians have cast aside. And, as Althaus-Reid observes, hegemony and conquest always work to keep money and power deeply stratified. *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 16–17. For far too long theology has served this purpose.

9. Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. Timothy Radcliffe suggests that theological formations which were originally intended as boundaries could be reframed as icons "which invite us to carry on our pilgrimage towards the mystery, pushing us beyond too easy answers." *Why Go to Church? The Drama of the Eucharist* (London: Continuum, 2008), 67.

10. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 138–39.

I've tried to read the anthropomorphic passages in the Bible straightforwardly, taking their depictions of God at face value, suppressing the urge to explain them away or harmonize them with other portions of Scripture that seem to say something different. I do this as an experiment. I want to see what our picture of God would look like if we took the anthropomorphic passages as a starting point from which to construct our ideas of God.

Over the years many have objected to this kind of approach. They assert that the humanlike pictures of God in the Old Testament are metaphors and should not be taken literally.[11] They narcotize the anthropomorphic language in the Bible or pretend it isn't there. They scorn the contemporary use of it by claiming that it diminishes the grandeur of the divine. Instead of giving us real insight into the reality of God, they say, it pulls deity out of heaven and reduces God to the status of us dirty mortals.[12] Martin Heidegger did not accept this line of thinking. When people use anthropomorphic language, Heidegger said, "God is not debased to the level of man, but on the contrary, man is experienced in what drives him beyond himself."[13] For Heidegger, anthropomorphic language brings God near, or alternatively, it helps us rise above our situation and imagine God more fully.

I think it is crucially important for our time that we expand our understanding of who God is instead of vigilantly patrolling the theological boundaries we've inherited. This involves listening to religious communities that are different from us, but it also includes listening again to the sacred texts we already hold dear. This act of listening should be done with an eagerness to learn something new, to hear a new voice within familiar stories, to embrace biblical accounts that have been ignored or actively suppressed, and to use these texts to embrace and include folks who are often excluded from religious communities.[14] In the religious tradition I was raised in, the

11. For instance, H. H. Rowley sees within the Eden narratives of Genesis a "cruder anthropomorphism" when God asks Adam what he has been doing. About this Rowley asserts, "It should not be overlooked that in the story of the Garden of Eden we can hardly presume that when God asks Adam what he has been doing, he is ignorant of the answer until Adam confesses." *The Faith of Israel: Aspects of Old Testament Thought* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 60. And Maimonides (1138–1204), perhaps Judaism's greatest philosopher, believed that all biblical language that speaks of God having hands or feet, resting or moving should be regarded as figurative. Warren Zev Harvey, "Notions of the Divine and Human Love in Jewish Thought: An Interview with Warren Zev Harvey," *Journal of Jewish Thought* 3 (2012): 2. In spite of Rowley and Maimonides's assertions, for the purposes of this book I presume that the authors of the Bible mean what they say.

12. William C. Placher describes some aspects of this tendency in the first chapter of *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 3–26.

13. Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), 163.

14. The Bible can be used for whatever purpose a person has in mind. Someone can quote it to shame or ostracize folks, or Scripture can be "the most important source for the articulation

so-called anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Bible were sidelined the most often (along with depictions of powerful women in the Bible, as well as instructions to release people from debt and transfer the wealth of the powerful to the poor).

In this book I offer what I think are some of the Old Testament's underappreciated conceptions of God that depict God as a humanlike being. I do not harmonize them with other passages. In this, I am following the model of most biblical authors. Even the few times harmonizations are included in the Bible, as I argue in chapter 2, their presence further reinforces the desire of the Bible's compilers to preserve differences instead of editing them out. They did not see the need to arbitrate every interscriptural disagreement and make the Bible's witness consistent. So I let tensions remain in flex. I do not attempt to reduce or mitigate the conflict between them.

In the last chapter I offer some implications of imagining a god with humanlike features. I use the insights of the eminent Jewish biblical scholar Benjamin Sommer to show how the humanlike God of the Old Testament lays a pathway for the New Testament understanding of the incarnation. Not only will this help Christians better understand Jesus, but I hope it will help deepen Christian appreciation of and dependence upon the Jewish Scriptures and Jewish interpretations.

In this book I do not attempt to construct a comprehensive treatment of the anthropomorphic Old Testament God. The passages I discuss are representative but not exhaustive. I want to leave room for the reader's imagination. Oftentimes we think of theology as a CliffsNotes version of the Bible—a short summation of the entirety of what the Bible communicates. We want to boil Scripture down to its essence so we can know exactly what it says. There is a danger to this approach. It is the same danger that Andre Dubus describes in relation to short stories:

> Wanting to know absolutely what a story is about, and to be able to say it in a few sentences, is dangerous: it can lead us to wanting to possess a story as we possess a cup. We know the function of a cup and we drink from it, wash it, put it on a shelf, and it remains a thing we own and control, unless it slips from our hands into the control of gravity; or unless someone else breaks it, or uses it to give us poisoned tea. A story can always break into pieces while it sits inside a book on a shelf; and, decades after we have read it even twenty times, it can open us up, by cut or caress, to a new truth.[15]

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of liberation in the experience of [a community of] people." Demetrius K. Williams, "The Bible and Models of Liberation in the African American Experience," in *Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 33–60.

15. *Meditations from a Movable Chair* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 49.

We can, I believe, discern the outline of the God of the Old Testament, God's basic shape, but the features of the divine face—the color of his eyes, the shape of her nose, the thickness of their lips—remain in the shadows. God's shadowy appearance reinforces the idea that we can never distill God into a bullet-pointed list of theological observations. The divine resists domestication, refuses to be owned.

As I discuss in chapter 1, it is difficult to predict what it will look like when we integrate a humanlike God into existing theological understandings. Our picture of God is complicated. It's a three-dimensional web. Add a new feature or take one out and the entire structure shifts. Some will regard this as an unacceptable risk and choose to stay within the confines of the theological houses they've already built. I can understand that fear, and sometimes I feel it too. But I also see this as an exciting journey. The great Trappist mystic Thomas Merton believed that the most vibrant and life-giving approach to God is through the imagination.[16] In these pages I use the Hebrew Bible's humanlike portrayals of the divine as fuel for my reimagination of the doctrine of God.

I think these types of reimagination are journeys we *must* take in order for theological reflection to have continued relevance in our age. One of my favorite quotes is from the German theologian Ernst Käsemann, "Christianity does not live on canned goods, especially not from such as are no longer edible and digestible."[17] We can learn much from the theologies of the past, but each generation must reassess what they have received from their forebears and learn to speak in new ways that better fit the contexts they find themselves in. Clayton Crockett captures this well when he defines theology as "an open-ended discourse about value and meaning in an ultimate sense."[18] Theology is an ongoing process. It is not merely the recollection of answers previously decreed in the dusty past.[19]

16. Merton wrote, "Why would one suppose that God can be approached dully, without imagination?" This quote is from Frederick Smock in his discussion of Merton in *Pax Intrantibus: A Meditation on the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, 2007), 47.

17. "What 'To Believe' Means in the Evangelical Sense," in *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene*, ed. Rudolf Landau, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 162. For more sustained reflection on the need to think differently about God in order for religion to remain vital and alive in our time, see Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), 34. Elizabeth A. Johnson put it this way: "To be plausible to any generation, Christian faith must express itself in ways consistent with the understanding of the world at the time." *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 9.

18. *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 50.

19. See the excellent discussions of this topic in James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 28–30; John F. Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 185–91; and Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40–41.

Consider this book an opportunity to begin a new way of thinking about God. It is an opportunity to imagine God as a being who is very similar to humanity instead of totally other. The idea came to me when I was reading Augustine's comments on Psalm 130. Augustine was troubled by the descriptions of God in this psalm that are profoundly human. He dismissed them whole-cloth in a rather patronizing way:

> If you think of God in carnal terms you go seriously astray. And you are being very childish even if you think of God in terms appropriate for the human soul: if, for instance, you think that God forgets, or has the wrong idea about something and changes his mind, or does something and then regrets it. All of these things are indeed said of him in scripture, but only to make us milk-nourished infants feel at home with God, not to encourage us to take them literally.[20]

I started to wonder: What if Augustine is wrong? What if God speaks to us not as milk-nourished infants but as full-grown human beings? What if all those Old Testament passages that depict God in very humanlike ways communicate something profoundly true that many Christians underappreciate? What if we take the authors of Scripture at their word when they say that God has a body? What if, rather than pushing these thoughts away, we add them to our theological lexicons?

I invite you to imagine yourself as a resident of the Brindled Moor who, in the course of trying to better understand how to communicate their understanding of their beloved home to other people, discovered that the vocabularies of folks from other places deepened their knowledge of the place in which they lived. Some Jewish and Christian communities have long embraced a theology of God that emphasizes God's immanence, and many religious communities have understood God in anthropomorphic ways.[21] Those of you who, like me, were taught to focus on God's transcendence have much to learn from these communities. But we will also discover how recent insights within the humanities and sciences can reframe all of our readings of Scripture and change the ways in which every tradition imagines God.

20. *Expositions of the Psalms 121–150*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2004), 150.

21. For instance, many Eastern Orthodox theologians emphasize the anthropomorphic aspects of theology (John Behr, *Becoming Human: Meditations on Christian Anthropology in Word and Image* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013]), and many African American and Latinx communities stress God's immanence. See, for instance, M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019); Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017); Noel Leo Erskine, *Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born in Caribbean Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Miguel A. De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

Studying the accounts of the humanlike god of the Old Testament should not merely be an exercise in knowledge acquisition. As biblical scholar Carolyn Sharp puts it, "Reading is potentially transformative for readers and for reading communities."[22] The way we read matters. It can profoundly change the way we move through the world. I hope you find that the biblical accounts of a human-shaped God are fertile material for this process of transformation.

And, finally, an explanation regarding my use of the word *Yahweh* to refer to the personal name of God that appears in the Hebrew Bible. It is common for translations to use the title LORD in all caps to indicate God's name since within Jewish tradition the name of God was not pronounced out of respect for the divine and to avoid the possibility of using God's name in a less than reverent manner. However, within the biblical period, the name was pronounced.

It appears in shortened form within personal names such as Jeremiah. Hebrew personal names were often sentences that contained significant theological meaning. The name Jeremiah is composed of two parts: a verb from the root *rmh*, which means "to place, give, or establish" and a shortened form of the divine personal name. Jeremiah's name means "Yahweh has given (the child)."

At some point, likely the intertestamental period, scribes within the Jewish community began using various conventions to indicate that readers should avoid pronouncing God's personal name. They used star-shaped symbols in place of the divine name or kept the consonants of the divine name in place but noted that the reader should say the title "the LORD" instead of vocalizing the name itself. With every good intention, these scribes put a "fence around the Torah" (Pirkei Avot 1:1) or a guardrail to keep people from misusing the divine name. If one never used the divine name, the thinking went, one could never misuse it.

This benefit came at a price. When the personal name of God is swapped for a title or a jumble of symbols, God seems more distant, less humanlike. I have the utmost respect for my Jewish and Christian friends who continue the reverent practice of not pronouncing God's name, and I have no desire at all to change their practice. However, for the purposes of this book, a book which aims to highlight the humanlike features of God, that practice does not fit. Therefore, I will use the reconstructed name of God while at the same time respecting the fact that others do not share this approach.[23]

Ascension Day, May 2021

22. *Wrestling the Word: The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Believer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 2.

23. Some scholars assert that the vocalization, Yahweh, is a hypothetical reconstruction and that we do not know for certain that this was the way the divine name was originally pronounced. While this is technically true, the reconstruction has a high enough probability of being correct that I feel comfortable using it.

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