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Excursus: Seeing the Finger of God: The Anthropomorphic Expectation

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Abstract: Ether 3:6 records that, during the brother of Jared’s presentation of the stones to Yahweh, “the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood.” The brother of Jared experienced an anthropomorphic God. The incident clearly surprised him, for “he was struck with fear,” but it was perhaps the seeing and not the finger that caused the fear.

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Ether 3:6 records that, during the brother of Jared's presentation of the stones to Yahweh, "the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood." The brother of Jared experienced an anthropomorphic God. The incident clearly surprised him, for "he was struck with fear," but it was perhaps the seeing and not the finger that caused the fear. (See commentary accompanying Ether 3:6.)

All humans have some form of religion. Nevertheless, what we share is a very nebulous category of beliefs in "something beyond the visible and palpable."¹ The ways in which those beliefs are elaborated can be associated with different types of social structures. Anthropologist Mary Douglas describes one type of approach to the invisible and impalpable. In religions that are impersonal, nonregulative, and self-exalted, she observes:

Anthropomorphism in these religions is weak. In so far as demons or gods are considered to be at all influential, they are only faintly drawn in the human image. They tend to be bizarre, dislocated or diffuse in their presence. Recall the idea of the forest as a cosmic force in the religion of the Ituri pygmies, the various confused refractions through which the Nuer God is manifested, the animal spirits of the Plains Indians, to realize the extent to which anthropomorphism can be diminished. At the same time these religions are not moral regulators. They hold out no system of rewards and punishment, neither in this world nor in the next.²

These impersonal and nonregulative religions are important, but not to our understanding of the Judeo-Christian religion. That tradition falls near the opposite end of her spectrum:

Powers that control the universe are modelled on human figures. Either they are the spirits of dead fathers and grandfathers, or culture heroes like big brothers, or a creator god, the most ancestral figure of them all. Or they are actual, real human beings, free men with powers to bless and curse, or witches and sorcerers with their own armoury of ill-doing. On this side, where group is strong, social control is built into the cosmos. These humans and human-like powers are activated by moral situations. Ancestors punish and reward; curses

¹Donald E. Brown, *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 139.

²Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 175–76.

avenge moral wrong; even witches only strike when provoked by neglect or rudeness. The idea of the self is surrounded with prickly moral contexts in which it has to operate.³

Hebrew society and religion fall into the category of cultures with a strong group ethic. It was precisely the kind of society where the general human trends would predict both a religion with a moral basis and an anthropomorphic deity (or deities). While Israelite religion developed along a unique trajectory in the ancient Middle East, it was part of a culture area that shared both the tendencies for a strong group focus and for the moral religion with anthropomorphic deities. This is the reason that William Propp, associate professor of Near Eastern languages and history, University of California at San Diego, notes: “Since almost all ancient gods, including Yahweh (Gen. 1:26–27; 5:2; Ezek. 1:26–27), resembled humans, most idols were anthropomorphic.”⁴ The conceptual anthropomorphism was manifest (save in noniconic Israel) in the similarly anthropomorphic artistic representations of deity.

In particular, the very near Ugaritic culture and the influential Mesopotamian religions strongly demonstrated this anthropomorphism. Of Ugarit (see 1 Nephi, Part 1: Context, Chapter 1, “The Historical Setting of 1 Nephi”), Mark S. Smith, Skirball Professor of Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at New York University, indicates that “anthropomorphism is quite the norm for descriptions of Ugaritic deities, so much so that J. C. de Moor suggests that ‘the gods of Ugarit had become too human.’”⁵ He further notes: “Divinity throughout the ancient Middle East is also experienced personally and not as entirely other. Indeed, anthropomorphism is a hallmark of the classic deities of the pantheon as opposed to divine monsters in many Mesopotamian myths of primordial conflict.”⁶

The earliest layers of the Hebrew Bible demonstrate a tendency to anthropomorphize deity that is similar to the Mesopotamian/Canaanite tendency. The clear presence of anthropomorphism is compromised by later editing that downplayed such aspects,⁷ but scholars have discovered sections that preserve the earlier understanding. The evidence begins with the scholarly work that has resulted in the modern understanding of multiple traditions and editors who have had a hand in the preservation of the biblical text as we know it. Michael D. Coogan, professor of religious studies, Stonehill College, Massachusetts, describes the scholarly designation of “Yahwist source” that can be discerned in the biblical text:

J., the abbreviation for the Yahwist “source” in the Pentateuch, derived from the German spelling (*Jahweh*) of the divine name Yahweh. Beginning the eighteenth century, scholars noticed that two different names were used for the deity in the book of Genesis,

³Ibid., 176.

⁴William H. Propp, “Graven Image.” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 261.

⁵Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 87, 144–45.

⁶Ibid., 95.

⁷Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 140–41.

and using this as a criterion, identified separate sources or traditions or documents. As this analysis matured, the J. tradition was traced in the rest of the Pentateuch (and by some in the books of Joshua and Judges and beyond), and was dated to the ninth (or perhaps the tenth) century B.C.E., though presumably using earlier sources. It is thought to have originated in Jerusalem. Its characteristics include the frequent use of anthropomorphism in depictions of Yahweh (e.g., Gen. 2:7, 8; 21:7, 17b; 7:21); the theme of divine promise of land, descendants and blessing and its fulfillment; and a focus in the ancestral narratives in Genesis on the territory later controlled by Judah.⁸

Norman K. Gottwald, a specialist in Deuteronomy at the Pacific School of Religion, expands on the way in which this early layer of biblical writing emphasized Yahweh's anthropomorphism:

The Yahwist stratum in the Pentateuch projects an intensely realistic conception or dramatization of God, shot through with descriptions of deity in terms of human physical features (anthropomorphisms) and human feelings (anthropopathisms). Without abashment, the Yahwist pictures God strolling in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8), sealing the door of Noah's ark (Gen. 7:15c), visiting and dining with Abraham before his tent (Gen. 18:1–22), reconnoitering Sodom and Gomorrah to see if their sin is as perverse as rumored (Gen. 18:21), and taking off or clogging the Egyptian chariot wheels (Ex. 14:25). Yahweh is alluded to in well-nigh corporeal terms.⁹

The shift from anthropomorphism to rather vehement anti-anthropomorphism took a long time to reach its current state, but the process began some time after the Yahwist redaction (ca. 900–800 B.C.) and the Josian reforms of 622 B.C. (See 1 Nephi, Part 1: Context, Chapter 1, “The Historical Setting of 1 Nephi.”) The process intensified after the Babylonian exile; but even in those later times, traces of the earlier anthropomorphism appear in biblical language. Smith describes the history of this movement:

The avoidance of anthropomorphic imagery was by no means a general feature of Israelite religion after the Exile. While the tendency away from anthropomorphism marks priestly and Deuteronomistic traditions belonging to the eighth through the fifth centuries, later works belonging to the priestly traditions continued to transmit anthropomorphic imagery. Postexilic priestly texts, such as Zechariah 3, attest to the divine council. Zechariah 3:7 includes the high priest in the ranks of the celestial courts (cf. Zech. 12:8). Postexilic apocalyptic circles also continued anthropomorphic renderings of Yahweh and the divine council (Dan. 7; cf. Zech. 14:4; 1 Enoch 14). These and other biblical passages (such as Isa. 27:1) reflect the continuation of old mythic material in postexilic Israelite tradition.¹⁰

⁸Michael D. Coogan, “J,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 338. See also Samuel Rolles Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 4th ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 120; and Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 88.

⁹Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1985), 328.

¹⁰Smith, *The Early History of God*, 145. See also Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 89. This trend continued until about the time of Christ, when references that might indicate an anthropomorphic presence of God were recast into the understanding of the *Shekhina*. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 99, describes the evidence:

The dating for the Yahwist source places it after my dating of the Jaredite exodus (ca. 1100 B.C.). Locating the Jaredites in a pre-Yahwist-redaction environment strongly suggests that they would have shared the Israelite/Canaanite/Mesopotamian cultural tendency to anthropomorphize God. Thus, when the brother of Jared saw the finger of God, he saw what he would have expected to see, at least in terms of the general form of deity.

In actual usage, the term Shekhina, when it first appears, means that aspect of God through which He can be apprehended by the senses. Whenever the original Hebrew Biblical text speaks of a manifestation of God through which He was perceived by man, the *Targum Onkelos* interpolates the term Shekhina [sic]. For instance, the verse "Let them make Me a Sanctuary that I may dwell [*w'shakhanti*] among them," is rendered by the *Targum Onkelos* as follows: "Let them make before Me a Sanctuary that I may let My Shekhina dwell among them". . . .

It appears that the earliest use of the term Shekhina was in the sense of an abstract hypostasis, interpolated wherever a Biblical statement appeared to be too anthropomorphic to the greater sensitivity of a later age.