

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #2: ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN THE BIBLE, PART ONE

By John Temples

You may have never heard the term *anthropomorphism*, but no serious Bible student's education is complete without some knowledge of it.

Here are some definitions of anthropomorphism:

- "Ascribing human traits or qualities to nonhuman objects."
- "Speaking of inanimate objects as if they were alive."
- "The attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities."

A closely related term is *personification*. There are slight, technical differences in the two terms, but essentially they mean the same thing. So, when your computer crashes and you address it as "You @#\$%^&*," you are using anthropomorphism or personification.

Actually, you use anthropomorphism quite often--you just didn't know what to call it. Some examples:

- "I'm on a diet, but that candy bar is *calling* my name."
- "The sun is *smiling* on me today."
- "Opportunity is *knocking* on my door."

These examples show why we use anthropomorphism: to liven up our speech, for dramatic effect, or to create vivid mental images. Hence, we name rifles "Old Betsy," or we call some object a "bad boy." I have often seen people by the side of the road, talking passionately to their broken-down vehicles and discussing their cars' ancestry in colorful terms.

The Bible contains anthropomorphic language, too, especially in poetic passages. Examples:

- “When Israel went out of Egypt...the sea *saw it and fled*....The mountains *skipped like rams*....*Tremble*, O earth, at the presence of the Lord....” (Psalms 114:1-6)
- “The *voice of your brother’s blood cries out* to Me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10).
- “O *Death*, where is your sting? O *Hades*, where is your victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:55)
- There is a remarkable, highly poetic example of anthropomorphism or personification in Isaiah 55:12--”For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; *the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*”

Certainly, this figurative language makes Scripture come alive; it conjures up powerful images in our minds. But where anthropomorphism really gets interesting is when it involves God.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM APPLIED TO GOD IN SCRIPTURE

The Bible makes it quite clear that God is not human. “God is Spirit” (John 4:24). “A spirit does not have flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39). “God is not a man, that He should lie; or a son of man, that He should repent” (Numbers 23:19). Yet the Bible often speaks of God as having human physical features, such as a face, hands, feet, etc.

We noted before that anthropomorphism is a literary device used to enhance and enrich speech or writing. Here, we see another reason the Bible writers used it: to help us relate to God, to assure us that He is personal and active in our lives. Hands, feet, mouths, etc. are the parts of us that enable action and speech. So, if God says or does something, it is natural to think of those actions in terms of human organs and appendages.

Here are some Biblical examples of human attributes being ascribed to God:

- HANDS: “I will stretch out My *hand* and strike Egypt” (Exodus 3:20).
- A FACE: “In heaven their angels always see the *face* of My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10).

- A MOUTH: “The Gentiles shall see your righteousness, and all kings your glory. You shall be called by a new name, which the *mouth* of the Lord will name” (Isaiah 62:2).
- EYES AND EARS: “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry” (Psalms 34:15).
- A NOSE: “And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Ephesians 5:2).

Occasionally in Scripture, God is even ascribed animal characteristics. Psalms 91:4 says, “He shall cover you with His feathers(!), and under His wings you shall take refuge.”

HUMAN EMOTIONS ASCRIBED TO GOD IN THE BIBLE

Anthropomorphism does not just ascribe human physical attributes to God, but also human emotions and even human shortcomings. This is the key to understanding some passages correctly. Examples:

- “And the Lord was *sorry* that He had made man on the earth, and He was *grieved* in His heart” (Genesis 6:6).
- “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?... My *heart* churns within Me, my *sympathy* is stirred” (Hosea 11:8).
- “And the Lord said, Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will *go down* now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know” (Genesis 18:20,21). (Here, God speaks as if He were a human judge carefully investigating the facts of a case, to assure Abraham that His judgment would be just.)

What do these anthropomorphisms do? They make God real to us. Always remember: God is in reality unlimited in His power and His knowledge. But sometimes He speaks as if He were limited, to help us more closely relate to Him.

The hand of God is a special anthropomorphism that deserves more attention. That will be the subject of Part Two of this Biblical Insight. --John Temples

