

Images, Form and Spirits

As promised, I have given the “little grey cells” a chance to do their thing; ah yes, M. Poirot was a smart little fellow. One of the things I was thinking about is how much explorers and detectives have in common, for they both look carefully at what they find, and follow each trail to see what they can uncover to understand things more completely. OK, a scholar does that too, but they always seem so dusty and dull; detectives and explorers are much more fun! Another thought that came to mind was the need for focus in this adventure...

So, let's focus.

A commenter pointed out the God is Spirit and so are we; an excellent point. Right here in the Garden that was demonstrated when God first created Adam out of the dust of the ground, and then breathed His breath of life into the man (Gen. 2:7-8). We also know that we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christ, so clearly we are both physical and spirit; the Scripture references of this are familiar to us all. That we are embodied is also obvious to all; what is not obvious is whether or not God has a form, a body, and appearance. So I thought some more...

After a time, it hit me like a ton of bricks: Duh! There are two theological terms I have used right here in this blog, each more than once, that describe visual appearances of God. What's more, there is a third theological term that is used to refer to comparisons of human references to describe or explain God's attributes. They are:

Theophany: A temporary and visible manifestation of God in a human or other form.

Christophany: A pre-incarnation appearance of Christ.

Anthropomorphism: The attribution of human characteristic to God in order to explain or express His attributes. (Theological definition, there are other applications in science).

It stands to reason, does it not, that if we have theological terms about the “appearance” or visual manifestation of God, that God has an appearance, and if human attributes can be used to describe the attributes of God, that humans do indeed carry His image or likeness in some way. The only thing is, is the “form” in which God appears temporary... or does He have a permanent form?

Let's look at some texts:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:8-9)

These verses come in the story of the fall and its aftermath (Gen. 3:1-24); both Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, and now they sought to hide from Him, and they “heard the sound” of God

walking in the Garden. God is Spirit, of that we can be certain, but on that fateful day, He was walking through the Garden, a physical act, making noise that could be heard by the physical ear, and spoke in language with a voice that could also be physically heard by humans. The text also implies that the sound of God walking through the Garden was recognized as Him walking, as though this was not unusual, and if it wasn't unusual, then why were the two hiding? Why wouldn't God relate to Adam this way when Adam was in his sinless state? I assure you that I can give you a more lengthy discussion here, and I will if you ask me to, but it seems pretty clear that God had a form and appearance in the physical sense in the Garden.

Shall we try another text?

Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, he said, "Listen to my words:

*"When there is a prophet among you,
I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions,
I speak to them in dreams.
But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.
With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the LORD.
Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?"*

Numbers 12:5-8 (full context Num. 12:1-16)

Who can forget the time when Miriam and Aaron were called out for daring to oppose Moses?

For our purposes, did you notice that God seems to think that He has a visible form? With other prophets, God deals in visions, dreams and riddles, but He gets with Moses face to face, in person.

Images, Form and Spirits, part 2

We continue now with our discussion that began last time; welcome back. We left discussing an interesting passage from Numbers 12:5-8 in which God is rebuking Miriam and Aaron for speaking against Moses, and as you will recall, God told them that Moses is the one to whom He speaks in person, rather than in visions and dreams; directly and not indirectly. During our break, I once again checked to see what Hebrew word was used in these verses to indicate that Moses saw God's form, and I have some interesting results to share. First, here's the verse again:

*With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the LORD.
Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?" (Num. 12:8)*

The Hebrew word used is *temuna* (H8544) which means "form, image, likeness, representation, semblance" and is found ten times in the Old Testament (Ex. 20:4; Num. 12:8; Deut. 4:12, 15, 16, 23, 25, 5:8; Job4:16; Ps. 17:15) with consistent meaning and application.

It is beginning to be clear to me that God does in fact have a form, and He may from time to time, at His sole discretion, choose to be seen by humans, and it is also becoming clear to me that we cannot discount this as though it were some sort of a fluke. Yes indeed, God is Spirit, that fact is not in despite in this journey of ours, but as I've long suspected, it is beginning to appear as though our understanding of what that means has been a bit short-sighted. Ask yourself a question: How many times have we read passages of Scripture in which someone saw an angel of the Lord? Angels are also spirit beings, and yet when the occasion arises, they too can be seen to have a form in Scripture.

I don't know about you, but I'm intrigued. Let's continue to follow this trail; there are more passages to examine...

Take a look at Exodus 33:18-21:

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

At this point in his experience, Moses wanted to see God, but that was not permissible, for no one could see God's face and live. In order for this to be true, wouldn't God need to have a face? So God decided to let Moses see His back... Wouldn't He need to have a back? Of course, it would also appear that He had a hand, since He was going to use it to cover Moses' eyes...

What shall we say – is this just anthropomorphism (human terms used to describe divine attributes)? Many say so, I've even said so! Yet they don't ring true when describing an actual event, because as we know, God did just as He said, *and Moses saw His back*. If there is a question presented by these two verses, it would be: What happened between Exodus 33 and Numbers 12 that made it possible for Moses and God to talk face to face?

Nothing in our discussion thus far negates the fact that God is Spirit, nor does anything negate the fact that humans also have a spirit: These things are not in dispute in our adventure

together. Remember, we are exploring the meaning and significance of being created in God's *image*. Humans as we know already have both form and spirit, and if God also has both form and spirit, then there is more significance for us in the here and now of being created in His image, than there would be otherwise, and that is what we are investigating.

The Image of God and the Western Mind

So far our journey of exploration has found that God's image, and our having been created in His image, runs headlong into the inescapable conclusion that it covers the whole package of human existence, body, soul and spirit. For many people, the idea of God having a form is a tough one to grasp, leading to difficulty in understanding that His image is also reflected in our human form. Certainly there are many who would argue against this notion, and yet looking at Scripture, it's hard to miss.

The difficulty that many of us have in seeing this is that most of us are Western in our orientation, and this makes quite a lot of Scripture hard to understand, for the Scriptures were not written by Western minds or in a Western mindset; they were written from an ancient Hebrew perspective, which is quite different.

In the early years of the church, the dominant mindset was Hebrew; even the Gentile believers learned to view things in the Hebrew manner, but as time moved forward, and Christianity became more and more populated by Gentiles, and Christianity became dominant in Europe, there came an impetus to move in a direction more akin to the traditions of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and away from that of the Jews. With time, even pagan ceremonies and observances were incorporated into the church because the church had become part of the State, beginning with Constantine making Christianity the State Religion of the Roman Empire.

By the time of the Reformation, Christianity was dominated by Western thought, and many of our doctrinal traditions of today came out of this period when some of the greatest theologians of all time wrote from an entirely Western point of view, including such names as Luther and Calvin. To the Western mind, God is most notable for His free exercise of power, while to the Hebrew, God is most notable for His restraint. The Western mind sees the physical realm as fallen, corrupt and depraved, while to the Hebrew it is God's perfect creation. To the Western mind, the human body is inherently evil, to the Hebrew the human body is inherently good; God's own image. To the Western perspective, a spirit having a form is hard to conceive of, but for the Hebrew mind, it is a given.

The Scriptures are more difficult for those of us who were raised and trained in the West; we miss things like the proper role of covenants, the nature of our own beings and how to understand apocalyptic texts; we even understand writers like the Apostle Paul as Western, when in fact, Paul was a Pharisee among Pharisees, trained by Gamaliel; the intellectual antithesis of Greek philosophy. I think we need to follow this trail for a bit, so when we come back, I think we need to take a look at a few things Paul wrote about that will shed some more light on this line of thinking as we continue in this series.