

BIBLICAL ANTHROPOMORPHISM - EVIDENCE OF A UNIPERSONAL GOD

He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?
—Psalm 94:9 NASB

Ubiquitous within the pages of the Bible, anthropomorphic language is used to describe Yahweh, our God and Creator. Through the divinely inspired writers of Scripture, Yahweh tells us how he wants us to envision him: by self-description, anthropomorphic imagery, and visions and theophanies experienced by the Bible chroniclers. H. Wheeler Robinson says, “The personality of [God] is sharply and vividly conceived—so vividly that it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that He is the most clearly drawn figure in the portraiture of the Old Testament.”¹ It stands to reason, then, if Yahweh is a multipersonal substance comprising three selves in what some call a godhead, then these biblical anthropomorphisms written under divine inspiration should indicate this. If there is any mystery to God’s being or nature, that must be revealed in the pages of the Scriptures, for, as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “We [Jews] worship what we know” (John 4:22). The apostle Paul notes that the Jews were given the sacred pronouncements of God (Rom 3:2), which include Yahweh’s revelation regarding his selfhood and nature.²

Those who believe that God’s Word is divinely inspired agree with the doctrine of biblical sufficiency—which states that everything we need to know about God has been

¹ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Record and Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 308.

² While all of Scripture is God-breathed and reveals God’s nature, the vast majority of the anthropomorphisms in the Bible were either experienced or recorded by those of Jewish heritage.

provided for us in Scripture. Evangelical scholar Wayne Grudem explains, “It is in Scripture alone that we are to search for God’s words to us. . . . God considers what he has told us in the Bible to be enough for us.”³ If this is true, then we should look to Scripture to inform our doctrinal understanding of the person of God and as teachers “should emphasize what Scripture emphasizes and be content with what God has told us in Scripture.”⁴

God says that he has revealed himself to his human creations in such a way that we can and must know him. We read in Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” (Jer 9:23–24)⁵

The people of Israel, in covenant with God, were expected to know the Torah well enough to be able to “teach [it] diligently to their children” (Deut 6:6–7).⁶ Not just in the Pentateuch but also in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, God revealed much about himself through anthropomorphic description. Ludwig Köhler notes, “The hominid perception of God is expressed in great detail, unconcernedly and drastically on every page of the Old Testament.”⁷

Those sacred pronouncements found in the Hebrew Scriptures are accessible to everyone—even the “simple” can understand them rightly and be made wise by them (Ps 19:7; 119:130). Indeed, as Grudem states regarding the clarity of Scripture: “[This doctrine] does not imply or suggest that all believers will agree on all the teachings of Scripture.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 127.

⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 134.

⁵ Unless stated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.

⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 105.

⁷ Ludwig Köhler, “Anthropomorphism VI. Dogmatics.” RPP 1 (2007), 30.

Nevertheless, it does tell us something very important—that the problem [of disagreement] always lies not with Scripture but with ourselves.”⁸

If that is truly the case, then, we should accept Scripture’s clear portrayal of Yahweh as expressed through anthropomorphic description. What we find is what we would expect to see if God is unipersonal—a singular self who uses singular personal pronouns, has a singular name, and is referenced consistently as “the Father.” If God is a trinity of “persons,” we would expect descriptive imagery that supports that reality. For Grudem and other adherents of the doctrine of the Trinity and the catholic creeds, his remark about the authority of “church fathers” should be taken to heart:

Although the history of the church may help us to understand what God says to us in the Bible, never in church history has God added to the teachings or commands of Scripture. Nowhere in church history outside of Scripture has God added anything that he requires us to believe.⁹

If the totality of Scripture is all that is needed to understand God, then we would be in error to add to the descriptions God gave his people regarding himself. With that warning, let us examine how Scripture reveals God through anthropomorphic description.

BIBLICAL ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Theologian Robert Culver defines anthropomorphism this way: “In theology it means to represent God under the figure of human form and parts—hands, ears, eyes, etc. There is also *anthropopathism*, or representing God as having human passions (emotions) such as pain, fear, hate, mercy, etc., and *anthropopoiesis*, ascribing human actions to God.”¹⁰

⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 127.

⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 129.

¹⁰ Robert Culver, “Anthropomorphism, Analogy and Impassibility of God.” Paper given at the Midwest meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society [ETS], Taylor University, Fort Wayne, IN, 1996.

For the purposes of this paper, we will examine only how Yahweh presents himself in form to his human creation and always as a singular someone. Simply put, “The purpose of anthropomorphisms is to make God accessible to man. . . . They represent God as a person.”¹¹ Abraham Heschel wrote: “To the prophet God is . . . always a person, a subject. The prophet does not think of God as something absolute in the sense of unrelated. He thinks of Him primarily as of One who takes a direct part in the events of the world.”¹² Walter Eichrodt states that an unprejudiced evaluation of the foundation of Old Testament faith will reveal a God who is fully alive and fully personal.¹³ Edmond Cherbonnier says, “Abandon the premise that God is a Person and you undercut with a stroke everything else that is said about him. . . . In short, to use the forbidden word, the biblical God is clearly anthropomorphic—not apologetically so, but proudly, even militantly.”¹⁴ Scholars consistently confirm God’s presentation of himself in singular terms, as a singular self. Scholar Yochanan Muffs posits that God wisely knew that revealing his “true, transcendent nature” to humans would cause “great havoc.”¹⁵ Though Yahweh is “utterly other than the stuff of the world,” says Muffs, God is portrayed as having typical humanlike qualities.¹⁶

This “sharply and vividly conceived” picture of God in Scripture is presented three ways: God self-describing or mentioning actions that imply his in some sense having a body, prophets receiving visions of God that depict him in hominid fashion, and theophanies in

¹¹ Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co., 2003), 24.

¹² Abraham J. Heschel, “The Divine Pathos,” in *Judaism* (vol. II, no. 1, January, 1953), 61.

¹³ Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. J. A. Baker, London: SCM Press, 1961), 209.

¹⁴ Edmond Cherbonnier, “In Defense of Anthropomorphism,” in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaean-Christian Parallels* (ed. Truman G. Madsen; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1978), 161.

¹⁵ Yochanan Muffs, *Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith and the Divine Image* (Woodstock, VT: LongHill, 2009), 178.

¹⁶ Muffs, *Personhood of God*, 55.

which God appears in human form.¹⁷ Regarding the theophanic appearances of God as recorded in the Old Testament, Eric Chang says that these have “the texture of a tangibility that one would normally associate with a body of flesh and bones”¹⁸ Critics and apologists throughout the centuries have often treated these anthropomorphisms as merely figurative or allegorical, but Elliot Wolfson, professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies, believes there is no reason to make such a conclusion.¹⁹ Regardless of how one chooses to interpret such hominid descriptions of God, we must acknowledge these characteristics are consistently showing a unipersonal figure. The reader naturally, on encountering such humanoid presentation of God, infers that this is a single someone, not a group or composite of such.

Chang points out that, according to Scripture, man is theomorphic, because man is created in God’s image.²⁰ Yahweh is described often in Scripture as appearing like a human being. He speaks of himself in human terms we can relate to. He chose this way, seemingly unconcerned that we might misinterpret these descriptions, as no relevant warnings are given. James Barr points this out: “The God whom Israel worships appears, if he wills to

¹⁷ In some theophanic incidents, God takes other forms, such as appearing in the burning bush on Mt. Sinai or going before the Israelites in the wilderness in a pillar of fire and cloud column (Exod 13:21). Such impersonal portrayals are of course consistent with God literally being a someone, not a mere thing. The accounts pertinent to this paper are those in which Yahweh appears in human form, often understood by the one experiencing this as a mere man or an angel. Often, we read of Yahweh engaging in conversation, but no description is given of his “body” or how exactly this conversation is taking place, as in Exodus 33:11, where we find Moses conversing with Yahweh “face-to-face,” though we are not told if Moses saw a figure speaking. However, it is one face to another face, not one to three.

¹⁸ Eric H.H. Chang, *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism* (Xlibris: Bloomington, IN, 2009), 243.

¹⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Judaism and Incarnation,” in *Christianity in Jewish Times* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 242. He cites the passage of Jacob wrestling with a “mysterious man” identified as Elohim (Gen 32:30–31). Jacob believes he has seen Yahweh face-to-face. He lists other theophanic accounts: Exod 24:10–11; Isa 6:1–3; Ezek chapters 1 and 2; Dan 7:9–10.

²⁰ Chang, *The Only True God*, 291.

appear at all, in living human likeness.”²¹ Gerhard von Rad, in his Genesis commentary, notes:

The meaning of the many human descriptions of God in the Old Testament is not to bring God from afar to a level like that of a man. The human likeness is not a humanization. And these descriptions were never thought of that way except in unfair polemic. Rather they are to make God accessible to man. . . . They present God as a person.

Biblical scholars acknowledge that God himself chose to present himself that way. Hilary of Poitiers wisely said, “Since then we are to discourse of the things of God, let us assume that God has full knowledge of Himself, and bow with humble reverence to His words. For He Whom we can only know through His own utterances is the fitting witness concerning Himself.”²²

THEOPHANIC APPEARANCES IMPLY A UNIPERSONAL GOD

Scripture is replete with theophanies, as Yahweh appears and interacts with humans throughout the centuries. We are given in Scripture not just descriptions of his appearance as conveyed by his prophets through divinely crafted visions but also in seemingly physical, interactive engagements. Kugel notes that the spiritual and material realms in the Old Testament “are not neatly segregated but intersect constantly. God turns up around the street corner, dressed like an ordinary person.”²³ From the very start of human creation, God is seen, felt, heard, and spoken with by those he chose to interact with. The repeated accounts of God resembling humans found in the early Scriptures in the Old Testament was

²¹ James Barr, “Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament,” in *Congress Volume: Oxford* (Oxford, 1959. VTSup 7; Leiden: Brill, 1960), 38.

²² “On the Trinity,” from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 9* (Ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Trans. by E. W. Watson and L. Pullan. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1899).

²³ James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (UK: Free Press, 2003), 35.

gradually replaced “by a concept of God who is cosmic in the sense that He becomes too great to interact with puny human beings in the way the God of old did.”²⁴ Chang notes that as God’s people drifted from him and became more and more disobedient, these theophanic visits dwindled, as indicated by Isaiah’s observation: “Truly you are a God who hides yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior” (Isa 45:15).²⁵ Regardless of this shift, Yahweh shows himself consistently to be a “hands on” Creator, forming man from the dust with his own “hands,” breathing breath from his own “mouth,” into Adam’s body, planting a garden and placing him there, making a sound when he walks in the garden, speaking in conversation with Adam and Eve, killing and skinning animal to fabricate clothing for them, and marking Cain’s forehead after numerous conversations with Cain. As Chang says, “This is a very personal God. . . . God even personally buried Moses, perhaps so no one would idolize and hence taint his burial place.”²⁶ These theophanic incidents, regardless of the form Yahweh chose to take, “is God Himself, but God unrecognized, God intruding into ordinary reality.”²⁷ In all these instances we see a singular individual, one person—Yahweh—who is never recognizable as being anything but a singular someone. Nowhere in Scripture, in any encounter with God in bodily form, is there confusion over what exactly is being seen. There are no obscure visions of three persons somehow existing as one God, three personalities or modes, three individuals joined together in some way into one body or appearance. The fantastical compositions of the later trinitarian imagination make no appearance here. No, every theophany, every personal interaction between God and human,

²⁴ Chang, *The Only True God*, 274.

²⁵ Chang, *The Only True God*, 280. He explains this is why, when Jesus arrived, with the fullness of Yahweh indwelling him, “God was no longer recognized. He came into the world through Christ, but the world did not know him (John 1:10). . . . Rather than Jesus appearing as the second person of a triune God, it is actually the first and only person of God, Yahweh, who appeared *in* Christ, not *as* Christ.”

²⁶ Chang, *The Only True God*, 280.

²⁷ Kugel, *The God of Old*, 34, 35.

is a one-to-one experience, such as Ezekiel's vision of God as a figure of a man on a throne (Ezek 1:26). While there is disagreement over whether the individuals encountering Yahweh were interacting with him directly or rather indirectly, via a divine/angelic representative, what matters is that, in every occurrence, what they encountered was a recognizable human form, speaking in one human voice in their language, and using singular pronouns and verbs in reference to himself. Cherbonnier pointedly remarks on this:

Not only is it doubtful whether even a single passage can be found that does not conceive God as a personal Agent, but the biblical authors also show a remarkable unanimity in what they have to say about him. . . . Of course there is room for differences of emphasis and interpretation; no two biographers of a person will ever describe him in exactly the same way. But they will unmistakably be describing *a single individual*. [Emphasis mine]²⁸

Thus, whether such interactions with God are direct or angel-mediated, they are presented as interactions with one divine someone.

MULTIPLICITY IN APPEARANCE AND LANGUAGE

What of claims that some Old Testament theophanies are of multiple divine persons in human form, implying a "plurality" in God? Arnold Fructenbaum, purported expert in Messianic Judaic theology, posits that

the Hebrew Scriptures show a plural Godhead. The first person is consistently called YHVH, while the second person is given the names of YHVH, the Angel of YHVH, and the Servant of YHVH. Consistently and without fail, the second person is sent by the first person. The third person is referred to as the Spirit of YHVH or the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit. He, too, is sent by the first person but is continually related to the ministry of the second person.

Pointing to these few such appearances in the Old Testament, he then concludes: "If the concept of the Tri-unity in the Godhead is not Jewish according to modern rabbis, then

²⁸ Cherbonnier, "In Defense of Anthropomorphism," 161.

neither are the Hebrew Scriptures.”²⁹ His conclusion centers on the assumption that “God the Son,” the second person of the Godhead, is an angel (and hence, not God) using Moses’s words at Exodus 23:20–21 as proof text: “Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.” There is, however, no scriptural evidence that “the angel of the LORD” is synonymous with God himself or one “Person” within a tripersonal God. Yahweh could have told Moses that he was sending himself, or “God the Son,” to go before the Israelites, but instead sends an angel who has God’s name in him.³⁰ Having God’s name “in him” implies this angel is not God himself.

Trinitarians also point to a handful of verses in the Hebrew text that use plural forms of Hebrew words, such as *Elohim* for God, that, they insist, hint at God being tripersonal or at least multipersonal.³¹ But professor of dogmatics Otto Kirn says: “Only an inaccurate exegesis which overlooks the more immediate grounds of interpretation can see references to the Trinity in the plural form of the divine name *Elohim*.”³² The few verses in which Yahweh speaks using plural pronouns are a matter of interpretation; no specific visual depiction is provided in these texts to help determine to whom Yahweh is speaking when he says, “Let us make humankind in our image” and “Come, let’s go down there and

²⁹ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “Evidence of the Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures,” *The Sacred Faith*, n.p. [cited 6 May 2024]. <https://thesacredfaith.co.uk/home/perma/1509645000/article/evidence-of-the-trinity-in-the-hebrew-scriptures.html>.

³⁰ Having God’s name in someone is generally understood to mean that person is acting in God’s authority and representing him in some capacity or situation.

³¹ Fruchtenbaum, “Evidence of the Trinity,” online. The Scriptures he cites are Ecclesiastes 12:1: “Remember now your Creator.” [Literally: creators.]; Psalm 149:2: “Let Israel rejoice in their Maker.” [Literally: makers.]; Joshua 24:19: “holy God” [Literally: holy Gods.]; Isaiah 54:5: “For your Maker is your husband.” [Literally: makers, husbands.].

³² Otto Kirn, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Ada, MI: Baker, 1960), 12:18. He references the use of *Elohim* in Gen 1:26; Num 6:24–26; Isa 6:3.

confuse their language, so that they do not understand each other's language" (Gen 1:26; 11:7). Dr. Dustin Smith explains that "the plural of majesty," using plural forms of words in reference to a singular thing, is used more than ten thousand times by the Bible writers throughout the Old Testament for both Yahweh and individual created beings (and animals as well), a practice not uncommon in the Ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman period.

Smith points out:

The existence of plural forms to refer to Yahweh is not evidence of a plurality of persons within the one God, supposedly hinted at all along by the biblical authors. As the concept suggests, Israel's God is *majestically* plural, *intensive* in scope, and *honorific* in value. In other words, the use of plural forms to portray the person of Yahweh reflects his heightened status, his incomparable value, and his unrivaled worth.³³

Therefore, to presume one self or "Person" within a triune God is speaking to another in these passages goes beyond what Scripture conveys and, according to Smith, what the best Hebrew modern scholarship has concluded about the plural of majesty. We should, then, look to the theophanies in Scripture to support the understanding of God's unipersonal nature.

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION OF GOD'S NATURE

Many scholars believe in what is called progressive revelation, which explains how the purposes of God—specifically through the succession of covenants with individuals and

³³ Dustin Smith, "The Plural of Majesty in the Hebrew Bible: Assessing the Extent of Its Pervasiveness and the Implications for Monotheism." Paper given at the Unitarian Christian Alliance Conference, Lawrenceville Church of God, Springfield, OH, 2022. Smith, in his paper, references John Beckman, who offers this definition: "The term 'majestic plural' or *pluralis majestatis* refers to the use of a plural word to refer honorifically to a single person or entity. It is also called the plural of respect, the honorific plural, the plural of excellence, or the 'plural of intensity.'" Smith explains that this definition takes concepts described in the Hebrew reference grammars to mean an individual person or thing portrayed honorifically with a plural form. He also notes that such plural of majesty language is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Jewish targums, and Modern Hebrew, suggesting it was "relatively widespread in influence, despite the occasional uninformed suggestion to the contrary."

the nation of Israel—gradually unfolded in clarity and detail over time. However, progressive revelation is also used to explain how God’s nature, including the doctrine of the Trinity (and, one can conclude, any anthropomorphic vision of such), are not clearly found in the Old Testament. It is claimed that only when Jesus arrived did he reveal the truth about the “tripersonal” nature of God. Theologian Charles Hodge puts it this way:

The progressive character of divine revelation is recognized in relation to all the great doctrines of the Bible. . . . All that we find unfolded in the fulness of the gospel lies in a rudimental form in the earliest books of the Bible. What at first is only obscurely intimated is gradually unfolded in subsequent parts of the sacred volume, until the truth is revealed in its fulness. . . . And this is specially true of the doctrine of the Trinity. . . . Thus, without any violent transition, the earliest revelations of this mystery were gradually unfolded, until the Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit, appears in the New Testament as the universally recognized God of all believers. As often claimed, the “angel of the Lord” is gradually identified as none other than the “second person of the Trinity,” the Son, who was in heaven all along with God and “as” God.³⁴

There is, however, nothing in the New Testament that identifies God in any “universally recognized” appearance as a triune God, nor is the “angel of the Lord” identified as Jesus or a preincarnate “Son” as part of a triune God.³⁵ Evangelical professor Harold O. J. Brown noted the transition from biblical monotheism to trinitarianism over the centuries and stated that Nicea represented “a fuller unfolding, not a distortion, of the self-disclosure of the God of Israel,” a common view among trinitarians.³⁶ However, Anthony Buzzard remarks that this scholar fails to notice that, according to the gospels, Jesus himself fully ascribed to the unitary monotheism of Israel. He gave no indication that a “transition” to another form of monotheism was conceivable or legitimate.³⁷ It is common for theologians

³⁴ Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology* (vol. 1. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 446.

³⁵ Hebrews 1:1–2 indicates that God finally spoke through his only-begotten son when Jesus engaged in his ministry of preaching the kingdom and not prior to that.

³⁶ Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 431.

³⁷ Anthony Buzzard, *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian: A Call to Return to the Creed of Jesus* (McDonough, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2007), 16.

to claim that the evangelists and apostles wrote from a background assumption that readers know God the Father because they have met the Son and Holy Spirit. “There is never a point in the New Testament when Paul writes to a church, ‘Now concerning the three persons in the one God, brethren, I would not have you ignorant.’ . . . The kind of work that Paul and the apostles are doing is alluding to a revelation that they had already received.” This is given as the reason they “refer almost offhandedly” to this doctrine that is obliquely noted.³⁸ However, it raises the question why, if true, the portrayals of God are always unipersonal in *both* Testaments.

Yet, Hodge claims in his *Systematic Theology* that

in all the early books of Scripture, we find a distinction made between Jehovah and the angel of Jehovah, who himself is God, to whom all divine titles are given, and divine worship is rendered. As the revelation is unfolded, such distinction becomes more and more manifest. This messenger of God is called the word, the wisdom, the Son of God. His personality and divinity are clearly revealed. He is of old, even from everlasting, the Mighty God, the Adonai, the Lord of David, Jehovah our Righteousness, who was to be born of a virgin, and bear the sins of many.”³⁹

Hodge’s straightforward conclusion that Jehovah is also the angel of Jehovah makes no logical sense, as he is distinguishing between two separate beings. A messenger is someone *other than* the one whose messenger he is.

If, in fact, God’s true nature was fully and finally revealed in the New Testament pages through Christ’s birth, life, and resurrection, we would expect to see this new clarified understanding of a trinitarian God depicted in Stephen’s heavenly vision as he was

³⁸ Zondervan Blog, “11 Things to Know about the Doctrine of the Trinity,” n.p. [cited 30 July 2024]. Online: <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/11-things-to-know-about-the-doctrine-of-the-trinity>. Theologian B. B. Warfield made this argument: ““We cannot speak of the doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, if we study exactness of speech, as revealed in the New Testament, any more than we can speak of it as revealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written before its revelation; the New Testament after it. The revelation itself was made not in word but in deed. It was made in the incarnation of God the Son, and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit.” (Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016], 89). If this is the case, then somehow, somewhere, via this appearance of Christ as part of a three-part godhead, we should see a stark shift in anthropomorphic portrayals to indicate this.

³⁹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 446.

being stoned to death. But what do we read in Acts chapter 7? After Stephen accused the crowd of having murdered the Righteous One, the man Jesus (v. 53), we read: “But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’” (vv. 55–56). Twice stated, Jesus, in his recognizable human form, is seen standing at God’s right hand.⁴⁰ Presumably, then, God is seen as seated on his throne. This vision is consistent with what Jesus said to the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, in Mark 14:62: “You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One.” The apostle Peter, drawing on Psalm 110, declared to those around him on Pentecost that Jesus, whom they had crucified, had been exalted to the right hand of God (Acts 2:33). Nowhere do we find in any of these verses the form or appearance of a triune God; rather, God is specifically mentioned as a singular and distinct self on the throne, with Jesus having been elevated to this subordinate yet honored position above all creation in heaven and earth.⁴¹

In the final book in the biblical canon, this image of God alone on his throne is repeated. The apostle John, in the revelation given to him by Jesus, sees a unipersonal God sitting on his throne with anthropomorphic features in the midst of the angels (Revelation chapters 4 and 5).⁴² In chapter 1, John sees the glorified Jesus, who is still in the form of a “Son of Man,” wearing a robe, having one mouth, one head, one right hand, and one chest—clearly a singular self, and obviously a different self than the God who is revealing through

⁴⁰ There are sixteen New Testament references to Jesus or the Son of Man being at God’s right hand. This passage is unique in describing the Son of Man as standing (twice). Four verses describe him simply as “at” God’s right hand (Acts 2:33, 5:31; Rom 8:34; and 1 Pet 3:22), and the rest describe him as seated (Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62; 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). Standing or seated, Jesus is a recognizable human who is alongside God, not God himself.

⁴¹ No doubt alluding to the Son of Man vision Daniel received (Daniel 7:13–14).

⁴² Carl Griffin and David Paulsen mention that in subsequent Jewish apocalyptic, rabbinic, and mystical literature, this consistent depiction of God as reflecting humanlike features is ubiquitous. (“Augustine and the Corporeality of God,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 95, [no. 1, 2002], 98).

him (1:1). Nowhere in the revelation is the holy spirit portrayed in any physical fashion, nor does the spirit have or sit on a throne. Thus, supposing the Son is to be a divine “Person,” there would still seem to be one too few such for there to be any depiction or even assumption of a tripersonal God. Nowhere do we see something akin to the likeness of God’s nature as depicted in a plethora of paintings by artists over the centuries who envisioned this triune God as a head with three faces stemming from one neck or three “persons” somehow sitting on one throne, merged into one divine being. Instead, in Revelation 4:2, John says he saw *one* seated on the throne, and *he* (not they) had a glorious appearance. Twenty-two verses in Revelation depict Jesus as a slain lamb, a symbolic image pointing to his sacrificial death that earns him the right to stand at God’s right hand. But he is never shown united with Father and spirit in a tripersonal form.

Certain church fathers appealed to this concept of progressive revelation to explain why a tripersonal God is never portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures, as if to say that whereas the ancient Hebrews lacked the ability to comprehend such a complex nature of God, Christians in 381 AD could. Were fourth-century believers more enlightened or intelligent? Were the ancient Hebrews more susceptible to the lure of polytheism, so that God hid the truth to protect them? D. Blair Smith, professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, sums up what Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the Cappadocian Fathers, stated in his fifth theological oration:

If we would have had all the light of the Trinity at the very beginning of the human race and in those earliest chapters and books of the Bible, we would not have yet been able to take it in. And so, what we have is a gradual unfolding in scripture, starting with God’s singular nature: the great Shema, the confession of the Israelites, “Hear, O Israel, our Lord, our God, our Lord is one.” And then, as scripture goes on, an unfolding of who he is as one in three,

and that's God accommodating himself to our ability to take that truth in, just like our eyes have to be gradually exposed to light in order to benefit from it.⁴³

This explanation of a hidden, then gradually revealed Trinity is based on the belief that mere humans in ancient times were incapable of taking in the truth about God's nature, and by "unfolding" this truth, he is "accommodating himself" to our limitations. For trinitarians to declare that God is three separate selves, they imply that Yahweh deceived the Israel nation for hundreds of years. Dr. Dale Tuggy rightly asks:

Why couldn't ancient people have understood the notion of three deities who work together perfectly, and whose wills are perfectly in harmony? . . . whenever it was that the [Social Trinitarianism] proponent thinks that that charade was dropped (in New Testament times, Patristic times, or in recent analytic philosophy of religion), she can't specify something crucially different about that time, as opposed to the days of the patriarchs or the prophets.⁴⁴

But Yahweh never held back in Scripture any important details of who he is, nor changed the way he presented himself over the 1,600 years in which the Bible was written and to those who saw and experienced him—as a singular individual self who alone is God, the one who alone created all things. (Isa 42:5; 45:12, 18; 37:16; 44:24).

⁴³D. Blair Smith. "Why Did God Wait to Reveal the Trinity?" in *Reformed Theological Seminary*, n.p. [cited 6 May 2024]. Online: <https://rts.edu/resources/why-did-god-wait-to-reveal-the-trinity/>.

⁴⁴ Dale Tuggy, "Divine Deception, Identity, and Social Trinitarianism," *Religious Studies* (vol. 40, no. 3, 2004), 281.

As noted in the opening of this paper, Grudem warns against taking descriptions out of context or disregarding what the rest of Scripture says about God. Doing so would run the risk of misunderstanding or painting an inadequate or imbalanced picture of who God is. Wisely, he counsels regarding anthropomorphism, “Each description of one of God’s attributes must be understood in the light of everything else that Scripture tells us about God. If we fail to remember this, we will inevitably understand God’s character wrongly.” I believe that Grudem is correct and that Trinitarians ought to carefully weigh the many theophanies, visions, and prophetic descriptions that seem to portray God as a single someone.

Trinitarians, in dismissing anthropomorphism as figurative, naïve, incomplete, or unenlightened, do well to heed Grudem’s admonition. If Yahweh were truly a godhead—a substance comprising three individual persons—surely he would have portrayed himself thusly throughout Scripture, or at least once in the latter portions, in clearly descriptive ways, instead of as a singular individual who speaks using singular pronouns.⁴⁵

We do well to pay attention to how God chose to appear and describe himself in singular, unipersonal terms, not dismissing it as an antiquated or whimsical human attempt to describe him. As G. Ernest Wright puts it: “Anthropomorphism indicates God’s personal relation to history, and to assume that we can dispense with it as belonging to a primitive stage in our religious development is to separate ourselves not only from the Bible but from

⁴⁵ Mark Smith, Old Testament scholar, surmises regarding Genesis 17:2 that Yahweh is one of the three men standing near Abraham; the other two are the two angels mentioned in 19:1. Admitting this is one of the rare passages in the Bible that refer to God as a man, that the figures are called men “suggests a bodily appearance of God and the angels.” Though some claim these three divine figures are proof that the Old Testament indicates an early hint at the Trinity, there is no indication in the passage that they comprise three selves of one God. (“The Three Bodies of God in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, [no. 3, 2015]: 474-75).

the biblical conception of the true meaning of history.”⁴⁶ To claim that progressive revelation leads to understanding the unipersonal Creator as in actuality being tripersonal, a “fact” revealed in the New Testament after Jesus’s arrival in the world, is to contradict the many Scriptures that state that the Jews had an accurate knowledge of God. It also contradicts the doctrine of biblical sufficiency.

To rely on belief in a hidden, vague, and weakly supported progressive revelation that leads to understanding that God is a Trinity is to go beyond what Scripture expresses and to dismiss Grudem’s statement that “what he has told us in the Bible . . . is enough for us.”

BIBLICAL ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN CONFLICT WITH THE TRINITY

Nowhere in Scripture is God represented metaphorically or descriptively as a tripersonal God or substance. Put succinctly, Rabbi Stanley Greenberg states:

The Hebrew Scriptures are clear and unequivocal on the oneness of God. . . . Monotheism, an uncompromising belief in one God, is the hallmark of the Hebrew Bible, the unwavering affirmation of Judaism and the unshakable faith of the Jew. . . . Under no circumstances can a concept of a plurality of the Godhead or a trinity of the Godhead ever be based upon the Hebrew Bible.”⁴⁷

In the various Trinity doctrines, all three persons of God are said to be of the same substance, none before or after the other. The Nicene Creed of 325 CE declares that Jesus is “God from God . . . consubstantial with the Father.” The Athanasian Creed of the fifth century CE professes, “We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confusing the Persons, nor dividing the Essence [i.e., divinity]. And nothing in this trinity is before or after,

⁴⁶ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. II (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 52.

⁴⁷ Fruchtenbaum, “Evidence of the Trinity,” Online.

nothing is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other.” The creeds thereby ascribe divine attributes and divinity to each person of the Trinity.

While the holy spirit is personified in figurative language by Jesus in the gospel of John (14:26;15:26) as a teacher and advocate, and in Acts and two letters of Paul as giving instruction, grieving, and interceding, this “third person of the Trinity” is never described with anthropomorphic humanlike features in the way Yahweh is (Acts 8:29; 13:2; Rom 8:26–27; Eph 4:30).⁴⁸ The spirit never appears in bodily form like Yahweh’s, as a separate self and part of a tripersonal God. And, as unitarian Christian readers have pointed out, God’s holy spirit (or spirit) is never an object of worship. Hence, we get at most two figures, not three, and one is clearly subservient to the other: at his right hand, similar to that of a second-in-command standing in the court of an emperor.

Some speculate why the holy spirit fails to make appearances alongside the other “Two Persons of the Trinity.” Jiří Moskala, professor of Old Testament theology, says, “It is extremely difficult to elaborate on the Spirit of the Lord because the Holy Spirit is a very humble Person.” According to Moskala, the Spirit only desires to speak about Jesus or the Father, and that is why there is only “little mention about Him” in the Scriptures. He explains: “It has to do with His role within the Godhead: He stands in the background and points to the other members of the divine ‘We.’” It should be noted that nothing in Scripture demands that we understand God’s spirit to be someone in addition to him, and this view of the spirit’s humility is not taught anywhere in Scripture. The lack of anthropomorphic humanlike features attributed to the holy spirit gives weight to the argument that this spirit

⁴⁸ Jiří Moskala, “The Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures,” in *Perspective Digest*, n.p. [cited 14 May 2024]. Online: <https://www.perspectivedigest.org/archive/20-1/the-holy-spirit-in-the-hebrew-scriptures>.

is not God or an individual person. While one may try to argue that God's spirit is literally a someone, we never see it portrayed in a threesome with the Father and the Son of God in any way that might suggest that the three somehow "are" the one God or that they are coequal, fully divine "Persons" within the one God. Scripture just never gives trinitarian theologians the images they would prefer.

In conclusion, if the Bible is sufficient in providing all that is needed to know about God, it seems that we do not need to know that God is multipersonal, much less tripersonal. And the anthropomorphic descriptions of Yahweh throughout its pages give evidence for a unipersonal God. God's form as depicted by the Bible writers is hominid, as humans are fashioned in his image and likeness. The argument that a multipersonal God is hidden in plain sight in Scripture and that only through progressive revelation has this truth come clear proves weak in view of the immense evidence of God's singularity. To portray God as comprising three "persons" goes beyond the clearly depicted imagery and language of Scripture.

The Hellenized Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria wrote, "Since God is featureless and sublimely superior, it is impossible that we can recognise him. We must be content to know that he is, without understanding what he is like."⁴⁹ But this is too skeptical for Christians, who are the recipients of God's rich self-revelations via Scripture. While it is true that God is sublimely superior to the humans he made in his image and likeness, we *can* understand what he is like, and we can recognize him as well, for he inspired the Bible writers to portray him in great detail, and that portrayal overwhelmingly paints an anthropomorphic picture of a unipersonal God, "our Father in heaven" (Matt 6:9).

⁴⁹ Andreas Wagner, *God's Body: The Anthropomorphic God in the Old Testament*. (India: Bloomsbury, 2019), 31.

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