

MTP/HB Introduction to the Hebrew Bible
Who is God in the Hebrew Bible?
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One of my favorite parts of being a seminary faculty member is that I am often invited to go to local congregations and speak on a variety of topics. I enjoy these invitations because laypersons are especially interested in learning about the bible. They seem to be hungry for knowledge about the scriptures, and they are genuinely curious about the stories of faith. But they are also curious about other things. I am asked many different questions, but one question seems to come up more often: "What's a nice Christian girl like you doing studying the Old Testament?" Now they may not word it just like that, but you get the gist. They just can not understand why, when given the choice, I would choose to focus on the First Testament of the Christian canon rather than the New Testament.

Their question really has very little to do with the fact that the Hebrew Bible is almost three times longer, and covers much more history, than the New Testament. Rather, their question seems to be grounded in what I have found to be a common impression among people in the church. They just do not like the Hebrew Bible. In fact, they seem to have the idea that, in this first part of their canon, there is one picture presented of God and that picture is of a vengeful, violent, judgmental deity.

I do not deny that there are places in the Hebrew Bible where God is portrayed in this kind of light. What amazes me is that people of faith, who

hopefully have read the scriptures or at least part of them, can miss the fact that there is not one consistent image of God presented in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the Israelites' faith is very specific that they can not envision God in any one way. Exodus 20:4 states: "You shall not make for yourself an idol whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

There is not one image of God presented in the Hebrew Bible because the Israelites wanted to prevent humanity from making God into an idol. Why were they so determined not to have idols? Obviously, they were surrounded by religions that contained many different ways of imaging their gods in tangible forms. In Dtr 4:15-20, Moses offers an explanation to the people of Israel.

"Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure-the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. . . But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of God's very own possession, as you are now."

The God of Israel was a god too big for any image to contain.

Most Christians are probably comfortable with this prohibition against making images. We applaud the idea that we should not have statues or pictures of God sitting around in our churches. But, what about verbal images? The human language makes it virtually impossible to speak about God without

using images. In fact, according to one biblical scholar, George Caird, "all or almost all of the language of the bible which refers to God is metaphor with the possible exception of the word 'holy.'"¹

We use metaphors to describe the indescribable. While a verbal image of God may not be exactly the same as a tangible image of God, the idea of prohibition is the same for both. God is not to be limited. Given the constraints of their human language, the biblical writers were careful to make sure that not any one image was used for God at the exclusion of others. Instead, they utilized a multitude of ways to describe the divine. In depicting God, some of these images were contradictory, but that was necessary in order to maintain the mystery of the divine. As Brian Wren states, "allowing God-images to clash is important because it reminds us that we are approaching that which is beyond all images."² When we think that we have definitively defined God, we have made for ourselves an idol and have committed idolatry.

How did the Israelites come up with all their images of God? As we look through the literature of the Hebrew Bible, we see that there are certain books that image God similar ways and other books that differ in the way that they speak about God. For instance, in the Torah, God is consistently portrayed in ways that are different from how God is described in the wisdom literature. Part of the explanation for this comes from the historical contexts that gave rise to

¹ George Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 18-19.

² Brian Wren, *What Language Should I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology*. (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 109.

each of these canonical texts. The experiences of the persons responsible for recording the stories of faith shaped how the community imaged God. So, for the exiles in Babylon, God seemed to be distant and perhaps cold at times, but for those who were able to return to Jerusalem and worship in the rebuilt Temple, God was triumphant and very present. Another explanation for the different and seemingly contradictory Divine imagery comes from the needs of the community. When Israel needed God to be a source of hope and strength, they were able to speak of a God of compassion and of mercy. However, when the prophets saw the people reneging on their covenant, they were able to speak of a God who had high expectations and who demanded justice. As new voices came on the horizon, Israel was taught, by God's messengers, new and more creative ways to talk about the God they worshiped.

As we are considering the question of "Who is God in the Hebrew Bible?", it seems appropriate for us to sample some of this kaleidoscope of images, suggested to us by the biblical writers, in order to see what we might be able to learn from them. Given constraints of space and time, it would be impossible to cover all of the Hebrew Bible, so we are going to do the "Reader's Digest" condensed version, stopping only at certain highlights, before focusing in on the Psalms and in particular on Psalm 119.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep while the spirit of God moved across the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light

"day," and the darkness God called "night." And there was evening and there was morning, a first day." (Gen 1:1-5)

From the first words in the book of Genesis, God is talked of as being a God of creation. A God who speaks, and it is so, and it is good. A God who makes female and male in the divine likeness. A God who forms us with the divine hand and breathes into us the very breath of life. "Then the LORD God formed '*adam*' from the dust of the earth and breathed into it's lungs the breath of life, and '*adam*' became a living being" (Gen 2:7). God blesses creation and yes, even God rests from all of God's work.

As the stories unfold in Genesis, we see a picture of a God who is in control of creation. One of the stories that I think contributes most to the negative picture most people have of the Hebrew Bible and of God is the story of Noah and the flood. This tale presents God in a light that makes us very uncomfortable, a God who seems very, very destructive. But what we forget is that, at the end of this story, we see a God who regrets the destruction, a God who promises never to deal with humanity in such a way again.

The stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the faith show us a God who makes covenant, a Giver of life and of land and of a future. This God will be our God in the future and will make us a blessing to the nations. In the accounts about Hagar and Ishmael, we are given a picture of a God who "sees" (Gen 16) and who "hears" (Gen 21:1-21). The story of Jacob reveals a God who wrestles with us and who gives us new opportunities to change throughout our

lives (Gen 32). From the beginning to the closing lines of Genesis, we see a God who keeps covenant no matter what humans do to mess it up.

Most scholars would agree that no story is more important to the Israelite faith than the story of the Exodus. Thus, we would expect in Exodus and in the books that talk about the story of the escape from Egypt and the journey to the promise land, to find some very helpful insights into how Israel envisioned and understood their God. In the introduction of the book of Exodus, we see a God who “remembers”, who will not forget the covenant (Exod 2:23-24). This is a God who “sees what binds us and wills us to be free.”³ The very name given to Moses at the burning bush, *'eyeh 'asher 'eyeh*, implies a God of action and a God of existence. The fact that this Hebrew name defies translation helps to maintain a sense of mystery in the relationship between humanity and God.

As the Israelites wander through the wilderness, God is a giver of manna and of water, a protecting pillar of fire and a guiding cloud of life. God provides what the people need when they need it. God establishes covenant, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” However, this covenant has some stipulations. There are certain things that God expects of the people, and so God gives some guidelines for how we are to live in covenant relationships. God makes promises, but there are obligations on God’s side of the bargain as well. Another bothersome image for many Christians, portrayed in the giving of the 10 Commandments, is the idea that God is a jealous God. This picture bothers us

³ This is a phrase which I adopted from Dr. Toni Craven in her courses on the Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School, Ft. Worth, TX.

because it reminds us of a characteristic within ourselves that we are not too proud of, but I think that this image is crucial for us to recapture and hold on to in our faith. To say that God is a jealous God is to say that God is not an indifferent God.

If we look at the stories of the Deuteronomistic history, we see other ways of understanding God. Probably the one we like the best is that God uses the unlikely and the imperfect to carry out God's will. God is a God who demands faithfulness, but God also has the capacity for immeasurable forgiveness.

Some of the most vivid images of the divine are found in the poetic books: the wisdom literature, the prophetic materials, and the Psalms. Poetry lends itself easily to metaphor. In fact, I would say poetry demands metaphorical language. In the book of Job, for example, we see some very unique pictures of God. In the first couple of chapters, we see a God who makes a bet. And this is another one of those pictures we do not like. Nobody wants to think of God as some cosmic gambler placing bets on the race called, "life." However, I find in this image something very comforting. We tend to overlook the fact that God makes the bet with *hasatan* expecting to win, because God has faith in us. The book of Job also reminds us that God is God and we are not! Now that may seem a little intimidating but at other times it is probably a great relief to know that we are not God.

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?
Speak if you have understanding. Do you know who fixed

its dimensions or who measured it with a line? Onto what were its bases sunk? Who set its cornerstone when the morning star sang together, and all the divine beings shouted for joy? . . . Does the rain have a father? Who begot the dew? From whose womb came forth the ice? Who gave birth to the frost of heaven?" (Job 38:4-7, 28-29)

The prophets of Israel were those new voices that brought to Israel some different images for God. They, as much as anyone else, were influenced by their historical contexts. It is only natural that pre-exilic prophets show us a God who chastises, while post-exilic prophets speak of a God of promise and forgiveness. However, all the prophets, I would argue, believe in the mercy of God. For if they did not, their prophecies would have been in vain. God, they tell us, is a God of justice; a God who punishes but a God who forgives; and above all a God who loves us unconditionally. God believes that humans are capable of transformation, but it is up to us to make that choice.

One prominent image the prophets use to talk about God is as a parent, both father and mother. The book of Isaiah offers some beautiful examples. Isa 1:2, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the LORD has spoken: 'I reared children and brought them up, and they have rebelled against me!' "I have kept silent far to long, kept still and restrained myself; now I will scream like a woman in labor, I will pant and I will gasp," says the prophet in chapter forty-two. In Isa 64:8, "But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hands." And in Isa 66:13, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." Contrary to popular belief, father is by no means the dominant image for God in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, out of all

the materials in this part of the Hebrew Bible, father is only used to talk about God fourteen times.

The prophets also spoke of God as a ruler. In a monarchy, it would only make sense that God could be compared to the perfect king. However, I would argue that this image has lost some of its potency in America, where we no longer have a monarchy or at least I hope we do not. I am not suggesting that we talk about God as a president because that certainly would not work for obvious reasons.

Jer 23:23-24 asks us, "Am I only a God near at hand and not a God far away? If a person enters a hiding place do I not see them?" The call of Isaiah, when he sees God high and lifted up, and the strange visions of Ezekiel remind us of God's holiness. Who can forget the images in the first three chapters of Hosea? God is portrayed in the role of a husband, though not always in a positive light. But that is not the only image that Hosea uses for God. Hos 13:8, "Like a bear robbed of her young I attack them and rip open the casing of their hearts." In Hos 11:3-4, "I have pampered Ephraim, taking them into my arms; but they have ignored my healing care. I drew them with human ties, with cords of love; but I seemed to them as one who would impose a yoke on their jaws, though I was offering them food." God can also be a mother bear or one who teaches children how to walk and holds them in her arms.

No other book in the Hebrew canon challenges us to expand our vocabulary to talk about God more than the Psalter. In trying to organize the

numerous images in the Psalms into some kind of comprehensible way, Dr. Toni Craven suggests using four different categories. The first category emphasizes God's transcendence. Here we find those psalms that talk about God as being beyond our reality, the creator and giver of life. The psalmist in Ps 104 says it well, "Bless the LORD, O my soul; O LORD, my God, you are very great. You are clothed in glory and majesty, wrapped in a robe of white you spread the heavens like a tent cloth."

The second category contains animal metaphors for God. These are relatively few, except for those images of God's protective wings, as we find in Ps 36: "How precious is your faithful care, O God! Humanity is sheltered in the shadow of your wings." The third category contains inanimate metaphors for God, and this one contains more than can be described in one setting. Some examples would be God as rock and fortress and shield. As we read in Ps 18:2, "The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

The fourth and most popular category includes those images that talk about God in human-like terms. Here the psalmists talk about God and God's actions by using human agents in a metaphorical way. So, just as God is not literally a rock, we must remember that God is not literally any of these images either. Here we see God as shepherd and ruler, judge and parent, and the list goes on and on.⁴

⁴ Toni Craven. *The Book of Psalms*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 100-113.

The psalm I chose as the subject for my dissertation, Ps 119, is but one example of how the prayers of the second Temple and of the early church teach us to use a variety of images to talk about our experiences of God, even within the same prayer. In the 176 verses of this psalm, there are many different ways to talk about who God is, what God does for humanity and for creation, and what we are to do in response to God's grace and gifts.

I did a quick read-through of the psalm to see how many different images I could find, and I will share only ten of the numerous ones I found. God is the giver and the reviver of life. God is the one who gives understanding but more importantly the one who broadens our understanding. God fulfills promises and remembers those promises that God has made. God is a just judge, and God has steadfast love and incomprehensible mercy for God's people. God is a redeemer, a God who is near, and a God who lends a helping hand, when we need it most.

But if there is one image that seems to be most prevalent in Psalm 119 it is the image of God as one who teaches us. Repeatedly the psalmist asks God to "teach me your way." The entire psalm is a celebration of God's torah, God's teaching, which God gives to us everyday so that we may learn more and more. In a day when we search for new images of God, non-sexist or non-gender specific ways to talk about the God we worship, I think this image provides great potential. Luckily, in our modern society, teachers are both male and female and

come from many different backgrounds, with many gifts and many different subjects to teach.

Who of us can not remember some of our favorite teachers? Especially those of our early formative years? For me, it was Mrs. Collins, my first grade teacher. Do you remember your first grade teacher? Mrs. Collins was a regal woman who cared very deeply for her students but demanded respect and good behavior. I will never forget having to stay after school one day because a few members of the class were misbehaving during math period. I was quite indignant about this because I was not misbehaving, and I *never* had to stay after school. What I learned from Mrs. Collins, though, was that I was a part of a community and sometimes I was held responsible for the mistakes of a few.

I had an added benefit that my classmates did not in that Mrs. Collins also belonged to the same church as I did. So, not only did she teach me to read and to write, but she also taught me about God and the bible. She and her husband were elders in the church, and their faith and their marriage were a source of inspiration for me when I was young. During my sophomore year of college, Mrs. Collins' husband died from stomach cancer. And then a year later Mrs. Collins was killed in a car accident. Her influence on my life and the lives of her other students lives on.

How then is God like a teacher? Like Mrs. Collins, God challenges us to be our best and gently instructs us in what we need to learn. And like Mrs. Collins, God has high expectations of us and helps us to learn that our actions have

consequences. God celebrates our achievements and helps us to make up for our mistakes.

This is only a brief sampling of some of the images found for God in the Hebrew Bible. It is apparent that some are contradictory and all are different, but “diversity is the hallmark of how God is to be conceived.”⁵ As was said at the beginning, diversity prevents us from making of God a concrete image, whether verbal or tangible. It prevents us from committing idolatry. The biblical texts are historically limited and their expressions are also limited. In new contexts, certain metaphors lose their effectiveness, like I suggested with the metaphor of king in a democratic society. Gail Ramshaw aptly reminds us that “when a metaphor no longer surprises it has become a dead metaphor.”⁶

Just like the biblical writers, we describe God from our own encounters with God in covenant relationships. Some may experience God as being imminent and others as distant and transcendent. God is one who keeps covenant and sometimes seems to fail to keep covenant. And just as we all have different experiences, we must listen to one another and learn from one another. In the Hebrew Bible, no expression is judged right or wrong. All images are accepted and the scriptures teach us to be open to new language and to new metaphors.

There is no homogeneous picture for God, but there are some things that are certain. One is the mystery and the otherness of God. God’s name is holy;

⁵ Craven, 82.

⁶ Gail Ramshaw. *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 99.

God dwells in a holy heaven; and God's way is holy. As limited beings, we struggle to comprehend this mystery, knowing that our language is inadequate and that we will never fully comprehend God. No human image could possibly contain the entire infinitude of the divine. So when the psalmist asks, "Who is like the LORD our God?" The expected answer is a resounding "No one!"