

BIBLE INSIGHTS #3:

ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN THE BIBLE, PART TWO

By John Temples

Anthropomorphism is “speaking of inanimate objects as if they were alive.” We use anthropomorphism all the time, and so did the writers of the Bible.

Anthropomorphisms involving God are especially interesting.

“The hand of God” is a special class of anthropomorphism that deserves careful study. The hand is a means and source of action. The hand of God stands for:

- **STRENGTH.** “I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt” (Exodus 3:20).
- **HOLINESS.** “Your right hand is full of righteousness” (Psalms 48:10).
- **GLORY AND POWER.** “Your right hand, O Lord, has become glorious in power” (Exodus 15:6).
- **SALVATION.** “Save with Your right hand and hear me” (Psalms 60:5).
- **LAW.** “From His right hand came a fiery law” (Deuteronomy 33:2).
- **JUDGMENT.** “For there was a deadly destruction throughout the city, for the hand of God was very heavy there” (1 Samuel 5:11).
- **BLESSINGS AND PLEASURES.** “At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalms 16:11).
- **PROVIDENCE.** “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord...for the Lord upholds him with His hand” (Psalms 37:23,24).
- **SAFETY.** “My Father, who has given [My sheep] to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand” (John 10:29).

By the way, did you notice that when there’s a spatial reference, it’s always God’s right hand? The Bible never speaks of the *left* hand of God. The Bible mentions the right hand some 153 times, almost always in an approving way; it mentions the left hand only 19 times, mostly in a disparaging way. For example, Ecclesiastes 10:2 says, “A wise man’s heart is at his right hand, but a fool’s heart at his left.”

This situation reflects reality in our culture. Let’s face it--left-handed people have a hard row to hoe in our world! The Latin term for “right” is *dexter*, meaning useful or

skillful (cf. our word *dexterity*); the word for “left” is *sinister* (cf. our identical word). Clumsy people are said to have “two left feet”--not two right feet! We call an especially helpful person a “right-hand man.” We give people the “right hand” of fellowship, never the “left hand.” We strive to get up on the “right side” of the bed, not the left!

A FASCINATING BIBLICAL SEQUENCE OF POWER

There’s a fascinating anthropomorphic sequence of power in the Bible involving God’s *finger*, God’s *hand*, and God’s *arm*.

We think of a finger as possessing a little strength, a hand as having more strength, and an arm as exerting the most strength. The Bible uses these terms in the same way in reference to God.

THE FINGER OF GOD

Exodus 8:18,19 (speaking of Aaron’s rod producing lice on men and beasts) says, “Now the magicians so worked with their enchantments to bring forth lice, but they could not. So there were lice on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘*This is the finger of God.*’ But Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them.”

The Ten Commandments were written with “the finger of God” (Deuteronomy 9:10). Jesus said in Luke 11:20, “I cast out demons with the finger of God.”

Think about it: in the grand scheme of God’s power and the wonders He has performed, creating lice, writing on stone, and casting out an evil spirit are relatively “minor” miracles.

THE HAND OF GOD--TURNING UP THE POWER A NOTCH

Ezekiel 25:13 says, “Therefore thus says the Lord God, I will also *stretch out My hand* against Edom, cut off man and beast from it, and make it desolate.” Amos 1:8 reads, “I will *turn My hand* against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines

shall perish, says the Lord God.” And in Acts 13:11, Paul rebuked the sorcerer Elymas, saying, “And now indeed, the *hand of the Lord* is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.”

Hmmm....destroying a nation, that takes God hand; creating a louse, just a finger will do!

THE ARM OF GOD--EVEN MORE POWER

Job 40:9--“Have you an *arm* like God? Or can you thunder with a voice like His?”
Isaiah 52:10--“The Lord has made bare His holy *arm* [He has “rolled up His sleeves,” we would say] in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

But even the arm of God is not the ultimate. That is...

GOD’S HIGH, UPLIFTED, OR OUTSTRETCHED ARM

Miracles like the creation of the world or the bringing of a whole nation out of slavery are the ultimate exertion of God’s power; hence, they are described under the figure of God’s “outstretched” arm.

“And remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there *by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm*” (Deuteronomy 5:15). Acts 13:17 says He brought the people out by “*an uplifted arm*.” And Jeremiah 32:17 reads, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and *outstretched arm*. There is nothing too hard for You.”

Yes, this is a truly fascinating set of figures of speech relating to manifestations of God’s power!

So remember and learn from this brief study of anthropomorphism in the Bible. It is common for us to assign human characteristics to nonhuman entities for dramatic effect, and the Bible writers did the same, even in regard to God. These

figurative expressions help make God real to us. And God may indeed have some of the emotions attributed to Him in these anthropomorphisms. But if we are not knowledgeable about anthropomorphism, we might erroneously think that God has the same weaknesses we do. --John Temples