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ARTICLE

The Scriptural Shape of God: Divine Anthropomorphisms in Synoptic Perspective

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Abstract

Although an increasing number of works are focusing on depictions of God in the New Testament, none so far specifically focus on how these depictions rely on anthropomorphic language in their presentation of God. This article attends to this oversight by turning to the Synoptic Gospels (and the book of Acts) as a test case. Not only do these narratives lack an explicit anti-anthropomorphic agenda, but they also rely on divine anthropomorphisms that are derived from Jewish Scripture. To demonstrate this claim, the article concentrates on how Matthew and Luke expand Mark's anthropomorphic presentation of God and how Luke's presentation emerges as the most anthropomorphic of all. It also discusses how Mark, Matthew, and Luke's respective narratives depict God's human, or human-like, characteristics according to the following four categories: (1) God's human roles and titles, (2) God's depiction as an acting subject who speaks and desires to be in relationship with humans, (3) God's concrete presence located in space, and finally, (4) God's description as a character with recognisable body parts and other markers of corporeality. In the end, we shall see that anthropomorphism is a central component of God's characterisation in the Synoptics and that this anthropomorphic characterisation better enables readers to see the Jewish, scriptural shape of God as a personal deity who desires to be in relationship with humans.

Keywords: God; anthropomorphism; characterisation; space; emotion; body; Hebrew Bible; New Testament; Synoptic Gospels; Luke-Acts

I. Introduction

In 1975, Nils Dahl famously brought attention to a curious neglect in New Testament studies: namely, the neglected factor of God.[1] Dahl observed that, while references to God occurred in discussions of Christology or other New Testament themes, studies that focused on God as a topic in its own right were noticeably lacking. Since Dahl's article, an increasing number of articles and monographs have responded to this lacuna by attending to portrayals of God in the New Testament, with this response especially escalating in the past few decades.[2] To date, however, all of these works reflect their own

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[1] Nils Alstrup Dahl, 'The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology', *Reflections* 75 (1975) 5–8. Repr. in *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine* (ed. Donald H. Juel; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 153–63.

[2] See, e.g., the many citations throughout this article, as well as the following books: A. Andrew Das and Frank J. Matera, eds., *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Jerome H. Neyrey, *Render to God: New Testament Understandings of the Divine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); Christiane

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curious neglect in their treatments of God: they neglect to discuss the specific—and thoroughgoing—ways that the New Testament portrays God in anthropomorphic terms. On the one hand, this neglect is curious since the New Testament adopts many Jewish understandings of God that are found in the Hebrew Bible, and the Hebrew Bible itself, as many have long recognised, presents a very anthropomorphic-looking deity.[3] Yet while a number of biblical scholars have recently turned to divine anthropomorphisms in the Hebrew Bible, anthropomorphic portrayals of God in the New Testament have not received the same attention and are indeed strikingly absent in the literature.[4]

On the other hand, however, the neglected factor of anthropomorphism in New Testament studies of God may not be so curious after all, for a number of related factors in all likelihood account for this oversight. First, there is a long tradition of dismissing anthropomorphic language for God in the history of biblical interpretation, especially in Christian circles, with interpreters going to great lengths to argue that such language does not express essential truths about God and thus must not be taken literally.[5] Second, anthropomorphic language for God in the New Testament is far less frequent—and less striking—when compared to its occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible contains stories of humans seeing God's 'human-shaped' body parts, as when Moses sees God's back and is covered with God's hand (Exod 33.18–23), and it is peppered with evocative descriptions of God's emotions, as when God's nose burns with anger and so forth (e.g., Exod 4.14; 22.24; 32.10–14; Num 25.4; 32.13–14; Deut 9.19; 2 Kgs 24.20). The New Testament, though, has nothing like this.

Finally, because of this relative paucity of anthropomorphisms in comparison to the Hebrew Bible, some scholars assume that depictions of God in the New Testament reflect a process of 'Hellenisation' that is evident in numerous Second Temple Jewish texts: a Hellenisation that includes a softening of divine anthropomorphisms.[6] For many years,

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Zimmermann, *Die Namen des Vaters: Studien zu ausgewählten neutestamentlichen Gottesbezeichnungen vor ihrem frühjüdischen und paganen Sprachhorizont* (AJEC 69; Leiden: Brill, 2007); Larry W. Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010); Warren Carter, *God in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016). In 2022, SNTS also began a seminar devoted to this topic entitled 'God in the New Testament'.

[3] Hurtado suggests that the belief that the New Testament effectively adopts a Jewish scriptural understanding of God—and does not contribute anything distinctive or new—is in fact one of the reasons why some scholars have not devoted more attention to God's portrayal in the New Testament in the first place (*God in New Testament Theology*, 3–4). The recognition that the Hebrew Bible contains divine anthropomorphisms extends back to at least the second century BCE with the Jewish philosopher Aristobulus, who like Philo in the first century CE, argues that these anthropomorphisms do not actually reflect God's essence.

[4] For recent discussions of divine anthropomorphisms in the Hebrew Bible, see, e.g., Esther J. Hamori, *"When Gods Were Men": The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* (BZAW 384; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008); Andreas Wagner, *Gottes Körper: Zur alttestamentlichen Vorstellung des Menschengestaltigkeit Gottes* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2010; ET 2019); Anne K. Knafl, *Forming God: Divine Anthropomorphism in the Pentateuch* (Siphrut 12; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014); Andreas Wagner, ed., *Göttliche Körper—Göttliche Gefühle: Was leisten anthropomorphe und anthropopathische Götterkonzepte im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament?* (OBO 270; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Mark S. Smith, *Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy* (New York: Knopf, 2022). To my knowledge, the only sustained discussion of divine anthropomorphisms in the New Testament is my article 'Forming God: Divine Anthropomorphism in Luke-Acts', *JBL* 140 (2021) 777–97.

[5] Among New Testament interpreters, this phenomenon begins as early as the second century. See Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

[6] While some New Testament scholars state this position outright (see, for example, my discussion of John Donahue below), I suspect that this assumption concerning Hellinisation plays a much larger role in the tendency to overlook divine anthropomorphisms in New Testament studies. For a helpful complication of the term 'Hellenisation' itself, see Martin Hengel's classic *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

scholars maintained that translations of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek and Aramaic (i.e., the LXX and the Targumim) systematically expunged divine anthropomorphisms in order to make God more palatable to a Hellenised or philosophically astute audience for whom such anthropomorphisms would be viewed as 'primitive' and unsophisticated.[7] Given that the New Testament arguably reflects many other aspects of 'Hellenisation', as well as an awareness of philosophical traditions that would have held anthropomorphism in disdain, it may very well be the case that the New Testament participates in this larger project of 'toning down' anthropomorphic language evident among some Jews during the Greco-Roman period.

However, while it is certainly true that the overall portrait of God in the New Testament looks much less anthropomorphic than what we find in the Hebrew Bible, I will argue in this article that it is problematic to assume that the New Testament tries to avoid presenting God as an anthropomorphic deity in an effort to align God with the largely impersonal, disembodied Gods of Greco-Roman philosophy or the like. As more recent scholarship demonstrates, the claim that the LXX or Targumim systematically tone down anthropomorphisms can no longer be sustained. Instead, the Greek and Aramaic translators are on the whole faithful to the Hebrew and often render divine anthropomorphisms quite literally.[8] While there are some divergences from the Hebrew that could be explained by anti-anthropomorphic concerns, other explanations for these divergences may also be possible, such as a growing trend in using more indirect, cautionary language in relation to God.[9] With this correction in view, I will also argue that this assumption concerning a wider 'Hellenistic' rejection of anthropomorphism impedes us from seeing the many ways in which God *is* portrayed as an anthropomorphic being in the New Testament. Such an assumption hinders us from seeing that divine anthropomorphisms are a frequent—and in fact foundational—way in which the New Testament depicts God. Because of its reliance on Jewish accounts of God in scriptural texts, the New Testament, like its scriptural predecessors, presents God as a thoroughly anthropomorphic being in a manner that is simply a part of its narrative fabric.

To demonstrate this argument, I will focus mainly on the Synoptic Gospels as a test case. Because the Synoptic Gospels evince interpretative tendencies among themselves, they are a helpful resource for discerning whether there is a specific, *anti-anthropomorphic* tendency within the New Testament, especially if we understand Matthew and Luke to be using Mark as a source. In this article, I assume Markan priority, but my argument does not depend on a particular solution to the Synoptic problem (i.e., I do not need to argue, for example, that Matthew and Luke relied on Q [the two-source hypothesis] or that Luke used Matthew [the Farrer hypothesis] in order for my argument to work).[10] Instead, my main point is that one cannot discern a clear anti-anthropomorphic tendency in either

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[7] See, for example, Charles T. Fritsch's widely influential book: *The Anti-Anthropomorphisms of the Greek Pentateuch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943).

[8] See, e.g., Steffan Olofsson, *God is My Rock: A Study of Translation Technique and Theological Exegesis in the Septuagint* (ConBOT 31; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990); Michael L. Klein, *Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in the Targumim of the Pentateuch: With Parallel Citations from the Septuagint* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1982); Martin Meiser, 'Die Septuaginta innerhalb der Literatur des antiken Judentums—Theologische Termini, Motive, Themen', in *Die Septuaginta—Geschichte, Wirkung, Relevanz* (ed. Martin Meiser, et al.; WUNT 405; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 3–28, esp. 13–24; Martin Meiser, 'Annotations on Theology in Ancient Scholarship on Homer and the Concept of God in the Septuagint', in *The Septuagint and Its Reception: Collected Essays* (ed. Martin Meiser; WUNT 482; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 3–29, esp. 13–15.

[9] See the discussion in Brittany E. Wilson, *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[10] Although the literature on the Synoptic problem is of course vast, key representative works that respectively reflect the two-source hypothesis and a version of the Farrer hypothesis are John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) and Mark

Matthew or Luke, regardless of their specific sources, for both portray a robustly anthropomorphic God.[11] Between Matthew and Luke, some may suppose that Luke presents a decidedly less anthropomorphic-looking God than Matthew, since scholarship has long characterised Matthew as a 'Jewish' Gospel and Luke as a 'Hellenised' or 'Gentile' Gospel.[12] I will demonstrate, though, that this binary cannot stand, for Luke's presentation of God is in fact the most anthropomorphic of all the Synoptics, especially when we include his second volume.[13] In this respect, my article thus also participates in the recent scholarly movement of reclaiming the 'Jewishness' of Luke-Acts.[14]

While I believe that my claim concerning the centrality of divine anthropomorphism applies to a number—if not most—New Testament texts, it is important to note that my chosen *comparanda* for this article arguably present some of the more anthropomorphic-looking portrayals of God in the New Testament, mainly because the Synoptic Gospels themselves are narratives in which God emerges as a *character*. As a character in these narratives, God remains largely off stage, primarily emerging via the narrator and other characters within the text in an indirect manner.[15] At the same time, the Gospel narrators provide us with numerous details about God and craft God as a character in a manner akin to other *human* characters within the narrative. Because of these similar narrative techniques, Robert Brawley makes the trenchant observation in a study on characterisation in Luke-Acts that a reader's construction of God as a character 'will likely assume an anthropological shape according to the reader's image of human beings'.[16] In a similar manner, I want to suggest that God's emergence as a character within the Synoptics contributes to God's anthropomorphic shape and that this anthropomorphic characterisation, in turn, encourages readers to view God in terms of a *person* (however that is conceived).[17] Thus while more attention needs to be devoted to the role of divine anthropomorphism throughout the New Testament, the anthropomorphic depiction of God in the Synoptics has implications for wider discussions of God's characterisation and 'personhood', and it may also provide a helpful comparison (and contrast) with depictions of God in other literary forms, such as the New Testament epistles.

In exploring God's anthropomorphic characterisation in the Synoptic Gospels (and Acts), it is important to note that I am especially informed by Anne Knafl's in-depth

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S. Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002).

[11] To be clear, I do not believe that we can discern whether the evangelists were *consciously* promoting an anthropomorphic-looking deity through their incorporation of divine anthropomorphisms. In this article, I am instead interested in the potential *effects* of these divine anthropomorphisms with respect to how a reader may envision God. On this point of attending to the effect of divine anthropomorphisms, see David Stern, 'Imitatio Hominis: Anthropomorphism and the Character(s) of God in Rabbinic Literature', *Prooftexts* 12 (1992) 151–74.

[12] For a critique of this tendency to identify Matthew as 'Jewish' and Luke as 'Gentile', see Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis After 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts* (WUNT 355; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), esp. 18–32.

[13] This point, of course, becomes all the more striking if one adheres to the Farrer hypothesis.

[14] In addition to Isaac Oliver's work, see also, for instance, Christopher Stroup, *The Christians Who Became Jews: Acts of the Apostles and Ethnicity in the Roman City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020) and the Enoch Seminar's forthcoming volume on the topic 'Luke and Acts with(in) Second Temple Judaism'.

[15] On the nature of God's indirect characterisation in the New Testament, see, e.g., Ling Cheng, *The Characterisation of God in Acts: The Indirect Portrayal of an Invisible Character* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011).

[16] Robert L. Brawley, *Centering on God: Method and Message in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 111.

[17] On this point of God emerging as a person via anthropomorphic language, see Mark S. Smith, *How Human is God? Seven Questions about God and Humanity in the Bible* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), esp. 25–41.

taxonomy of divine anthropomorphism in the Hebrew Bible.[18] I rely on Knafl's work not only because Jewish Scripture is the main source for the evangelists' portrayal of God, but because Knafl significantly broadens our understanding of what constitutes a divine anthropomorphism in the first place. Unlike definitions that focus on God's human form, Knafl defines divine anthropomorphism as '*any* description that applies human characteristics, actions, abilities, or feelings to a deity' (in this case, the God of Israel).[19] By having a broad definition, Knafl highlights the degree to which the Bible is saturated with anthropomorphic language about God, even though interpreters have typically only focused on God's body parts (anthropomorphism) or God's emotions (anthropopathism) when discussing God's human or human-like descriptions.[20] By having a broad definition, Knafl also forces us to wrestle with the centrality of anthropomorphic language in scriptural accounts of God, despite the long interpretative tendency of downplaying or 'explaining away' this language within the Bible's reception history.[21]

Therefore, with this more expansive definition in view, this article will look at how Mark, Matthew, and Luke describe God according to four key, at times overlapping, categories: (1) God's human roles and titles, (2) God's depiction as an acting subject who speaks and desires to be in relationship with humans, (3) God's concrete presence located in space, and finally, (4) God's description as a character with recognisable body parts and other markers of corporeality. I will begin with Mark and then turn to Matthew and Luke, highlighting, in particular, the ways that *both* Matthew and Luke expand on Mark's depiction of God and how Luke goes even beyond Matthew in depicting God as an anthropomorphic figure. As we shall see, anthropomorphic language is key to how the Synoptics characterise God, especially in terms of portraying God as a personal, relational, and fundamentally *Jewish* God. In short, I will maintain that attending to divine anthropomorphisms in the Synoptic Gospels—and indeed the New Testament as a whole—can help us better see the scriptural shape of God and how God emerges as a 'person' in relation to God's people.

II. The Shape of God in Mark

Of the Synoptics, Mark presents us with the most reserved portrait of God.[22] Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark never refers to God's body and, as is typical of the brevity of his narrative in general, he provides us with the fewest explicit details about God. In a discussion of God in Mark's Gospel, John Donahue contrasts this Markan reserve with 'the anthropomorphism of Matthew' and even argues that Mark exemplifies a tendency in Hellenistic Judaism to move away from anthropomorphism.[23] But even though Mark lacks details about God that we would typically classify as anthropomorphisms, when we broaden our view of what constitutes an anthropomorphism, we find that Mark still speaks about God in a variety of human-like ways, including God's identification with human persons such as fathers, God's interactions with humans, and God's concrete location in space. As a whole, Mark's portrait of God looks, in fact, remarkably like the anthropomorphic God of Jewish Scripture, and it is this portrait that provides a key foundation upon which Matthew and Luke form their own anthropomorphic pictures of God.

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[18] Knafl, *Forming God*.

[19] Knafl, *Forming God*, 35. Entire definition originally in italics.

[20] Since Philo, interpreters have tended to treat anthropopathism as a separate category from anthropomorphism, but like Knafl, I will treat God's emotions under the wider umbrella term of anthropomorphism since emotions are bodily phenomena.

[21] Again, see, e.g., Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition*.

[22] John Donahue argues that Mark speaks about God in a 'sober and reserved way' ('A Neglected Factor in the Theology of Mark', *JBL* 101 (1982) 563–94, here 569). Paul L. Danove, however, identifies no less than 314 direct and indirect references to God in Mark, despite the paucity of references when compared to Matthew and Luke (*Theology of the Gospel of Mark: A Semantic, Narrative, and Rhetorical Study of the Characterization of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2019)). For other studies that specifically attend to the role of God in Mark's Gospel, see François Vouga, 'Habt Glauben an Gott. Der Theozentrismus der Verkündigung des Evangeliums und des christlichen Glaubens im Markusevangelium', in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts: Essays in Honor of Lars Hartman* (ed. Tord Fornberg and David Hellholm; Oslo: Scandinavian Universities Press, 1995), 93–109; Klaus Scholtissek, 'Er is nicht ein Gott der Toten, sondern der Lebenden (Mk 12,27). Grundzuge markinischer Theologie', in *Der lebendige Gott. Studien zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Festschrift fur Wilhelm Thusing zum 75* (ed. Thomas Soding; Munster: Aschendorf, 1996), 71–100; Paul Danove, 'The Narrative Function of Mark's Characterization of God', *NovT* 43 (2001) 12–30; Jack Dean Kingsbury, '"God" within the Narrative World of Mark', in *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology. Essays in Honor of Paul J. Achtemeier on the Occasion of His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (ed. A. Andrew Das and Frank J. Matera; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 75–

First, Mark describes God as having human roles and titles. Mark's language of God's 'kingdom', for example, situates God as a king (e.g., 1.15; 4.11, 26, 30; 9.1, 47; 10.15, 23, 24, 25; 12.34; 14.25; 15.43), and in parables, Jesus likens God to a sower (4.13–20; cf. 4.3–9) and to a vineyard owner (12.1–12).[24] God especially emerges as a human (or human-like) character through the epithet 'Father', an epithet, along with 'King', that likewise appears in Jewish Scripture.[25] Mark refers to God as 'Father' four times in his narrative (8.38; 11.25; 13.32; 14.36) (all four times by Jesus), and he also positions Jesus as God's Son (1.11; 9.7; cf. 8.38; 13.32; 14.36) and followers as God's children since they are to pray to their 'Father' in heaven (11.25).[26] Jesus directly addresses God as Father, and he famously calls God 'Abba' as well (14.36), a unique Markan detail that may underscore the intimacy between God and Jesus (cf. Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6).[27] Mark's title of Father highlights the relationality between God and humans, including Jesus, and it invites the reader to think of God in terms of a parental figure, albeit a divine parental figure.

Second, God's actions and interactions with creation, humans in particular, cast God in anthropomorphic terms, for they demonstrate an interest to affect change in the world and to enter into a relationship with people.[28] Such a decision, as Knafl notes, is itself

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89; Gudrun Guttenberger, *Die Gottesvorstellung im Markusevangelium* (BZNW 123; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004); Neyrey, *Render to God* (2004), 1–43; Laura C. Sweat, *The Theological Role of Paradox in the Gospel of Mark* (LNTS 492; London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Paul Danove, 'The "History" of God's Actions in the Gospel of Mark', *RB* 127 (2020) 518–43.

[23] Donahue, 'A Neglected Factor', 567, 569. Donahue also claims that the Markan Jesus 'speaks with reserve of a transcendent God with virtually no anthropomorphisms' (593) and that Mark's emphasis on God's transcendence and avoidance of anthropomorphisms serves a missional, or apologetic, function (594).

[24] Parables, by virtue of their generic form, resist exact, one-to-one correlations, as when the sower in Mark's parable of the sower could refer to God, Jesus, and/or the Christian preacher (see, e.g., Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 311). As instances of figurative speech, parables also do not fully *equate* God with human figures. Nonetheless, they still encourage the hearer to think of God in terms of human figures (such as a sower, vineyard owner, and so forth), and they invite further reflection on how God *is* like these humans.

[25] On God as 'Father' in the New Testament, Jewish Scripture, and the Greco-Roman world, see Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Zimmermann, *Die Namen des Vaters*, 41–166.

[26] On God as Father in Mark, see also Danove, *Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 202–4. On God's other epithets in Mark, see Donahue, 'A Neglected Factor', 565–6; Neyrey, *Render to God*, 2–8. The two most common names for God in Mark include θεός ('God') (48x) and κύριος ('Lord') (9x [cf. 12.9]) (cf. εὐλογητός ['Blessed One'] in 14.61). Note, though, that Mark also applies the title κύριος to Jesus (2.28; 7.28; 11.3; 12.37 [cf. 12.36]; 13.35; 16.[19], [20]) and that the title can sometimes apply to both God and Jesus (e.g., 1.3; 5.19; 11.9).

[27] Although most commentators today agree that Abba does not mean 'Daddy', it may still connote a sense of intimacy between a child and father (see, e.g., Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27A; New York: Doubleday, 2009), 977–8). Cf. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father*, 21–34, 90; Zimmermann, *Die Namen des Vaters*, 76–83.

[28] On how statements about God in the New Testament, as in the Hebrew Bible, focus largely on God's actions toward humans, see Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology*, 35–7. He writes: 'the God of the NT is not presented

an emotional one that invites a response from humans in terms of an ongoing connection, which is carried out through practices such as prayer and observing the law and so forth.[29] Divine actions in the Bible range from the supernatural to the mundane, meaning that God sometimes performs actions that can only be carried out by a supernatural being (such as creating the world) and that God at other times performs actions that humans themselves could (and do) carry out (such as loving others and swearing oaths and so forth).[30] In Mark, God's actions lean more toward the supernatural end of the spectrum.[31] Mark portrays God as the one who created humans and all of creation (10.6; 13.19) and as the one who can alone forgive sins (with the exception of Jesus) (2.7; 11.25).[32] Similarly, God's descriptors also lean more toward the supernatural end of the spectrum since Mark highlights God's singular power, knowledge, and goodness.[33] According to Mark, God can do things that mortals cannot, because for God 'all things are possible' (10.27; cf. 11.22–4; 12.24); God is the only one who 'knows' about the coming end (13.32) and God alone is good (10.18). God's will, or what God wants, can also conflict with what humans want, a point that Jesus reveals when he prays: 'Remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want [θέλω], but what you [want]' (14.36; cf. 3.35).[34]

Yet while Mark distinguishes between God and humans and depicts God's actions as distinctly divine, Mark still demonstrates God interacting with creation in a personal way. God, for example, answers human prayers (11.22–4), shows mercy (5.19), wants human hearts to be near the divine self (7.6) and self-identifies as the God of specific people—namely, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (12.26).[35] Overall, there is a reciprocity between God's actions and human actions, and while God is certainly an agent who initiates contact with human beings, God is also the recipient of human actions, as when God receives prayers (1.35; 6.46; 11.24, 25; 12.40; 13.18; 14.32, 35, 38, 39), blessings (6.41; 8.7; 14.22), thanks (8.6; 14.23) and the love of humans (12.30, 33).[36] Thus while God is clearly 'Other' in Mark, God also acts in recognisably relational ways.

God's most anthropomorphic interactions with humans, though, occur when God speaks to them. Sometimes God's first-person discourse appears on the lips of Jesus

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primarily as an *object* of intellectual reflection but instead is an acting *subject*, the knowledge of whom is gained by this deity acting toward people and establishing with them a *subject-subject* relationship' (37).

[29] Knafl, *Forming God*, 261–4.

[30] Note, though, that hearers may also have associated God's act of creating (through Mark's usage of the verb κτίζω in 13.19 [cf. Mark 10.6; Matt 19.4]) with the action of human kings founding a city. See Barbara Schmitz, 'Does κτίστης Mean "Creator"?: The Lexeme κτι- and Its Implications in the Greek-Hellenistic Context', in *Cosmos and Creation: Second Temple Perspectives* (ed. Michael W. Duggan, Renate Egger-Wenzel, and Stefan C. Reif; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 35–54.

[31] Mark, as in other texts of the New Testament, also at times refers to God's action more indirectly through the use of passive verbs and the like (e.g., Mark 10.37–40). Beniamin Pascut, however, cautions that God should not always be identified as the subject of passive verbs ('The So-Called Passivum Divinum in Mark's Gospel', *NovT* 54 (2012) 313–333). Peter-Ben Smit and Toon Renssen further caution that there is no evidence to suggest that agentless passives function as a circumlocution, or a way to avoid naming God ('The *passivum divinum*: The Rise and Future Fall of an Imaginary Linguistic Phenomenon', *Filología Neotestamentaria* 27 (2014) 3–24).

[32] For a fuller account of the range of God's actions, see Danove, *Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 101–25.

[33] For a fuller discussion of God's descriptors, or attributes, see Danove, *Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 127–66. See also Guttenberger, *Die Gottesvorstellung.* Matthew and Luke also highlight the singularity of God's power, knowledge, and goodness. See, e.g., Matt 19.17; 24.36; Luke 1.37; 18.19.

[34] Note that while some witnesses leave θέλεις implied ('but what you *want*'), a number of other manuscripts (such as Codex Bezae) include θέλεις.

[35] In 7.6, one can assume that God wants human hearts to be near the divine self since Mark quotes Isaiah, who speaks for God and says the following: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me' (cf. Isa 29.13 LXX).

[36] On God as the one who experiences these various actions, see Danove, *Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 185–99. See also pp. 167–84.

when he quotes from Scripture (7.6–7; 11.17; 12.26, 36).[37] But God also enters into the narrative as a character and speaks directly to humans at two significant turning points: first, at Jesus' baptism and second, at Jesus' transfiguration (1.11; 9.7). In both instances, God's 'voice' becomes manifest: during the baptism, as a 'voice' coming from heaven, and during the transfiguration, as a 'voice' coming from a mountain top cloud.[38] In both instances, God's voice also speaks to human characters using direct discourse—first to Jesus and then to the disciples, Peter, James and John. While Mark is careful not to present God visually *appearing* in anthropomorphic form during these theophanies, God's voice and speech nonetheless suggest God's corporeality, for a mouth (and other body parts) is typically required for speech.

What is more, the content of God's speech in both theophanies provides a rare glimpse into God's interior thoughts and emotions.[39] When God speaks to Jesus at his baptism, God identifies Jesus as 'my Son, the Beloved' or 'my beloved Son', a designation that God reiterates to the disciples at the transfiguration. Not only do we have God positioning the divine self as a parent in relation to Jesus, but God says that this Son is beloved. The translation 'my beloved Son' heightens the sense that *God* is the one who loves Jesus, and at the baptism, God's additional words 'with whom I am well pleased' enforces our understanding of God's parental love and positive disposition toward Jesus—a disposition that should lead others to 'listen to him', as God tells the disciples during the transfiguration. In short, the divine voice at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration reveals that God is an emotional being who feels love, pleasure, and acceptance toward Jesus.[40]

Third: Mark suggests that God has some kind of 'form' since God has a concrete presence that occupies space, particularly heavenly space. God is not an intangible, place-less entity but instead has a 'street address', as Robert Brawley puts it.[41] As in Jewish Scripture, Mark refers to the temple as God's 'house' (2.26; 11.17), thus suggesting that the temple can be a place where God dwells. But as in many other scriptural texts, Mark primarily locates God within the heavenly realm. Mark intimates this location when Jesus looks up to heaven before blessing and breaking bread and before healing a man (6.41; 7.34).[42] But Mark more explicitly locates God in heaven with his incorporation of the first line of Psalm 110 (109.1 LXX)—an enthronement Psalm that became important in early Christian articulations of Jesus' exaltation.[43] When teaching in the temple, Jesus interprets the Psalm to refer to Israel's messiah and quotes it, saying, 'the Lord [God] said to my Lord [i.e., the messiah], "Sit at my right until I put your enemies under your feet"' (12.36). Not only does God's speech envision God as a king sitting on a throne, but it indicates that God occupies a space next to which someone can sit. We later understand that this throne room is in heaven when Jesus tells the Sanhedrin during his trial that they 'will see the Son of Man seated at the right of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven' (14.62). In this conflation of Ps 110.1 with Dan 7.13–14, we see God—referred to as 'the Power'—ruling in heaven with the Son of Man seated at God's side until the eschaton (when the Son of Man will come with the clouds of heaven).[44] With these interpretations of Psalm 110, we learn that God is a character who primarily dwells in heaven and who is described as doing so via anthropomorphic language.

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[37] See also the vineyard owner's direct discourse in 12.6.

[38] On God's voice, see also Danove, *Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 129–30.

[39] On this point, see Brawley, *Centering on God*, 122–3.

[40] See also Danove, *Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 191–2, 196–8.

[41] Brawley, *Centering on God*, 110–11.

[42] Cf. Job 22.26; Ps 121.1; Luke 18.13; John 11.41.

[43] E.g., Matt 22.44; 26.64; Mark 16.[19]; Luke 20.42–3; 22.69; Acts 2.34–5; Rom 8.34; 1 Cor 15.25; Eph 1.20; Col 3.1; Heb 1.3, 13; 8.1; 10.12.

[44] In the longer ending of Mark, we also find that Jesus' exaltation to God's right occurs directly after he is 'taken up into heaven' (16.19), a detail that firmly situates God as a king ruling in heaven alongside Jesus.

III. The Shape of God in Matthew and Luke

When we turn to Matthew and Luke, we find them characterising God in a very similar manner.[45] In fact, Matthew and Luke not only incorporate these anthropomorphic details in their characterisation of God, but they expand on these details in a variety of different ways. First, Matthew and Luke expand on Mark's description of God's human roles and titles. They do so through the increased number of their parables in which listeners are encouraged to envision God in relation to a number of human figures, ranging from kings (Matt 18.23–35; 22.1–14) and wealthy property owners (Matt 20.1–16; 21.33–44; Luke 13.22–9; 16.1–13; 20.9–19), to a sower (Matt 13.1–23; Luke 8.4–15) and a shepherd (Matt 18.10–14; Luke 15.3–7), and to a father (Matt 21.28–32; Luke 15.11–32) and a woman seeking a lost coin (Luke 15.8–10; cf. 18.1–8).

But Matthew and Luke also heighten God's association with particular human figures through their use of titles and direct references to God. For one, Matthew and Luke more clearly identify God as a ruler and king. They retain Mark's picture of God as a heavenly king, as well as Mark's language of God's 'kingdom', and while Matthew prefers the terminology of 'kingdom of heaven' as opposed to 'kingdom of God', he does not completely omit the phrase 'kingdom of God' (6.[33]; 12.28; 19.24; 21.31, 43).[46] Matthew also clarifies that God is the one who rules this kingdom (6.10; 13.43; 26.29; cf. 18.23; 22.1–14), and he even refers to God as 'the great King' (5.35; cf. Ps 48.2). Luke heightens God's identification as a ruler figure through his frequent use of the appellation 'Lord' (κύριος), which is also a favourite Lukan Christological title, and by recalling God's past martial activity on behalf of the Israelites against other nations, which Stephen and Paul relate in the book of Acts (Acts 7.45; 13.17, 19).[47]

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[45] For specific treatments of God in Matthew and Luke's respective accounts, see François Bovon, 'Le Dieu de Luc', *RSR* 69 (1981) 279–300; Robert L. Mowery, 'God, Lord and Father: The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew', *BR* 33 (1988) 24–36; Brawley, *Centering on God* (1990) 111–24; Robert L. Mowery, 'Direct Statements Concerning God's Activity in Luke-Acts', in *Society of Biblical Literature 1990 Seminar Papers* (ed. David J. Lull; SBLSP 29; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 196–211; Robert L. Mowery, 'Lord, God, and Father: Theological Language in Luke-Acts', in *Society of Biblical Literature 1995 Seminar Papers* (ed. Eugene H. Lovering Jr.; SBLSP 34; Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 82–101; Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the "Acts of the Apostles"* (SNTSMS 121; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85–108; John T. Carroll, 'The God of Israel and the Salvation of the Nations: The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles', in *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology. Essays in Honor of Paul J. Achtemeier on the Occasion of His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (ed. A. Andrew Das and Frank J. Matera; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 91–106; Neyrey, *Render to God* (2004), 44–106; Diane G. Chen, *God as Father in Luke-Acts* (StBibLit 92; New York: Lang, 2006); Cheng, *The Characterisation of God in Acts* (2011); Scott Shauf, *The Divine in Acts and in Ancient Historiography* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Christine H. Aarflot, *God (in) Acts: The Characterization of God in the Acts of the Apostles* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2020); Wilson, *The Embodied God* (2021), 23–148; Steve Walton, *Reading Acts Theologically* (LNTS 661; London: T&T Clark, 2022), 15–30. (Note that when compared to Mark and Luke, there are the fewest studies on God in Matthew.)

[46] Scholars often identify Matthew's 'kingdom of heaven' language as a circumlocution and thus a way to avoid saying God's name, but this argument does not seem entirely plausible since Matthew refers to 'God' (θεός) a total of 51 times in his narrative. On Matthew and Luke's portrayal of God as a heavenly king, see the discussion below.

[47] Luke applies the title κύριος to God approximately 55 times in his two-volume work. (Cf. Mark 9x; Matt 18x.) For a discussion of Luke's use of this title, along with the titles 'God' and 'Father', see Mowery, 'Lord, God, and Father'. For other images that potentially convey God's martial ability, see Luke 1.51–2; Acts 13.11; 23.3. Note too that Luke is the only evangelist to refer to God as 'Saviour' (σωτήρ) (Luke 1.47; cf. 1 Tim 1.1), a title that has military connotations in a Roman imperial context.

Matthew and Luke also refer to God as 'Father', both in relation to Jesus (who is God's Son) and followers (who are God's children).[48] Matthew and Luke, however, refer to God as Father much more frequently, with Matthew in particular including the epithet a total of 44 times in comparison to Luke's 20 times and Mark's four.[49] Aside from the Gospel of John, Matthew calls God 'Father' the most in the entire New Testament; understanding God as a father is clearly key to Matthew's characterisation of God.[50]

Matthew and Luke expand on Mark's depiction of God as a ruler and parent, and they also develop the notion that God is a slave master, primarily through their parables. In Mark's parable of the wicked tenants, God, as the vineyard owner, sends a number of slaves, implying that the vineyard owner owns slaves, or is at least in a position to send them (Mark 12.1–12; see also 13.32–7). Matthew and Luke both amplify this association of God as a slave master with additional sayings and parables that do not appear in Mark.[51] But Luke also directly refers to followers as being God's 'slaves' (δοῦλοι) or as being 'enslaved' (δουλεύω) to God (Luke 1.38, 48; 2.29; 16.13 [cf. 17.7–10]; Acts 4.29; 16.17) and on two occasions (once in Luke and once in Acts), followers who self-identify as slaves directly address God as 'Master' (δεσπότης) (Luke 2.29; Acts 4.24, 29). Matthew's and Luke's emphasis on God as a slave master likely draws from the experience of master/slave relations under Roman imperial rule, but it also likely draws from similar language found in Jewish scriptural texts, as well as the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, which uses master/slave imagery in its configuration of cosmic/human power relations.[52]

Second, Matthew and Luke expand on Mark's anthropomorphic portrayal of God by increasing the range of God's actions.[53] In addition to being a creator God who forgives and who speaks to humans in theophanies and so forth as we find in Mark, Matthew and Luke present God as sending and commanding angels, and according to Luke, as giving the Holy Spirit.[54] Matthew and Luke also present God as one who both hides and reveals when Jesus declares that God has hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to infants (Matt 11.25 // Luke 10.21; cf. Matt 16.17). But in addition to these more supra-human actions, we also get an increased sense of God's personal care toward humans. We learn additional information about how God provides for humans (and creatures more broadly) and how God can heal humans, a detail that Matthew and Luke reveal when they extend Mark's citation of Isa 6.9–10 (Matt 13.14–15; Acts 28.27; cf. Mark 4.12; Luke 8.10).[55] Luke, moreover, goes into even further detail about God's care for humans. In unique Lukan material, we learn that God grants both mercy and justice (Luke 1.72; 18.7–8; cf. 11.42), with God's mercy—as a divine descriptor—particularly emerging as a leitmotif (1.50, 54, 58, 72, 78; 6.35–6; cf. 15.20; 18.13).[56] We also learn of God's special care for Israel and beyond, including the marginalised. (Indeed, God lifts up the lowly [1.52], fills the hungry [1.53], helps 'his child' Israel [1.54], redeems 'his people' [1.68], prepares salvation before [the face of] all people [2.31; cf. Isa 52.10], and calls people near and far [Acts 2.39].) Such personal attention also extends to the internal lives of individual humans, for Luke, drawing on scriptural intertexts (e.g., Prov 21.2; 24.12), uniquely mentions how God knows human hearts (Luke 16.15; Acts 1.24) and even refers to God as 'the heart-knowing God [ὁ καρδιογνώστης θεός]' (Acts 15.8).[57]

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[48] For a discussion of Matthew's application of the title 'Father' to God, along with the titles 'God' and 'Lord', see Mowery, 'God, Lord and Father'. For an in-depth discussion of Luke's depiction of God as 'Father', see Chen, *God as Father in Luke-Acts*. See also Thompson, *Promise of the Father*, 87–115; Zimmermann, *Die Namen des Vaters*, 84–107.

[49] Like Mark, Matthew and Luke primarily place this epithet on the lips of Jesus. Luke refers to God as 'Father' 17 times (or 16 times, depending on the textual tradition) in his Gospel and three times in Acts (Luke 2.49; 6.36; 9.26; 10.21 [2x], 22 [3x]; 11.2, 13; 12.30, 32; 22.29, 42; 23.[34], 46; 24.49; Acts 1.4, 7; 2.33).

[50] On God as 'Father' in John, see Thompson, *Promise of the Father*, 133–54; Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 57–100. On how Luke includes intimations of God as 'Mother', see Wilson, 'Forming God', 784–85.

[51] See Matt 6.24; 18.23–35; 21.33–44; 22.1–14; Luke 14.15–24; 16.1–13; 20.9–19. (Note that some of these parables also portray God as a king or a property owner. Note too that Matthew and Luke likewise associate Jesus with a slave master in a number of their parables. See, e.g., Matt 13.24–30, 36–43; 24.45–51; 25.14–30; Luke 12.35–48; 17.7–10; 19.11–27.) For a discussion of these sayings and parables, see Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 102–29.

[52] On the identification of God's followers as 'slaves' in Jewish Scripture, see, e.g., Deut 34.5; Josh 24.29; Isa 48.20; Ps 78.70; John Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity: A Traditio-Historical and Exegetical Examination* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), esp. 47–59. On master/slave language in apocalyptic rhetoric, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, 'The Rhetoric of Violence and the God of Peace in Paul's Letter to the Romans', in *Paul, John, and Apocalyptic Eschatology: Studies in Honour of Martinus C. de Boer* (ed. Jan Krans, et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 61–75, esp. 66–7, 69–75. On the problematic ways in which such slavery language can reinscribe lived realities, see Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[53] For more in-depth discussions of God's actions in Luke-Acts, see Walton, 'Acts of—God?', *Reading Acts Theologically*, Brill: Leiden, esp. 16–20, 28–30; Robert L. Mowery, 'Direct Statements Concerning God's Activity in Luke-Acts' (SBL Seminar Papers; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); Aarflot, *God (in) Acts*; Wilson, 'Forming God', 787–8. While Mowery and Walton highlight the number of times that God appears as a proper noun and the subject of verbs in Luke's narrative, Aarflot's extensive study principally focuses on 'how God is characterized *through God's actions* in the narrative of Acts' (*God (in) Acts*, 4 [italics original]).

Furthermore, Luke, when compared to Mark and Matthew, provides us with a more robust understanding of God's past and present relationship with Israel. In the birth narrative, Luke reflects on God's past actions toward Israel when he recalls how God 'spoke to our fathers' (1.55) and 'swore an oath to Abraham' (1.73) (cf. Acts 7.17). In Acts, we find even more substantive recollections of God's past actions, particularly in speeches, as when Stephen provides an abridged overview of God's dealings with Israel (7.2–53) or when Paul makes a similar move in Pisidian Antioch (esp. 13.16–22). In Acts, we also find reflections on God's more recent actions as they unfold *within the Lukan narrative itself*. Such reflections about God's earlier actions in the narrative especially centre around God's raising and exalting of Jesus, God's promise of giving the Spirit, and God's inclusion of the Gentiles, all of which, Luke argues, is in accordance with the Scriptures.[58] Over the course of his two-volume work, Luke thus provides us with the most in-depth 'biography' of God, so to speak.[59] God's biography is not a biography in the usual sense of the word, but we do learn that God has a past and present, as well as a future, since God's kingdom plays a role in the eschaton (Luke 21.25–36; cf. Mark 13.32; Matt 24.36). By having human characters interpret God's past, present, and future actions, Luke sets God within particular times and places and roots God's story within a larger story of God's relationship with

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[54] On God as creator, see Matt 19.4; Acts 4.24; 14.15; 17.24–8 (cf. Mark 10.6). (See also Zimmermann, *Die Namen des Vaters*, 345–83; Schmitz, 'Does κτίστης Mean "Creator"?'.) On God forgiving, see Matt 6.12, 14–15 [cf. 18.23–35]; Luke 5.21; 11.4; 23.[34]; Acts 8.22 [cf. Luke 4.18; Acts 5.31; 26.18] (cf. Mark 2.7; 11.25). On God's direct speech, see Matt 3.17; 17.5; Luke 3.22; 9.35 (cf. Mark 1.11; 9.7). (Luke may also recount an additional instance of God's direct speech in Acts 10 [see 10.13, 15; cf. 11.7, 9], although in this instance, I believe that Jesus is more likely the speaker. See Wilson, *Embodied God*, 87–8.) On God sending and commanding angels, see Matt 4.6; 26.53; Luke 1.19, 26; 4.10. On God giving the Holy Spirit, see Luke 11.13; Acts 2.17–18, 33; 5.32; 15.8; cf. 10.45, 47.

[55] On how God provides for humans (and other creatures), see esp. Matt 6.19–33; 7.7–11; Luke 11.9–13; 12.22–31. On how God's personal attention extends to knowing every hair on a human's head, see Matt 10.29–30; Luke 12.6–7.

[56] In Luke 6.36, note that Jesus urges his listeners to be 'merciful as your Father is merciful' and not to be 'perfect as your Father is perfect' as in Matt 5.48. On God's mercy, see also Carroll, 'The God of Israel', 104–5.

[57] On how God and Jesus know human hearts in Luke's narrative, see Collin Blake Bullard, *Jesus and the Thoughts of Many Hearts: Implicit Christology and Jesus' Knowledge in the Gospel of Luke* (LNTS 530; London: T&T Clark, 2015).

[58] E.g. Acts 2.14–36; 3.15, 22–6; 4.10; 5.30–2; 10.40; 44–8; 11.15–18; 13.30–7, 46–9; 14.27; 15.7–21; 17.31.

[59] As Brawley puts it: '[I]n Luke-Acts God does have a biography . . .—not literally but equivalently. There is no biography from birth to death, but God does have a past, present, and future' (*Centering on God*, 110).

Israel.[60] In doing so, Luke, of all the Synoptic evangelists, provides us with the most fully developed picture of God as a character: a character who is an acting subject and who is inextricably connected with people in space, time, and history.[61]

Third: Matthew and Luke portray God as an anthropomorphic character in that they include details that locate God in heaven. Both Matthew and Luke associate God with the heavenly realm, and Matthew in particular refers to God as the 'Father in heaven' or the 'heavenly Father' on a frequent basis (although Matthew also clarifies that God dwells in the temple sanctuary [23.21]).[62] Matthew and Luke also concretise the image of God being enthroned in heaven. They both include the Ps 110.1 reference in the discussion about Jesus' messianic identity and at his trial.[63] But Matthew explicitly refers to God sitting on a throne in heaven (23.22) and later to Jesus' own 'throne of glory' (25.31; cf. 25.34, 40). Matthew also refers to heaven itself as God's throne (5.34; cf. 23.22), an image that draws from Isa 66.1. In Acts, Luke explicitly quotes Isa 66.1 (Acts 7.49), and he also interprets Ps 110.1 in relation to the exaltation of Jesus to heaven: an exaltation in which Jesus sits *at God's right* (Acts 2.34–5; cf. Acts 2.33; 5.31). What is more, in Acts 7, Stephen even sees Jesus standing at God's right. Here we learn that Stephen 'gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right of God' (7.55; cf. 7.56). In this theophany, Luke confirms what his interpretation of Ps 110.1 implied: God is a concrete presence in heaven next to which Jesus can stand (or sit, as the case may be).[64] Both Matthew and Luke emphatically situate God in heaven and use anthropomorphic imagery—including heavenly throne room imagery—to do so. Luke, moreover, indicates that God, or at least God's 'glory', can be seen (7.55).[65] Along with Stephen, we are offered a glimpse into heaven and what we see localises God in a heavenly throne room.

In all these ways, Matthew and Luke incorporate and expand on Mark's anthropomorphic portrayal of God. They describe God in reference to human characters and as an acting subject who speaks and occupies concrete space, mainly in heaven, with Luke often going beyond Matthew in portraying a highly relational, human-like God. Matthew and Luke, however, also expand on Mark's anthropomorphic portrayal of God by specifically mentioning God's body parts and by characterising God as a cognitive, emotional, sensing being.

Matthew and Luke's inclusion of God's body parts—the most familiar way to speak of divine anthropomorphism—mainly draws from Jewish Scripture, both in terms of direct quotations and allusions. Matthew, for instance, refers to God's 'mouth' (στόμα) and later, God's 'soul' (ψυχή), both of which are drawn directly from scriptural texts. Jesus cites Deut 8.3 when he mentions God's mouth during the scene of the temptation, saying, 'A person does not live by bread alone but by the very word that comes from the mouth

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[60] Indeed, Luke identifies God as the God of the people Israel (Luke 1.16, 68; Acts 13.17; cf. Matt 15.31), the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Luke 20.37; Acts 3.13; 7.32; cf. Matt 22.32), and the God of 'our fathers' (Acts 3.13; 22.14; 24.14). Brawley, *Centering on God*, 116. See also Carroll, 'The God of Israel', 97–100.

[61] Of course, there are elements of God's past, present, and future in all three Synoptics. See, e.g., Danove, *Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 118–25. Luke, though, is the one who elaborates the most on the past, present, and future scope of God's actions. See Aarflot, *God (in) Acts*, 229–38.

[62] For Matthew's association of God with heaven, see Matt 3.17; 5.16, 34, 45, 48; 6.1, 9–10, 14, 26, 32; 7.11, 21; 10.32, 33; 11.25; 12.50; 15.13; 16.17; 18.10, 14, 19, 35; 23.9, 22. For Luke's association of God with heaven, see Luke 2.13–14 (cf. 19.38); 3.22; 9.16; 10.21; 11.[2], 13; 18.13; Acts 7.49, 55–6.

[63] Matt 22.41–6; 26.64; Luke 20.41–4; 22.69.

[64] For a summary of the different interpretive options as to why Jesus is standing and not sitting next to God in Acts 7.55–6, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 392–3.

[65] Note, though, that Stephen is reticent to speak of what he sees. In 7.56, he does not report that he saw God's glory; he only relates that he sees the Son of Man standing to the right of God.

[στόματος] of God' (Matt 4.4).[66] (This is a corporeal detail that does not, interestingly, occur in Luke's version of this scene; his quotation of Deut 8.3 simply reads 'A person does not live by bread alone' [Luke 4.4].)[67]

Later in Matthew's Gospel, the narrator cites Isa 42.1–4 when he mentions God's soul during one of the famous Matthean formula citations. Although the prophet Isaiah is the one through whom this 'word' was spoken (Matt 12.17), God is the speaker of this first-person discourse, and in the opening lines, God refers to 'my servant whom I have chosen' as 'my beloved in whom my soul [ψυχή] is well pleased' (Matt 12.18)—words that not only resonate with God's words at Jesus' baptism but that also portray God as having a 'spirit' or 'soul'. On two other occasions, Matthew respectively refers to God's feet and face in a manner that still draws from scripture but in a more allusive way. In Matt 5.34–5, Jesus refers to heaven as God's throne and the earth as a footstool for God's 'feet' (ποδῶν), a reference, as noted earlier, that draws from Isa 66.1 and that also appears in Acts 7.49 as a direct citation.[68] In Matt 18.10, Jesus also tells his audience that the angels of the 'little ones' 'continually see the face [πρόσωπον] of my Father in heaven', language that resonates in particular with Jesus' earlier teaching of how the pure in heart shall 'see God' (Matt 5.8).[69]

Like Matthew, Luke also includes references from Scripture about the divine body, both in terms of direct quotations and allusions (as well as the incorporation of common biblical expressions). Luke, though, includes a greater range of God's body parts, including God's face, arm, hand, finger, feet, and heart. Luke mentions God's 'face' (πρόσωπον) in Acts, once from a citation of Ps 15.11 LXX (Acts 2.28) and once as a way to identify God's face as the source of the coming 'times of refreshment' (Acts 3.20).[70] Luke mentions God's 'arm' (βραχίων) in the birth narrative when Mary, in a pastiche of biblical phrases, sings of God showing 'strength with his arm' against the proud and powerful (Luke 1.51–2), and Luke mentions God's arm again in Acts when Paul recounts how God led the people out of Egypt with 'uplifted arm' (Acts 13.17). Luke also refers to God's 'hand' (χείρ) a number of times: in the birth narrative, 'the hand of the Lord' is with John the Baptist (1.66); on the cross, Jesus quotes Ps 30.6 LXX, saying, 'Father, into your hands I place my spirit' (23.46); in Acts 4, followers tell God that Jesus did 'whatever your hand and your plan had predestined' (4.28) and they allude to Isa 6.10 by praying for God to stretch out 'your hand to heal' (4.30); and finally, in Acts 7, Stephen includes the rhetorical question from Isa 66.2 when God asks, 'Did not my hand make all these things [i.e., heaven and earth]?' (Acts 7.50).

Luke's most eye-catching reference to a divine appendage, since it appears nowhere else in the New Testament, is when Jesus says, 'it is by the finger [δακτύλῳ] of God that I cast out demons' (Luke 11.20). Jesus' statement is all the more startling since God's finger does not appear in its Matthean parallel, although it does occur in a number of Jewish scriptural texts (Exod 8.19; 31.18; Deut 9.10; cf. Ps 8.3).[71] (Instead of 'by the finger of God', Matthew says 'by the spirit [πνεύματι] of God' [12.28], a point that has not gone unnoticed by commentators and is sometimes attributed to Matthew's [!] desire to remove an anthropomorphism from Q.)[72] Finally, the last divine body part Luke mentions is God's 'heart' (καρδία), the centre of intellect, volition, and emotion in Hebrew Scripture.[73] God's heart appears when Paul quotes God's speech from 1 Samuel 13, in which God describes King David as 'a man after my own heart [καρδίαν μου] who will carry out all my desires [θελήματά μου]' (Acts 13.22; cf. 1 Sam 13.14)—a quotation that, in this case, links God's heart to God's volition.

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[66] Codex Bezae does not include the phrase 'coming from the mouth' (ἐκπορευομένῳ διὰ στόματος), perhaps in an effort to eliminate the corporeal anthropomorphism.

[67] Note, though, that a number of textual witnesses do include the extended Deut 8.3 citation, presumably in an effort to correlate Jesus' words with his words in Matt 4.4. Note also that Luke may refer to God's 'mouth' (στόμα) in Acts 22.14, although the antecedent in this case is more likely the ascended Jesus.

[68] English translations often omit the reference to God's 'feet' in these Isaiah citations, perhaps as a way to avoid mentioning this divine body part.

[69] Although commentators often interpret Jesus' saying about the pure in heart seeing God as a metaphor or as a 'spiritual' seeing, this tendency to identify such language as 'figurative' or 'metaphorical' should not obscure the fact that some Jews in antiquity may very well have expected to see God in a bodily sense.

[70] In both these references, it may be better to translate πρόσωπον as 'presence'. See the discussion below. If πρόσωπον communicates God's presence, it could be functioning as an instance of synecdoche, or a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole.

With all of these references to the divine body, it is important to be clear that Matthew and Luke's language can, and does, function in an idiomatic way.[74] God's face can denote God's presence or self, and God's mouth—or a word coming from God's mouth—can underscore how God is the source of the speech. God's arm, hand, and finger communicate God's power, although God's hand can also convey God's care (e.g., Luke 23.46; Acts 4.30) and God's finger is at times associated with God's revelation and the writing of the commandments (e.g., Deut 9.10).[75] Something being under God's feet, in this case, the earth, indicates God's dominion and rule over the earth, and God's heart, or David being a man according to God's heart, captures how David is in accordance with God's will and desires.

At the same time, it is also important to recognise that such scriptural images verbally present a God who has human, or human-like, body parts. In other words, these images help to construct a picture of the divine as a corporeal being in the imagination of the reader, a picture that Jewish Studies scholar Elliot Wolfson calls 'the imaginal body of God'.[76] By reading verbal descriptions of God's body or body parts, a reader can form a mental conception of what God may look like and can thus phenomenally experience God in somatic terms. Such mental images are no less 'real' than material images (while being real in a different way), and mental images can even lead to the production of material images, a famous example from the Roman imperial period being the portrayals of God's hands in the synagogue paintings at Dura Europos.[77] Moreover, while commentators often dismiss language like God's 'hand' and so forth as being 'metaphorical', there is no reason to suppose that such language about God in Scripture should always be treated in a figurative manner.[78] Scriptural texts, Matthew and Luke included, do not reflexively meditate on the nature of divine anthropomorphisms and their effect, in conjunction with their broader, anthropomorphic characterisations of God, seem primarily to invite the reader to envision God in terms of a person, or at the very least, a personal being.[79]

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[71] On the potential scriptural intertexts of Luke's phrase, see Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, 'A Note on Matthew XII. 28 Par. Luke XI. 20', *NTS* 11 (1965) 167–9; Robert W. Wall, '"The Finger of God": Deuteronomy 9.10 and Luke 11.20', *NTS* 33 (1987) 144–50.

[72] On this argument (to which none of the following authors subscribe since Matthew has no problem using anthropomorphisms elsewhere in his narrative), see Hamerton-Kelly, 'A Note on Matthew XII. 28 Par. Luke XI. 20', 167–9; Wall, '"The Finger of God"', 144–5; C. S. Ross, 'Spirit or Finger', *ExpTim* 72 (1960–1) 157–8.

[73] See Christine Mitchell, 'Heart and Mind in the Hebrew Scriptures', *Touchstone* 23 (2005) 5–13.

[74] On how these (and other) body parts can function idiomatically, see Knafl, *Forming God*, 257–8; Smith, *How Human is God?*, 25–41. See also Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli, *Body Symbolism in the Bible* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001).

[75] On this latter point, see Wall, 'The Finger of God'.

[76] Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God', in *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky; Boulder: Westview Press, 2000) 239–54.

[77] On the depictions of God (including God's hands) at Dura Europos, see Christoph Markschies, *God's Body: Jewish, Christian, and Pagan Images of God* (trans. Alexander Johannes Edmonds; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019) 93–99.

[78] For a discussion of why divine anthropomorphisms in scriptural texts may not always function as metaphors, see Charles Halton, *A Human-Shaped God: Theology of an Embodied God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021) 39–51.

In Matthew and Luke, as in their scriptural interlocuters, this invitation to view God as a 'person' increases when we look at how they depict God as a cognitive, emotional, and sensing being. Like Mark, Matthew and Luke depict God knowing, having a will, and being 'well pleased' (εὐδοκέω) with the Son.[80] But they also depict God specifically knowing what humans need, and they include more references to God's will.[81] Luke, moreover, depicts God remembering and knowing human hearts, and he emphasises the importance of God's plan and God's foreknowledge of that plan.[82] Luke also increases the range of God's emotions beyond being 'well pleased' with the beloved Son. Luke adds that God is not only 'well pleased' with Jesus but 'well pleased [εὐδόκησεν] to give the kingdom' to Jesus' followers (Luke 12.32). Luke further reveals that God finds favour with people, such as Jesus' mother Mary and King David (Luke 1.30; Acts 7.46; cf. 7.20), and he speaks of God's love (Luke 11.42), as well as God's 'compassionate mercy [σπλάγχνα ἐλέους]' (Luke 1.78), a phrase that recalls the visceral source of 'compassion' in the 'bowels' (σπλάγχνα) and that connects God to the father in the parable of the prodigal son who is 'moved with compassion' or literally 'moved in the bowels [ἐσπλαγχνίσθη]' (15.20).

Finally, Matthew and Luke portray God as a sensing being who sees and hears. Matthew relates that God 'sees' when Jesus refers to God as 'your Father who sees [ὁ βλέπων] in secret' (Matt 6.18). Luke, moreover, relates that God both sees *and* hears.[83] Luke intimates that God hears prayers (Luke 1.13; Acts 10.31), and he explicitly situates God as the subject of a variety of different 'seeing' verbs (Luke 1.25, 48, 68; 7.16; Acts 4.29; 7.34; 15.14; 17.30). In three of these eight times that God 'sees', Luke connects God's sight with God's presence by using the verb ἐπισκέπτομαι (Luke 1.68; 7.16; Acts 15.14)—a verb that can mean both 'to look upon' and 'to visit'.[84] Like an ἐπίσκοπος, or 'overseer' (a term that would eventually develop into the office of bishop; cf. Acts 1.20; 20.28), God's oversight is intimately linked to God's direct presence and care for God's people (both Jews and Gentiles, as Luke clarifies).[85] God's ability to see and hear, though, is captured most poignantly during Stephen's speech in Acts 7. Here Stephen reports the following words of God to Moses from the burning bush, saying: 'I have surely seen [ἰδὼν εἶδον] the suffering of my people who are in Egypt and have heard [ἤκουσα] their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them' (7.34; cf. Exod 3.7–8). Once again, God's sensory capabilities are linked to God's intervention on behalf of God's people and thus provide us with another glimpse into God's relationality, and in this instance, a glimpse into God's interior emotions—specifically, a desire to respond to the suffering of Israel.[86]

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[79] Once again, on the importance of attending to the *effect* of divine anthropomorphisms and how it explores the character of God (in this instance, with respect to rabbinic literature), see Stern, 'Imitatio Hominis' 151–74.

[80] On God knowing about the eschaton, see Matt 24.36 (cf. Mark 13.32). (On God's knowledge in Luke, see below.) On God having a will, see Matt 26.39; Luke 22.42 (cf. Mark 14.36); and the references in the footnote below. On God being well pleased, see Matt 3.17; 12.18; 17.5; Luke 3.22; 12.32 (cf. Mark 1.11).

[81] On God knowing what humans need, see Matt 6.8; 6.32; 24.36; Luke 12.30. (On God knowing the Son, see Matt 11.27; Luke 10.22.) On God's will and desires, see Matt 6.10; 7.21; 12.50; 18.14; 26.39; 27.43; Luke 11.[2]; 22.42; Acts 13.22 (cf. Mark 14.36).

[82] On God remembering, see Luke 1.54, 72; cf. Luke 12.6; Acts 10.31. On God knowing human hearts, see Luke 16.15; Acts 1.24; 15.8. (Cf. Luke 2.35; 5.22; 6.8; 9.46–7; 24.38.) On God's plan, or 'purpose' and 'will' (βουλή), see Luke 7.30; Acts 2.23; 4.28; 13.36; 20.27. On God's foreknowledge, see Acts 2.23. (Cf. Luke 22.22; Acts 4.28.) On the theme of God's plan in Luke's narrative, see Charles H. Cosgrove: 'The Divine ΔΕΙ in Luke-Acts: Investigations into the Lukan Understanding of God's Providence', *NovT* 26 (1984) 168–90; John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (SNTSMS 76; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[83] Luke may also imply that God smells when he mentions that the priest Zechariah offers incense to God (Luke 1.9–11) and that the Gentile Cornelius's prayers ascend as a 'memorial offering' before God (Acts 10.4). On how God's speech may also function as a sense, see Yael Avrahami's discussion of the sensorium in the Hebrew Bible in *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (LHBOTS 545; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012).

[84] On the verb ἐπισκέπτομαι and its cognates, see Hermann W. Beyer, 'ἐπισκέπτομαι κτλ.', *TDNT* 2:599–622.

[85] As Scott Shauf puts it: 'Luke couples a firm sense of the particularity of God—God as the God of Israel—with an expanding sense of divine partiality. God is still partial to his people, but inclusion in the people of God is now open to all' (*Divine in Acts*, 264).

IV. Conclusion

In sum, Mark, Matthew, and Luke portray God as a character who is anthropomorphically conceived. Within their respective narratives, God is portrayed in terms of a human ruler, parent, and master; God is an acting subject who intervenes in the world and speaks to humans; God is primarily located in heaven. According to Matthew and Luke, God also has recognisably 'human' body parts and can experience a range of corporeal acts such as thinking, feeling, and sensing. Matthew and Luke thus follow Mark's lead in presenting the God of Israel in anthropomorphic terms, but they go even beyond Mark in this portrayal. Luke in particular presents the most anthropomorphic-looking God of all and betrays no overarching anti-anthropomorphic tendencies that would make Israel's 'living God' more amenable to a Gentile, philosophical audience.[87] Instead, both Matthew *and* Luke construct God's human 'shape' by turning to scriptural texts, and in doing so, they, like Mark and other places in the New Testament, situate God as a divine 'person' who desires to be in relationship with human persons. Indeed, all three of the Synoptics point to how the New Testament is deeply indebted to Jewish Scripture and the anthropomorphic portrait of God found therein.

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[86] Brawley identifies a total of three instances of God's interior emotions in Luke-Acts: Luke 3.22; Acts 7.34; 13.22 (*Centering on God*, 122–23).

[87] Luke, to be clear, adapts his portrayal of God to a more philosophical *narrative* audience in scenes such as Paul's Areopagus speech (Acts 17:16–34). My point is that Luke does not reflect an *overarching* anti-anthropomorphic tendency. On the phrase 'living God' in the LXX and the ancient world, see Zimmermann, *Die Namen des Vaters*, 385–426. On references to the 'living God' in the New Testament, see Matt 16.16; 26.63; Acts 14.15; Rom 9.26; 2 Cor 3.3; 6.16; 1 Thess 1.9; 1 Tim 3.15; 4.10; Heb 3.12; 9.14; 10.31; 12.22; Rev 7.2; cf. John 6.57; Rom 14.11; Rev 4.9; 10.6; 15.7.

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