

Does God Have a Body?

Not so long ago I was asked by a very young child at church the question, “Fr. Lawrence, does God have a body?” She was not thinking of the incarnate Christ our God, but of God in the Old Testament, Yahweh, the pre-incarnate deity, the Father (though she did not express it in those terms). The answer, of course, is: No, God does not have a body. Next question? But when examining the Scriptures closely, it is not as simple as all that. For it almost looks as if God *does* have a body of sorts—though of course of different “stuff” than ours.

As was documented by (Bishop) Alexander Golitzin in his article “The Vision of God and the Form of Glory” in the *festchrift* for Metropolitan Kallistos Ware *Abba: the Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*, it was taken for granted by the ancient Rabbis that God did have a body.

One sees how they might have gotten such an idea. For example, *Exodus 24:9f* plainly says that Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the elders of the people “saw the God of Israel, and there was under His feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone...And He did not lay His hand upon the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God and ate and drank”. The translators of the Septuagint were uncomfortable enough with this to alter the verses to read, “they saw *the place where God stood...they appeared in the place of God* and ate and drank”, but this was clearly an alteration of the original text. The received wisdom of the time said that no man could see God and live (compare *Exodus 33:20*), and so the Hebrew text was at pains to say that although Moses and his people saw God, they did not die: “He did not lay His hand upon the chief men of the people of Israel”. They saw God and still lived.

This notion of God having a visible form is also found in *Exodus 33*. There Moses prayed to see God’s glory, and God acceded to the request. “But,” God continued, “you cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live”. God therefore placed Moses in the cleft of a rock and covered him with His hand until He passed by, so that when He took His hand away, Moses saw only His back, not His face (*Exodus 33:20f*). Once again the Septuagint was not happy with all this, and so translated the offending verse, “you will see what is behind Me”. But that is not what the original text said. The text said that God had a back which Moses saw.

Then there was the vision of God seen by Isaiah and Ezekiel. Isaiah testified that he “saw the Lord sitting upon a throne” when he was in the Temple, and he cried out in distress, “Woe is me! For I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!” (Isaiah 6). Note: Isaiah saw Yahweh of hosts. Later Christian exegesis would identify this vision with the pre-incarnate Word (*John 12:14*), but that doesn’t alter the fact that prior to the incarnation, God had a form which could be seen and which Isaiah saw.

Ezekiel also had a vision of Yahweh, which he described in careful detail in *Ezekiel 1:4f*. After describing Yahweh’s cherubic chariot throne, the prophet said that he saw the likeness of a firmament, spread out above the heads of the cherubim, and “above the firmament over their heads there was the likeness of a throne and seated above the likeness of a throne was the likeness as it were of a human form. And upward from what had the appearance of His loins I saw as it were a gleaming bronze...Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh”.

We see here the prophet’s concern to preserve the transcendence of Yahweh—Ezekiel repeatedly speaks of “the likeness” of firmament, throne, and Yahweh. He doesn’t say (as did Exodus) “such was Yahweh”. Rather he backs away from this bold statement by a few paces and merely says, “such as the appearance of the likeness of the glory” of Yahweh. But the point is (as the Rabbis recognized) Ezekiel saw *something*.

A number of people in the Church afterward agreed with the ancient Rabbis and thought that God had a body of some kind, and when Origen (and the Alexandrian bishop Theophilus after him) denied this, there was great angst among some of the monks of Egypt. As the story was told by Cassian (in *Conference* 10), one monk, upon learning that God had no visible form, threw himself on the ground and cried out with tears, “Woe is me! They have taken my God away from me, and now I have no one to hold on to!” This kind of thinking Cassian condemned as “Jewish weakness” and as “pagan misapprehension”.

No doubt Cassian (as with Origen and Theophilus) was thinking of such texts as, “No one has ever seen God” (*John 1:18*, repeated in *1 John 4:12*), or Paul’s description of Him as “the invisible God” (*Colossians 1:15*), or Paul’s statement that God “alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (*1 Timothy 6:16*).

This view of God as above mere bodily existence is summarized by St. John of Damascus in his *Exact Exposition*: “The Deity is simple and uncompound...the terms ‘without beginning’, ‘incorruptible’, ‘unbegotten’, as also ‘uncreated’, ‘incorporeal’, ‘unseen’ and so forth explain what He is not...All statements concerning God that imply body are symbols” (Book 1, Chapters 9, 11). By the Damascene’s time this understanding of God had become standard in the Church, and eventually was regarded as self-evident to all Christians everywhere. Thus, for example, the Church of England’s “Thirty-nine Articles” opens with the statement, “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions”.

So then, how are we to understand the statements in the Old Testament that clearly state that men saw God? I suggest that what we are dealing with here is theophany: God’s appearances to our eyes of flesh were acts of condescension. In our weakness, we find it impossible interact with the invisible; in the I-Thou relationship that is our salvation, we need a visible “Thou”—if only in a mental construct while praying. In His mercy God appears to us in visible human form that we may more easily enter into this I-Thou relationship.

In our experience, true conversation and relationship are only possible among human beings, and so God appears to our senses in human form to facilitate this. How else could we relate to Him?

Other forms of visible manifestation might be possible. Here I am thinking of a passage in C.S. Lewis’ *Perelandra*, in which the angels (who are also bodiless—though not as God is bodiless) took visible form in order to converse with and relate to Lewis’ protagonist Ransom. Their first attempt to appear to Ransom in visible form he experienced as “a tornado of sheer monstrosities pouring over him. Darting pillars filled with eyes, lightning pulsations of flame, talons and beaks and billowy masses of what suggested snow, volleyed through cubes and heptagons into an infinity of black void. ‘Stop it...stop it’ he yelled”... A second attempt produced “rolling wheels. There was nothing but that—concentric wheels moving with a rather sickening slowness one inside the other. There was nothing terrible about them if you could get used to their appalling size, but there was also nothing significant. He bade them to try yet a third time. And suddenly two human figures stood before him”. It seems that to enter into calm and meaningful relationship, we humans need to relate to something rather like ourselves. I suggest that is why God chose a recognizably human form for His theophanies.

When the invisible and bodiless God whom no man has seen or can see appeared in ancient days in the form of a man, He was not thereby revealing His essence or His nature. He did not have a body or form like ours. He was stooping down to us, so that we could address Him as “Thou” and find salvation. Such was His greatness that angels and archangels trembled to approach Him. One day He would clothe Himself in our poor flesh and walk among us as a man. Until then He chose to appear in human form in theophany to create and sustain a covenant relationship that would lead to that blessed day. His theophanies were therefore prophecies and promises of His future incarnation, when the bodiless Word would indeed have a body.