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Brian C. Howell’s *In the Eyes of God: A Contextual Approach to Biblical Anthropomorphic Metaphors*, a revised dissertation completed under the supervision of Gordon Wenham, tackles the long-standing yet increasingly popular issue of the application of anthropomorphic language to the divine. Howell exhibits a high regard for Scripture, in several cases informed by conservative systematic Christian theology, and chooses to analyze the final form of the text, which may be viewed as an advantage by some and a disadvantage by others.

Chapter 1 (1–58) examines the long-standing problem of religious language, more particularly if and how the language in the Bible can speak accurately of God. Howell introduces and critiques four approaches to divine description: equivocal, univocal, analogical, and partial-univocal. According to the equivocal approach, descriptors refer to God and to humans in different ways, such that it is unclear what things said of God actually mean. The related *via negativa* (“the negative way”) allows for some truth claims. Presupposing that God is not like humans, this approach suggests that negations of truth statements about humans apply to God. For example, God is neither finite nor changeable but infinite and immutable. The univocal approach suggests that, to communicate meaningfully, figurative language must be reduced to literal language. The analogical
approach contends that all created qualities may be attributed to God in greater measure and that beings possess attributes in a way appropriate to their nature. Howell argues that equivocity as a manner of speaking is “too nebulous,” univocity “too human,” and analogy “too ungrounded” (59).

Partial-univocity ascribes the function, not the mechanics, of the predicate to the subject. For example, calling God a shield suggests that he protects yet is not strapped to someone’s arm. Howell critiques the partial-univocal approach’s assertion that a literal statement can be substituted for a figurative one. Partial-univocality also unnecessarily restricts itself by relying on systematic conceptions such as timelessness.

Instead, Howell posits metaphor as the way forward. More than simply serving as linguistic embellishment, metaphors use language at home in one context and apply it to another, which suggests that not everything from the source concept transfers to the target, thereby highlighting certain aspects while hiding others. Building on the work of Josef Stern (Metaphor in Context [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000]), Howell suggests that metaphors are context-specific and when read in context produce precise interpretations that can be used as truth claims.

Howell proceeds to address how human terms can be applied to God. In general, accommodation refers to God making himself comprehensible to humanity in human terms. According to Howell, since revelation is the only way to gather information about God, there is no way to tell if this revelation is accommodated or literal. Rather than rejecting accommodation altogether, he suggests that anthropomorphic texts should be understood according to the accommodated language of metaphor.

This, however, is not in contrast with veridical language, but is another means of expressing truth which allows for the differences between divine and human realities. Unlike some interpreters’ use of the concept, God does not accommodate by saying one thing and meaning another. Rather, He accommodates by revealing things through metaphors which give us fuller and more accurate pictures of what He is like, whilst retaining the flexibility to hide those elements that either do not correspond to human life, or that He has simply chosen not to reveal about the workings of His inner being. (33)

Howell then tackles how such language serves as an accurate reflection of God. He appeals to Nicholas Wolterstorff’s appropriation of speech-act theory (Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections of the Claim that God Speaks [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995]), which argues that God in the Bible commandeers human speech and
applies it to himself, in certain cases both their words and intentions. In other words, biblical language “applies to God because he applies it to himself” (39).

In order to address how God appropriates human language for himself, Howell surveys anthropomorphism in Old Testament theology before offering his approach. For Howell, by nature of their appropriation by the divine, biblical language is autobiographical, not biographical, as it contains “divine self-description transmitted through human agents” (52). Thus, he argues that it makes truth claims about God.

Chapter 2 (59–82) begins by addressing how metaphors convey meaning. Howell derives his approach from cognitive linguistics, conceptual blending theory, and Stern’s context-sensitive semantic approach to metaphor. According to cognitive linguistics, metaphors use “knowledge of one conceptual domain (the source) in order to gain new understanding of a second, non-related domain (the target)” (62, citing P. Van Hecke, “Conceptual Blending: A Recent Approach to Metaphor. Illustrated with the Pastoral Metaphor in Hos 4,16,” in Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible, ed. P. Van Hecke [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005], 219). For Howell, this helps to explain how only certain elements of anthropomorphic metaphors transfer from the human source domain to the divine target. Conceptual blending theory adds two additional spaces to the blend and target generic space (where the shared elements of the source and target are located) and the blend (where entailments from both source and target interact and merge). According to this theory, metaphors serve as “the interaction of entire conceptual domains consisting of all human relationships to the term, rather than literary definitions” (68). Thus, anthropomorphic divine metaphors may be used to hide or to highlight different elements of the human conceptual domain (e.g., concealing corporeal aspects while emphasizing functional elements). Stern contends that no expressions are either metaphorical or nonmetaphorical; what they are is determined by how they are used. Thus, metaphorical meaning is context-specific. For Howell, “divine usage of human terms generally necessitates a metaphorical reading more on the basis of a lack of perceived structure within the divine realm, requiring this to be supplemented from the human conceptual domain of the term in question” (71).

Like demonstratives (this and that), metaphors find their meaning in context. Like the indexical I, “metaphors have a rule of ‘character’ that determines how they will function, what they can entail, and how they will refer in a given instance.” Thus, “we establish the character of a metaphor semantically and the content of a metaphor contextually” (74). Although a metaphor may have infinite potential meanings, in context it has a fixed and finite meaning. For Stern, “the specifically contextual orientation of a metaphor enables it both to extend our powers of expression and to restrict the reception of their contents” (Metaphor in Context, 196). Thus, according to Howell, biblical metaphors can make
truth-conditional statements that “point to a transcendent divine attribute without explaining its mechanisms” (80) yet are not reducible to literal paraphrases.

In chapter 3 (83–104), Howell contends that, since humans are fashioned in the divine image, God is not described in anthropomorphic terms; humans are presented in theomorphic terms. Thus the divine meaning of terms is primary and the human meaning derivative. These theomorphisms, for Howell, provide an ontological basis for understanding God. Metaphors point to but do not define divine attributes, thereby pointing at the primary sense and allowing it to cast the derivative in new light. For example, Howell contends that “in stating that God sees, we do more than claim something of God, we claim something of ‘seeing’ ” (98). In addition, terms predicated of humans and God bear both a natural and supernatural sense and in certain cases can be used in either way of both the deity and humans.

Chapters 4–9 apply Howell’s methodology to divine sight in Genesis. Chapter 4 (105–34) addresses divine sight in Gen 1–3. Howell argues that in Gen 1 God seeing entails evaluation and enjoyment of creation, while in Gen 2 seeing implies the partial transfer of authority from God to humanity in regard to naming animals. In Gen 3 Eve sees the beauty of the tree and its utility for her personal gain, which Howell contrasts with divine sight, arguing that God sees items for their inherent good and not for any personal gain.

Chapter 5 (135–64) examines divine sight in Gen 6, 7, and 9. Howell contends that in Gen 6 the sons of God, like people, see for utilitarian purposes and seek to “undermine the redemptive plan of God ‘through the seed of woman’ ” (146). By contrast, God sees general human wickedness, which contrasts with Noah’s righteousness, measuring humanity “by setting their created purpose against their current intentions” (150). According to Howell, their evil behavior is evident in their choice to serve as accomplices to the wickedness of the sons of God.

Chapters 6–7 (165–73, 174–95) address the divine sight in the tower of Babel and the initial banishment of Hagar scenes. Howell contends that the God’s inspection of the tower does not suggest a limit to divine sight. Rather, God descends to inspect their activity, “which requires, not a closer look for better information, but His presence” (170). Divine descent thereby reflects the failed human attempt to bridge heaven and earth. Howell suggests that in Gen 16 God sees according to an individual’s relationship to his covenant partner, Abraham, and that Hagar perceives God’s seeing her as a sign of divine valuation of her person.

In chapter 8 (196–218) Howell addresses God’s seeing Sodom and again contends that the divine visit is not a fact-finding mission, since signs suggest that he is already aware of its
condition and has already passed judgment on it. Instead, the descent of his proxies, the two angels, who serve as the requisite two legal witnesses, demonstrates to Abraham God’s righteousness. In chapter 9 (219–35) Howell turns his attention to Gen 22, the binding of Isaac, and concludes that the divine test serves as an opportunity for God to see the heart of his worshiper. Howell’s book closes with a conclusion (236–42), which summarizes his argument and offers avenues for future research, and three appendices (243–71).

Howell’s often careful and clever book has much to commend it. In particular, his first three foundational chapters offer a substantial and competent survey of the issues and approaches related to God language in the Bible (though, as with any such undertaking, it could be more comprehensive). He rightly appeals to metaphor as the best interpretive tool for understanding language of and about the divine and highlights its complexity, utility, and context-specific meaning. He helpfully notes how metaphor can used to express something that can be expressed in no other way, while at the same time involving only a partial transfer from the source to the target domains. As such, it can be used to transfer only those qualities that help to elucidate contextual meaning without entailing the transfer of others that are either deemed inappropriate or unnecessary in context. Howell also offers a plausible reconstruction of how human biblical language may accurately refer to the deity and indeed serve as divinely appropriated speech, for those who share his theological presuppositions. In addition, his analysis chapters offer some fresh readings and ably demonstrate that seeing is associated with different meanings in different contexts.

On the debit side, there are several places where further defense is warranted. In particular, Howell seems to make various assumptions without attempting to convince the reader of the merit of following them. For example, he does not sufficiently establish what literal sight is in distinction to metaphorical and why divine sight must always be metaphorical—other than passing references to God being incorporeal, a theory challenged on biblical grounds by several recent authors (esp. Esther J. Hamori, “When Gods Were Men”: The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature [BZAW 384; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008]; Andreas Wagner, Gotteskörper: Zur alttestamentlichen Vorstellungen der Menschengestaltigkeit Gottes [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010]; Benjamin D. Sommer, The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011]). It is prudent to read anthropomorphic language metaphorically so as to stress the intended meaning of the divine language in context without necessarily involving other entailments about which we do not have enough information (e.g., that the mechanism of sight is the same for humans and the divine). However, this does not mean that all biblical writers believed that divine sight is
“entirely distinct from normal sight” (101) or that the deity does not possess physical eyes.

Taking the Bible at face value is not necessarily problematic (it, of course, influences Howell’s interpretations, but so do most authors’ theological positions); the problem comes when he simply assumes without defense that we should do so as well. Likewise, a synchronic reading is not bad in itself, yet it becomes problematic when it is not defended and when the diachronic approach is unnecessarily denigrated (e.g., on 121 Howell calls it a “fruitless task”). It also has some (perhaps) unintended consequences on the analysis. While Howell stresses the importance of interpreting anthropomorphic metaphors contextually, on several occasions he opts to import meaning from other contexts, from the biblical and theological aggregate. For example, although the text offers little by way of description and says nothing of the sons of God’s intent, Howell concludes that they are “divine beings, members of divine council, who had forfeited their rank as divine messengers” and maliciously attempted to undermine the divine redemptive plan (146).

Finally, although I am perhaps nitpicking, it seems that Howell’s application of Stern’s approach could also use greater precision. Seeing in general refers to observation, whether visual or perceptual. Sight gains specificity in context and contributes to the larger message of a passage. In Gen 2:19, God seeing what Adam would call animals connotes divine observation of Adam’s behavior. This does not mean, as Howell suggests, that the verb “see” functions “to transfer a limited sense of authority to humanity” (126). Instead, the larger context of the passage implies transferred authority, of which seeing is one small part. Thus, the contextual meaning offered by Howell does not inhere in the verb itself or perhaps even in the verb at all but in the aggregate passage.

In sum, despite some room for refinement, Howell’s study is thoughtful, sympathetic, and helpful for those interested in anthropomorphic language, especially those who share his theological convictions.