

God E6 Final

Experiencing God Through Humans

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Jon: This is Jon from The Bible project. We've been going through a series on this podcast about the complex identity of God in the Bible. If you've been following along, you've heard us talk about how the word for "God" in the Bible is the word "Elohim" and how the God of the Bible isn't the only character referred to as an Elohim. In fact, there are many spiritual beings in the Bible referred to as Elohim.

Tim: Most human cultures or most of human history have had a gradient view of reality, namely, there are different grades of powerful beings in the universe. At the top is usually a particular deity or a handful of them, but then there are deities all the way down. So this is the world in which the Bible comes into existence.

Jon: And in this world, the gods they're always fighting to prove who's the top dog that can climb the ranks of the god pile as it were. So if you're a smart person, you give respect to as many gods as you dare, but the biblical authors, they don't buy this.

Tim: Ultimately, where the biblical authors are going is where you call the Binary view. That their fundamental view is there's Yahweh the chief Elohim, then everything else.

Jon: Or as the first commandment says, have no other gods before me. In the biblical view, the Creator God of the universe is in a class of His own.

Tim: Yahweh is transcendent, unique, above all totally different than all other reality.

Jon: But if God's totally different, then everything we can understand, then God would be unknowable, impossible to relate to, but strangely...

Tim: At the same time, they believe that God is personal, knowable, involved in human history, He's utterly unique and other, but he is also at the same time completely involved, and His story is interwoven with the story of this world.

Jon: Theologians talk about this paradox, is God's transcendence in his Eminence. He's both unreachably far away, and at the same time intimately close by. And so, what does this look like practically? How can a transcendent being enter our story?

In the next few episodes, we're going to explore that question. We're going to look at a few ways that God interacts with the world. The first and most common way this happens is what we'll look at in this episode, that God relates to us through other humans.

Tim: The majority of times in the whole Bible (Old and New Testament) when God appears to interact with people, it's through mediators: priests, prophets, Kings, that kind of thing.

Jon: When God does this, we get a glimpse of what it means to be truly human, what it means to be made in the image of God.

Tim: There are going to be particular human characters that God is going to use and act through in very unique ways, so much so that it's hard to tell if it's the human acting or God acting. Moses is actually the first character.

Jon: Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

We're going to talk in this hour about Yahweh, how he relates to the created world. Before we get into that—

Tim: Let's begin here. This would be a good summary then. I think there's the biblical scholar, sheesh, all things, some old testament, some Second Temple Judaism and New Testament, his name is Richard Bauckham. He's one of my personal scholar heroes. He's done a lot of writing and work on this, both monotheism Jewish beliefs in the One God in the period of the Second Temple, and he's done a lot of work on the concept of Jesus' deity in the New Testament in light of all that. He's been really influential person on me.

He has a helpful way of at least giving language that I think will be helpful as we go on. So he talks about how most human cultures or most of human history have had a gradient...He calls it a gradient view of reality, namely, that there are different grades of powerful beings in the universe. So humans, you know, we're more powerful than squirrels or a cat, though some might argue that cats are smarter.

Jon: No. Who argues that?

Tim: I have met people in my life that treat cats like humans and relate to them as if they're equivalent. Anyway.

Jon: Squirrels are actually very dumb animals. I think we attribute too much intelligence to squirrels because they're cute.

Tim: Yeah, personality.

Jon: Squirrels, when they're digging holes and dumping the acorns in, I think like 75% of those will never find again.

Tim: That's amazing.

Jon: So it's not that intelligent.

Tim: Okay, gradient. Then you get humans, and then in most polytheist views that there are many powerful divine beings would then go up. But there's different gradations - a gradient view of the world. At the top is usually a particular deity or a handful of them, but then there's deities all the way down. This was true, especially in the ancient Greek and Roman world or in the in the Canaanite world.

So, what it means is you have to acknowledge and honor everybody that's above you, human or nonhuman. And so, you accord them different degrees of honor. You're offering sacrifices to all kinds of gods where there's this kind of thing. So this is the world in which the Bible comes into existence is in a what he calls cultures with the gradient view of the world.

He says, "Ultimately, where the biblical authors are going," is what he calls a binary view. "That their fundamental view is there's Yahweh the chief Elohim and then everything else."

Jon: Spiritual and physical.

Tim: Spiritual and physical, yes. So, Yahweh, he's the creator of all and he's the sovereign supreme ruler of all. He might delegate some of that authority but you can't ever truly compare middle management to the founder.

Jon: And other cultures, the primary God, the kind of head God usually kind of fought his way to the top.

Tim: That's right. That's right. And another deity might make its way to the top one day.

Jon: So it's a big battle. But in the binary view it's like, "No, there's just one, he created everything."

Tim: Page 1, no rivals.

Jon: He has no rivals.

Tim: He doesn't have to slay any other gods to make the world.

Jon: No one's ever going to be able to take over his job.

Tim: That's right. The base assumption of the biblical authors is that there's only one chief God.

Jon: That's a great definition of monotheism there, right?

Tim: Yes. Yeah, totally. That's what he's going to say is biblical monotheism.

Jon: Biblical monotheism?

Tim: Yeah. Which again doesn't deny the existence of other Elohim. It just says there's only one chief and so that one chief puts that particular Elohim into a category of its own. This is a quote from him. I found this helpful.

He says, "Jewish monotheism understands the uniqueness of the One God in terms of an absolute difference in kind from all other reality. We could call this a transcendent uniqueness, understanding the uniqueness of the God of Israel as the one creator and the one sovereign ruler of all things."

So he's surveyed all the ancient literature, he notices these themes. What is it that puts Yahweh at a unique category from any other being, Elohim or human? He's the only creator, that is no other Elohim participated with Yahweh in generating the universe. So he surveyed the literature. That's one distinct character trait. The other one is Yahweh is the sovereign ruler. He might delegate authority for this or that but ultimately he's the one guiding the ship.

He goes on. "In ancient Judaism, this binary distinction between God and all of the reality was observed and promoted by monolatry," which is a weird—

Jon: To worship one.

Tim: Yeah, the worship of one. Their worship and allegiance and prayers were offered only to the One God of Israel." And this made Israelites stick out in the ancient world.

Jon: This is the first commandment.

Tim: It's the first commandment: No other gods.

Jon: First commandment is monolatry.

Tim: So Canaanite culture, all polytheistic, Greek and Roman culture, all polytheistic. This was seen as offensive, even dangerous. Think, if you're a Roman neighbor or Greek and you have some Jewish neighbors, you really believe that honoring the gods of the nation and the city and your neighborhood are all very important. You need to offer monthly sacrifices to secure the safety of your city. And then you've got these neighbors, and they say, "No, no, we don't think those gods are actually even significant or worth paying attention to."

Jon: They might be thinking like, "You're going to screw this up for us."

Tim: Yes. You would think it's political, it's treasonous. You're actually subverting the wellbeing of our community by saying there's only one God worthy of worship. So this had political, religious, economic significance.

Jon: It couldn't divorce it from the rest of life.

Tim: And it was a public physical, very visible practice - not going to those temples only offering prayer and worship to the God of Israel.

Jon: Spiritual holdouts.

Tim: Totally, totally. The best analogy would be defined like...again, in the modern West America, so different forms of liberal democracy but then finding holdout groups like anarchist groups or something like that.

Jon: We're not on board.

Tim: We're not on board and they publicly, visibly display themselves in public as not on board.

Jon: "The hierarchy of power that you guys believe in, we don't care about."

Tim: We don't care about. It would be that kind of oddity. It's both odd and defensive.

Jon: It is kind of anarchist, a little bit.

Tim: Yeah, totally.

Jon: It's like, "The police, they don't matter. These governors, they don't matter."

Tim: They are cultures where everything is run off of this gradient view of keeping all of the beings, human and god like happy and honored, and these all these Jews are going around saying, "No, there's only one God. I don't even think yours is real actually. That's just a piece of wood. Or it's real but it's subordinate."

Jon: Or like another culture would just import their god and say, "Okay, we're going to worship our God too. We'll worship all of your gods, but our god's important. So even though we're living in your city, we'll just add them to the list."

Tim: Like a Macedonian who moves to Rome, would be like, "Okay, well, I've got the gods I grew up worshiping, but now I'm in your country, you worship these gods. Okay."

Jon: "I can get on board."

Tim: "I'll work him in my schedule."

Jon: "We'll put him on the counter."

Tim: Correct? Yeah, so Jews, none of it. "We're having none of this." That's a classic Jewish biblical monotheism. His point here is that that theological belief translated into very practical political, economic choices that were visible to your neighbors.

To finish quoting him, "Judaism turned their monolatry their worship of one God into a powerful cultural symbol of exclusive monotheism." So you can't just talk about what did these biblical authors and Israelites believe, we also have to look at their behavior. Their behavior and their beliefs mesh into this very particular way of life. There you go. That's a binary view of reality.

So just ask yourself this question. If you hold the theological belief that there's only one Elohim that's the creator of all and the ruler of all and worthy of your allegiance and worship, but then you also have received all this traditional literature that you believe is authoritative and comes from that God, that reveals that God, and there's all these stories that show God relating to people in very different kinds of ways, what you're going to see is biblical authors on this balance beam because they believe that Yahweh is transcendent, unique, above all, totally different than all other reality. Transcendent is what Bauckham called it.

At the same time, they believe that God is personal, knowable, involved in human history and often rolls up his sleeves and gets in the thick of things.

Jon: Imminence.

Tim: Imminence, yeah. That God is here now. Psalm 139: where can I go to escape you? You're everywhere I go, and not just as a spirit, but actually at work in the world. and so, the biblical authors they're going to develop a very nuanced vocabulary and they're going to draw a nuanced portrait in the stories of the Bible about God's transcendence, but also his involvement.

So what you see is that God relates to the world most often through some kind of mediator figure. And this is going to be crucially important, once again, when we

finally get to Jesus and understanding what it means to affirm the classic Christian conviction that Jesus is God become human.

Jon: Yahweh become human.

Tim: Yahweh become human. That's right, thank you. What does that even mean? For many people, that just to say Jesus is God, is how it's often put, I think, is just confusing, and actually doesn't help people in our cultural setting understand what the claim actually is. So there you go.

So all of this is creating groundwork to help us understand the Incarnation and the claim that God is Trinity, three in one.

Jon: That's where we're headed?

Tim: That's where we're heading.

Jon: And in order to get there, we need to first just talk about how God relates to the world?

Tim: Yeah, you got it. He's utterly unique and other, but He is also at the same time completely involved, and His story is interwoven with the story of this world. Most of those are true at the same time, even though they seem to be opposite to each other.

Jon: Opposite because if He is so unique and other, He shouldn't be able to relate to the world?

Tim: Well, in the discussions about deity in the Greek philosophy tradition, there's all kinds of discussion about well, if there is a being there that is completely other, the unmoved mover, the on uncaused cause, then that being to truly be God or ultimate deity, needs to be utterly removed from anything temporary, or finite, or material. If He's uncaused cause, He doesn't care whether or not your cat dies or not. He doesn't weep when a city gets taken over by another invading army.

Jon: He's so powerful that we become non-important.

Tim: This idea has been very influential in Christian history and in Christian thought, that if God is truly God, then He can't really truly have a relationship, because that would cause God to respond to you a finite creature. So if God knows all and is all powerful, then He already knows whether or not you're going to get sick. And so if you get sick, God won't be sad. You know what I'm saying?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So there's a whole layer of assumptions about what it means for a deity to be all powerful.

Jon: So, if a deity is all powerful, then the deity operates on a different plane that just doesn't jive and mesh with the way we operate.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: It's like oil and water, they can't mix.

Tim: You and I are so not like that. We're very much subject to things that happen to us and then to my environment, and they affect my mood and the decisions I make.

Jon: And for God, this divine ultimate supreme being to then come down and interact in that way would actually then make him less of the supreme being.

Tim: Correct. I'm saying this is a conception of deity that was made most clear in the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition - Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and so on. But it's continued to haunt Christian history because that formed some kind of default that we think, "Oh, yeah, that's actually what it means to be the ultimate creator and supreme ruler."

Jon: In Jewish kind of Hebrew thought, they weren't wrestling with that. They just take it for granted that the same God would—

Tim: Exactly. That's what I'm saying, the biblical authors are walking this balance beam because they want to claim about Yahweh, that he is ultimate creator, the uncaused cause, all that kind of thing, the ruler, but yet his story is truly involved in and affected by the human story happening here on earth.

Jon: Do they see that as a balance beam? Do they see that as a compromise?

Tim: Well, that's a good point. I'd have to think about that more. I don't know if they would conceive of it as a balance being.

Jon: I see.

Tim: But it's more that modern Westerners looking back with—

Jon: With this paradigm handed to us from Greek thought. It seems like, Oh, how are they dealing with this idea of a transcendent God? Yeah, they seem to be kind of going back and forth delicately.

Tim: Yeah, yeah. Because you have Psalm 139 saying, "Where can I go from you? You're everywhere." Solomon when he dedicates the temple, I know you really don't really fully ever reside in a building. You are above all the heavens." But then you have other stories that are like, "Yeah, there was a pillar of cloud and smoke over this building."

Jon: And that was God.

Tim: That was God there. God has eyes that see, God has hands that do stuff, God is depicted having a back that appears to Moses and "Because you can't see my face." So all of a sudden, you have all these very human, almost material creaturely things said about God in the Bible right there alongside these very transcendent other, I am God and not man. No man can see me and live, this kind of thing.

So just on the face value, reading the Bible, you're like, "Oh, this is a complex God. This is a complex portrait of God, who's both transcendent and above all, but also totally involved, and allows himself to be affected by human history. This is what I'm calling, just simply, God's complex relationship to the world. We need to honor that, first of all, and the second of all, allow the biblical story itself to remake what the word "G-O-D" means for us.

[00:20:50]

Tim: So, God's complex relationship to the world. Let's start with something very simple. Pick up the Bible, start reading Page 1, and you'll notice stories about Yahweh just like walking around talking with people, and people responding to Yahweh like another character in the story standing right there. So God is taking a walk, the people eat the fruit. And then God's depicted as walking around at the windy time of day saying, "Hey, where are you?" And then He's somebody you can hide from because the humans hide. So it's just like, oh, Gods depicted as just walking around talking to people.

Jon: Which is not a very transcendent type of image of God.

Tim: It's very interesting. Yeah. It's a crucial part of the biblical portrait of Yahweh God is that He's personal and involved, so much so that in these narratives just...And God said this, and Abraham said to God—

Jon: Not only is He walking around in the garden, He's walking around during a time when it's very pleasant to walk around. It's kind of like that's how much he's come down.

Tim: That's right. Now, here's what's very interesting, is that most of those narratives where there's no indication of a prophet representing God or priest or anything like that. Most of those narratives are in the book of Genesis, and they become very rare after the book of Genesis. Well, I take that back. I'd say Genesis, and then the Exodus story.

Then once you move on, especially once Moses dies, almost everybody's interacting with Yahweh the God of Israel by means of some other mediator. The majority of times in the whole Bible (Old and New Testament) when God appears, the Yahweh God appears and interacts with people. It's through mediators and a whole host of mediators.

Many humans act as mediators on God's behalf to other humans. That's a very common way that God interacts with the world in the Bible. So priests, prophets, kings, that kind of thing. But then you have these other Elohim, which are sometimes called Elohim, other times they're called angels, or just messengers, and then other times they are what Bible nerds call personifications. They are attributes of God that are personified as characters in stories. So God's name, God's glory, God's word, God's Spirit, God's wisdom.

There's all stories and poems about each of those divine attributes that are depicted in narratives in some form as being characters that are God but are also distinct from God and mediating God in some way.

Jon: And they mediate God in some way.

Tim: But this all fits under this category of this binary view of reality. So there's the supreme chief creator God, He's Above all, but He's not totally removed, like Greek conception of deity. This God is intimately involved and aware and active in the world, and most often through mediators, sometimes other creatures, and then sometimes through these in between categories of personified divine attributes.

Mostly, I just want to walk you through those big categories and give you examples. Again, here's why, is because when we go to the New Testament and look at how the apostles describe Jesus, they're going to draw upon all of these categories. In other words, they're going to describe Jesus with the language of these different types of agents or mediators that God uses in the Hebrew Bible.

It really helps to know what tradition or category the apostles are tapping into as they make their claims about who Jesus is and his relationship to God.

Jon: Okay. Sounds good.

[00:25:46]

Tim: First, I'm want to start with how God works in the world through humans. This is very important to the narrative logic of the whole biblical story. And in the theme, we've talked about a ton. We even made a video about it.

Jon: The image of God?

Tim: The image of God, yeah. So this is interesting. Page 1 of the Bible tells us about Yahweh God generating and ordering the world. Why? What for? What's the purpose? Well, we're not told the purpose on Page 1 - you have to let the story develop - but apparently this God wants to share existence with other creatures.

Jon: And not just existence, but also delegate authority.

Tim: And partnership. He wants to partner with other creatures in the running and maintenance of a world.

Jon: That's just asking for trouble.

Tim: Totally. I guess in as much as just if you enter a relationship with somebody that's not you, yourself, you are asking for trouble.

Jon: Exactly.

Tim: So how does God rule the world according to Page 1 of the Bible? It's quite clear. It's through His images - through humans. So when God says, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, let them rule over all the creatures

on earth," there's a couple of things happening there. First of all, it's God delegating his own authority to humans.

So wherever you see humans at work, you see an image of divine rule, of God's own rule. At least ideally. There's also the fascinating detail of the "let us" "our image" "our likeness."

Jon: Yeah, God said, "Let us make man in our image and our likeness," which I've always been told as a good Trinitarian evangelical, that's referring to the Trinity. That's why it's plural.

Tim: Right. I want to push pause, and just let the story develop at its own pace. Before we go back and think about that fully developed portrait of the Triune God, which I do think is what the whole story is claiming about God, and if I'm looking for what other reference does that "us" or "our" have just within the Old Testament itself, the Divine Council is for sure the first place you would go. It's God sitting among his divine staff, saying, "Let's make a creature that will be under our rule and authority."

Jon: But the divine Council is not making the creature.

Tim: "Let's."

Jon: "Let us." It's almost like, "Let me on behalf of us."

Tim: While you watch.

Jon: Right?

Tim: Yes.

Jon: I don't "we," and by "we" I mean me.

Tim: Yeah, I hear that. The thing is, there are other divine plurals that happen. They happen with the story of the building of Babylon. "Let's go down and see what they're up to down there." That's what God says when they start building the city and the tower. "Let's go down."

Jon: That's fine, because they're all going to go down.

Tim: They are all going to check it out. When Isaiah is commissioned by God, he has that vision in the temple, and "Who will go for us? Whom shall we send?" So it's a common pattern. It's an image of God publicly deliberating among the Divine Council about what His purposes and plans are. That's at least the first layer of reference.

Jon: We know at least it can mean and does mean that. There is a Divine Council and God often talks about what he's going to do, and His intentions in terms of like the team. "We're going to do it together. You guys report to me. I'm doing it and you're doing it."

Tim: "We're doing this together."

Jon: "We're doing this together. We're in this."

Tim: That's it. There you go. That's fascinating. God announces to the Divine Council that they will appoint a creature that represents the divine rule. The narrative logic of the whole story of the Bible flows from right there. Whatever the story is going to be about, it's actually not only going to be about a spiritual being at work in the world, it's going to be about an Elohim (Yahweh) and humans together working in partnership, that this whole story is going to make any sense and come to its completion.

So right here, you see, in a sense, God declaring some kind of self-limitation, that His purposes in the world are going to be carried forward by another creature that may have its own purposes, that don't correspond to God's purposes, and God creates space for that. There you go. That's the biblical drama, is the image bearers redefine their own purpose and will in the world.

Jon: And that's the conflict. And so, in the plot structure, you've got the setting, which is the cosmos, you've got the characters, which are the humans and the Elohim, and then you've got the conflict, which is...Well, I guess the call to action first, right?

Tim: The call to action, which is "Humans, go rule the world on my behalf."

Jon: "Rule the world with me. Awesome. This can be cool story." Then the conflict becomes, "Well, we don't know if we want to do it the way you want it to be done."

Tim: "We want to rule the world a different way."

Jon: And the whole story of the Bible is then, how does that conflict get resolved?

Tim: That's right. It's a way of telling the story. It's more faithful to the actual biblical story and includes the more typical idea known of Protestant Christianity at least, that the main conflict is the relationship between God and humans is broken.

And while that's true, it's not just a relationship for the sake of a relationship, it's a relationship for the sake of getting a job done. A partnership. And so, the conflict isn't just about "let's reconcile our relationship." That still leaves unresolved who's going to rule the world and the world still needs to be run once we heal our friendship. That's where the real adventure is.

That's why most of the biblical story is going to be about God dealing with, putting up with, and working through screwed up humans, and allowing screwed up humans to represent his purposes in the world. This is where a lot of the scandal comes in.

Jon: ...patience of putting up with us.

Tim: Or God committing himself to actions that are not how God would do it if he were the only one involved.

Jon: If he was the only one involved, He'd just be chilling.

Tim: Totally. And He just run the world as we're going to see within His own little community of love going on up there, or out there, or wherever there is. In which case, we're talking about a different God. A God that's content to exist solitary without any others is not at all the God of the Bible.

Here you go on. Then think through the biblical narrative. That's humans. Humans forfeit that so God commits himself to Noah, which is great until Noah gets drunk and blows it. Then God commits himself to Abraham, and is going to work out the divine purpose for all humanity, which is to restore blessing to humans, but through a particular human and his family.

Jon: Blessing being that role.

Tim: The role, that's right. Restored relationship and restored job.

Jon: Vocation.

Tim: Vocation, yeah, that's right. We already have this category then. What happens to the story, then, is there are going to be particular human characters that God is going to use and act through in very unique ways, so much so that it's hard to tell if it's the human acting or God acting.

Moses was actually the first character. When God calls Moses in the burning bush, this is fascinating. This is from Exodus 3. Famous story. Here's what God says to Moses. "Surely, I've seen the affliction of my people in Egypt. I've given heed to their cry, I'm aware of their sufferings." I, I, I. "I'm coming down to deliver them from the Egyptians. I'm going to bring them up to the land that's good and spacious. Who's going to save Israel?" I, I, I, Yahweh. Verse 3:10: "Therefore, come, Moses, I'm going to send you to Pharaoh so that you bring the people up out of Egypt." Wait.

Jon: Did he just change his mind?

Tim: Yeah, exactly.

Jon: "I'm going to do it. Okay. So, Moses, you can do it, right?"

Tim: "I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it. So, Moses, you go do it."

Jon: In a different context, that would seem really silly.

Tim: Oh, yeah, that's right. You're right. In any other story, this would seem like God's changing his mind, going back on what he said he would do.

Jon: I'm trying to picture a story like a classic story, I don't know like—

Tim: I have a live example. It doesn't put myself in a flattering light.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: What happening right now is we're back in the recording room having this conversation, my son's kindergartens having a fundraiser, selling these coupon

books. And for two weeks, I've had the job of telling people about it here in The Bible Project studio. And I have, I have.

Jon: Which got to close the deal.

Tim: We got to close the deal. And so, Jessica was texting me while we were talking about monotheism or whatever a few minutes and I essentially had to say, "I did it. I did it. I did it. I guess you'll have to come in and like finish getting the names and do the deal."

Jon: Yeah, you close the deal.

Tim: Exactly. You do it. In that case, Jessica is very much experiencing it as "Tim said he would do it, but now I have to do it." It's passing responsibility.

Jon: That's very self-aware of you to realize that.

Tim: I'm making her close a deal. In almost any normal relationship, it's passing the baton which means I'm not doing it. But that's not how God works in this story. For me, once that clicked, I realized, "Oh, this is its own category of story."

Jon: It is its own category story. I think we could hit this home a little bit more in like, I don't know why I'm having a hard time thinking of an example. I'm trying to think of some sort of story where someone has a quest, and it's like, "I'm going to do it." It's like, "All right, I'm in. I'm going to do this. I'm on board." Like Frodo climbing the mountain in the "Lord Of The Rings" or something.

Tim: That's a good example. Let's run with it.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: You go first.

Jon: There's probably some part of the story where Frodo is like, "All right, I'm in. I'm going to climb Mount Doom. I'm going to do this." And so, if he's there with Sam and they're like, "I'm going to do it, I'm going. This is my role. This is what I need to do," and then if he turns the Sam and says, "Okay, go. I'll hang out here and you go do it," Sam would be like, "What? You said you would do it. That's weird."

Tim: Here's why I like that you bring it up, though, is because, in that story, their partnership is extremely important.

Jon: Yeah, that's true.

Tim: It's not actually a perfect analogy at all to the biblical story, but it's about the category. It's about that one person's will and purpose has to happen through more than just that person.

Jon: Yeah, he needed Sam.

Tim: He needed Sam. And there are many points at which the movement towards Mount Doom is actually happening because of Sam, and Sam's will and purpose. So it's the joining of multiple wills and purpose to do what the first person said, "I have to do this."

Tim: So in the case of that is because Frodo's weakness or he gets compromised. So that's—

Jon: That's where it falls apart in this area, because it's not because of God's weakness.

Tim: Yeah. But it is helpful analogy about the merging of two wills to accomplish the purpose of one will. And so did Frodo take the ring to Mount Doom? Yes. But sometimes it was Frodo, sometimes it was through Sam and sometimes through them working together.

There's something similar here. God said, "My purpose is that humans carry forward the divine rule in the world." And here, God's purpose is to save some suffering slaves that are His covenant people. And so, "I'm going to do it, so Moses, you go do it."

Jon: And that's how I'm going to do it.

Tim: And that's how I'm going to do it. God's going to do it by Moses doing it.

Jon: Because God could have just come down in a pillar of smoke and just made it happen.

Tim: Yeah. Once you have this category, you'll notice that the number of stories where God does something without a human agent is less than the fingers on my hand. It's very rare that God does things directly. Most of the narratives in the Bible are about God using humans.

Jon: And most of them are in Genesis.

Tim: And most of them are in Genesis, yeah.

[00:40:23]

Tim: That begins to create a category for you that sometimes these human mediators, agents - I'm going to call them agents - things that are said about them are now also said about Yahweh himself. For example, in Exodus 6, God says, "I'm Yahweh." He's speaking to the Israelites through Moses. "I am Yahweh; I'm going to bring y'all out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm." That's the first appearance of a phrase that's going to appear dozens of times in the story and throughout the Bible. "With an outstretched arm, I brought you out of Egypt." It's a key phrase. But that's an interesting image. Where'd that come from?

Jon: The arm?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: I don't know.

Tim: Well, okay. It's an amazing question because the story is going to answer it.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: It's a great metaphor. "With an outstretched arm."

Jon: It's got to have some sort of already some sort of meaning in that language.

Tim: Yeah. Whether it's a strong arm so we're talking about strength, but the outstretched arm. So you have to read on? What does it mean that God's arm is stretched out to save the people? Then you go to chapter 7 and the 10 plagues start. Almost all of the plagues start with lines like this. "Yahweh said to Moses, go to Pharaoh in the morning - when he's going up the water - stand on the bank, take the staff in your hand and say this. 'By this you'll know that I am Yahweh. With the staff in my hand, I'll strike the water.' So Moses did. He lifted up the staff and struck the water."

Jon: So the Moses is lifting the staff and is saying, "I am Yahweh"?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Oh, wow.

Tim: Well, he's speaking as Yahweh's prophetic voice. So he's saying, "Say to Moses." Imagine the scene here. Moses speaking to Pharaoh with the staff. He's stretching out as I'm saying, I am Yahweh with the staff in my Yahweh's hand, I strike..." And then the narrative says, "And Moses lifted the staff and struck the..."

Notice, Moses as a human character is being presented as a stand in for Yahweh himself, so much so that Yahweh can speak of Moses' arm as "my arm," "my outstretched arm."

This isn't saying that Moses is God. Yahweh is not saying that Moses now has become deity.

Jon: That he's an Elohim or that he's Yahweh himself.

Tim: Correct. It is elevating Moses. And wow, what a job. What a responsibility to represent God in that way?

Jon: He's the agent.

Tim: Yeah. But the emphasis is actually the opposite. It's that "Wow, God's so committed, that He will allow himself to be so fully represented by a human." There you go. That's the category. So Moses is the first biblical character that you're like, "Whoa, this guy, I'm looking at him and I'm apparently looking at a really close representative of Yahweh."

There's that weird story about Moses goes up on the mountain and then he comes down and his face is glowing. So the tabernacle, you have the curtains, covering the Holy of holies so Moses has to put a little curtain front of his face.

Jon: Because in some way God is shining through him.

Tim: It's as if he's an image. He's like an image that now reflects the very brightness of Yahweh himself because he's so close to Yahweh.

Jon: So are you saying then that this was the hope for humans being images all along, that they wouldn't be agents for God?

Tim: It's as if the narratives about Moses are showing us a human who is recapturing the original job description, the ideal human.

Jon: So to be the image of God is to have your own will, but to allow yourself to be an agent of God's will?

Tim: Yeah. The more that my own will becomes merged with God's will, first of all, I don't become less myself, I become more myself, I become more human, and I share in God's glory. I become a reflector of God's glory.

If this is starting to sound like the New Testament, it's actually because the New Testament is sounding like the Old Testament. Particularly, the character of Moses is crucially important for understanding the incarnation of Jesus.

Jon: Wow.

Tim: Just this way. Because Moses as it goes on the story, he has deep flaws. He's very imperfect. But when he's at his best, completely submitted to Yahweh, he's fully himself.

Jon: But he's fully an agent of Yahweh.

Tim: In those moments, it's hard to tell him apart from Yahweh in the narrative, because his arm is Yahweh's arm, his face shines like Yahweh's face.

Jon: Like the tabernacle.

Tim: And it's not trying to say Moses is God, is trying to say Moses is an image of God.
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Jon: Which was the purpose of humanity.

Tim: Of humanity, yes. This is really important category. I never heard this anywhere, anybody talk about this, but over the years, as I've read and now I'm reading other people who are Bible nerds, like Bible nerds are tracking with all this - which is lots of theologians and scholars, but I never heard this talked about, and it's so helpful.

Jon: I have never either. The summary would be - if I had to summarize - that we're really talking about the image of God, and we're talking about, why did God create

humans? Why did He create anything? Why didn't He just chill out and be God? Why did He create anything with its own will and agency?

Well, God wanted to delegate His authority, and He wanted other beings to partner with him. In the Bible, the phrase is the "image of God." And then, the question becomes, "Well, now in this world where humans are kind of in rebellion, how is God going to interact with these humans? What's his relationship with humanity?"

The big takeaway is that almost always, God doesn't just show up and do something on His own. There's always some sort of mediator that's acting on God's behalf. You could actually count on your one hand how many times God actually just shows up on His own? It usually happens in Genesis. An example would be Genesis 2, that God's walk in the cool of the garden. He's just there walking and chilling.

So, we bring this all to Moses and get this picture of a human who is mediating on God's behalf, so much so that there's actually literary confusion as to is it God acting or is it Moses acting? Is it Moses' outstretched arm or is it God's outstretched arm? And there's this fusion.

Now, Moses, his will has become God's will in such a way that it's hard to separate the two. Does that mean Moses is now God? No. It means Moses is the image of God - the purpose that God had for humanity in the first place. It's this really beautiful picture of recapturing what the purpose of humanity was to be aligned with the will of God. And it doesn't make you less human, it makes you truly human. It doesn't give you less of a will, it just aligns your will with the divine will. In Moses' case, it brings justice.

Tim: Yeah, it brings liberation in that case.

Jon: Right. It's something that brings life and goodness to the world when you are doing this. That image of Moses coming down from the mountain and his face shining and having to cover it like a tabernacle covering the Spirit of God, it's like, that's how intense it is when you are aligned. And that category of God working through a mediator, in this case, a human and where it gets so fused, that category is going to be important for us to carry forward as we continue the narrative.

Tim: And to understand what the New Testament is trying to tell us about Jesus. Okay, the rabbit hole goes deeper.

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Simon: Hey, my name is Simon and I live in the beautiful city of Vienna, Austria, and I love The Bible Project so much that I actually chose to translate it into German and I'm actually here with my good friend Philip who is the leader of the German Bible Project.

Phillip: Hello. My name is Phillip. I love The Bible Project because I love to train people in Germany to love Jesus Christ.

Simon: We believe the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus. We're a crowdfunded project by people like me. Find free videos, podcasts, study notes, and more at the [Bible project.com](http://Bibleproject.com).