

A HUMAN-SHAPED GOD

Theology of an Embodied God

By Charles Halton

READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE

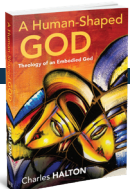
For the past fifteen hundred years, so-called Western theologies (religious reflections that are linked to European thought) have sidelined the passages in the Old Testament that picture God in humanlike ways. These portions of the Bible are considered to be metaphors that don't reflect the reality of who God is. When prominent readers of Scripture have encountered them, those readers have applied clever interpretive methods to produce interpretations that are the exact opposite of what these passages mean if read straightforwardly.

There are several reasons why theologians have done this. The most common one, perhaps, is that theologians have preferred to imagine a God who is stable, consistent, and predictable. It is comforting to imagine God as a safe harbor of unchanging permanence within a world that is chaotic and constantly in flux. But this is not the God we encounter in many of the Old Testament's pages. And if we excise these pictures of God from our theologies, then our theologies begin to unravel when they come into contact with the world around us.

A Human-Shaped God attempts to rebalance theological conversation by centering these humanlike pictures of God and using them as the starting point for imagining what God is like. This approach may change many of the ways you have thought about God. That is the exciting task of theology. And, hopefully, as our theologies evolve we will become more loving and compassionate people.

As you begin imagining God in new ways, it might be good to ask yourself (and the others in your group) two questions that will help prepare you for this journey:

1. What are you hoping to learn or discover by reading this book?
2. What would a positive encounter with this book be for you?



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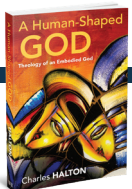
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CHAPTER 1

Imagining a Human-Shaped God

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What practical differences does it make when we distinguish between the reality of God-as-God-is versus our imagination of who God is? How would our religious conversations change? Would we study the Bible differently?
2. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson give examples of how the linguistic framing of a scenario can change the ways we view the scenario. One example is framing an argument as “combat” or a “dance.” How has the linguistic framing of God that you have experienced shaped the ways in which you think about God?
3. On page 18 Charles writes: “The point of studying Scripture is not to arrive at the correct interpretation of it. . . . Rather, the point of scriptural engagement is for us to become more loving and charitable people.” What do you think about this statement?
4. On page 24 Charles writes: “The scriptural portrayals of God in human form are tools that can help us become more charitable people.” Can you think of any stories or portrayals of God in human form? If so, which ones come to mind, and how could these be useful in helping us become more charitable?

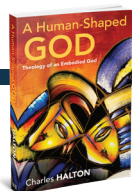


CHAPTER 2

God, Humanlike and Not

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many of us were taught that contradiction is not desirable and should be eliminated. How do you react to the idea that the editors of the Bible took pains to *preserve* contradictory presentations of God and put these contradictory stories side by side, as in Genesis 1–3?
2. On page 42 Charles writes that in contrast to literal descriptions, “Metaphor is an entirely appropriate, and in some circumstances a preferred, means of communication.” What do you think about this statement?
3. On page 48 Charles writes, “If God stamped the divine image onto humans, one way we can better understand who God is is to understand God *in light of ourselves*.” What do you think about this method of theological reflection that starts with humanity and imagines God in light of us? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
4. On page 30 we read of John Calvin’s strategies to reverse the humanlike ways God is pictured in the Bible. On page 51 Charles suggests that we should do the opposite—that is, interpret the humanlike portrayals of God literally. What do you think of this suggestion?

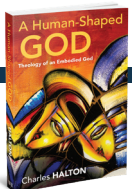


CHAPTER 3

God's Body

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did Naaman and Elisha in 2 Kings 5 understand God's presence (pp. 60–62)? Does that change *your* perception of God?
2. Does your understanding of the phrase “image of God” in Genesis 1:27 change if you read this verse in light of Genesis 5:1–3 (p. 80), where Adam fathers a son who looks like Adam? If your understanding does change, how so?
3. In the section on God's gender and sex (pp. 81–92) was there anything you read that was new, surprising, exciting, or troubling? If so, what was it?
4. What did you think of this statement: “God is intersex, a being that embodies the fullness of humanity within the divine person” (p. 92)? Is this helpful or not?

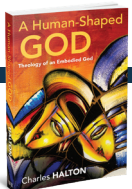


CHAPTER 4

God's Mind

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you react to the idea that many parts of the Bible portray God as not knowing certain things such as the future decisions a human will make (pp. 103–106), the inner character of a person (pp. 106–107), and all the things that take place on earth (pp. 107–110)?
2. Many biblical passages describe God as learning through observing human action (pp. 113–114). How does this compare to the previous ways you have thought about God's knowledge?
3. The idea that God might change God's mind has been a very contentious proposition in theological discussion for hundreds of years. Why do you think that might be? What are the implications of a God that changes their mind?



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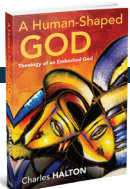
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CHAPTER 5

God's Emotions

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Classical European theology imagined God as disembodied and therefore unemotional. What do you think about the questions Pierre Teilhard de Chardin inspired: “If God did not want the company of other beings capable of relationship, what would move God to make the universe, which seem programmed to produce sentient life?” And how would you answer the related question, “If God is unemotional, what would move God to create the world” (p. 127)?
2. How do you imagine God’s love (pp. 128–135)? Is there a way to think about God’s love apart from an emotion that fluctuates?
3. How do you react to the biblical passages that depict God getting angry? What do you make of the Noah story—is God sad, angry, or both (pp. 147–149)?
4. What do you think of Charles’s assertion that divine affects, not the rational judgment of God, drives many of God’s actions (pp. 154–155)?

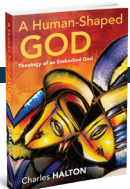


CHAPTER 6

God's Character

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your definition of character? Is it different from the discussion on pages 157–58?
2. What aspect of God's character is most fearsome or scary to you?
3. What aspect of God's character is most comforting to you?
4. What are your reflections on this observation on page 187: "God, like humans, is in a process of understanding how to deal with God's emotions and more productively interact with other conscious beings more beneficially"? Does this assertion match the portrayals of God in the Bible? How does it intersect with various theologies?



CHAPTER 7

Embracing a Humanlike God

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of this description of theology on page 189: “Theology is an act that seeks to join together people, planet, and God”? Is it missing anything? Is it too broad to be helpful? What are its strengths?
2. What do you think of this statement by James Cone on page 190: “Whether theologians acknowledge it or not, all theologies begin with experience”? What are some implications of this perspective?
3. On pages 194–195 Charles encourages us to shift the way we judge the value of a particular theology away from judging its correspondence to metaphysical reality to the pragmatics of “will this idea of God help us become better and more loving people”? Is this shift helpful? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
4. In what ways do you think the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament is similar to ideas of God in the Old Testament? How is Jesus different?

