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GOD AS A SYMBOLIZING GOD: A SYMBOLIC HERMENEUTIC

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> "Look on him, beloved, and love him," said the first. "He is indeed but breathing dust and a careless touch would unmake him. And in his best thoughts there are such things mingled as, if we thought them, our light would perish. But he is in the body of Maleldil and his sins are forgiven. His very name in his own tongue is Elwin, the friend of the eldila."[1]

So declares the eldil Malacandra to the eldil Perelandra about the human Elwin. In this dialogue the spiritual creature eldil speaks on the perennial mystery: What is distinctive to humans and, for those who believe in or posit the possibility of a Creator of humans, how are humans like their Creator?

Some of the concepts discovered in the twentieth-century study of the philosophy of language, particularly those elaborated on by Susanne K. Langer and Ernst Cassirer, begin to answer these intriguing questions. Interestingly enough these findings in historical philosophy may suggest a symbolic hermeneutic, God as a symbolizing God, which can be of great service to the field of Biblical studies, enlightening for us difficult-to-interpret passages such as the darkness at the exodus and at the crucifixion.

I. SYMBOLIZATION IS A CHARACTERISTIC DISTINCTIVE TO HUMANS

> The heresy is this: that I believe there is a primary need in man, which other creatures probably do not have, and which actuates all his apparently unzoölogical aims, his wistful fancies, his consciousness of value, his utterly impractical enthusiasms, and his awareness of a "Beyond" filled with holiness.[2]

From the perspective of a scholar who certainly and honestly declares her beliefs to be this-worldly[3] begin to come the answers to this quest. Is there any quality or characteristic distinctive to humans? Langer aptly shows that there is:

> Not higher sensitivity, not longer memory or even quicker association sets man so far above other animals that he can regard them as denizens of a lower world: no, it

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[1]C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 208.

[2]S. K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (3d ed.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957) 40.

[3]She states: "That man is an animal I certainly believe; and also, that he has no supernatural essence, 'soul' or 'entelechy' or 'mind-stuff,' enclosed in his skin" (ibid., p. 40). On p. 88, in contrast to Lord Russell, she writes about herself: "Now, I do not believe that 'there is a world which is not physical, or not in space-time,' but I do believe that in this physical, space-time world of our experience there are things which do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression." As Langer does not prove these assumptions, for this essay I too will merely state my beliefs: God exists, God is able to affect history, and God reveals himself in the Old and New Testaments.

> is the power of using symbols—the power of *speech*[4]—that makes him lord of the earth.[5]

In her early chapters she brings to light a distinction between "sign" (or "signal" as she later prefers to call it) and "symbol." In order to have psychological meaning any item must be employed either as a sign or a symbol. In understanding the difference between these two terms lies, according to Langer, the distinction between humans and animals. "A sign indicates the existence—past, present, or future—of a thing, event, or condition." It calls for immediate action. On the other hand, a symbol indicates the existence of a concept: "Signs *announce* their objects to him, whereas symbols *lead him to conceive* their objects." A word can function either signally or symbolically. Both a dog and its master may respond to a doorbell. The dog may run to the door and bark, and the master may stop his activities to open the door. In this way both are responding signally to the ring. But until this day only masters have been known to sit and chat about the freedom or lack of freedom one has to answer doorbells whenever they might ring. In this latter example the masters are responding symbolically to the concept of doorbells. No immediate action is entailed. In one manner of thought one reacts to the thing, while in the other one reacts to the conception of that thing.

> [The interpretation of signs] is the most elementary and most tangible sort of intellection; the kind of knowledge that we share with animals, that we acquire entirely by experience, that has obvious biological uses, and equally obvious criteria of truth and falsehood.

Although animals and people are both able to respond to words signally, only humans are able to respond to and to employ words and events symbolically. Thus in studying animals researchers need to look for the first indication of symbolic behavior, not the pragmatic use of vocables.[6]

Within these concepts of sign and symbol is embedded a distinct understanding of language: "The essence of language is the formulation and expression of conceptions rather than the communication of natural wants." Language originates with the desire to transform experience into concepts, not to elaborate on signals and symptoms. Humans need to express their ideas. "How else shall we account for man's love of talk?" Langer concludes that only humans have this "need of symbolization." [7]

Language and Myth by Ernst Cassirer was written to show the early interrelationship between the categories of language and myth and to show how unpragmatic mythic thought has a more fundamental connection with language than pragmatic or reasonable thought. Thus even language itself is primarily symbolic.

According to Langer the chimpanzee is in some measure prepared for symbolic representation, yet he definitely has no speech. She comes to this conclusion after having extensively demonstrated it by examining the results of numerous experiments with animals. "He is conceptually not far from the supreme human

[4]All italics within quotations are original to the author unless otherwise indicated.

[5]Langer, *Philosophy*, 26.

[6]Ibid., pp. 53, 57, 59-61, 110.

[7]Ibid., pp. 41, 43, 118, 126.

achievement, yet never crosses the line. What has placed this absolute barrier between his race and ours?" She posits two reasons why "speech is the mark of humanity." First, only humans have an instinctive desire to babble as babies. Apparently human babies spontaneously play with sounds. Second, when infants are with adults they appear gradually to recognize that the sounds of the adults are similar to theirs.[8]

Furthermore from a physical perspective Langer observes that humans unconsciously tend to perceive forms rather than a flux of unrelated impressions. Without this capacity people could never symbolize.

> Eyes that did not see forms could never furnish it with *images*; ears that did not hear articulated sounds could never open it to *words*. . . . A mind that works primarily with meanings must have organs that supply it primarily with forms.

Only humans have this capacity to abstract continuously, unconsciously and spontaneously from the great amount of sense data.[9]

Alexander Marshack takes this physical perspective further by referring to the well-known "canine fossa," a depression in the bone above the teeth in the cheek of the skull. This depression is found only in humans, not in monkeys or apes. "The depression is the anchor point for a muscle that controls movement in the face and lips and in man it helps control the manipulation of speech." [10] From an archaeological perspective Marshack demonstrates that this human talent for symbolizing occurred as far back as 30,000 B.C. He shows how early bone objects most probably were calendars.

> We find, then, a complex tradition in which tools and slates reveal a practical and a symbolic sense of coming time, as well as varied techniques either for utilizing or making notational slates and marking off units of time.

He calls this system of notations "already evolved, complex, and sophisticated," "a cognitive, time-factored, and time-factoring technique." Marshack explains how 500,000 years ago the *Sinanthropus Pekinensis'* use of fire necessitated symbolic thinking since it involves "a cognitive, visual recognition and comparison of processes and relations." [11]

It seems to be generally agreed by philosophers, psychologists, neurologists and anthropologists that symbolizing is distinctly human. "Animals, on the other hand, are one and all without speech. They communicate, of course; but not by any method that can be likened to speaking." [12] Langer and Marshack have shown that humans have this capacity and need of symbolization. Robert Q. Young summarizes the matter in this way:

> The study of communication is essentially the study of human thought, human experience—for all intents and purposes, the definitive study of our species. While many forms of animal life use some form or forms of communication, humans are the only life form (with the possible exception of porpoises and some whales) whose

[8]Ibid., pp. 45, 115, 116, 124.

[9]Ibid., pp. 72, 90.

[10]A. Marshack, *The Roots of Civilization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972) 75.

[11]Ibid., pp. 57, 90, 113.

[12]Langer, *Philosophy*, 27-28, 104.

existence is governed primarily by *symbols* rather than by physical events.[13]

II. Would Then God Be a Symbolizing God?

Biblical commentators and writers have proposed many excellent interpretations of what it means for humans to be created in the image of God. Gen 1:26-27 reads literally as follows:

> And God said, "Let us make Adam in our image according to our likeness, and they will rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the moving things which move upon the earth." And God created the Adam in his image; in the image of God he created him; a male and a female he created them.[14]

If it is possible to learn more about the created by studying the nature of their Creator, it may also be possible to learn more about the Creator by studying the nature of the created.

According to Genesis only humans were created in resemblance to God. Only humans and no other creatures are capable of symbolizing and need to symbolize.

A "symbol" is "something that stands for or represents another thing, especially, an object used to represent something abstract; an emblem; as, the dove is a *symbol* of peace, the cross is the *symbol* of Christianity." [15] It comes from the Greek words *syn* ("together") and *ballein* ("to throw"). According to Langer as she interprets Philip Wegener, the most vital principle of language is metaphor, and "our literal language is a very repository of 'faded metaphors.' " [16] Thus the concept of metaphor seems to be intricately related to symbolic thought. Consequently if God is a symbolizing God we may test this by discovering whether God uses metaphor in communicating to humans.

III. What Is the Difference Between the Way the Creator and the Created Symbolize?

> Language and myth stand in an original and indissoluble correlation with one another, from which they both emerge but gradually as independent elements. They are two diverse shoots from the same parent stem, the same impulse of symbolic formulation, springing from the same basic mental activity, a concentration and heightening of simple sensory experience.[17]

A number of contemporary philosophers of language and psychologists believe in categorizing manners of conception as mythic or rational, often although not always conceiving of the latter as superior to the former. According to the rational

[13]R. Q. Young, "Some Notes on Early Writing Systems," *The Languages of Communication: From Cave Painting to Print* (New York: University Press, 1978) 1.

[14]All Biblical translations are literally rendered by the author, the better to represent the original Hebrew or Greek grammatical structure.

[15]*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (2d ed.; ed. J. L. McKechnie; New York: Publishers Guild, 1962) 1847.

[16]Langer, *Philosophy*, 140.

[17]E. Cassirer, *Language and Myth* (tr. S. K. Langer; New York: Dover, 1946) 88.

mode of thought a concept or word is not as real as the object of conceptualization.

> That a word is not the reality, not the thing that it represents, has long been a commonplace to all of us. The thing that I hold in my hand as I write *is* not a pencil; I *call* it a pencil. And it remains the same whether I call it *pencil, molyvi, Bleistift*, or *siwiqoq*.[18]

In contrast, to the mythic consciousness a word does not represent something but is something.

> The notion that name and essence bear a necessary and internal relation to each other, that the name does not merely denote but actually *is* the essence of its object, that the potency of the real thing is contained in the name—that is one of the fundamental assumptions of the mythmaking consciousness itself.[19]

Thus if employing this delineation of thought a rational thinker would not think that the communication of one's name would in any way leave one powerless, whereas a mythic thinker might feel that the communication of one's name would indeed leave one powerless.[20]

I propose that in God is unified the mythic and theoretical ways of perception. God's symbol is as real as the object symbolized, but nevertheless the symbol is not lost in an indissoluble union with its object. In our society people who confuse the characters and events of a fictional novel with those people and events that surround them are considered to be on their way to insanity. But with God everything he creates does have an essence of its own although it may also represent something else.

Mary McDermott Shideler has written an excellent book that carefully elaborates on these suggestions. Although her definitions of "allegory" and "image" might in themselves comprise an excellent study (e.g. comparing her categories to the categories of "reason" and "myth") they also provide a helpful basis for our present consideration. In her critical essay Shideler divides all natural symbols into allegories and images on the basis of the ways in which the symbols are related to their respective referents. An allegory is constructed, whereas an image is discovered. An allegory, she quotes Charles Williams as proposing, is "suggestively similar" to its referent or basis, while an image partakes of the same nature as or has "identity" to its referent. The differences between an image and its referent are as important as their similarities. An allegory has no significance apart from its function as an illustration. It parallels deduction, the movement from general to particular. In contrast an image exists in its own right, independent of its imaging function. It parallels induction, the movement from particular to general.[21]

The value of allegory lies in its precision. An image may be vague. Thus the

[18]D. Lee, "Lineal and Nonlineal Codifications of Reality," *Explorations in Communication* (ed. E. Carpenter and M. McLuhan; Boston: Beacon, 1960) 137.

[19]Cassirer, *Language*, 3.

[20]Of course modern people also have many qualities that are called "mythic." How many of us are disturbed when someone calls whose voice we do not recognize but who refuses to identify himself?

[21]M. M. Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 12-15.

discovery and explanation of an image necessitates great discipline. Shideler suggests that "the ascent from image to basis, and the descent from idea to allegorical symbol, are not mutually exclusive, but complementary." [22]

The symbols God creates in many ways unify allegory and image. His symbols have the precision of allegory. They are constructed, not discovered by God. But as in an image the symbol itself exists independently of its imaging function.

IV. How Does Understanding God as a Symbolizing God as a Hermeneutic Clarify Several Difficult-to-Interpret Biblical Passages?

I have posited that because humans have a unique capacity and desire to symbolize, their Creator too has this capacity. Yet the Creator is distinct in being able to create a natural reality, significant in itself, which may also serve as a symbol. How does understanding God in this way clarify several difficult-to-interpret Biblical passages? As an example I will take the theme of darkness at two Biblical events: the exodus and the crucifixion.

> And Lord said unto Moses, "Extend your hand towards the heavens, and darkness will be upon the land of Egypt—and a darkness to be felt." And Moses extended his hand towards the heavens, and a deep darkness was in all the land of Egypt three days. A man did not see his brother, and a man did not rise from beneath it three days, and to all the children of Israel there was light in their dwelling.[23]

In Exodus 5-13 we have recorded Moses' famous conversations and interactions with Pharaoh requesting that the Israelites be allowed to leave for three days so that they might keep a festival to the God of Israel in the desert (5:1). Ten natural occurrences are recorded as signs of God's presence and encouragement to the Egyptians to release the Israelites, but only one of them is unannounced and unpresented to Pharaoh. This is the three days of darkness that precede the last plague, the death of the firstborn son. What is the purpose of this singular event? Since it is the only unannounced occurrence it would seem that its purpose is primarily symbolic. Pharaoh could not prevent this sign as he could have prevented the other ones. As an image it suggests several levels of meaning. First, since it was an unusual event to have darkness everywhere, it was likely to have caused much discomfort and fear. When Pharaoh saw that there was light where the Israelites dwelled, associating this difference with the preceding nine explained signs, he responded by deciding to let the Israelites depart with their lives but with none of their herds. In this perspective the three days' darkness functioned in the same manner as the nine other natural events, a sign of God's presence and an encouragement for the release of the Israelites. Second, the three days' darkness occurs immediately before the last and the most devastating plague, the death of the eldest son. Here it serves as a portent of a great disaster to come. It is interesting to note that the author wrote, "A man did not see his brother and a man did not rise," rather than the more generic "they" or "the Egyptians." By contrasting a "man" to his "brother" we already may have a suggestion that one male will be distinguished from another in the plague to come. Third, the three

[22]Ibid., pp. 15-16, 20-21, 28.

[23]Exod 10:21-23.

days' darkness is in contrast to the three days' journey into the wilderness that was originally requested. Because the Egyptians did not want to grant three days of feasting they were themselves justly given three days of nonfeasting.

These are but three suggestions of the potential multi-leveled quality of the symbol of the three-day darkness to Pharaoh, a symbol he could not prevent but had to confront.

> And it was by this time about [the] sixth hour, and darkness appeared upon the entire region (earth) until [the] ninth hour the sun was eclipsing (Luke 23:44-45a).

Matthew, Mark and Luke[24] all record this three-hour darkness that began around noon.[25] In each account the darkness occurs immediately before Jesus' death. Again we have here a symbolic communication that in many ways is similar to the Exodus event. The darkness during the crucifixion seems to have no function in the narrative other than to be symbolic. It is unannounced. It serves as a sign of God's presence. It instills fear in those present. The centurion responds with praising God and saying, "Certainly that person was righteous" (Luke 23:47); "truly this person was [the] Son of God" (Mark 15:39; Matt 27:54). The multitudes "feared greatly" (27:54) and returned home "beating their chests" (Luke 23:48). Thus it was a symbol to them also of a miscarriage of justice.

By occurring immediately before Jesus' death, like that in the Exodus record, this darkness also served as a warning of a great disaster to come, the death of a "firstborn" son. While the three days' darkness hearkened back to the original request for a three days' journey, in the first century A.D. the three hours' darkness seems to hearken forward to the three days in the tomb. The three hours serves as a synecdoche for the longer three days. One commentator, Norval Geldenhuys, interprets the darkness in this manner.

> In Gethsemane [Jesus] chose finally to bear the punishment for the sin of mankind. And because this punishment is everlasting death, Jesus had on the cross to experience absolute forsakenness of God, and the pangs of hell itself. It was a time of utter spiritual darkness that the Son of God had to pass through, as the Substitute for the guilty world. Therefore it was also inevitable that the world of nature, the creation of God through the Son (John i.3), should on that day be radically affected. And so darkness came over the whole earth from twelve to three o'clock and an earthquake rent the rocks in the vicinity (Matt. xxvii.51).[26]

This leaves us with the additional question: Was the three days' darkness in Exodus also a symbol of the forthcoming three days' in the tomb? In this case, God would be communicating that his Son, his own "firstborn," would receive the same punishment that he was rendering to the unresponsive Egyptians. As Jesus is called the firstborn by Paul, it is an apt metaphor. "Firstborn" may refer not only to the son born first but also to the function of a firstborn: to rule a family. In 1 Chr 26:10 the chief or "firstborn" was not born first. The psalmist is recorded as being made the firstborn, "the highest of the kings of the earth" (Ps 89:27). Thus the firstborn was that member of the family who had the status of

[24]See Matt 27:45-54; Mark 15:33-39; Luke 23:44-46.

[25]A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Luke* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969) 536.

[26]N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 611.

rulership. One Jewish rabbi even called God the firstborn. Therefore, according to Fred Fisher, when Paul called Jesus "the firstborn" over all creation, he meant to say that Jesus had complete and absolute sovereignty over all creation.[27]

The three days' darkness occurs before the Passover, an event in which the killing of a lamb represents a vicarious death. Jesus entered Jerusalem at the same time that thousands of lambs entered the city for the Passover celebration. He died the day before Passover itself (Luke 23:54). During the three days' darkness it is said of the Egyptians that "a man did not see his brother and a man did not rise from underneath it three days" (Exod 10:23). You might say it was like a tomb, and they had not yet risen from the dead.

Now, a modern reader might ask, are these accounts of darkness merely fictional devices employed in the text as a pathetic fallacy to indicate great calamities? Are we to believe they actually occurred? When studying correspondence of that time we note with interest that Thallus, the naturalistic Roman historian, disagreed with Julius Africanus (c. A.D. 220) and contended that the crucifixion darkness was caused by an eclipse. Africanus argued that no eclipse of the sun is possible with a full moon, nor is any recorded in that time's meteorological records.[28] What is interesting here is that during the early centuries A.D. everyone was aware that a natural unusual darkness had occurred. What were disputed were its cause and its significance, not its reality.

In regard to the plagues recorded in Exodus most commentators seem to agree at a minimum that the plagues did refer to natural occurrences. "There is no doubt that a series of disasters took place in Egypt, and these disasters were severe and came quickly after one another." [29] Bernhard Anderson believes that "Israel's ancient faith undoubtedly was based on the experience of actual events which facilitated the escape of slaves from Egypt." [30] William Neil states that "the basic facts would seem to be a combination of unusual natural disasters." [31] Philip C. Johnson concludes:

> Most scholars agree that the darkness was probably cause by the hamsin, the fierce sandstorm so dreaded in the East. The hot dry wind, like the blast of a furnace, fills the air with sand and dust, and the static electricity makes conditions almost unbearable physically. Added to this is the effect on mind and spirit of the thick and oppressive darkness. This plague concluded the manifestation of God's wonders and was a forbidding prelude to the final act of judgment.[32]

Few Biblical commentators discuss the symbolic significance of darkness at the exodus and at the crucifixion. Most authors have overlooked the question.

[27]F. L. Fisher, *How to Interpret the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 91.

[28]F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 30. Also see Plummer, *Critical*, 537.

[29]G. H. Davies, "Exodus," *The Twentieth Century Bible Commentary* (rev. ed.; ed. G. H. Davies et al.; New York: Harper, 1955) 133.

[30]B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Tesatment* (2d ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 49.

[31]W. Neil, *Harper's Bible Commentary* (New York: Harper, 1962) 76.

[32]P. C. Johnson, "Exodus," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (ed. C. F. Pfeiffer and E. F. Harrison; Chicago: Moody, 1966) 60.

Some merely discuss to what extent these were accurately recorded. A few allude briefly to their symbolic significance. However, if the Biblical student were to suppose that God is a symbolizing God from whom we reflect our own capacity and desire to symbolize, then such a student would be prepared to find real events that had a symbolic level. Of course such discovery would best be limited by reasoned considerations such as Shideler's controls on interpretation. In this case the fruit from the labors of philosophers of language would result in a great service to theological scholars.

V. How Does This Study Affect Our Use of and Response to Symbol?

I have shown how God uses symbols with care and with the intention of communication. God's symbols have their own significant reality. I think that these observations should provide both an encouragement to employ symbols as a means of communication and a warning to use them with care and respect. Humans' natural desire to symbolize is not only unrestrainable. It is also good in itself. God can serve even as a model to us. "Why in parables do you speak to them?" (Matt 13:10).

But a symbol created by God is not to be taken lightly. Not only may it have its own reality, but also the reality has natural repercussions for our own lives. Furthermore, by being real it has a worth of its own.