

Anthropomorphisms in P

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For nearly two centuries biblical scholars have accepted P as a distinct literary source of the Pentateuch. This consensus has endured despite modifications to the assignment of material to P, and the ongoing debate over distinguishing P from the Holiness Code. As part of this consensus, scholars have discerned specific characteristics of P that, for the most part, differentiate it from the other Pentateuchal sources. One of those characteristics is that, unlike the J source, P does not employ anthropomorphic language about God. Richard Elliott Friedman makes precisely this point when he writes:

Blatant anthropomorphisms such as God's walking in the garden of Eden (J), making Adam's and Eve's clothes (J), closing Noah's ark (J), smelling Noah's sacrifice (J), wrestling with Jacob (E), standing on the rock at Meribah (E), and being seen by Moses at Sinai/Horeb (J and E) are absent in P.¹

The force with which Friedman makes this claim is surprising, since, for example, P's creation account appears to be littered with anthropomorphic language. For example, P has God "calling" the light "day," and the expanse "sky," and the dry land "earth" (Gen 1:5, 8, 10). God "saw" that his creation was good (Gen 1:4), he "blessed" the man and the woman he had created (Gen 1:22, 28), and then "rested" when the work of creation was finished (Gen 2:2-3). Accepting such language as anthropomorphic reflects a broad understanding of anthropomorphism. Other scholars constrain the classification of anthropomorphism as that which suggests an embodied

¹ Richard Elliott Friedman, "Torah (Pentateuch)," *ABD* 6:611.

deity. Most of the vocabulary highlighted in Friedman's assertion above is certainly suggestive of some notion of divine embodiment, and so one would expect that while more elastic vocabulary might occur in P, this kind of explicit anthropomorphic verbiage would not be present in the P source. But is this actually the case? Has not this question been settled, as Friedman's declaration suggests?

This article argues that the claim that P does not contain explicit anthropomorphic language cannot be sustained, since it can readily be falsified through the application of new database technology unavailable until very recently. Though there are exceptions, a great deal of Pentateuchal source-critical research in the last century did not have as its aim the kind of painstaking word-for-word detective work that characterized the rise of source criticism. Rather, the focus of scholarship had moved away from establishing Pentateuchal sources in favor of analyzing the redactional enterprise or elucidating the contributions of source criticism to the exegesis of the Pentateuch. Consequently, claims about Pentateuchal source attributes were more often transmitted than evaluated. There was no need to reinvent the source-critical wheel. With the advent of new tools, though, scholars have entered a new era where many claims about the text—whether grammatical, syntactical, or critical—can be tested in new ways. Consequently, the focus of this article is not to summarize or evaluate recent scholarship on source critical theory or the P source itself, or discussions of anthropomorphism in the Pentateuch. Rather, the

purpose is to evaluate one particular claim about the content of P in light of new database capabilities.²

Testing the Claim and Analyzing the Results

The claim that “blatant anthropomorphisms” are not found in P can easily be tested using a database called the Andersen-Forbes Analyzed Text of the Hebrew Bible, an achievement that is the result of thirty years of scholarly labor by Francis I. Andersen and A. Dean Forbes. Like other databases of the Hebrew Bible, the Andersen-Forbes database includes morphological information on every word and meaningful sub-word level segment in the Hebrew text. Unlike other databases, however, the Andersen-Forbes database features grammatical-syntactical tagging which enables the user to search for a multitude of linguistic structures and the function of those structures within clause boundaries. In other words, up until Andersen-Forbes, scholars of the Hebrew Bible could search for where a word or words are, but not how they relate to one another structurally, or for how those structures function in the clause. Andersen-Forbes also includes word-level tagging for basic genre categories, reported speech, semantic information and, most importantly for the question at hand, Eissfeldt’s source-critical designations for the Pentateuch.

To test the claim about anthropomorphisms in P, the approach is straightforward. Returning to Friedman’s quotation, it is a simple matter to note the verb lemmas for the deity’s

² The validity of P as a source does not rest with this one criterion, naturally, and so this article does not intend to argue that P should be re-envisioned or abandoned. Rather, scholarly pursuits such as source criticism can benefit from new tools and the approaches those tools enable.

The results of such a query are interesting in several respects. The query yields ten very clear instances where the kind of anthropomorphic language drawn from Friedman's quotation is present in P:

Genesis 17:1 – . . . And the LORD appeared (וּרְאָה) to Abraham . . .

Genesis 35:9 – . . . God (אֱלֹהִים) appeared (וּרְאָה) to Jacob . . .

Genesis 48:3 – . . . El-Shaddai (אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי) appeared (נִרְאָה) to me at Luz . . .

Leviticus 9:4 – . . . today the LORD will appear (נִרְאָה) to you.

Leviticus 9:6 – . . . that the glory of the LORD may appear (וּרְאָה) to you.

Leviticus 9:23 – . . . the glory of the LORD appeared (וּרְאָה) to all the people.

Numbers 14:10 – . . . the glory of the LORD appeared (נראה) at the tent of meeting . . .

Numbers 16:19 – . . . the glory of the LORD appeared (וירא) to all the congregation . . .

Numbers 17:7 – . . . and the glory of the LORD appeared (וירא).

Numbers 20:6 – . . . and the glory of the LORD appeared (וירא) to them.

All of the instances returned by this query are the same lemma, ראה. Some scholars might seek to argue that ראה is merely “quasi-anthropomorphic,” since a divine manifestation that may be seen is not necessarily humanoid in appearance. This suggestion lacks coherence as a criticism, though, since ראה is the same lemma used in the E (or L)³ source in dramatically anthropomorphic descriptions such as Exod 24:9-11, where verse 10 states that Moses and those with him “saw (ראה) the God of Israel.”

Six of the ten verses returned by the search query describe “the glory of Yahweh” appearing. Once again some scholars might suggest that P is presenting only quasi-anthropomorphic

³ Exodus 24:10 is labeled as belonging to the E source by Friedman (Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003], 161). Eissfeldt labeled Exodus 24:10 as belonging to the “Lay” source (L), a strand of J dealing with legends and myths.

Four of the verses state that Yahweh appeared, not the כבוד יהוה. Such language is identical with that used in J / L (Gen 12:7; 18:1; 26:2, 24) and E (Gen 15:1; cp. vv. 7-8).⁴ Further, three of the four passages that have Yahweh appearing, as opposed to the כבוד יהוה, are direct parallels to incidents described by J and E in terms that have long been accepted as truly anthropomorphic. Gen 17:1 hearkens back to Genesis 12 and 15, while Gen 35:9 (cp. Gen 35:7) and 48:3 refer to Jacob's experiences at Bethel. J and E recount those experiences with explicit anthropomorphic language, as Jacob sees Yahweh "standing" (נצב) and later wrestles (אבק) with a deity in human form.⁵ The point here is that, had the author of P had some theological predilection for obscuring or rejecting anthropomorphic language, he did not do either in these instances. While P has the כבוד יהוה appearing more often than Yahweh alone, one cannot coherently argue that P shies away from the same kind of anthropomorphic language used in J and E.

⁴ Per the note above, Friedman has all these verse references as J, while Eissfeldt assigns Gen 12:7 and 26:2 to his Lay (L) source.

⁵ See Gen 28:13 (J), 32:22-32 (E). Eissfeldt assigns Gen 32:22-32 to L, with a few strands of J and E included.

Still, some scholars might suggest that these references to Yahweh appearing in P actually speak of the less anthropomorphic **כבוד יהוה** since P mixes descriptions of Yahweh appearing with appearances of the **כבוד יהוה**, and since P is writing later than J and E at a time of presumably greater religious sophistication. This perspective assumes that the **כבוד יהוה** is in fact less anthropomorphic, a notion that is not beyond challenge. For example, the **כבוד יהוה** of Ezek 1:28 is described in 1:26-27 in very human terms. Commenting on the supposition long held by scholars that anthropomorphism was something Israelite religion and its writers eventually outgrew, Mark S. Smith notes, “This characterization is inaccurate both for Israel and the rest of the ancient Middle East . . . Israelite anthropomorphism hardly ends with the monarchy.”⁶ Given the data of Israelite religion, there is really no reason to suppose P would find anthropomorphisms in poor taste. In fact, J and E alternate between descriptions of Yahweh appearing and “veiled Yahweh” appearances (the cloud, the Angel, the glory).⁷

The question of whether the **כבוד יהוה** was conceived in human terms in P is made clear by other passages from P. In Exod 24:15b-16, the **כבוד יהוה** “calls” (**קרא**) to Moses out of the cloud that had settled on the mountain. The text of P ensues unbroken for seven chapters, as the

⁶ Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 87, 89.

⁷ Juxtaposed with passages already noted for anthropomorphisms in J and E are examples such as Gen 48:16; Exod 3:2-6; 24:16ff.

To summarize the results to this point, if Exod 31:18 is included in the current running tally, the total of anthropomorphisms in P thus far is eleven. Exodus 8:15, the other instance of the phrase “finger of God,” shall be excluded on the grounds that the words are placed into the mouths of Egyptians.

Additional Instances of Anthropomorphisms in P

The search query utilized above does not yield all the possible instances of anthropomorphic language in P. There are a number of other strategies that could be employed via the new database technology for adducing this literary phenomenon in P. For the purposes of illustration, three additional approaches follow.

First, since the Andersen-Forbes database includes rudimentary semantic tags on each word in the Hebrew text, this information can prove useful in a search of P. For example, verbs of motion could be construed as anthropomorphic language. Instead of asking for specific lemmas within a

⁸ Italics are the author's. Friedman assigns Exod 31:18 to P (*Sources Revealed*, 173) while Eissfeldt assigns the phrase “written with the finger of God” to E. Friedman helpfully notes that “finger of God” occurs elsewhere in P (Exod 8:15). It is unclear how this can be construed in any other way than as anthropomorphism.

clause that function as the predicator when a deity noun is the subject, one could broaden the query to search for any predicator that is a verb of motion. Such a query yields three results, one of which (Exod 12:41) is a false hit:

Genesis 17:22 – . . . God went up (ויעל) from Abraham.

Genesis 35:13 – . . . God went up (ויעל) from him (i.e., Jacob) . . .

Exodus 12:41 – . . . all the hosts of the LORD went out (יצאו) from the land of Egypt . . .

Genesis 17:22 and Gen 35:13 have the deity speaking to Abraham and Jacob respectively and then leaving the scene. P describes the patriarchs as conversing with a deity that, as we saw via the first query, had “appeared” to them, precisely the same language as used by J and E. To this point, then, thirteen cases of anthropomorphism in P have been detected.

A second additional strategy for quickly detecting anthropomorphism in P involves adjusting the first search query once again, but in a more sophisticated way. The original search for a noun of deity as the subject of a predicator whose lemma came from Friedman’s quotation assumed that the predicator was a finite verb form functioning as the lone predicator in the clause. The Andersen-Forbes database has the capability of searching for clause predications that are distributed or which work in tandem with quasi-verbal predicators such as הנה.⁹ Accounting for

⁹ The classification of הנה as “quasi-verbal” is that of Andersen and Forbes in their database.

Exodus 16:10 – And, behold (הנה), the glory of the LORD (כבוד יהוה) appeared in the cloud.

A third additional search strategy that could be attempted for further results is the least precise of the queries illustrated in this essay. There are instances in P where the same anthropomorphic language as already noted occurs, but the subject of the clause is unexpressed. Unlike the instances discussed thus far, where the searches targeted a clause subject that was a noun of deity, the subject of a clause is often produced by the morphological form of the lemma.

In such cases, context dictates that the subject of the clause is a deity figure, and so searching is more haphazard. Since Andersen-Forbes has source-critical tagging, the above example can be mimicked by constructing a query for our earlier list of lemmas when any of those lemmas is the predicator of a clause in P and the morphological form is first person singular.

This less precise search produces two additional instances of anthropomorphic language in P, drawn from a total of eight query results:¹⁰

Exodus 6:3 – I appeared (וארא) to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai . . .

¹⁰ The eight results of the query are: Gen 9:16; Exod 6:3; 12:12, 13; Lev 16:2; Num 14:28, 35; Num 33:56.

Leviticus 16:2 – . . . I will appear (אֲרָאֶה) in the cloud over the cover . . .

Scholars could no doubt argue that other instances could be added from the eight results yielded by this query, but Exod 6:3 and Lev 16:2 are likely the two most apparent. Conservatively, then, the addition of Exod 6:3 and Lev 16:2 brings the total to sixteen anthropomorphisms in P.

Comparisons with J and E

This brief essay would not be complete without comparison of its findings with J and E.

Specifically, if the very same search queries are run with respect to the material assigned to J and E, what are the comparative results?

The first search examined all the clauses in the Pentateuch where any noun of deity is the subject of a clause, and the predicator of that subject was one of the lemmas derived from Friedman's list of examples that contain anthropomorphic language allegedly not found in P. That same search conducted in Andersen-Forbes using J and E as a constraint reveals three instances in J and two instances in E.¹¹ The second search, which used verbs of motion in the predication of the clause, results in four anthropomorphisms in J and seven in E.¹² The third search, where the predicator straddled a gapped subject of the clause, yields no instances for either J or E. The final search, where there was no expressed subject, produces two instances in J and none in E.¹³

¹¹ J = Gen 18:1; 26:24; Num 14:14; E = Gen 35:7; Deut 31:15.

¹² J = Gen 18:33; Exo 19:11, 20; 34:5; E = Gen 20.3; 31.24; Num 11.25; 12.5; 22.9, 20; Deut 33.2 (Friedman assigns Deut 33:2 to Dtr1; *Sources Revealed*, 364).

¹³ J = Gen 2:18; 6:7.

The comparative totals are quite interesting and defy expectation. Rather than J or E containing more instances of clear anthropomorphisms, it is P that outnumbers J and E. There were sixteen instances for P compared to a total of nine for J and nine for E. P, therefore, has almost as many anthropomorphisms as J and E combined with respect to these searches.

Conclusion

The point of this paper was not to call the validity of P as a source into question. Rather, the focus was to challenge one of the alleged characteristics of P that has been passed on in biblical scholarship for a very long time. As the application of new database technology demonstrates, this presumed characteristic, that P does not contain anthropomorphisms, cannot be sustained by an examination of the data.