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Charles Halton, *A Human-Shaped God: Theology of an Embodied God*

(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021), pp. xviii + 221. $45.00

Collin Cornell

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA (collin.cornell@emory.edu)

In the past decade or so, Hebrew Bible scholars have renewed attention to divine embodiment. Benjamin Sommers' 2009 book, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, was a landmark work in the literature. Although Sommer and other authors like Esther Hamori, Andreas Wagner and Mark Smith have constructive designs, seeking to make biblical thoughtforms intelligible to religiously observant publics, their contributions remain mostly descriptive. They exposit biblical texts within their ancient horizons. Their books are also fairly technical. The task of addressing bodily depictions of God in the Bible to contemporary God-talk and God-practice has remained outstanding – especially to do so in lucid and accessible prose.

Charles Halton's *A Human-Shaped God* fills this exact need. His 'Acknowledgments' recognises his debt to Sommer: 'Sommer introduced me to a new way of imagining God'; and it identifies his own contribution: 'this book is my attempt to apply Sommer's insights to Christian theology' (p. ix). But in fact Halton's characterisation is too modest. *A Human-Shaped God* does interact with Christian theologians, a startling range of them: Augustine plays a star role, Gregory of Nyssa and John Calvin and Julian of Norwich make appearances; many more quotes and footnotes refer to Black and feminist and decolonial theologians. Yet Halton's intellectual radius reaches much further than just Christian theologians. He engages with scholarship on metaphor, neuroscience, evolution, emotion. He draws on rabbinic traditions and makes common cause with post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers. In a very unusual way, *Human-Shaped God* is at once disciplinary, a biblical studies book, and post-disciplinary, the fruit of a decade's worth of zealous, general, humanistic reading.

Halton's argument has two basic moves. First, it demonstrates that the Hebrew Bible contains many texts in which God's profile is human-like. Out of a total seven chapters, four serve this purpose. They inventory 'God's Body', 'God's Mind', 'God's Emotions' and 'God's Character'. For readers who have followed discussions of divine embodiment, these chapters present much familiar content. Operating with the assumption that, unless otherwise marked, 'we need to analyze [Old Testament] depictions of God as if they are literal descriptions' (p. 51), Halton finds that God is localised, God repents, God learns, God experiences passions. The chapter on 'God's Character' reads like an unflinching, miniature Old Testament theology, touring through God's personality as just, patient, vengeful, jealous, forgiving and forgetting. Even so, Halton's presentation is fresh and readable; many more students will access these data because of Halton's synthesising and clarity. So, too, his refusal to countenance harmonisation or minimising is a pervasive virtue. His treatment of divine emotions, for example, explores some that are usually passed over, not just sadness or anger but also God's *hate*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930622000862 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The second basic move of Halton's argument is to make the humanoid-God texts usable for current-day Christians. The book's first two chapters, 'Imagining a Human-Shaped God' and 'God, Humanlike and Not', as well as its closing chapter, 'Embracing a Humanlike God', articulate a proposal; *imagining* and *charity* are its watchwords. Halton submits that theology is essentially an activity of imagination. This must be so because our bodily senses, our language and the metaphors that organise our thinking are, in effect, all that we have. Halton's first chapter is deflationary: 'we are not able to understand God-as-God-is' (p. 11). Instead our experiences and our inherited religious resources inspire acts of theological imagining. At the same time, it is good that theology is imagination-work, since images powerfully govern our lives, far more than philosophical commitments. Biblical authors imagined God in experienced, traditioned, piecemeal ways, and we today 'must continue the hermeneutic activity' (p. 38).

Charity is a concept Halton borrows from Augustine. It specifies the goal of biblical interpretation, which is transformative rather than (mainly) informative. Indeed, Halton sets aside truthfulness as a primary criterion of theologising, bracketing historical *and* theological accuracy: 'I shy away from asking whether or not the stories of the Bible happened or whether the ways in which God is described reflect God in reality' (p. 22). Instead Halton attends to the capacity of God-talk to expand human charity. He suggests that 'it would be beneficial for us to form our theologies backward, to reverse engineer them with the aim of constructing an image of God that will help us become more compassionate and loving people' (p. 191).

According to Halton, human-like biblical portraiture of God supports this reverse-engineering. It offers 'experiential touchpoints' that help us understand more deeply what it means to be human (p. 192). It relieves the problem of evil, by showing a God whose power is limited and whose understanding progresses. New events and new information 'caused God to move to a deeper and more expansive realization of love and compassion', and we humans can imitate God's own growth in charity (pp. 200–1). Human-like pictures of God also hold ecumenical potential, given the importance of divine suffering to some post-Holocaust Jewish theology; and they can, Halton asserts, sharpen our compassion for suffering humans in our midst.

Halton's proposal is bold, and boldly constructivist. I suspect many readers interested in theologically interpreting scripture may not frame their endeavour with quite such indifference to how biblical language witnesses to the real, out-there-in-the-world God. I would guess, too, that for those on whom the influence of Brevard Childs hangs heavy, the sheer diversity of biblical perspectives that Halton champions might fail to persuade. The diversity is *bounded*: multifarious renditions of God have been edited together. Additionally, in Childs's aphorism, 'we are neither prophets nor apostles', and as such, we readers of scripture do not reprise the hermeneutical activity of biblical writers; our procedure for theological reflection takes its bearings, unlike for them, from a body of normative literature. Finally, some will question the lynchpin that Halton assumes between God-concept and ethics: it is difficult to know in advance whether and to what extent certain images of God foster (or obstruct) compassionate and loving behaviour. All that said, *A Human-Shaped God* offers a readable, deeply humane presentation of the embodied biblical God, and it makes a daring constructive case for the relevance of that human-like God to our lives today.

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