

How Can I Say God Is Physical?

Description

How Can I Say God Is Physical?

by [Brinnon Spence](#)



4th century BCE Jewish coin possibly depicting Yahweh

First off, this is a really great question! It is important to realize that the idea that God is physical is not something that I, or anyone else in modern times, came up with. It is actually something the ancient Israelites believed, as is evident in their writings. You might be thinking, "I've read Israelite writings in the Bible and I've never noticed anything that indicates that God is physical!" Or, if you haven't spent much time in the Bible, you have probably at least heard sermons, but most likely never heard one on the physicality of God. But we need to remember we have all learned, read or seen the Bible through the lens of hundreds of years of interpretation. Doubtless, most Christians today believe that God is not physical, so it is natural to read the Bible as though it shares that perspective.

But this is only an interpretation imposed onto the text; not something the text itself states. To be more clear on that last point, the Bible itself never says that God is not physical. With that in mind, let us look at what the Bible does say. And let us try to read it on its own terms rather than reading it in light of our preconceived ideas from years of interpretation. There are many passages we could look at, but I'll just be using three examples from the Pentateuch.

We all know the creation story in Genesis 1, so the passage I want you to consider from it will doubtless be familiar. Yet, there may be something about the passage that you've never noticed before.

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:26-27 (NIV)

Let's recognize the points that the author is making. This verse declares that humans were made in the image of God. But what does this mean? Thankfully, we can find this in the text itself. But first I'll mention that there are more than a few interpretations of this text. Most introduce elements into the text that

are just simply not there. The plain meaning of this text, the one that would have been obvious to its first readers, is that God looks like a human. Or, more accurately, that humans look like God. This is simply how the Hebrew word for "image" in this text was understood – it referred to a physical image. Take for example this text from Ezekiel: "she saw male figures carved on the wall, images of the Chaldeans" (Ez. 23:14). To say that the figures on the wall were "images of the Chaldeans" clearly indicates that they bore a physical resemblance to the Chaldeans, a people native to Mesopotamia. This basic meaning of the word "image" is maintained throughout Israelite writings.

In Genesis, Adam is said to have fathered a son "in his likeness, according to his image" (Gen. 5:3). In this verse, it is plain enough that Adam's son looked like Adam himself. And then a little later, in Genesis 9:6, we are told that "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind." If the author of Genesis believed that humans have immortal souls and that the possession of these souls is what it means to be in the image of God, as one popular interpretation asserts, then Genesis 9:6 wouldn't make any sense since killing a human body isn't supposed to kill a soul. Genesis 9:6 instead indicates that a crime against the human body is an affront to the image of God. Thus, according to the author of Genesis, it is the human body that is in the image of God. This basic idea that God is a physical being, whose body looks like a human body, is found all throughout ancient Israelite literature.

Our next example is from Exodus 24. The scene depicts Israel gathered around Mt. Sinai and God chooses some of them to come up the mountain. What happens next is most relevant for our subject:

"Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky." Exodus 24:9-10 (NIV)

If you read this text with the preconceived notion that God is not physical and thus has no body, you might place upon it any number of interpretations that have the effect of saying that people in this verse didn't really see God or that when it refers to His feet, it doesn't really mean He has feet. But if we care about what the text itself has to say, the straightforward meaning is that they did see God and that He does have a body, including feet. If this were a passage of Hebrew poetry talking about placing your feet in footprints left by God, then one would be justified in interpreting it as a metaphor for following God's example or something along those lines, but this is not poetry and metaphor. This is a narrative text describing an actual appearance of God to human beings. The text's description of what they saw straightforwardly indicates that God is able to be seen and that He has feet.

The last example I want to go through is found in Exodus 33. In this passage, Moses is asking God to show him His glory. This is how God responds:

"you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." Exodus 33:20-23 (NIV)

As we can see, this passage portrays God as having a face, hands, and a back. He not only tells Moses about these parts of his body. He even uses one part of his body (His hand) to block Moses from seeing the rest of

his body, and then he lets Moses see his back. Evidently, the author of this text understood God as having a body and he expected his readers to understand that from his description as well. Imagine the alternative! If the author was really thinking that God is bodiless essence, then it really makes it seem like God was just playing games with Moses. It isn't like Moses brings up God's body parts and God goes along with it because it would be premature to explain to Moses that He really doesn't have a body. No! Moses just asked to see God's glory, and then God, on His own initiative, explains the details of how He is going to use some of His body to conceal other parts of His body from Moses leading to the climactic moment when Moses will get to see His back! To suggest that the God spoken of in this passage is really a bodiless essence, makes Him out, at the end of the day, to be a deceiver, and this whole arrangement that He suggested to Moses would be nothing more than a sham — a farce. Obviously, the author of this passage was not trying to say that God is a deceiver or that this scenario was a farce. But this, of course, means that according to the author, God truly is a physical, bodily being.

While I've only gone through a few examples, the idea that God is physical is found all through the Bible as well as extra-biblical Israelite literature. This isn't something that is just mentioned once or twice, it is the consistent portrayal of God throughout their writings. He is described as having a head and hair (Dan. 7:9), hands (Jer. 1:9), feet (Ex. 24:10), loins (Ez. 1:27), a back (Ex. 33:23), a face (Mt. 18:10), and a form (Num. 12:8).

So, while the idea of the physicality of God is admittedly unpopular today, it was believed by the ancient Israelites and is preserved in the Bible. All who desire to base their views of God upon the Israelite Scriptures will, sooner or later, have to come to terms with the fact that the God of those Scriptures is not a bodiless spirit, but is instead a physical, complete bodily person.

For a podcast on this topic, give this a listen: