

What is the Similitude of the LORD?

'The LORD He is God; there is none else beside Him'



Mount Sinai (Courtesy of [wiki](#))

'The Similitude of the LORD shall he behold.'

וַתִּמְנַח יְהוָה יִבְיֹט

(Numbers 12.8)

Moses, the great prophet, was distinguished from the High Priest and his sister, Aaron and Miriam,

by being privileged to speak with God face to face, openly and manifestly, and not receive revelation as other prophets by riddles or engmas (חֵידוּת) or visions or dreams.

The most emphatic confirmation of this distinguished calling is the statement above, Moses shall behold or gaze upon the Similitude of HaShem. What does this term mean, what kind of sight was this, and what kind of entity is the Similitude of the LORD, how does this differ from seeing the LORD directly in the absolute?

We need not assume this experience was completely unique only to Moses.

Moses is described in Exodus 33.11 as one who spoke to the Lord 'face to face', as a man

speaks to his friend. Was this not also Abraham's [exact experience](#) in Genesis 18, not a vision, but face to face conversation, communion and even a meal with the Most High? Though it is asserted at the end of his life that a prophet has not arisen since Moses, who experienced this awesome intimacy, 'there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face'. (Deut. 34.10)

What does the term mean?

Three Hebrew words carry subtly distinctive if overlapping significance:

תמונה (Tmoonah) comes from the root word מִן, to classify, the noun carrying the sense of 'form, image, likeness, representation or semblance'.

A close synonym used in Deuteronomy 4.16, תבנית (Tavniit) is derived from the verb to build בנה (Banah), it may also be translated construction, plan, figure, or form.

Another less used synonym is דמות (Damoot) derived from the verb דמה which means to liken, devise or compare, and often suggests, as Maimonides indicates, a more analogical than physical similarity.

All three words are translated as 'similitude' and also as 'likeness' in the AV.

Israel was warned no less than eight times in Deuteronomy 4 alone using these terms, for example that though 'the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words,

but **saw no similitude** (תְּמוּנָה); only ye heard a voice'. (Deut.4.11)

The reason for this admonition became painfully clear within less than 40 days.

'They changed their glory into the similitude (תְּבֻנִית) of an ox that eateth grass.' Psalm 106.20

It was this grave error that the LORD had guarded against:

'Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude (תְּמוּנָה) of any figure, the likeness (תְּבֻנִית) of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air, the likeness of any thing that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth.' Deut.4.16-18

Here is the key term in the most violated Second Command.

'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness (תְּמוּנָה) of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth' Exod.20.4

It is an emphatic and repeated command, Deut.4.16,17,18,23,25; 5.8.

Each word however does not always indicate a physical resemblance, sometimes each refers to an allegorical reference, a metaphor.

'That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; that our daughters may be as corner stones, polished after the similitude (תְּבֻנִית) of a palace' Ps.144.12

It is used by David to indicate his ardour to be like God,

'As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness (תְּמוּנָה).' Ps.17.15

'Their poison is like (דְּמוּת) the poison of a serpent: they are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear.' Ps. 58.4

Nor does the term when it *is* applied to a physical resemblance necessarily imply evil or disobedience, for the use of a 'similitude of oxen' was in fact commanded in Temple worship, at the laver.

'And under it was the similitude (דְּמוּת) of oxen, which did compass it round about: ten in a cubit, compassing the sea round about.' 2 Chron.4.3

It is also crucial to note that whilst each of the three terms may indicate a metaphor or simile, by functional or physical analogy, they are **never** used of an absolute identity to the object or person being described. The daughters are not palaces, the sculptures under the sea are not actually oxen, the graven images are exactly that - only representations of that which they depict.

In fact, what the people were deprived of, Moses did himself behold, not just a glimpse or a far off sight, but a careful inspection of the Similitude of HaShem.

Yet *even* Moses was denied a real face to face view of God in the absolute, Moses asked, 'shew me Thy glory'. God replied, 'Thou canst not see My face: for there shall no man see Me, and live' and 'thou shalt see My back parts: but My face shall not be seen'. Ex 33.20

So even Moses beheld *a likeness*, a Divine Similitude, not a direct sight of HaShem in the absolute, but some form of Divine manifestation.

When at the contracting of the covenant at Horeb, the elders of Israel with Aaron and his sons were invited to commune with God, they too *saw* the God of Israel. Exod. 24.10

יָרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

The Hebrew is crystal clear, using exactly the same term used to indicate that neither Moses nor any man could see God and live,

כִּי לֹא-יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם, וְחָי

Yet the idea is immediately repeated, this time with a verb implying a gaze or extended contemplation and perception of its object. Lest the two should be dismissed as a prophetic vision or trance, the elders communally are said like Abraham to have eaten and drank together. (v.11)

יָחִיו, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים

So although from the distance of the Earth to the sapphire paving, and unlike Moses or Abraham not face to face, or mouth to mouth, the Elders also had some kind of real sight of the Divine, more eye to sole of feet. How then can this ever be consistent with what HaShem told Moses later about Him never being seen?



Views of Rabbinic Authorities

Although these passages are clear, unambiguous and direct assertions, they cause a great deal of disquiet for [Rambam](#) and the authorities he cites. He is repeatedly and emphatically insistent that 'seeing' may refer to a mental conception alone, and strongly excludes physical sight.

Explanation of Temunah.

'Thirdly, the true form of an object, which is perceived **only by the intellect** : and it is in this third signification that the term is applied to God. The words "And the similitude of the Lord shall he behold" (Num. 12.8) therefore mean "he shall comprehend the true essence of the Lord."' [Emphasis added]

Maimonides, ch.4, part 1, MN, Friedman's translation.

Explanation of figurative use of raah, hibbit, and hazab.

(Exod. 24.10) 'All these instances refer to intellectual perception, and **by no means to perception with the eye as in its literal meaning** : for, on the one hand, the eye can only perceive a corporeal object, and in connection with it certain accidents, as colour, shape, etc.' [Emphasis added]

Maimonides, ch.5, part 1, MN, Friedman's translation.

He struggles to swim against the immediate and obvious sense of the texts, and repeatedly forces an interpolated meaning.

'In this sense we must understand the words "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God" (Exod.3.6), though retaining also the literal meaning of the passage, that Moses was afraid to gaze at the light which appeared to his eye; but **it must on no account be assumed** that the Being which is exalted far above every imperfection **can be perceived by the eye.**' [Emphasis added]

Maimonides, ch.5, part 1, MN, Friedman's translation.

He adds a curious explanation of the feast to which the elders were invited to partake, and again repeats his strange contention.

'The nobles of the Children of Israel, besides erring in their perception, were, through this cause, also misled in their actions: for in consequence of their confused perception, they gave way to bodily cravings. This is meant by the words, "Also they saw God and did eat and drink" (Exod. xxiv. 11). The principal part of that passage, viz., "And there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone" (Exod. xxiv. 10), will be further explained in the course of the present treatise (ch.28). All we here intend to say is, that wherever in a similar connection any one of the three verbs mentioned above occurs, it has reference to **intellectual perception, not to the sensation of sight by the eye**: for God is not a being to **be perceived by the eye**.'

Maimonides, ch.5, part 1, MN, Friedman's translation.

It is clear for Maimonides that this is a sacred cow, an eisegetic taboo to be fenced around and *not* to be touched so much as with a hand, though not one warranted by the text in hand in the least, on the contrary.

'You are acquainted with the version of Onkelos [of the passage quoted]. He contents himself with excluding from his version all expressions of corporeality in reference to God, and does not show us what they (the nobles of the children of Israel Exod. xxiv. 10) perceived, or what is meant by that figure. In all similar instances Onkelos also abstains from entering into such questions, and only endeavours to exclude every expression implying corporeality; for the incorporeality of God is a demonstrative truth and an **indispensable element in our faith**;' [Emphasis added] Maimonides, ch.28, part 1, MN, Friedman's translation.

His mission statement is crystal clear, though it is not from warranted from Heaven.

'The primary object of every intelligent person **must be to deny** the corporeality of God, and to believe that all those perceptions (described in the above passage) were of a spiritual not of a material character. Note this and consider it well.' [Emphasis added] Maimonides, ch.5, part 1, MN, Friedman's translation.

To maintain this sacred cause, he is prepared to violently sacrifice the sense of the text of v.10 and discard the breastbone of the parallel verse 11. The sight of God's 'feet' *must* refer only to a created emanation.

'They (the nobles of the children of Israel) therefore comprehended the real nature of the materia prima, which emanated from Him, and of whose existence He is the only cause.' Maimonides, ch.51, part 1, MN, Friedman's translation.

What motivates this concern? What drives Rambam's anxiety about Divine incorporeality? The root of this derives from his affection for [the Syrian altar of neo-Platonism](#). Part of this defence serves as a refuge against any notion of Divine communion or relationality. In particular he believes he forms a necessary fence against a doctrine one might otherwise naturally conclude was the marrow of revelation.

'If, however, you have a desire to rise to a higher state, viz., that of reflection, and truly to hold the conviction that God is One and possesses true unity, without admitting plurality or divisibility in any sense whatever, you must understand that God has no essential attribute in any form or in any sense whatever, and that the rejection of corporeality implies the rejection of essential attributes. Those who believe that God is One, and that He has many attributes, declare the unity with their lips, and assume plurality in their thoughts. **This is like the doctrine of the Christians, who say that He is one and He is three, and that the three are one.** Of the same character is the doctrine of those who say that God is One, but that He has many attributes; and that He with His attributes is One, although they deny corporeality and affirm His most absolute freedom from matter; as if our object were to seek forms of expression, not subjects of belief. For belief is only possible after the apprehension of a thing; it consists in the conviction that the thing apprehended has its existence beyond the mind [in reality] exactly as it is conceived in the mind.' [Emphasis added]
Maimonides, ch.50, part 1, MN, Friedman's translation.

This helps explain the root of the emphatic emphasis in Maimonides 3rd Principle on denying any kind of form in God.

ג
אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה שֶׁהַבּוֹרָא
יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ אֵינוֹ גּוּף
וְלֹא יְשִׁיגוּהוּ מְשִׁיגֵי הַגּוּף
וְאֵין לוֹ שׁוֹם דְּמִיּוֹן כָּלֵל:

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I believe with perfect faith that the Creator,
blessed be his name, is not a body,
and that he is free from all the properties of matter,
and that he has not any form whatsoever.

אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה, שֶׁהַבּוֹרָא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ אֵינוֹ גּוּף, וְלֹא יְשִׁיגוּהוּ מְשִׁיגֵי הַגּוּף, וְאֵין לוֹ שׁוֹם דְּמִיּוֹן כָּלֵל.

It is a doctrine familiar to neo-Platonists as an axiomatic principle, but it has as much to do with Torah as the Apis or Chemosh.

'This produced reality is an Ideal form for certainly nothing springing from the Supreme can be less and it is not a particular form but the form of all, beside which there is no other; it follows **that The First must be without form, and, if without form, then it is no Being'**

[Fifth Ennead, Fifth Tractate, Section 6.](#)

Rambam's denial of the expression דְּמִיּוֹן comes perilously close to contradicting the scriptural expression דְּמוּת, found for example in Ezekiel's theophany
(Ezek. 1.28) מִרְאֵה דְּמוּת כְּבוֹד-יְהוָה

In Kernerman and Kahn's Oxford Dictionary of Modern Hebrew (1994) the former is defined as 'imagination, likeness, resemblance, similarity,' and the latter 'figure, shape, likeness, image, character (stories)' indicating how close the sense of the expressions now is.

How then does a view of the Similitude differ from direct sight?

The elders of Israel saw with physical eyes an optical reality. Moses and Abraham's eyes did not deceive or mislead them, they beheld light which emanated from the Creator Himself. This was emphatically *not* just a conception or perception of the mind. In some instances a trance or dream-like state was involved or a vision, for example in Genesis 15.1, 28.3 and in numerous examples in the prophets. However in other instances in Exodus 3, 24 and 33, and in Genesis 17 and 18 God's manifestation takes place during awake and conscious activity like meal preparation, eating, walking or discussion.

How then can it be properly stated that 'no man see Me, and live'? The primary answer is that God's face, His essential and absolute nature was not seen. As the light carries rays from the sun, which may be attenuated, refracted or filtered, so our sight of the sun's core is not immediate, but an experience mediated by the carrier. That is why Moses is uniquely said to have seen God face to face and mouth to mouth, not in the absolute, but as His Similitude, His own Image, His own ordained likeness and Representative. Abraham also enjoyed this intimacy (Gen.17.1,3,15,22, Gen.18.1,3,13,16,17,22,23,33), and was thus called God's friend (2Ch 20.7).

What then is this Similitude, One in the form of God?

The Mediator of God's message is His Messenger, his Angel, not a created Angel like Gabriel or Michael, but *The* Messenger of the Lord. [We have considered multiple examples of this.](#) One is worshipped and prayed to and besought, as is wholly improper for a mere creature. [This is the True Participant in the Counsel at Creation](#) and of Commission (Isaiah 6.8 and Ezek. 1.28). Here is the God of Israel made manifest visibly and to the naked senses primarily and intimately to Moses, but in a more remote sense (as those under His footstool) to the elders of Israel at Exodus 24, who saw His glory, when He appeared in the form of a man, as He had to Abraham and they beheld Him. Is this not the [Memra](#), the Eternal Judge and Word, Whose goings forth have been from ages past (Mic. 5.2)?

Sharing the Form of God

This glorious One is God's Similitude, not a forbidden human artifice, but God's *own* ordinance, by Whom alone He is known and worshipped. Recall that the use of the term similitude in Numbers 12.6, indicates that this Representative is **not identical** with God in the absolute, but is an exact Likeness. His Being is derived from the Source, the Fountain, He stands for and perfectly communicates that Fountain, He is that Fountain for us, so that He and the Fountain are One, but they are not in simple identity. We can say Absolute Deity and the Similitude are One, but they are not simply identical, as a man and his word are one, but not identical, or the sun and its light are in union, but not exactly the same. The Similitude fully shares the Form and essence of Deity, otherwise it were illicit to worship, pray to and plead with Him, but He and Deity are also in relation. This implies perfect Union and harmony of will and purpose, as well as real not merely apparent distinction. There is only One God, One object of worship, One to be prayed to, One to be loved and admired with all the heart, soul and strength, but He may be known only through His Manifestation and Similitude, the Angel of the Covenant, the LORD.

Before Whom even the Seraphim must veil their faces

When the Seraphim, the 'burners' cry out in the Temple of Isaiah's vision, they minister to the Lord (אֲדָנִי). This Lord is seated on the throne of the Ark, central to the Temple, wears a robe with a train, like the High Priest, and one which fills the Temple. The angels cry to Him, 'קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת' (Holy, Holy, Holy, LORD of Hosts)'. They will not look upon His countenance, for dread of His glory, as lesser creatures may not look upon their own (Daniel 10.8-10). These exalted creatures too cannot look upon the face of the Most High, how then can they worthily represent Him?

Messenger of His Presence, of His Face

However The Messenger of HaShem, the Word, is described in Isaiah's prophecy as 'The Angel of His Presence' מַלְאָךְ פָּנָיו or more literally the Messenger of His face. The only One Who beholds His face, He can represent HaShem. Moreover this glorious Being is described as the Saviour from affliction, despite Isaiah's repeated assertion that HaShem alone can save (Isa. 45.21,22; 43.11; 12.2). Yet more significantly He is described as their Redeemer הוֹאֵל גְּאֻלָּם, redemption of this nature is a task for a kinsman, not an angel (Ru.4.4, Heb.2.14-16). It is also prerogative of the Deity (Isa. 41.14; 43.1,14; 44.6,23,24; 47.4; 48.17; 49.7,26; 50.2; 52.3; 54.5; 59.20; 63.4,16) and a peculiar cause of the glory and worship that belongs to God alone. Who is this Angel to Whom so much is ascribed? Is it not Jacob's Angel who redeemed him from all evil, הַמַּלְאָךְ הַגָּאֵל אֶתִּי מִכָּל-רָע Gen. 48.16, the only source of blessing with God, of Whom after Jacob wrestled, said as has been said of Moses, 'I have seen God face to face' כִּי-רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים Gen. 32.31?

The Mighty God and Emmanuel

This Angel is the unique Angel of God's presence, the only Being to behold His face, the only true Representation of His character, His brightness. He is the Messiah, the Mighty God, co-equal with the Father, yet commissioned and commanded by Him, God with us, Emmanuel עִמָּנוּ אֵל (Isa. 8.8, 7.14, 8.10).

This is what the New Testament says of the Messiah:

*'Who being the brightness of his glory,
and the express image of his person,
and upholding all things by the word of his power,
when he had by himself purged our sins,
sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;
Being made so much better than the angels,
as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.
For unto which of the angels said he at any time,
Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?'*
(Heb. 1.2-4)



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