

## Language as the Symbolic Barrier between the Divine and Humankind (Second Draft)

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When examining the nature of any text, specifically a religious text, the nature of language must be taken into account. As language is concrete, it can only attempt to define the abstract. It is the object of literature, within the arena of art, to express the meaning of abstract ideas. A writer can arouse the abstract only through concrete details and images. Language, as the medium of communication, does not possess the ability to define; hence, most language can be categorized into metaphor and analogy. When considering language as a set of symbols which are then translated, in the mind, to pictorial images one can draw the conclusion that humans understand only in reference to their own experience. For instance, if asked “What is God?” one might respond that he is the Creator of heaven and earth, or that he is the Father, or the one who alone speaks the divine Word. These responses are analogous to tangible images. The image of a Creator can be related to that of someone who makes something from nothing, id est an artist. We may also relate the Father to human parenthood and the Word, according to John, as the text in the Bible. In the absence of ostensive definitions for words such as “one,” “length,” or “God,” metaphor is used to fill the lack. Such is the case in *The Bible*, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. As religious texts, metaphor is the predominant method of explaining the relationship between the divine and humankind. Because of the limitations of language, the metaphorical style of each text signifies a purely symbolic relationship between the divine and humankind.

The account of the creation of heaven and earth is explained in the book of Genesis. God’s six-day feat is, in itself, considered to be a symbol. The language used to describe creation is poetic. The account is not a dry report of God’s creation. It employs imaginative writing,

rhythm, and repetition. A balance exists between compound-complex and fragmented sentences. For example, the two are juxtaposed in the following passage: ““Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it’. And it was so” (Gen. 1.11). Once God had created the earth he created “humankind in his image” (Gen. 1.27). Humans were created in the likeness of God, not as God himself. It can be argued that man created God in his own image. Similarly, man created all existence in accordance to his own image. God is deemed the Father of humankind. Thus, humans equate Him to our own image of parentage. He then becomes a genial dad, a personal and palpable reality. Whereas God as the “Creator” and “Father of mankind” is unknowable to humans; such an abstract concept cannot be understood. So He is instead transformed into *our* Father. The very creation of man is abstract, prompting, again, the use of metaphor. As the creation of flesh and bone from nothing is too broad to grasp, Genesis explains that God “formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (2.7). This metaphor is understood because the idea of oxygen and breathing is a quintessential qualification for living. The earth, “the dust of the ground,” was the third element to be created by God. It is an organic, vital source of life which is understood in contemporary terms as the requirement for growing food and the source of plant life. While God physically interacts with Adam and Eve he is symbolically the Creator of humankind. The Bible is a symbol of the divine Word. Humans are symbolically the children of God. A literal, physical, or anthropomorphic relationship does not exist between God and humankind in Christianity.

*The Bhagavad-Gita* is written in poetic verse. Literally, the god Krishna is counseling Arjuna in the ways of the *dharma*. The diction which is used to explain the proper conduct of the self, or *atman*, is in the form of metaphor. Krishna dictates that a man of discipline “should

evaluate himself by the self,/ not degrade himself;/ for the self is its own friend/and its own foe”

(*Gita* 6. 5). The quality of a man’s pursuit of *dharma*, his sacred duty, determines his *karma*.

Such a pursuit requires internal discipline. The self is an individual entity as well as a vessel to fulfill Krishna’s teachings, ultimately to become indivisible with the *Brahman*. The conflicting nature of the *atman* embodies the relationship between the divine, Krishna, and humankind.

Being at one with the *Brahman* is the goal of life; it is ultimate enlightenment which will end the cycle of reincarnation. However, only Krishna can embody the essence of the infinite spirit.

Krishna’s power is so absolute that he is “the beginning, the middle,/ and the end of creations,/ of sciences, I am the science of the self;/ I am the dispute of orators” (*Gita* 10. 32). Krishna is the divine and the self. His absolutism extends so far that humankind cannot understand the depth or width of his power. Hence, Krishna uses a metaphor in this case to relate the abstract idea of his existence to humans who lack divine understanding. To achieve understanding, the *Brahman*,

Krishna advises “knowledge will let you see creatures/ within yourself and so in me” (*Gita* 4.35).

To understand the concept of “knowledge” in accordance with Krishna’s definition is unconceivable. His absolutism, knowledge, and infinite reach cannot be understood in terms of language. Metaphor can feebly attempt to explain his divinity. Nonetheless, metaphor cannot define his oxymoronic existence and non-existence, his infinite spirit and self; essentially: *him*.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, polytheism and anthropomorphism are central to the relationship between the divine and humankind. Gilgamesh’s trials begin upon his first meeting with Enkidu and continue after his death. Similar to the relationship between Rumi and Shams, Gilgamesh’s modus operandi in coming to terms with mortality is to seek religious solace.

Gilgamesh is capable of succeeding in feats of valor as demonstrated through his victory over Humbaba. While Gilgamesh possesses godlike physical ability he is also subject to the throes of

man. He does not possess immunity to carnal desire; however, his relationship with Enkidu changes his perspective. Although Gilgamesh had indulged in bodily pleasure with Ishtar in the past, he discredits her after returning from the Forest of Cedar with Enkidu, “[*who is there*] would take you in marriage?/ [You, a *frost* that congeals no] ice,/ a louvre-door [that] stays [not] breeze nor draught” (*Gilg.* 5. 32-34). In his companionship with a mortal he is confronted with the conflict between divine interference and earthly life. He is both god and human. However, Gilgamesh’s choice to explore life with a mortal friend has consequences for his people as seen in Ishtar’s sending of the Bull of Heaven. In this instance the gods have direct contact with humankind. However, as this poem is figurative the Bull of Heaven is symbolic. The existence of a Bull of Heaven is not plausible. It is used as a concrete image of destruction, to pictorially demonstrate the consequences of not obeying a god. Once Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is tormented by the abstraction of death. Out of fear from having no knowledge of the meaning of death, Gilgamesh leaves Uruk on a pilgrimage in search of immortality. It can be argued that Gilgamesh was not looking to live forever; instead he wanted to know the meaning of death in context of the meaning of life (as life was familiar and knowable to him). After having found the immortal Uta-napishti, Gilgamesh discovers that life, death, and the afterlife are interchangeable. In a moment of epiphany Gilgamesh says to Uta-napishti, “your form is no different, you are just like me” (*Gilg.* 11. 3). His journey demystified and defaced death. Although he is abruptly robbed of immortality by the serpent, he returns to Uruk as king. His fury at the gods for taking Enkidu has quelled and, in turn, is at peace with his own mortality.

When not only analyzing a text but looking also at the nature of language the book of Genesis, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* fall directly into the category of metaphorical language. The use of such language is instrumental in a religious text because of its

abstract subject matter, the divine. Because language is limited and limiting, metaphor allows the reader to understand the text through the natural habit of image association. Humans can only think in terms of analogy, leading to the conclusion that a divine body such as God cannot be understood, at least not holistically. With the lack of complete understanding of the meaning of the divine, humankind's relationship with the divine is restricted to symbolism.

### **Works Cited**

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