

THE FACE OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Old Testament theology, the concepts of “face” and “presence of God” are essential for understanding the relationship between the people of Israel and God. The Hebrew word פָּנִים (*panim*), often translated as „face,” encompasses more than just physical appearance; it embodies a range of meanings related to feelings and emotions. These nuances highlight the complexity of the relationship between God and humanity, revealing the divine nature. In Scripture, the “face of God” is a powerful metaphor for His living and dynamic presence. For instance, when Moses speaks to God „face to face,” it emphasizes the intimacy and closeness of a direct relationship with the Divine. This imagery suggests not only God’s loving accessibility but also His mystery and authority, as directly seeing YHWH is inaccessible and dangerous for ordinary mortals, underscoring His transcendent holiness. Moreover, the “face of God” symbolizes divine blessing and favour. When God “turns His face” toward someone, it signifies goodwill, faithfulness, and protection. Conversely, when He “hides His face,” it suggests disapproval or withdrawal of His presence. Thus, these biblical images reflect not only the dynamics of divine relationships but also the emotional depth of human interaction with the sacred. Therefore, the concept of the “face of God” in the Old Testament is not merely a literary expression; it is a fundamental theological element that continues to inspire and guide the spirituality of believers. It calls them to seek and cultivate an authentic and vibrant relationship with their Creator, emphasizing that this relationship transcends physical limits and deeply penetrates the heart of the believer’s spiritual existence.



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The Hebrew word *panim* originates from the root *panah*, which means “to turn” or “to return.” This etymological background underscores the concept of a shift in direction, focus, or orientation towards someone or something. In biblical texts, the term appears nearly 400 times, carrying a variety of meanings and nuances. On one hand, *panim* can refer simply to the physical direction one faces towards a person or

object. On the other hand, it also conveys emotional states, feelings, and attitudes. For instance, a “bright” face can indicate joy, happiness, or appreciation, while turning away or hiding one’s face may reflect disgust, rejection, or even divine wrath. In a divine context, the “face of God” serves as a profound symbol of God’s attributes, such as mercy, love, justice, or severity. Thus, the divine face is not merely an aesthetic symbol; it represents a true manifestation of God’s presence and the state of the divine soul. It encapsulates both the closeness and distance that can exist between God and humanity, functioning as a means of communication and revelation. Overall, the term *panim* underscores the complexity of the relationship between divinity and humanity, reflecting not only the physical aspects but also the spiritual and emotional dimensions of the divine presence.

In the Scriptures, the face of God symbolizes a profound and significant means of communication between the divine and humanity. This concept goes beyond a mere physical expression; it represents Yahweh’s inner state, reflecting His true feelings and intentions. Just as a human face conveys a wide range of emotions—such as joy, love, anger, and disgust—the face of God serves as a channel through which these emotions and attitudes are clearly communicated. For instance, when God turns His face away or hides His gaze, these actions symbolize either closeness or rejection. Edmond Jacob emphasizes that the divine face should not be interpreted literally. Instead, it should be understood as a symbol of God’s total presence, encompassing all His emotions and desires for communion with humanity. Thus, it reflects both mercy and love, as well as anger and justice, serving as a surface for the intimate and dynamic relationship between the Divine Spirit and created beings. From this perspective, the face of God is essential for understanding divine love and His desire to reveal Himself personally and directly to believers. It symbolizes His sincerity, closeness, and holiness.

The search for the face of Yahweh is a fundamental aspect of Old Testament religion, reflecting the desire for a personal and authentic relationship with the divine. In the Psalms, believers frequently offer prayers and supplications, asking God to turn His face of benevolence toward them. This signifies a longing for divine blessing, support, and protection. This expression not only conveys the need for assistance and the outpouring of grace but also the aspiration to draw closer to God, who is understood as a living and engaged presence in the lives of believers. The face of God, particularly in the context of personal worship and prayer, symbolizes a direct and individualized encounter with the Creator. This notion transcends mere poetic imagery; it embodies a profound

desire to be in communion with God, experiencing His presence in tangible ways. Consequently, prayer and worship become means of asking God to reveal His face, facilitating blessings and spiritual transformation. In this relationship, the divine face serves as a symbol of complete closeness, sincere dialogue, and mutual openness between humanity and God. This strengthens the faith that divinity is not distant, but rather near, and ready to reveal itself to those who earnestly seek it.

Several biblical accounts, such as Moses' conversation with God in Exodus and Jacob's encounter with the divine at Peniel, illustrate the concept of direct and personal communion between humanity and God. These experiences represent moments of profound revelation, in which "seeing the face of God" symbolizes intimate knowledge and a direct encounter with the divine presence. In the case of Moses, his face-to-face dialogue with God and his yearning to see God's glory emphasize the desire for complete closeness to penetrate the mystery of the divine presence. Similarly, Jacob's experience at Peniel signifies his belief that he had a direct encounter with God and was saved, reflecting a moment of profound spiritual intimacy. However, these accounts also underscore the limits of this communion. Tradition holds that not every mortal can see God's face and live, as His greatness and holiness are transcendent and beyond the reach of the average human being. This distinction highlights the fundamental difference between the divine and human natures. Generally, the most significant accounts of divine vision are moments of limited revelation, in which God either "passes by" or "hides His face" to preserve His mystery and immortal holiness.

Throughout history, theological developments in Judaism have sought to reconcile the idea of God's personal presence with the need to preserve His invisible and transcendent nature. In this evolving process, the notions of angels and divine glory became symbols and means of manifesting divinity, gradually replacing the direct concept of God's presence as the primary expression of the divine. Angels, as messengers or envoys of God, serve as representations of His presence in the visible world, helping to preserve the divine mystery and preventing a reduction of God to an anthropomorphic image. The concept of divine glory (*kabod*) has been understood as a manifestation of God's splendour and greatness, conveying that God makes Himself present in ways that exceed human understanding while maintaining His unmatched holiness. This shift allowed believers to retain the divine mystery, steering clear of constructing an anthropomorphic image of God, which could diminish His holy and mysterious nature. Rather than relying on a direct and visible manifestation, these symbols became conduits

for spiritual closeness and communion, while continuing to uphold deep respect for God's divine holiness and incomprehensible nature. Thus, theology has evolved toward a more nuanced and respectful vision of the human relationship with God, preserving both the mystery and transcendence of the divine.

The concept of the "face of God" in the Old Testament is rich with nuances and meanings, reflecting the divine presence, generosity, holiness, and mystery that characterize Yahweh. Understanding this aspect of divinity provides insight into how the people of ancient Israel perceived and interacted with God. The "face of God" is more than just a metaphor; it represents a profound expression of the direct and personal relationship between humanity and the divine. This concept underscores mankind's longing to experience God's presence in everyday life, emphasizing both His closeness and His holiness. As Jewish theology evolved, the idea of a divinity that can be seen or felt became more nuanced. It recognizes that while God reveals Himself through love and mercy, He also remains an unfathomable mystery to human understanding. This tension between accessibility and transcendence is central to humanity's ongoing dialogue with the divine, challenging generations of believers to seek a deeper understanding and a more intimate relationship with their Creator. Consequently, the "face of God" symbolizes the presence that guides and enriches the lives of believers in the Old Testament and beyond.

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