# A Semiotic Analysis of Anthropomorphic Conceptions of God in Biblical Verses

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**Abstract**

In biblical context, anthropomorphism is a significant communicative strategy for portraying God. This study examines anthropomorphic conceptions of God in biblical discourse as cognitive constructions that create understanding of abstract divine concepts through familiar human experiences. Using thirteen purposefully selected biblical verses, the research applies Peirce's triadic semiotic framework to investigate how anthropomorphism conceptualises and communicates divine reality. The study examines how iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs facilitate systematic correspondences between finite human experiences and infinite divine concepts. Findings demonstrate that anthropomorphic constructions serve as vital semiotic codes establishing domain alignments - mapping physical attributes onto divine presence, corresponding emotional states to divine disposition, and aligning sensory experiences with divine action as imaginary representations of divinity within human cultural knowledge limits.

The study demonstrates that anthropomorphic symbolism extends beyond biblical expressions, as evidenced in Yoruba religious discourse, where similar semiotic strategies conceptualise the Supreme Being (Olorun) through human-centred metaphors, confirming anthropomorphism as a cross-cultural cognitive strategy for linking abstract spiritual concepts to human reasoning.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, biblical discourse, Peircean semiotics, religious language, semiotic mapping.

## 1. Introduction

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of meaning to the abstract and ineffable through the projection of human characteristics onto non-human entities. According to Cuddon (2013:40), "anthropomorphism describes the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities or concepts, for example animals, inanimate objects or abstract ideas or forces." Anthropomorphism has great significance in simplifying abstract concepts and perceptions. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) note that anthropomorphism helps individuals process complex ideas by relating them to familiar human experiences.

Anthropomorphism is one of the most significant communicative strategies deployed in biblical narrations to conceptualise God. Examples abound in the Bible where God is described using physical features such as hands, eyes, and face, or emotional responses such as anger, joy, and regret to portray divine actions. Such expressions reveal how biblical authors consistently employ embodied human experience to construct comprehensible theological concepts. This strategy extends beyond biblical discourse, manifesting across diverse religious and linguistic traditions. In Yoruba religious discourse, for instance, God (Olorun) is similarly conceptualised through anthropomorphic expressions such as "Ọba tó fi ìmọ́lẹ̀ ṣe aṣọ bora" (the king who clothes himself with light), demonstrating that anthropomorphic symbolism represents a cross-cultural cognitive necessity for bridging the conceptual gap between finite human understanding and infinite divine reality.

Crucially, humans employ anthropomorphic language to communicate their conceptualizations of God. Whether viewed as divinely inspired or purely human compositions, the anthropomorphic language itself remains irreducibly human in origin: chosen and shaped by human cognition, constrained by human linguistic capacities, and embedded in specific human

cultures and historical instances. The representation of God through anthropomorphic language has generated considerable theological controversies. Maimonides (1963) argues that anthropomorphic depictions constitute fundamental categorical errors that misrepresent divine nature. He anchors this argument on Aristotle's three key principles that "God is incorporeal, without a physical body; God is one; and God transcends the material world," stressing that attributing human qualities to God constitutes a form of idolatry and compromises divine transcendence.

Tillich (1957) views anthropomorphism as an essential but insufficient form of divine discourse. According to him, while anthropomorphic language points toward divine truth, it does not provide a complete description of it. He describes God as "Being-itself," and argues that anthropomorphism operates symbolically rather than literally. However, these theological debates often assume what they should interrogate: that anthropomorphism represents divine accommodation to human limitation rather than human cognitive necessity in constructing concepts of transcendence.

The significance of anthropomorphic language in biblical discourse extends beyond its examination as a literary device; it functions as a complex semiotic system operating through iconic, indexical, and symbolic connections to bridge the gap between human lived experience and abstract spiritual concepts. Peirce's (1931-58) triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant provides foundational tools for analysing anthropomorphism's communicative elements as religious symbols, demonstrating how religious signs function simultaneously as icons, which resemble their objects; indices, which point to their objects; and symbols, which are conventional representations of their objects.

This study examines how the writers of biblical verses construct theological meaning through these triadic semiotic relationships, treating anthropomorphism as a human semiotic practice that documents cognitive and cultural processes of theological constructions. It examines the textual manifestations of anthropomorphism as products of human cognitive and linguistic processes, analysing the semiotic signs through which abstract divine concepts are constructed and communicated. While the primary focus remains biblical discourse, the study also demonstrates the cross-cultural applicability of this semiotic framework through comparative analysis of Yoruba religious expressions, thereby illustrating that anthropomorphic symbolism constitutes a universal human strategy for conceptualising transcendence.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

While theological debates regarding anthropomorphism's doctrinal implications (Hackett, 2024; Marmorstein, 1927, 1937) and the application of semiotic theory to religious discourse (Corrington, 2000; Yelle & Paschalidis, 2013) have generated significant scholarly interest, systematic analysis of biblical anthropomorphism through Peirce's triadic semiotic framework as human cognitive construction remains underexplored in contemporary linguistic research. Specifically, there is limited investigation into how anthropomorphic expressions function simultaneously as iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs that document human processes of theological conceptualization rather than divine self-revelation.

Most existing studies implicitly assume anthropomorphism functions as divine communication strategy without interrogating whether these expressions might instead document human cognitive processes of conceptualizing transcendence using available experiential and cultural resources. A fundamental question of agency must be addressed: who employs anthropomorphism? Evidence suggests that human authors, constrained by embodied cognition and cultural contexts, construct theological concepts through anthropomorphic projection because they possess no alternative cognitive resources for conceptualizing non-embodied transcendence.

This study addresses this gap by examining anthropomorphic conceptions of God in biblical discourse as coherent semiotic systems constructed by human authors, characterized by distinctive Peircean sign relationships and cultural codes. It investigates how biblical authors employ anthropomorphic language as sophisticated triadic semiotic systems encoding theological meanings through human cognitive and cultural resources. This research investigates how anthropomorphic language in biblical texts captures human efforts to construct theological concepts within the boundaries of cognitive capacity.

## 3. Aim of Study

This research seeks to:

1. identify key anthropomorphic representations of God in selected Biblical texts, documenting the range of human characteristics that biblical authors project onto their theological conceptualizations;
2. analyse these representations through Peirce's triadic framework of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, demonstrating how anthropomorphic expressions function simultaneously across all three Peircean sign categories;
3. explore how anthropomorphic expressions reveal human cognitive processes of theological construction, examining how embodied experience, emotional architecture, and cultural contexts shape the language biblical authors employ to conceptualize transcendence; and
4. demonstrate the semiotic significance of the identified anthropomorphic representations as evidence of human meaning-making rather than as proof of divine self-disclosure.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

This study employs Peirce's triadic model of signs as the primary theoretical framework, supplemented by cognitive linguistics regarding embodied cognition. Peirce's semiotics provides foundational structure for analysing how anthropomorphic expressions operate simultaneously as iconic signs, creating resemblance between theological conceptualizations and human characteristics through similarity; indexical signs, establishing causal or contiguous relationships that create impressions of divine presence through human-like manifestations; and symbolic signs, establishing conventional relationships between human attributes and divine nature through cultural agreement within specific interpretive communities.

A critical consideration emerges: Peirce's model assumes signs refer to independently existing objects. However, if God exists primarily as human conceptual construction, signs do not point beyond human semiotic systems but refer to other human-created signs, forming self-referential systems that feel transcendent while remaining immanent. This study treats

anthropomorphism as human semiotic practice constructing theological concepts through available cognitive resources, analysing sign structures while acknowledging they may document human imaginative construction rather than independent divine reality.

Additionally, this study draws on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, which demonstrates that abstract thinking fundamentally depends on physical experiences. Human cognitive architecture may be unable to conceptualize transcendence without embodied reference points. Therefore, anthropomorphism emerges not as divine accommodation but as cognitive necessity - humans can only construct concepts of the non-physical through embodied experience.

## 5. Methodology

A corpus of thirteen biblical passages containing anthropomorphic representations of God was extracted from the King James Version of the Bible. The King James Version was selected due to its literary richness and established tradition in theological scholarship, though translation choices inevitably shape anthropomorphic expressions.

The selection criteria identified anthropomorphic elements across five categories: physical anthropomorphism (bodily features or actions attributed to God), emotional anthropomorphism (human affective states projected onto divine consciousness), sensory anthropomorphism (human perceptual modalities extended to divine awareness), communicative anthropomorphism (divine-human interaction depicted through human linguistic patterns), and relational anthropomorphism (divine-human relationship conceptualized through human social structures).

Using Peirce's triadic framework, this study employs qualitative semiotic interpretation to analyse how the biblical passages function as iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, examining these as human constructions that utilize available cognitive and cultural resources to make abstract spiritual concepts comprehensible and communicable.

The analytical descriptions throughout this study should be understood as shorthand for "biblical authors construct and portray God, recognizing that human agents created these textual representations regardless of theological commitments regarding divine inspiration or biblical authority. Fauconnier & Turner, (2002).

## 6. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to understanding human meaning-making, symbolic representation, and cognitive processes in theological construction through systematic application of Peircean semiotic theory. It advances semiotic scholarship by demonstrating that anthropomorphic usage in religious texts documents sophisticated human sign-making systems constructing spiritual concepts through embodied experience and cultural resources. By treating anthropomorphism as human cognitive practice rather than divine communication strategy, the study illuminates fundamental features of human conceptual architecture, revealing how humans construct abstract ideas through mappings from embodied experience.

The research documents how cultural contexts shape theological imagination, with communities projecting their social structures, environmental experiences, and value systems onto conceptualizations of divinity. Understanding these processes advances knowledge in cognitive linguistics, religious studies, semiotics, and anthropology by documenting mechanisms through which humans create and sustain concepts of transcendence using finite cognitive and cultural resources. The study demonstrates that humans may be neurologically constrained to conceptualize transcendence anthropomorphically, making anthropomorphism not divine accommodation but cognitive necessity arising from embodied conceptual systems. It thus illuminates the cognitive and cultural mechanisms through which humans conceptualize, communicate about, and relate to abstract concepts exceeding direct experiential access.

## 7. Data Presentation and Analysis

### 7.1 Data Presentation

The following thirteen biblical passages, extracted from some chapters in the King James Bible Version, constitute the data for analysis.

| S/N | VERSES | BIBLICAL PASSAGE | CATEGORY |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Genesis 3:8 | And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. | Physical |
| 2 | Exodus 33:20 | But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." | Physical |
| 3 | Deuteronomy 33:27 | The eternal God is your refuge, And underneath are the everlasting arms; He will thrust out the enemy from before you, And will say, 'Destroy!' | Physical |
| 4 | Genesis 6:6 | And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. | Emotional |
| 5 | Hosea 11:8 | "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. | Emotional |
| 6 | Genesis 8:21 | And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. | Sensory |
| 7 | Psalm 34:15 | The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry. | Sensory |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | Genesis 1:3 | Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. | Communi cative |
| 9 | Exodus 19:19 | And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice. | Communi cative |
| 10 | Jeremiah 31:20 | Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; Therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD. | Relational |
| 11 | Isaiah 62:5 | For as a young man marries a virgin, So shall your sons marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So shall your God rejoice over you. | Relational |
| 12 | Psalm 18:9-10 | He bowed the heavens also, and came down With darkness under His feet. | Action |
| 13 | Isaiah 59:17 | For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, And was clad with zeal as a cloak. | Action |

## 7.2 Semiotic Analysis Through Peirce's Triadic Framework

### 7.2.1 Iconic Signs in Biblical Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphic references in biblical narratives serve as veritable iconic elements that biblical authors construct to create meaning through resemblance relationships between their theological conceptualizations and familiar human characteristics. They establish similarity between abstract divine concepts and human attributes, making theological ideas accessible

through embodied human experiences. Anthropomorphic iconic signs, which establish physical, emotional and sensory relationships with their referents, are abundant in biblical narratives, revealing how human authors employ personified metaphors to construct theological meaning.

**Physical Iconic Signs**

In Genesis 3:8, there is anthropomorphic representation of God as a physical entity. In excerpt 1: line 1, the expression *"walking in the garden"* creates an iconic resemblance between the conceptualization of divine movement and familiar human locomotive activity. The sign (divine walking) iconically resembles the object (human walking) through shared characteristics of conventional movement and spatial progression. The sign capacity of anthropomorphism as used here points beyond literal interpretation; it enables readers not only to conceptualize, but have image depiction of divine presence through familiar embodied experience. Effectively, the author of this verse, with no non-embodied language for divine presence, is able to map human spatial movement onto theological conceptualization using anthropomorphism as iconic strategy.

Also in Deuteronomy 33:27, the phrase *"everlasting arms"* as shown in excerpt 3, lines 1 - 2 is another iconic representation of divine protective power captured through physical resemblance to human protective embrace. This phrase captures Jappy's (2019) description of Peirce's hypoicon, where the icon operates through analogy rather than simple resemblance. While God's "arms," in reference here, functions iconically, sharing visual and formal qualities with human arms that encircle, support, and protect, the qualifier "everlasting" attempts transcendence of human limitations. In this verse, the author scales up temporal, limited, physical human arms to theological magnitude through linguistic modification, qualifying it with the adjective "everlasting". These further give credence to the fact that anthropomorphism depiction of God originates from human embodied experience rather than divine self-description.

**Emotional Iconic Signs**

While physical iconic signs relate to metaphoric expression of theological concepts through bodily resemblances, emotional iconic representation creating similarity between the conceptualizations of divine consciousness and human emotional states. In excerpt 4, line 2, the

phrase *"He was grieved in His heart"* in Genesis 6:6 presents divine regret through iconic resemblance to human emotional experience, enabling understanding of abstract divine consciousness through corresponding human emotive experience. The attribution of grieve to God, as shown above, reveals human's cognitive constraint of God's representation. God's perfect knowledge and immutable nature make grieve ontologically impossible, as grieve requires temporal sequence and imperfect foreknowledge. Conceptualizing divine response through human emotional vocabulary as shown above becomes necessary because humans possess no mental categories for non-emotional consciousness.

In Hosea 11:8, there is demonstration of complex iconic relationships where the prophet employs parental emotional complexities to construct a conceptualization of divine compassion. The rhetorical questions *"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?"* (excerpt 5, line 1) iconically mirror human parental agony, creating recognizable emotional patterns indicative of the author's conceptualization of divine-human relational dynamics. The import of the anthropomorphic relations here is making mental translation of distinctive divine compassion quality possible through connective characteristics of emotional human distress. Here, emotional anthropomorphism is best deployed, not because God chose this communication strategy, but because human brains are wired for social cognition and cannot engage religiously with non-personal concepts.

**Sensory Iconic Signs**

Genesis 8:21 uses olfactory anthropomorphism to create iconic resemblance between the conceptualization of divine awareness and human sensory experience. *"And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma…"* establishes iconic similarity through shared sensory modalities, enabling understanding of divine acceptance through familiar human sensory processes. See excerpt 6, line 1. Smelling, as used here, is metaphorical as God is incorporeal, possessing no olfactory apparatus. The biblical author of this verse had no language for divine acceptance except through human sensory experience and therefore projected human olfactory pleasure onto the theological conceptualization.

### 7.2.2 Indexical Signs in Biblical Anthropomorphism

Indexical signs create meaning through causal, temporal, or spatial relationships between sign and object (Peirce, 1935-1958). The use of biblical anthropomorphism in the selected Bible verses reveals how authors construct indexicality, creating signification of divine presence, action, and attributes through contiguous relationships with human-like indicators. Some of the selected verses demonstrate how anthropomorphic indicators are employ to construct physical, emotional, and communicative indexical sign relations: excerpts 1, 7, 4. 8 and 9.

A critical consideration emerges: Peirce's indexical signs presuppose actual causal or spatial relationships between sign and object, as smoke indexes fire because smoke is caused by fire. But what if the "object" - God's presence or action - has no independent existence to cause indexical signs? In such cases, biblical anthropomorphisms function as pseudo-indexicals; signs that mimic indexical structure while pointing to no extralinguistic referent. They create narrative illusion of divine presence through familiar indexical patterns without necessarily indexing actual divine presence. This is standard literary technique that biblical authors, with human limited knowledge, employ to construct theological narratives.

**Physical Indexical Signs**

In Genesis 3:8, the author's construction of God's physicality through locomotive engagement is further strengthened with auditory dimension in excerpt 1, line 1 with the phrase *"And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking…,"* using sound imagery to construct God's presence in the garden. An index, according to Dirven and Verspoor (1999:2), indicates something in the immediate proximity. The phrase "they heard the voice" constructs divine proximity through indexical sign that, according to Peirce, has causal relationship with the object and confirms the object's existence.

This indexical function transcends mere description, establishing the author's construction of divine presence through sound rather than sight. By using these familiar indexical patterns, the author constructs a claim of divine presence, whether describing actual historical events or crafting sophisticated theological narrative.

**Sensory Indexical Signs**

Psalm 34:15 exemplifies how the psalmist constructs anthropomorphic signs through dual indexical relationships: *"The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry"*. Visual attention through "the eyes" indexes the psalmist's conceptualization of divine awareness, while auditory attention through "his ears" indexes divine responsiveness. Significantly, the anthropomorphic items "eyes", "ears" have physical indexical import of the author's construction of God's divine quality to observe human behaviour "righteousness" on one hand, and human supplication "cry" to divine response on the other hand.

This dual indexical structure reflects human embodied experience of attention and response: we know others are aware of us when their eyes focus on us; we know others respond when their ears turn toward our voices. The psalmist employs these embodied indexical patterns to conceptualize divine attention and response. God, being incorporeal, will suggest that the above anthropomorphism representations function as analogical indices, borrowing the structure of human embodied indexicality to create conceptual frameworks for understanding divine awareness.

**Emotional Indexical Signs**

The attribution of human qualities to non-humans in biblical narratives includes emotional characters that authors construct. In Genesis 6:6, as shown in excerpt 4, conventional emotional states such as "grieve," "heart," and "troubled" are conceptualized in divine explications, where the author's construction of divine emotional states functions indexically by pointing to underlying divine-human relational dynamics. The author's depiction of divine "grieve" in *"... the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart"* (excerpt 4) indexes the causal relationship between human wickedness and divine response. The emotional sign points beyond itself to indicate the author's conceptualization of divine sensitivity to human moral conditions. In human experience, "grieve" indexes value commitment; by attributing grieve to God, the biblical author establishes divine moral investment in human behaviour through familiar emotional indexicality, making God psychologically comprehensible as a relational agent.

In Hosea 11:8, the temperature imagery *"My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred"* as shown in excerpt 5, line 3 functions indexically, where physical warmth points to emotional intensity in the prophet's conceptualization. The words "stirred" is a thermal index creating causal connection between the prophet's construction of divine feeling and physical sensation, giving import to understanding divine compassion through understandable bodily-based indexical relationships.

Common across human cultures is the warm-cold temperature metaphor for emotional intimacy-distance. Hosea's use of thermal indexicality to describe divine compassion reveals attempt to conceptualise abstract theological concepts from bodily experience through metaphorical extension.

**Communicative Indexical Signs**

Dialogical anthropomorphic device is a potent semiotic sign identified as communicative indexical marker in the referenced Bible verses. In Genesis 1:3, the author constructs divine speech acts that operate indexically through performative efficacy. *"Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light."* (excerpt 8) demonstrates indexical relationships where the author's depiction of divine utterance points to immediate material effect. While the speech index establishes causal connection between divine word and cosmic transformation, the semiotic import exemplifies the author's understanding of divine utterance transcending conventional human linguistic limitations.

The narrative structure as shown above is anthropomorphic: the author has God speak (in whatever language the text was composed), using human grammatical structures, and employs human communicative patterns of imperative utterance. Even if one believes God actually spoke creation into existence, the biblical representation of the act is irreducibly anthropomorphic, filtered through human linguistic categories and narrative conventions.

In the same vein, Exodus 19:19 presents how the biblical author constructs dialogical indexical relationships of divine responsiveness through temporal sequence and conversational reciprocity in *"...Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice."* (excerpt 9). This human-divine dialogical relationship as presented here reveals signification of supremacy of God to man, who, even when not physically present, can be heard. The call-and-response pattern reflects universal

human conversational pragmatics that the author employs to make God comprehensible as communicative agent rather than impersonal force. By depicting divine-human interaction through conventional dialogical patterns, the biblical author makes God comprehensible as communicative agent capable of responding to human initiative in temporally sequenced dialogue.

### 7.2.3 Symbolic Signs in Biblical Anthropomorphism

The sign-referent relationship can be symbolic, with interpretation derived through conventional relationships established by cultural agreement rather than resemblance or causal connection. The referenced anthropomorphic expressions function through what Eco terms "overcoding," where primary denotative meanings (human characteristics) generate secondary connotative meanings (divine attributes) through culturally specific interpretive frameworks that biblical authors employ. This process enables biblical authors to communicate theological concepts through human intrinsic linguistic structures. The verses used as data reveal biblical anthropomorphic symbolic signs that function through culturally coded associations between human attributes and the authors' conceptualizations of divine nature. These signs manifest in different forms, demonstrating physical, emotional, relational and action symbolic relationships.

#### Physical Symbolic Signs

In excerpt 2, the biblical author in Exodus 33:20 constructs anthropomorphic signification of physical symbolic relationship, associating physical visual access with intimacy and power. While the phrase *"...you cannot see my face…"* presents the author's conceptualization of God as physical entity in the likeness of humans, the concluding dependent clause gives further insight into the use of anthropomorphism as powerful semiotic tool to show supremacy and wholesomeness through contrasting elements of physical appearance and prohibition: *"for no man shall see Me, and live."* (excerpt 2, lines 1 - 2). This symbolic prohibition simultaneously affirms the author's construction of divine personality through anthropomorphic reference "face" while establishing divine transcendence through access limitation. The "face" in this excerpt functions symbolically rather than literally, encoding divine transcendence through conventional

associations between facial visibility and relational accessibility that the author employs. Asserting both divine personhood (requiring anthropomorphic description) and divine transcendence (requiring distinction from created beings) presents a challenge. Asserting both, as done in this narrative, anthropomorphism is employed, simultaneously denying its literality, in an attempt to manage competing theological situations.

As noted earlier, the "everlasting arms" in Deuteronomy 33:27 function symbolically through cultural linguistic elements where the author associates human parental embrace with divine security and protection. The symbolic relationship operates through conventional associations rather than literal divine anatomy.

**Emotional Symbolic Signs**

Human affective state is connected with relational meaning through the use of anthropomorphism in Genesis 6:6. The author's construction of divine regret in excerpt 4 functions symbolically by encoding divine-human covenant relationship through conventional associations between regret and relational investment. In human experience, regret symbolizes care; we regret only what matters to us. By attributing regret to God, the biblical author symbolically encodes divine investment in human moral behaviour, making God relationally comprehensible. As earlier noted, if God is omniscient and immutable, regret is ontologically impossible. A good explanation for this is that biblical author attributed regret to God because that was the only way humans can conceptualize divine response to human behaviour, constrained by human emotional vocabulary and projecting human emotional experience onto divine consciousness because no other conceptual resources were available.

**Relational Symbolic Signs**

Through relational symbolic representation, the prophet in Jeremiah 31:20 employs symbolic relationships using father-son metaphors: *"Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child?"* The symbolic signs signify governing familial relationships, establishing the prophet's conceptualization of divine-human connection through conventional kinship associations. The father-son relationship provides symbolic structure for understanding divine-human relationship:

authority, care, discipline, inheritance, intimacy. This metaphor works by mapping the source domain (human kinship) onto the target domain (divine-human relationship), carrying associated attributes, expectations, and emotional valences.

In Isaiah 62:5, there is the author's use of anthropomorphic symbolism of natural nuptial tie to construct heavenly communion: *"For as a young man marries a virgin, So shall your sons marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So shall your God rejoice over you."* Through semiotic relational signs, the symbolic signs related to physical marriage union represent the author's conceptualization of divine covenant commitment, intimacy, and joy. The marriage metaphor symbolically encodes multiple dimensions drawn from human social experience: covenant commitment, intimacy, joy, fruitfulness, complementarity, and permanence. The anthropomorphism exposes how thoroughly human social structures shape theological imagination, with the author naturally occupying the culturally superior position (bridegroom) for God and the culturally subordinate position (bride) for humanity.

**Action Symbolic Signs**

The biblical author portrays God as divine entity in physicality and power through action-oriented symbolic relationship in Isaiah 59:17 where God is described as cloaked in divine armament. As shown in excerpt 11, the statement *" For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, And was clad with zeal as a cloak "* employs military imagery that functions symbolically through cultural codes connecting armour with protection, warfare with justice, and clothing with identity assumption.

These semiotic codes represent humans' imaginary representation of divinity within the limits of their cultural knowledge using associated physical imageries to understand the unexplainable divine posture. This pattern of using culturally significant symbolic representations to conceptualise divine attributes is not unique to biblical discourse. In the Yoruba socio-cultural context, for instance, similar anthropomorphic and symbolic strategies are deployed as meaningful imagery to bridge the conceptual gap between human understanding and divine reality, as demonstrated in the section below.

**Anthropomorphic Symbolism in the Yoruba Socio-Cultural Context**

As noted above, the Yoruba language is equally replete with rich symbolic and anthropomorphic elements in reference to God (Olorun), where speakers attribute human qualities, physical features, or metaphoric objects to the Supreme Being. Such symbolic representation includes the use of imagery similar to excerpt 11 above. God is described with anthropomorphic metaphors such as *"Oba to fi imole se aso bora"* (the king who clothes himself with light), symbolizing purity, transcendence, and divine majesty. In a deliberate effort to construct the supremacy, mystery and holiness of God, the lexical item "king," which represents the highest authority in Yorubaland, is not only used metaphorically to describe supremacy; the king also clothes himself with light, thereby signifying the mystery of holiness. This metaphoric construction parallels the biblical imagery of divine armament in Isaiah 59:17, where clothing serves as a symbolic vehicle for communicating divine attributes. In both contexts, the act of "clothing," "cladding" or "wrapping" establishes an iconic relationship between material covering and spiritual reality, demonstrating how different cultures could employ structurally similar semiotic strategies to conceptualise the divine.

The Yoruba name for God, *Olorun* (the Owner or Ruler of the Heavens), is symbolic of God's supreme authority over the spiritual realm. As Oguniyi (2022) notes, Olorun is a contraction of the words "oni" (ownership) and "orun" (heavens), meaning "the owner or ruler of the heavens." This linguistic construction operates as a symbolic sign within Peirce's triadic framework, where the signifier (Olorun) functions through cultural convention to represent supreme divine authority.

The Yoruba discourse, either religious or cultural, also employs some similar anthropomorphic expressions that mirror the domain alignments identified in biblical texts. For instance, sensory anthropomorphism appears in expressions such as *"Olorun to n ri ohun gbogbo,", " Olorun, arinu rode, olumoran okan," etc.* (God who sees everything), which attribute visual perception to the divine, establishing an indexical relationship between human sensory experience and divine omniscience. Similarly, emotional anthropomorphism manifests in phrase like *"Ọlọ́run aanu"* (God of mercy), mapping human compassionate disposition onto divine character. These semiotic constructions illustrate how Yoruba speakers, like biblical authors, employ iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs to bridge the conceptual gap between finite

human understanding and infinite divine reality, which confirms that anthropomorphic symbolism represents a cross-cultural cognitive strategy for making abstract spiritual concepts accessible to human reasoning.

### 7.3 Discussion

The analysis of the biblical references used as data reveals that biblical authors construct anthropomorphic expressions that operate simultaneously across all three Peircean sign categories, creating complex semiotic systems that function through integrated triadic relationships. In Genesis 3:8, there is demonstration of triadic integration where the author constructs meaning iconically resembling human movement, indexically pointing to (or creating narrative impression of) divine presence through auditory effects, and symbolically encoding divine accessibility through cultural codes governing walking and garden encounters. Hosea 11:8, as recorded in excerpt 5, also operates triadically, with the prophet constructing meaning iconically resembling parental emotional complexity, indexically pointing to divine-human relational dynamics through emotional intensity, and symbolically encoding covenant love through cultural codes governing parental commitment. Genesis 1:3 also functions across all three categories, with the author constructing meaning iconically resembling human speech patterns, indexically pointing to divine creative power through performative efficacy, and symbolically encoding divine authority through cultural codes governing commanding speech.

The triadic integration demonstrates remarkable communicative sophistication and semiotic richness in how biblical authors construct theological meaning. However, sophistication of communicative strategy documents impressive human meaning-making capacity without adjudicating the ontological status of the theological concepts being constructed. Effective mythmaking across all cultures consistently exhibits triadic semiotic integration, and biblical authors employed the same sophisticated techniques that characterize compelling narrative construction universally. What the triadic integration definitively demonstrates is that biblical authors were sophisticated semiotic practitioners who understood, intuitively if not explicitly, how to deploy icons, indices, and symbols simultaneously to create rich, multilayered meaning systems that make abstract theological concepts comprehensible and psychologically engaging.

## 8. Findings

The analysis of biblical narratives, as shown in the verses used as data for this work, reveals that biblical authors construct anthropomorphism as organized triadic semiotic patterns functioning simultaneously as icon, index, and symbol, creating integrated meaning systems that document sophisticated human cognitive processes of theological construction.

Iconic signs create accessibility to divine concepts through resemblance relationships using familiar human characteristics. This accessibility makes human-constructed theological concepts comprehensible through familiar experiential categories, whether corresponding to divine reality or constituting imaginative projection. The iconic function enables human comprehension of abstract ideas through embodied experience, whether those ideas correspond to divine reality or constitute human imaginative projection.

Some anthropomorphic expressions function as indexical signs where biblical authors establish divine presence through imagery of causal and contiguous relationships with humans. The authors deployed familiar indexical patterns borrowed from human experience of detecting agency through sensory evidence, creating narrative authority through conventional indexical structures. Whether these structures point to actual divine presence or create compelling narrative illusion remains interpretively open, but they demonstrate sophisticated indexical sign construction in theological narratives.

Symbolically, the verses encode complex theological meanings through cultural conventions, enhancing readers' capacity to conceptualize divine reality through shared symbolic competence within specific communities. However, symbolic competence functions through the same mechanisms as any meaning-making system, documenting human cultural creativity rather than validating symbolic referents. The cultural specificity reveals that biblical authors drew upon locally available materials to construct theological concepts, with variations tracking human cultural differences rather than universal divine attributes.

The analysis reveals that anthropomorphism is a cognitive necessity. Biblical authors had no other way to conceptualize transcendence except through human features, emotions, senses, and relationships, asserting that anthropomorphism stems from embodied human experience. Biblical authors constructed theology through bodily metaphors - physical features, emotions, sensory perception, language, and social relationships. This complete dependence on embodied

metaphor indicates humans are neurologically incapable of conceptualizing non-anthropomorphic transcendence, making anthropomorphism a human cognitive requirement rather than divine accommodation.

## 10. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that anthropomorphic conceptions of God in biblical discourse constitute sophisticated human communicative strategies that biblical authors employ to construct theological concepts through available cognitive and cultural resources. The authors deploy veritable sign-making systems serving multiple simultaneous functions through integrated Peircean semiotic categories, revealing remarkable human capacity for meaning-making in domains that exceed direct experiential access. Peircean triadic patterns create coherent meaning systems that enable human conceptualization of transcendent concepts through embodied sign relationships that authors construct using physical, emotional, sensory, communicative, and relational human characteristics.

Each anthropomorphic expression that biblical authors employ functions simultaneously as icon (creating resemblance relationships between theological concepts and human characteristics), index (establishing apparent causal or contiguous connections that create narrative impressions of divine presence), and symbol (encoding cultural meanings through conventional associations within specific interpretive communities). This shows that the sophisticated semiotic architecture constructed in biblical verses reflects human narrative capacity and cognitive creativity in theological construction. The triadic integration makes abstract theological concepts psychologically accessible and socially functional by engaging multiple cognitive processes simultaneously through iconic, indexical, and symbolic channels.

This study has analysed anthropomorphism as human semiotic practice through which biblical authors employ embodied metaphors to construct theological concepts using available cognitive and cultural resources. The sophisticated triadic semiotic systems that authors constructed document impressive human meaning-making capacity while revealing the cognitive constraints and cultural boundaries within which such construction necessarily operates. Understanding these processes illuminates fundamental features of human cognition, cultural creativity, and the sophisticated linguistic mechanisms through which communities construct and

sustain shared concepts of transcendence, revealing as much about human nature and meaning-making as biblical anthropomorphism claims to reveal about divine nature.

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