Creating God in Our Image

A Case Study of Anthropomorphic Language in Rabbinic Literature

by

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From the earliest known religions there has been a difficulty in describing God with human language and anthropomorphic representations have been in existence. For the Rabbis' midrashim the problem was less one of whether God has a body, but what kind of body it should be described as being, and what character and personality of God is portrayed. It became clear that there is a difference between anthropomorphic conceptions and anthropomorphic expressions—the use of the latter does not prove the belief in the former.

Since very few words exist that refer exclusively to God (such as bara' for the act of creating), human images and characteristics were needed to describe the 'incomparable' God, and demonstrate his immanence. The model of the human king, especially through the common literary form of the King-mashal, became standard in rabbinic literature, effectively creating God in their own image.
Acknowledgments and Notes

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It should be noted that there has been one minor modification in the topic structuring since the approval of the thesis proposal. That proposal, as does this version of the thesis, indicated five chapters. Chapter Two on The King-Mashal originally had two parts: the literary characteristics, and an explanation of rabbinic application of these meshalim as anthropomorphic examples in their teachings. This breakout remains, but the first section of that chapter, The King-Mashal, has now been moved forward, to become instead the continuation of Chapter One on The Mashal. The present Chapter Two, then, focuses exclusively on the teaching application regarding two important challenges for the Rabbis in the period following the destruction of the Temple, namely, to renew Judaism's understanding of the immanence of God, and to counter the influence of the rise of Christianity. These important issues have been expanded since the date of the proposal, and thus are presented as a chapter unto themselves.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgments** ........................................................................................................... ii

**Table of Contents** .......................................................................................................... iii

**Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 1

**Chapter I:**  *The Mashal Form in Rabbinic Literature*
  1.  *Its Characteristics and Application* ......................................................... 3

**Chapter II:**  *Anthropomorphic Language in Rabbinic Literature for Teachings On Divine Immanence and the Indwelling Spirit* ................................................. 20

**Chapter III:**  *Identifying Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* .................................................................................... 34

**Chapter IV:**  *Understanding the Use of Anthropomorphisms in Descriptions of God's Image as Expressed in Rabbinic Literature* .................................................. 52

**Chapter V:**  *Why Did the Rabbis Use Anthropomorphisms, and What Did They Really Believe About Them*? .......... 64

**Summary** ..................................................................................................................... 86

**Bibliography and Sources Cited** .................................................................................. 90
Introduction

There has been extensive research published on the subject of anthropomorphic language in the Bible, and its use in rabbinic literature. Similarly, the motif of God as King has received a good deal of treatment by scholars. However, much less academic work exists that examines the pedagogical use of anthropomorphic language made by the Rabbis in their teaching about God and his immanence, especially where this instruction draws on the metaphor of God as King, comparing the roles of the imperial flesh-and-blood model of daily life with those of the Divine ruler of all Creation. Since God is often presented in the Hebrew Scriptures as the 'incomparable One' who is beyond our understanding, it is interesting to note the teaching examples used by the Rabbis in their discussion of him. Since almost no unique vocabulary for God exists, whenever human words are used, they must be understood from human perspectives, and within human limits of comprehension. To do that, the Rabbis of the early centuries employed a literary structure of their time, the mashal/parable, especially the popular version that put a human king in the central role of the story.

To understand the meaning assigned to the mashal, its allegorical application must be considered along with the fictional elements that are at play within it, and what should be believed at the simple level of the narrative. But the relevance of the mashal extends beyond its exegetical application, where theological significance lies in representing God as a familiar presence. It must also be understood contextually, taking into consideration the cultural and political influences of the day. The rabbinic methodology of using kings as models for God, and the specific characterizations
assigned to them by the Rabbis, gives us a good indication of the image of God being portrayed. Often the very antithesis of the first impression was the true message being presented. Drawing as it did on sometimes blunt anthropomorphic descriptions, the mashal became an important vehicle to translate the theology contained in the biblical accounts and talmudic stories into the day-to-day life and beliefs of the rabbinic audience, that largely scattered population of Jews outside of Israel following the destruction of the Temple. Their unqualified statements about God drawn from biblical sources, and present also in rabbinic teaching, dealt with his holiness, his immanence, and his loving care for his chosen people, virtually all with human language and descriptions that, almost by definition, were inadequate simply for their being human. In the process we discover that their images of the Deity are images recognizable to earth-bound creatures—they had created God in their own image.

Anthropomorphic usage by the Rabbis was both controversial and effective as a teaching tool. But did they themselves really believe in the images they so effectively created? Why would Rabbis have said that God is like humans when this comparison would seem to weaken the force of their meshalim? In our examination of the literature, and the historical context for the writing and teaching, we come to the conclusion that while many of the Rabbis of that period may indeed have embraced the human figures they assigned to God, their underlying intent was not dependent on graphic descriptions. It was not to create God in their image for that end. Rather, the methodology was one of creative language use that served specific and identifiable literary needs for a theological end, a way of exploring the nature of an immanent God who chose—needed—personal contact with his own Creation.
Chapter I

The Mashal Form in Rabbinic Literature

1: Its Characteristics and Application

The mashal, or parable, is an ancient literary tradition, and the most common narrative form used by the Rabbis in midrash to interpret the Torah. Parables are found in the Bible, and there seems to have existed a popular oral tradition of parabolic literature between the biblical and rabbinic periods, although very little has survived. Ironically, some of the earliest examples of rabbinic meshalim are those preserved in the parables attributed to Jesus in the three synoptic Gospels. There is little doubt that Jesus' parables are part of the larger tradition of meshalim which comprise midrashic and talmudic literature.

The mashal is a rhetorical device that works essentially through obliqueness, suggesting meanings to the audience indirectly and not always very explicitly. Historically, this often produced implications that could be exploited by the rabbis for the purpose of interpreting Torah. As the mashal became more popular in midrash, it took on a more stylized form in its language and themes. One of the most obvious illustrations of this process of conventionalization is the fact that most rabbinic meshalim use the device of the 'king mashal.' In these parables the protagonist is a king, while other characters in the parable are members of the royal court, and the kinds of situations portrayed in the narratives are frequently associated with a royal

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setting. The king mashal form will be the subject of fuller elaboration in the second part of this chapter. In the traditional mashal there are two standard parts. The first is the narrative, or mashal/parable itself. The second part, the nimshal, the solution or explanation, usually provides the context in which the parable is to be understood by the audience. The nimshal usually refers to a proof text from scripture which then is itself reinterpreted in light of the nimshal and the mashal preceding it. The mashal provides a point of entry into nearly every aspect of rabbinic literature and its interpretation. Just as a fable utilizes anthropomorphic animals or plants to portray aspects of human behaviour, a parable/mashal sets a parallel between imagined fictional events and a more immediate, real situation confronting the author’s audience. The task of understanding the parallel and its implication is left largely to the audience. Unlike a fable’s moral or a tale’s secret message, the parable is a narrative that actively involves its audience in the determination of the ‘solution’ or interpretation.

Parables and fables can be found in the literatures of most cultures throughout the world. The rabbinic mashal’s own tradition can be traced back to the ancient Near East, and is represented in the Hebrew Bible as well as in the New Testament. Starting points for parables and fables tend to be traditional cultures that possessed oral literary traditions. The Greek epic is perhaps the foremost example, described as a literary genre which is “an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose.” This aptly

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2 Ibid., from his Introduction, p. 36.
characterizes the mashal as well, its meaning being, like the fable, almost entirely context-specific: "You are fools to wish to rebel against Rome!" Rabbi Joshua tells his audience of contentious Jews. "Do not stick your heads into Rome's mouth a second time! You were lucky to have survived with your lives—'intact'—the first time!"⁵ This message of warning is the mashal's "ulterior purpose." However, most meshalim in rabbinic literature are preserved not in narrative contexts but in exegetical ones, as part of the study and interpretation of Scripture, otherwise referred to as midrash. They were collected into anthologies in which the Rabbis' biblical interpretations were eventually collected, after being transmitted orally from teacher to disciple.⁶ Thus it assumed its normative, standard form.

The root of the word mashal, as it appears in the Bible, relates to a word that seems to refer to any kind of language used in a special way: to figures of speech like metaphors or similes, to proverbs, and to allegories, and is not limited to the specific narrative forms now called parables or fables.⁷ Only in rabbinic literature does the word become a formal title for parables, although even there it retains its earlier meanings of allegory, metaphor, and proverb.⁸ The conventional translation of mashal as 'parable' derives from the Septuagint, which first renders mashal as parabole; somewhat later, the synoptic gospels also designate Jesus' mashal-like narratives as parabolai.⁹ Among ancient rhetoricians, the word parabole took on the sense of "an

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⁵ From a longer tale in Bereshit Rabbah 64.10, quoted in Stern (1991) p. 7.
⁶ Ibid.
⁹ For examples of the Septuagint's translation of mashal as parabole, see 1 Kings 5:12; Ezek. 17:2; and Ps. 78:2. However, the Septuagint also translates 'mashal' with other words: paroima, as "proverb" or "maxim," Prov. 1:1; thrulema, as "byword," Job 17:6; ainigma, as "riddle," Deut. 28:37; and threnos,
illustrative parallel," and eventually included narratives that serve as illustrations. Although the term parabole never appears in rabbinic literature, the midrashic mashal has also been understood by most scholars as a parable in the Greek rhetorical sense, if only because mashal scholarship has always been strongly influenced by Christian scholarship about the New Testament parables. Contemporary scholars see a definite connection between parable and metaphor, thus seeing Jesus' narratives as "extended metaphors" that usually explain their meanings within their narratives. In this view, the parable is not a mere text but rather what linguists call a "language event," something which creates a new reality merely by the act of being spoken (not unlike the way the Bible describes God as creating the universe). Given an emphasis such as this, Jesus' parables are seen as being virtual revelations of the Divine Word. This would not be a surprising definition in the writings of devout Christians, for whom Jesus' parables are revealed truth, but it is also a view implicit in much contemporary scholarship about the parables.

Of all its influences, the most important has been a general consensus among scholars that the parabolic structure ought to exclude allegory, even suggesting that the parable as a literary form is the opposite of allegory. Where individual parables seem to exhibit 'allegorical' characteristics, these have been labeled as additions made by later editors or redactors to the 'authentic original' text. In the case of rabbinic scholarship,

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the mashal's allegorical features have been interpreted by some scholars as evidence of some degeneration in the literary form. For Stern, however, terms like 'allegory' and 'parable' are not helpful in understanding the mashal. "Granted, if the term allegory is taken in its largest sense, to describe all discourse that is referential, then the mashal possesses allegorical features: the characters portrayed in its narratives, the deeds those characters perform, the situations they find themselves in—these all routinely refer in meshalim to something beyond themselves. But even if the mashal overlaps with allegory in this respect, it is not itself a mode of literary discourse as allegory is, a type of speech that says one thing and means another. Rather, the mashal is a literary-rhetorical form...employing techniques to persuade its audience of the truth of a specific message relating to an ad hoc situation. Even if a mashal's narrative personifies abstract concepts, entities, and relationships—God, the community of Israel, the covenant—those features of the mashal...exist only for the sake of enabling its audience to grasp for themselves the ulterior message that the mashal bears." If the mashal is only thought of as an account of human deeds and actions rather than as allegory or not-allegory, it would mean that a certain theological interpretation of the 'privileged language' of the parable is ignored. Those who prefer the claim that parable is not-allegory are expressing a desire for a word (perhaps, The Word) that exists in a realm beyond interpretations, and part of the surreal. On the other hand the concept of parable as metaphor may consider the parable as Logos.

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It is because the word parable has these kinds of theological and scholarly language definitions associated with it, that it may be easier for us just to use the Hebrew ‘mashal,’ especially since it is the term the Rabbis themselves use to describe parabolic narratives. With the term used that way, we can define the aspects according to definitions which best relate to the literature being considered here, recalling in particular that the mashal narrative often uses ambiguity. This is done by including within the text suggestive hints about just which meaning is to be understood by the audience, and allowing for some questioning of which possible meaning is more valid. In this way it cleverly manipulates its audience to read between the lines so as to arrive at the mashal’s ‘correct’ conclusion. The saying that God resides in the detail might be reapplied for the Rabbis in the use of the mashal, wherein God, or meaning, resides between its details, between the narrative and its nimshal/interpretation. Thus the story in a mashal/parable does not exemplify truth in itself, but simply alludes to it. Certainly this allows the freedoms of interpretation and teaching application which the Rabbis have jealously guarded in their creation and use of the mashal in midrashic writings. To examine further how this form relates to rabbinic literature, and serves a useful pedagogic purpose for the Rabbis in specific applications of the genre, we will now look more closely at one of the most popular forms of the mashal—the ‘king-mashal.'
"Mashal, lemah hadavar domeh, lemelech—A parable: To what can this be compared? To a king..." With this standardized opening phrase, the Rabbis have introduced to their audiences hundreds of midrashim about the relationship of human beings to God. The image of ‘God as King’ was popular in ancient Israel, as the biblical texts show, and rabbinic literature unhesitatingly adopted it for its teachings and aggadah. In our day it would not be so obviously suitable—the image of God as king is no longer evocative to most readers of the Bible. Politically the monarchy is no longer the powerful and pre-dominant system that it was in the ancient world. Therefore, we need to be conscious of how the Rabbis’ description of the image was heard by the contemporary audience. What the Israelites meant by calling their God a king—or the extent to which kingship imagery was projected onto him—should more appropriately be approached as metaphor, considering it along with some depiction of what human kingship was in ancient Israel. This helps us to better understand how the original audience would have responded to the image. Marc Brettler uses the analogy of the metaphor ‘my love is a rose’, pointing out that the illustration would be incomprehensible for someone who doesn’t know what a rose is, has never seen or smelled one.\footnote{Brettler, Marc Zvi, \textit{God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor} (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) p. 13.} We must remember that some of the biblical references to God as king
predate the Israelite monarchy\textsuperscript{17} and thus were not very likely the basis for the king metaphor in commentaries on those passages. The conception that gods were kings is documented in the literature of Israel’s neighbours\textsuperscript{18} and could have been borrowed from them. But the vast majority of biblical texts with reference to God as king are traditionally dated from after the establishment of the monarchy, although there is no evidence that in Israel the human king was generally patterned after God; however, in aggadic usage where common imagery is shared by God and the king in the mashal/parable, we see that human imagery—both anthropomorphic and anthropopathic—has been projected upon God.\textsuperscript{19}

If, as we suggested in the earlier section, the mashal form in general is fundamental to the study of rabbinic teaching on the human understanding of God, then the king-mashal is a specific demonstration of it, becoming a fixture in the literature. This literary form became so standardized that its usage extended beyond the specific teaching that required the God-king analogy for comprehension of the narrative. The stylistic phenomenon in which the protagonist conventionally became a king was widely employed, even for many king-meshalim that have nothing intrinsically royal about them. In these instances, the character of the king could easily have been replaced by an anonymous person without changing the mashal’s plot or meaning: a father who gets angry at his son might be anyone, a king or a commoner, as might a man hopelessly in love with his wife. But the use of a king as the conventional

\textsuperscript{17} Even allowing for the difficulty of establishing accurate dates for some biblical texts, there is considerable agreement that the song of Exodus 15 was composed in the late second millennium, thus being pre-monarchic; yet it concludes, ‘The Lord will reign for ever and ever’ (v. 18).
\textsuperscript{18} Brettler, p. 14, 5n.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., pp. 13-14. These will be examined in greater detail when we look at the specific usage of king-meshalim in a later chapter.
protagonist is not solely a matter of style in storytelling; typically, the character of the king symbolizes God. This symbolization derives from ancient Near Eastern traditions, and is already close to being a cliche in the Bible, as for example in Psalm 93:1-2: "The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; The Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity." Even though Israel as a nation had come late on the scene, for the psalmist her God had been King since before the creation of the world.

In midrashim and Jewish prayer a standard reference is to God as King of the universe (with the intimate second-person singular ‘atah/thou’ in the Hebrew)— Baruch atah, Adonai eloheinu, Melech ha-olam. The rabbinic experience of God is always a conscious personal relationship that allows human beings to address God as "Thou," especially in the berachah. Evoking the Divine name, whether in petition or praise, brought a sense of God’s nearness more than in a physical way. "Can you have a God nearer than that?" ask the Rabbis in telling of how God hears even a whispered prayer. "He that prays ought to regard himself as though the Shechinah (God) were in front of him, as it says, ‘I have set the Lord always before me’" (Psa. 16:2). It was expected that the people at large cultivate a sense of the immediate nearness of God, and the intimate ‘thou’ blessing for God as King was part of a daily practice.

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20 Stern, p. 19.
22 Sanhedrin 22a. The idea of “the whispered prayer” was incorporated in a halachic practice. It was forbidden for a person to cause his voice to be heard when he prays (Berachot 31a). “He that causes his voice to be heard when he prays,” declares a baraita, is among those of little faith, (and) he that raises his voice when he prays is among the false prophets (Berachot 24b). Rashi adds in a gloss on “those of little faith”—“As though the Holy One, blessed be he, does not hear a whispered prayer.” (Kadushin, p. 209).
According to some Rabbis, a blessing that does not designate God as king of the universe is not even a valid blessing. Yet the image of the king portrayed in the king-mashal is not the typical one from biblical tradition but rather seems to be modelled more on the Roman emperor—or if not on the emperor himself, then on his representative, the procurator or proconsul in Palestine. Structured in this way, and since they were frequently based on Greco-Roman affairs of the time, some meshalim are virtually unintelligible if one does not know the historical incidents to which their narratives allude. The many references in the meshalim to the larger world in which the Rabbis lived certainly show how familiar the Sages were with that world and its culture, and how creatively they were able to turn that knowledge of current affairs into teaching material for their imaginative narrative compositions. Although, as we have pointed out, many king-meshalim do not depend in any significant way on their protagonist being a king, it is still the case that when a king-mashal alludes to a fact or an incident that does not make sense in purely narrative terms, there is a high probability that behind the mashal lies some historical reference point—a tale about the emperor or his court that reached the Rabbis in some way, or an anecdote of some Roman law or custom, all without any particular historical significance, but

23 For the compulsory mention of kingship in the blessing/berachah, see J. Berachot 9.1, 12d; also Joseph Heinemann, Prayer in the Talmud, R. Sarason, trans. (Berlin, 1977) pp. 32-33, and esp. 94, 26n.


nevertheless holding some interest for the audience and the Rabbis who then wove it into another instructional mashal.²⁶

The most common structure in meshalim is the simple past-tense narrative that follows the conventional opening as described at the beginning of this section.²⁷ After this opening comes the mashal's story line, which is followed by the nimshal, or explanation/solution.²⁸ Less commonly, the variation 'Melech basar vadam—A king of flesh-and-blood' is used as the opening, especially where current events figured prominently or when the structure was used, for example, to condemn the Roman imperial cult or to refute its claims for the divinity of the Roman emperor.²⁹ Such antithetical comparisons between God and the human protagonist are not unusual with this latter form, as illustrated in this mashal as a commentary on Exod. 15:1:

A king of flesh-and-blood (melech basar vadam) enters a province, and everyone praises him—that he is mighty, when he really is weak; that he is wealthy, when he is poor; that he is wise, when he is foolish; that he is merciful, when he is cruel; that he is a fair judge, when he doesn't have any of these qualities. Nonetheless everyone flatters him. But he who spoke and thereby created the world is not so: "I will sing to God" (Exod. 15:1)—that he is mighty, as it is said, "the great, the mighty, and the awesome God" (Deut. 10:17).³⁰

In this example, the mashal's irony lies precisely in the understanding that the flattery paid to the emperor in the mashal is modelled in part upon the conventional praises sung to the gods.³¹ The lesson about God that is being taught by the Rabbis is obvious to the listener; a clear distinction is made between the characteristics of the king of

²⁶ Stern, p. 20.
²⁷ The terminology itself became so standardized that sometimes it was shortened, in the writing or telling, simply to mashal le, or even to just le.
²⁸ The nimshal also begins with a formulaic kakh, usually translated as "similarly," "likewise," or "so."
²⁹ For more such examples see E.E. Urbach, The Sages (Jerusalem, 1975) pp. 87-90.
³⁰ Recorded in the Mechilta (Shiria, 1).
³¹ Stern, p. 23.
flesh-and-blood and the great, mighty, and awesome God of Israel. A careful delineation of character traits is made, setting up the king of flesh-and-blood as the supposed ideal, only to have him compared with a greater king who outscores him at every turn.\textsuperscript{32} To fully realize the significance of this teaching within this mashal, one must look at the biblical verses that serve as the contextual base for this teaching. Exodus 15:1 begins the Song of Moses, part of a victory celebration following the escape of the Israelites from the Egyptian armies who drowned in the sea of reeds. The obvious strength and seeming invincibility of this massive military force—especially against the helpless and unarmed escapees—is suddenly reversed. Horses and chariots against pedestrians with backpacks and animal caravans would not seem to be an even pairing of might ("...that he is mighty, when he really is weak"). If one of the measures of the wealth of a nation is the number of slaves it has, Egypt ranked high, with hundreds of thousands of forced labourers busily constructing edifices for the empire. Yet it was unable to hold on to that massive economic resource, losing in a weekend a workforce which also stripped its host citizens of huge amounts of gold and silver before it left ("...that he is wealthy when he is poor"). The wisdom and learning of the Egyptians was well known, yet their wisest advisors and magicians were outflanked by the messenger of the God of the foreigners within their gates ("...that he is wise when he is foolish"). It is interesting to see in this mashal the rabbinic reference to flattery to describe the praise of the human king by the crowds. The term itself implies a degree of insincerity, intended to impress someone but spoken with a view of getting something in return.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
When the mashal lists each of the presumed strengths of the great rulers and empires, as measured by temporal standards, the kings of flesh-and-blood come up short in the comparison with the attributes of the “great, the mighty, and the awesome God” of Israel (Deut. 10:17). This latter proof text is taken from a section in which Moses has been reviewing aloud the wonderful things that God has done for his chosen people. He asks rhetorically, “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord... (v. 12). Why? “The Lord set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today.” (v. 15.) How comforting a message to those who had almost forgotten their chosenness, that there was a time when foreign despots were overthrown. Since the Israelites’ God and King is so obviously superior in every way to their temporal leaders—Egyptians then, Romans now, or other political powers throughout their history—they received reassurance through the message, anthropomorphically couched, of the mashal.

Such stereotyping, as that of the king in the mashal above, is typical of the formulaic language and themes that characterize many types of ancient oral literature. Most of these types have the same rhetorical structures, narrative motifs, similar phrases and narrative functions appearing in one mashal after another, even though they still provide unique interpretations of the biblical verse, or of theme being elaborated upon. A simple parallel—if not totally equivalent—might be drawn with the common fairy tales and fables with which we are familiar from our youth; from their standard opening, “Once upon a time...” to the good/white hat vs. evil/black hat antics of the characters, or moral-building narrative, through to the closing “And they lived happily
ever after”—it is always a recognizable story structure, enhanced for the listener through standardization and repetition, allowing variable content to be introduced within the familiar formula, and thus be more easily presented and understood. The narrative of a mashal is itself about interpretation, and as such is importantly context-specific, with historical events and characters used symbolically to produce understandable reference points to aid in the audience’s comprehension. It is good teaching methodology to start with the familiar and move to the unfamiliar. Parallels with known figures aid in the comprehension of the unknown, and models of acceptable character standards are more defined when set alongside the unsavoury; whiteness is more evident when laid alongside shades of off-white. Thus the narrative provides the model for interpretive responses, and serves as much more than a purely rhetorical function—it is also clearly exegetical, drawing out of its original biblical context a particular message and pedagogical application by the Rabbis as we have seen in the Exodus example above.

In an example that relates to the difficult plural words in Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image,” there are king-meshalim from Midrash Rabbah which use blunt anthropopathic language—God is displeased, indignant, and grieved:

With whom did he take counsel? R. Joshua b. Levi said, He took counsel with the works of heaven and earth, like a king who had two advisors without whose knowledge he did nothing whatsoever. R. Samuel b. Nahman said: He took counsel with the works of each day, like a king who had an associate without whose knowledge he did nothing. R. Ammi said: He took counsel with his own heart. It may be compared to a king who had a palace built by an architect, but when he saw it, it did not please him: with whom is he to be

33 An interpretation of the word, parabole, is ‘to lay alongside.’ The typical parable/mashal compares a character or situation which is familiar with something unfamiliar—‘laying them side by side’—in the expectation that the former will cast light on the latter as an aid to comprehension.
35 Translated by Freedman and Simon, pp. 56-57.
indignant? Surely with the architect! Similarly, *And it grieved him at his heart* (Gen. 6:6). R. Jassi said: This may be compared to a king who did some business through an agent and suffered loss: with whom is he to be indignant?

The implications of this story are far-reaching; firstly, Divine omniscience seems to be cast aside in the references to God seeking the counsel of others—at least two of whom are of a standing *without whose knowledge he did nothing whatsoever*. Even taking counsel with his own heart, as R. Ammi offered, seems to allow the superiority of the emotional aspects over the purely intellectual in the physical act of creation. Indeed, the emotion of grieving is the biblical reference point for this mashal (Gen: 6:6) when God must face the unimaginable “error of Creation” which seems to have gone so wrong. A delicate matter is raised now in that God not only needs the advice of others, then presumably acts on their advice, but also ends up blaming them for the outcome that displeases him. None of these characteristics reflects well on the image of God as all-powerful, acting alone in Creation (whether or not with the advice of ‘counsellors’), and producing something that he himself had already pronounced “very good” when it was completed (Gen. 1:31).

To further explore this situation, we will move beyond a specific discussion of the king-meshalim as a literary category, to a background explanation for rabbinic use of these meshalim—indeed all uses of anthropomorphic language—for their teaching. Two specific areas selected are those of Immanence and the presence of the Spirit of God within a person, both being critical for the Rabbis at this point in their history. These will be the subject of the following chapter.
As functional as the king-mashal was for teaching, the Rabbis were not always able to use it without introducing problems of interpretation: in fact, a fundamental flaw in the use of the king-mashal model of storytelling is the situation in which the king/emperor role itself is often unsatisfactory when used to refer to God. The very act of using a flesh-and-blood model to describe the almighty and incomparable God of Israel meant that quite imperfect images of God were being created with anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terminology. The Rabbis were certainly not the first to employ human language to depict divinity in ancient Jewish literature—even their own prophets outdid them at that—but the Rabbis did intensify the tendencies of their inherited tradition. Their own imaginations were frequently even bolder than those of their predecessors, continuing to refer to God as having human limbs, organs, and feelings, although these statements are virtually formulaic and idiomatic. Curiously, in many of the meshalim found in Midrash, the Rabbis allowed some of the most unsavoury aspects of the human king to be used in their portrayal of God in this literary genre of the parable. "Far from being generalized representations—mere personifications of God's sovereignty in the world—these portraits of God are vivid depictions of recognizably human figures who frequently act in shockingly undivine ways, at times exhibiting a pathetic vulnerability, at other times acting despotically and unjustly toward their subjects and inferiors." In the Greek world that surrounded the Rabbis, even divinity did not connote decency. Homer attributed to the gods all kinds of shameful things such as theft, adultery, and mutual deception. Plato

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36 Such as when God is said to point with his finger or swear by his right hand, or when a person is said to be worthy of 'greeting the face of God's Presence.' For God pointing, see Mechilta Pisha 2; for God swearing, Eikhah Rabbah 2:3; for greeting the face of God's Presence, B. Sanhedrin 42a.
denounced the corruptibility of the gods, from whom in Greek belief the wicked could secure immunity from punishment by means of entreaties and offerings. The conception that jealousy or envy was inherent in the very nature of the gods was repulsive to both Plato and Aristotle. Abraham Heschel writes: “The realm of religion is one thing, and the realm of moral striving is another. It was at a late date in history, when man became aware of the majesty and eminence implied in the concept of the divine, that man undertook to remove from this concept all that contradicts propriety. Sometimes the simple insight was enough: What decency forbids man is likewise unbecoming to God.”

The need for anthropomorphic language, the language of the common people, to describe things of the world of spirituality, was the root base for the development of the mashal format—to provide a system of simple storytelling with a profound underlying message. In spite of the drawbacks and limitations of the anthropomorphisms of king-meshalim, as examples, it was clear that there was no other way to communicate; there was no God-language to serve the purpose, and no apparent alternative for reaching the audience that was the Rabbis’ chief concern. Among their challenges was the urgency of developing a strategy to overcome two major concerns of the post-Temple period: the loss of confidence in an immanent God-protector, and the rise of a new Jewish sect that would soon grow into dominance—Christianity. If ever there was a need for language to treat divine matters on an earthly level, it was at this time.

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39 Ibid.
Chapter II

Anthropomorphic Language in Rabbinic Literature for Teachings on Divine Immanence and the Indwelling Spirit

The mashal/parable format which we have been reviewing is a literary treatment of the storytelling methodology of the Rabbis. Using anthropomorphic language of the king of flesh-and-blood to create a character that represented the Divine became a teaching tool that served the purpose of providing a comprehensible form of learning about more difficult theological themes. But when the king in the Hebrew narrative refers to God, how appropriate is an image of the Divine if the people are reminded by the story of their own king’s very human characteristics and failings? Surely the familiar tales and mythologies about the antics of the gods would be the first thing to come to mind. Would not some other image, even if fictionally contrived so as to demonstrate ideals and morals, better serve the rabbinic goals? Perhaps so, but the particular manner in which the Rabbis represented the king’s emotional and physical traits in their parables actually reveals the image of God they wished to portray, especially when the king was used as negative counter-image. An important example of this could be seen in the period after the destruction of the Temple, a dramatic watershed of cultural and spiritual self-identity for the Jews. The Rabbis were confronted with the critical challenge of reinstating in the minds of the Jewish people the teaching that their God is an immanent Deity, present and accessible, and not one who, by all appearances, had abandoned them. The destruction had been devastating for the Jewish people generally, and for the Rabbis very particularly. The difficulties
in maintaining a spiritual direction over the people seemed insuperable: "the sundered covenant, life without atonement, the abandonment of future hope, the judgment of the Nations, God’s silence. The Rabbis had somehow to neutralize the destruction and defuse its subversive implications.... In meeting this task the Rabbis had nothing but their own interpretive powers to rely on."40 Although in previous eras there had always been the expectation of a new revelation from God, they now lived in an age when, they believed, the channel of prophecy had been closed and the Holy Spirit, once dwelling in the magnificent Temple that was left in ruins, seemed exiled from earth. Even their own land was being denied them. Their interpretive powers needed to be brought to the fore as they grappled with the fundamental questions of faith.

Although the Temple was destroyed, the sacred texts remained. "By using certain authorized hermeneutical procedures, it was possible for the Rabbis to release [the] meanings...which the pressures of contemporary events made it most necessary to release."41 These current events would have to serve again as the familiar base of the narratives in order to introduce the teachings on God’s immanence. In the face of their people’s deep feelings of despair and Divine rejection, the Rabbis told stories that portrayed the God of Israel as an intimate friend and one who continued to be a Father figure—an immanent God. In these circumstances, the use of the king-mashal form might have complicated the matter since typical personal aloofness on the part of flesh-and-blood rulers, combined with their deliberate separation from the daily life and routines of the masses, produced a somewhat negative image when transferred to

41 Ibid., p. 50.
God. This image made him seem more distant rather than approachable, transcendent rather than immanent. Such an understanding of God was inconsistent with the Rabbis’ own awareness and experience of him. God continued to be overwhelmingly real and present for the Rabbis now, just as he had been for the prophets who communicated with God in earlier times. They never spoke of him as from a distance. The attributes of God that they proclaimed were real, with vital challenges and direct commandments rather than timeless philosophical notions detached from his Being. In their teaching they tried to demonstrate that closeness.

Several phases of rabbinic instruction on Divine immanence came about through the use of the word “Memra,” found only in the Targumic literature. The Targumic sense of Memra was something new, although with some resemblance to the rabbinic connotation of Shechinah. It started to be used to explain the relations between the Divine and human beings, in part it seems, to avoid using anthropomorphisms to speak about God. But the problem is that the Targum itself makes use of many anthropomorphisms: not only such obvious translations as “God called,” or “God spoke” in numerous verses. Consider the translator Onkelos’ rendering of Exod. 14:31 as “Israel saw the might of the great hand”—clearly an anthropomorphism. Similarly, in Exod. 31:18 he translates “with the finger of God,” and his treatment of Deut. 4:34

43 The Rabbinic equivalent is Ma’amar but it is rarely employed; and even when it is, it carries a significance different from Memra. Instead, it seems to have the ordinary meaning of “word” without including any theological reference at all. It should also be noted that “Memra” does not always have a theological meaning, sometimes referring just to ordinary words of humans. (Abelson, The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature, p. 150)
44 The Targumim are a branch of Rabbinic literature; both Onkelos and Jonathan ben Uziel were pupils of Talmudic doctors, although their exact identities and their relations to the works that bear their names remain in dispute, it is generally agreed that they were part of the Palestinian academies.
is also literal, “with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.” 45 On the other hand, there are many instances where the Targum inserts the word Memra (or Shechinah on occasion) even when there is no danger of anthropomorphism. Nahmanides highlights the example of Exod. 16:8, “Your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord,” which is given as, “against the Memra of the Lord,” even though there is no necessity for such an adjustment, assuming the whole intent of the terminology was to avoid anthropomorphic language. Similarly in Gen. 9:16-17 and Exod. 31:17, the rainbow and the Sabbath respectively are spoken of as a sign between humanity and the Memra. From examples such as these, Nahmanides insists there was no systematic avoidance of anthropomorphism in the Targum literature, and that perhaps the Memra had for them some deep mystical or further theological significance, something we will not attempt to investigate here. 46

This critical point in their history, when God’s presence in the Temple seemed to have been swept away by the Romans, was not the time to offer an exposition of the nature of God, but rather to give an exposition of God’s insight into human beings and his ongoing concern for them. So the Rabbis disclosed attitudes of God rather than ideas about God. He became a God like them, created in their image, in their own best

45 Maimonides says: “Onkelos the proselyte, who was thoroughly acquainted with the Hebrew and Chaldaic languages, made it his task to oppose the belief in God’s corporeality. Accordingly any expression employed in the Pentateuch in reference to God and in any way implying corporeality, he paraphrases in consonance with the context” (from his Moreh, chapter 27). Abelson comments that the implication thus is that the round-about phrase with Memra would have, as its sole object, the avoidance of anthropomorphism. Chapter 66 of the Moreh is devoted to an exposition of the phrase “finger of God” in Exod. 31:18. The phrase is identical with “written by the word of God,” and if the latter phrase had been used it would have been equal to “written by the will and desire of God (ｙｏｚו)” But this just seems to raise other complications. Once you interpret these human acts of God in terms of will and desire on the part of God that such and such should take place, the thesis of what is or is not anthropomorphism becomes hopelessly contorted. Maimonides does admit that “it would have been more reasonable to say ‘written by the Memra of God.’” but even that is not a very helpful solution. (Abelson, pp. 168-169)
46 Abelson, p. 152.
conception of themselves—an immanent God of mercy, compassion, justice, love, and joy who was quite unlike their experience of their own kings, especially the despised foreign ones who were part of their daily personal experience. The rabbinic God-understanding was not the result of a theoretical inquiry or search for alternatives about his Being and attributes. Nor did they just have theories or “ideas” of God the King. What they had was an understanding of his holiness, and they would try to unveil for their students what was spiritual and essentially indefinable in its own terms, using whichever models could best be constructed along familiar human lines of comprehension.\textsuperscript{47} Ideals of holiness originated in the conception of the kingdom, the central idea of rabbinic theology, and in Israel’s consciousness of its close relationship to its God, the King. “Broadly speaking,” says Solomon Schechter, “this holiness may be but another word for \textit{imitatio Dei}, a duty intimately associated with Israel’s close contact with God. The most frequent name for God in Rabbinic literature is ‘the Holy One,’ with Israel itself being called holy. But the holiness of Israel was dependent on the people acting in such a way as to become God-like. ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord am holy’” (Lev. 19:2).\textsuperscript{48} The old rabbinic Sage Abba Saul took this to mean that “Israel is the \textit{familia} (suite or bodyguard) of the King, so it is incumbent on them to imitate the King in everything they do.”\textsuperscript{49} Holiness, \textit{kedushah}, as the rabbis conceived and experienced it, was not necessarily associated with the unusual or the awesome. On the contrary, it could be associated with the ordinary and the familiar, and the Rabbis apparently sought for every opportunity to transform the

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Holiness, according to Abba Saul, is identical with ‘Imitation of God’. The nature of this imitation is defined by him thus: “\textit{I and he,} that is like unto him (God). As he is merciful and gracious, so be thou (man) merciful and gracious.” (Schechter, pp. 200-201)
commonplace into the significant, thus the inclusion of details of daily living as part of their rituals.\footnote{Kadushin, Max, \textit{The Rabbinic Mind} (New York: Bloch, 1952) p. 169.} \"The aspect of \textit{kadushah} which is concerned with personal conduct,\" says Schechter, \"is nothing else than the imitation of God.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 168-169.} From almost every page of the rabbinic texts it is evident that the Rabbis \textit{experienced} God. The actual experience of God was personal; the ways or modes of imitating God, however, were common to the group as a whole.\footnote{Being common to the entire group, the modes of God-experience are expressed in value-concepts, among them such concepts as prayer, repentance, the Study of Torah. (Kadushin, p. 194)}

This imitation was to draw people and God closer together, overcoming the normal experience of maintaining distance between royalty and subjects. The task of the Rabbis' storytelling was to make the seeming problem of a transcendent God an appealing attribute, insofar as recognition of this characteristic lifted him above the negative image of the flesh-and-blood models. At the same time, it focussed on his \textit{pathos}, the caring immanence and presence in the world that, quite unlike that of their own rulers, heard and responded to their cries of despair and abandonment. The Temple was no longer there for them, but God was; and the matter of his pathos was treated in the teachings that inevitably incorporated a fair amount of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terminology.\footnote{There may be a question of legitimacy of applying the term anthropopathy to statements about the divine pathos. Heschel explains that the term applies properly to religions in which there is no discrepancy between imagination and expression: the gods are conceived of as human beings and described thus—in their appearance, their way of life, their passions, and their occupations. In contrast, the biblical person's imagination knows nothing about God, how he lives and what occupies him. He is God and not human (Hos. 11:9); no one can see him and live (Exod. 33:20); even seraphim cover their faces lest they see him (Isa. 6:2). \"Who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord?\" (Psalm 89:6); \"To whom then will you liken God, Or what likeness compare with him?\" (Isa. 40:18).}
Mashal narratives modelled on the lives and struggles of human kings were also used to respond to the paradox that pathos/immanence represents. For example, how could the God who created the universe be affected by what a tiny particle of his creation does or fails to do? It may at times have been easier to associate God with the idea of absolute majesty, with unmitigated grandeur, with omnipotence and perfection. God is often thought of as a First Cause that started the world’s mechanism working, and which then continued to function according to its own inherent laws and processes, making it even more inconceivable that such a Supreme Being should be involved in the affairs of human existence. Furthermore, if God is a Being of absolute self-sufficiency, then the entire world outside him must be irrelevant to him, leading to the obvious implication that God has no need of a world, and that there is nothing humans can do to add to his excellence. Aristotle stated that “One who is self-sufficient can have no need of the service of others, nor of their affection, nor of social life, since he is capable of living alone. This is especially evident in the case of a god. Clearly, since he is in need of nothing, God cannot have need of friends, nor will he have any.” Philosophical theologians maintained, therefore, that while humans are dependent upon the Supreme Being, that Being has no need of them and remains aloof from their affairs.

This was in sharp contrast to what the Rabbis understood and taught about prophetic thinking. To the biblical writers, and the Rabbis later, the relationship of the world to the transcendent was amply demonstrated by the participation/pathos of God in the world. Rather than self-sufficiency, it is God’s concerned worldly involvement that

characterizes his relationship to humans. Unlike the Greek writings, the Jewish biblical accounts begin with God addressing human beings, and entering into covenant with them—Israel's God is in need of them. A Supreme Being who is apathetic and indifferent to humans may denote an idea, but not the living God of Israel. The Rabbis vigorously argued against those who prooftexted, “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill” (Zeph. 1:12); “The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land” (Ezek. 8:12); “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God” (Isa. 40:27). God was portrayed in the rabbinic teachings in all his grandeur, majesty, and power without being tainted by other attributes of the flesh-and-blood kings of the parables that left them aloof and distant. Since human beings could never be regarded as divine, there was no danger that the language of pathos would distort the difference between God and human beings. The less attractive model of an ‘immanent’ human king, who for the Jews could never be thought of as divine in the Greek or Roman manner, could not detract from the image of God as king as portrayed by the Rabbis.

What sorts of ideas were present in the rabbinic mind which anthropomorphic words were supposed to convey? The statements about pathos were not a compromise—ways of accommodating higher meanings to the lower level of human understanding. They were rather the accommodation of words to higher meanings, anthropopathic words of psychological import that were endowed with a theological connotation.

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58 In chapter five we will discuss the question of whether or not the Rabbis really believed that God had the human characteristics and emotions that were so vividly described in their meshalim. Suffice it to say here that they were intent on using the anthropomorphic descriptions fully in order to project the image of God's immanence they required for teaching.
Biblical expressions of divine emotions are always morally conditioned and morally required. It is in such anthropopathic expressions, Heschel believes, that the religious consciousness experiences a sense of superhuman power rather than a conception of resemblance to humanity. Nowhere in the Bible is a human being characterized as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abundant in love and truth, keeping love to the thousandth generation. Pathos is a thought that bears a resemblance to an aspect of divine reality as related to the world of man.⁶⁰

During the period after the loss of the Temple there was a second impelling reason for the Rabbis to redouble their efforts to compose the parable stories that would reassure the Jewish people once again of their centrality in God’s eyes. The need to establish a sense of his immanence was critical, but they also had to deal with the rise and impact of the religious movement that developed into Christianity. Since the period following the destruction is our reference point for this example of rabbinic adaptation of the message to accommodate the needs of their constituency, it should be recalled that this period also coincides with the “parting of the ways” between Jesus’ reform movement and Pharisaic Judaism which had survived the political and religious turmoil of the times.⁶¹ It was essential for the Rabbis to respond to the growing

⁶⁰ Heschel (1962), p. 51. As a theological category, it is a genuine insight into God’s relationship to humans, rather than a projection of human traits into divinity, as found for example in the images of the gods and goddesses of mythology.

⁶¹ While a specific date cannot be specified beyond which Jewish-Christian relations were “irrevocably altered, the evidence suggests that proximity and distance, coexistence and confrontation, are to be found throughout the period” [i.e., 70-170 C.E.] (Stephen G. Wilson, Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70-170 C.E., Fortress, 1995). While challenging some of the premises, Mary C. Boys notes J.D.G. Dunn’s contention that three “partings” can be identified: the first happened over the Temple, the second in regard to Gentile mission (involving covenantal election), and the third with the affirmation of Jesus as the divine Word-made-flesh (Boys: Has God Only One Blessing? Paulist Press, p. 153). Scholarship indicates clear evidence of some Christians and Jews continuing to worship together with a certain regularity over several centuries, indicating that the ‘split’ was not a clearcut historical event. No matter; the period under discussion in this study was a time of Jewish determin-
awareness in the Jewish community that Christian preachers were openly associating the loss of the Temple to the Jews' loss of God's preferential treatment. They argued that God was withdrawing from his chosen people, separating himself first from the Holy of Holies, and also by withdrawing the presence of the Shechinah. The Rabbis could not stand idly by and have the Christian teaching of the personal infilling of the Holy Spirit further aggravate the corporate depression of the Jews who had not only lost their Temple but also their land at the hands of the Romans.

The question before them was, Could Judaism show that during an epoch more or less contemporaneous with Christ and the Apostolic Age, its adherents too had experiences of a Divine Presence filling them and accompanying them wherever they went? There has been an impression that the Jewish theological thinkers and teachers of the Scriptures—Hebrew as well as New Testament—concentrated their work almost exclusively on the transcendence of God. Only within later Pauline and Johannine Christianity did there arise the mystical teachings on the Holy Spirit as God's dwelling in a person, thus making unity with God possible. This Christian interpretation was presented as the only way to bridge the gulf between humanity and God. It may well be that this development occurred in large part because of the rabbinic understanding of angels at the time. The argument of the Christian preachers was that, in post-prophetic times, Jewish theories of the nature and function of angels were devised as a means for bridging the chasm between humans and God.

ation to fight influences that threatened their beliefs and challenged their right of access to God, the issue being reviewed here.
Abelson, p. 12.
Quite possibly attributable to the Jewish need to avoid direct use of God's name, since usage could be construed as being synonymous with irreverence. Angels bearing messages negated the need for God to be addressed directly.
since from Christian analysis of the Hebrew Scriptures, God seemed to have lost immediate contact with his chosen people.\(^{64}\) There were enough proof texts to support that view, such as when Isaiah wrote that God “sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in” (Isa. 40:22). But rabbinic writings did not consider the Hebrew Scriptures to be so exclusively transcendental. In fact, the immanent view could also be defended from the Scriptures with a Jewish doctrine of the Spirit which, although undeveloped, is present in many Psalms of praise, as well as in the story of Job. This idea is also expressed in the rabbinic usages of the terminology of Shechinah and Holy Spirit.

The Rabbis hesitated to describe God as mixing too freely with human beings; however, not addressing the Deity by name was not intended to discount the belief that God had a special closeness to the Jewish people.\(^{65}\) The doctrines of angels, frequent references to the spirit of God and to the Holy Spirit, and similar hints to the immanence of God—all these contributed to the subsequent development of the rabbinic doctrines of Shechinah and Holy Spirit, and not only Christian parallel concepts as an influence on Judaism. “Even if Paul had never lived,” Abelson proposes, “the Jew would still have been the heir to the belief in a Father that indwells

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\(^{64}\) Among the more persistent statements against Judaism is the assertion of the transcendentalism of the rabbinic God, and his remoteness from people. “That a world of ingenuity is spent to prove the absence of the mediatorial idea in rabbinic theology is a sign not of its acceptance of our close relationship with God,” says Schechter, “but of its failure to establish the missing link between heaven and earth. Sayings of a fantastic nature, as for instance, when a Rabbi speaks of God’s abode in heaven, with its various partitions; epithets for God, such as Heaven or Supreme, which ancient piety accepted for the purpose of avoiding the name of God ‘being uttered in idleness’, terms expressive of his providence and sublime holiness, as the Holy One, blessed be he, the King, the Lord of the World, or the Master of all Creation—all these are brought as evidence of the great distance which the rabbinic Jews must have felt between themselves and their God.” (Schechter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology)

\(^{65}\) Abelson, p. 14.
him and the universe." This counters to a large extent the detrimental comparisons often made between the *inwardness* of the Christian faith and the *outwardness* of traditional Judaism, wherein the "righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees" is set over against the *inwardness* seen to be the distinctive feature of Christianity. The implication was that this righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees was merely "an external punctiliousness" in ceremonial observances that was not heart-felt, nor implied any spiritual content. The inaccuracy in this assessment is pointed out by Schechter who admits that while Judaism does have "a good deal of the outward yoke about it" it clearly emphasizes the necessity of the inward call. "To the Jew, God [is] at one and the same time above, beyond and within the world, its soul and its life."

The very reference to a Jew's obedience to the smallest details of everyday life, a typical legalistic charge against Judaism, itself indicates that it regarded nothing as being too humble to come within the purview of their God. For the Rabbis that is not a doctrine of transcendence, but immanence!

The rabbinic consciousness of God exemplified in these instances is undeniably mystical in character. Max Kadushin points out that one's daily contacts and activities are what give rise to this awareness of God. But this is only one of the

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66 Ibid.
67 Christian theologians have long been accused of fomenting this attitude among their students, by attempting to show that the predominance of legalism in Jewish theology was so overwhelming that it crushed God under its oppressive burden, removing him entirely from the world and leaving him almost unattainable for the Jew. This however flies in the face of the reality of synagogue worshippers regularly addressing themselves directly to God as Father in heaven, and not through some mediator Memra or Logos. (Schechter, pp. 37-38)
68 Kadushin, Max, *The Rabbinic Mind*, (New York, 1952) pp. 214 ff. According to Kadushin, the rabbinic experience of God is a phenomenon associated with normal functioning of the value-concepts. God's love and God's justice are value-concepts and are represented in rabbinic literature by genuine conceptual terms. But ideas like omniscience, God's omnipotence, God's omnipresence, are not represented by conceptual terms. This is a reflection of the way these ideas are employed in rabbinic literature. They are not value-concepts but are among what can be characterized as auxiliary ideas. It is
characteristics of normal mysticism. In the example which taught of God hearing even a whispered prayer, the Rabbis ask, "Can you have a God nearer than that?" This question contains the idea of God's omnipresence, but the relevant aspect is God's nearness in prayer, not the idea of God's omnipresence. Philo, a first-century contemporary of Paul whose Greek philosophical leanings often left him on the margins of current Jewish thought nevertheless wrote extensively on the question of immanence and God's relationship to the Jewish people. He did not forget the distinctively Jewish doctrine of God's fatherhood, and understood that God fills the universe, as seen in his curious interpretation of Genesis 3:9, "For since you have thought that God was walking in the garden, and was surrounded by it, learn now that in this you are mistaken, and hear from God who knows all things that most true statement that God is not in any one place. For he is not surrounded by anything, but he does himself surround everything.... For even the whole world would not be a worthy place or habitation for God, since he is a place to himself, and he himself is full of himself, and he himself is sufficient for himself, filling up and surrounding everything else which

highly indicative of rabbinic literature that the ideas of God's omnipotence and omniscience, for example, lack abstract conceptual representations in those writings. If rabbinic religion were a kind of religious philosophy, there would have been an attempt to coordinate all ideas, including the auxiliary ideas (which indeed later medieval Jewish philosophy did try to do). But rabbinic religion, not being a religious philosophy, had no occasion to speak of these ideas in any abstract manner. (Kadushin)

Ibid., pp. 220-221. There are also other expressions of God's omnipresence, such as the idea that God is the makom/place of the world. In the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 39a), Rabbi Gamliel is asked by an infidel how many Shechinah there are in existence, since according to Jewish belief wherever ten men are gathered together there is the Shechinah. Gamliel replied that the Shechinah is God, who is everywhere. 'There is only one sun but it can light up every corner of the universe. How much more so then that the one and only God makes his presence known and felt everywhere.' Genesis Rabbah 48:9 says: "Why is God called a 'dwelling-place'? (Psa. 90:1) Because he is the dwelling-place of the world, and the world is not his dwelling-place." (Cited in Abelson, p. 109)

"Philo gives us a Greek skeleton, and clothes it with a blend of Greek and Hebrew flesh. He was too devoted a lover of Jewish thought to give the OT any disparagement in his writings, but he presses it into a framework of philosophy which is essentially Greek. And the allegorizing process enables him to give the appearance of unity and consistency to his expositions of Scriptural doctrine." (Abelson, p. 66)

His many references to an immanent God probably result from Stoic influence, but may also have come from his studies of Palestinian Midrash as a result of his visits to Jerusalem.
is deficient in any respect, or deserted, or empty. But he himself is surrounded by nothing else, as being himself one and the Universe.” This is consistent with rabbinic teaching on Immanence: “[God] is the place of the world, and the world is not his place.”

The consciousness of relationship to God, which is incommunicable by itself, thus becomes something that can be expressed or suggested. It can be expressed particularly when concepts such as God’s love and justice are concretized in prayers. Thus rabbinic berachot and prayers played a tremendous role in the spiritual life that enabled the ordinary person as well as the spiritual leader to express the consciousness of relationship to God. The recitation of a prayer has the effect of making that consciousness more acute, even evoking it.73 Rabbinic religion was experiential—God’s love, his justice, prayer, are all aspects of that normal experience. The concepts of rabbinic religion were not the result of deliberate conceptualization but of experience.74 Experiencing God’s immanence was the antidote for the sense of loss and abandonment felt by the Jewish people, further threatened by Christian theological challenges. The incorporation of anthropomorphistic language into the concepts of the rabbinic stories was a necessary form of teaching to convey the immediacy of the message to a people who were reaching out for comfort and reassurance.

73 Kadushin, pp. 264-272.
74 Ibid., p. 222.
Anthropomorphism—the attribution of a human form, human characteristics, or human behaviour to deities—is a normal phenomenon in virtually every primitive and ancient religion. Jewish literary sources from the Bible to the aggadah and midrashim, contain widespread use of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic expressions, the latter referring to the attribution of human emotions to a deity or object of worship. An obviously anthropomorphic expression is found right at the beginning of the biblical text, with reference to God as saying, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” There are references to ‘seeing’ God, and other biblical verses contain clear references to an apparent anthropomorphic God while the limbs of the human body frequently serve as allegorical descriptions of the acts of God as perceived by man. This concept is present, explicitly and implicitly, throughout the Scriptures. An anthropologist or a philosopher might say that human beings were not

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75 Definition from Encarta (World English Dictionary, 1999) Microsoft Corporation.
76 Anthropomorphism and anthropopathy generally are not interchangeable terms, but in the interests of avoiding pedantic repetitiousness of terminology in this paper, the term anthropomorphism will often be used alone where it should be clear to the reader that the differences between the physical and the psychical or emotional aspects are not at issue, and where either or both terms illustrate the point.
77 As for example, Exodus 24:10-11, “[Moses and Aaron...] saw the God of Israel,... they saw God, and they ate and drank,” and Numbers 12:8 where God says, “With [Moses] I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord” (NIV).
created in the image of God, but rather we seem to have created God in our image. The idea expressed here is not a new concept, nor attested in the Bible; in fact the Hebrew Scriptures even contradict it frequently. This chapter will identify several examples of anthropomorphic usage selected from the biblical and Jewish traditions as preserved in Midrash and other literature.

Beginning with the basic anthropomorphisms of the Genesis Creation story as noted above, it was not difficult for the Rabbis to expand their storytelling accounts with a range of other proof texts; each time new descriptions of a human attribute or organ were identified in Scripture, subsequent embellishments of God’s actions were based on those findings. Laypersons and prophets alike, it seems, believed that God had a figure that can be seen and described: that is, God has form, a head, and the like. It is not surprising, therefore, to read of the prophet Isaiah saying: “my hand laid the foundation of the earth” (48:13), since it is by hand that one creates new artifacts. The extension of this ‘body building’ concept further develops itself thus: if God has a hand and a body, he also has a bow (Gen. 9:13), “I set my bow in the cloud.” Therefore, one who has a bow must also have arrows and a sword (Deut. 32:42), especially when “The Lord is a man of war” (Exod. 15:3). Not only do the hands of God make war, but they also write, since we are told that the tablets of the Covenant were “written with the finger of God” (Deut. 9:10). We also learn that God has feet (Exod. 24:10), and that he stands (Exod. 17:6), or sits (Ps. 2:4) on his throne (Isa. 66:1). It follows that God has a face (Deut. 31:17), eyes (Prov. 15:3), a nose (Num. 11:33), and a back (Exod. 33:23). However, according to an ancient belief it was

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forbidden to see God: “for man shall not see me and live” (Exod. 32:20). In other words, though one is not allowed to see God, he does have a figure like a human.80 Throughout the Scriptures there are similar references that allowed creative storytellers to develop elaborate designs on the figure and limbs of God, making them into a complete Being with basic elements equivalent to those of humans.

Just as important for our study, from a theological perspective, are the references to anthropopathisms, the psychical personifications of the Deity. These are the elements that are represented in God’s pathos, his concern and care for his created beings. Scripture attributes to God love and hate, joy and delight, regret and sadness, pity and compassion, disgust, revenge, and other feelings. Even if one explains these terms as being nothing but picturesque expressions, intended to give the reader a sense of the real presence of God and his works, they remain personifications nonetheless. The basis for such terms is the conception of God as a Being who wills in a personal, though not quite human, way. Such a personalized conception of the Deity, in conjunction with the belief in his absolute transcendence, allows a rather bold use of anthropomorphic imagery. This can lead to a dilemma between the theological desire to emphasize the transcendental nature of the Divine (which reduces the sense of immediate reality and relevance), and the religious need to conceive of the Deity and our contact with him in some meaningful and vital way. Jewish tradition has shown a preference for this second option, with a marked readiness to speak of God in a very

concrete manner, and not making much attempt to avoid the dangers inherent in the use of anthropomorphisms.\textsuperscript{81}

Throughout the literature, there are constant references to reservations about the use of anthropomorphic terminology. The basic opposition is already clearly formulated in the Decalogue (Exod. 20: 4) where the Ten Commandments forbid making an image of God. Yet God seems to violate his own commandments in the first week of Creation by making an image of himself.\textsuperscript{82} Further biblical opposition is clearly stated as well in frequent verses in the Pentateuch, Psalms, Job, and elsewhere, which maintain that nothing can be compared to God, who has no form or shape, cannot be seen, is eternal and without end. Yet these verses tend to contradict others that describe God in corporeal terms. In Exodus 25:8, the Lord said to Moses “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them,” but when Solomon does that, he stands before the people and exclaims, “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built” (I Kings 8:27). In Genesis 6:6, a very anthropopathic God, seeing the wickedness of his creation, “…was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain,” but the prohibition against images is reinforced in Deut. 4:15, “You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire…so do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth…”\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 3, pp. 51-52.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 53. It should be noted here in passing that there is no evidence of any physical representation of God in Jewish history (in contradistinction to the worship of Canaanite and other foreign gods.
Here the verses emphasize the transcendent nature of the Divine in vivid descriptive expressions, not in philosophical abstractions. In other places, less graphic terminology is used to avoid such personifications: while it is said that the Lord dwells in his sanctuary (Exod. 35:8), and also appears in the cloud over the cover of the ark (Lev. 16:2), there are also verses that speak instead of God’s kavod (“glory”) or Shemo (“his name”: Exod. 24: 16-17, Num. 14:10, Deut. 12:5). Some scholars have argued that the present vocalization of Exod. 34:24 “to appear before the Lord” was amended by the masoretes from the original תָּבוּרִים, (lirot, “to see”), to בָּרוּרִים (lera’ot, “to be seen”), to avoid an objectionable anthropomorphism.

In spite of the influence of Hellenistic thinking, the biblical heritage of the Sages maintained not only the commandments, deeds, and interpretations of the Bible, but also broadly based and popular beliefs such as that of an anthropomorphic God.84 Arthur Marmorstein suggested that in Talmudic sources there are fewer anthropomorphic concepts of God than in the Bible.85 Nonetheless, scholars have already pointed out that rabbinic sources obviously reflect anthropomorphic concepts, and this belief was also shared by the common people in the Land of Israel and in Babylon in the first centuries C.E.86 The biblical references to God’s “body” are numerous and specific, so this clearly encouraged anthropomorphic concepts to be used as midrashim in the oral tradition, subsequently finding their way into the Talmud. In

by Israelites). In archeological excavations no images of the God of Israel have been unearthed. Further, biblical Hebrew is the only fully developed language that has no specific term in its vocabulary for the notion of “goddess.”
84 Bar-Ilan, p. 322.
85 Marmorstein, Arthur, The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God (New York: Ktav, 1968 reprint) p. 146. This view has been challenged; he himself admits that any such indications may have resulted from the literary differences between the sources.
86 Ibid.
addition to those biblical references already cited in the first few pages of this section, we will look at a few examples from Midrash and later Jewish literature.

The following example from Sanhedrin 38b includes a commentary of Rabbi Akiba on a legend of the creation of Adam:

When the Holy One, blessed be he, wished to create man, he (first) created a company of ministering angels and said to them: Is it your desire that we make a man in our image? They answered: Sovereign of the universe, What will be his deeds? Such and such will be his deeds, he replied. Thereupon they exclaimed: Sovereign of the universe “what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?” (Ps. 8:4). Thereupon he stretched out his little finger among them and consumed them with fire...

The first man reached from one end of the world to the other.... But when he sinned, the Holy One, blessed be he, laid his hand upon him and diminished him, as it is written, “Thou dost beset me behind and before, and layest thy hand upon me” (Ps. 139:5).

If God pointed out with his small finger, and later put his hand on Adam during the creation, it therefore followed, for Rabbi Akiba, that God has a hand and fingers. He was not the only one. The Tannaim, as well as numerous biblical verses, referred to the hand of God. In the Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, on Exodus 12:2 we read:

“This month shall be for you the beginning of months”...R. Ishmael says: Moses showed the new moon to Israel and said to them: In this manner shall ye in coming generations observe the new moon and fix the beginning of the month by it. R. Akiba says: This is one of the three things which were difficult for Moses to understand and all of which God pointed out to him with his finger. So also you interpret: “And these are unclean to you” (Lev. 11:29). So also you interpret: “And this was the workmanship of the lamp stand” (Num. 8:4). Some say, Moses found it also hard to understand the ritual slaughtering, for it is said: “Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar” (Ex. 29:38).

Based on this text, Rabbi Akiba’s opinion was that God has a finger, with which God used to explain to Moses issues that he did not understand. Given this belief by Rabbi

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88 Translation from the Hebrew by Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication of America, 1949) p. 15.
Akiba, it is therefore not surprising to learn that his colleague, Rabbi Ishmael, could further argue that not only did God reveal things to Moses by pointing with his finger, but that in four such instances it was with a different finger.\(^8\) In his Midrash, Rabbi Ishmael continued the biblical heritage by quoting verses to establish his argument. He was fully aware of the verses that speak of the fingers and the hand of God but, in perhaps a too realistic and anthropomorphic way, he connected different verses to elaborate a coherent system of the hand of God in the Bible.\(^9\) It is interesting to note that in copying the text, in some places it was “corrected” by scribes who preferred not to ascribe anthropomorphic ideas to God. So, instead of writing that the Lord showed Moses something with his finger, the scribes used the phrase “as if with a finger”.\(^1\)—a theological concept motivated the rabbis to “correct” and purify the texts.\(^2\)

Bar-Ilan argues, however, that the position which Fox came to hold on such cases of text tampering—namely, that “it seems that the Tannaim and Amoraim did not see the finger of God in Midrash as anthropomorphism of the Creator”—was a questionable conclusion to reach.\(^3\) Alon Goshen-Gottstein shows where Marmorstein identified the anthropomorphic tendency of rabbinic thinking, stating that the schools of Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ishmael were divided on the question of the literality of the understanding of the biblical text. Rabbi Akiba’s literal reading gave rise to an anthropomorphic understanding of God. Rabbi Ishmael’s non-literal, or allegorical,

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8. This is explicit in Midrash Hagadot to Genesis 6:15, M. Margaliot, ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1967) p. 159, excerpted in Bar-Ilan.
1. Fox, Harry, “‘As if with a Finger’—The text history of an expression avoiding anthropomorphism,” Tarbiz, 49 (1980) quoted by Bar-Ilan, p. 324.
2. Bar-Ilan, p. 324.
3. Ibid.
reading brought about an opposition to anthropomorphism.\textsuperscript{94} However, the term "anthropomorphism" as used by Marmorstein, designates a wide spectrum of phenomena and is not limited to the fundamental question of the existence or the meaning of the ascription of bodily form to God. For example, Goshen-Gottstein suggests that "Once we are able to perceive that rabbinic literature expresses anthropomorphic beliefs, we encounter a series of fascinating questions. Instead of asking, 'Does God have a body?' we should inquire, 'What kind of body does God have?' God's body is seen as identical, or similar, to the human body. This understanding leads to a rejection of anthropomorphism.\textsuperscript{95} It is a point of rabbinic belief we will pick up again in the final chapter.

In an example from Leviticus Rabbah 34.3, there is the story of Hillel who was on his way to the bathhouse in his village:

His disciples asked him: "Rabbi, where are you going?" He said to them: "To perform a commandment." They said to him: "And what then is this commandment?" He said to them: "To bathe in the (public) bath." They said to him: "And is this a commandment?" He said to them: "Yes. If the man who is appointed to take care of the images of kings, which (the gentiles) set up in their circuses, scour them and rinse them, and they provide his livelihood, and not only that, but he occupies an important place among government officials, so we, who were created in the image (zelem) and in the likeness (demut) of God...a fortiori.\textsuperscript{96}

In the mashal a senior official of the appropriate municipal government department sends out his cleaning crews with the task of scrubbing down the statues of the king, to clean them and thus make them more attractive—presumably not only for the


\textsuperscript{95} Emphasis added.

masses but also for the king himself as he passes by. The very idea of statues being set up by the king in the first place is presumably for purposes of establishing recognition, authority, and as a basis for adoration. But the thrust of a parable like this is not only against the making of images for purposes of worship, but rather to encourage the proper care and public appearance of the image of God, a human being. The reference within the mashal to our being created in God's image leaves no room for doubt that the statue of the king is us, and the king is God. Both of the terms found in Genesis 1:26—image and likeness—appear in this mashal, with obvious bodily connotations of zelem or demut. They are the basis for the Rabbis' giving a religious value and responsibility—a halacha—to taking care of the body by bathing it. Both terms refer to the physical body, and no distinction is drawn between them. In this the Rabbis remain true to the biblical text that does not distinguish between the terms either.

In Mechilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el there is a mashal that explains the prohibition of murder in terms borrowed from Roman imperial life at that time. It teaches that whoever hurts, abuses, and kills a fellow human is likened to someone who injures the statue of the emperor. Rabbi Akiba taught from this that 'Whoever sheds blood

97 Interestingly, the prime rabbinic teaching for this mashal seems distant from our simpler peshat interpretation. Expanding on the words of Leviticus 25:25, "If your brother becomes poor...," and drawing further on the secondary reference in Psalm 41:1, "Happy is he that deals wisely with the poor, the Lord will deliver him," it is part of a teaching on the Redemption of Servants. Those who show mercy to others benefit themselves as well, as in Proverbs 11:17, "The kind man benefits himself, but a cruel man brings trouble on himself."
98 The qal vehomer argument [a typical rabbinic form of reasoning that argues "If THIS...how much more so, THAT"] which is suggested here on the need to care for our bodies simply because we are made in the image of God, the King of the universe, draws on the familiar elements of daily life that the audience would easily recognize.
100 Mechilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el. Bahodesh 8. Commentary on the Book of Exodus. See also b. 'Aboda Zar. 43b, where the making of an image of the human face is forbidden on the grounds that it is making an image of the divine.
destroys the image,’ and his disciple Ben ‘Azzai added ‘Whoever does not engage in propagation of the species is considered by Scripture to diminish the likeness.’\textsuperscript{101} The concept is that in preserving the human race—which is made in God’s image—we preserve that image in the world; and this is not enhanced by ‘the release of the soul from the body’—killing another person. This thought is extended in \textit{Midrash Tannaim} in an analogy similar to that cited by Hillel: ‘This may be likened to a human king who entered a country, and set up images of himself, and made statues of himself, and coins were struck with his likeness. Even so, whoever sheds blood is deemed by Scripture to diminish, as it were, the likeness of the King.’

The Sages found a basic principle in the verse ‘In the image of God he made man.’ In his dictum ‘Still greater was the love in that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God,’\textsuperscript{102} Rabbi Akiba declared that the election of human beings consists in the fact that it was made known to them that they were created in God’s image.... In the way human beings were created and in the form that the Creator gave them, the Rabbis taught that two principles emerge—human unity, and the individual worth of a person:

‘Hence each human was created a single individual... and for the sake of peace among others, that one should not say to his fellow: ‘My father was greater than yours,’ and to declare the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be he, for a tradesman stamps many coins with one seal, and they are all identical, but the ‘King of the kings of kings’ stamped every person with the seal of the first human, and none is identical with his fellow. Therefore it is the duty of every one to say: ‘For my sake the world was created.’ (\textit{M. Sanhedrin} iv, 5)

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Urbach}, p. 227.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{M. 'Avot}, iii, 14.
This Mishnah states, on the one hand, that no person is identical with his neighbour, but is a separate personality, possessing his own worth and bearing responsibility for the existence of the world, "but at the same time all are stamped with the one seal, and no one can say to his neighbour that he is unique."103 As in the previous example, the king’s role in the parable is a deliberate rabbinic allusion to God; just as the all-powerful king would have ordered the creation of the statue in his own image and likeness, and in his own honour, so were we created in the image of the King of the universe. If a statue in the image of a ruler is intended to honour him before the people, how much more do we, as images of God, bring honour to God before others. Underlying this parable is again the notion of physical resemblance. Just as the statue resembles the king physically, so a human’s physical being can be said to resemble God’s.104 At issue is what this comparison should allow us to say in terms of our descriptions of an ‘incomparable’ God.

In Midrash Tana’im on Deut. 21:22-23105 Rabbi Meir used the following parable to explain the prohibition against leaving an executed criminal’s body hung overnight:

(This is like) two brothers who were identical twins and lived in the same city. One was made king, and the other became a bandit. The king commanded, so they strung him up. Everyone who saw (the dead body) said, “The king has been hung up.” So the king commanded and they took him down.

Here the similarity between the king and his brother is purely physical.106 A rabbinic teaching was that God had put a curse on Cain for the murder of his brother, and any

104 Goshen-Gottstein, p. 176.
105 "If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse" (NIV). See also David Hoffman, Midrash Tana’im (Berlin: n.p., 1908) p. 132.
prolonged visible reminder of the curse would be an insult to the king, whose image was identical to that of the murderer on public display. As “identical twins” of God, therefore, we should not put our abuses [of his image] on public display and thus bring discredit to him as well as upon ourselves. The taking of life was a source of numerous rabbinic teaching parables, emphasizing as the fundamental issue the point of each human being made with a Divine likeness. Bloodshed was condemned as an offence against God, since it entails the destruction of one created in his image. A teaching from the Mechilta asks, “How were the Ten Commandments given? There were five on one tablet and five on the other. On the one side was inscribed, ‘I am the Lord thy God,’ and opposite it, ‘Thou shalt not murder.’ The inference to be drawn is that if one sheds blood, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had diminished the likeness of the King.”107 Here the image of God is almost considered as an extension of himself, so that any destruction of the image (as with murder) lessens the image of God, thus his presence, in the world.108

The comparison of God to Man/Adam in their physical appearance is clearly demonstrated in another mashal attributed to R. Hoshaya. In this instance an amusing example of anthropopathic language is used for the king/God character—jealousy on God’s part over the fact that Adam looks so much like him that the angels cannot distinguish between the two. While Adam might be pleased at the very thought, God

106 Goshen-Gottstein, p. 176-177.
107 Mechilta To 20:17; 70b.
108 Another rabbinic teaching that grew out of this idea of humans being extensions of God’s image is the one which opposes celibacy. Producing children, themselves made in the image of God, would therefore extend God’s image on earth, whereas not having offspring lessens that image.
certainly is not: the detracting look-alike is quickly and unceremoniously dispatched from his presence:

R. Hoshaya said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam, the ministering angels mistook him [for a divine being] and wished to exclaim ‘Holy’ before him. What does this resemble? A king and a governor who sat in a chariot, and his subjects wished to say to the king, ‘Domine! (Sovereign)!’ but they did not know which it was. What did the king do? He pushed the governor out of the chariot, and so they knew who was the king. Similarly, when the Lord created Adam, the angels mistook him [for a divine being]. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He caused a sleep to fall upon him, and so all knew that he was [but mortal] man; thus it is written, Cease ye from man, in whose nostrils is a breath, for how little is he to be accounted (Isaiah 2:22)!

Our relationship to God is amply demonstrated in this mashal regarding the significance of the soul. Nowhere in rabbinic literature is the soul regarded as divine. It may be of heavenly origin, and therefore considered pure in its nature, but in Jewish belief it was not considered divine. Moreover, like a battery in an electronic gadget, the gadget and its source belong together, rather than apart. Thus, the soul is the vitalizing agent, whose proper place is in the body, not out of it. This understanding is reflected in rabbinic eschatology. The future life takes the form of resurrection of the dead, rather than the eternal life of the soul. As the classic tale of the lame and the blind, introduced in Leviticus Rabbah 4:5 as a commentary on the verse “when a soul sins” (Lev. 4:2), expresses it:

R. Ishmael taught: This may be compared to the case of a king who had an orchard containing excellent early figs, and he placed there two watchmen, one lame and the other blind. He said to them: “Be careful with these fine early figs.” After some days the lame man said to the blind one: “I see fine early figs in the orchard.” Said the blind man to him: “Come and let us eat them.” “Am I then able to walk?” said the lame man. “Can I then see?” retorted the blind man. The lame man got astride the blind man, and thus they ate the early figs and sat down again each in his place. After some days the king came into that vineyard, and said to them: “Where are the fine early figs?” The blind man replied: “My lord the king, can I then see?” The lame man replied: “My lord the king, can I then

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109 Midrash Rabbah, Soncino, p. 61.
walk?" What did the king, who was a man of insight, do with them? He placed the lame man astride the blind man, and they began to move about. Said the king to them: "Thus have you done, and eaten the early figs." Even so the Holy One, blessed be he, in the time to come will say to the soul: "Why hast thou sinned before me?" And the soul will answer: "Master of the universe, it is not I that sinned, but the body it is that sinned. Why, since leaving it, I am like a clean bird flying through the air. As for me, how have I sinned?" God will also say to the body: "My hast thou sinned before me?' And the body will reply: "O Master of the universe, not I have sinned, the soul it is that has sinned. Why since it left me, I am cast about like a stone thrown upon the ground. Have I then sinned before thee?" What will the Holy One, blessed be he, do to them? He will bring the soul and force it into the body, and judge them both as one.

The body and the soul operate as one unit, like the seeing lame who sits on the shoulders of the walking blind. They belong together and will be put back together in the future. The thousand years of midrashic activity indicate a growing prominence in the place of the soul in rabbinic anthropology.\textsuperscript{110}

As a final example of rabbinic writings that figure importantly in this study there is a literary remnant of anthropomorphism in Palestinian Jewry of the earliest centuries of the Common Era called \textit{Shi'ur Komah}.\textsuperscript{111} In this little booklet, anthropomorphic usage reaches its climax. It expresses an esoteric doctrine developed in the Tannaitic period as the most secret part of Merkabah mysticism. When the mystic attained the vision of the supernal world and found himself standing before the throne, he was promised a vision of this "figure in the form of a man" which Ezekiel had seen on the throne in his first vision (Ezek. 1:21). Not only was this doctrine consistent with the obviously anthropomorphic descriptions of God in many biblical passages, it was also reinforced by the interpretation of the Song of Songs as relating to God and Israel. Fragments of this doctrine have been preserved in many allusions to it in Midrashic literature. The fragments consist of a detailed description of the limbs of God in the

\textsuperscript{110} ibid., pp. 177-178.
\textsuperscript{111} literally, "measure of the body," i.e., the body of God.
figure of a man, and this apparently deliberate and excessive indulgence in anthropomorphism proved shocking to later and more rationalistic Jewish thought. The measures given for several limbs may have contained some sort of numerical symbolism which can no longer be reconstructed. Not only is God spoken of as a man with a figure and limbs, but fantastic measures and numbers are used to convey an idea of God’s physical greatness. There was evidently an important school in Judaism that believed in a God who accompanies man in human form and shape. These mystics, seemingly far removed in their religious life and thought from any rationalism, were so near to—and one with—their Maker that they could think of him as invested with human figure and limbs. The very fact that this piece of literature survived for centuries in Hebrew is strong evidence for the immense influence that this non-rational theology had on the course of Jewish history. It seemed to satisfy a craving for nearness to and oneness with God, which rationalism and pure wisdom cannot supply. As one of the key examples of Jewish literature independent of the Bible and Talmud, the Shi’ur Komah deserves mention also because it was both reviled and revered by various elements within Judaism through the ages, chiefly for its unconventional understandings of God expressed in its overtly anthropomorphic language. From its very beginning, it aroused the bitterest antagonism among all sections of Jewry who had held themselves aloof from mysticism. Conversely, all the later mystics and kabbalists came to regard its obscure language as a symbol of profound and penetrating spiritual vision. The antagonism was mutual: it is in this attitude towards anthropomorphism that the ways of the Jewish rational theology and

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112 For example, the height of the Creator is given as 236,000 parasangs, based on a numerological interpretation of Psalm 147:5. It cannot have been intended to indicate any concrete measurements.
Jewish mysticism have parted always. It was the only work in the entire Hebrew literature before the Middle Ages that dealt exclusively with God's likeness. The special linguistic terms used in it are at the centre of ancient Jewish mysticism, and became part of Jewish culture for more than 1500 years. The kabbalists of all generations, from Sefer Ha-Bahir to the Ba'al Shem Tov, used the terminology contained in it. In dealing with the phrase, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness," it identifies two facets, the one humanistic—a person's prestige as containing a divine element that is above him—and the second theological, stating that one can learn something about God by studying humanity, because the parallel between them in the "image" and the "likeness" enables us to extend a bridge between material man and God.

While the Shi'ur Komah is the fullest and most specific expression of anthropomorphism in Jewish sources, and serves as the basis for the mystic literature that depicts God in human terms, primarily in medieval and modern Kabbalah, Joseph Dan questions whether such apparently "bodily" descriptions and the strange, meaningless and unpronounceable names of God's organs do, in fact, describe God in the form of a human. Is this anthropomorphism plain and simple? What is the purpose of the strange names and unfathomable measurements? Were they meant to bring the image of God closer and more real, so that people could understand it better, or perhaps the opposite—to create a barrier of unintelligibility and estrangement—between the reader and the figure itself? He suggests that perhaps a second possibility is the more

115 Dan, p. 63.
116 Ibid., pp. 63-64.
correct reading—that there actually is no anthropomorphism in it at all, but rather the opposite, elevating God and distancing him from our comprehension.\(^{117}\) The fact that the incomprehensibly large numbers used for the measurements—when ancient Hebrew does not even have a word for any number larger than 10,000—could suggest that they were never intended to be understood as physical sizes in the first place. Dan believes one should not regard Shi'ur Komah, as an anthropomorphic work that tries to describe the Godhead in human terms. It is more logical to assume the opposite; this is a polemic and struggle against the simplistic anthropomorphic view.\(^{118}\) By making the measurements of God's physical body seem so fantastic and unreal the writer could be devising a teaching technique to demonstrate that indeed such a body is impossible, and therefore cannot exist in anthropomorphic reality.

From the biblical period onward the debate continued over the question of how to consider and describe God—whether or not any material representation of the Deity is possible or permissible. Both of these positive and negative positions—and to varying degrees within each one—were held over the centuries. The resolution of the contradictory arguments would require an understanding of virtually every anthropomorphic expression. Whether the expression used is an actual, concrete personification of God, or an allegorical expression that is used to artificially clothe some spiritual concept in more concrete and understandable imagery\(^{119}\) is a question we will be considering further in the next chapter. Even though the matter of humanity's

\(^{117}\) Ibid., p. 73.
\(^{118}\) Ibid., p. 74. Dan admits that this interpretation too has been criticized as being naive; even this early classic work of traditional mystical understanding of an anthropomorphic God has not been free of differing scholarly analyses as to its real anthropomorphic significance.
creation in the image of God appears to have had less importance in the biblical tradition than it assumed in later theological discussion, the statement itself clearly constitutes an important and positive affirmation about humanity's place in the created order. We have seen examples of how humanity considers itself in relation to the Deity: rabbinic writers created an image of God like themselves writ large.

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Chapter IV

Understanding the Use of Anthropomorphisms in Descriptions of God’s Image as Expressed in Rabbinic Literature

Having examined the meshalim and examples of rabbinic use of these kinds of anthropomorphic literary vehicles, we turn now to a discussion of the interpretations assigned to this usage in the contexts of the meshalim. It may be helpful to discover the circumstances that encouraged such extensive use of anthropomorphic language in rabbinic literature, especially in their parables, since comparing God to any part of his creation necessarily limits him at a time when the underlying goal is to teach his uniqueness. The Hebrew Bible presents God as the ‘incomparable one.’ If that were taken seriously on the level of language in ancient Israel, the vocabulary used of God would also have to be unique to him. It is true that there is an initial move in that direction: the second word of the Bible, bara’, usually translated ‘created’, is only used of God in the Bible, thus suggesting that his action as ‘creator of heavens and earth’ differs from any type of human creative activity.121 If the entire vocabulary used of God were distinct to him, he would indeed be ‘incomparable’, but also not grounded in human experiences, and therefore, not understandable either.122 There needed to be some other way of referring to him. From the biblical period onward the debate continued over the question of how to consider and describe God, and whether or not any material representation of the Deity is possible or permissible. Both of these positive and negative positions were held over the centuries—and to varying

121 Brettler, Marc Zvi, God is King: Understanding the Israelite Metaphor, p. 159.
122 Ibid.
degrees within each one. The resolution of the contradictory arguments about interpretation of human imagery would require an understanding of virtually every anthropomorphic expression in its story context. Whether the expression used is an actual personification of God, or an allegorical expression that is used to artificially wrap some spiritual concept in more concrete and understandable imagery is the issue that confronted the Rabbis.\textsuperscript{123} Biblical rhetoric uses language typically belonging to the human sphere and applies it to God, often in a metaphorical manner. These uses may be considered metaphorical because the biblical God does not generally possess these human attributes in their usual form. For example, the Israelite king is crowned and is part of a dynasty, but God as King lacks these qualities.\textsuperscript{124}

Metaphor becomes a major instructional tool for the Rabbis to describe God in that it allows the application of ideas and terms familiar from everyday use to depict the unseen God of biblical narrative and spiritual encounter. The question that emerges is whether the audience distinguishes metaphor from straight anthropomorphic imaging when the mashal blends the elements literally. Apart from the Rabbis themselves, most of the rabbinic audience generally was not highly educated. They would not have been interested in grammatical explanations of relative senses of words and meanings. The simple first hearing of the story is what they would respond to. It is more likely that they heard and accepted pure anthropomorphic description, and formed their concepts of God along literal lines.

\textsuperscript{124} Brettler, p. 159.
We have already noted that although the fundamental statement of the 'creation of humanity in the image of God' had less significance in the biblical tradition than it was assigned in later theological discussion, the very statement constitutes an important self-understanding about humanity's place in the created order. The way in which God is described speaks volumes about how humanity considers itself in relation to the Deity. To consider oneself like God, or a god, cannot but resonate positively in the mind of the hearer. Consider what interpretation is projected when using the phrase, *image of God*: of what does this image consist, and how has it been defined, presented, and understood historically within Judaism? The debate over anthropomorphism was a problem whose impact spanned the millennia. Some reconciliation was attempted regarding the apparent conflict between anthropomorphism and traditional fundamental beliefs, and Jewish treatment of the theme passed through a variety of stages of development from the Tannaitic period down to the medieval philosophers and mystics.

The references to humanity being created in the image, or likeness, of God (*be-zelem Elohim*) have been some of the most influential biblical verses in Jewish history. From a rabbinic perspective, this concept is the foundation of Jewish ethics and morality—Jewish tradition even considered this ethic to be the essence of the Torah. It expresses the enormous value of a human life, and the inherent dignity and respect required in all interpersonal relationships. Modern Jewish writers on ethics have expanded the meaning of this concept to include all aspects of the moral life. “The theological foundation of Jewish ethics is the duty to imitate God, to 'go in his ways'”

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(Deut. 28:9). This duty is rooted in the character of a person as created in the image of God. Since we are created in his image we have both the responsibility and the capacity to follow him."\(^{127}\) This value expresses a person’s ability to be God\textit{like} but \textit{not} God. Indeed, the concept of the “image of God” points both to the enormous potential and the inherent limitations of humanity.\(^{128}\) But already from the earliest commentaries, we see in rabbinic sources that there has been a certain reluctance to define the meaning of the phrase “image of God.” This is particularly evident in the Aramaic versions of the Pentateuch. One of the oldest of these, the Targum Yerushalmi, hesitates to use the term zelem, “image,” in its Aramaic equivalents and instead uses the less graphic demut, “similitude,” which carries with it the association of \textit{imitatio Dei}, rather than any anthropomorphic concept of God. Since Genesis 1:26 speaks of both zelem and demut (“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”) this Targum translates the second term by a synonymous phrase meaning “in similar fashion.” In verse 27, where the term zelem occurs twice, demut is used in the Aramaic version, and in order to avoid any suggestion of anthropomorphism, “in the image of God” (\textit{be-zelem Elohim}) is translated somewhat awkwardly as “in a similitude from before the Lord.”\(^{129}\) The Aramaic versions show a marked tendency to avoid speaking of the “image of God” while apparently having no objection to using the phrase “similitude of God.” An innovation found in Pseudo-Jonathan occurs in the rendering of \textit{be-zelem Elohim Bara’ oto by be-zalma’ YY bera’ yateh (“in an

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bera' yateh ("in an image the Lord created him"). In other words, by making Elohim the subject of the clause and separating it from be-zelem, the translator obviously wanted to retain the phrase zelem (zalma') without incurring any suspicion of anthropomorphism, so he interpreted the phrase in question to mean that God created persons in an image specific to him alone. The effort was to put some distance between God and the human-like terminology that referred to him.

It was prevalent in the early translations of Scripture to deal with offensive anthropomorphisms by means of small emendations, which the Tannaim delicately described as "biblical modifications of expression." Onkelos, the second-century proselyte and Bible translator, often renders the name of God with such substitutes as "the glory of the Lord," "the Word of the Lord," and "fear of the Lord." Similarly, he translates "he saw" or "he knew," referring to the Deity as "it was revealed before him"; and "he heard" becomes "it was heard before him", and so on to detract the reader from any thought of God having human organs. As well, if the same verb is used to describe an action of God and of humans, Onkelos uses two different words in order to distinguish clearly between the Divine and human (Gen. 32:29; 40:8; Exod. 14:31). Curiously, however, he still allows human psychical qualities—anthropopathisms—to be attributed to God, and he translates such expressions as hatred, love, anger, and

130 ibid., p. 237.
131 Questions of unclear translation were always difficult to handle. Rabbi Eliezar once said: "He who translates a verse (from the Bible) literally, is a liar. He who adds to it commits blasphemy." The example used to illustrate his point is in reference to the translation for Exod. 24:10, (Solomon Schechter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, p. 40). "If he translated the words, And they saw the God of Israel, he spoke an untruth, for the Holy One, blessed be he, sees but is not seen. But if the translation is, And they saw the glory of the Shechinah of the God of Israel, he commits blasphemy for he makes three (a Trinity), namely, Glory, Shechinah, and God." The inconsistencies of the Targumim and of the Rabbis concerning the question of anthropomorphism are common.
the like without making any changes at all. Yet Onkelos is not consistent in his treatment of anthropomorphisms in his writing; there is some suggestion that he prepared his translations with the simple worshipper in mind, realizing their intellectual and theological limitations. It is the same consideration that later Rabbis had when they adapted the language to their audience’s level of understanding.

In aggadic literature—seemingly simpler stories created to teach more profound concepts—the Rabbis essentially followed the biblical manner of using anthropomorphic imagery without much hesitation. But at the same time they qualified it, thus increasing the number of substitute terms: to the Memra (Word) of the Targum are now added other names and terms, such as gevurah (“strength”), shamayim (“heaven”), makom (“place”), and so on. A typical qualifier for sentences in which personifications occur is to alter them by adding the qualifying term kivyakhol (“so to speak,” “as it were”) or by means of sayings such as “if it were not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to utter it.” Occasionally, anthropomorphic personifications of God are justified for didactic reasons and served to make divine truth accessible to human understanding; as R. Ishmael put it: “The Torah speaks in the language of men.” If one’s audience is human, one must use human language to communicate the message, even of the Divine. At times the Rabbis resorted to anthropomorphic language in order to drive home a moral lesson. They did not try to avoid such terms whenever they wanted to impress their listeners with an awareness of God’s existence, his love and his fear, and so in aggadic literature there are many statements to the effect that God studies the law, (Hagigah 15b), puts on tefillin/

133 Ibid.
phylacteries (Berachot 6a), weeps over the destruction of the Temple, and the like.\textsuperscript{134} Using earthly language to describe God as a model for us to follow is an effective teaching concept, and creating him to seem like us provides us with a reference point from our daily life experiences.

Because of the dominant cultural environment in which the Jewish writers lived, let us consider Jewish-Hellenistic positions in relation to rabbinic thought during this period. Concepts derived from outside influences and foreign sources, and for which there is no biblical authority, left their mark on the anthropological conception during these early centuries of the Common Era.\textsuperscript{135} It is not surprising that some of the earliest biblical interpretations written by Jews of the Hellenistic world were an attempt to answer objections raised by that world. For the educated class of the Hellenistic world a God who appeared to be anthropomorphic in character was objectionable.\textsuperscript{136} For several centuries Homer had been attacked because he represented the gods as human in form and in faults, and had been defended because his stories about the gods contained deeper, non-anthropomorphic truths. In a sense the problem of anthropomorphisms was not a new one for Jewish writers. After all, the author of Second Isaiah had already been concerned to show that nothing was comparable to the reality of God. Two examples are from chapter 40:12-31: \textit{Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?} [v. 12], and, \textit{To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., p. 55.
\textsuperscript{135} Urbach, E. E., \textit{The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs} (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975) p. 224.
you compare him to? [v. 18]. Yet what was new for the Jewish interpreter living in the Hellenistic world was the way in which the problem was to be solved. The concepts used in dealing with the problem were drawn from the philosophical thought patterns of the Hellenistic world.

The consistent avoidance of any personification of God led the Hellenistic Jew, Philo of Alexandria, to the concept of a Deity who neither acts nor creates, who is without attributes or qualities and therefore no kind of positive relationship to the world could be attributed to him. At the same time Philo must have been aware of the dynamic vitality and activity of God as portrayed in the Bible. This contradiction caused him to posit an intermediate being between God and the world. His biblical exegesis is an allegorization of Scripture in this direction. In the first century of the Common Era, Philo wrote that “the human mind is created as the image of God, and is an image of God, the Mind of the universe.” The human being has been created both mortal and immortal—mortal in body, and immortal in mind. Philo also held that of all of the creatures made by God, only humans were capable of turning from virtue to vice. Creatures above humans, such as disembodied souls or spirits who inhabited the heavenly bodies, partook only of virtues. Creatures below humans, such as animals and plants, partook neither of virtue nor of vice, because they lacked the prerequisite of mind that would have enabled them to be either virtuous or its opposite. Humans however were capable of both. Because of this peculiarity, it was fitting for God to

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138 Tobin, p. 36.
140 Quoted in Tobin, p. 41.
make only that part which was the highest and to leave to helpers the creation of the lower parts of humans, the parts from which vice would originate. In this way whatever was good in a person could be assigned to God, while whatever was evil could be attributed to these helpers.141 In a similar treatment of the topic, Rabbi Simai said: “All created beings that were created from heaven, their soul and body are from heaven; and all creatures that were created from the earth, their soul and body are from the earth, except man, whose soul is from the heaven and his body from the earth. Therefore, if he observed the Torah and did the will of his father in heaven, he is like the beings (of heaven) above. But if he did not observe the Torah nor do the will of his Father in heaven, he is like the creatures (of earth) below. Accordingly, humans hold a position between the higher beings of heaven and the lower beings of earth.”142 So creation in God’s image was also to make the human response to God and his laws a determining factor in the explanation of the nature of that image.

In sharp contrast to the manner in which the Aramaic versions deal with the *homo imago Dei* passages, most Greek translations render the text literally. For Philo, the text carried Platonic overtones and thereby enabled him to conceptualize the ‘image’ motif. When reading the Septuagint version of Genesis 1:26, he could not help being reminded of Plato’s use of the term *eikon* (image).143 Philo worked out an elaborate exegesis built on it,144 treating the whole of the sensible world as an “image” of the “ideas.” Further, the sensible world is an image of the ideas, but the ideas, or the

141 Tobin, pp. 38-39. There appears to be no distinction drawn by the Sages between souls that were never attached to a body and are the pure souls that serve the Creator, on the one hand, and the souls that have an inclination towards matter and descend into the body, on the other, as Philo held (Urbach, p. 224).
142 Urbach, p. 221.
143 Ibid., p. 240.
Logos$^{145}$ (which represents the totality of the ideas), are themselves but an image of God who is their “pattern” and “archetype.” The world perceived by our senses is, therefore, nothing more that “an image of an image.” Philo takes the creation of humans “after the image of God” to mean that man is not an immediate image of God but is made after the immediate image, which is the Logos. He distinguishes between the human whose creation in the image of the Logos is described in the first chapter of Genesis, and the one whose formation is narrated in chapter 2: “There are two types of men: the one heavenly, and the other earthly. The heavenly one, being made after the image of God, is altogether without part or lot in corruptible and terrestrial substance; but the earthly one was compacted out of the matter scattered here and there, which Moses calls clay.”$^{146}$

Some of these earliest Jewish interpretations of the story of creation of humans as found in Philo were attempts to answer accusations that God was human in form. One of the clearest examples of this anti-anthropomorphic type of interpretation is his treatment of the Genesis proclamation: "Let us make man after our image and likeness." The objection, of course, was that if we are like God, then God must be like us. His response was that this image referred not to the human body but only to the mind. No, he wrote, it is in respect of the mind, the sovereign element of the soul, that the ‘image’ is used, “for after the pattern of a single Mind, even the Mind of the Universe as an archetype, the mind in each of those who successively came into being was molded. Only the human mind is an ‘image’ of God and not the human body.

$^{145}$ The Memra ("Word") of Onkelos and the Logos of Philo cannot be equated in meaning, despite their similar terminology in translation. The Aramaic and Greek senses respectively implied distinct usages and somewhat different connotations theologically.

$^{146}$ Altmann, pp. 240-241.
God is the archetype and the human mind is the image of that archetype.\textsuperscript{147} In this way the interpreter thought that he had overcome the problem—that even the fact that the human mind is an image of God could itself be considered as anthropomorphism.\textsuperscript{148} More than a thousand years later, Maimonides would teach that anyone who entertains anthropomorphic notions of Deity, believing that God can actually be described in human terms, is a heretic and has no share in the world to come.\textsuperscript{149}

A different understanding of the divine form may lead to a different position, as Goshen-Gottstein holds. The concept of what constituted “anthropomorphism” was not universal. In all of rabbinic literature there is no statement that categorically denies that God has body or form. If God has a body, then obviously the creation of man in God’s image refers to human physical form, and there is no objection in all of rabbinic literature to such an interpretation. The bodily meaning is the only meaning of zelem in rabbinic literature, and is borne out in all Tannaitic and Amoraic sources.\textsuperscript{150} The rabbinic understanding of a human’s physical form as the image of God may seem less shocking when an important aspect of rabbinic anthropology is considered: that is, the relation of soul and body. Since the time of Philo, who identified the image of God with the soul or the rational aspect of the soul, Western tradition has mostly identified the image of God with the soul or with a human’s intellectual capacity. The divine self must be non-material, and therefore only the soul may be said to be in the image of God.\textsuperscript{151} The distinction between spirit and matter is

\textsuperscript{147} Cited in Tobin, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{150} Goshen-Gottstein, pp. 171-172.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., p. 176.
not known in rabbinic literature. Consequently, there is little substantive distinction to be made between soul and body. Metaphysically, soul and body form a whole, rather than a polarity. We have referred to Goshen-Gottstein's use of a modern metaphor when he likens the soul to the battery that operates an electronic gadget. It may be different and originally external to the gadget, but the difference is not one of essence. Nowhere in rabbinic literature is the soul regarded as divine; it is of heavenly origin, and therefore pure in its nature, but it is not divine. Like a battery, the soul is the vitalizing agent, whose proper place is in the body, not out of it. 152

The definition of what constitutes anthropomorphism is perhaps broader than that of limiting its use to concrete examples and human organ equivalents in speaking about the Deity, and delineating the relation of soul and body. Those distinctions were not always kept clear. It may be for some that God has a "body" but not necessarily one with flesh and blood. Some of the descriptions of a "body of light" in the literature indicate such differing intents, and there are a variety of possibilities to explore since the term "anthropomorphism" may have had other connotations to the writers and thinkers of the early centuries. But to enter that broader field of discussion is considerably beyond the scope of this study. Instead, we will move to the fundamental question of what the Rabbis really believed about these anthropomorphic literary constructions that had become so prevalent.

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152 Ibid., pp. 176-177.
Chapter V

Why did the Rabbis Use Anthropomorphisms, and What Did They Really Believe About Them?

In this study we have examined a range of rabbinic texts that have employed anthropomorphic and anthropopathic images—chiefly those portraying God as a king—as part of the explanatory narrative. We have suggested that the audience (the masses, at least, if not also the educated religious elite) accepted the human-like descriptions of God literally. Anthropomorphic usage by the Rabbis was both controversial and effective as a teaching tool. But did they really believe in the images they so effectively created? The Greco-Roman social and cultural environment of the early centuries of the Common Era quite understandably would have led them to that understanding. In order to assess the teaching impact then of those meshalim, we should also consider the question of whether or not the Rabbis as teachers were inclined to understand their own stories similarly. Did the Rabbis believe that God has an actual form, and that he is subject to human feelings and emotions, as their passages seem to suggest so vividly?

Traditionally, rabbinic anthropomorphisms have been discussed mainly with a view to ascertaining the degree to which they reflect the Rabbis’ beliefs about God’s nature. Are these statements instead to be understood non-literally, figuratively, precisely because it is assumed as axiomatic that the Rabbis could never have believed that God actually possesses a human or corporeal form? That issue is not so clear, neither from the rabbinic sources nor from the extensive commentaries over the ages. It is
interesting that the Rabbis themselves rarely explicitly discuss their own use of anthropomorphisms, almost as though the issue had never arisen for discussion. When they do make reference to it, it is mainly to extol its use. "Great is the power of the prophets, for they liken the creature and its Creator." R. Yudan is quoted as saying in *Genesis Rabbah* 27:1. And in the one place where the Rabbis discuss the "function" of anthropomorphism (as it appears in the Bible), they ascribe it to a rhetorical or representational function. Commenting on Amos 3:8, "The lion has roared, who can but fear..." the *Mechilta* asks:

> And who gave strength and force to the lion? Was it not he? But it is merely that we describe (mekanim) him by [figures derived from] his creatures so as to break open the ear in its capacity for hearing (leshaber et ha'oz en mah shehi yechol ha'oz Mishmoa ).\(^{153}\)

What the Rabbis mean by the concluding phrase in the passage—so as to break open the ear—is more than simply the apologetic notion that "the Torah speaks in the language of the people." Rather, it is closer to the sense of "breaking" the ear "in" to a certain way of hearing, of "opening" its capacities for understanding. For them, this is the purpose served by the anthropomorphic representation of God. It is this imagery that most appeals to our sense of the issue since it incorporates the notion of pedagogic significance as well: the underlying reason for using anthropomorphic language was to enhance the teaching goals. The use of human language for God recognizes first of all that there is no specific "God-language" available as an alternative. We earlier discussed the use of the verb 'bara/created' as being a term unique to references to God, with no other linguistic application apart from descriptions of activity that God alone undertakes. But there are few other examples in

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\(^{153}\) *Mechilta Bahodesh,* 4. Ed. Lauterbach, 2: 221.
Hebrew vocabulary with a similar specificity. To accustom the hearer—*to break in the ear*, as the expression had it—to the sound of human terms used for the incomparable King of the universe is perhaps the most suitable expression, suggesting as it does the need for the hearer to adjust to the language definitions outside of the ordinary, and for which the normal definitions should not automatically apply either. The idea implied here is that one should not expect to ‘hear’ the anthropomorphic terms in the same sense as their normal word definitions would suggest; rather, to allow for a new sense and meaning to apply to the common language. Thus human expression assumes another dimension in its descriptions of divine beings.\(^{154}\)

Let us look briefly at the historical and cultural background of the rabbinic period and following, which led to the opposing views that arose surrounding the use of anthropomorphisms. Jews were aware that anthropomorphism was a sore problem among the neighbouring Greeks who could see their gods in statues and images, thus conveying to onlookers the idea of not only a personal, but of a physical god appearing in a form made by humans from earthly material. No matter how beautiful the models may have been, they could not help but detract from the spiritual conception and identity of the divine being that they represented. That particular problem did not affect the Jews, but the Greek condemnation of anthropomorphic doctrines as being dangerous superstitions reflected badly on the Jews of the Diaspora who wanted to gain the good opinion of their neighbours. For example, the Jews of Alexandria were eager for full emancipation and full equality in their adopted culture. To get it, they sacrificed a great deal of their ancestral religion and national legacies.

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\(^{154}\) There were never any suggestions about what the varying interpretations would imply, and how they could be taught as a ‘new vocabulary’ of divine terminology. Our imagination is our only guide here.
The general idea was that by so doing they would gain the favour of those Greeks seen as the more advanced and cultured intellectual classes. Judaism needed to be able to stand alongside other mainstream religions recognized at that time. In categorizing Judaism, it is not degrading to say that it is classed along with anthropomorphic religions. No system of religious thought or form of religious life can be separated from anthropomorphic or anthropopathic conceptions. These literary terms and ideas are the tools whereby religion can describe the existence of an active and living God. It is difficult to worship and show reverence to some impersonal power that remains nameless, unrecognizable, and invisible, and who is devoid of any actions or response.

It seems evident that people’s longing for a personal deity drives them to ascribe to their God certain human attributes and refer to his functioning in human ways. Marmorstein suggests that “higher religions cannot exercise any influence, and rule the hearts of multitudes, if they are divested or robbed of their anthropomorphic and anthropopathic wealth inherent in their sacred narratives and teachings. [Thus these] elements in a religion are not to be looked upon as disadvantages. On the contrary, they endowed men with spiritual strength and opened higher ways of thought leading to religious enlightenment.” Nonetheless, even though these terms found their way into Jewish religious instruction, they did begin to produce disadvantages that were clearly evident early on in the synagogues and schools. Some of these resulted from

[155] The Jewish Hellenist Aristoboulos was interrogated by his king about certain passages in the Bible, in which the hands and arms, face and legs, walking and resting of God are mentioned. In an effort to soften the charges of the king, Aristoboulos did his best to propound suitable allegorical explanations of the offending anthropomorphisms. (Marmorstein, p. 3, with reference to M. Friedlander, Geschichte der Judischen Apologetik (1904).

historical developments, especially for Jews living among foreign cultures and civilizations. We will look more at this particular issue shortly. As Jewish religion was embodied in the Scriptures, describing God as having human form and expressing human emotions caused embarrassment and misgivings for the Jews defending their beliefs to pagans.\footnote{157 The Greek historian Herodotus speaks in terms of high praise of the Persians who banished all images from their divine worship and abstained from depicting their divinity in human form. He apparently was not aware of the prohibition which forbids the making of images or likenesses of God enforced among the Hebrews. (Bk. II. 172, quoted in Marmorstein, p. 3.)} The very people whom they wished to impress, and whose own religion seemed beneath that of Judaism in its development, were the ones who were disparaging the religious notions the Jews taught about God.

From a historical perspective, post-Talmudic criticisms of the preceding period are a good source of information about just what positions were held by the Talmudic scholars and teachers. While there are no explicit indications in the literature where the Rabbis oppose the use of anthropomorphisms,\footnote{158 There have been treatments of this topic by some writers who try to find instances of ambivalence regarding anthropomorphism. But the texts in which opposition to anthropomorphism have most often been located in past scholarship have been the Targumim, but these have generally not been seen as convincing. Stern suggests that the first unequivocal evidence in Jewish literature for discomfort with anthropomorphism—that is, the first time that anthropomorphism appears as a problem or source of misinterpretation—comes only in the early Middle Ages, with Saadiah Gaon. Here began the philosophical conception of God predicated the absolute incorporeality and unity of the divine being in Jewish thought. The categories through which the philosophers viewed anthropomorphism as a “problem” have dominated almost every treatment of the phenomenon since the Middle Ages. (Stern, esp. p. 172, 9n.)} many post-Talmudic Sages and scribes were unhappy with an anthropomorphic concept of God they found in the teachings passed on to them, and refrained from copying texts that included it. This form of internal censorship was evident when writings resulting from later disagreements between the Karaites\footnote{159 Karaism is a Jewish doctrine originating in Baghdad in the eighth century that rejects rabbinism and talmudism, and bases its tenets solely on interpretation from the Scriptures.} and the Rabbis were not copied by the scribes. Other writings with similar content were then erased in the centuries after the texts were
composed. This type of censorship by the time of the Middle Ages indicates considerable uneasiness with earlier expressions of the anthropomorphic concept of God on the part of the Talmudic Sages. This change in attitude towards the body of God, and also the change in the understanding of the authentic Talmudic anthropomorphic belief, was significant.

It seems that Jews of this period looked at some of the Talmudic texts with embarrassment because of two major changes in their world view: one was theological and the other philosophical. Christians joined with Karaites in condemning traditional Jews for their belief in an anthropomorphic God, so post-Talmudic Rabbis found themselves involved in both an external and internal war. These attacks originating from different theological and philosophical attitudes made the Rabbis withdraw from their previously held position, especially when the theological point under attack was not considered fundamental to Jewish belief, and might even cause damage to it. This is what led to examples of further significant alterations to Talmudic text. There is the phenomenon of citations from the Talmud referring to other non-existing sources, when the citations obviously relate to an authentic text that had once been in use. Since the Jews did not want to be ridiculed by their neighbours, some of these texts were erased from the Talmud so as not to supply further ammunition to all those who fought against Jewish religion, especially apostates.

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160 Bar-Ilan, p. 332.
161 Ibid.
During the seventh and eighth centuries, after Islam became virtually a state religion and sects of Islam were arguing whether God has a body or not, most of the Jewish Sages in the Diaspora found themselves in a religious atmosphere where the majority of people, with non-Jews included, were of the opinion that God had no body, and it was a heresy to believe in an anthropomorphic God. Apparently, this theological and philosophical reality influenced Jews to look differently upon the Talmudic sources. This background helps to explain, if only partially, the relatively late Jewish attitude towards one Talmudic source that seems to demonstrate the ‘authentic’ rabbinic denial of any phrase of anthropomorphism: the only book attributed to Rabbis of the first six centuries C.E. where God has no body is the Aramaic translation of Onkelos.\(^{163}\) There are a number of cases of Targum where this translator refrained from a literal translation when the Hebrew text speaks of an anthropomorphic God. Here God has no body, and the many biblical verses are mere figures of speech that do not convey real meaning.\(^{164}\) It was he who commented that ‘the Torah spoke in the language of the people’ and that biblical phrases attributing figure and body parts to God are nothing but literal ways of conveying heavenly matters to ordinary people in everyday language. Therefore the Torah was said to speak anthropomorphically. This attitude was common in virtually all rabbinic sources, leading to the conclusion that Talmudic Sages did not believe in anthropomorphism at all.\(^{165}\) But the fact is that there is no express Talmudic objection to any anthropomorphic concept. Furthermore, Talmudic sources, just as their biblical equivalents and Shi‘ur Komah, clearly indicate

\(^{163}\) Bar-Ilan, p. 333.
\(^{164}\) The first scholar to claim this was R. Saadya Gaon (died 942), in his Book of Beliefs. Abridged English version: “Saadya’s Purification of the Idea of God” in Saadya’s Studies, E. Rosenthal, ed. (Manchester, 1943) pp. 139 ff.
\(^{165}\) Bar-Ilan, p. 333.
that Jews in the Talmudic period—at least those not influenced by philosophic rationalism—did believe in an anthropomorphic God. Thus it seems that while Jewish philosophers condemned an anthropomorphic God, those Jews who were not living in a 'philosophic' atmosphere maintained their ancestors' beliefs.\footnote{Ibid., p. 334. It is known that the ancient belief did survive in France and southern Germany especially. In those places many Sages, and probably laymen as well, thought that there was nothing wrong in believing in anthropomorphism for the Divine as their forefathers did. Alexander Altmann states that in 12th-century Provence, even learned Rabbis did not see anything wrong in believing in an anthropomorphic God. See reference in "Moses Narboni’s ‘Epistle on Shi’ur Qoma’," Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) p. 225.} As we have seen, in the post-Talmudic period Jews were under considerable theological and philosophical pressure that made them reject anthropomorphic beliefs by rewriting old texts or by just not copying the parts that could cause misinterpretation of Jewish belief on the part of others.

Jewish philosophers of the medieval period aimed at purifying the concept of the deity of any trace of anthropomorphism. For Saadiah Gaon, strictly speaking only the attribute of \textit{existence} could be ascribed to God. The forms that the prophets saw in their visions were not actually the Deity but his \textit{Shekhinah} ("Presence")—the divine light or \textit{kavod} ("glory") created by him. Later thinkers developed Saadiah’s views, although many of them defended the uneducated simple believers who were intellectually incapable of properly understanding Scripture and approaching God without concrete or human references. Some saw a didactic value in such anthropomorphisms. Discussion of the problem reached its peak in the philosophical work of Maimonides, who insisted upon a nonliteral, allegorical understanding of all anthropomorphic expressions, both physical and psychical, and ruled categorically.
that every anthropomorphism was outright heresy. The violence of Maimonides’ polemic against anthropomorphic beliefs and doctrines suggests that these were fairly widespread, and that a great many people were affected by the stories “that confuse one’s mind” as Abraham ben David put it. However, the influence of Maimonides was both powerful and lasting. Even against the vehement opposition of more conservative thinkers of his day, his writings determined what was to become the Orthodox concept of God within Judaism for a long time. There is evidence to suggest that it was the writings of Maimonides that finally did away with all anthropomorphic notions among the Jews.

Needless to say, the polemics led to the blurring of the anthropomorphic God in Talmudic texts, making it harder for us to determine just what were the rabbinic beliefs a thousand years earlier. Since we have seen post-Talmudic commentators react against anthropomorphisms in the rabbinic writings, there is good support for the argument that it must have been vividly present in the earlier period. Because of the emendations to which we have already alluded, the literature itself does not provide an unequivocal answer but some other evidence is available. We have tried to determine at what point in Jewish history the first objection to anthropomorphism was raised among the Jews, and where it originated. Certainly well before it can be identified in post-biblical literature, it shows up in the writings of the Prophets and Psalmist where there is strong opposition to popular beliefs in God’s corporeality and to human forms and passions of the deity, as well as to any suggestion of limited

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167 Encyclopedia Judaica, p. 56.
168 Specifically, Guide of the Perplexed.
169 Encyclopedia Judaica, p. 56
knowledge and imperfect justice on his part. At the same time those writings did not do away with the criticism of narratives that attribute human limbs and human feelings to God. There was not yet a full realization of the difficulty faced by all anthropomorphic religions in harmonizing their highest concepts of God and his spirituality with human shortcomings. It is possible to locate the struggle between anthropomorphic and anti-anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity in the Judaism of the first centuries. The possibility that the movement may have originated with Hellenism is not clear since earlier Hebrew manuscripts reveal indications of similar tendencies that later show up in Hellenic writings. Besides, some questioning of anthropomorphic passages of the Bible is traced directly to Palestinian origin, and both literal and spiritual readings of the Bible are represented in both regions. There is also uncertainty about whether it was Palestinian Jews who influenced the thinking of Alexandrian Jewry or vice versa; it is known that these groups were in touch with each other.

170 Marmorstein, p. iii.
171 Parenthetically, one can only wonder about how much Jewish theology was developed in defense of polemics directed against Judaism by the united forces of pagan religion and philosophy, Gnosticism, and early Christianity. The observance of the Sabbath was attacked by all three since it was such a distinguishing visible practice by the Jews of the Diaspora. It became the subject of ridicule from Rome to Alexandria. On one side Jews were asked, “If the law of the Sabbath is of such importance and cannot be abrogated, as taught by the teachers of Judaism, why does your God not keep it?” (Here reference is made to Isaiah 40:28: “He will not grow tired or weary...”) On the other hand the anthropomorphic objection was raised, “How can the Scriptures write about God resting on the seventh day?” (Exod. 20:11). Philo entered the fray with the defense that Moses said “caused to rest” and not “rested” because “...he causes to rest that which, though not actually in operation, is apparently making, but he himself never ceases making.” [Allegorical Interpretation, i, 5, ed. Loeb, p. 151; used in Marmorstein, p. 27. The use of the causative form of the verb would later be employed to deal with other instances where the direct form of an action verb required of God a too human dimension; e.g., ‘I will slay you with the sword’ (Exod. 22:23), the idea of the apologists became ‘caused to slay by the sword’. In reply to Christian and Gnostic anti-Jewish attacks, other rabbinic apologists introduced the theory that God observes the Sabbath, just as their teaching gained ground that God also observes other particular laws. However, this development could not have helped to silence the charges that Jewish Sages of that period held an anthropomorphic concept of God (Marmorstein, p. 28).
Some information on factions from the early centuries has come to light. For his study on these divisions, Arthur Marmorstein collected nearly every rabbinic statement he could identify on anthropomorphism, including exegeses of biblical verses with anthropomorphic imagery, in order to narrow down identifiable trends among the early Rabbis. He then proceeded to trace the development of these schools of thought through later tradition. The first of the tendencies, which he associated with Rabbi Akiba in the early second century, interpreted biblical anthropomorphisms literally; the second, the allegorical tendency that can be connected to the figures of Rabbis Ishmael and Yose Hagelili, expressed a rationalistic point of view that tended to explain away anthropomorphisms.\(^{172}\) Along with Rabbi Akiba, scribes like Rabbi Joshua b. Hananyah and Rabbi Meir, and others acquainted with Greek literature and philosophy, opposed allegorical interpretations, preferring to stay with simple anthropomorphic conceptions about God. Others without exposure to philosophical or similar external influences generally favoured allegorical expositions of Scripture. Marmorstein was able to show that the anthropomorphic trend gained the upper hand during the Amoraic period, even while a small minority persisted in propagating allegorical doctrines.\(^{173}\) More recently, Jacob Neusner too has adopted the literalists’ side of the debate, arguing that one can trace through the history of classical rabbinic Judaism a growing tendency that reaches its climax with the composition of the Babylonian Talmud—for him, the acme of rabbinic thought—where God is depicted not only anthropomorphically but as incarnate, and as having assumed the full

\(^{172}\) Marmorstein, p. 12.

\(^{173}\) Ibid., p. 56. Only in the Middle Ages did the latter gain its real prominence. Essentially, Marmorstein read back into rabbinic literature the later medieval view of anthropomorphism, and then put that view alongside the more conservative literalism of Akiba’s group.
particularity of a human being in the flesh. Not everyone is prepared to go as far as that. Stern for one questions the approach which Neusner uses in that while the latter’s examples are drawn largely from rabbinic meshalim, he overlooks the parabolic form of these narratives, something which would open the door to a more metaphorical reading. Yet he does allow that there remain enough other instances of rabbinic anthropomorphism that appear to indicate a belief in divine corporeality to take seriously Neusner’s argument, and his methodological claim to taking anthropomorphic statements “to mean precisely what they say”—that is, as being “clear evidence of a corporeal conception of God” on the part of the Rabbis, and not merely as some attempt at poetic characterization or what a more spiritual interpretation would have required.

It would be natural to read all of the anthropomorphic passages literally, and thus assume that the Rabbis must have believed that God was a corporeal being just like a human, and after the fact, it cannot be proven that they did not actually believe that themselves. On the other hand, if the Rabbis did indeed believe that God either possesses or could assume human shape, they would not have been alone in the late antique world. Belief in the visibility of gods as well as comments about divine appearances in human shape are well documented in pagan religion and literature even in late antiquity. If one compares the pagan sources to the few comparable ones in rabbinic literature, one cannot help but suspect that rabbinic anthropomorphisms may not have been intended to be taken as unequivocal support

175 Ibid., p. 171.
for a belief in God's literal corporeality on the part of the Rabbis.\textsuperscript{177} Even the one exception to this—the famous and problematic document known as the \textit{Shi'ur Komah} which we discussed earlier—proves the general rule against the literal reading of rabbinic anthropomorphisms; the enormous and monstrous measurements of God's body recorded in \textit{Shi'ur Komah} are so fantastic they have no intelligible meaning or sense-content in a literal reading.\textsuperscript{178}

Lest there be a suggestion that all writings in the first century were anthropomorphic in content, we must refer again to the influence of Philo. He gives the issue of anthropomorphism major treatment, asserting that God cannot have a human form because that would further imply that he has human needs and desires, something Philo would not tolerate. He was quite agitated by those anthropomorphic passages, which tended to allow what he considered to be mischievous teachings about the Jewish doctrine of God, and often resorted to uncomplimentary references to describe those who were identified with them. This was done not only against the literalists but also against the rabbinic commentators who did the reverse—using such extreme allegorization that nothing was left of real text or of religious law which would mean anything to a Jew. The balancing act Philo tried to perform ended up being neither a centre balancing nor a helpful alternative on one side or the other of the extremes, but rather a somewhat unstructured casting about from one position to the other. For

\textsuperscript{177} This view held by Michael Fishbane who writes that the complicated controversies in early Christianity concerning the divinity of Jesus, and anthropomorphic doctrines found in early Gnostic texts, may be related in some way to Jewish traditions. Fishbane's views are also discussed in Stern, p. 155.

\textsuperscript{178} As Gershom Scholem discusses in \textit{Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism}, (New York, 1961) p. 64.
example, in his exposition of Genesis 6:6-7 the question arises as to how one can speak of God repenting when he is himself the giver of wisdom. Philo had criticized others for misinterpretation of an anthropopathic expression in that verse, and writes: "Some, on hearing these words suppose that the Existent (God) feels with wrath and anger, whereas he is not susceptible of any passion at all." To explain himself in passages such as these, he combines elements of the Hellenistic style of thinking with that of rabbinic theology:

All the same the lawgiver uses such expressions just so far as they serve for a kind of elementary lesson to admonish those who could not otherwise be brought to their senses. Thus in the laws which deal with commands and prohibitions—laws in the proper sense of the word—there stand forth above others two leading statements about the cause. One that God is not a man (Num. 23:19), the other that he is as a man, but while the former is warranted by grounds of certain truth, the latter is introduced for the instruction of the many, and therefore it is also said of him 'like a man he shall train his son' (Deut. 8:5).

Philo thus explains how to deal with two contradictory Bible passages, and further how to remove the belief in God being human. For those who stuck with the literal meaning of the text, he condemned such methodology as "the mythical fiction of the impious." Philo was not satisfied merely with reproaching others, but laid down general rules by which they should handle such passages. He strongly disliked any kind of literalist teaching which reduced the biblical text to what he considered absurdity regarding Divine shapes, forms and emotions. In the end, though, Philo's influence on Judaism was lessened because of theories that came dangerously close to compromising the unity of God. Abelson suggests another reason: namely, that

179 "The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth. So the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth...for I am grieved that I have made them" (NIV).
180 Philo, pp.36-37, cited in Marmorstein, p. 7.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid., p. 23.
Philo’s God is too impersonal, too much of a metaphysical entity. “Philo does not teach religion, but theology—theology with all its speculativeness, with all its aloofness from the tasks of the everyday world. The immanent God of Philo is a philosophical principle. The immanent God of Judaism is a person. At the basis of the Jewish hearts’ longing and panting after God was the unshaken consciousness that he is a father with a father’s compassion for his children.”

In an earlier chapter, we expended some effort to examine the urgent need of the Rabbis to re-present an immanent God to the Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple. Teachings of his immanence and accessibility were utmost in their minds, so the issue of God’s pathos was one of the important points in the examination of why they used anthropomorphic images in their teachings. A God who is caring, loving, concerned, and responsive was what the people needed to hear about at that juncture. As a moral problem, anthropopathy has been of very limited relevance to Jewish thinkers. It was due to other presuppositions that pathos became an issue in Jewish theology. A major motive for the rejection of the idea of pathos has been the fear of anthropomorphism, or any type of endowment of God with human attributes. The religious person would denounce not only the idea that the Deity has a body or limbs like a human or animal, but also the attribution of some kind of emotion or passion—anthropopathy—as incompatible with the nature of the Supreme Being. Since divine pathos was regarded as an aspect of anthropopathy, every effort was made either to disregard it or to cancel out its significance. The aversion to

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183 Abelson, p. 72.
anthropomorphism among cultured Greeks was principally a reaction against any concepts that were offensive to their moral sensibilities.

To consider another aspect of what the belief system was for these Rabbis, let us turn to an examination of some theological points from the literature of that period to which we referred earlier, and where the anthropomorphic terminology of the ‘image of God’ figures significantly. Our key focus has been the frequent anthropomorphic use of the image of the current king to refer to God. Stern considers the recognition of this imperial model for the Rabbis’ portrait of God as significant for several reasons. First, it suggests how deeply rooted in history was their construction of God. Of course, we have noted that the representation of God as king was in no way an innovation of the Rabbis; its use was common in ancient literature, not to mention the Bible itself. Yet if it is not surprising that the Rabbis should have chosen this conventional figure of power and sovereignty as their symbolic figure for God, it is revealing that the actual model they selected should have been one so insecure and unconfident in his ability to exercise the power at his disposal. In portraying God in the image of this king, the Rabbis were quite possibly reflecting their own feelings of insecurity, their own self-conscious powerlessness in the world, and their anger and resentment at the earthly powers that controlled their this-worldly existence. In other words, the Rabbis’ God was for them no refuge from the world—he was too much like that world. The use of an anthropomorphic representation of God helped make him more ‘manageable’ to influence and understand. He could be approached more

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184 Brettler, Mark Z., God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor (Sheffield, 1989).
easily, comprehend their political predicament, and be convinced of the need for intervention in the affairs of humanity. The problem of his transcendence is the first to be solved with this model. In the view of E.E. Urbach, the Rabbis were insistent that God not be identified with nature or with the phenomenal world, and yet equally determined to maintain his providential connectedness with this world. They walked a kind of tightrope between the two poles. Along this tightrope, anthropomorphism was a corollary of the Rabbis’ need to hold onto the idea of immanence. By representing God in human-like features, they affirmed his continuing concern with the world of humanity, where God himself undertakes “to imitate human behaviour and emotional expressions, to adopt the anthropomorphic turn himself. God’s intention is not just to demonstrate his abiding concern with mankind. He imitates human behaviour because he has no other satisfactory model.” And the Rabbis had no other model either. According to the celebrated statement of Xenophanes, “If oxen and horses and lions had hands or could draw with hands and create works of art like those made by men, horses would draw pictures of gods like horses, and oxen of gods like oxen.... Aethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair; Thracians have gods with grey eyes and red hair.”

We have looked at the literary presentation of God mainly within the structure of the biblical story and rabbinic mashal. We see that the anthropomorphic construction of God is almost always a presence within a narrative or a larger aggadah. As a character, God hardly ever appears in rabbinic literature in isolation, as the object of independent discourse: he is always doing something, always part of some story in

186 Ibid., p. 165.
187 Freeman, K., Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers (Oxford University Press, 1952) p. 15.
which he plays some function or role. This might suggest to us that, in our assessment of that literature, God is a character whose meaning cannot be understood apart from the narratives in which he appears. If that is a useful assumption, then the question can be asked, What did the Rabbis believe when they depicted God anthropomorphically? It is a corollary to the question, What did the Rabbis believe about their aggadot? When Stern picks this up, he develops the reasoning further: “Did they believe the aggadot were historically accurate, and that they occurred just as narrated? Did they believe not only that God actually possessed the anthropomorphic features attributed to him in the stories but all the other details and incidents in these narratives as well? When they described God sitting in judgment in heaven, they surely had no difficulty in believing that the patriarchs and matriarchs were there as well, pleading for Israel before God. But did they equally believe that the Torah and its letters also spoke and acted like persons, refusing to testify against Israel, as the aggadah says they did?”  

Far more so than biblical narrative, rabbinic aggadah resembles ancient Greco-Roman myth, a tradition that remained very much alive in late antiquity as was aggadah itself. So the question, Did the Rabbis believe in their stories? is akin to asking, Did the Greeks believe in their myths? Rabbinic stories, like myths, are usually anonymous (even when attributed to someone, they generally represent oral tradition). “When it comes to gods and heroes, the only source of knowledge is the

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188 Stern, p. 169.
189 Fox, Pagans and Christians, pp. 93-94.
190 This question phrase is also the title of a book which Stern quotes in answer to his question, accepting the conclusion that, “The Greeks believe and do not believe in their myths. They believe in them, and they use them and cease believing at the point where their interest in believing ends... Myth was nothing more that a superstition of the half-literate, which the learned called into question.” Paula Wissing’s translation from the French, for Paul Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? (Chicago, 1988) p. 83.
anonymous 'they say,' and this source has mysterious authority.' That authority is not unlike the authority of Scripture when a text records "as it is written," but perhaps even more so in such expressions as "If Scripture did not say it, it would be impossible to believe." Far from being an apology for anthropomorphism, Stern argues, it may actually be seen as an appeal to authority in order to gain credibility.192 Paul Veyne has produced a creatively argued explanation of the matter that deserves special note. There is what he calls "the sense of a time of myths, of a 'mythological space and time... secretly different from our own': A Greek put the gods in heaven, but he would have been astounded to actually see them in the sky. He would have been no less astounded if someone, using time in its literal sense, told him that Hephaestus had just remarried or that Athena had aged a great deal lately. Then he would have realized that in his own eyes mythic time had only a vague analogy with daily temporality; he would also have thought that a kind of lethargy had always kept him from recognizing this difference."193

It is helpful to keep in mind that the native theology of Judaism is a biblical theology, as Altmann points out; it is rooted in biblical images and ideas, in biblical language and hopes, and in biblical values and concerns, however much these concepts were transformed through reinterpretation and reformulation. "Being so biblically based, much of the ancient and early medieval theology is preserved in the midrashim, the

191 Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, p. 23.
192 Stern, p. 170.
193 Veyne, p. 18. Compare this to Maimonides' comment in The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, 1963), p. 102: "The doctrine of the corporeality of God did not ever occur even for a single day to the Sages, and that this was not according to them a matter lending itself to imagination or confusion. For this reason you will find that in the whole of the Talmud and in all of the Midrashim they keep to the external sense of the dicta of the prophets. This is so because of their knowledge that this matter is safe from confusion and that with regard to it no error is to be feared in any respect; all the dicta have to be considered as parables and as a guidance conducting the mind toward one being."
commentaries on the Scriptures. The need was to preserve the stories and interpretations in a form that was not abstract, so its images of God are necessarily anthropomorphic. This bothered no one, and actually helped give Jewish theology a nondogmatic flexibility." The recognition of what worked for rabbinic purposes was more important than a concern for theological fine points that in any event were not central to their belief. We should not forget that it is always important to read figurative language figuratively. "The fact is that the question of God's corporeality is not the only issue raised by the anthropomorphic description of God in rabbinic literature. And when all discussion of anthropomorphism is devoted solely to the matter of corporeality, the more subtle and fascinating nuances of the portrayal of God in human features are simply neglected and lost. Yet these nuances may offer the real key to the significance of rabbinic anthropomorphism." Stern examined those nuances—"the poetry of the anthropomorphic analogy"—to shift the issue from one of belief to that of literary characterization. In this view anthropomorphism was not just an idiomatic feature of rabbinic language, nor a theological key pointing to God's corporeality or attributes. Instead, it was "a creative turning of language employed to express a truth, a way of exploring the nature of God and of characterizing his nature." That turning of the language to express a truth is another way of emphasizing

195 It would be incorrect to assume that all anthropomorphisms in the literature of this period inevitably assume a belief in divine corporeality or in the material embodiment of God. In an early Gnostic text, The Apocryphon of John, its narrator describes how the demiurge 'Ialatbaa' created the first Adam together with his servant powers, and then lists each one of those powers by name and the limb or organ it created. Yet this Adam, we are later informed, was an entirely spiritual creature, a type of incorporeal anthropomorphism; only later is Adam actually embodied in material form; in Stern, p. 156, with reference to the English translation of the text, published as "The Secret Book According to John," found in The Gnostic Scriptures (Garden City, N.Y., 1987).
the teaching value of anthropomorphic imagery; ironically, in their attempts to
describe God and express their feelings about him, the only model the Rabbis had
available to them was the human character. In the absence of any other divine
vocabulary of terms, anthropomorphism was the best instrument for “breaking in the
ear” to the new concepts of God which served to create him in our image.

The question might still be asked today: How do we try to accommodate the
knowledge of the ages with the word of the Bible? Do we read Scripture in a literal or
in a figurative sense? The attitude of the Jew to his God, to his people, and to his
religion, depends on the answer to this very question. The allegorists suggested that
the teachers of Israel were entitled to ‘put new wine into old bottles’, to invigorate the
old religious life with new methods and approaches. A legend recounts that when the
Schools of Shammai and Hillel reached the climax of their famous spiritual
controversy, a bat kol was heard, saying that both schools proclaimed the words of the
living God.197 “The ups and downs of the history of the Jewish people, the advances
and retrogressions of Jewish life, the triumph and fall of Jewish thought, testify
clearly that both views of God, the literal and the allegorical, have their rightful places
in Judaism. Both are the words of true religion, of the living God.” The time and
space of meshalim and aggadot, like that of myth, flourished in a world and time in
which God was expected to act and behave anthropomorphically, just like a person. It
was understood differently by the ear that was ‘broken in’ to a different definition of
terms in storytelling. “But if someone had asked the Rabbis if God were indeed a
person like themselves, they surely would have responded that the personhood of God

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197 Pal. Berakoth i. 4, b. Erubin 13b.
bore only the vaguest analogy to personhood in their world as they knew it in their daily lives. This is probably as close as we will ever come to knowing what the Rabbis believed. There is no reason for us, the Rabbis' modern readers, to believe more or less than they did."\footnote{Stern (1992), p. 171.}
Summary

From the earliest known religions, and the first Hebrew biblical writings in Genesis, anthropomorphic representations of God have been in existence. The problem that developed for religious leaders such as the Rabbis in the post-Temple period was to recognize the theological difficulties in using such human terminology to describe the incomparable Deity, while also facing up to the reality that there really was not a suitable or effective alternative available to them. In our study it became clear that what constitutes a definition of God’s “body” in the anthropomorphic interpretations of biblical and rabbinic writings is not a universal one. In rabbinic sources, while there was a reluctance among some Sages to define the phrase “image of God,” there was no statement in their literature denying that God has a body. Although the Bible itself contains phrases that both implicitly and explicitly relate to a figure, form, or bodily organs of God, some writers took exception to this becoming the norm. Philo, one of the early opponents of anthropomorphic language, devised a notion of the description being that of “the image of an image,” with humans created mortal in body yet immortal in mind. Also in the first century after the destruction of the Temple, Rabbi Akiba’s literal readings gave rise to an anthropomorphic understanding of God while his colleague, Rabbi Ishmael, preferred a non-literal or allegorical reading which brought about an opposition to anthropomorphism. The question became less one of whether or not God has a body, but what kind of body it should be described as being—a non-corporeal interpretation offers a different understanding of the anthropomorphic language used in the writings.
The error in regarding concepts such as divine pathos an anthropomorphism consisted in treating something that was a unique theological category, as a common psychological concept. This resulted from the complex nature of prophetic language, which combined concepts of otherness and likeness, or uniqueness and comparability, in speaking about God. There is difference between anthropomorphic conceptions and anthropomorphic expressions—the use of the latter does not necessarily prove belief in the former. Heschel reminded us that throughout history God has often been pictured in human form, or as having passions like those of humans. To picture him as human does not mean to think of him as human since all language is relative, adapted to the ideas and associations cherished in a particular age and capable of evoking them.\textsuperscript{199} When the writers of the biblical accounts were speaking about God, they did not simply describe him as a fact, but they praised him, extolled his greatness, and celebrated his glory and majesty. “Merely to personify God would have been to disparage him,” Heschel put it. Anthropomorphism as a way of thinking is in harmony with the thought that a human may become a god, and the presence of this belief, widely held in ancient religions, could be regarded as a test for the genuineness of anthropomorphism. However, a belief such as that was nothing short of blasphemy to the biblical writers. Since human beings could never be regarded as divine, there was no danger that the language of pathos would distort the difference between God and human beings. The less attractive model of an ‘immanent’ human king, who for the Jews could never be thought of as divine in the Greek or Roman manner, could not detract from the image of God as King as portrayed by the Rabbis. This use of the mashal format—especially the king-mashal that drew on the imperial model familiar

\textsuperscript{199} Heschel, pp. 50-51.
to the rabbinic audience—was a popular and successful literary vehicle to teach the theological fundamentals of Judaism in the face of opposition from the non-Jewish cultural and religious environment that surrounded them.

Much of what we know about the early rabbinic period comes from the subsequent period commentators. Most of the post-Talmudic Sages and scribes were unhappy with an anthropomorphic concept of the Godhead, often refraining from copying texts of the rabbinic period that included reference to it. As well, Jews increasingly found themselves in a non-Jewish milieu in which a belief in God’s ‘bodily form’ caused much embarrassment. While many learned rabbis of this period still did not see anything wrong in believing in an anthropomorphic God, by the 12th century Maimonides considered it heresy to speak of God in this way, and his writings were largely responsible for eventually quelling anthropomorphic notions among the Jews.

Just how one explained the concept “in God’s image” became a watershed in defining differences between rationalistic terminology and mystic symbolism. Our questions later about the Rabbis’ beliefs as expressed in the anthropomorphic literature became not so much, What did they believe about God? or, Did they believe he had a body or not?, but rather the better question, What is God’s character and personality that the Rabbis wished to portray? It became increasingly clear that their intent in characterizing God in human terms was not to reduce his stature in any way, but to define him in understandable terms that made him more of a God whom they could worship.  

\[200\] Stern, p. 157.
In the end, there can be no definitive statement about rabbinic beliefs about anthropomorphism, or at least one that was fixed in time. Images and mental conceptions kept evolving. But the final result was to accept that the Rabbis had found a way to speak about a God they experienced as immanent, a Father figure who loved them and chose to share their emotions as a way to show his pathos. Ultimately the problems of anthropomorphism become secondary to that. Abelson, resigning himself to the matter, expressed it best: "The Rabbis solved the problem practically, as people of piety do in all religions: they did not, for they could not, solve it theoretically. The only practical solution was to live as if the problem did not exist!"201

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"The best Jewish thinkers, mystics, saints and scholars have tried to avoid, when thinking of God, the extremes of both anthropomorphism and 'de-personalization.' God as understood in traditional Judaism is the Supreme Being, who is known through his deeds, never comprehended as he is in himself, who is more than personality not less, and who, because this is so, can be worshipped by his creatures who will find him if they seek him."

Louis Jacobs, We Have Reason to Believe

201 Abelson, p. 294.

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