

Transcendental and Anthropomorphic Tendencies in the Hebrew Bible

THE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD distinctive to the Hebrew Bible and hence to Judaic tradition is an amalgamation of anthropomorphic and transcendental tendencies. Emphasis upon the former however runs deep, and to such a level that God in the ancient biblical period is presented in manifest anthropomorphic terms, with ascription of human qualities and attributes so clear, that even the Ten Commandments are said to have been written by the “finger of God”. Some of the anthropomorphisms employed are crude and blatant, portraying God as embodying human physical characteristics and feelings, even acting much like a human being (details being quite graphic in certain places) leaving the theological problem of how to interpret them, their impact, and whether to regard them as objectionable or not. These and other elements are explored in this chapter.

In the Bible God appears in human form, eats, drinks, rests and is refreshed. For example, in a well known biblical encounter, God wrestles with Jacob, dislocates Jacob’s thigh and is even shown to be weak, unable to physically dominate Jacob, to the point of finally asking Jacob to let Him go as the dawn breaks.

Theophany (meaning appearance of God) is thus a common occurrence in the Hebrew Bible. Many biblical theophanies are either concrete anthropomorphisms, or subcategories of physical anthropomorphism, such as envisioned anthropomorphism. And many of these theophanies portray God’s utter closeness to human beings, for the most part in terms of human form, but with varying degrees of explicitness

and human embodiment. So, most human organs are ascribed to God with the exception of sexuality. There are times when God is depicted in transcendental anthropomorphisms where He is portrayed in human shapes and qualities yet residing in the heavens. He is enthroned on a special throne, rides cherubim, plants a garden, studies Torah, presides over a divine council and even speaks to people directly from this heavenly sphere. Some of the anthropomorphic expressions are figurative or metaphorical in nature as they render themselves to linguistically accepted metaphorical interpretations. Many however are not, being corporeal and anthropomorphic through and through. Unfortunately numerous biblical scholars muddle these concrete and literally corporeal phrases by attempting to give them figurative or representational interpretations through recourse to some very arbitrary means. So, for instance, we have scholars attempting to synthetically impose their own sophisticated and developed understandings of God and His nature onto the text of the Hebrew Bible, an approach which completely defies the original intent as well as context of the script.

The origins of Biblical anthropomorphism lie in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible. In verse 1:26 God is said to proclaim “*na’aseh ‘adam beselmenu kidemutenu*”, meaning, “Let us make man in our image after our likeness.” Many orthodox exegetes try to interpret this verse spiritually, claiming that the image and likeness mentioned in the verse refer not to a physical but to a spiritual aspect. However, the original Hebrew words defy any such interpretation. The Hebrew words *tzelem* (image) and *demute* (likeness) denote the outward form and not inward spiritual attributes. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has no hesitation in confessing that this passage in Genesis presupposes

a resemblance between the human body and divine form. The use of the word “image” (*selem*), which most interpreters construe to mean a physical likeness, supports this view. Furthermore, in Genesis 5:1–3, the term “image” and “likeness” are used to describe the resemblance between Adam and his son Seth. The use of the terminology here suggests that humanity resembles God in the same way that Seth resembles Adam, including their physical characteristics.¹

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Therefore the Hebrew God looks like man and very often acts like man. This idea of a God-man resemblance abounds in the Hebrew Bible together with anthropomorphic imagery. Thus God, like man, is “mutable”, freely “localized in space and time,” moves, changes and reacts to changes. Esther J. Hamori observes:

The God of the Hebrew Bible is profoundly anthropomorphic, mutable, free and able to be localized in space and time, able to move, change and be influenced to change. In biblical texts, this includes both intrinsic and extrinsic change...The Israelite God is hardly the immutable, atemporal God of classical theism.²

Further, the God of the Hebrew Bible also changes His mind as well as His decisions. For instance the prophet Moses is recorded as having made God repent of certain evil decisions so causing God to change His mind. At times God appears as tribalistic with racist undertones, and at others a real estate agent more concerned with property rights than worship. Very often He represents the Hebrews’ aspirations and national agenda projecting in a sense their failures, dreams and fears into the cosmos. Thus in the Hebrew God what we have is not the absolute transcendent and perfect God of theism but rather an imperfect, corporeal and finite God, a product of His very finite creators, those who recorded the Old Testament.

Ethical monotheism was not the predominant concern of the early Hebrews. Henotheism is perhaps the best term to denote a patriarchal understanding of God. Monolatry or Mono-Yahwism replaces henotheism with the arrival of Moses who at the same time seems to be sowing the seeds of biblical monotheism although not in the strict sense of the term. His Yahweh is a jealous God though his universe is not free from the existence of other gods. Moreover, his Yahweh is not free from anthropomorphic attributes and qualities seemingly boldly presented in anthropomorphic as well as physical terms. The anthropomorphic tendency is quite visible even in the case of later prophets, who championed strict monotheism and offered vehement opposition to idolatry and graven images. Their God is not presented in crude material terms, but is still visibly corporeal and anthropomorphic i.e., a reflection of the idea that God created man in His own image and

likeness. There are many biblical statements which if taken at face value present God in transcendental terms. On the other hand, God's transcendence is not carefully protected against possible exploitation and compromise. So, the same Bible which categorically differentiates God from mortals, also on many occasions portrays Him very much like mortals with mortal qualities and attributes. There appears to be a tension between anthropomorphism and transcendence throughout the Hebrew Bible but that tension is not quite decisive in eliminating the anthropomorphic depictions of God. Moreover, the Jewish community at large did not seem troubled by the presence of these anthropomorphic expressions in their scripture, until the onslaught of Greek philosophy especially in the first century BC. Even later Rabbinic thought, though not without exceptions, appears to be accepting of biblical anthropomorphisms. Hellenistic thought moved a number of Jewish scholars to interpret anthropomorphic expressions figuratively. For instance, Aristobulus (150 BC) and Philo Judaeus (20 BC-40 CE) championed allegorical interpretation to eliminate anthropomorphic passages, so much so that Philo completely stripped his God of all ascription of attributes.

Later in medieval times Sa'adia Gaon (882-942), Bahya ibn Paquda (1040), and Judah ha-Levi (1075-1141) vehemently opposed biblical anthropomorphisms. Finally we come to Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) who propounded the dogma of God's incorporeality and declared its deniers as idolaters and heretics. The medieval Jewish philosophers seem to have been really bothered by these anthropomorphic expressions, and this was mostly due to the polemic offensive of Muslim speculative theologians against them. Despite the authoritative esteem with which Maimonides was, and is, held among many Jews, his intellectualization of the Hebrew God failed to receive acceptance from among his coreligionists who rejected his incorporeal deity. They regarded his Hellenistic doctrine to be antithetical to the historically authenticated and scripturally mandated anthropomorphic tradition of Jewry at large.

The history of God in the Hebrew Bible seems to be progressive, with conflicting anthropomorphic tendencies reflected throughout this progressive process. This paradoxically simmering tension, with regards to the transcendental and anthropomorphic tendencies characterized of

God, poses a problem. However, it would not be an issue were the Bible to be accepted as a composite work of many generations, a multiplicity of biblical writers, whose differing worldviews, dispositions and cultural milieus reveal themselves in the text, and so explain the tension. If, on the other hand we view the Bible as the Word of God verbatim given to Jews through the prophetic offices of Moses and other Hebrew prophets we are left with manifold challenges. For instance, if God is entirely capable (as of course He is) of expressing His will and intent in idioms most appropriate to His majesty and grandeur then needless to say His authentic Word does not need artificial and arbitrary allegorical tools to convey His true intent to the recipients of His Word. In sum the conflicting tension in the Hebrew Bible is reflective of the competing tendencies, thought patterns, worldviews, and metaphysics of the Hebrew Bible's compilers and little more. The Hebrew Bible itself is best witness to this claim, so we turn next to its study for the proof.

THE BIBLE: AN INTRODUCTION

Along with the Qur'an, the Bible is perhaps ranked one of the most read, distributed and discussed books in the world. Read for nearly two thousand years or more it has been a force, molding, shaping and reshaping the lives and views of millions into its own thought patterns. Some of its readers have taken it literally and others figuratively or symbolically. Some have related themselves to it, and revered it as the fountainhead of their faith and tradition, whilst others have read it to criticize it or study it as a powerful force which has led to or helped to create a number of great civilizations and cultures. Whatever the case, the fact remains that the Bible has without doubt, been part and parcel of various human religious, educational, political and social institutions, in different capacities since its compilation, or canonization, centuries ago. So vast is the work connected with it, says Geddes MacGregor, that "even if an international commission were set up with unlimited funds to investigate the work, a complete inventory of it would be impossible."³

The word "Bible" is derived from the Greek "biblos," which itself is a translation of the Hebrew *Seapharim* meaning "books". As a general

term it can be used for any book venerated as “Sacred” by its followers but as a specific term “the Bible” denotes the books which are acknowledged as canonical by the Christian Church.

The Bible consists of two main parts, commonly referred to as the Old Testament and the New Testament. Both form part of the Christian Canon but the Old Testament is specifically the sacred scripture of the Jews who refer to it as the “Hebrew Bible” or just the Bible rather than Old Testament, as this designation implies a new testament based on events the Jews believe never happened. For Christians, on the other hand, the Hebrew Bible is traditionally accepted as heavenly inspired along with the New Testament and hence authoritative in shaping their religious teachings and practices.

The Hebrew (or Jewish) Bible differs from the Old Testament of the Catholic Bible in a number of respects, and this concerns the number and order of the books that comprise it. Most importantly the Hebrew Bible excludes the twelve books of the Apocrypha, which are accepted by Catholics as canonical and part of their compilation of the Bible. Like the Jews, the Protestants also do not treat these Apocryphal works as canonical, or heavenly inspired, and so do not include them. However the order of the books in the Protestant Old Testament differs from that of the Hebrew Bible.

The Jews divide their Bible into three main categories comprising a total of 39 books: the Law or *Torah*, the Prophets or *Neve'im* and the Writings or *Ketuvim*. These three sections are collectively known as *TaNaKh*, which is an acronym derived from a combination of the first letters of each section in their Hebrew terminology (*Torah*, *Neve'im*, and *Ketuvim*).

The Law or Torah comprises the *Chumash* (five) or the *Pentateuch*, the five “Books of Moses”: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

The “Prophets” fall into two further subdivisions: the “Former Prophets” (four historical books) comprising Joshua, Judges, Samuel (I & II) and Kings (I & II) and the “Latter Prophets” comprising Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and “The Books of the Twelve Prophets”: Hosea, Nahum, Joel, Habakkuk, Amos, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Haggai, Jonah, Zechariah, Micah, and Malachi.

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The third section “Writing” or *Hagiographa* contains the rest of the books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles (I & II) Daniel, Ruth and Esther.

This threefold division of the Hebrew Bible is simply a reflection of its historical development and in no way or form represents any topical or stylistic classification or categorization. It is frequently believed to correspond to the three historical stages during which the books of each section received canonical recognition. Although all three parts of the scripture were believed to be inspired and their significance and authority determined by their respective positions in this tripartite division, the Pentateuch stands in a special class with its author Moses considered as the fountainhead of the rest of the books. Therefore,

the prophets are transmitters of a continuous tradition beginning with Moses; the Prophets and the Hagiographa explain the Pentateuch. Thus all the rest of [the] books, with no detracting from their divine inspiration and authority, are an authority of the second rank; they repeat, reinforce, amplify, and explain the Law, but are never independent of it.⁴

In view of this conspicuous position of the Torah it is pertinent to discuss the status and authority of the “Law” or “Pentateuch” in Judaic tradition.

THE “LAW” OR THE “TORAH”: SIGNIFICANCE AND AUTHORITY

The term “Torah” separates the Pentateuch from the other two sections of the Hebrew Bible. It means “teaching”, “doctrine”, or “instruction” and is often used to refer to all the body of laws. The term in a wider sense is also applied to scriptures as a whole and to biblical legislation in contrast to rabbinical enactments.

The Torah is the most important and authoritative book in Jewish faith. It received this recognition from Numbers 8:1, “And the Lord spoke unto Moses” and also from Deuteronomy 31:9, “And Moses

wrote this law"; (see also Exodus 20:1, 32:16; Leviticus 1:1, 4:1; Numbers 1:1, 2:1, etc.) In view of its divine origin and Mosaic authorship, the Torah has been held in great esteem throughout Jewish history. The Rabbinical tradition declared it to exist even prior to its revelation to Moses. To the Rabbis the Torah existed even before the world was created. It is regarded as one of the six or seven things that were created before the creation of anything in the world and it even preceded the throne of God's glory. The "Torah which God had kept by him in heaven for nine hundred and seventy-four generations was a hidden treasure."⁵ God consulted the Torah in regard to the creation of the world as an architect consults a blue print.

It is evident from these quotations that Rabbinic Judaism had a strong belief in the Torah being the preexistent "Word of God" given to Moses in a mode of direct revelation. They also had no doubt whatsoever about the physical Mosaic authorship of the Torah, "And who wrote them? Moses wrote his own book (The Torah) and the sections concerning Balaam and Job."⁶ Otto Eissfeldt summarizes the point in the following words:

Moses was from an early date regarded as the compiler, or more correctly as the mediator, of the laws of the Pentateuch which issued from God himself. The name used in the New Testament clearly with reference to the whole Pentateuch – *the Book of Moses* – is certainly to be understood as meaning that Moses was the compiler of the Pentateuch. Explicit references to this conception may be found in Philo ..., in Josephus, and in the Talmud (bab. Baba Batra 14b), where it is said that Moses wrote the five books named after him. Philo and Josephus explicitly attribute to Moses also the conclusion which relates his death (Deut. xxxiv, 5-12), whereas the Talmud regards this as having been written by Joshua. The Jewish tradition concerning the compilation of the Pentateuch was taken over by the Christian church.⁷

In addition to this, the rabbinic sources contended that God's whole revelation was not comprised in the written Torah but also in the Oral

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Torah, the Talmud, which Moses received side by side with the Written Torah on Mount Sinai and which was orally carried and conveyed through subsequent generations.

The medieval Jewish scholars maintained the same position *vis-à-vis* the divine provenance of the Torah and the resulting authoritative and binding nature of the Bible in general and the Dual Torah in particular. There is a popular saying concerning Moses Maimonides that “from Moses to Moses there was none like Moses”.⁸ This medieval philosopher and Rabbi argued in his introduction to the “Mishneh Torah” (“Repetition of the Torah”) that:

All the precepts which Moses received on Sinai were given together with their interpretation, as it is said, “And I will give to you the table of stone, and the law, and the commandment” (Exodus 24:12). “The Law” refers to the Written Law: “the commandments” to its interpretation... This commandment refers to that which is called the Oral Law. The whole of the Law was written by Moses, our Teacher, before his death in his own hand.⁹

In his letter to Joseph Ibn Gabir, he declared that “the Torah in its totality has been given to us by the Lord through Moses.”¹⁰ This greatest of the Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages formulated “Thirteen Principles” which a Jew must believe in order to be a Jew. The Eighth Fundamental Principle is comprised of the following words:

[T]hat the Torah came from God. We are to believe that the whole Torah was given to us through Moses, our Teacher, entirely from God. When we call the Torah “God’s Word” we speak metaphorically. We do not know exactly how it reached us, but only that it came to us through Moses who acted like a secretary taking dictation. He wrote down the events of the time and the commandments, for which reason he is called “Lawgiver.”¹¹

To Maimonides, the entire Hebrew Bible was the inerrant Word of God. He argues:

There is no distinction between a verse of Scripture like “The sons of Ham were Cush and Mizraim” (Genesis 10:6), or “His Wife’s name was Mehatable and his concubine was Timna” (Genesis 36:39, 36:12) and one like “I am the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:2) or “Hear, O Israel” (Deuteronomy 6:4). All came from God, and all are the Torah of God, perfect, pure, holy, and true. Anyone who says Moses wrote some passages on his own is regarded by our sages as an atheist or worst kind of heretic, because he tries to distinguish essence from accident in Torah. Such a heretic claims that some historical passages or stories are trivial inventions of Moses and not Divine Revelation.¹²

These words are crystal clear and forceful enough to speak for themselves. Jews of the Middle Ages held a strong belief in the divine origin and Mosaic authorship of the entire Torah, as well as belief in its infallibility, immutability, and eternity. Sa’ad ibn Mansur ibn Kammuna, a 13th century Jewish philosopher, wrote a famous treatise which argued that the law would neither be abolished nor changed nor substituted for something other than itself.¹³ This belief in the Torah’s infallibility, supernatural origin and permanent credibility was so deep held in the hearts of medieval Jewish scholars that they closed all doors to and denied all the possibilities of progressive revelation. They held with Maimonides that “it will neither be abrogated nor superseded, neither supplemented nor abridged. Never shall it be supplanted by another divine revelation containing positive and negative duties.”¹⁴ They also maintained, as Maimonides observed, that “To the Torah, Oral and Written, nothing must be added nor any thing taken from it.”¹⁵ And this view continued to be maintained by Jews till the beginning of our era. Even in today’s world of scientific naturalism and cosmic pessimism, this is what a reformed Jew has to say about the significance of the Torah:

The teachings of the Torah are the most sacred legacy and inspiration of the Jewish people. They are so fundamental that they are recited in public reading every week of every year. The five books are divided into segments or portions, one of which is to be

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read on each successive Sabbath. Usually, the first words of each portion are chosen as the title, so that every week of the Jewish year can be identified by its Torah portion....since no object in Jewish life is more precious than a Torah.¹⁶

He further informs us that “A Torah can never be deliberately destroyed. If it becomes too brittle or too fragile to use, it is buried in the earth just like a deceased person.”¹⁷

Though voices against such a literal view of the Torah have included Christian scholars like Clementine Homilies, St. Jerome, and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. c. 428) and some Jewish scholars like Isaac ibn Yashush, Rashi, David Kimhi and Abraham ibn Ezra (d. 1167) in the twelfth century, continuing with Carlstadt, Andreas Masius (1574) in the sixteenth, and Isaac de la Payrere (1655), and Richard Simon, Thomas Hobbes and then Spinoza in the seventeenth century, it was only in the age of reason in the eighteenth century that the stage was set for the loss of biblical authority as inspired Scripture.

Finally it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century that biblical scholars like Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) were able to analyze, oppose and finally shatter the idea of the divine and supernatural origin of the Torah and Mosaic authorship of it. At present, claims R. E. Friedman, “there is hardly a biblical scholar in the world actively working on the problem who would claim that the Five Books of Moses were written by Moses – or by any one person.”¹⁸

Contemporary Jews and the Authority of the Torah

Though significant results were achieved by the as mentioned scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yet nobody attempted to differentiate clearly between various component parts of the Pentateuch. This process started with H. B. Witter whose *Jura Israelitarum in Palastinam* appeared in 1711. He pointed out the usage of different divine names in the Book of Genesis. Jean Astruc (born in 1684) identified these sources as one which used the divine name “Elohim”, and the other which used the divine name “Jehovah”. Eichhorn in his *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (first edition 1780–3) proved that there existed two main strands and hence two sources for the ancient

writings. English scholar Alexander Geddes and German scholar J. S. Vater developed “*the fragment hypothesis*” picturing the Pentateuch as a collection of fragments. Hupfeld in his book *Die Quellen der Genesis und die Art ihrer Zusammensetzung*, inaugurated a new phase in the history of Pentateuchal criticism. He identified three narrative strands in the Pentateuch.

As a result of biblical scholars Wilhelm Vatke’s *Die Religion des Alten Testament I* (1835) and Karl H. Graf’s *Die geschichtlichen Bucher des Alten Testaments* (1866), two independent research works, a historical or documentary hypothesis about the different sources of the Pentateuch came into the limelight. Vatke sought to trace from the biblical narration the historical development of the ancient Hebrew religion while Graf worked on the text itself so as to find which of the texts must have preceded or followed others. They identified four different source documents; J (the document associated with the divine name Yahweh or Jehovah), E (the one associated with Elohim, the Hebrew word for God), P (the passages emphasizing the legal aspects and the functions of priests), and D (the source responsible for composing the book of Deuteronomy). J. Wellhausen combined the research of his predecessors and propounded the “Documentary Hypothesis,” which brought a revolution in the field of biblical research in general and Pentateuch studies in particular. Since then most critics of the Pentateuch argue that it is a composite work, produced at different intervals, with contradictions, inconsistencies and different literary styles, and as such it cannot be the work of one individual (Moses) as has been claimed for centuries. Opposition to the critical study or examination of the Bible comes from the Church as well as Judaism, but the new scholarship has impacted on followers of both religions resulting in schism with respect to the authority of the Torah. At present there are three main groups among those of the Jewish faith, each having a different view with regards to the authority of the Torah.

Reform or Progressive Judaism

Reform Judaism, which appeared in nineteenth century Germany, recognizes the validity of the critical study of the Bible and accepts the picture of the Torah or Pentateuch which has emerged as a result of

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modern historical and critical research and investigation. The movement of Reform Judaism can be further divided into two main categories: the “Classical” and the “Radical”. The Classical Reform movement does not dispense with the traditional concept of the Torah altogether. These reformers attempt rather to reinterpret and adapt it to new requirements:

The emphasis at the outset was on adaptability, not on total rejection. The early Reformers understood very well that Jewish law was central to Jewish life. They acknowledged the need to discontinue the observance of antiquated commandments, but they staunchly defended the necessity of the legal process in determining Jewish belief and practice.¹⁹

The Classical Reform movement ended in 1881 when radical trends within the movement got a chance to dominate it. The outcome, the Radical Reform Judaism movement, practically dispensed with the concept of “Torah,” having lost faith in its divine origin. In the words of M. M. Kaplan, one of the pioneers of modern Jewish thought:

With critical and historical research proving that the Pentateuch is a composite document which began to function as a single code not earlier than in the days of Ezra, the laws and institutions contained in the Pentateuch are deprived at one blow of the infallibility and permanent validity which traditional Judaism was wont to ascribe to them.²⁰

Contrary to the traditional view, Radical Reformers give more importance to Jewish history, the Jewish people, Jewish civilization etc. and see Judaism as a constantly evolving organism rather than something revealed and static. Judaism, observes J. Neusner, “has a history, that history is single and unitary; and it has always been leading to its present outcome: Reformed Judaism.”²¹ This means that “the origin of the reliable definition of Judaism lies not in revealed records of God’s will but in human accounts of humanity’s works.”²²

For Radical Reform Judaism the source of religious authority, observes Danzger, is “the ethical and universalistic teachings of the prophets. Because conscience is a reflection of the Godhead for Reform, the ultimate authority is man’s own conscience, guided by the moral and ethical teachings of the Bible.”²³ This perhaps is the reason why the Reformers are more concerned with philosophy than the Torah. Even the term “Torah” is missing from their vocabulary. This is evident from the language used in the historic Pittsburgh platform which declared:

We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization... We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regular diet, priestly purity, and dress... Their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.²⁴

One cannot imagine a more forthright declaration addressed to the age which refutes or transforms the authority of the Written as well the Oral Torah. Commenting on this revolution, Greenstein observes that

the principle of earlier Reform had been a commitment to evolution in Jewish law, not revolution. Classical Reform tried to adapt Jewish law to new conditions while still retaining the principle. The Pittsburgh Platform abandoned that effort altogether. Halakah, the Hebrew word for “Jewish law,” disappeared from Reform vocabulary.²⁵

This trend continued in Reform circles till the early 1930s. In 1930 the Columbus Platform replaced the Pittsburgh Platform. It emphasized the evolution of Jewish law and life rather than revolution. It renewed the approach of Classical Reformers *vis-à-vis* the Torah and continues to be popular among Reform Jews today.

Orthodox or Traditional Judaism

Orthodox Judaism, contrary to popular impression, is not a monolithic movement. Orthodoxy spans a range of complexity with regards to beliefs, customs, practices and political views. However, there is one thing common among them: the Orthodox do not see Judaism as a constantly changing organism or as a human construct. They believe that the Torah was revealed on Sinai and is supernatural and eternal and in no way man-made or subject to change. Jacob Neusner defines orthodoxy as “all Jews who believe that God revealed the dual Torah at Sinai, and that Jews must carry out the requirements of Jewish law contained in the Torah as interpreted by the sages through time.”²⁶ Therefore, the Orthodox or traditionalists are in line with the position held by the generality of Jewry at large for centuries. They maintain that the Torah is the word of God and by definition truth itself. They further maintain that the Torah

being given by God, must carry meaning in every word and not even one letter can be superfluous. One may not understand everything, but that is human shortcoming. If modern scientific knowledge appears to contradict the biblical word, then either our present-day science will prove to be in error or we do not understand the Bible properly.²⁷

So to Orthodoxy the Torah constitutes facts that are divinely oriented and above all doubt. As the facts of nature leave no room for any kind of doubt, so does the Torah. This view of the essential truthfulness or absolute inerrancy of the Torah also attended to its natural corollary that the Torah teachings are directed, precise and full of divine wisdom. Human beings may not deny them even if they are at a loss to grasp the meanings. In short the religious authority in orthodoxy is the Written as well as the Oral Torah (Talmud) along with the subsequent rabbinic traditions and not (as in Reform Judaism) the history of the Jewish people. Greenstein observes that

in more recent times, this appeal to authenticity through traditional sources has persuaded portions of [the] Orthodox

community to define its theological stance as “Torah-true” Judaism. They perceive themselves as guardians of the Torah and its commandments with the duty to preserve them and follow them regardless of changing times or circumstances.²⁸

Conservative Judaism

Conservative Judaism is a “counter-Reform” movement and is a mixture of both the above discussed views. Conservative Jews maintain their belief in the revealed nature of the Dual Torah, but do not seal the door of revelation with the rabbinical period. They believe in a continuity of revelation in Jewish tradition. This middle position espouses both the previous views, for it holds that God revealed the written Torah, which was supplemented by “the ongoing revelation manifesting itself throughout history in the spirit of the Jewish people.”²⁹

To the Conservatives, Jewish tradition, culture, customs, and the practices and value schemes of the Jewish people, are quite significant. It is their belief that Judaism is a tradition that includes not only the written and oral Torah, the Mishna and the Talmud, but also the historical practices of Jews, the traditions of the entire Jewish civilization. Robert Gordis summarizes the fundamental postulates of Conservative Judaism in the following words: “The maintenance of the twin principles of authority and development in Jewish law... together with the emphasis upon the worldwide peoplehood of Israel – these are the basic postulates of Conservative Judaism.”³⁰ This emphasis upon the catholic Israel does not imply lack of faith in the Torah. The Torah to the Conservatives is the word of God and divinely inspired. Such a strong faith in the validity of the Torah is clear from the words of Isaac Leeser, ‘the founder of Conservatism’ in the United States. He wrote in the preface to his English version of the Bible, “the translator believes in the Scriptures as they have been handed down to us, as also in the truth and authenticity of prophecies and their literal fulfillment.”³¹ Conservatives would allow application of biblical criticism to the Hebrew Bible with the exception of the Pentateuch. Morris Raphall, for instance, “differentiated between the Five Books of Moses and the rest of the Scriptures. It was not possible, he believed, to apply the same

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measure of analysis to both. Whoever undertook the criticism of the Pentateuch would touch the basis of Judaism.”³²

In light of what has been discussed thus far, it may be asserted that although modern biblical criticism has left its traces in and imprint on modern Judaic thought and has caused some Jews to revise their faith in the supernatural origin and binding nature of the Torah, many Jews maintain a strong belief in the divine origin and nature of the Torah. They believe in its essential facticity and venerate it as the true “word of God”. In case of the Orthodox, the Torah is the inerrant and infallible Word of God in its literal sense. None of the Jewish groups, even Reformism in its radical form, has rejected its validity altogether. The phrase, all Scripture (Written + Oral), only Five Books of Moses, not five books of Moses in its entirety, but just the beliefs along with the ethical and moral teachings, will, perhaps, be fitting to convey the position regarding the Torah of the traditionalists, conservatives and reformists consecutively. Therefore, a student who intends to learn about the authentic Jewish concept of God, or transcendence or anthropomorphism, and compare these to their counterparts in other traditions, would have no choice but to go to the Hebrew Bible in general and the Five books of Moses in particular, because the Torah, whatsoever may be the claims and findings of modern research, enjoys authoritative and authentic status among Jewry at large. This assertion may be substantiated by the words of one of the best known Conservative Jewish scholars, Kohut, who observes, “to us the Pentateuch is *noli me tangere!* Hands off! We disclaim all honour of handling the sharp knife which cuts the Bible into a thousand pieces.”³³

THE HEBREW BIBLE AND CHRISTIANITY

The Christian Scriptures consist of two Testaments, the Old and the New. What Christians regard as the Old Testament, an intrinsic part of Christianity since the very beginning of the faith, is for Judaism the Hebrew Bible. So, in reality the original Christian Bible, which was used by Jesus and his followers, was the Hebrew Bible of the Jewish community. It was treated as “Sacred Scripture” and enjoyed absolute

canonical authority. Thus, the Holy book for Jesus as well as for the early founders of the Christian faith, was not the New Testament but the Hebrew Bible of Judaism. Though perhaps we should qualify this by noting that the New Testament and Early Church quotations from the Old Testament seem to have been almost always made from the Greek Septuagint (ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and therefore the Bible for the first Christians also included the apocrypha which was almost invariably in all Christian Bibles until the Protestant Reformation. Since the New Testament books, observes Grant,

which reflect the life of early Christians are written exclusively in Greek, it is not surprising that most of the Old Testament quotations in them are derived from the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint; but sometimes, for example in the Gospel of Matthew, some of the quotations seem to be based on different renderings of the Hebrew text. Recent archaeological discoveries have shown that the Septuagint was in circulation even in Palestine, and that its text was somewhat different from that found in the major, later manuscripts. Undoubtedly the Palestinian Greek manuscripts underwent a good deal of correction on the ground of comparison with Hebrew texts, and it may be that New Testament passages which seem to be closer to the Hebrew than to the Septuagint are based on corrected Septuagint texts.³⁴

The Old Testament enjoyed this authoritative status even when need was felt to add the Christian Gospels to it, which were the first books to be added to the Hebrew Bible as supplementary scriptures. The issue of the New Testament canon will be addressed at length in the next chapter. However, it must be noted that throughout the long centuries of the formative period of Christianity it was the Hebrew Bible and not the New Testament which was fully in the canon. Some of the New Testament books obtained their place in the canon gradually while the Old Testament books were accepted as canonical from the beginning.

It is beyond doubt therefore that the Hebrew Scripture was the original Sacred Book of the Christian faith. Indeed for the first four centuries it remained the only canonical Scripture (before the complete

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canonization of the New Testament), and has been in the Christian Bible since the Church's canon was first formulated. The question arises as to the relationship of the Hebrew Bible with the Christian faith and its doctrines. Is the Hebrew Bible in conformity with Christian doctrines, and further, is it accepted by all Christians as authoritative and binding? Could the findings of anyone studying the text of the Old Testament for instance be equally applicable to the Christian faith as they would be to the Jewish one? The answer to these important and valid questions is extremely difficult. What is required is a thorough discussion of Christian responses to the Old Testament. Nevertheless, we can gain an impression of what some Christians at least feel about this complex situation. John Bright for instance states:

The Old Testament... is different. It was not in the first instance a document of the Christian faith at all, but of the faith of Israel. It contains much that is strange to Christian belief and that has never been practiced by Christians, together with not a little that may even be offensive to Christian sentiments. How is this ancient book, which presents a religion by no means identical with the Christian religion, to be appealed to by the church as normative over Christian belief and Christian conduct?³⁵

Bright further points out what could be offensive to Christians when he tells us that

there is much in the Old Testament – and it ought frankly to be admitted – that offends the Christian's conscience. Its heroes are not always heroes, and are almost never saints. They lust, they brawl, and commit the grossest immorality; they plot, they kill, or seek to kill. And often enough their conduct receives no whisper of rebuke: it is just recorded. How are the stories of such things in any way a guide for the faith and conduct of the Christian? How shall he learn from them the nature of his God and of the duty that his God requires of him? Many a sincere Christian has, explicitly or tacitly, asked that question. Scarcely a part of the Old Testament is exempt from it. Not even the prophets!³⁶

Giving as example the well known story of David and Bethsheba, Bright further elaborates that

it is an altogether sordid tale of lust, adultery, treachery, and murder, and many a reader has been shocked by it. How can such a story possibly be said to speak any authoritative word to the Christian with regard to his faith, or in any way furnish guidance for his conduct? Certainly it provides him with no example to follow – unless it be an example of what he ought under no circumstances to do.³⁷

In view of this complex situation it is entirely justifiable to ask the question, in what sense is the Old Testament authoritative for Christians in matters of faith and practice? Do Christians differentiate between the two Testaments and assign the Old Testament a position second in rank to the position and authority of the New? And if what the Old Testament comprises of, was and is not identical to the Christian faith and cannot work as the fountainhead of its doctrines, why was it and why is it a part of the Bible today, accepted by the Church as the legitimate authority in matters of faith and practice? Why are pastors and evangelists of modern times reading and quoting the Old Testament in their sermons and services?

The Christian response to these significant questions is interesting, and can be classified into three main categories.

(i) The Marcionist Response

‘Get rid of the Old Testament’ was the solution typified by Marcion (in around CE 140). Marcion (100–160), the son of a Christian bishop in *Pontus*, found the Old Testament to be absolutely different from the Christian faith and therefore completely separated the two Testaments in his canon, rejecting the Hebrew Bible entirely. Marcion, observes Grant, “believed that the earliest apostles had distorted the original tradition in order to make it relevant to their earliest hearers.”³⁸ His canon consisted of the *Gospel* (Luke, without interpolations) and *Apostle* (Paul, without interpolations and without the Pastoral Epistles). He is classified by some as a Gnostic and an extreme dualist while

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others, disputing the degree to which he was influenced by Gnosticism, do accept that his systematic effort to justify the devaluation of Hebrew Scripture was an outcome of Gnostic teachings that swept over the ancient world.

Marcion believed that there were two gods in existence. One, the Creator and Just God of the Old Testament, and the second the good God who loved and redeemed humanity from the angry and jealous God of the Old Testament. It was this latter good God who in his opinion sent Jesus to be crucified as atonement to satisfy the justice of the Old Testament God. Carmichael observes that the

redemption in Christ was to him in no way to be understood in terms of Judaism or the Scriptures of Judaism, in which he found much to offend him. The God of the Old Testament is another and inferior being, the Demiurge-creator, the vindictive God of the law, wholly opposed to the Gracious God revealed in the Gospel.³⁹

For Marcion redemption meant redemption from the Law (Old Testament). He had no reservation in declaring that as the book of a different and hostile god, the Old Testament had no place in the Christian scheme of divine revelation or Christian Canon.

Marcion further maintained that both Jesus and Paul had held the same views about the Old Testament, but that their teachings had been corrupted by the apostles. Marcion's radical views were well accepted among his followers. The Church, on the other hand, rejected his views and declared him a heretic because, in the words of Irenaeus, "he persuaded his disciples that he was more trustworthy than the apostles who transmitted the gospel."⁴⁰

Though the Christian Church roundly rejected this solution and persecuted Marcion's followers, his teachings nevertheless maintained their corporate existence until the fifth century. In modern times, a Marcion-like attitude re-emerged in the Liberal period of the late nineteenth century, with Goethe, Schelling, Feuerbach and Schleiermacher being just a few examples of Christian Marcionite tendencies. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1786-1834), accepted as the father of modern Protestant theology during the nineteenth and for about half the twentieth century, made a systematic effort to draw a stark line and

pinpoint the gulf which lay between Old Testament theology and that of the New Testament by placing Old Testament theology on a par with heathenism. He contended that "The relations of Christianity to Judaism and Heathenism are the same, inasmuch as the transition from either of these to Christianity is a transition to another religion."⁴¹ Though he did not object to the Old Testament being printed in the Bible, he did feel that its addition to the New Testament would be more appropriate in the form of a sort of appendix and not as something of equal rank and authority for "The Old Testament Scriptures do not ... share the normative dignity or the inspiration of the New."⁴² The proponents of this trend argued that there existed no bond of continuity or internal relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The two faith traditions followed two very different deities, that of the Old and New Testaments, with very different schemes of salvation.

The Marcionist strain has survived in Christianity down to the present day. Although people like Friedrich Delitzsch are accused of Nazism, anti-Semitism, and their views on the Old Testament are often discarded as biased and sick, the views of scholars like A. Harnack, one of the great historians of dogma, are not given the same treatment. Harnack like Marcion concluded that "the Old Testament should be removed from the Christian canon."⁴³

(ii) The Official Response

Although the Church from the very beginning accepted the Old Testament as "Holy Scripture", meaning the word of God, and hence authoritative and canonical, this does not mean that the early Church Fathers were unaware of the problem of incongruity and strangeness inherent in the texts of the two Testaments. For, as Origen observes, if someone

points out to us the stories of Lot's daughters and their apparently unlawful intercourse with their father, or of Abraham's two wives, or of two sisters who married Jacob, or the two maidservants who increased the number of his sons, what else can we answer than that these are certain mysteries and types of spiritual matters, but that we do not know of what sort they are?⁴⁴

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Men like Celsus, Porphyry and others did point out the existence of immoralities as well as anthropomorphisms contained in the Old Testament, identifying several passages to indicate the human aspect of the Hebrew Bible. The Fathers, on the other hand, could not declare the Old Testament to be manmade and hence unauthoritative for they believed that it had been divinely inspired and entrusted by God through His only Begotten Son Jesus Christ. They reasoned to themselves that it was the normative Scripture which Jesus had in fact followed and thus urged others to look to this as the key to understanding his person. To discard the Old Testament was tantamount to discarding the person of Jesus Christ, an act which would have risked the entire faith. *Ipsa facto*, the Church Fathers retained the normativeness of the Old Scriptures by appealing to “allegory” and “typology”.

The school of Alexandria in the shape of two of its theologians and philosophers, Clement (155–215) and Origen (185–254), advocated this allegorical recourse which, later on, came to be adopted by other Fathers including, Ambrose and Augustine. Origen saw numerous difficulties with the literal textual sense of the Scriptures arguing that many people misunderstood the Old Testament because “they understand Scripture not according to their spiritual meaning but according to the sound of the letter.”⁴⁵ According to R. E. Brown:

Many of the Church Fathers, e.g., Origen, thought that the literal sense was what the words said independently of the author’s intent. Thus was Christ spoken of as “the lion of Judah,” the literal sense for these Fathers would be that he was an animal. That is why some of them rejected the literal sense of Scripture.⁴⁶

Origen argued that

the law has twofold interpretation, one literal and the other spiritual... It is consistent with this when Paul [2 Corinthians 3:6] also says that ‘the letter kills,’ which is the equivalent of literal interpretation; whereas ‘the spirit gives life’ which means the same as the spiritual interpretation.⁴⁷

Charles J. Scalise observes:

Though Origen takes Paul's contrast between "the letter and the spirit" and Paul's use of allegory as scriptural points of departure, his view of "the letter and the spirit" dramatically alters the Pauline perspective. For Paul, the "historical pattern" of the Old Testament story is explicitly preserved, even in the few places where an allegorical approach is explicitly used (e.g., the story of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4:22–26). For Origen, however, though much of the Scripture is viewed as historical, the historicity of Scripture is itself unimportant; what matters is the spiritual meaning of Scripture developed by the method of allegory.⁴⁸

Hanson observes that to Origen "History... is meaningless unless a parable is derived from it, unless it is made into an allegory."⁴⁹

Origen, following Neo-Platonistic tendencies and using a word pattern from Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:23), introduced what came to be his famous threefold distinctive meanings of the Scripture corresponding to the supposed trichotomy of man's nature: body, soul and spirit. First among these, he contended, was "the somatic" literal or philological meaning of the text which everybody can understand. Second was "the psychic" moral or tropological meaning, the existential application of the biblical text to one's own situation, and the third "the pneumatic" spiritual or mystical meaning which could be grasped only by those who were mystically perfect. He argued that "all [Scripture] has a spiritual meaning but not all a bodily meaning."⁵⁰ He observed that certain passages do not make sense at all if not understood allegorically. "Now what man of intelligence will believe that the first, second, and third day, and evening and the morning existed without the sun, moon, and stars?"⁵¹ Therefore, Origen interpreted them thoroughly and allegorically. Bigg, Wolfson, and J. Danielou argue that Origen derived this method of interpretation from Philo. Bigg observes that "his rules of procedure, his playing with words and numbers and proper names, his boundless extravagance are learned, not from the New Testament, but through Philo from the puerile Rabbinical schools."⁵² Grant, on the other hand, argues that it was not "Philonic, but derived from Origen's studies of Greek grammar and rhetoric."⁵³

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Origen went so far in his allegorism that all Scripture became, as Bigg observes, “transparent beneath his touch; the ‘crannies in the wall’ multiply and widen, till the wall itself disappears.”⁵⁴ By this “exegetical suicide”⁵⁵ as Hanson characterizes it, the Alexandrians, argues Bigg:

found symbols where there was no symbol; they treated symbols not as indications, as harbingers, but as proofs. Thus they undertook to demonstrate Christian doctrine by passages which in the belief of the Jew were not Messianic at all, or, if Messianic, had not been fulfilled. They neglected the difference between before and after.⁵⁶

In short they “found in the Old Testament what they already possessed, what they could not have found unless they had possessed it. But at any rate they found nothing more.”⁵⁷ Through this “dangerous” and “delusive” method, as Bigg characterizes it,⁵⁸ they abandoned too quickly the grammatical and historical sense of the text, such that the text, argues Scalise, lost “its capacity to exercise hermeneutical control over interpretation through its literal sense.”⁵⁹

The school of Antioch represented by Theophilus of Antioch (115–188), Diodorus of Tarsus (d. 393), Theodor of Mopsuestia (350–428) Chrysostom (354–407) and Theodoret (386–458), was more sober in its approach to the Scriptures than its rival the Alexandria School. These Antiochian interpreters, observes Mickelsen:

all emphasized historical interpretation; yet this stress was no wooden literalism, for they made full use of typology. The school of Alexandria felt that the literal meaning of the text did not include its metaphorical meaning, but the school of Antioch insisted that the literal meaning cannot exclude metaphor.⁶⁰

These early fathers tried to solve problems raised by Marcion and others by typology and allegory. D. B. Stevick observes:

Insofar as the Fathers recognized problems and discrepancies in the text of Holy Scripture (as many of them did), they seem able

to accept some ingenious reconciling explanation or to shift to allegorical exegesis. That is, they would observe the problem passage and then say that the apparent difficulty concealed a mystery: This number stood for one thing; this river was a symbol of something else; and this person was a type of still another thing. Put them together as an allegory, and the problem passage becomes a revelation of great truth.⁶¹

Other fathers like Jerome (347–419) and Augustine (354–430) followed Origen in allegorism. Though Jerome in his later life tried to get away from allegory, he did not fully succeed. Farrar observes that “He flatters himself that he succeeded himself in steering safely between the Scylla of allegory and the Charybdis of literalism, whereas in reality his ‘multiple sense’ and ‘whole forests of spiritual meanings’ are not worth one verse of the original.”⁶² Augustine, in the name of having sound principles for interpretation, himself allegorized extensively. From 600 to 1200, allegory, observes Mickelsen, “had a real hold upon the minds of medieval theologians.”⁶³ Brunner observes that “the rank growth of the allegorical method of Biblical exposition made it impossible to maintain the Bible text as normative, as compared with the ecclesiastical development of doctrine.” By means of allegorical exposition the Scholastics, says Brunner, “‘prove’, with the help of Scripture, all that they wish to prove.”⁶⁴ The outcome was, as John Bright puts it:

a wholesale and uncontrolled allegorizing of Scripture, specifically the Old Testament. This did not confine itself to difficult or morally offensive passages, or to passages that tell of something that seems unnatural or improbable, or to places where Scripture contradicts, or seems to contradict, other Scripture; it extended itself almost everywhere. Scarcely a text but yielded hidden and unsuspected riches to the interpreter’s ingenuity.⁶⁵

By means of this wholesale allegorizing, the Church was able to save the Old Testament as the Sacred Scripture which, according to them, propounded Christian meanings in each of its texts. The Roman

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Catholic Church, the heir of this tendency, has traditionally been and still is more inclined and hospitable to the allegorical “mystical” meanings of the text than most Protestant churches.

Many Protestants, following the pattern of Reformers like Luther and Calvin, reject allegory in principle. Luther scolded those who used the allegorical method of interpretation and rejected it altogether. In his “Preface to the Old Testament” he writes:

There are some who have little regard for the Old Testament... They think they have enough in the New Testament and assert that only a spiritual sense is to be sought in the Old Testament. Origen, Jerome, and many other distinguished people have held this view. But Christ says in John (5:39), “search the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to me.”⁶⁶

He further argues:

The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and advisor in heaven and on earth. That is why his words could have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue... But one should not therefore say that Scripture or God’s Word has more than one meaning.⁶⁷

Calvin called allegorical interpretations an invention of the Devil, something “puerile” and “farfetched” meant to undermine the authority of Scripture.⁶⁸ By emphasizing the plain historico-philological sense of the text, both Luther and Calvin emphasized the authority of the Scripture and dispensed with “Tradition” with its accepted mystical meanings, “the exotic jungle of fanciful interpretation.”⁶⁹ Luther gave profoundly Christological interpretations to the Hebrew Bible and urged Christians to search Christ and the gospel in the Old Testament.

Since the Reformation period, the trend to find Christological as well as typological meanings in the Old Testament has been quite pervasive in influential Protestant circles, and is still popular among a number of scholars especially in Europe and the UK. Karl Barth, Wilhelm Vischer, O. Procksch, A. B. Davidson, and R. V. G. Tasker are examples. Vischer, for instance, argues that, “the Bible is the Holy Scripture only

insofar as it speaks of Christ Jesus.”⁷⁰ It is the only “dogma which for the Christian binds the testament together; the Old Testament telling us what the Christ is and the New Testament telling us who He is.”⁷¹ Procksch contends that “the figure of Jesus Christ has the Old Testament as its background. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies: without him the Old Testament is a torso.”⁷² Bright remarks that:

The normative element in the Old Testament, and its abiding authority as the Word of God, rests not in its laws and customs, its institutions and ancient patterns of thinking..., but in that structure of theology which undergirds each of its texts and which is caught up in the New Testament and announced as fulfilled in Jesus Christ.⁷³

This approach, though rejecting the allegorical sense and advocating a plain literal or grammatico-historical meaning of the text, seems to do a similar injustice. All these methods supply the Old Testament with meanings and results in advance. The result is that writers merely quote the Old Testament to prove what they think should be proven by it. Somewhat like their Catholic friends, Protestants, in the name of finding Christological meanings, approach the Old Testament with preconceived, set ideas, as well as hard and fast assumptions, superimposing these assumptions onto the text of the Old Testament itself and in the process perhaps consciously disregarding its plain meanings. The practical outcome not surprisingly is the same, a disguised sort of allegory. Worth mentioning here is the fact that the Protestant approach to the Scriptures has probably caused more confusion and diversity of interpretation than that of the Roman Catholics. For Catholicism the Church is the final authority determining the validity of interpretation. No interpretation can be given to, and no meaning interpolated from the Scriptures, which contravenes the Church’s dogmas and teachings. Protestantism, on the other hand, exercises individualism. Protestants shrink from official church-dictated meanings of biblical text and give every individual Bible reader the right to find meanings for him/herself. Predictably, this has resulted in such a diversity of biblical interpretation

that often it seems we are left with nothing but a heap of confusion, with biblical text meaning simply what each individual interpreter takes it to mean.

(iii) The Liberalist Response

This solution was advocated by liberal theologians during the nineteenth century. Accepting the validity of Wellhausen's theory of an evolutionary development in the Old Testament, they not only looked at the Bible as a historically conditioned book but also recognized its human aspect as a whole, something which had largely been ignored by orthodoxy over the centuries. The liberal writers observed that the Old Testament had over time evolved from primitive to more developed forms and had gone through a fundamental change during this developmental process. They accepted the person of Jesus along with his teachings as their point of orientation and looked into the Old Testament from that perspective. As the New Testament is the only record of Jesus and his teachings, they therefore based their value judgment on the principles of the New Testament. By imposing these principles on the Old Testament, they separated passages of a normative nature from primitive, immoral, outgrown, and non-Christian ones contained within it, without denying the Old Testament's authority. A. B. Davidson, for example, argues that we must neither deny all authority to the Old Testament in favor of the New nor place the Old Testament on the same level as the New, but study the Old Testament in view of "its climax in the New Testament."⁷⁴ E. Sellin maintains that "the Old Testament Canon is significant for the Old Testament theologian only in so far as it was accepted by Jesus and his apostles. That is to say, Old Testament theology is only interested in the line which was fulfilled in the Gospel."⁷⁵ F. W. Farrar informs us:

Is it not enough that, to us, the test of God's word is the teaching of Him who is the Word of God? Is it not an absolutely plain and simple rule that anything in the Bible which teaches or seems to teach anything which is not in accordance with the love, the gentleness, the truthfulness, the purity of Christ's Gospel, is not God's word to us, however clearly it stands on the Bible page?⁷⁶

This liberal approach to the Old Testament was unique in the sense that it neither fully followed Marcionism, nor the official, traditional solutions. Rather it assimilated thoughts from both camps without following any of the tendencies in toto. The position of the Liberalists was and still is quite complicated. Whilst they attempt to honor the Old Testament with historical and religious importance, they simultaneously cut it into a thousand pieces, treating some elements as binding and others as insignificant. Such an approach is in effect tantamount to their imposing their own authority upon the text of the Old Testament and determining which of the text should be religiously significant and which should be ignored as irrelevant. Through this approach, of which A. Harnack and H. Gunkel are good examples (as mentioned earlier), the liberals brought to modern Christianity “at least the camel’s nose of Marcionism.”⁷⁷ The result was that large parts of the Old Testament lost their importance as well as practical authority, and the effective liberal canon became a rather small one, usually containing the life and teachings of Jesus and some other biblical passages which might add some moral or spiritual point of view to these teachings.

It is justifiable to ask whether the Old Testament is divinely inspired or not. If the answer is yes, then it follows logically that it cannot be taken in parts. Either the Old Testament is fully inspired and authoritative in its entirety, or it is not authoritative at all. In fact, Jesus’ person and his teachings cannot be taken as the yardstick to determine authoritative passages from non-binding ones in the Old Testament due to historical reasons. The Old Testament existed historically before the person of Jesus Christ. And he followed it as Scripture (as is commonly held) and did not change it or cut it into pieces. On the other hand, the true facts about his historical life and teachings are themselves problems of great magnitude, as will be seen in the next chapter. The solution put forward by liberals not surprisingly encountered problems and limitations similar to those of Marcionism and the Orthodoxy, and the individual interpreter’s understandings were again to play a vital role in interpreting the accepted passages of the Old Testament. This ultimately lead to individualism and very often to mutual contradiction, confusion and utter subjectivism.

It is clear from the above discussion that mainstream Christianity has preserved the Old Testament as something sacred and canonical

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and an intrinsic and inseparable part of its Holy Scripture whilst at the same time maintaining that it has been superseded by the New Testament. In this Christianity's view of the Old Testament differs sharply to that of Judaism, which latter regards the Old Testament as sacred and unsuperseded. Theoretically the Old Testament is regarded as authoritative by Christianity and a part of its Holy Scripture, practically however, it is the New Testament which enjoys unitary, undisputed and unsuperseded authority. Christians read, understand, evaluate and explain the Old Testament in light of the New Testament and as a result accept its validity only to the degree that its teachings accord with those of the New. In doing so modern Christianity toes the line delineated by early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen. Although these Fathers clearly subordinated the Old Testament to the New Testament since the early part of the second century, one can also see similar mixed and confused views concerning the real significance and authority of the Old Testament in the very early Christian Church dating back to the first century. Harnack summarizes the situation of the time in the following words:

The fact of the New Testament being placed on a level with the Old proved the most effective means of preserving to the latter its canonical authority, which had been so often assailed in the second century.... The immediate result of this investigation was not only a theological exposition of the Old Testament, but also a theory which ceased to view the two Testaments as of equal authority and subordinated the Old to the New. This result, which can be plainly seen in Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, led to exceedingly important consequences. It gave some degree of insight into statements, hitherto completely unintelligible, in certain New Testament writings, and it caused the Church to reflect upon a question that had as yet been raised only by heretics, viz., what are the marks which distinguished Christianity from the Old Testament religion?⁷⁸

The Early Church, like most modern Christians today, could not completely reject or accept the Old Testament. It also harbored contradictory views about the Old Testament, as Harnack observes:

An historical examination imperceptibly arose; but the old notion of the inspiration of the Old Testament confined it to the narrowest limits, and in fact always continued to forbid it; for, as before, appeal was constantly made to the Old Testament as a Christian book which contained all the truths of religion in perfect form. Nevertheless the conception of the Old Testament was here and there full of contradiction.⁷⁹

AUTHORITY IN CHRISTIANITY

In light of the discussion so far, it becomes clear that were, for instance, a student to examine anthropomorphic and transcendental tendencies in the Bible as a whole, he/she may find themselves not doing justice to Christian readers, for the validity of the findings taken from the Old Testament may not be accepted by a great many Christians, as not all of them take the whole Bible as binding. The student would in fact have to study the New Testament to explore Christian views on anthropomorphism and transcendence because the New Testament alone is the claimed primary authority for most Christians. In this case would they accept the text of the New Testament as binding?

(1) The Catholic Church maintains that the Scripture does not only contain the Word of God, but is the Word of God and hence final authority. It also maintains that alongside the Scripture, the Church's ongoing tradition, the rule of faith, is also authoritative. The Scripture and the Tradition are accepted with equal piety and reverence.

"Tradition" in the past was nothing but the Church or the decisions of the Vatican, and no one was allowed to oppose or reject these. It was stated in the Council of Trent in 1546 that, "No one... shall presume to interpret Sacred Scripture contrary to the sense which the Holy Mother Church – to whom it belongs to judge the true sense and interpretation of Holy Scripture – both held and continues to hold..."⁸⁰ This belief found its climax in the dogma of "Papal Infallibility", when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, defined at the Vatican Council of 1870 as "when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*; that is, when in his character of 'pastor and doctor of all Christians,' he 'defines a doctrine regarding

faith and morals,' he is possessed of infallibility."⁸¹ This doctrine was applied in 1950 to the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary (the taking up of the Virgin Mary into Heaven at the end of her life). "When the dogma of Mary's assumption was declared in 1950", observes G. C. Berkouwer, "the absence of any reference to it in Scripture was acknowledged. But, it was added, 'The Catholic Church teaches that there are two sources of revelation from which we can derive divine truth, the written Word of God and unwritten tradition. We know Mary's ascension into heaven through tradition.'"⁸² In modern Catholic theory, the Scripture, the "Tradition" or the Church in the figure of the Pope, are all considered authorities, but practically this means the Pope or the Church, as Loofs a responsible theologian of the Vatican states, "Neither the Holy Scripture nor the Divine tradition, but the teaching Church, which infallibly expounds both sources of truth ... is for us the first rule of faith."⁸³

In recent times, especially after the Second Vatican Council of 1959, this view has been slightly modified to give a strong accent to the scriptures. As an outcome of this unexpected Council, which has created unprecedented tensions within the Roman Catholic Church in the twentieth century, the two sources of authority previously held independent were closely interconnected. The Council declared that both the Scripture and sacred traditions are "like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God...until she is brought to see Him as He is, face to face."⁸⁴ To fully understand the Scripture:

Christian scholars must be ever mindful of the findings which the Spirit-guided Church has already achieved, above all, those which the magisterium has guaranteed. This perfect accord with the insights of the Church's living tradition is the best guide that anyone can have in studying God's word.⁸⁵

In short the final guarantee of correctness and truth lies with the Church. The gist of this new theological standpoint is that though the Scripture is all authority its true interpretation can only be achieved by the tradition and with the help of the Holy Spirit. And Rome is quite sure it has both of them.

Some observers have rightly pointed out that though the recent shift is significant it “does not make much difference because a tradition that interprets can very subtly become a tradition that creates truth.”⁸⁶ It will easily be apparent that although the Scriptures are acknowledged as the final authority in matters of doctrine, in practice this seems mere lip service to them. The authority of the Scriptures is closely linked with the ‘tradition’ of which the church is the sole repository. Therefore, the end product remains the same, the Church’s certain authority over the Scriptures (or at least in effect it seems to be), and this authority is manifested through the Church’s sole right to declare an interpretation of the Scriptures as traditional. The Church’s official stamp guarantees the validity of the interpretation and finally assumes binding and authoritative status.

(2) One dominant trend in Protestantism, as exemplified for instance in classical Lutheranism, neither gives the Church nor Tradition equal authority with the Scripture. These Protestants do not accept the Church as infallible but following Luther, subordinate the Church to Scripture in matters of faith. The Church, argued Luther, “cannot create articles of faith; she can only recognize and confess them as a slave does the seal of his lord.”⁸⁷ Calvin, debating the Romanists, argued:

For if the Christian Church has been from the beginning founded on the writings of the prophets and the preaching of the apostles, wherever the doctrine is found, the approbation of it has preceded the formation of Church, since without it the Church itself had never existed.⁸⁸

Therefore, “Those persons betray great folly who wish it to be demonstrated to infidels that the Scripture is the Word of God, which cannot be known without faith.”⁸⁹ He concluded:

Let it be considered, then, as an undeniable truth, that they who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments from reason; but it obtains the credit which it deserves with us by the testimony of the Spirit.⁹⁰

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To many Protestants today, the Word of God alone in its “Grammatical, historical meaning” or the “meaning of the tongue or of language” in which it is understood by everyone, and not the doctrine of the Church, has the ultimate authority. Although this is overtly claimed, the reality, as has already been seen, is that final authority ends up in the individual interpreting that Scripture.

Luther himself, in spite of his principle of Verbal Inspiration, made distinctions between different passages of the Scripture. He accepted some of them as binding and others as non-binding. For instance, he rejected the Apocryphal books of the Old Testament and described James as a “right straw Epistle.” To him “it is not the Bible that counts but Christ therein contained.”⁹¹ Other Reformers like Calvin, on the other hand, seemed to maintain the traditional and authoritative view of the Scripture.

Scholars like C. A. Briggs state that “the theory of a literal inspiration and inerrancy was not held by the Reformers.”⁹² On the other hand, Warfield, Brunner, Harris and many others argue otherwise, maintaining that the Reformers did hold a literal view concerning the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Harris remarks that “Most students of the Reformation will be astonished at the suggestion that Calvin believed anything else.”⁹³ Brunner notes:

Calvin is already moving away from Luther toward the doctrine of verbal inspiration. His doctrine of the Bible is entirely the traditional, formally authoritative, view. From the end of the sixteenth century onwards there was no other “principle of Scripture” than this formal authoritarian one. Whatever development took place after this culminated in the most strict and most carefully formulated doctrine of Verbal Inspiration...⁹⁴

Today, the situation, especially in academic circles, is quite different. “Historical and Literary Criticism” in biblical studies or “Lower”, and “Higher” biblical criticism, as briefly mentioned earlier, has brought about substantial changes in a great many biblical scholars’ attitude towards the Scriptures. Lower criticism refers to attempts to determine what a text originally said before it was altered, and is concerned with

the transmission and preservation of the biblical text, whilst higher criticism refers to attempts to establish the authorship, date, and place of composition of the original text. Starting with Jean Astruc's (1753) discovery of the variation of the divine names in *Genesis*, the hypothesis or the documentary theory was developed (generally stating that the Pentateuch was derived from different narratives) and modified by German scholars like Eichhorn (d. 1827) and Hupfeld (1853). Higher criticism was given its classical form by Karl H. Graf (1866) and Julius Wellhausen (1876 and 1878). In England this approach found expression through the edited work of Benjamin Jowett *Essays and Reviews* published in February of 1860. In his long essay "On the Interpretation of Scripture" Jowett set his own principles of scriptural interpretation. They were taken as outrageous at the time but are still viable and serve as a charter for modern critical biblical scholarship.

Jowett's guiding principle was "*Interpret the Scripture like any other book.*" The real meanings of the Scripture were the meanings intended by the author and by the text itself. Jowett argued:

The book itself remains as at the first unchanged amid the changing interpretations of it. The office of the interpreter is not to add another, but to recover the original one: the meaning, that is, of the words as they struck on the ears or flashed before the eyes of those who first heard and read them. He has to transfer himself to another age to imagine that he is a disciple of Christ or Paul; to disengage himself from all that follows. The history of Christendom is nothing to him.... All the after thoughts of theology are nothing to him.... The greater part of his learning is knowledge of the text itself; he has no delight in voluminous literature which has overgrown it.⁹⁵

He further observed that "we have no reason to attribute to the Prophet or Evangelist any second or hidden sense different from that which appears on the surface."⁹⁶ He denied infallibility to biblical writers and believed in "*progressive revelation.*" This, to him, was the solution to rectify biblical immoralities. "For what is progressive is necessarily imperfect in its earlier stages, and even erring to those who

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come after....Scripture itself points the way to answer the moral objections to Scripture.”⁹⁷ Since then this approach has been the dominant trend in almost all the universities of the western world though not without resistance.

In the nineteenth century William Robertson Smith, editor of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, advocated the principles of the historical criticism of the Bible, publishing articles by Wellhausen within it. He was put on trial and expelled from his chair. In the same century, John Colenso, a South African Anglican bishop, was condemned as “the wicked bishop” and his works drew three hundred responses within twenty years. In the twenty-first century, however, we witness a quite different situation. Even the Catholic Church, the age long opponent of such investigation into biblical data, has joined the majority of biblical scholarship. In 1943 Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical letter, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which promoted biblical studies opening, the door for such investigation in Catholic circles. It has been called “a Magna Carta for biblical progress.” The Pope concluded writing:

Let the interpreter then, with all care and without neglecting any light derived from recent research endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources written or oral to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he employed.⁹⁸

Since then the approach has been adopted universally in most academic institutions.

This approach, as we have seen, presupposes that in all books of the Bible there is only one meaning that matters and that is the meaning intended by the original human author. One needs to explore to the best of his/her ability the original historical and cultural setting of the individual author of each book or passage and study his thought to discern what it was that he believed and wanted to say. Theologians such as Kahler, Schlatter, v. Oettingen, Ritschl, Harnack, Bultmann, Joseph Stevens Buckminster, Moses Stuart, Andrews Norton, and Morton Smith are just a few examples of this approach.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Hebrew Bible is comprised of different books, as well as approaches, trends, styles, focuses and directions. More importantly, it does not easily yield to a systematic theological treatment specifically *vis-à-vis* anthropomorphism and transcendence. Its original text is non-existent. In addition, in the case of the Old Testament one becomes lost in the ocean of allegorical interpretations, and occult and mystical meanings, ascribed to its text by countless followers, especially the Christians, spanning centuries. Of these, what is one to accept and what to reject? What is the criterion to be used to prove the authenticity or invalidity of any given meaning or interpretation? Jewish interpretations are not accepted by Christians and vice versa. Catholic interpretations differ from the Protestants and a very wide diversity of interpretations exists within Protestantism itself. The diversity of the interpretations concerning the same text is fascinating. In this process of interpretation and allegorization, the text, the assumed original revelation, seems to be completely enveloped in fanciful allegorical categories, foreign to the original linguistic and contextual meanings. Consequently the text itself very often suffers violence and injustice. Furthermore, it does not seem to provide meanings by itself, but is provided with meanings by its interpreters. Instead of being an authority itself, the Bible, especially the Hebrew part of it, seems to surrender to the authority and mercy of interpreters. History is witness to the strange and often absurd garb into which the biblical text has been attired. Due to the diversity of interpreters and their backgrounds, the meaning and understanding of biblical texts has itself become alarmingly diversified. This diversity and lack of unity necessitates a return to the text of the Bible itself.

To avoid all such intricacies and confusion I propose, for the purpose of this treatise, to treat the Bible as the Word of God and authoritative. Claims with regards to the Bible's divine origin and inspiration should be tantamount to claims concerning its full authority, a view held for centuries by the majority of its followers. The Bible should be the primary source used to study the beliefs of its followers and to compare such beliefs with those of other faith traditions. Moreover, I suggest that the revelation, or the Word of God, if it is so, in itself should be

quite competent to convey its message and spirit without any need for external human help. God, the author and source of that Word, is the Wise, the Knowledgeable, and the Powerful. He has all the means and power to communicate His message in clear, intelligible, and logical terms to the recipients of His revelation. It is my belief that God does not need finite beings of very limited knowledge, wisdom, and resources to hijack His word in the name of a highly subjective agency i.e., the Holy Spirit. People should not be allowed to say or prove from the biblical text whatever they want to say or prove, using by way of excuse the metaphorical nature of the biblical language. I would like to point out that this is in no way meant to cast doubt on the intention, sincerity or piety of the text's interpreters, rather my intention is simply to respect the Word of God if one believes the Bible to be so. The Word of God is the text of the Scriptures and all the rest is the word of man, whatever position or status he/she may enjoy in the tradition. Let the Word of God speak objectively for itself, this should be the criterion for any comparisons.

THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

God the Almighty and All-Powerful is the Hero of the Hebrew Bible. At the same time the Hebrew Bible's understanding, representation and concept of God appears to be complex and often confusing. In the text of the Hebrew Bible, God is presented as the Transcendent Reality and at the same time is often described in concrete anthropomorphic and corporeal terms. These two polar tendencies or strands go side by side in the entire Hebrew Bible. Though the biblical text shows visible efforts made by the classical prophets to reduce the usage of anthropomorphic expressions and to lay more and more emphasis on the transcendental elements of the deity, there is hardly a page in the Old Testament in which anthropo-morphism or its vestiges cannot be found. This is why even Jewish biblical scholars, like S. T. Katz, feel no hesitation in admitting that, "Anthropomorphisms abound in the Bible."⁹⁹ P. van Imschoot, a contemporary biblical scholar, observes that, "There are

many anthropomorphisms in all the Old Testament books. They abound in the narratives attributed to the Yahwist and in the works of most of the prophets, who have nevertheless, a very high idea of God.”¹⁰⁰

Considering the diversity of the biblical writers’ backgrounds and confusions about the Hebrew Bible’s interpretations, it is interesting to note that, as a whole, the biblical God is more transcendent than anthropomorphic and more homogeneous than contradictory or heterogeneous, as compared to the deities of neighboring cultures and nations of the time. This tendency becomes more interesting when examined in light of the historical fact that the Bible is not a continuous revelation to a single person, nor the product of a single writer, but a collection of different books and volumes compiled in various places spanning a period of more than a millennium. There is a manifest progressive element in the theistic notions of the Hebrew Bible. Various kinds of concepts can be located in regard to the deity in various parts of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible). Animism, polytheism, henotheism, monolatry, national monotheism and universal and ethical monotheism, all these ‘isms’ are reported to have been practiced by the Israelites during the various stages and periods of their early history and overlooked in most cases if not sanctioned by the biblical writers. This is one reason why it has been observed that, “one could not speak of Old Testament theology (in the singular), for the Old Testament exhibits not one theology but many.”¹⁰¹ Perhaps this is also one of the leading factors that explains the fact that, “In recent discussion of the beginnings of Israel’s religion no subject has received more attention than belief in God.”¹⁰²

Evidently most of the western anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and scientists, discussed in chapter 1, who have interpreted religion either as a psychological illusion or a sociological need, are clearly interacting with, and reacting to, the anthropomorphic and progressive concept of God as presented by a majority of the Old Testament writers. Indeed amongst the Scriptures of all the developed religions, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is the Hebrew Bible which depicts God in the most anthropomorphic and corporeal terms. Undoubtedly Christian incarnational theology is one culmination and

climax of this anthropomorphic and corporeal concept of God, whilst interestingly, (as discussed in chapter 3), the Christian New Testament does not contain many anthropomorphic expressions. In reality anthropomorphic incarnational theology is but one interpretation of the New Testament material though it is the most popular among Christian believers. There are many Christologies and theologies in the New Testament. The Qur'anic theology is ultra transcendental and does not lend itself to an evolutionary scheme of progressive development from animism to polytheism to monolatry to monotheism. Qur'anic theology is transcendental and monotheistic through and through. It also seems that many of the scholars of religious phenomenon discussed earlier, and exponents of various theories of the origin of religion, did not have access to the Qur'anic concept of the deity nor the linguistic tools to comprehend it. Their understanding of metaphysics might have been a little different had they had the opportunity or the tools to study the Qur'anic concept of God. We turn next to the Hebrew Bible to examine the nature of the tension existing between the transcendental and anthropomorphic tendencies.

The Unity of God and The Hebrew Bible

The unity of God or monotheism

is the belief in one unique god to the exclusion of any other divinity. Its absolute and exclusive character distinguishes it [monotheism] from monolatry which is the belief of a group of men in god, recognized as the only legitimate god of the group, but who concede the existence of other divinities adored by other peoples.¹⁰³

The Hebrew Bible in its present set up contains many passages that can be interpreted as explicitly or tacitly advocating the unity of God. The first verse of the Bible declares that only One God and no one else created the universe. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The verse manifestly declares the oneness of God the Creator who created heaven and earth and all that is in them in six days by His all-powerful word. In spite of the anthropomorphic

conception of God, the Yahweh of this biblical account is the absolute master of man and his surroundings and is presented as the only God. The Hebrews, from the very beginning, took the existence of God for granted. As A. B. Davidson observes, “it never occurred to any prophet or writer of the Old Testament to prove the existence of God. To do so might well have seemed an absurdity. For all the Old Testament prophets and writers move among ideas that presuppose God’s existence.”¹⁰⁴

Genesis aside, one of the next immense statements made in the Bible with regards to God’s oneness is the first of the Ten Commandments taught by God to Moses, one of the great figures of the Hebrew Bible, in order for him to convey them to the Hebrews. Moses is additionally required to make sure that the Israelites put them into practice. The first and the foremost Commandment reads, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thine heart: These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children...” (Deuteronomy 6:4–7). Nothing, says Abraham J. Heschel, “in Jewish life is more hallowed than the saying of the Shema: Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” He further argues that this monotheism was

not attained by means of numerical reduction, by bringing down the multitude of deities to the smallest possible number. One means unique. The minimum of knowledge is the knowledge of God’s uniqueness. His being unique is an aspect of His being ineffable.¹⁰⁵

Hermann Cohen observes that:

In the “Hear, O Israel” this uniqueness is designated by the word Ehad... throughout the development of religion unity was realized as uniqueness, and this significance of the unity of God as uniqueness brought about the recognition of the uniqueness of God’s being, in comparison with which all other beings vanish and become nothing. Only God is being... This, to be sure, makes

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anthropomorphism unavoidable, and the decline of Jewish thought into myth would have been unavoidable if the *fight against anthropomorphism* had not proved from the very beginning of the oral teaching to be the very soul of Jewish religious education. It is perhaps possible to say that this fight already played a role in the compilation of the canon of Scripture... God is not that which is, nor is he only the one, but the Unique One that is.¹⁰⁶

W. G. Plaut, on the other hand, translates the verse of *Shema* as: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” This translation is identical with that of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. In this translation, Plaut observes that

two affirmations are made: that the Divinity is Israel’s God, and two, that it is He alone and no one else. Other translations render “The Lord our God, the Lord is One” (stressing the unity of God) or “The Lord our God is one Lord” (that is, neither divisible nor to be coupled with other deities, like Zeus with Jupiter).¹⁰⁷

In “Exodus” God is reported to have given the commandments to Moses in the following words:

And God spake all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me. (Exodus 20:1–5)

The jealousy of God is very often mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. “Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of people who are round about you; (For the Lord thy God is a Jealous God among you) lest the

anger of the Lord thy God be kindled against thee, and destroy thee from off the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 6:14-15). This theme is so pervasive in the entire Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 4:24, 5:9, 6:15; Exodus 20:4-5; Joshua 24:19 etc.) that Imschoot argues that, "jealousy is a trait completely characteristic of Yahweh, since in the Old Testament it most frequently expresses the exclusive character of the God of Israel."¹⁰⁸

The *Midrash* (a form of rabbinic literature) translates the first part of this commandment as follows: "You shall have none of those (whom others call) gods before Me."¹⁰⁹ Plaut observes:

The prohibition of the sculptured images for purpose of adoration stresses the incorporeality of God. "You saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire", Deuteronomy 5:15 reminds the people. The worship of images is proscribed in the most urgent and vivid terms: nothing, but absolutely nothing, is permitted that might lead to idolatry.... This meant, however, that, in ages when the arts served primarily the goals of religion, sculpture and painting found no fertile soil amongst the Jewish people. Instead, Judaism directed its creative powers towards the inner life, the vision of souls rather than the eye, the invisible rather than the visible, the intangible rather than the sensual.¹¹⁰

In view of the great significance of this commandment, Ibn Ezra, the great Jewish mediaeval scholar, used to say that this commandment must not be transgressed even in one's thought.

Contrary to these explanations, some modern scholars do not see in the First Commandment the affirmation of God's unity, uniqueness and transcendence. Following methods of biblical criticism, they date this commandment far later than Moses' times.¹¹¹ They also argue that it may prove monolatry or mono-Yahwism rather than strict monotheism. Robin Lane Fox, for instance, contends:

Before we find early monotheism in the first commandment, we have to date it (it might be as late as the seventh or sixth century) and also be sure that we can translate it. Its dating is extremely

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difficult, although Hosea might seem to presuppose it too: chapter 8 of his book appears to connect idolatry and foreign worship with a blindness to God's law (8:1, 8:12). However, this law seems to be something more general than our First Commandment, and Hosea himself does not deny that other gods exist.¹¹²

Furthermore, there is no consensus among scholarship about the exact translation of the First Commandment. Many biblical scholars argue that this Commandment is neither historically authentic nor categorical or precisely directed in its meanings. Fox states:

As for the First Commandment, the translation of its Hebrew is also not certain. Perhaps originally it meant 'Thou shalt have no other gods before my face' (no idols in Yahweh's temple), or 'before me', in preference to me, but on any view, 'the claim for Yahweh's exclusiveness, that Yahweh alone has existence, is not contained in the First Commandment'. The text need only have been saying that Yahweh is Israel's Number One among other lesser divinities. Monotheism, the much stronger belief that only one god exists anywhere, was not revealed on Sinai's peaks.¹¹³

T. J. Meek asserts:

There is no certainty of course that this command originated with Moses or that it was known in his day...However, the most we can claim for Moses in it is monolatry. Neither here nor anywhere else does he deny the existence of gods other than Yahweh, nor does he assert the sole existence of Yahweh, and not having done that, he cannot be called a monotheist. Even O. E. James, who is an anthropologist as well as an Old Testament scholar, with decided leaning towards the theory of primitive monotheism, has to acknowledge that the command asserts nothing more than monolatry and not pure monotheism, and so conservative a churchman as late Bishop Gore has to concede that it neither proves nor disproves either monolatry or monotheism.¹¹⁴

G. Von Rad:

The problem of monotheism in ancient Israel is admittedly connected with the first commandment, in so far as Israel's monotheism was to some extent a realization which was not granted to her without the long discipline of the first commandment. Still, it is necessary to keep the two questions as far as possible distinct, for the first commandment has initially nothing to do with monotheism: on the contrary, as the way it is formulated shows, it is only comprehensible in the light of a background which the historian of religion designates as polytheism. Even the way in which Jahweh introduces himself, "I am Jahweh, your God," presupposes a situation of polytheism. For many a generation there existed in Israel a worship of Jahweh which, from the point of view of the first commandment, must undoubtedly be taken as legitimate, though it was not monotheistic. It is therefore called henotheism or monolatry.¹¹⁵

K. Armstrong:

When they recite the Shema today, Jews give it a monotheistic interpretation: Yahweh our God is One and unique. The Deuteronomist had not yet reached this perspective. "Yahweh ehad" did not mean God is One, but that Yahweh was the only deity whom it was permitted to worship. Other gods were still a threat: their cults were attractive and could lure Israelites from Yahweh, who was a jealous God.¹¹⁶

She further observes:

The Israelites did not believe that Yahweh, the God of Sinai, was the only God, but promised, in their covenant, that they will ignore all other deities and worship him alone. It is very difficult to find a single monotheistic statement in the whole of the Pentateuch. Even the Ten Commandments delivered on Mount Sinai take the existence of other gods for granted: "There shall be no strange gods for you before my face."¹¹⁷

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Such an interpretation of the First Commandment seems more in line with the biblical data (as we will see later in the chapter). It is sufficient meantime to quote the work of Cristoph Uehlinger who has shown that “With regard to the situation in the kingdom of *Israel*, we have ...archaeological, inscriptional and iconographical evidence which clearly points to the use of anthropomorphic cultic statuary by Israelites to a degree similar to their neighbors.”¹¹⁸ Yehweh was “worshipped in the form of an anthropomorphic cult statue both in the central state temples of Israel (Samaria) and Judah (Jerusalem).”¹¹⁹ The strong emphasis upon Yahweh’s jealousy also implies belief in monolatry. One cannot be jealous of people being devoted to a non-existent entity. Jealousy implies a rival for one’s affections and goes well with the idea that Israel ought to be loyal to Yahweh and not to the gods of other nations.

Historically speaking, Jews from antiquity to modern times, have held the First Commandment to mean emphasis upon the unity of Yahweh. Traditional Jews had always argued that the Hebrew religion had been monotheistic from the very beginning and such an understanding was the theme of the entire corpus of the Rabbinic/Midrashic literature. Even ancient Jewish philosophers and historians, such as Philo, Jubilees and Josephus, had maintained similar views about the ancient Hebraic religion. Almost all of them had contended that Abraham believed in monotheism and following him, the patriarchs were monotheists. Though the philosophers disagreed with the rabbinical traditions in maintaining that Abraham was a convert to monotheism; nevertheless, like Rabbinic Judaism, they saw in Abraham the origin of Hebrew monotheism. In the words of Jubilees: “He was thus the first to boldly declare that, God, creator of the universe, is one, in that, if any other being contributed aught to man’s welfare, each did so by His command and not in virtue of its own inherent power.”¹²⁰ Philo and Josephus held similar views. Biblical texts like Exodus 3:6, 16 and 4:5 were frequently quoted to substantiate the claim that the God of Moses was also the God of Abraham and other patriarchs. The Bible reports that God said to Moses “I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God” (Exodus 3:6). God

ordered Moses "Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt" (Exodus 3:16, see also Genesis 26:24, 28:13, 32:10, 43:23, 49:24-25).

In modern times A. Alt, while drawing attention to Palmyrene and Nabataean inscriptions, informs us that three such gods who were not bound to any locality and were worshipped in patriarchal times – the God or Shield of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac (Genesis 31:42), the Mighty One of Jacob (Genesis 49:24) – were fused to produce the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and identified with Yahweh.¹²¹ Following Alt's theory Spieser, J. P. Hyatt, R. de Vaux and C. A. Simpson have contended that the Patriarchs (especially Abraham) were monotheists.¹²² A. B. Davidson, discussing the peculiarity of the patriarchal religion, observes that

this peculiarity, if it cannot be called Monotheism, forms at least a high vantage ground from which a march towards Monotheism may commence. And it is probable that we see in the patriarchal names just referred to, particularly in El Shaddai, the advance in the family of Abraham towards both the unity and the spirituality of God. He who called God El Shaddai, and worshipped Him as the 'Almighty,' might not have the abstract and general conception in his mind that He was the only powerful Being existing. But, at least to him He was the supreme power in heaven and in earth, and He had given him His fellowship, and was condescending to guide his life.¹²³

He concludes arguing that there may be a difference of emphasis "But the doctrines were the same from the beginning."¹²⁴

Davidson seems to be indulging more in speculation than substantiation of his claims from the data of the Hebrew Bible itself, for the names mentioned, like *El Shaddai*, do not prove that the patriarchs believed in monotheism or the spirituality of the Deity as he contends. K. Armstrong, after a good discussion of biblical narration, argues that it is wrong to

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assume that the three patriarchs of Israel – Abraham, his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob – were monotheists, that they believed in only one God. This does not seem to have been the case. Indeed, it is probably more accurate to call these early Hebrews pagans who shared many of the religious beliefs of their neighbors in Canaan. They would certainly have believed in the existence of such deities as Marduk, Baal and Anat. They may not all have worshipped the same deity: It is possible that the God of Abraham, the “Fear” or “Kinsman” of Isaac and the “Mighty One” of Jacob were three separate gods. We can go further. It is highly likely that Abraham’s God was El, the High God of Canaan. The deity introduces himself to Abraham as El Shaddai (El of the Mountain), which was one of El’s traditional titles. Elsewhere he is called El Elyon (The Most High God) or El of Bethel.¹²⁵

Ignatius Hunt explains that:

The accounts in Genesis 12–50 were written up in their final form many centuries after the events narrated had taken place. In the meantime the Hebrew religion had greatly developed, and great advances had been made, at least by those who served as Israel’s spokesmen. Many crudities, and other defects of the ancient traditions were corrected and at times omitted, recast, or transformed in keeping with a more refined outlook. This is common in religious development.¹²⁶

After posing a number of questions regarding these biblical narrations Hunt concludes, that “With the advent of archaeology and the discovery of sources of texts, the religious milieu of the patriarchs is now seen as completely polytheistic.”¹²⁷ A. Lods’ conclusions are very much the same.¹²⁸ Hans Kung views patriarchal religion as henotheism:

Thus nowadays there is agreement among the critical exegetes that neither the exalted ethic of Bible nor strict monotheism will have prevailed as early as the time of patriarchs. From a historical perspective, Abraham was certainly a henotheist, someone who

presupposed the existence of a number of gods but who accepted only the one God, his God, as the supreme and binding authority.¹²⁹

In light of the available biblical data, polytheism, or in the extreme case henotheism, rather than monotheism, would appear to be a better alternative with regard to the patriarch's understanding of God. The Biblical text portrays patriarchs as worshipping other gods besides Yahweh. "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods" (Joshua 24:3). It also says:

Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:15)

Moreover, we are told that God made Himself known to the patriarchs with the old name of "El Shaddi" and to Moses with the name of Yahweh. "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shaddi but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them" (Exodus 6:2-3). El Shaddai means the God of the Mountain, or The Rock, or the Mighty One etc. and occurs in the Pentateuch several times (Genesis 17:1, 28:3, 35:11, 43:14, 48:3). The Bible also uses other personal names for God, such as *El-Elyon* (God most high), *El Roi* (God of vision) or *El Olam* (The Eternal God). The patriarchs are reported to have addressed God with these names and also with the word "*Elohim*", the word most often used in the Hebrew Bible to designate God (about 2,000 times). *Elohim* is a plural word and in many early passages is used straightforwardly in the plural sense. For example: "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods (*elohim*)..." (Exodus 18:11, also see 12:12, 34:15; Deuteronomy 10:17). In view of these facts, it may certainly be concluded that *elohim*, the

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plural word, was later used as if it were singular while retaining its original format. The frequent usage of these names also suggests that the original god of Israel was El as Mark S. Smith contends. This reconstruction, he argues,

may be inferred from two pieces of information. First the name of Israel is not a Yahwistic name with the divine element of Yahweh, but an El name, with the element el. This fact would suggest that El was the original chief god of the group named Israel. Second, Genesis 49:24–25 presents a series of El epithets separate from the mention of Yahweh in verse 18... Similarly, Deuteronomy 32:8–9 casts Yahweh in the role of one of the sons of El, here called elyon: “When the Most High (elyon) gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated humanity, he fixed the boundaries of the people according to the number of divine beings. For Yahweh’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.”¹³⁰

Furthermore, the variety and diversity of these names also suggest that originally there was a belief in many “Els”. Many of the personal names, observes Rowley,

which we find in Israel testify to the polytheistic background out of which they emerged. Alt has argued that each of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had their own special God. Moreover, while in the Old Testament Shaddi, El, Elyon, and Yahweh are all equated and identified, it is hardly to be denied that they were once regarded as separate deities.¹³¹

The claims of patriarchal monotheism therefore would seem to be less of a reality than polytheism or henotheism.

In contrast to this, D. Nielsen argues that the word *elohim* originally was not a plural word, but is the noun ‘*elah*’ with mimation (that is the addition of an ‘m’).¹³² Davidson contends that though the word is plural it is but “a plural of that sort called the plural of *majesty* or *eminence*, more accurately the plural of *fullness* or *greatness*. It is common in the East to use the plural to express the idea of the singular in an intensified

form.”¹³³ According to Davidson, *elohim* does not imply a polytheistic tone or background. Hermann Cohen argues that “the intention of this word in the plural form could not be plurality, but, as its connection with the singular form proves, singularity.”¹³⁴ Moreover, Davidson sees its origin in prehistoric animism or spiritism from where, as he contends, the ancient Israelites developed their practical monotheism. Having said this, Davidson also confesses that the word in itself does not imply monotheism and neither do the other related names: “Such names as *El-Elyon*, *El-Shaddai*, do not of themselves imply Monotheism, inasmuch as one God Most High, or Almighty, might exist though there were minor gods...”¹³⁵ In light of the passages mentioned earlier where it has been straightforwardly used as a plural (see also Deuteronomy 10:17; 11:24; 3 Kings 11:5), and other passages where (with a weakened meaning) it has been employed to refer to beings belonging to the divine sphere but having lesser importance or intensity (Jacob 1:6, 2:1), what becomes more evident is the word’s plurality rather than singularity. Therefore, it is more convincing to agree with R. Smend, E. Meyer, Otto Eissfeldt, W. Eichrodt, and many others who maintain that the word *elohim* “is a vestige of the polytheism of the ancient Hebrews: gradually they fused the many local divinities which they adored into one single god and came to use the plural as singular to designate the unique God.”¹³⁶

Monotheism also asserts that God transcends nature, and is not identical with or part of it. The transcendence of God is one of the crucial traits of monotheism. Hence Yahweh is said to be the Most High God (Genesis 14:18–20) who is “The Lord God of heaven” (Genesis 24:7) who dwells in celestial heights (Genesis 19:24, 21:17, 24:7). Abraham is reported to have said to the King of Sodom: “I have lifted up mine hand unto the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth” (Genesis 14:22). In Genesis 14 alone, the phrase “Most High God” has been used four times (Genesis 14:18, 19, 20, 22; also see Numbers 24:16; Deuteronomy 32:8). Psalm 7:17 reads: “I will praise the Lord according to his righteousness: and will sing praise to the name of the Lord most high.” God is exalted in the earth: “Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10). He is exalted because he dwells on high

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(Isaiah 33:5). God rides in His eminence through the skies: “There is none like unto the God of Jesh-u-run, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and in his excellency on the sky. The eternal God is thy refuge...” (Deuteronomy 33:26, 27). From passages like these Davidson maintains that to the Hebrews “God and the world were always distinct. God was not involved in the process of nature. These processes were caused by God, but were quite distinct from God.”¹³⁷

The God of the Hebrew Bible is also “The Holy” *qados*. “There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none besides thee: neither is there any rock like our God” (1 Samuel 2:2; also see 2 Samuel 7:22; Isaiah 1:4, 10:17, 40:25, 30:11–12; Joshua 24:19; Habakkuk 3:3; Jacob 6:10). The governing principle or the motto of the so-called “Holiness Code” (a term used in biblical criticism to refer to Leviticus 17–26, so-called due to its much repeated use of the word Holy) is: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Robert C. Dentan observes that

the word “holy” has become almost [an] epitome of the whole character of the God of Israel. On the one hand, in its original metaphysical sense, it speaks of its inexpressible remoteness from everything created, his absolute otherness to everything that is, and of his ineffable power, manifest in the violent forces of nature, that summons all the nature to kneel before him in reverent awe. But, on the other hand, it speaks with equal clarity of the moral purity of his being, which excludes the ugly, the cruel, the irresponsible and the arbitrary, and makes him of “purer eyes than to behold evil” (Habakkuk 1:13). When the several “Isaiahs” who produced the Book of Isaiah speak so regularly of Yahweh as the “Holy One” (Isaiah 57:15) – “the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 1:4, 41:14)...it is in both these senses, the metaphysical and the moral, that they use the term, but the major stress has come to be on the latter.¹³⁸

Biblical scholars such as Dentan and Baab stress that the name “Holy” emphasizes the apartness and otherness of God. It is evident from this discussion that a great many Old Testament theologians

interpret the holiness of the Hebrew God as His transcendence over, and otherness from, the world. They seem to argue that a developed concept of the divine transcendence is implied in the Hebrew Bible's usage of the term "Holy" for God. Katz and Hermann Cohen are just a few examples of this tendency. It is worth noting, however, that all these intellectual and philosophical interpretations of the title "Holy" are probably reflections of the interpreters' own backgrounds and on key points no substantial support is found in the biblical data. Such lofty claims of God's incomparability, immutability, and otherness cannot be proven from the material attributed either to Moses or to many other biblical writers, as will be seen later in this chapter.

Monotheism also declares that God is different from human beings and is not comparable or similar to them. His ways are not the ways of mortals. Thus the Bible says: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall not do it? Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19).

For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome above all that are around him? O Lord God of hosts who is as mighty as you O Lord? Your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them...The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it – you have founded them. (Psalm 89:6–11)

All other gods are made of wood and stone, "the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell" (Deuteronomy 4:28). But nobody can see Him and survive: "And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live" (Exodus 33:20).

Most of the passages emphasizing God's incomparability are from later writings. The polemics against polytheism and idolatry and the stress on the otherness and transcendence of God increase noticeably in the later prophets such as Isaiah, Hosea, Nahum and others:

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All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God? Or what likeness will ye compare unto him? The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains. He that is so impoverished that he hath no oblation chooseth a tree that will not rot; he seeketh unto him a cunning workman to prepare a graven image, that shall not be moved. Have ye not known? Have ye not heard? Hath it not been told you from the beginning? Have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in: That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity. (Isaiah 40:17-23)

“Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it...” (Second Isaiah 44:6-7).

Here in these prophets the actual denial of the worship of other gods and existence is seen. Isaiah explains the absurdity of idol worship in the following strong words:

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame. Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good?...The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammer, and forging it with his strong arms; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass, he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine...Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire...The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Save me, for you are my god!” They do not know, nor they comprehend, for their eyes are shut, so they cannot

see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. (Second Isaiah 44:9-19; also see 44:6-8, 43:10-14, 45:12-13)

He further ridicules the idol worshippers by saying:

To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales – they hire a goldsmith, who makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries out to it, it does not answer or save anyone from trouble...for I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is no one like me... (Second Isaiah 46:5-9; also 45:21-25, 55:7-19)

God is not made of any material thing but is a spirit: “Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit” (Isaiah 31:3).

Contrary to these ideas of the transcendence and otherness of God there are many passages in the Hebrew Bible that portray God as part of this world of nature. Despite being the “Most High”, according to Exodus 15:17, He has a sanctuary on the mountain built with His own hands: “You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.” Psalm 76:1-2 specifies His dwelling place: “In Judah God is known, his name is great in Israel. His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion.” Zion is His eternal dwelling place: “Rise up, O Lord, and go to your resting place...For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation: This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have desired it” (Psalm 132:8-12-13). In addition to Zion, He dwells on holy mountains, on Sinai, Horeb, the heights of Seir (Judges 5:4). His epithet “*s’dy* or Shaddy” probably means “Mountain-dweller” as De Moor has shown.¹³⁹ Korpel has observed that “The idea of God dwelling on a mountain [*hr*], or hill [*qb’h*] occurs throughout the Old Testament. In 2 Kings 20:23, 28 it is expressly stated that YHWH is a

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mountain god [*'ihy brym*] and *not* a god of plains [*'mqym*]. Most theophanies also took place on a mountain.”¹⁴⁰ God also has his abodes in ancient sanctuaries, such as Bethel (Genesis 28:16–17, 31:13), Barsabee (Genesis 21:33) and later in the temple of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:4).

Archaeological investigations have proven that in ancient Israel there existed numerous sanctuaries founded for Yahweh at various sites. Although Solomon is reported to have said: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you” (1 Kings 8:27), in the same chapter we also have him saying:

And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. Then Solomon said, “The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever.” (1 king 8:10–13)

Before these sanctuaries were built, Yahweh lived only in a tent and a tabernacle: “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle” (2 Samuel 7:6–7). Several verses show that Yahweh was believed to be enthroned between Cherubim (2 Samuel 6:2) and was present only at a place where His ark was located:

When the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. When the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said: “What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said: “Gods have come to the camp.” (1 Samuel 4:5–6)

The King James version translates the last verse as “for they said, God is come into the camp.”

A. Lods has identified four stages of development regarding the idea of Yahweh’s dwelling. In the early settlement days of the Israelites it was believed that Yahweh dwelt in the *desert of the south* (Judges 5:4).

A new concept however evolved when people had settled down in Palestine. They believed that Yahweh was the *God of the land of Canaan*. Palestine was the only abode of Yahweh. The people who lived on the frontiers of the chosen land were “nigh unto Jahweh”.¹⁴¹ To be banished was to be “driven out from the face of Jahweh.” He could not be worshipped in foreign lands:

He cannot be worshipped in any other country: a foreign soil, belonging to other gods, permeated with their effluvia, is unclean in the eyes of the God of Israel. Hence in order to obtain the help of Jahweh in a foreign country, it is necessary either to make a vow to him, that is, to promise him a sacrifice, a vow which can only be paid on returning to Palestine, as Absalom did, or to have recourse to the more original method of Naaman, the Aramean general whom Elisha healed of his leprosy: he carried off into his own country two mules’ load of earth from the land of Canaan, and set up an alter which was thus land of Jahweh (2 Kings: 17).¹⁴²

In the third stage a distinct belief evolved that Yahweh lived in the *sanctuaries of the land of Canaan*. His full presence was felt only in this sacred enclosure. This belief persisted even among the great prophets who otherwise had a relatively developed concept of the Deity. According to Ezekiel the destruction of the temple in 586 would have not been possible had Yahweh not abandoned his sanctuary. “The whole priestly legislation is unintelligible unless it is recognized that the post-exilic Jews believed in a real though mysterious presence of the God of the heavens within the Holy of Holies of the second temple.”¹⁴³

It was only in the fourth stage that the belief appeared that Yahweh dwelt in heaven (Exodus 24:10; Ezekiel 1:26, 10:1; Psalm 135:7; Deuteronomy 28:12 etc.). This thought of Yahweh as dwelling in heaven, argues Lods:

did not necessarily involve the abandonment of terrestrial limits which popular belief imposed upon him. It is possible that the God of Israel was thought of as reigning only in that part of the heavens corresponding to the land of Canaan, in “the heaven of Jacob,” as a poet of that period expresses it (Deuteronomy xxxiii. 28).

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However, such a representation would suggest a more superhuman, less material conception of the nature of Jahweh and one which would harmonize better with the increasing recognition of the wider extent of his kingdom.¹⁴⁴

Surprisingly, Davidson derives altogether different conclusions from the above quoted passages i.e. the universality of Israel's God:

We cannot say that from the time of Israel's becoming a nation any belief in a local limitation of God can be traced. The sanctuaries scattered up and down the country were hardly places where, having manifested Himself, He was held to have authorized His worship. Such facts as that men, e.g. Gideon, Saul, etc. reared an altar anywhere, and that Absalom who in exile in Geshur outside of Palestine made a vow to Jehovah, show that they conceive of Jehovah as without local limitations.¹⁴⁵

Davidson, after this fascinating interpretation, cannot deny the fact that Yahweh, according to these passages, seems closely bound to the soil itself. Such a bondage is not universality but a definite limitation. In light of passages such as Judges 11:23 where Jephthah fights the Moabites to contain them to the territory given to them by their god saying: "Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess?" and in light of passages such as 1 Samuel 26:19, all claims of Yahweh's universality until the time of later prophets in or after the eighth century BC lose ground. They clearly connect Yahweh's divinity to the land of Palestine.

Moreover, although the term 'holy' does imply the transcendence of God, its usage by the ancient Hebrews may not be equivalent to our understanding of the term, i.e. a full-fledged concept of the transcendence of God. In addition, prevailing popular belief among the ancient Hebrews with regards to the existence and power of other deities over different nations is another factor extremely detrimental to the idea of a transcendent God. Finally, manifestations of God in nature (theophanies) and in human form are also indicative of the fact that the ancient Hebrews' concept of God was rather primitive. That God can

give visible evidence of his presence on earth is a conviction taken as much for granted by Israel as by other nations. Their sharing the common view on this point is shown by the fact that they regard it as perfectly possible for the deity to manifest himself both in the forces of Nature and in human form.¹⁴⁶

From the earliest Old Testament writings to the latest, God is depicted as appearing in the guise of various natural phenomena, i.e. a thunderstorm (Exodus 19:9 ff, 20:18 ff; Deuteronomy 5:21, 33:2; Judges 5:4 ff; Psalm 18:8 ff, 68:8 ff, 77:17 ff, 97:2 ff), riding upon storm-clouds (Psalm 18:1; Isaiah 19:1, 66:15; Habakkuk 3:8), causing His voice to resound in thunder (Exodus 19:19, 20:18; 1 Samuel 7:10; Amos 1:2; Isaiah 30:27; Job 37:5), shooting fire from the heavens with burning breath or a tongue of flame (Psalm 18:9; Isaiah 30:27), etc. The vivid description of the Sinai theophany is another concrete example of this in practice:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. (Exodus 19:16–21)

Also, “When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at distance, and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die’” (Exodus 20:18–20). Exodus 24:9 narrates that Moses and seventy of the elders of Israel “went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone...”

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Eichrodt observes that “It can, however, hardly be disputed that the original narrative is concerned with an actual vision of God.”¹⁴⁷ He also warns against a common tendency of coloring the old traditions with higher concepts presented by the later narration:

It is not permissible to evade the force of such passages by playing off against them others according to which Israel indeed heard the voice of God at Horeb, but did not see any form. Such a procedure would be valid only on the historically untenable assumption that the total of statements in the Old Testament must provide a unified ‘corpus of doctrine’. On the contrary one thing of which we can be sure is that at different periods Israel produced differing statements about the nature of God’s relationship with the world, and that there was therefore unquestionably an advance to a deeper knowledge of God.¹⁴⁸

The same warning should be repeated *vis-à-vis* anthropomorphic passages in the Hebrew Bible.

In monotheism, God is not subject to the variations and limitations of a material and mortal life. Many verses of the Hebrew Bible describe Yahweh as “the living God, and an everlasting king. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation” (Jeremiah 10:10). Joshua says to the Israelites: “By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Cananites...the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into Jordan” (Joshua 3:10–11). The writer of Psalms (42:2) finds consolation in the fact that God is living: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” “My heart and my flesh give a shout of joy for the living God” (Psalm 84:2). David has the confidence to face Goliath because his God is the living God (1 Samuel 17:26, 36). In view of passages like these Baab observes that the most typical word for identifying the God of the Old Testament is the word “living.” Baab observes that: “The living God is, of course, a creating and a creative God....Holiness in association with personal and spiritual traits denotes the transcendent power which enables God to act as God, and not as man, in creating both the world and human beings.”¹⁴⁹ Psalm 93 is full of praises of God’s majesty:

The Lord is King, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved; your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting...More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord. Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore. (Psalm 93:1-5)

Unlike mortals God neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4). He does not grow weary: "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable" (Isaiah 40:28). He does not repent as mortals do (1 Samuel 15:29; Numbers 23:19). He is Omnipotent, so much so that His words are realities: "so shall my word be that goes out of my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). "I am God...there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?" (Isaiah 43:13). He is the Most High (Genesis 14:18-20-22), the Omnipresent: "The whole earth is full of His glory", the Omniscient (Jeremiah 11:20): "O Lord of hosts, that judgest righteously, that triest the reins and the heart...", the eternal: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god" (Isaiah 44:6 also 41:4), the immortal, the immutable: "For I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6), the sublime, the spirit, the all-forgiving: (Isaiah 55:7).

All these sketched attributes and qualities are often related to Yahweh. They express the fact that He is not subject to the limitations of mortals. However, it is worth noting that these attributes, terms and notions about God's absolute qualities are not always used in absolute terms or in an absolute sense, for there are times when they are marked with explicit reservations or qualifications, as we shall see later in the chapter. Suffice it to say and as already noted, the usage of these terms in their absolute sense most often occurs with later prophets like Isaiah. Early writing reports concerning God's repentance (Exodus 32:10-14) and His wrestling with Jacob (Genesis 32:24-30) for instance, pose serious threats to the idea of His omnipotence. In the same vein, His

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advice that “the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:13), and other verses of this nature, (i.e. Genesis 18:21) also put his omniscience in jeopardy. The list continues, we have for instance the idea that God “rested” on the seventh day after the work of creation (Exodus 20:11) with, in addition, passages like Psalms 44:24 going against the claims of Deutero-Isaiah that God does not weary. These claims are in themselves completely nullified in light of the creation passage where the word “*nwh* meaning rest” is specifically used for God. Korpel has observed that “It is noteworthy that the first verb is a general term which occurs frequently with human beings as the subject, but also with insects”¹⁵⁰ (see Exodus 23:14; Deuteronomy 15:14 ‘man’; Exodus 10:14 ‘locusts’). Moreover, in view of the passages where God is reported to have ordered the destruction of everything (1 Samuel 15:3; 2 Samuel 7:6), His mercy and righteousness are shown to be restricted. Even traditional Jews understand and recognize the difficulties caused by the presence of such daring passages in the Hebrew Bible. S. T. Katz, for instance, while discussing God’s omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence, observes: “Another fundamental question about the biblical view of God is whether the Godhead is subject to restriction. Biblical teaching seems to imply that such a limitation exists...”¹⁵¹

In light of these issues it becomes evident that there are different narrative strands regarding the biblical Deity that occur side by side in the Hebrew Bible. Not surprisingly, the existence of so many polar strands has left biblical scholarship divided and confused. Scholars have drawn widely varying and contradictory conclusions *vis-à-vis* the original Hebrew concept of God, with some biblical scholars, in view of the many passages that delineate Yahweh (God) in relatively transcendental categories, arguing that the Israelites were originally a monotheistic nation and their monotheism was authentic and original, not something secondary but a fundamental expression of Hebrew culture. Y. Kaufmann contends that the Israelite religion

was an original creation of the people of Israel. It was absolutely different from anything the pagan world ever knew; its monotheistic world view had no antecedents in paganism. Nor was it a

theological doctrine conceived and nurtured in limited circles or schools: nor a concept that finds occasional expression in this or that passage or stratum of the Bible. It was the fundamental idea of a national culture, and informed every aspect of the culture from its very beginning.¹⁵²

H. Cohen maintains that, “Monotheism is not the thought of one man, but the whole Jewish national spirit...”¹⁵³ According to Leo Baeck:

Only in Israel did an ethical monotheism exist, and wherever else it is found later, it has been derived directly or indirectly from Israel. The nature of this religion was conditioned by the existence of the people of Israel, and so it became one of the nations that have a mission to fulfill.¹⁵⁴

Hans Kung, on the other hand, rightly observes that “Yehezkel Kaufmann, who ignores the results of historical-critical research, does not answer one question. Was it like this from the beginning?”¹⁵⁵ As we have already discussed at length views regarding the patriarchal understanding of God, it should come as no surprise to see W. F. Albright also disagreeing with Kaufmann and other Jewish thinkers, disputing the idea of Hebrew monotheism being a fundamental and natural idea outcome of Israelite national culture. Albright, for instance, shows that the Israelites borrowed and adapted heavily, and greatly, from the neighboring Canaanite culture, maintaining that the simplistic picture being presented to us of the Hebrew religion is in fact not so, rather, “we can state definitely that it does not support the extreme position of the late Yehezkel Kaufmann, who maintained in his great “History of the Faith of Israel” that Mosaic monotheism was a phenomenon entirely peculiar to Israel.”¹⁵⁶ However, he does agree with Kaufmann in suggesting the *Mosaic* origin and age of monotheism as opposed to the purely Israelite. Kaufmann, for example, strongly advocates that:

With Moses the sin of idolatry particularly as a national sin – comes into existence. Before, idolatry was nowhere interdicted and

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punished. The stories depicting idolatry as a national sin presuppose the existence of a monotheistic people. Since such stories begin only with Moses, we infer that it was in his time that the great transformation took place. By making Israel enter a covenant with one God, he made it a monotheistic people that alone among men was punishable for the sin of idolatry.¹⁵⁷

Similarly, Albright argues that:

The only time in the history of ancient Near East when we find monotheism in the leading cultural centers, Egypt and Babylonia, is about the fourteenth century BC; it is also then that we find the closest approach to monotheism in Syria and Asia Minor. Since it is now an historical commonplace that we find similar ideas emerging simultaneously in different parts of a given cultural continuum, we should expect to find Israelite monotheism somehow emerging at the same time.¹⁵⁸

He further argues that the God of Moses was a creator God unrelated to any deity, and not bound to any geographical area or setting or any natural phenomenon. Though conceived anthropomorphically He was not represented in material or unexalted forms. All the human attributes and characteristics of the Hebrew God were exalted. Albright concludes observing that “It was indeed Moses who was the principal architect of Israelite monotheism.”¹⁵⁹ In *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, emphasizing the historicity of Mosaic traditions, Albright observes:

The Mosaic tradition is so consistent, so well attested by different pentateuchal documents, and so congruent with our independent knowledge of the religious development of the Near East in the late second millennium BC, that only hypercritical pseudo-rationalism can reject its essential historicity.¹⁶⁰

Albright has used the term “monotheism” in its very broad sense and not in its refined, modern and philosophically developed sense. He himself has observed:

Was Moses a true monotheist? If by “monotheist” is meant a thinker with views specifically like those of Philo Judaeus or Rabbi Aqiba, of St. Paul...of Mordecai Kaplan or H. N. Wieman, Moses was not one. If, on the other hand, the term “monotheist” means one who teaches the existence of only one God, the creator of everything, the source of justice, who is equally powerful in Egypt, in the desert, and in Palestine, who has no sexuality and no mythology, who is human in form but cannot be seen by human eye and cannot be represented in any form – then the founder of Yahwism was certainly a monotheist.¹⁶¹

Meek criticizes such a usage of the term “monotheist” observing:

Albright protests against giving a Unitarian definition to the word “monotheism,” but the only acceptable use of the word is in its dictionary sense, and it is Albright and his kind, rather than his opponents, as he affirms, who are “highly misleading” when they read into a word a meaning it cannot and should not bear.¹⁶²

H. W. Robinson also warns against such a broad usage of the term:

Yet the very term ‘monotheism,’ together with all other metaphysical attributes, such as omnipotence, omnipresence, immanence, and eternity, can be misleading. Such terms suggest modern and intellectualistic categories. They conceal the gradual development of an intuition, and substitute for it a process of ratiocination never found in the Old Testament.¹⁶³

Meek further rejects Albright’s arguments stating: “There was no great, onrushing movement toward monotheism in the Near East in the fourteenth century, such as Albright affirms. There is no evidence that Syria and Asia Minor were more monotheistic then than at any other period.”¹⁶⁴

Many modern scholars of the Bible conform to Albright’s position and maintain the Mosaic origin of Hebrew monotheism. G. E. Wright, J. Bright, I. Engnell, E. Jacob are a few examples. E. Jacob, for instance, noted:

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One cannot speak of evolution within the faith of Israel towards monotheism, for from the moment when Israel becomes conscious of being the people chosen by one God it is in practice a monotheistic people; and so one can speak with Albright, to name only one of the most recent and illustrious historians, of the monotheism of Moses, on condition that by this term there is understood a conviction of faith and not a result of reflection.¹⁶⁵

The definition of Albright, on the other hand, is not acceptable to many contemporary scholars who see in it significant flaws and shortcomings. H. H. Rowley for instance adds:

Most of the elements of this definition are irrelevant to the question of monotheism, and of the one vital element there is no evidence. For nowhere in the Pentateuch is Moses credited with the formal denial that any other gods exist, such as we find in Deutero-Isaiah, save in passages such as Deuteronomy 4:35, 4:39, 32:39, which quite certainly did not issue from Moses.¹⁶⁶

There is no evidence that Moses worshipped many gods and was a polytheist (like a number of his followers), yet according to the biblical narration, there exists no proof that he was a monotheist, in the sense that he clearly denied the existence of more than one God. On the other hand there is every evidence that he worshipped only Yahweh and denied any association with Him, though without universalizing him. This fact has led scholars like T. J. Meek, S. R. Driver, and R. Kittle to conclude that Moses was a 'henotheist'. Meek observes:

It is hard to find any evidence that Moses either believed or taught that Yahweh was the only existing God, and that He was therefore not only the God of Israel but of all men. On the other hand, it does not seem sufficient to note that at Sinai it was affirmed that Yahweh was alone the legitimate object of Israelite worship, and that there was no denial of the existence of other gods.¹⁶⁷

He also notes:

The new thing that came with Moses was not the worship of Yahweh to the exclusion of all other gods, but the united allegiance of a number of tribes to Yahweh as their confederate god, Yahweh being to the confederacy as a whole what the tribal god was to the tribe. This is monolatry and is quite like the monolatry that we noted in Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, and elsewhere in the ancient world...¹⁶⁸

S. R. Driver and Kittle conclude that the Mosaic religion can be described as ethical henotheism.¹⁶⁹

A. Lods holds Moses' religion as monolatry, "for the god whom Moses sought to win over to his people was not a universal god like that of Islam: he had a proper name, Jahweh, local centers of worship, and an essential national character, he was and chose to be the God of Israel." He further argues that

the Israelites, when they emerge into the full light of history and up to the time of the great prophets, although Jahwist, were not monotheists. They only worshipped one national god, Jahweh; but they believed in the existence and power of other gods: they were monolaters. But monolatry is a form of polytheism.¹⁷⁰

The charge of polytheism, henotheism and monolatry is too much for scholars like Rowley, Baab, Bright, F. James, Th. C. Vriezen and a good number of other contemporary scholars to accept *vis-à-vis* Moses. Baab stresses:

We must reject the easy evolutionism which sorts out the records, arranges them in neat piles on the basis of decisions as to dates, and finds a convincing illustration of development from animism to absolute monotheism, with all the stages from polydaemonism to henotheism in between.¹⁷¹

He further argues that:

The concept of the oneness of God was not reached primarily through logical analysis by Hebrew thinkers; their approach was

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pragmatically religious and experience centered. The life and social experience of the community, with its inner tensions and its relations to other groups, made up the historical ground for the achievement of monotheism. The great doctrine of modern Judaism as of biblical Judaism, drawn from Deuteronomy – “Listen, O Israel; the Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (6:4) – was not formulated except as the result of prolonged and decisive acquaintance with this particular Deity. Undoubtedly the leadership of Moses, the work of the great prophets, and the faith of the many anonymous believers in ancient Israel helped to shape this doctrine.¹⁷²

Bright strongly rejects the progressive theory too: “Certainly Israel’s faith was no polytheism. Nor will henotheism or monolatry do, for though the existence of other gods was not expressly denied, neither was their status as gods tolerantly granted.”¹⁷³ F. James concludes that “The actual evidence regarding him (i.e. Moses) points more towards his having been a monotheist than a henotheist.”¹⁷⁴ G. Fohrer expresses the concept more carefully when he states that:

Mosaic Yahwism therefore knew nothing of a theoretical monotheism that denies the existence of other gods. Neither is the oft-used term “henotheism” appropriate, since it refers to belief in several individual gods who alternately rank supreme. It would be more correct to speak of monoyahwism or practical monotheism.¹⁷⁵

Th. C. Vriezen fully agrees with Fohrer in describing the Mosaic religion as “monoYahwism” rather than monolatry or henotheism.¹⁷⁶

H. H. Rowley presents a relatively more elaborate and careful view concerning the Mosaic religion as it is portrayed in the Bible. He maintains that “if Moses was less than a monotheist he was more than a henotheist.”¹⁷⁷ He recognizes that Yahweh shared the name with the Canaanite’s deity, but had a unique character of his own:

I do not take the view that the work of Moses is to be resolved into the mere mediation to Israel of the religion of the Kenites. The

divine name Yahweh was probably taken over, and the forms of the religion; but a new spirit was given to the religion and a new level to its demands. The sense of Yahweh's election of Israel, of His deliverance, of His claims upon her obedience, were all new, and through the truly prophetic personality of Moses it was established on a higher basis than the Kenite's religion had reached.¹⁷⁸

The gods worshipped by the Israelites were identified with Yahweh and ceased to be counted against him. "This is not monotheism, and there is no reason to attribute universalism to Moses. Yet here we have surely seeds of both."¹⁷⁹ Yahweh, according to Rowley, was not restricted to a single area or people:

He could be active in Egypt or in Palestine as freely as in His chosen seat. A God who could thus be active wherever He wished, and beside whom no other gods counted, was not a tribal or national god, and certainly not merely one of a host of gods. His "onliness" might not be affirmed; but His uniqueness is manifest. If He is not the only God, He is certainly more than one example – even the most important example – of the categories of gods. Among all gods He alone mattered, and He could do with Israel or with any other people what He would.

Rowley draws from here a conservative conclusion:

This is not monotheism, and it is unwise to exaggerate it into monotheism. Nevertheless, it was incipient monotheism and incipient universalism, so that when full monotheism was achieved in Israel it came not by natural evolution out of something fundamentally different, but by the development of its own particular character.¹⁸⁰

Dentan's views are very similar to that of Rowley's. He observes:

The views of scholars today vary all the way from that which regards Moses, or even Abraham, as monotheists, to another that

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sees monotheism as emerging only with Second Isaiah, or, in less theoretical form, with Amos. The truth is probably to be found in a mediating position that sees the germ of monotheism present in early times, with the full flower coming at the end of the Old Testament period.¹⁸¹

Such an interpretation of Hebraic monotheism is neither new nor specific to Rowley or Dentan only. It has been held by a number of scholars like E. Konig, P. Volz, A. B. Davidson, B. Bascheit, N. K. Gottwald and G. W. Anderson. One would have to resort to far-fetched interpretations and several twists to a variety of biblical passages, as cited above, to fully agree with this view on the Mosaic understanding of God. Rowley's view in substance is very close to the Albright school. He, like Albright and others, leans towards the traditional standpoint. For Albright and almost all 'right-wing' scholars, "the significance of Moses' achievement for the religion of Israel is an established fact; and many of them still view him, if not as the man who taught monotheism, at any rate as the founder of Israel's religion."¹⁸² Even those scholars who deny monotheism to Moses recognize him as one of the leading factors towards this end. A. Lods for instance asserts:

The principle laid down by Moses was that of 'monolatry': in everything that concerns the nation. Yahweh is the only Elohim to whom Israel has the right to appeal. Yahweh is a jealous God. This rigorous exclusivism was, however, one of the roots of the theoretic monotheism of the Jewish period.¹⁸³

Whilst we may agree that Moses played a significant role in putting the Israelites on the track of monotheism, we may disagree as to labeling him the hero of Hebraic monotheism as far as the biblical data is concerned. Our concern here is not a comparison of the Mosaic concept of the deity with that of the Canaanite's or indeed other primitive societies of that time, but rather to focus on monotheism as the term itself denotes. Moses, according to available biblical data, does not seem to deny the existence of other gods. Further, his portrayals of God are corporeal and anthropomorphic through and through. This representation of God as well as lack of stand against other gods, does not sit

well with the notion of a transcendent, monotheistic God. All things considered, this context, as well as the issues outlined concerning the historicity and translation of the First Commandment, leave a great many issues unresolved in terms of Moses being a monotheist. Therefore, in light of the biblical data, Mose's monolatry is more evident than his leaning towards monotheism in the strict sense of the term. Monolatry, on the other hand, is an idea detrimental to the Unity, Oneness and Transcendence of God as the terms are understood today. Therefore we conclude this section with the observation that the Hebrew Bible's early concept of God is neither monotheistic nor transcendental in the developed sense of these terms. Furthermore, ethical monotheism and the transcendence of God are vaguely stated but not well defined or protected against violations and compromises, and the depiction of the deity is anthropomorphic and corporeal. Finally, this tendency is as pervasive in the later prophets as it is in the early writings, though with a relative degree of sophistication and refinement.

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A great majority of biblical scholars, especially after the 19th century evolutionary approach to religion and Wellhausen's evolutionary presuppositions in the field of the history of religion, disagree with the theory of original biblical monotheism or a transcendental deity. They see in the Hebrew Bible an evolution of the idea of God. They contend that the developmental process starts with animism, then anthropomorphic and corporeal concepts of the Deity, gradually developing, as a result of the Davidic monarchy and finally after the Babylonian exile, into a full fledged monotheism. M. Kaplan, A. Lods, I. G. Matthew, T. J. Meek, J. Barr, H. H. Rowley, W. Eichrodt, Morton Smith, and Mark S. Smith are just a few amongst those who represent this position. A. Lods, for instance, asserts that "Israel only attained to monotheism in the eighth century and to a clear and conscious monotheism only in the sixth, and that by a slow process of internal development whose stages we can trace."¹⁸⁴ Causse attributes the beginning of monotheism to Elijah, while I. G. Matthew thinks that it was Amos who laid the foundations of ethical monotheism. Pfeiffer absolutely denies any real

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monotheism before Deutero-Isaiah. He observes that “We can only speak of monotheism in the Old Testament before Second Isaiah by using the word in some other sense than the belief that there is only one god.”¹⁸⁵ M. M. Kaplan observes that:

The traditional belief that the Jewish religion has remained the same since it was promulgated at Sinai is quite untenable and is being superseded by the evolutionary conception of its origin and growth. According to that conception, the complex of ideas and practices centering about the belief in God underwent gradual but thorough-going changes.¹⁸⁶

Following this evolutionary approach, Kaplan, a well-known modern Jewish thinker, concludes that the Hebrews, like other primitive people, were originally polytheists worshipping multiple anthropomorphic and corporeal deities. In the second stage of the developmental process, they reached the belief in a national God, Yahweh, worthy of worship and all other acts of obedience, but still conceived of in anthropomorphic terms. “They retained the survivals of animism.”¹⁸⁷ Yahweh would fight their battles, take care of all their needs, and in turn they would conform to His laws and be loyal to Him. At this stage, there existed no thought of denying the validity of other gods for other nations. It is in the third stage, especially with the victories of David, that Yahweh’s oneness is achieved:

By this time the God of Israel is no longer conceived merely as a god, or as the principal god, but as God, the creator of the world and of all that it contains, the one Being who is *sui generis*, whose power is manifest both in the ordinary and in the extraordinary manifestations of nature and whose will governs the life of every created being.¹⁸⁸

Still, even at this later stage of the developmental process, we do not have monotheism in the strict sense of the term:

The religion of canonical Prophets is not quite identical with what is commonly understood by the term “monotheism.” That term

usually designates the outcome of an intellectual development which could not possibly have been carried on in early Israel. God, as monotheism conceives him, is a metaphysical being whose traits and attributes have nothing in common with anything in human experience. When we say that God is all-knowing, or all-good, it is with the qualification that we are using terminology which in strictness is totally inapplicable to God. Why then do we use it? Simply because we have none better. No such sophistication could ever form part of the Prophet's Idea of the God of Israel.¹⁸⁹

In the final and fourth stage, real monotheism and transcendence was achieved by denying the ascription to God of human corporeal and anthropomorphic terms and the negation of those attributes and qualities which were thought as unworthy of His being. The Jewish religion passed through this stage "of its existence from about the beginning of the common era down to modern times."¹⁹⁰ Therefore, argues Kaplan, "to ascribe to traditional Jewish religion the urge to teach the nations the formal truth of monotheism is to convey an entirely wrong impression of what the Jews conceived to be their place in the world."¹⁹¹ The concept of such a transcendent Deity was forced upon Jewish thought by the circumstances in which they found themselves:

Until Judaism was compelled to reckon with the challenge of Aristotelian philosophy, the philosophic difficulty of ascribing form to God in no way disturbed rabbinic thought. Even the question of Gods' omnipresence did not trouble them greatly. Although they assumed that God was omnipresent, they nevertheless held the idea of God as moving from place to place, and of heaven as his principal abode. Certain as it was that God was a being perceptible not merely to the mind but also to the senses, traditional Jewish religion could, for practical purposes, afford to leave unsolved the question about the form and substance of the divine nature and its relationship to the visible world. Hence the vagueness and the contradictions which abound in the traditional conception of God with regard to his spatial relationship to the physical universe.¹⁹²

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It was in medieval Jewish theology “when the anthropomorphic conceptions of God in the Bible were found to clash with the more intellectualized conceptions of God developed in Greek philosophy, there arose the need for reinterpretation.”¹⁹³ Such a development in the Jewish concept of God was a result of evolution; a product of Jewish civilization and culture; and not in any way or form a supernatural intrusion or event. Therefore:

The Jewish quality of the religion of the Jews will not depend on claims to supernatural origin or claims to being more rational or more ethical than other religions. Its uniqueness will consist chiefly in the fact that it will be lived by Jews, and will be expressed by them through such cultural media as Jewish civilization will produce.¹⁹⁴

To Kaplan and other modern Jewish scholars like Rabbis Solomon Goldman and Herman Lissauer, “what a person understands about God or any other reality is the result of patient, persistent searching and not a miraculous intervention from a supernatural source.”¹⁹⁵ This group of Jewish “clerical apostles”, to use B. J. Heller’s term, have eliminated the traditional vital God idea from their purview and program. Such an idea of God is a part of the ancient Jewish civilization and primitive in nature. As a result this belief can be dispelled and dispensed away with in modern times. To the above mentioned Reformists “Judaism primarily is and was a culture and a civilization. God and religion played a part in it, but were not synonymous with the whole of it. Significant as it may have been to the Jewish scheme in the past, it is not essential to it in the present.”¹⁹⁶ They do not accept the long held doctrine that “*Israel’s ideal life was Israel’s Scripture*” and God; they believe Israel’s ideal life was and is Israel itself. Rabbi Herman Lissauer frankly admits:

I am not sure whether we may properly use the term God since our meaning of the term is so different from our fathers. We don’t hold any belief in God as an ‘externalized, individualized, personal being.’ When we speak the word God, it is purely in poetical

meaning, and as a symbol for the idea. I have defined God as 'the advancing totality of our highest ideals.'...We deal with man and not with God. Our great difficulty is to find in Jewish life and literature any expression of this view, and we are compelled to interpret even the 'Sh'ma Yisrael' in order to enable us to voice the one expression which every Jew uses as a watchword.¹⁹⁷

This account of the concept of God on the part of some leading modern Jewish thinkers echoes and bears close resemblance to modern humanism placing emphasis upon man as the architect of his destiny and in effect the creator of God, as discussed in the previous chapter. This secular humanist phenomenon, divorcing God from the high position traditionally accorded Him by the Hebrew Bible, may be connected to the diversity of ideas concerning God found in the Hebrew Bible, and perhaps most notably, the bold, corporeal, and anthropomorphic depictions of Him prevailing in many biblical writings.

It should be apparent by now that biblical passages such as the First Commandment most quoted to prove original biblical monotheism and the transcendence of God, as well as classical arguments long cited as evidence, are in fact not fully accepted as proving monotheistic transcendence, and this by virtually all biblical scholars, including to some degree, those of Judaism. I feel no hesitation in attributing these problematic multiple theories concerning the God concept or monotheism in the Hebrew Bible to the biblical text itself. In fact, a thorough, systematic, and honest treatment of biblical passages, as they are recapitulated and expressed in the Hebrew Bible in its present shape, would reveal that the idea of monotheism and God's absolute transcendence was probably one of the most perplexing ideas the Israelites had to wrestle with throughout their ancient history. Monotheism penetrated the minds and souls of the Hebrews gradually and slowly. The five books attributed to Moses describe God in relatively transcendental and monotheistic terms, yet these same books give clear indications of the existence and presence of other gods of other nations, legitimize their worship in the lands of those nations, limit Yahweh's territory, power, and sovereignty to the land of Canaan, give detailed information about his sanctuaries and dwelling places, portray

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patriarchs as well as known Israelite figures as idolatrous, and depict God in naive anthropomorphic and corporeal terms.

Examining these aspects of the biblical text in detail, a modern scholar would easily unearth the unusual tension prevailing with respect to the unity, unicity, and uniqueness of God. On the one hand, the unity and uniqueness of Yahweh is emphasized, whilst on the other it is seriously undermined, by showcasing not only the existence of other gods but also through God Almighty's recognition of their existence by appointing other nations to them while keeping Israel for Himself. "When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he set up the divisions of mankind, He fixed the boundaries of the people according to the members of the sons of God. But Yahweh's own allotment is His people, Jacob His apportioned property" (Deuteronomy 32:9). A contemporary Jewish biblical scholar comments on this passage by observing that:

Faith in YAHWEH's triumphant majesty facilitated acceptance of the principle that YAHWEH was the supreme deity, that he had appointed other gods to govern the non-Israelite peoples of the world but retained himself rulership of Israel and ultimate jurisdiction in the council of heavenly beings.¹⁹⁸

In this perspective then Yahweh is not the universal God of mankind, but a national God of Israel; one God among many differing gods (ascribed for other nations) with the exception of His being unique among them: "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among other gods?" (Exodus 15:11). Such texts, argues Marjo Christina Korpel, "prove that initially the Israelites did not deny the existence of other deities and they therefore cannot be termed pure monotheists."¹⁹⁹

The belief in the existence, power, and rule of other gods, besides God Himself, is detrimental to the concept of the true unity, unicity, uniqueness, and transcendence of God; therefore, the above quoted passages and others like I Samuel 26:19 and Judges 11:23–24, that assert the existence of other gods, are in conflict with the monotheistic and transcendental concept of God. Moreover the Hebrew Bible allows worship of these gods, as A. Lods point out:

The worship of “strange gods,” as they were called, was regarded as perfectly legitimate within the limits of their respective territories. The view which placed the true God in sharp opposition to the false gods, God over against the “non-gods”, and the true religion in contrast with the worship of lies, was still unknown.²⁰⁰

So the Bible portrays patriarchs as serving other gods, without denouncing them as patriarchs due to this act of ignorance (for instance see Joshua 24:2,14,15; Judges 5:7-9). Aaron, who according to the Bible, was made the prophet and spokesman of Moses to the Israelites, whom God promised to stand with his mouth and teach him what to do (Exodus 4:15-16), is reported to have made the golden calf and allowed his people to worship it (Exodus 32:22-35). King Solomon is reported to have gone after other gods due to the influence of his foreign wives (I Kings 11:1-16). The Israelites are often depicted as engaged in the worship of other gods like Asherah and Baal. Morton Smith notes:

Solomon’s worship of Yahweh was not exclusive; he built high places to Moabite, Sidonian, and Amonite gods and worshipped others, too. And there is no evidence that his subjects were more Yahwist than the King. When the northern tribes broke away from Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, about 925 BC and set up the separate kingdom of “Israel” in central and northern Palestine, as opposed to “Judah” in the south, the first king, of Israel, Jeroboam, showed his devotion to Yahweh by endowing the shrines of Bethel and Dan with golden images of the deity in the form of a bull calf.²⁰¹

In view of these facts, it has already been suggested that, “up to the eighth century, the Israelites believed firmly in the existence of many other deities beside their national God.”²⁰² Morton Smith argues that the fundamental change in attitude towards the worship of Yahweh took place in the reign of King Asa (died c. 875). “Evidently, from this period on there was a newly important element in the situation: the demand that Israel worship Yahweh and Yahweh alone.”²⁰³ On the other hand, we know from the text of the Hebrew Bible that the

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worship of other gods was still prevalent amongst the Israelites as late as the time of Jeremiah in the seventh century. Jeremiah admonishes his people saying:

Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry out to the gods to whom they make offerings, but they will never save them in the time of their trouble. For your gods have become as many as your towns, O Judah; and as many as the streets of Jerusalem are the alters you have set to shame, alters to make offerings to baal. (Jeremiah 11:12-13)

Smith observes that:

In spite of the Yahwist revolutions of the ninth century, the cult of the various Baals continued. It was evidently popular in the eighth century, when Hosea denounced it, and still popular at the end of the seventh century, when denounced by Zephaniah and Jeremiah. The prophets, Jeremiah said, prophesied by Baal and the people swore by him. Jerusalem had as many alters to him as it had street corners – perhaps an exaggeration. Sacrifices and incense were commonly offered to him. Nor were the baals Yahweh's only competitors. Judea had as many gods as it had cities. When another Yahwist reformation was put through in the time of King Josiah (621 BC) the priests throughout Judea had to be stopped from burning incense on the high places, not only to Baal, but also to the sun, the moon, the planets, and all the host of heaven; around Jerusalem the high places of "the Satyres" and of the gods Ashtoreth, Kemosh, and Milkom had to be destroyed; and the temple of Yahweh itself had to be purged of the vessels of Baal, Asherah, and the host of the heaven, the chariots of the sun, and the houses of the sacred "prostitutes" where the women wove coverings for the pillar which symbolized the goddess Asherah. Josiah's reforms seem to have had little success with the masses and to have died with him in 609, for the later prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are full of denunciations of Judean worship of other gods than Yahweh. Such complaints are not to be

dismissed as mere exaggeration; the evidence of archaeology supports them.²⁰⁴

He further argues that only “with the appearance of the beginnings of synagogue worship – a type of worship quite different from the sacrificial cult of the temples – the Yahweh alone party became in effect a new religion, and a new kind of religion.”²⁰⁵

The emergence of an Israelite monotheism involved perplexing and numerous factors, elements, and features, and developed over various stages. It was most probably the Babylonian Exile which gave impetus to the idea of a strict, universal, and ethical monotheism. W. Eichrodt, van Rad, D. M. G. Stalker, Fohrer, B. Lang, Halpern, Mark S. Smith are just a few of the scholars who follow this line of approach. They emphasize the crucial role played by the exile experience in determining the nature of Israelite monotheism. Texts dating to the Exile, explains M. S. Smith, “are the first to attest to unambiguous expressions of Israelite monotheism. Second Isaiah (Isaiah 45:5–7) gave voice to the monotheistic ideal that Yahweh was the only deity in the cosmos. Not only are the other deities powerless; these are nonexistent.”²⁰⁶

As far as the textual data is concerned, monotheism and the idea of God’s transcendence were scarcely hallmarks of Israel’s earliest history. Monotheism emerged as a result of the differentiation between Yahweh and other gods and the convergence of their characteristics and attributes to the Israelite Deity. “Monotheism”, argues M.S. Smith, “was hardly a feature of Israel’s earliest history. By the sole token, convergence was an early development that anticipates the later emergence of monolatry and monotheism.”²⁰⁷ He further states that three levels of development in early Israel bear on convergence. The first reflects Israel’s Canaanite heritage, features in this category include El, Baal, Asherah, and their imagery and titles, and the cultic practices of the Asherah, high places, and devotion to the dead. The second level involves features that Israel shared with its first millennium neighbors: the rise of the new national deity, the presence of a consort goddess, and the small number of attested deities compared with second-millennium West Semitic cultures. Third, there are characteristics specific to Israelite culture, such as the new god, Yahweh, the traditions

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of a separate origin and a southern sanctuary, the aniconic requirement, and decreased anthropomorphism. Any of the features in this third category might be invoked to help explain convergence. This long process of convergence, for Smith, was an evolution and a revolution at the same time:

It was an “evolution” in two respects. Monolatry grew out of an early, limited Israelite polytheism that was not strictly discontinuous with that of its Iron Age neighbors. Furthermore, adherence to one deity was a changing reality within the periods of the judges and the monarchy in Israel. While evolutionary in character, Israelite monolatry was also “revolutionary” in a number of respects. The process of differentiation and the eventual displacement of Baal from Israel’s national cult distinguished Israel’s religion from the religions of its neighbors...Israelite insistence on a single deity eventually distinguished Israel from the surrounding cultures, as far as textual data indicate.²⁰⁸

According to these biblical scholars, the united Davidic monarchy played a decisive role in uniting the Israelites to the worship of Yahweh alone. Conversely, scholars like Albright, G. Mendenhall, J. Bright, and others, who believe in the existence of an early pure Yahwism, argue that the monarchy had a negative effect upon the religion of Israel for it was at this time that pollution occurred through the worship of Baal and other deities. Mark Smith, criticizing this line of approach, argues that “The pure form of Yahwism that Mendenhall and Bright envision was perhaps an ideal achieved rarely, if ever, before the exile – if even then.” He further argues that

the monarchy was not a villain of Israelite religion that Mendenhall and Bright make it out to be. Indeed, the monarchy made several religious contributions crucial to the development of monolatry. In short, Mendenhall and Bright stand much of Israel’s religious development on its head.²⁰⁹

It is difficult to determine the authenticity of the narration attributed to Moses or other patriarchs, as Morton Smith and others have shown.

The reason is very simple and straightforward. The present Hebrew Bible has gone through a lengthy process of editing, party politics, correction and transmission. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to say with certainty what religious beliefs these patriarchs originally held. As far as biblical textual data is concerned, the view emphasizing progressive revelation seems the more probable, virtually having become a classic as Hans Kung observes. On the bases of most recent research

present-day scholars assume that polytheism was widespread in Israel down to the Babylonian exile. In other words...it was only after long controversies that strict biblical monotheism was able to establish itself. From our present perspective we have to begin from 'a chain of successive revolutions in the direction of monotheism following relatively rapidly after one another'.²¹⁰

He summarizes this classic view by observing that it was the ninth century, the early monarchical period, which witnessed the battle against Baal and the emphasis upon Yahweh instead of Baal:

The eighth century saw the beginning of the 'Yahweh alone movement,' which was first in a minority: only this one God is to be worshipped in Israel, no matter what gods other peoples worship...In the seventh century this sole worship of Yahweh became established. The existence of other gods outside Israel was not still denied, but in Israel, the exclusive people of the covenant, Yahweh was to be worshipped exclusively, in exclusive worship (and not Baal or later Zeus); there was a reform program under King Josiah with a purification and centralization of the cult and the declaration that the new cultic order was the law of the state. The sixth century, finally, saw the further development of the sole worship of Yahweh to the point of strict monotheism, which now denied the existence of other gods: the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was interpreted as punishment for going astray into polytheism, and a redaction of the old writings was undertaken in a strictly monotheistic direction.²¹¹

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This manifest progressive feature of the Hebrew Bible is proof that it is a historically conditioned account of the efforts on the part of finite human beings to understand and perceive God. These efforts seem to be as limited as the limitations of the societies they first appeared in. God, as He is portrayed by many theistic traditions in their developed form, is formless, eternal, immutable, and everlasting. In any case why would God portray Himself in categories inappropriate to His Majesty just because the understanding of the ancient Hebrews was a primitive one? Why would He have to sanction the worship or existence of other gods which are in reality non-existent? This could only muddy waters as to His transcendence, and sow the seeds of confusion. The answer that makes sense is that He did not do so but human agency makes it appear to be so. By this I mean that these issues cannot be resolved if we take the Hebrew Bible to be, in its present shape, the direct, unchanged, pristine revelation or Word of God, verbatim, to the Hebrew prophets. On the other hand, the difficulties can be grasped and mitigated if we recognize the decisive role played by human agency in the final outcome of these writings. The latter alternative will free God of a number of accusations and avert the finger of blame for all the subsequent confusion.

In addition to the flaws contained in the Hebrew Bible with respect to monotheism, there is additional evidence in the text of the Bible indicating that the ancient biblical concept of God was primitive in nature. There are, of course, passages in the Hebrew Bible that emphasize God's transcendence, incorporeality, and otherness, as discussed above (Isaiah 31:3; Job 10:4; Hosea 11:9; Psalm 121:4; Isaiah 40:28). But the passages portraying him in anthropomorphic and corporeal terms and categories outweigh the transcendental passages, so much so and so vividly in fact that it has been argued that "All the evidence suggests that from the outset Yahweh was conceived in human form."²¹² Korpel observes that early Israelite traditions attribute "a visible human form to God."²¹³ Indeed, a majority of mortal, human, physical and mental categories appear to be present in the Hebrew God: God has a body; in the plains of Mamre, He appears to Abraham in a mythico-anthropomorphic form; Abraham bows down towards the ground, offers God water, requests Him to let him wash His feet, fetches

Him a morsel of bread and God responds to Abraham's request and does eat:

And the Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamre; and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself to the ground. And said, My Lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, pass not away, I beseech you, from your servant. Let a little water, I beseech you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and you comfort your hearts; after that you shall pass on; seeing that you are come to your servant. And they said, So do, as you have said. And Abraham hurried to the tent to Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it to a young man; and he hurried to prepare it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they ate. (Genesis 18:1-8)

There are several interpretations given to this passage to avoid the idea of the presence of God with Abraham. One traditional explanation is that all three were angels.²¹⁴ But the biblical text itself refutes such interpretations. Only two of the angels, the Bible tells us, went to Sodom while Abraham was still standing with God. On the basis of this evidence, Friedman observes that "from the text it has been argued that the third visitor is God."²¹⁵ Esther Hamori after a detailed analysis of Genesis 18:1-33 concludes that the text is so crystal clear that it does not leave any room for any other interpretation but to confess that "Yahweh appears as a man, with such anthropomorphic realism that Abraham does not recognize him until Yahweh's verbal self-revelation."²¹⁶ There is no metaphor in the text and it must be taken literally. "Yahweh arrives, washes up, rests, eats, and speaks with Abraham and Sarah, all in entirely concrete human form."²¹⁷

Likewise, Genesis 32:25-33 portrays God in the most graphic corporeal terms. God wrestles with Jacob in an absolutely physical

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form, so much so that Jacob does not even recognize until the last moments of the match that his opponent is in reality Almighty God. During the fight God touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh and dislocates it. These are without doubt physical acts. The passage reads:

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaks. And he said, I will not let you go, except you bless me. And he said to him, What is your name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince you have power with God and with men, and have prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I beg you, your name. And he said, Why is it that you ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel; for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Peniel the sun rose upon him, and he limped upon his thigh. Therefore the people of Israel do not eat of the sinew of the vein, which is in the hollow of the thigh, to this day; because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the vein. (Genesis 32:25–33)

According to Esther Hamori the text is

blunt and concise regarding what follows: “a man (*‘is*) wrestled with him.” The ensuing description leaves no room for ambiguity regarding the man's physical form. He cannot prevail against Jacob – that is, he is not supernaturally strong, but is fully tied to the realistic human form. He therefore resorts to dislocating Jacob's hip. Yet even now he is not stronger than Jacob, but rather must ask to be let go! It is clear that he is in physical form concretely a man, and not simply a disguised divinity with superhuman strength.²¹⁸

Moreover the man blesses Jacob and Jacob has no further questions about the man's identity. He immediately claims that he has seen God

face to face. The place is called “Peniel”. The man also gives a new name to Jacob. “The giving of a new name does reflect his divine nature, but moreover, the ‘is names Jacob *Yisra’el*, or ‘God strives.’”²¹⁹ Hamori has extensively analyzed the traditional interpretations of this passage and shown their absurd nature. Stephen Geller throws light upon the passage’s complexity: “This is a famously enigmatic story. The weird struggle in darkness and blessing in the twilight of dawn tempt normally sober exegetes to flights of allegory, often disguised as psychological symbolism... Others despair of ever finding coherent meaning in it.”²²⁰

This passage is nothing short of blasphemy and utterly defies logic. Are we seriously expected to believe that God who is Omnipotent, Creator of the universe, is so helplessly weak that He cannot overcome a feeble human being like Jacob even after dislocating his hip? The whole narrative is a complete affront to the majesty of God Almighty, and without doubt the handiwork of an audacious and blasphemous scribe. We can barely trust the nonsense contained in this so-called wrestling match passage which was certainly neither revealed nor inspired by God.

In Exodus 33 Moses is allowed to see the back part of God and speak face to face to Him: “And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exodus 33:11):

And he said, You cannot see my face; for no man shall see me and live. And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and you shall stand upon a rock; And it shall come to pass, while my glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with my hand while I pass by; And I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen. (Exodus 33:20–23)

James Barr describes this passage as “the most sophisticated and delicate discussion of the seeing of God by man in the OT.”²²¹ This is a strange conclusion for the point here is not the possibility of seeing or not seeing God but the fact of divine holiness, for no man can see God and survive. God’s holiness is incompatible with human sinfulness and impurity. The preceding chapter, Exodus 32, throws light upon the

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Israelites' sinful act of fashioning and worshipping the golden calf. As Barr states:

in this chapter the problem is not really the problem of anthropomorphism as such... It seems clear that the passage was written for its context, that is, to follow immediately after the incident of the sin of Israel in making the golden calf... The danger is that if he goes with them personally, he will consume them clearly, because of their rebelliousness.²²²

So therefore the problem here is not with the anthropomorphism or the transcendence of God, rather, the issue is connected with sin and atonement regarding God's presence and vision. As Moses did not participate in the golden calf transgression, he is shielded by God's hand and placed in the cleft of a rock so that he can withstand the overbearing radiance of God's glory and see Him. The passage shows God's special grace upon and intimacy with the person of Moses to the exclusion of the other Israelites. Moreover, Moses here is not shown asking something new, for other righteous Israelites have also seen God's glory quite often (Exodus 16:10, 24:9-11, 33:11). The preceding verses show that Moses had already had an intimate dialogue with God "face to face" as a person speaks to a friend. The passage shows Moses' closeness to God. In Numbers 12:8 God confirms that he spoke to Moses "mouth to mouth."

In addition to Moses, the elders of Israel had also seen God, "Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone ..." (Exodus 24:9-10). Despite figurative interpretations by the Jewish philosopher Saadya and others, that what was actually seen was some form created by God rather than the great God Himself, this is not what the text says. The words clearly state, "they saw the God of Israel". Howard Eilberg-Schwartz observes that this passage "lends itself more readily to literal reading. Indeed, the myth goes out of its way to emphasize that the Israelite leaders saw God, repeating the idea two times."²²³ Samuel Terrien admits that, "In this narrative, on the contrary, the setting is topographically concrete, the human witnesses are many, and the visual

perception of Godhead, twice affirmed (vss. 10 and 11), is made even more explicitly sensorial by its sequential climax ‘they ate and drank’.”²²⁴

The passage also depicts God as having feet, a theme also presented in several other biblical passages (Nahum 1:3; Habakkuk 3:5; Zechariah 14:4). There is a tendency among traditional biblical scholars to interpret theophanies (appearances of God) such as Exodus 33:23 as transcendental anthropomorphisms or something metaphorical in nature, and they attempt to equate these theophanies with anthropomorphic expressions such as God’s hand, face, eyes etc. and give them metaphorical explanation. James Barr has shown that such tendency is flawed as the theophanies are not metaphorical in nature at all, rather thoroughly physical and depict God in embodied human form. He observes that:

In contrast with all this, it is in the theophanies where God lets himself be seen that there is a real attempt to grapple with the form of his appearance. Indeed, for Hebrew thought ‘form’ and ‘appearance’ may be taken as correlative, and where there is no ‘appearance’ a passage is of only secondary importance for the idea of form.²²⁵

God it is written has a head (Isaiah 59:17; Psalm 110:7), and the hair of His head is like pure wool (Daniel 7:9). His face is mentioned around 236 times.²²⁶ Whilst metaphorical meaning can be ascribed most of the time, sometimes the text is fairly literal and anthropomorphic as seen in the case of Moses. God hides His face. This particular phrase occurs over thirty times in the Hebrew Bible:²²⁷ “And I shall leave them, and I shall hide my face from them... and they will say in that day, ‘Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have found us?’” (Deuteronomy 31:17; also Deuteronomy 32:20). Some of these passages are metaphorical in nature but a good number of them are inescapably anthropomorphic. Not surprisingly, therefore, it has been observed that, “Originally... the Israelites did believe that God could reveal himself with a human face.”²²⁸

God’s eyes are mentioned 200 times. He has a nose (Genesis 8:21) such that there issues “a smoke out of his nostrils” (Psalm 18:8), and

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he has a sense of smell (Exodus 25:6, 29:18; I Samuel 2:18), and Ezekiel 20:41 where He likes and is pleased with sweet odor. Given these bold and daringly descriptive passages, it has been observed that:

According to the Old Testament, God also has a nose [‘P]. Genesis 8:21 and other comparable texts state that he can smell and likes the pleasant odor of agreeable sacrifices. Therefore his people burn incense “under his nose” according to the archaic verse Deuteronomy 33:10. It would seem that such an expression still presupposes a fairly literal, anthropomorphic image of God.²²⁹

These and other anthropomorphic expressions in Deuteronomy seriously call into question M. Weinfeld’s theory that Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic school are vigorously against the conceiving of God in anthropomorphic terms.²³⁰

Further, God’s ear is mentioned frequently (Numbers 11:1; II Samuel 22:7; Psalm 86:1). God is said to have a mouth, “With him will I speak mouth to mouth even apparently” (Numbers 12:8); he has lips, a tongue and breath “his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue as a devouring fire and his breath, as an overflowing stream” (Isaiah 30:27–28). He has teeth “he gnasheth upon me with his teeth” (Job 16:9); he has a back “I will shew them the back and not the face” (Jeremiah 18:17). God’s hand is mentioned almost as frequently as his face and eyes. Although a good number of these expressions can be understood in an allegorical and non-mythological sense, some passages are, however, far too anthropomorphic. They ascribe a right and left hand to God, “Thy Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand” (Psalm 110:1), “Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy” (Exodus 15:6), “I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left” (I Kings 22:19). He has the name of Zion written on his palm, “Behold I have graven thee upon the palms of my hand” (Isaiah 49:16). He gives to Moses, on Sinai, two tablets of stone “written with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18). God has arms (Isaiah 30:30; Jeremiah 27:5), he stretches his arm, he claps (Ezekiel 21:17), Amos sees him with a plumline in his hand “behold, the Lord

stood upon a wall made by a plumline, with a plumline in his hand” (Amos 7:7). Howard Eillberg-Schwartz makes an important observation regarding the historical theophanies of Amos, Ezekial and others. He argues that to

say the body is simply a metaphor like ‘God is a lion’ or ‘God the rock’ is to fail to take seriously the distinctive context in which images of the body are used...The ancient Judaic sources after all have special significance. They depict the exceptional cases of religious leaders who were privileged to see God...The point is that when they described seeing God, they evoked a human form. The image of the human body is thus of a different order than other metaphors that are used to refer to God. The comparison of God to a lion does not conjure up the image of a lion because this image is not used in contexts that describe God sightings. But when Moses is said to have seen the divine back, and Isaiah the divine robe, and Ezekiel the divine figure, the sources evoke a human image. The human body, then, is the privileged image for imagining what it might be like to gaze on the deity. In the texts of ancient Israel, then, we are dealing with at least two kinds of God images: (1) visual descriptions of what is seen when a character looks upon God and (2) conceptual representations that describe God in contexts in which seeing does not take place.²³¹

Jeffrey J. Niehaus confirms the fact that biblical theophanies are “cast in a mode of historical reportage.”²³² It is worth noting also that when God is portrayed as coming in thunder, lightening or behind clouds, this does not mean that He does not have a physical human form or body but rather that sinful Hebrews are not allowed to look at his radiant glory with their immoral eyes, which is only the purview of the righteous among them, who can still physically gaze at God’s glorified majestic form. Binyamin Uffenheimer states that the “dispute between these traditions relates to the question whether it is *permitted* to see Him, though all agreed that it is *possible* to see Him.”²³³

In sum and given the numerous descriptive passages involved, we can only conclude that the God of the Hebrew Bible is neither

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incorporeal nor invisible. The bare facts are that a) He has appeared to many people (very often unexpectedly) at different times, and b) He has often appeared in human form leading to widespread confusion as to His identity, for many in the encounter have mistaken Him for an ordinary human being.

Therefore it becomes evident, taking these passages of the Hebrew Bible together, that the concept of God in the Hebrew Bible, at least as presented by its different writers, is clearly an anthropomorphic one. Although some of the passages can undoubtedly be explained away metaphorically, the overall picture is such that given the very vivid, graphic, and detailed nature of most of the depictions of the deity, it is almost impossible to believe that certain writers of the Hebrew Bible did not have an anthropomorphic and corporeal deity in mind. Such in fact is the resemblance of God to the human physical form that almost all the major organs and parts of the human body are ascribed to God with certain exceptions, i.e. legs, buttocks, toes, sexual organs etc. The Israelite, observes A. Lods:

went still further in this assimilation of God to man: they ascribed to Jahweh bodily organs which in man are the seat of organs of expression of feelings or thoughts: Jahweh had eyes, ears, a mouth, nostrils, hands, a heart, bowels, his breath was long or short (quiet or disturbed). These were not metaphors.²³⁴

Furthermore, at times these anthropomorphic expressions are so naive as to leave no room for any metaphorical interpretation to be ascribed to them. As Katz observes, even “if one explains these terms as being nothing but picturesque expressions, intended to awaken within man a sense of the real presence of God and His works, nonetheless they remain personifications.”²³⁵ According to Fahrer, they prove that Yahweh was “conceived solely as having human form.”²³⁶

In addition the anthropomorphic concept of God is as much abundant in the Torah (the so-called five books of Moses), as it is in the later classical prophets. Isaiah for instance, a stalwart of universal monotheism, does not feel any hesitation in portraying God in anthropomorphic and corporeal terms saying:

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.... Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. (Isaiah 6:1-5)

In this passage Isaiah sees God with his own physical, not imaginative, eyes. He sees God's transcendent *anthropos*.²³⁷ J. J. M. Roberts after detailed analysis of the visual elements in this passage concludes that "Isaiah claims to have seen with his own eyes Israel's God sitting enthroned as a king on a high and lofty throne."²³⁸

Ezekiel 1:1-28 also reports God as enthroned transcendent *anthropos* with radiant luminosity. Rimmon Kasher observes that "there is perhaps no other biblical prophet whose God is so corporeal as Ezekiel."²³⁹ Ezekiel's physical breakdown in the face of God is proof that the experience is not a visionary but a very real physical one.

Amos, the proposed originator of ethical and pure monotheism, claims to have seen the Lord standing on a wall with a plumbline in His hand, as mentioned earlier (Amos 7:7). It is a striking fact, observes Eichrodt,

that in prophetic visions too the human manifestation of Yahweh frequently recurs, even if, with greater reticence, it is rather suggested than described; and the same anthropomorphism persists in eschatological word pictures...It will be better to revert to an observation made earlier, namely that the immediate proximity and reality of God, which for us are all too easily obscured by spiritualizing concepts, are outstanding features of the Old Testament revelation, and compel men to clothe the divine presence in human form.²⁴⁰

A. Lods observes:

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Another feature of the “theology” of ancient Judaism, which has often been noted, was what is known as the “transcendence” which it attributed to God. The term cannot here be taken in its strictly philosophical sense, or it will give rise to false conclusions: the Jews of this period did not think that because God was a spirit he could have no relation to the world of matter, or that he was outside the visible universe. Ezekiel and the priestly historian tell of the appearances of God to man, and sometimes make use of distinctly anthropomorphic expressions to describe divine activity.²⁴¹

This alludes to the fact that an anthropomorphic and corporeal concept of God was not thought to be a problem at all even by those classical prophets who roundly rejected idolatry, graven images, and a material representation of God. Hence it has been suggested that:

The anthropopathic and anthropomorphic conception of Jahweh was an advance on the naturalistic and theriomorphic representations: this explains why the great prophets, far from opposing this mode of conceiving of Jahweh, commonly made use of the metaphors which served to express it.²⁴²

Moreover, the anthropopathic (attribution of human passions/emotions to a deity) descriptions of God are prevalent throughout the Hebrew Bible and substantiate, as discussed, the theme of pervasive anthropomorphism. Some of these attributes and actions are inevitable for God’s perception as a living, personal, active, close, and loving God. Such attributes are congenial to His absolute majesty and perfection while others are undoubtedly inappropriate to His omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and absolute perfection. These qualities are too human to be ascribed to the true God, the source of all perfection. It is natural for God to have eternal life, ceaseless mercy, unparalleled, unmatched and surpassing love, infinite knowledge, unlimited and unprecedented power, unsurpassed authority and all other attributes of goodness and perfection in absolute terms. These are the terms and attributes essential to produce in human beings a profound and

appropriate response to their Creator. But the attribution of traits such as weeping, sleeping, crying, roaring, repenting, doing evil, walking etc. are too anthropomorphic and terrestrial to be believed of, or ascribed to, any celestial being, let alone God. They transmogrify the majesty, awesomeness and mystery of God and transmute the resultant response.

These anthropopathic passages, when studied in light of the pictorial passages cited above, leave little room for doubt that the majority of biblical writers and narrators held an anthropomorphic concept of the deity and that very often they speak of God as of a man. Ironically, the God who it is said created man in His own image and likeness seems very often to be created in man's own image and physical likeness. And indeed, such are some of the characteristics and categories ascribed to God by several biblical writers that an honorable and dignified human being would disdain their being ascribed to him (meaning man), let alone to God.

The following verses of the Hebrew Bible substantiate the claim. God fears (Deuteronomy 32:27), He weeps, wails, laments, "For the mountains will I take up a weeping and wailing, and for the habitations of the wilderness a lamentation" (Jeremiah 9:10). "Therefore will I howl for Moab, and I will cry out for Moab; mine heart shall mourn for the men of Kirheres. O vine of Sibmah, I will weep for thee with the weeping of jazer" (Jeremiah 48:31-32). Extraordinarily God does "evil". This happens not only as a reaction to the sins of man, but also as a non-causal action. Moreover, He is shown to repent His planned evil when Moses reminds Him of his promises with the patriarch:

And Moses besought the Lord his God, and said, Lord why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people...wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains...Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people.... And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people. (Exodus 32:

11-14)

Commenting on similar passages a contemporary American scholar has observed that, "The God of Moses was a God with hands, with

feet, with the organs of speech. A God of passion, of hatred, of revenge, of affection, of repentance; a God who made mistakes – in other words, an immense and powerful man.”²⁴³ Though it is sometimes stated that God is not a man and therefore need not repent “for he is not a man, that he should repent”, (I Samuel 15:29), yet nevertheless, in the same chapter he is made to repent, “and the Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel” (I Samuel 15:35). In fact throughout the Hebrew Bible God is made to repent very often, “And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at heart” (Genesis 6:6; and also Amos 7:6). This is not perfection but imperfection. It is not appropriate for the All-Wise, All-Knowing God to repent of what He plans or does because His plans are eternally based on His absolute knowledge and He has all the power in the world to execute them accordingly. Friedman rightly observes that “This is a curious way to speak about God. The concept of God regretting something is strange enough. If God is all-knowing, how could He possibly regret any past action? Did He not know when He did it what the results would be?”²⁴⁴

Not only does God repent, but He also wrestles with Jacob and Jacob prevails, as mentioned earlier,

for as a prince hast thou power with God and with man, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. (Genesis 32:28–30)

Friedman notes that, “After all, it is not just a story of a man having contact with divinity. It is a story of a man having a *fight* with divinity.”²⁴⁵ He further argues: “Adam disobeys God. Abraham questions God. Jacob fights God. Humans are confronting their creator, and they are increasing their participation in the arena of divine prerogatives.”²⁴⁶ In addition to this powerlessness, God walks (Genesis 3:8), sleeps (Psalm 44:23), “in [the] Old Testament God is supposed to take his rest at certain times.”²⁴⁷ He awakes “Then the Lord awoke as one out of sleep, and like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine” (Psalm 78:65). If God made man in His own image and in His

likeness (Genesis 1:26) are we to infer from this that our basic experiences, emotive responses, characteristics, both positive and negative are a mirror of God's? Of course the verse requires a metaphorical reading but subsequent biblical passages seem to belie this. Ingersoll argues, that:

No one can read the Pentateuch without coming to the conclusion that the author supposed that man was created in the physical likeness of the Deity. God said "Go to, let us go down;" "God smelled a sweet savor;" "God repented him that he had made a man;" "and God said;" "walked;" and "talked;" and "rested." All these expressions are inconsistent with any other idea than that the person using them regarded God as having the form of man.²⁴⁸

Anthropomorphism and the Rabbinic Mind

In addition to the Written Torah, the Oral Torah or Talmud is very important to Judaic tradition and a central text of mainstream Judaism. Rabbinic authorities believed that God had revealed the Oral Torah or Law to Moses just as He had revealed the Written Torah and this is what the term *Halakha LeMoshe MiSinai* exactly means. The Oral Torah was transmitted meticulously through continuous chains of narrators and well preserved orally though not compiled into an earlier written form until later like the Written Torah. Lawrence Shiffman observes that the Oral Torah or Talmudic "material became the new scripture of Judaism, and the authority of the Bible was now defined in terms of how it was interpreted in the rabbinic tradition. Scripture had been displaced by Talmud."²⁴⁹ The rabbis, observes Friedman, with the help of this doctrine of the "Oral Torah" "placed their own traditions and rulings on a par with the Bible."²⁵⁰ The scholars differ over when and how this metamorphosis took place but not many of them differ with regards to the outcome. In a classic work on rabbinic Judaism, Ephraim Urbach has observed that the tradition of the fathers, the enactments, and the decrees, became the Torah alongside the Written Torah. The expositions of the Sages possessed decisive authority and deserved at least the same place in the scale of religious values as the Written Torah, and in truth transcended it.²⁵¹ This

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doctrine, remarks Neusner, became “the central myth of rabbinic civilization.”²⁵²

The Oral Torah or Talmud echoed the Written Torah in preserving the anthropomorphic and corporeal depictions of the Divine contained in the latter. In fact, the rabbinic authorities, with rare exception, emboldened the corporealism of the Written Torah and made it so graphic that the Talmudic God becomes nothing short of a complete human being with excessive human limitations. Some efforts have been made by rabbis such as Rabbi Simon b. Judah, Rabbi Judah b. Ilai, Rabbi Joshua b. Levi and Rabbi Zeira (the student of Hisda of Huna) to remove or mitigate biblical anthropomorphism from rabbinic literature but they have been part of a tiny minority. Some of these Rabbis have placed particles such as “as it were” or “as though it were possible” before anthropomorphic biblical expressions to mitigate their intensity. Many actions, appearances, and attributes, repugnant to the concept of a transcendent and absolute Deity, were ascribed to intermediary beings and angels. In these circumstances, observes Jacob B. Agus:

their legal training came to the aid of the sages. Accustomed to weigh the full significance of each word in the Torah, they applied the same method to the Scriptural verses which imply the Lord's presence with men. The verb *shochon*, “to dwell,” was thus turned into a noun, *shechinah*, “presence,” implying that an emanation from the Supreme Being or a special effulgence of divine radiance was made to dwell in certain places...²⁵³

Such interpretations had their own peculiar difficulties and problems. The terms, states S. Schechter:

which were accepted in order to weaken or nullify anthropomorphic expressions were afterwards hypostatized and invested with a semi-independent existence, or personified as the creatures of God. This will explain the fact that, along with the allegorizing tendency, there is also a marked tendency in the opposite direction, insisting on the literal sense of the world of the Bible, and even exaggerating the corporeal terms.²⁵⁴

The rabbinic mind faced two choices in describing God, i.e. personification (hypostatization) or anthropomorphism and corporealism. They seem to have clearly opted for the second option. As a result, the “God of rabbinic Judaism”, notes R. M. Seltzer:

was as anthropomorphic as the God of the Bible, but in different ways. He studies Torah, he dresses in a prayer shawl; he prays to himself... Qualified by “as it were,” the human qualities that the rabbis identify as godly lead them to depict a fatherly deity, intimate and personal, loving without compromising his ethical rigor, a God who weeps when he must punish.²⁵⁵

The following Talmudic passages substantiate the points made. God prays:

R. Johanan says in the name of R. Jose: How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers? Because it says: Even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. It is not said, ‘their prayer’, but ‘My prayer’; hence [you learn] that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers. What does He pray? — R. Zutra b. Tobi said in the name of Rab: ‘May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice’.²⁵⁶

Some Rabbis are regarded as spiritually so elevated that God seeks their blessings:

It was taught: R. Ishmael b. Elisha says: I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary] to offer incense and saw Akathriel Jah, the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. He said to me: Ishmael, My son, bless Me! I replied: May it be Thy will that Thy mercy may suppress Thy anger and Thy mercy may prevail over Thy other attributes, so that Thou mayest deal with Thy children according to the attribute of mercy and

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mayest, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice! And He nodded to me with His head.²⁵⁷

Talmudic passages such as these met with vehement opposition and ridicule from non-Jewish writers and were dubbed as blasphemous. Both the Geonic era (539–1038 CE) and post Geonic era rabbis responded to such attacks by interpreting Akathriel Jah as an angel or the Light of Glory. Arthur Marmorstein notes that such an effort would not have succeeded anyway as the

ancient readers saw in this name God Himself. Besides, the older as well as the younger Haggadah preserved numerous traces of a religious conception in which God is spoken of or imagined as a visible figure. Rabbis in the Middle Ages still adhered to such a presentation of religious teaching. The Midrash depicts the Hebrews as seeing God as a warrior or as a learned scribe. The Hebrews on the Red Sea were able to point at God with their fingers, 'They beheld His image as a man is able to look his friend in the face.'²⁵⁸

God wears traditional Tefillin, "I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My back. R. Hama b. Bizana said in the name of R. Simon the Pious: This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moses the knot of the tefillin."²⁵⁹

God follows a fixed day schedule and sports with Leviathan:

Yet Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: 'The day consists of twelve hours; during the first three hours the Holy One, blessed be He, is occupying Himself with the Torah, during the second three He sits in judgment on the whole world, and when He sees that the world is so guilty as to deserve destruction, He transfers Himself from the seat of Justice to the seat of Mercy; during the third quarter, He is feeding the whole world, from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin; during the fourth quarter He is sporting with the leviathan, as it is said, There is leviathan, whom Thou hast formed to sport therewith?' Said R. Nahman b. Isaac: Yes, He sports with His creatures, but does not laugh at His creatures...²⁶⁰

God also has a night schedule and he listens to songs:

And what does He do by night? — If you like you may say, the kind of thing He does by day; or it may be said that He rides a light cherub, and floats in eighteen thousand worlds; for it is said, The chariots of God are myriads, even thousands shinan... He sits and listens to the song of the Hayyoth, as it is said, By the day the Lord will command His loving kindness and in the night His song shall be with me.²⁶¹

According to certain other rabbis God has some extra work to do at night:

R. Eliezer says: The night has three watches, and at each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion. For it is written: The Lord does roar from on high, and raise His voice from His holy habitation; 'roaring He doth roar' because of his fold. R. Isaac b. Samuel says in the name of Rab: The night has three watches, and at each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion and says: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world.²⁶²

It has been taught: R. Jose says, I was once travelling on the road, and I entered into one of the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray. Elijah of blessed memory appeared and waited for me at the door... He said to me...My son, what sound did you hear in this ruin? I replied: I heard a divine voice, cooing like a dove, and saying: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world! And he said to me: By your life and by your head! Not in this moment alone does it so exclaim, but thrice each day does it exclaim thus! And more than that, whenever the Israelites go into the synagogues and schoolhouses and respond: 'May His great name be blessed!' the Holy One, blessed be He, shakes His head and says: Happy is the king who is thus praised

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in this house! Woe to the father who had to banish his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father! ²⁶³

The rabbinic sages project a myth of repeated divine lamentations over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Israelites:

R. Kattina said...When the Holy One, blessed be He, calls to mind His children, who are plunged in suffering among the nations of the world, He lets fall two tears into the ocean, and the sound is heard from one end of the world to the other, and that is the rumbling...R. Kattina, for his own part, said: [God] clasps His hands, as it says: I will also smite my hands together, and I will satisfy my fury. R. Nathan said: [God] emits a sigh, as it is said: I will satisfy my fury upon them and I will be eased. And the Rabbis said: He treads upon the firmament, as it says: He giveth a noise as they that tread grapes against all the inhabitants of the earth. R. Aha b. Jacob says: He presses his feet together beneath the throne of glory, as it says: Thus saith the Lord, the heaven is my throne and the earth is my foot-stool.²⁶⁴

God weeps over the destiny of Israel and the destruction of His temple in secret chambers:

But if ye will not hear it, My soul shall weep in secret for the pride. R. Samuel b. Inia said in the name of Rab: The Holy One, blessed be He, has a place and its name is 'Secret'... But is there any weeping in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He? For behold R. Papa said: There is no grief in the Presence of the Holy One blessed be He; for it is said: Honour and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are His sanctuary! There is no contradiction; the one case [refers to] the inner chambers, the other case [refers to] the outer chambers. But behold it is written: And in that day did the Lord, the God of Hosts, call to weeping and to lamentation, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth! The

destruction of the Temple is different, for even the angels of peace wept [over it]; for it is said: Behold for their altar they cried without; the angels of peace wept bitterly.²⁶⁵

God daily weeps over three failures:

And mine eye shall drop tears and tears, and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock is carried away captive. R. Eleazar said: Wherefore these three [expressions of] 'tears'? One for the first Temple, and one for the second Temple, and one for Israel, who have become exiled from their place.²⁶⁶

Our Rabbis taught: Over three the Holy One, blessed be He, weeps every day: over him who is able to occupy himself with [the study of] the Torah and does not; and over him who is unable to occupy himself with [the study of] the Torah and does; and over a leader who domineers over the community.²⁶⁷

Rabbinical recognition of the blasphemous nature of these daring statements concerning God is evidenced from their own confessions that "if Scripture did not speak thus, the tongue that says this should be cut to ribbons."²⁶⁸ Nevertheless they have continued to repeat the myth of divine sorrow, pain and lamentation as if this were an integral part of the scriptural portrayal of God:

'My eye, My eye flows with tears' (Lamentations 1:16). R. Levi said: (This verse may be) compared to a doctor whose eye ailed him. He said, 'Let my (good) eye weep for my (bad) eye'. Similarly, Israel is called the eye of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said, 'For all men's eyes will turn to the Lord, along with (like) the tribes of Israel' (literally, 'For to the Lord is the eye of man, and all the tribes of Israel') (Zechariah 9:1). The Holy One, blessed be He, said, as it were (kivyakhol), 'Let My eye weep for My eye'.²⁶⁹

Commenting on this vividly anthropomorphic interpretation of a scriptural passage, Michael Fishbane notes that:

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God is the speaker of the verse, and His lament is over one of His eyes which has been damaged—this being the people of Israel. Indeed, instead of the biblical lament marking the absence of God from the nation, it now underscores His active presence, expressed through tears and lamentation. For R. Levi, therefore, the wound of the people is construed as a wound for God Himself, since Israel is mythically transformed into part of the corpus dei—‘for the Lord has a human eye’. The qualification *kivyakhol* at the end does not undermine this point, but rather fixes attention on the fact that this mythopoeic teaching has been derived from Scripture. Through such theology, the borders between history and myth collapse.²⁷⁰

R. Ishmael ascends to the heaven and sees God crying:

At that moment...the Omnipresent would cry, and five rivers of tears flowed from its fingers into the Great Sea, making the whole earth quake; as it is written, “The foundations of the earth will shudder; the earth will be rent in ruin; the earth will split asunder; the earth will bend and buckle; the earth will totter and tilt” (Isaiah 24:18–20)—five times, corresponding to the five fingers of the great right arm.²⁷¹

Finally God himself comes to appease Jerusalem and is judged through fire. According to Fishbane:

Perhaps with such extraordinary judgements in mind, recriminations could be made which take ancient rabbinic theology to the brink. Thus the Palestinian Amora R. Reuben (a contemporary of R. Isaac Nappaha) transmitted a statement of R. Hanina bar Hama, with all due caution but with no doubt about the point: ‘If Scripture did not say so, one could not say this—“For YHWH is judged through fire” (Isaiah 66:16); (note that) Scripture does not say “(YHWH) judges (shophet)” but “is judged (nishpat)” —not more and not less. A more complete inversion of the theme of God’s salvific judgement than this portrayal of divine punishment and purgation is hard to find.²⁷²

The rabbinic God is an absolutely corporeal deity with countless human limitations, and the rabbinic theological conception of God in no way or form resembles the Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent, and independent God of monotheistic transcendental theology. Rather, evidence would appear to suggest that the rabbinic concept of God is a reflection of Judaic religious and political aspirations, with God's destiny being paired off with Judaic destiny: He suffers with their suffering and laments their failures. This lamenting and weeping deity can hardly be said to be the Omnipotent God of the universe:

R. Aba said to R. Nahman b. Isaac: Since the day of the destruction of the temple, there is no laughter for the Holy One, blessed be He. Whence do we know that there is not? Shall we say from the verse, And on that day did the Lord, the God of Hosts, call to weeping and lamentation? But this refers to that day and no more. Shall we then say, from this verse: If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember thee? But this, too, excludes forgetfulness, but not laughter. Hence, [it is known] from the verse, I have long time held my peace, I have been still, and refrained myself, now will I cry. What then does God do in the fourth quarter? He sits and instructs the school children, as it is said, Whom shall one teach knowledge, and whom shall one make to understand the message? Them that are weaned from the milk. Who instructed them theretofore? If you like, you may say Metatron, or it may be said that God did this as well as other things.²⁷³

God is frequently depicted as crying. For example, He requests Jeremiah to summon an embassy of Patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to console Him:

'for they know how to cry'. Soon a procession of lamentation and mourning moved towards the Temple—a cortege involving Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. And when the Holy One, blessed be He, saw them (approach), at once, "On that day, YHWH,

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God of hosts, summoned to crying and lamenting, to tonsuring and girding with sackcloth” (Isaiah 22: 12); and if Scripture did not say so, it would be forbidden to say it. And they went crying from one gate to another, like a person “whose dead (relative) lies before him”; and the Holy One, blessed be He, was lamenting and saying, “Woe to the king who was successful in his youth (*shebe-qatnuto hitzliah*), but who, in his old age (*be-ziqnuto*), was not successful”.²⁷⁴

These portrayals and assertions of God’s supposed historical failures, weaknesses and personal lamentings are nothing short of blasphemy. The powerful sovereign of the universe is depicted as a helpless king unable to protect His children, defend His sanctuary, establish His services etc. and lamenting openly due to His broken pride. He weeps in inner chambers and needs human patriarchal consolation in private to avoid other nations’ mockery. These utterly physical anthropomorphisms and realistic corporeal manifestations of God are not the result of human or language limitations but rather truly reflect the authors’ understanding of the deity. A. E. Suffrin rightly observes that “When we turn to the Rabbinic writings from about the 3rd cent. A.D. onwards, however, we meet with gross anthropomorphisms... It not only wrote human history as it ought or ought not to have happened, but explored the seven heavens and revealed the Deity.”²⁷⁵ He further remarks that:

Putting together the passages from the Talmud and Midrashim, we find in plain prose that on the highest heaven is the throne of Glory, on the back of which is engraved the image of Jacob... Metatron is close to the deity... Behind the throne stands Sandalphon, whose height is a distance of a walk of 500 years, and who binds chaplets for the Deity... God is occupied with studying 24 books of the Bible by day, and the six sedarim of the Mishna by night... There are schools in heaven after the Rabbinic model, where Rabbis in their order discuss the Halakha, and God studies with them... Every day He promulgates a new Halakha... He wears phylacteries... of which Moses saw the knot... At the

Exodus from Egypt every servant girl saw God bodily and could point Him out with her finger. When God descended on Sinai, He was wrapped in the Rabbinic tallith... He has His own synagogue. He prays to Himself that His mercy should overcome His wrath... He weeps daily over Jerusalem... The last three hours of the day He sports with Leviathan...²⁷⁶

This perhaps explains the reason why Gedaliahu Stroumsa argues that the corporeal nature of biblical expressions was widely recognized by rabbinic thinkers, and that in antiquity, God not only had "human feelings, but also a body of gigantic or cosmic dimensions."²⁷⁷

Arthur Marmorstein, on the other hand, does not consider anthropomorphism to be a problem at all. He claims anthropomorphism to be a higher level of religious understanding:

Paganism was far removed from anthropomorphism, it cherished the lower stage of theriomorphism... The religion of Israel was from the very beginning free from this false doctrine... Without anthropomorphism the ordinary man with his narrow vision and limited intelligence would not have been able to grasp the belief in God, in His omnipotence and eternity, His universal knowledge and presence.²⁷⁸

He further argues that:

In this respect the teachers of the Haggadah stand not much below the prophets; they attain in many respects the height of the prophetic conception of God. The treatment of the anthropomorphism in the Bible had from of old been a subject of dispute between opposing schools. The history of this spiritual conflict goes back very far. If this is borne in mind the contradictions between the scholars in Haggadah become much more intelligible. One has only to think of the attitude of R. Akiba and of R. Ishmael to this problem. No harm is done to religion if one designates it as anthropomorphic. All higher religious systems are of this nature.²⁷⁹

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Marmorstein attempts to solve all the problems posed by rabbinic anthropomorphism by asserting a hypothesis which states that since ancient times two schools existed among the rabbis, the allegorists and the literalists. By qualifying anthropomorphisms by various qualifiers, the rabbis, according to Marmorstein, allegorized and hence overcame anthropomorphisms. On the other hand, the literalists took these anthropomorphisms literally, enlarging them and adding to their vitality. He then explains away some of the anthropomorphic passages as a reaction and endeavors to respond to the polemics directed against Israel in the rabbinic period.²⁸⁰ Schechter contends that arguments in favor of rabbinic anthropomorphisms and their allegorical interpretations are as shallow as Marmorstein.²⁸¹

Max Kadushin strongly rejects any such hypothesis and argues that:

The whole hypothesis, indeed, falls to the ground as soon as we examine its central thesis – the division into two schools. In the attempt to maintain this division, Marmorstein is forced, in a number of instances, to change around the proponents of opinion, often solely on the basis of his thesis.²⁸²

Biblical writers and rabbinic thinkers did not view anthropomorphic descriptions of the Deity as a problem, and a great majority of them did not consider it wrong to ascribe to God characteristics and qualities altogether human and corporeal. Kadushin rightly argues that:

To ascribe to the Rabbis any sort of stand on anthropomorphism is to do violence, therefore, to rabbinic thought. Indeed, this entire discussion only shows that when we employ the terms of classical philosophy even in an attempt to clarify rabbinic ideas, we are no longer within the rabbinic universe of discourse.²⁸³

He further asserts that “Whatever the Rabbis do, they do not really qualify or mitigate either biblical anthropomorphisms or their own. The very problem of anthropomorphism did not exist for them.”²⁸⁴ This is probably the reason that most rabbinic writings seem not to worry much about gross anthropomorphisms.

Moreover, the problem, as noted in chapter one, is not really one of minor or mild anthropomorphisms such as seeing, watching, loving etc. for these are essential for the communication between God and man. The difficulty occurs when we come to concrete anthropomorphisms which go beyond the purpose of modality and depict God as a human-like figure. In the *Genesis Rabbah*, ca. 400–450, it is reported that R. Hoshaiiah said: “When the Holy One, blessed be he, came to create the first man, the ministering angels mistook him [for God, since man was in God’s image,] and wanted to say before him, ‘Holy’, [holy is the Lord of hosts].”²⁸⁵ According to Said R. Hiyya the Elder, God had appeared to the Israelites through every manner of deed and condition:

he appeared to them at the sea as a heroic soldier, carrying out battles in behalf of Israel... he had appeared to them at Sinai in the form of a teacher who was teaching Torah and standing in awe... he had appeared to them in the time of Daniel as an elder, teaching Torah, for it is appropriate for Torah to go forth from the mouth of sages... he had appeared to them in the time of Solomon as a youth, in accord with the practices of that generation...²⁸⁶

J. Nuesner observes that, “Both passages constitute allusions to God’s corporeality and refer to God’s capacity to take on human traits of mind, and soul and spirit as well as of outward form.”²⁸⁷ Daniel J. Silver notes that:

Midrash necessarily emphasized the immanence, even the humanness, of God... God is not an idea, but an intimate. Midrash often depicts God as one of the folk. God participates in the exile, cries over Israel’s anguish, bends down to hear prayer, rejoices with a bride at her wedding, puts on tefillin and joins in public prayer. The Midrash innocently and happily speaks of God as father, friend, shepherd, lover, and avenger. One episode may picture God as guardian protecting Israel, another as sage teaching Torah, still another as shepherd shielding his flock...²⁸⁸

In explaining Exodus 15:3 which states, “The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is his name”, the Talmud has no hesitation in portraying God

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as a real man. "The word 'man' signifies none other than the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said: The Lord is a man of war."²⁸⁹ At another place the Talmud reports:

R. Johanan said: What is meant by, I saw by night, and beheld a man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom, etc.? What means, 'I saw by night'? — The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to turn the whole world into night, 'but behold, A man riding'. 'Man' can refer to none but the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written, The Lord is a man of war: the Lord is his name; 'upon a red horse' — the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to turn the whole world to blood; but as soon as he looked upon Hananiah, Mishaël and Azariah his anger was appeased, for it is written, and he stood among [hadasim] the myrtle trees that were in the deep. Now 'hadasim' refers but to the righteous, as it is written, And he brought up Hadassah; and 'deep' refers to Babylon, as it is said, that sayeth to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers. Straightway He who was filled with wrath was partially calmed, and then completely pacified.²⁹⁰

Given the graphic nature of many Talmudic passages such as these even the otherwise cautious Schechter is forced to point out that there is an awareness by rabbis of the danger of losing God 'in the world':

Eager, however, as the Rabbis were to establish this communication between God and the world, they were always on their guard not to permit him to be lost in the world, or to be confused with man. Hence the marked tendency, both in the Targumim and in the Agadah, to explain away or to mitigate certain expressions in the Bible, investing the deity with corporeal qualities.²⁹¹

How deep does this awareness really go? The same Schechter also observes that the God of the rabbis:

acts as best man at the wedding of Adam and Eve; he mourns over the world like a father over the death of his son when the sins of

ten generations make its destruction by the deluge imminent; he visits Abraham on his sick-bed; he condoles with Isaac after the death of Abraham; he “himself in his glory” is occupied in doing the last honors to Moses, who would otherwise have remained unburied, as no man knew his grave; he teaches Torah to Israel, and to this very day he keeps school in heaven for those who died in their infancy... Like man he also feels, so to speak, embarrassed in the presence of the conceited and overbearing, and says, I and the proud cannot dwell in the same place. Nay, it would seem that the Rabbis felt an actual delight in heaping human qualities upon God whenever opportunity is offered by Scripture.²⁹²

Nuesner writes:

God figures in the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah as premise, presence, person, and, at the end, personality. God is represented not solely in abstract terms of attributes (e.g., merciful, loving) but in concrete terms of relationships with the world, humanity, and Israel. The theological discourse of the dual Torah may be classified in four parts: first comes discourse which presupposes God as premise; second is the recognition of God as a presence; third, God appears as a person; and fourth, God personally participates in the here and now of everyday discourse.²⁹³

He concludes that “out of the material of the final stage of the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah, we can compose something very like a gospel of God incarnate on earth.”²⁹⁴ This to Nuesner is “divinity in the form of humanity, however the relations between the one and the other are sorted out. And that is what, in a narrowly descriptive framework, incarnation, as a species of the genus anthropomorphism, means.”²⁹⁵

On the other hand, apologetics like Silver, Schechter and Kaufmann try to explain away rabbinic anthropomorphism and corporealism as simply efforts to maintain and stress the immanence of God, contending that the problem of anthropomorphism and corporealism was in fact

foreign to indigenous Judaism. There are two key problems here, the first is that they forget to consider, and as we have already seen, God's immanence does not necessarily require expression in concrete anthropomorphisms and corporealism. That is, God does not have to literally weep or cry or repent to emphasize His mercy and love. Neither does immanence require Him in any way, shape or form to have a fixed schedule of study, undertake sport, or be the best man at anything. Secondly, anthropomorphism and to some extent corporealism, have historically very much existed alongside almost all stages of ancient Judaic thought with very few exceptions. Therefore, it would appear that it is perhaps the concept of immanence, in the strict sense of the term, and not anthropomorphism that seems foreign to indigenous Judaism. Kadushin observes that "the very idea of immanence is foreign to rabbinic thought."²⁹⁶ G. F. Moore argues that the Palestinian masters were innocent of an abstract, transcendent God. To him, imputation to the rabbis of the concept of transcendence is an abuse of philosophical terminology.²⁹⁷ Kadushin rightly points out that:

The problem of anthropomorphism is indeed foreign to indigenous Judaism, but foreign in a far more radical manner than Kaufmann conceives it to be. Such problems are not in any sense within the rabbinic universe of discourse, not even by implication, and are not to be injected there even for the purpose of analysis.²⁹⁸

Their interpretations and stories are, argues Kadushin, "thoroughly and completely anthropomorphic, and they tell of actions done by God and emotions felt by Him in terms entirely human."²⁹⁹ The same trend continued in the later generations. Suffrin observes that:

A more hideous form of anthropomorphism meets us in the period of the Gaonim (7th-10th cent.)... The most monstrous book of this period was the Shi'ur Koma, 'Estimation of the Height,' of which we possess only two fragments – a greater one in the book of Razi'el, and a lesser in the Alphabet of R. 'Akiba. In it the Deity is described as a huge being in human shape and out of all proportion. The measurement of each member, such as the neck,

the beard, the right and left eyes, the upper and lower lips, the ankles, etc. is given in parasangs. Only 'those parasangs are not like ours, for a heavenly parasang measures a million cubits, each cubit four spans, and each span reaches from one end of the world to the other.' 'And,' says the book of Raziël, 'blessed is he who knows these measurements, for he has a share in the world to come.'³⁰⁰

The Karaites (Karaite Judaism being a movement distinct from Rabbinic Judaism), Gaonim Saadya (889–942), Sherira (d. 1002), and Hai (d. 1032), vigorously opposed such anthropomorphisms and interpreted them figuratively. Interestingly, most of the known Karaites including Saadya, were contemporaries of al-Ash'ari, the Mu'tazilites, and other well known Muslim theologians and apologetics (discussed in chapter 4), and were most probably influenced by Islamic transcendental thought as many western scholars have observed. Wolfson for instance notes, "The need of explaining scriptural anthropomorphisms became all the greater to spokesmen of Judaism under Muslim rule during that period in view of the fact that in Muslim literature Jews were represented as anthropomorphists."³⁰¹ The Karaites (meaning "readers" of the Hebrew scripture) believed in original Judaism and denied rabbinic/Talmudic authority partly due to the anthropomorphisms this indulged in. Karaites such as Salmon ben Yeruhim for instance, snapped at some of the daring anthropomorphic expressions found in post-scriptural rabbinic writings to show, as Wolfson observes:

that the rabbis had an anthropomorphic conception of God. Of post-Talmudic literature he explicitly mentions the mystical works *Sefer Shem ben Noah*, *Otiyyot de-Rabbi Akiba*, and *Shi'ur Komah*, and quotes from other works of the same type without mentioning them by title.³⁰²

The Karaites explained most biblical anthropomorphisms figuratively, for example, the phrase God creating man in His own image (Genesis 1:26–7) was explained as "by way of conferring honor."³⁰³ The movement was very much influenced by Greek rational thought,

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as well as coming very close to Muslim rationalists with regards to their conception of the Deity. The Karaites, Jacob B. Agus informs us:

ventured into the field of philosophical speculations, in advance of their rabbinic brethren, identifying themselves completely with the Mutazilite school of thought among the Arabs. In common with the Moslem theologians, they elaborated a rationalistic theology, which emphasized the principles of God's unity, incorporeality, man's freedom and God's justice.³⁰⁴

There was so much identification that, to I. Husik, the works of one group can be credited to the other.³⁰⁵

Saadya opposed Karaite rejection of rabbinic/Talmudic authority, defending traditional rabbinic thought by emphasizing the figurative nature of the anthropomorphic expressions and hence the figurative interpretations employed. Notably, his translation of the scripture into the Arabic language, eliminated all anthropomorphic expressions by the figurative method. For instance referring to Moses' plea (Exodus 33) to behold the glory of God, and God's response that Moses could see the back of God but not His face, Saadya explained:

I wish to say in explanation of this entire passage that the Creator possesses an effulgence which He created and showed to the prophets in order that they might be convinced that the words they hear are indeed from the Creator. When one of them sees it, he declares, "I have seen the glory of God." Some, too, speaking figuratively, say, "I saw God"... But when they perceive this light, they cannot endure contemplating it, because of its tremendous potency and splendor...³⁰⁶

Similarly, Daniel saw not God but the same created form which the rabbis called *Shekinah*. He further argued that "If we were to speak of Him in true language, we should have to forego and reject such assertions as the following – that He hears and sees, that He loves and wills, with the result that we should be left with nothing but His existence alone..."³⁰⁷ In addition to this, and like the Mu'tazilites

(Muslim anti-attributists), he established the internal unity of God in the sense of His simplicity. Clearly there exist a great many similarities and borrowings from Islamic Rationalists, especially the Muʿtazilites, and as Neusner and others have observed, figurative interpretations of scriptural anthropomorphisms, were mostly due to them.³⁰⁸ Wolfson notes that such a

conception of internal unity or absolute simplicity was not derived by the Arabic-speaking Jews directly from Scripture, for the unity of God in Scripture meant only numerical unity. It was the Muʿtazilite stressing of internal unity or absolute simplicity that led them to interpret scriptural unity in that sense.³⁰⁹

Saadya was later followed by many other rabbis such as, Bahya (1270–1340), Chasdai Crescas (1340–1410) and Joseph Albo (1380–1444), who favored allegorical interpretation of anthropomorphic passages of the Hebrew Bible.

Yet it was in the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, rabbi and physician, Moses b. Maimon (1135–1204), “a proud son of *aljamas* of Muslim Spain”, and physician to the Muslim governor of Egypt, Ayyub, in whom Jewish rationalism received its classic formulation. Maimonides stressed the transcendence, incomparability and absolute otherness of God, interpreting biblical anthropomorphisms thoroughly and figuratively. In this area, argues O’Leary, Maimonides “reproduces the substance of that already associated with al-Farabi and Ibn Sina put into a Jewish form.”³¹⁰ He also observes that “the teaching of Maimonides shows a somewhat modified form of the system already developed by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina adapted to Jewish beliefs.”³¹¹ Lawrence V. Berman no less, famous Stanford professor of Judaic Studies, declares Maimonides as “the Disciple of al-Farabi.”³¹² Berman declares that “doubtless, there were many intellectuals who accepted the Alfarabian view and tried to understand Islam and Christianity from its perspective, but no one else in a major work attempted to apply his theory in detail to a particular religious tradition.”³¹³

In his *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides, according to Berman, “appears as a theologian in the Alfarabian sense and here the

Alfarabian point of view is clearly felt.”³¹⁴ In the *Guide* Maimonides asserts in philosophical language the spirituality of God and mitigates biblical anthropomorphisms by *via negativa* meaning that God cannot be known by human categories but by negative attributes i.e. God does not commit evil, God is not finite, in other words stripping God of all positive attributes. He argues for the complete “rejection of essential attributes in reference to God.”³¹⁵ After a detailed discussion of various attributes Maimonides concludes:

Consider all these and similar attributes, and you will find that they cannot be employed in reference to God. He is not a magnitude that any quality resulting from quantity as such could be possessed by Him; He is not affected by external influences, and therefore does not possess any quality resulting from emotion. He is not subject to physical conditions, and therefore does not possess strength or similar qualities... Hence it follows that no attribute coming under the head of quality in its widest sense, can be predicated of God... are clearly inadmissible in reference to God, for they imply composition, which... is out of question as regards the Creator...He is absolutely One.³¹⁶

Maimonides saw in literalism the source of error. “The adherence to the literal sense of the text of Holy Writ is the source of all this error...”³¹⁷ He further argued that

the negative attributes of God are the true attributes; they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God, while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate... we cannot describe the Creator by any means except by negative attributes.³¹⁸

So Maimonides’ God is existing but not in existence, living but not in life, knowing but not in knowledge, etc.:

It is known that existence is an accident appertaining to all things, and therefore an element superadded to their essence. This must

evidently be the case as regards everything the existence of which is due to some cause; its existence is an element superadded to its essence. But as regards a being whose existence is not due to any cause – God alone is that being, for His existence, as we have said, is absolute – existence and essence are perfectly identical; He is not a substance to which existence is joined as an accident, as an additional element. His existence is always absolute, and has never been a new element or an accident to Him. Consequently God exists without possessing the attribute of existence. Similarly He lives, without possessing the attribute of life; knows without possessing the attribute of knowledge...³¹⁹

He concluded by observing that

every attribute predicated of God either denotes the quality of an action, or – when the attribute is intended to convey some idea of the Divine Being itself, and not of His actions – the negation of the opposite... All we understand is the fact that He exists, that He is a Being to whom none of His creatures is similar, who has nothing in common with them, who does not include plurality. ... Praised be He! In the contemplation of His essence, our comprehension and knowledge prove insufficient... in the endeavor to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure!³²⁰

Maimonide's transcendental Deity did not seem to be resembling either the original biblical Deity nor the rabbinic one, and was in no way a development upon them. Its philosophical nature and foreign color was quite obvious. Therefore, his *Guide*, observes Agus, "was severely criticized, occasionally banned, more frequently permitted only for those over thirty. It was not included in the curriculum of study in the great *yeshivoth*, but the adventurous souls who dared to think for themselves regarded the *Guide* as their Bible."³²¹ His Creed of the thirteen essentials of faith, writes Suffrin, "has never been favorably accepted; and, although it is printed in some prayer-books, it is never recited publicly."³²² His path, argues Guthrie, ended "in obscurity and

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never has been the mainstream of Jewish belief.”³²³ Modern Jewish thinker, Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), observes that the negative theology

dismembered and abolished the existing assertions about God’s “attributes,”... This path leads from an existing Aught to Nought; at its end atheism and mysticism can shake hands. We do not take this path, but rather the opposite one from Nought to Aught. Our goal is not a negative concept, but on the contrary a highly positive one.³²⁴

Kadushin contends that the whole “Medieval Jewish philosophy is neither a continuation of that development nor in line with it. Rabbinic thought alone has its roots firmly in the Bible, and it alone remains united with the Bible in a living bond.”³²⁵ And rabbinic thought is undoubtedly anthropomorphic and in certain cases quite corporeal.

Biblical scholars and theologians, without denying the presence of crude and other forms of anthropomorphisms contained in the Bible, try to explain away some of the reasons why they feel their mention to be necessary. The first and most commonly cited cause is the assumption that the human mind is unable to represent God as He is in Himself. The second reason claims to be the lack of a philosophical spirit in ancient people such that they had no choice but to perceive of the Deity as a living, active, personal and individual God, this perception requiring an anthropomorphic depiction. The third reason is said to be the practical nature of the Hebrew people, their boldness and the linguistic structure of their language. Thus some theologians like Franz Rosenzweig do not see any problem with depicting God in anthropomorphic terms. Rosenzweig regards authentic revelation as the vehicle of transcendence, and views human experience of God as “incommunicable, and he who speaks of it makes himself ridiculous.”³²⁶ Still he argues that, “though man is not God and recognizes his limits, he can still address God in meaningful language, with the Divinity doing the same in relation to man.” Given a situation like this Rosenzweig fails to see “why human language to and about God, even anthropomorphic, should be considered inauthentic or impermissible, given the

revelatory situation which exists between God and humankind.”³²⁷ Thus, he argues, “it is not human illusion if Scripture speaks of God’s countenance and even of his separate bodily parts. There is no other way to express the Truth.”³²⁸

All very well, but if, as traditionally believed, the Hebrew Bible is the true revelation or inspiration of God, the Word of God verbatim as is commonly held, then how is it, we may ask, that God the Creator of human nature and the Revealer of His Will, is suddenly regarded as being incapable of informing people in proper terms and categories of what He is and how He should be represented? Why would He resort to the use of crude and naive anthropomorphic expressions to explain Himself when He has afterall endowed human beings with the capacity and capability to recognize the fundamental facts and truths about Himself as the Ultimate Reality and Truth? As Rosenzweig himself observes: “Truth is not God. God is Truth.”³²⁹

In point of fact, it is the very existence of such terminology that points to biblical scripture being the outcome of human agency. Meaning that the very assumption of progressive or evolutionary revelation and existence of crude anthropomorphic expressions (rather too simply explained away as being a result of man’s inability to know God or represent Him in non-anthropomorphic and appropriate terms) forces the inevitable conclusion that these parts of the Bible are not divine revelation but man’s own words and representations. Human limitation and inability to grasp the essence of God should not be used as an excuse to depict God in concrete human forms and shapes; in the forms and qualities which all agree are not there in Him. In actual fact it is entirely possible to emphasize God’s love, mercy and concern without making Him weep or cry. The Torah’s significance can be stressed in many other ways than claiming God reads its 24 books throughout the day and the Mishna during the night. One fails to make sense of or understand the bizarre connection between God’s daily, three hourly, sport schedule with the Leviathan and the excuses made that human beings are unable to understand Him! Ironically the whole matter if anything seems to have become skewed in entirely the other direction, with human beings knowing/focusing on far too many details regarding God, down to His personal schedule even, eclipsing any sense

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of His greatness and majesty. Proper communication and retention of the mystery that is God does not need or allow for such crude familiarity. The transcendent God is far above these limitations or depictions.

In addition, the non-philosophical nature of a person or a nation does not require that God be represented in terms, categories, and characteristics that are altogether inappropriate and detrimental to the very definition and concept of His transcendence and unicity. Moreover and as discussed, this is reinforced by the fact that using the same Hebrew language, individuals from the same nation and culture have perceived and represented God in transcendental, non-corporeal, non-anthropomorphic terms. Meaning that had anthropomorphism been intrinsic to the nature of the language, or a practical requirement of the Hebrews, or even part of the boldness of the Hebrew nation, then it would have been an inclusively universal phenomenon. But it is not. So why do it? Ironically the same scholars who maintain that the patriarchs, or Moses, or at least the great prophets, were monotheists in the strict sense of the term, also at the same justify the use of primitive, crude expressions to visualize and understand God, providing explanations to make some sense out of them. But strictly speaking we can't have it both ways. For if, as these scholars maintain, the nature or boldness of ancient figures like Moses or other prophets, did not stop them from holding a high concept of God, then this should not and cannot be a leading factor behind the crude anthropomorphisms of the biblical narrative. The same can be said with regards to the nature of primitive societies in terms of their concept of God.

The problem lies in the fact that the Bible is considered to be the word of God verbatim, and not the work of primitive Hebrew people or the Hebrew nation. Yet, the remoteness of societies, the limitations of language structure and construction, or any other factor, could only have a bearing were human agency to be involved, for God does not and cannot misrepresent the facts or conceal the truth.

Further, these causes cannot realistically be cited as the only reasons to explain biblical anthropomorphisms. Room should be left for other rational suggestions, reasons, and foundations to explain the presence and vividness of crudely realistic human anthropomorphisms as well as biblical confusion and discrepancies. In fact the major reason, and

explanation for the existence of the latter would be to accept the role played by human agency in the compilation and transmission of the Hebrew Bible, and this in fact is being widely recognized in our times. What is clearly apparent is that the writers, redactors and compilers of the Hebrew Bible created a biblical God in their own image and in their own likeness.

In summary, and projecting these conclusions and reasoning to our own times, we may safely assert that it is the Hebrew Bible's core understanding of God and the progressive or evolutionary nature of its God-concept that could be factors attributing to modern man's reckless and heedless attitude towards the transcendent God of traditional religion. Furthermore, biblical data does not seem to disprove the projection theory (discussed earlier) in categorical terms, but rather underscore it, for the human element is so dominant in several parts of the Bible that it seems clear that authorship can only be ascribed to human beings, imposing their own images, qualities, and categories upon God and conceiving of Him as like themselves.

We leave the last word to Robin Lane Fox who puts it rather succinctly: "In scripture this God is not revealing himself: human authors are creating him, as he is supposed to have created them, 'after their own image'."³³⁰

NOTES

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- ³⁰ Greenstein, *Judaism*, p.121.
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¹³² See Imschoot, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p.12.

¹³³ Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, p.41.

¹³⁴ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, p.38.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.42.

¹³⁶ Imschoot, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p.12.

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- ¹⁸⁶ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p.352.
- ¹⁸⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p.353.
- ¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp.357-58.
- ¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p.368.
- ¹⁹¹ Ibid., p.372. Leo Baeck disagrees with such a claim and argues that "Only in Israel did an ethical monotheism exist, and wherever else it is found later, it has been derived directly or indirectly from Israel." *The Essence of Judaism*, p.61.
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²²⁴ Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p.135.

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²²⁷ See Richard E. Friedman, "The Biblical Expression *master panim*," *Hebrew Annual Review* (1977), vol.1, pp.139–47; and Samuel Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face in the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). It is interesting to see the psychological theories and interpretations of Erich Fromm and Dale Patrick. See Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods* (Greenwich; Connecticut: Fawcett Premier, 1966); and Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

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