Introduction

Loyal to the simple meaning of Scripture, rabbinic Judaism as recorded in the talmudic-midrashic corpus presented God anthropomorphically, in visual terms. When Adam was created, the angels were unable to distinguish him from his Creator (Genesis Rabba 8). Commenting on Deuteronomy 21:22–23 (‘If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, for an impaled body is an affront to God’) R. Meir offered a twinship parable: one twin is King and the other a criminal. When the criminal was crucified for his crimes, and so displayed publicly, the people mistakenly took him for his twin and proclaimed: ‘The king is crucified!’ (Tosefta Sanhedrin 9, 7). Likewise Scripture forbade exposing the body of a person executed for a crime because the human body is the likeness of the Creator.

In the second part of this paper I will discuss a rabbinic passage which should be interpreted as an unrecognized visual presentation of the divine image, with human likenesses indistinguishable in both physique and physiognomy, Jacob being the outstanding representative of this paradigm. This is indeed the original meaning of the legend that Jacob’s icon was engraved upon the Divine throne.

The first part of the paper is devoted to Maimonides’ struggle against traditional anthropomorphic concepts, in comparison to Augustine’s work in the same area.
Maimonides’ (1135–1204) theology swept away all Jewish belief in an anthropomorphous God.¹ His learned demonstrations reduced such a belief to philosophic absurdity and dogmatic heresy, capped with denial of a place in the world to come for any wayward devotee of this blasphemy (Mishneh Torah, Repentance, 3, 7). The Rambam, a Hebrew acronym for Maimonides: Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, devoted himself to overcoming the two obstacles he encountered on his path: the texts and the people.

Not only the literal meaning, but even the plain and simple meaning² of Scripture and of the talmudic-midrashic corpus represent God as bearing the form in which He had created man (Weinfeld, Creator, 125, n. 100) and an overwhelming percentage of Jewish intelligentsia in Maimonides’ time certainly subscribed to this concept. The solutions adopted by the master were essentially reading the texts out of their plain meanings through allegory³ and the like, and reading those who professed these ideas out of the fold of the faithful and the wise, making of them boorish savages, more to be pitied than feared.

As a zealous ideologue, the Rambam could not be expected to place the beliefs regarding the persona of God in historic perspective, nor perhaps could any medieval thinker, if we are speaking about the history of ideas in the modern sense. Portraying God as a formless being entered Jewish conceptualization only where Judaism intersected with Greek thought, viz., Philo, Saadia Gaon, and Maimonides. Traditional talmudic culture never abandoned the indigenous Jewish concepts, and in fact these were still vigorously championed shortly after Maimonides time by Moses Takau.⁴

Much of Maimonides’ major philosophic work Guide for the Perplexed is devoted to expunging the simple meaning of ‘image’ in Genesis 1, 27 and similar usages, and distancing himself from the unsophisticated who hold that the ‘image of God’ has a visual connotation. The same

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¹ The reader will find more detailed documentation for the general issues touched upon here in Friedman, 2007, in press.
² On the validity of these concepts, see Milikowsky, 2005.
³ ‘Allegory being defined in the sense of the method of reading promulgated by Philo and Origen, that is, the representation in concrete terms of abstractions which must be supplied from outside in order to interpret the text’ (Boyarin, 1997, II).
⁴ Ktav Tamim. It was published in a facsimile edition of single surviving manuscript with introduction; Y. Dan, Jerusalem, 1984 (Hebrew).
themes were already addressed in detail in the Rambam’s early work, the Commentary on the Mishna.

Maimonides powerful intellectual stature and influence eventually wiped out all vestiges of the anthropomorphic God in accepted dogma. A poetic version of his 13 principles, including ‘He has no bodily form’, became the closing hymn of the synagogue service. Little wonder then that the historians of Jewish Thought, down to mid 20th century and beyond, shied away from revealing, no, even recognizing, the plain meaning of rabbinic passages depicting a God of human form. As intellectuals, they came under the powerful attraction of Maimonides, the supreme Jewish intellectual of all times. There is no little irony in the fact that philosophizing the talmudic texts was taken as sophistication, while their responsible philological and historical exposition was reduced to naïveté. Only in recent decades has the pendulum swung in the other direction.

Christianity underwent the struggle of eradicating literal anthropomorphism many centuries before the work of the late 12th-early 13th century Jewish sages. In addition to the passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, Christians had to address clearly anthropomorphic contexts in the Gospels and other early Christian works.

Origen, in the context of creating Christian Neoplatonism, and others, sought to free Christians from an anthropomorphic understanding of God ‘like that espoused by the Jews’ (Griffin, Paulsen, 2002, 103). It was Augustine (4th century) who undertook the fervent and sustained campaign to eradicate anthropomorphism.

Maimonides was destined to repeat some of the intellectual reactions of Augustine to widespread anthropomorphism, including belabored demonstrations and disdainful condescension towards contemporary thinkers. Griffin and Paulsen write:

‘[...] contextual and direct evidence in Augustine that would indicate fourth-century Christians did indeed believe God to be both corporeal and anthropomorphic in bodily form [indicates that] the young Augustine was himself a corporealist and knew Christians who believed God to be anthropomorphic, and that this latter belief was a critical impediment to his acceptance of Christianity’ (Griffin, Paulsen, 2002, 96). [According to Augustine] ‘Carnal and childish’ Christians err concerning anthropomorphic language in scripture, understanding it literally instead of allegorically’ (ibidem 110).

In his contribution to this volume, Paul van Geest writes about Augustine as follows:
'As thinker formed by Neo-platonic ideas and almost a Christian, Augustine stated in his early work *De ordine* that the best way to know Him is by not knowing Him (*De ord. 2.16.44*) and that the only thing the soul knows of its maker is that it does not know Him (*ibid. 2.18.47*). In his *Confessiones*, written during the time he was bishop, he seems to suggest that every representation of the purely spiritual and ineffable God in philosophical reflections or in metaphorical language is an infringement of the divine reality' (Van Geest, 2007, 187)

Furthermore, Van Geest states that Augustine in his twenties had a strong aversion to the primitive anthropomorphisms used in the Bible. The allegorical way of reading the Bible of Ambrose was an indication for him that the Catholic faith did not teach God as having the shape of a human body and that the creation of human being to the likeness of God should not be taken in a literal-anthropomorphic sense (Van Geest, 2007, 183). After he had become a priest and a bishop the inability of the ‘weaker brethren and the little ones’ (*parvuli*), the illiterate and the catechumens, who were influenced by the anthropomorphic God experience of the North African Church to think of God in terms of a purely immaterial entity remained a source of great concern:

‘He (Augustine) does not hesitate to call the idea that God is a corporeal entity a destructive and ruinous lie…He proceeds with the cynical remark that the *parvulus* will gather in temples and mountains in order to seek and find God… quite shocking to the anthropomorphic belief of the *parvulus* may have been his remark that Solomon’s temple is too small for God, but that rather the *parvulus* himself has to be a pure temple in which God can be received.’ (Van Geest, 2007, 185)

Because of his allegorical way of reading the Bible, Augustine also rejects the Manichean interpretation that God, therefore, must have teeth, if humankind is created to his likeness, Augustine also rejects as ‘ridiculous’:

He (Augustine) recognizes that bodily parts such as God’s eyes, ears, lips and feet are indeed frequently mentioned in the Scriptures. Nevertheless he blames the Manichees that they, first of all, ridicule the Old Testament anthropomorphisms without realizing that they likewise occur in the New Testament. Secondly, he reproaches them for their defective hermeneutics: if they had accepted the Ambrosian allegorical method, then they could have learned that these anthropomorphic names were not meant as an indication of parts of the body, but referred to the spiritual powers of God. Augustine concludes his argument by referring to the passage in Scripture in which man is said to be made to the image of God… for Augustine the anthropomorphic Catholic popular culture and,
especially, the inability of his *parvuli* to think of God as a non-corporeal or non-material entity, is still a source of great concern. (Van Geest, 2007, 183, 185)

Similarities of approach and metaphor in Maimonides’ tirades against popular and even rabbinic acceptance of anthropomorphisms are striking. In his Commentary to the Mishna, completed before he reached the age of 35, his thinking on this subject was already full-blown. He characterizes categories of Jewish understanding/misunderstanding on the question of divine anthropomorphisms as follows:

the first group [I am going to describe]…understand [anthropomorphisms] literally, and thus leave them unexplained. They do this simply due to their ignorance [boorishness] in philosophy, and distance from the sciences. They lack sufficient [intellectual] perfection to awaken themselves…this miserable group, mercy upon their ignorance…destroy all the grandeur of Torah…and this group expound from the simple meaning of the words of the sages things of which were the gentiles to hear them they would say ‘Certainly this lowly nation is a stupid and boorish people’ (playing on Deuteronomy 4, 6). Many [rabbis] preach publicly matters they do not understand themselves. If only they would keep quiet (Commentary to Sanhedrin 10, 1).

In his Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides wrote:

That God is incorporeal, that He cannot be compared with His creatures, that He is not subject to external influence; these are things which must be explained to every one according to his capacity, and they must be taught by way of tradition to children and women, to the stupid and ignorant, as they are taught that God is One, that He is eternal, and that He alone is to be worshipped. Without incorporeality there is no unity…

Those who are not sufficiently intelligent to comprehend the true interpretation of these passages in the Bible, or to understand that the same term admits of two different interpretations, may simply be told that the scriptural passage is clearly understood by the wise, but that they should content themselves with knowing that God is incorporeal (1, 35) (Friedländer, 1942).

In his letter ‘Essay On Resurrection’:

When I applied myself to this task, I realized that it was not correct to strive to explain the ramifications of the religious law, and to leave its roots neglected, unexplained, and its essentials undiscussed, providing no

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5 Mishnah: *im Perush Rabbenu Mosheh ben Maimon*, Neziqin, with Arabic original, Y. Qafih, 1964, 200–201 (my translation to English).
guidance. This is especially urgent since I have met some who think they are among the sages of Israel—by God, they indeed know the way of the Law ever since childhood, and they battle in legal discussions—but they are not certain if God is corporeal, with eyes, hands, and feet, as the Bible says, or if He has not a body. Others, whom I have met in some lands, assert positively that He is corporeal and call anyone who thinks differently a nonbeliever, name him a heretic and Epicurean. They explain the homilies of Berakhot literally. I have received similar reports of some whom I have not met.

When I learned of these exceedingly deficient folk and their doubts, who, although they consider themselves sages in Israel, are in fact the most ignorant, and more seriously astray than beasts, their minds filled with the senseless prattle of old women and noxious fancies, like children and women, I concluded that it was necessary that I clearly elucidate religious fundamentals in my works on law. I determined not to teach these basic truths in the idiom of inquiry, since examination of these roots requires skills in many fields, of which, as I pointed out in the Guide, the learned in Torah know nothing. More than anything else I preferred to have the truths accepted by the masses. (Halkin, 212).

Augustine laid the mistaken belief in anthropomorphism at the door of ‘carnal and childish’ Christians, ‘weaker brethren’, ‘illiterate’, and in a word, parvuli, ‘the little ones’, those who suffer from pueritia mentis. The Manichees are reproached for defective hermeneutics and rejection of the allegorical method. These beliefs are ‘a destructive and ruinous lie’. In content and tone, Maimonides replays Augustine. He lashes out against ignorance and boorishness, bemoans those who lack sufficient intellectual perfection to awaken themselves. He is provoked by ‘this miserable group, mercy upon their ignorance’. The stupid and ignorant are not sufficiently intelligent to comprehend the true (= allegorical! SF) interpretation of these passages in the Bible. They are ‘deficient’ folk who, although they consider themselves sages in Israel, are in fact the most ignorant. They go ‘more seriously astray than beasts, their minds filled with the senseless prattle of old women and noxious fancies, like children and women’. These are Maimonides’s parvuli.

The Christian authors cautioned their flock regarding false doctrines ‘like that espoused by the Jews’. Jewish medievals considered anthropomorphistic thinking among the Jews an embarrassment. Maimonides was annoyed by the possibility that ‘were the gentiles to hear’ the ideas espoused by many Jews ‘they would say ‘Certainly this lowly nation is a stupid and boorish people’’. A thirteenth-century authority warned: ‘But if you think in your thoughts… that the Shekhina has a body, [then
I say that we are not permitted to think of this and also not to mention it to a non-Jew.\textsuperscript{6}

There are those, according to Maimonides, who are considered ‘the sages of Israel by God: they indeed know the way of the Law ever since childhood, and they battle in legal discussions. But they are not certain if God is corporeal, with eyes, hands, and feet’. The Manichees, whose thinking attracted Augustine, offered a ‘cynical interpretation of Gen. 1:26 (‘Let us make man to our image and likeness’). Perhaps this God, they suggested, may have nostrils, teeth and a beard, or even internal organs’. What would the proponents of this position say about the passage in The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan which expounds: ‘Adam, too, was born circumcised, for it is said, \textit{And God created man in \textit{His own image} (Gen. 11:27)}’ (Version A, I).\textsuperscript{7}

With reference to the words of the prophet Isaiah that for God heaven is his throne and the earth his footstool and that God has measured the heavens in the palm of his hand, Augustine ‘wonders in an almost sarcastic voice whether in this case God’s bottom has the same seize as the palm of his hand’. We will consider two points regarding this passage: figurative language and proportionalism.

It is surprising that the opponents of anthropomorphism seem to have been equally threatened by clearly metaphorical or figurative biblical passages as by plain sense explicit description of God in human terms, such as Exodus 24, 10: ‘And they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire’. This is a simple prose description, in contrast to the poetic version of Isaiah 40, 12, which reads (N]PS):

\begin{quote}
Who measured the waters with the hollow of his hand,
And gauged the skies with a span,
And metered earth’s dust with a measure,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{6} Quoted from Oxford MS 2289, fol. 43a. See Abrams, 1994, 320–21. In the continuation of this text we find: ‘And he who says to them that the Shekhina [indeed] does have a body, foolish Christians will laugh at him and say that the Jews have no [true] wisdom [of their own]…But of all this, do not mention a word to the non-Jews, for they do not understand and they share no part in the supernal understanding. Even to the masses of our own people one should conceal this [view], so all the more so from the impure [nations]’.

\textsuperscript{7} Goldin, 1955, 23. Goldin notes: ‘The image of God, is of course perfect, and so long as one is uncircumcised, he is not perfect’. See context there. Goldin, perhaps apologetically, veers towards the abstract’.
And weighed the mountains with a scale
And the hills with a balance?

The passage is clearly poetic, and its metaphors per se are not descriptions of actual events. Maimonides also struggled with poetic biblical passages with the same intensity he applied to sober prose.  

‘And his feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives’ (Zech. xiv. 4) can be explained in the following way: ‘And the things caused by him ([His feet. S.F.]) on that day upon the Mount of Olives, that is to say, the wonders which will then be seen, and of which God will be the Cause or the Maker, will remain permanently.’ . . . In the passage (Exod. xxiv. 10, lit.,’ And there was under his feet, like the action of the whiteness of a sapphire stone’ . . .), Onkelos, as you know, in his version, considers the word raglaw ‘his feet’ as a figurative expression and a substitute for ‘throne’: the words ‘under his feet’ he therefore paraphrases, ‘And under the throne of his glory.’ Consider this well, and you will observe with wonder how Onkelos keeps free from the idea of the corporeality of God, and from everything that leads thereto, even in the remotest degree. For he does not say, ‘and under His throne’: the direct relation of the throne to God, implied in the literal sense of the phrase ‘His throne’ would necessarily suggest the idea that God is supported by a material object, and thus lead directly to the corporeality of God: he therefore refers the throne to His glory, i.e., to the Shekhinah, which is a light created for the purpose (Guide, I, ch. 28).

Thus the poetic ‘his feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives’ is converted to the abstract no less than the concrete ‘under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire’. Similarly:

The Hebrew ayin… denotes ‘eye’… Another meaning of the word is ‘providence’… In this figurative sense it is to be understood when used in reference to God (ch. 44, ed. Friedländer, 1942, 58).

The ‘eye’ passages cited are used in poetic context and metaphoric, but are treated the same as the more descriptive. Regarding Exodus 33, 20: ‘Then I will take my hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen’, Maimonides writes:

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8 ‘Maimonides seems to have refrained from explaining anthropomorphisms as figurative [better: metaphoric. SF] expressions, lest by such interpretation he might implicitly admit the existence of a certain relation and comparison between the Creator and His creatures’ (Friedländer, 1942, xli).

9 Friedländer, 1942, 27. Maimonides’ attempts to ascribe to Onkelos an approach to anthropomorphisms equally philosophic and absolute as his own. This was already called into question by Nahmanides (to Gen. 46, 1). The targumic spiritualizing of the divine persona continued a tendency already found in many biblical passages, but never arrived at absolute philosophic abstraction and denial of form.
The Hebrew term ahōr...signifying ‘back’...The term includes also the idea of following a thing and of conforming with the moral principles of some other being...In this sense the word occurs in Exodus xxxiii. 20, ‘And thou shalt see my back’ (ahōraï): thou shalt perceive that which follows me, is similar to me, and is the result of my will, i.e., all things created by me (ch. 38’). (ed. Friedländer, 1942, 53–54).

Let us return to Isaiah 40, 12:

Who measured the waters with the hollow of his hand,
And gauged the skies with a span,
And meted earth’s dust with a measure,
And weighed the mountains with a scale
And the hills with a balance?

The metaphors in this verse are measuring and weighing. Although one might assume that the measuring metaphor envisions more than one unit for each action, Augustine did not take it that way. And indeed, the metaphor\(^\text{10}\) describes the Creator as making each measure with one unit. Hence Augustine’s conclusion: ‘God’s bottom has the same size as the palm of his hand’!

Augustine’s ridiculing the anthropomorphism which might be seen in this metaphor, raises the question of proportionalism, which the church father did not really take seriously. Jewish sources did. The mystical work Shiur Qomah,\(^\text{11}\) already attested in the 6th or early 7th century, insists on perfect proportionalism of the divine anatomy,\(^\text{12}\) based upon traditions of ideal relative measurements in the human body.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{10}\) On the cultural parallels see Couroyer, 1966, and Avishur, 1982.

\(^{11}\) ‘It consists of the description of the limbs of God in the figure of a man and reads like a deliberate and excessive indulgence in anthropomorphism. Small wonder that it has deeply shocked later and more sober Jewish thought...Jewish apologetics has always tried to explain it away’ (Scholem, 1960, 37). ‘From the very beginning, the frank and almost provocative anthropomorphism of the Shiur Komah aroused the bitterest antagonism among all Jewish circles which held aloof from mysticism’ (ibidem, 63).

\(^{12}\) ‘The width of the forehead [Hebrew: mesah] is as [i.e. equals] the length of the neck; and the lip [similarly] is as the length of the nose. The length of the nose is as the length of the little finger. The height of the cheek [Hebrew: leset] is one half the circumference of the head, and such are the [ideal] proportions of all men’ (Cohen, 1983, 28); ‘the soles of his feet cover the whole universe; the length of his soles is 30,000 thousand parasangs; from the sole to the heel 1,000 times, 1,000 plus 500 parasangs; his square beard is 11,500 parasangs. Each parasang is 3 miles and each mile 10,000 cubits’ (Cohen, 1997, 638).

\(^{13}\) ‘...we may assume that originally the measures aimed at conveying the notion of ideal proportions. These proportions were shared by God and man alike...Since man was created in the image of God, those interested in the subject felt entitled to make inferences from the physical proportions of the human body to that of God’ (Gruenwald, 1980, 214). See below.
One of the rules of divine correlation of limb dimensions in Shiur Qomah already appears in the Talmud. Among definitions of bodily blemishes disqualifying a kohen from performing priestly functions, the Mishna lists: ‘If his body is too big or too little compared with his other parts; if his nose is too big or too little compared with his other parts’ (Bekhotot 7, 4). To this the Talmud comments: ‘Like the little finger’ (ibid., 44a). In other words, the ideal length of the nose is the length of the little finger (Lieberman, 1939, 12; Lieberman apud Scholem, 1960, 125). Shiur Qomah applies this model to the Divine Presence: ‘The length of the nose is as the length of the little finger’.14

14 Cohen, 1985, 67. Louis Ginzberg suggested that the author of Shiur Qomah flourished in the post talmudic period, and had made use of this talmudic passage (quoted in a letter from Lieberman to Ginzberg dated 1939/40, published in Shapiro, 2006, 16). Lieberman entertained a common external source to the talmudic baraita and Shiur Qomah (Lieberman, 1939, 12), ‘external’ here meaning ‘foreign’: ‘I could not say that the baraita in Bekhorot served as the source for Shiur Qomah, since Shiur Qomah deals at length and in detail with many body parts whose relative proportional measurements are not at all mentioned in Bekhorot. Therefore I conjecture that the material was taken from an external source, namely, from textbooks on sculpture or drawing which were common among the Greeks. Also this exact investigation which concludes that the length of the nose is normally that of the little finger demonstrably points to a source which was specifically devoted to addressing the relative size of the limbs’ (Lieberman in Shapiro, op. cit.). In the Ptolemaic temple of Horus at Edfu (between Aswan and Luxor), the catalogue of the temple library, written on the temple walls, includes: ‘In the second chest was contained… the Book of rules concerning wall paintings and the proportions of figures’ (see Sarton, 1941, 72, as referenced by Lieberman without elaboration apud Scholem, 1960, 125). Pythagoras, the Greek geometrician, was interested in the ‘golden section’, and proved that it was the basis for the proportions of the human figure. He showed that the human body is built with each part in a definite golden proportion to all the other parts. The proportions of Michelangelo’s David conform to the golden ratio from the location of the navel with respect to the height to the placement of the joints in the fingers. In classical art, the body of the ideal figure is eight head-lengths from head to toe. Disproportion was used in the Talmud for derision. ‘And Abitol the hair-dresser, citing Rab, said [also this]: Pharaoh the contemporary of Moses, was [a puny fellow] a cubit [in height] with a beard a cubit long and his shock of hair a cubit and a span, justifying what is said: And He setteth up over it [the kingdom of men] the lowest of men’.

Gershom Scholem opted for an early date for Shiur Qomah: ‘the teachings of the Shiur Komah do indeed represent a second century Jewish tradition’ (Scholem, 1960, 38); ‘As long as the age of the Shiur Komah could not be determined, this could be explained as a mere coincidence or, perhaps, as a quotation from the Baraitha in the Shiur Komah. With our present knowledge, however, we may assume that the true relation of the two passages is just the reverse. That is to say, the application of this rule about the nose in a halakhic context was but a quotation from the Shiur Komah, the composition of which preceded the talmudic speaker, who quotes it, quite rightly, as a Baraitha’ (ibid., p. 41). Liebermann eventually concurred with Scholem’s position (apud Scholem, 1960, 123). However, his explicit pronouncement on this is in regard to the genre of Shiur Komah (cf. Gruenwald, 1987, 101–102; Cohen, 1985, 31), whereas ‘the book Shiur Qomah’
The author of Shiur Qomah does comment on Isaiah 40, 12, but not (as far as I was able to ascertain) on 66, 1. On 40, 12 we find:

But he told me the calculation of parasangs, what their measure is. Every parasang is four miles, and every mile is ten thousand cubits, and every cubit is three spans, and His span fills the entire universe, as it is said ‘Who measured the waters with the hollow of his hand, and gauged the skies with a span.’

A span is calculated as the maximum distance between the top of the little finger and the top of the extended thumb, about nine inches. Since we have no comment on Isaiah 66, 1 in Shiur Qomah, we can only guess how the author would respond to Augustine. One thing, is the language he uses in recording its sixth century attestation (Cohen, 1985, 124). After an exhaustive study, Martin S. Cohen convincingly concludes that Shiur Qomah is post-talmudic: ‘Thus are we led back to an early gaonic date for the composition of the Urtext of the Shi’ur Qomah, a date late enough to post-date the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, and yet early enough to explain why, by the ninth century, the antiquity of the work could be uncontested, and to allow the work to have been known to Kallir. If the sixth century date for Kallir can be maintained, then it is probably the most desirable for the Shi’ur Qomah as well, being both early and late enough to satisfy our various requirements’ (Cohen, 1985, 65). Ezra Fleischer has produced evidence upon which he surmises that Qilir lived between 570–640 CE (Fleischer, 1985, 383–428 [Hebrew with English Summary]). It is quite obvious to me that any analysis of style and diction would preclude Tannaitic dating of Shiur Qomah.

15 From the regular versions. A quotation in a medieval fragment (Qafih, 1989, 478) does mention the second metaphor: ‘The calves of his legs are the fullness of the entire world, as it says ‘The heavens are my throne etc. [and the earth is my footstool].’ Shiur Qoma often uses ‘are the fullness of the entire world’ in place of a measurement with reference to descriptions in Scripture.

16 Sefer Haqqomah, lines 104–07, Cohen, 1985, 147; my translation from the Hebrew, other translations below by Cohen when presented.

17 Hebrew zeret, see Exodus 28, 16 etc.

18 The span mentioned in the Torah is half a cubit. There are thus two spans to the cubit. ‘Two’, is one of the manuscript readings recorded by Cohen at this passage, as against ‘three’ in his base text; all the variants in the apparatus here are Hebrew numeral names beginning with shin. However, ‘three’ is corroborated by parallel texts included in Cohen’s study.

19 In general, Shiur Qomah does not mention private parts. Neither does it supply width measurements of the torso. As to the measurement of the divine hand, cf: ‘We have stated that the width of His hand is 4,000 (parasangs. We must then ask), is it possible for One regarding whom it was stated, ‘He meted out heaven with the span,’ (to have it said by you that) His hand is only 4,000 parasangs? Rather, (we must conclude that) each parasang of the Holy One, blessed be He, is 240,000,000 terrestrial parasangs, and that each of these parasangs is measured (in terms) of His cubits, and His cubit (equals three) spans. And one handsbreadth (alone of His) fills the entire universe, as it is stated (in Scripture): ‘Who measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, etc.’ (Cohen, 1985, 51–52). Shiur Qomah regularly pictures the throne on top of the universe, with Metatron under it, but still clearly above the heavens,
however, is certain: his concept of the divine figure is that of absolute proportionality.

We already noticed that according to Shiur Qomah, God has a square beard (11,500 parasangs in length). This was to the chagrin of the Manichees.

Apropos, Maimonides originally accepted Shiur Qomah as an authentic and legitimate Jewish treatise, but eventually rejected it as equivalent to idolatry. It may have been the Rambam himself who penned, in substitution for the laudatory original, the following closing lines to Shiur Qomah found in a medieval quotation:

‘All these things are great abominations and blasphemies/cursed is he who believes it and cursed is he who composed it/by the numerical value of every letter in it/for the Lord is a true God/He has no image or measure/neither breadth nor length / as it says, “To whom then can you liken God etc. [What form does compare to Him?]” (Isaiah 40, 18), “To whom then can you liken me, to whom can I be compared?” (ibid., 40, 25).

Anthropomorphic visual perception of the Godhead in the talmudic-midrashic corpus

An explicit anthropomorphic visual perception of the Godhead is indicated in many passages in the talmudic-midrashic corpus, and most of
these have been listed by writers who have dealt with this subject. Our interpretation of the homiletic expansion on Jacob’s Ladder in Bereshit Rabba\textsuperscript{23} certainly justifies adding this passage to the list. However, before presenting that account we will open with a partial parallel in the gospel of John:

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, ‘Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.’ ‘How do you know me?’ Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, ‘I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Then Nathanael declared, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.’ Jesus said, ‘You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.’ He then added, ‘I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’ (John 1, 47–51).\textsuperscript{24}

‘Son of man’ is the phrase Jesus borrowed from Ezekiel (cf. 2, 6 etc.)\textsuperscript{25} to refer to himself. The ‘greater things’ which he predicts are a vision in which the heavens are opened, and the ‘angels of God’ ascend and descend upon Jesus.

The imagery of angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth clearly connects this passage with Jacob’s Ladder in Genesis 28, 12:

\textit{Aspects of the discussion in this part appeared in Friedman, 1994, 233–238.}

\textsuperscript{23} Several scholars have suggested that v. 51 is a ‘detached saying’ and not to be connected with the previous verses (see Brown, 1966, 88–91). This does not affect the substance of our thesis, which deals with this verse alone. Furthermore, the thesis is questionable. Bernard, 1928, 66–67, makes an impressive case for unity. Some of those suggesting detachment refer to the switch from second person singular to plural in addressing Nathanael. However this takes place within v. 51 itself, and is explained by Bernard: ‘Nathanael is only one of those who are to see ‘the heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending,’ etc.’ (\textit{ibidem}, 66).

\textsuperscript{24} Probably through mediating literature (cf. Daniel 7, 13; 1 Enoch 48, 2; Odes of Solomon 38, 3). See also the extensive discussion in Kittel, vol. II, 400–77.

\textsuperscript{25} This connection was already made by Augustine: ‘Scalam vera istam intellegitur ipse Salvator nobis in memoriam revocare in evangelio, ubi, cum dixisset de Nathanael: \textit{Ecce Vere Israelita, in quo dolus non est, quia Israel viderat istam visionem—ipse est enim Jacob—eodem loco ait: Amen, amen, dico vobis, videbitis caelum apertum et angelos Dei ascendentes et descendentes super filium hominis}’ (‘And truly our Saviour himself is known to have recalled that ladder to our minds in the Gospel (when he had said of Nathaniel: ‘Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile,’ then because Israel had seen that vision—for Israel is Jacob himself)—he continued in the same speech: ‘Verily, verily, I say to you, you shall see the heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man’, \textit{De Civitate Dei}, 16.39.
He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and the angels of God were going up and down on it.

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

Jesus pictures himself as the bridge connecting heaven and earth, the ladder upon which God’s angels travel. The natural place to look for a rabbinic parallel of this theme is Bereshit Rabba, the earliest rabbinic midrash to Genesis, at the section dealing with the Ladder verses.

On the verse ‘and the angels of God were going up and down it’, this midrash comments as follows:

R. HYYA RABBH and R. YANNAI: one said, ascending and descending on the ladder, and the other said ascending and descending on Jacob! The one who said ascending and descending the ladder is easily understood. But the one who said ascending and descending on Jacob [what does this mean?]...

‘Israel in whom I glory’ (Isaiah 49:3). You are the one whose image (Hebrew: ekonin) is engraved on high. They ascend and see his image; descend and see him asleep. This can be compared to a king who was sitting in judgment in the colonnade. They go up to the basilica and find him asleep; go down to the colonnade and find him sitting in judgment. (par. 68).

‘Ascending and descending on Jacob’ is a striking parallel to ‘the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man’ in the John passage, too striking to be a coincidence of independent composition. Who, then, influenced whom? Burney, who noted the similarity of the two passages, did not take a stand on the question of their mutual relationship. In the tradition of scholars who standardly saw rabbinic motifs as antecedent to their NT parallels, Odeberg declared that

27 Besides the vivid similarity of ascending and descending between heaven and earth, the very phrase ‘the angels of God’, not at all common in the NT (see Luke 12, 8 and following only) is an additional link between John and Genesis.

28 I defended the suggestion that the brief elided passage is an insert borrowed from its parallel and is not original to this context.

29 Burney (Burney, 1922, 116) studying John, was the earliest author I have found connecting these two passages. Indeed, after observing the obvious similarity to Genesis 28, 12, Bereshit Rabba on that verse is a natural place to check for rabbinic discussions, vise versa however; it would hardly be obvious.

the nondependence of the rabbinic theme upon the NT passage was beyond question, and a similar approach was regularly adopted by later writers, who saw the NT passage as representing the influence of a rabbinic *midrash* like the one in Bereshit Rabbah.

In this context I wish to call into question the general assumption that a NT parallel to a Jewish motif is always to be taken as the ‘borrower’ and not as the ‘lender’. Regarding the two passages under study here, we can point to specific chronological and contextual support.

The book of John was composed between approx. 90–100 CE; R. Hiyya Rabbah and R. Yannai functioned in tandem at the beginning of the third century CE, and Bereshit Rabbah was compiled in about the fifth or sixth century. Jewish-Christian dialogue regarding the

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31 ‘That the latter did not derive the interpretation in question from Jn or from Christian exegesis needs no demonstration’ (*o.c.*, 35).

32 Menahem Kister (*Kister, 1994, 19–20*) postulated the existence of an unrecorded early mystical *midrash*, already misunderstood by Bereshit Rabbah: ‘If we were to have to understand what is said in the Christian source in light of the text of the Hebrew Bible that underlies it, we would explain that the later source rests upon a mystical *midrash* on Jacob’s dream. Such a *midrash*, describing the Son of Man as a mythical heavenly figure, seems possible in the special mystic atmosphere of the Gospel of John, but very strange and improper in the context of rabbinic *midrashim* as we know them.

Yet it seems to me that the original saying known to us from *Genesis Rabbah* should be explained by that same daring and mystical interpretation, although it is doubtful whether those who transmitted the tradition recorded in *Genesis Rabbah* understood its full meaning.’

33 The problem was raised by Morgen (*Morgen, 1993, 13*) quoting Boismard: ‘Enfin, on peut ajouter que cette exégèse intéressante faite à partir des *midrashim* doit néanmoins rester discrète pour l’interprétation de Jn 1,51, car, comme le fait remarquer M.-E. Boismard, ‘les deux rabbins, dont on rapporte ici les paroles appartenaient à la première génération des Amoraï, et vivaient donc dans la première moitié du troisième siècle’. Christopher Rowland is aware of the problem but wagers on forced assumptions: ‘The problem with this passage from Ber. R., as with so many others from rabbinic collections, is that in its present form it cannot be dated with any certainty before the third century A.D. Thus we cannot be sure that it was in fact in existence at the time of writing of the Fourth Gospel. This criticism is not as weighty as is often supposed, however. One cannot deny that the basis for such an interpretation already existed in the ambiguity of the Masoretic Text itself. Although the evidence that such an interpretation was in existence in the first century is not available, it would seem to be a reasonable assumption that, in the light of the sophistication of exegetical methods practised by Jewish interpreters, this ambiguity would have been exploited to the full from a very early time’ (*Rowland, 1984, 501*). He similarly struggles with the *Targumim*, which we feel are certainly dependent on Bereshit Rabbah. He writes ‘There are many problems with the dating of *targumic* material, for it cannot be doubted that the most elaborate of the *targumim* to the Pentateuch, *Pseudo-Jonathan*, did not reach its final form until well into the Islamic period. Nevertheless few would deny that this late *targum* and the others do contain relics of very ancient Jewish exegesis…it would appear that this
midrashic interpretation of Scripture was a reality in the third century and even earlier (Urbach, 1988, 521; Hirshman, 1992, 7).

‘And the angels of God go up and down on it (Hebrew bo)’, is homiletically explained in both sources under study here as ‘on him’, a legitimate meaning of bo. In John this homiletical meaning is applied naturally and literally: the angels ascend and descend upon him, that is to say, upon Jesus, who becomes the ladder himself, connecting heaven and earth—simple, and direct. By contrast, the application of this interpretation in Bereshit Rabba is forced, artificial, and even obtuse. The angels are not ascending and descending on Jacob, but rather on the ladder, as in the biblical verse. They ‘ascend and see his image; descend and see him asleep’. Only in this sense, according to the midrash, are they ‘ascending and descending on Jacob’. This extreme artificiality can be explained if we see the Bereshit Rabba presentation of this midrash as a secondary usage, taken from its original context in John or another similar source, and reapplied.

The reapplication refrains from making Jacob himself the connecting ladder between heaven and earth, but in effect produces an even more daring construction. However, we must elucidate the exact meaning of the midrash we quoted from Bereshit Rabba (see p. 170) before we return to explicate this point.

The angelic travelers ascend and see Jacob’s image engraved on high; they descend and see him asleep. The sage who held that the angels ascended and descended ‘upon Jacob’ meant that when they ascended to heaven the angels saw Jacob there, and when they descended to earth they saw Jacob there also. This situation is exemplified by a king-parable, ostensibly drawn from a real-life situation of the Roman world, where the citizens seem to find the king in two places at one and the same time. In one he sits as judge in court; in the other he is asleep. Whether this feat was accomplished by a stunt using a hidden passageway, using a double in one of the two locations, or perhaps a dummy in the bed, we can assume that both the homiletist and his audience were quite familiar with a ‘double vision of the king’ motif, and therefore for them the parable was able to serve the homily well.

How are we to understand the angels seeing Jacob’s image engraved ‘on high’ while at the same time seeing him asleep below? Notwithstanding the various previous explanations that have been applied to

interpretation is presupposed by the passage in Ber. R. 68. 12, for the latter seems to be a development of the version found in the targumim’ (Rowland, 1984, 502–3).
this passage,\textsuperscript{34} it is clear to us that the two beings that they saw were the Divine Presence above—as indeed the Ladder passage in the Bible indicates: ‘And the Lord was standing above him/it’ (Gen. 28.13)—and Jacob sleeping below. The two were as identical to the angels as the double vision of the king in the parable (or as the angelically perceived identity of Adam and the Creator, recounted in Bereshit Rabba 8, p. 63). Jacob’s image being engraved ‘on high’ means that it is engraved upon the visage of the Divine Presence, ‘on High’ (‘l’im’a’ala’) being a not uncommon epithet for God Himself!\textsuperscript{35}

This interpretation is supported by the parallel to this midrash in the Babylonian Talmud. It reads: ‘They ascend and behold the image on high; they descend and behold the image below’ (Hullin 82b), without ‘engraved.’ The simple meaning (contrary to the commentators) is that ‘on high’ here is an instance of the standard use of this phrase as an epithet for God.

There is a Talmudic passage that registers similarity of visage regarding famous biblical and rabbinic personalities, in chronological retrospect: ‘The beauty of R. Kahana was like the beauty of Rav, the beauty of Rav was like the beauty of R. Abbahu, the beauty of R. Abbahu was like the beauty of Father Jacob, the beauty of our Father Jacob was like the beauty of Adam, the beauty of Adam was like the beauty of the Divine Presence!’ (Bava Batra 58a; Bava Metzia 84a).\textsuperscript{36}

Comparing the beauty of Adam to the Divine Presence is an elaboration of the biblical theme that man was created in the image of God. According to the rabbinic tradition, that image was passed on to Adam’s descendents in a general sense,\textsuperscript{37} while the exact ‘spit and

\textsuperscript{34} Which were rather unanimous is seeing the eikon engraved on the throne, in light of this theme within the midrashic corpus itself. See my ‘Graven’ in detail.

\textsuperscript{35} The possibility of such an interpretation was anticipated by Rowland, in the form of a question: ‘Nevertheless the great significance which is attached to the disclosure of the ascent of the angels suggests something even more important. That could only be the climax of the apocalyptic ascent, the glimpse of God in glory (Rev. 4. 2; 1 Enoch 14. 20; Slav. Enoch 22). In the light of this it has to be asked whether the targumim here hint that Jacob’s features were in fact identical with the form of God on the throne of glory (Ezek. 1. 26f.)’ (p. 504). He does not mention the traditional explanation, engraved on the throne which is of course the main obstacle to be overcome in order to arrive at this position, which we feel is correct.

\textsuperscript{36} According to the manuscript readings. Several editions eliminated the last link.

\textsuperscript{37} In contrast to the Christian doctrine indicating that the image of God was lost by Adam (and maintained only by Jesus).
image’, with identical facial features, was inherited by a select few, the first of whom was Jacob.

We have hereby recovered early evidence corroborating our interpretation of ‘engraved on High.’ There was a specific tradition that included Jacob in a list of humans whose countenance preserved the exact features that the Creator gave to Adam, making them as indistinguishable from Him as was Adam in the eyes of the angels. The extension of this list to representatives of the Talmudic sages themselves is a touching addition, connecting the exceptional personalities of later ages to biblical figures in an iconic genealogy. The earlier form of this equation of identities, however, clearly included biblical personalities only, or, to be more precise, Adam and Jacob only! It was they, and they alone, who possessed the beauty of the countenance of the Creator Himself.

This aggadic tradition recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, and our passage regarding the ekonin of Jacob, shed light upon each other. The Creator said, ‘I will make man in My image, after My likeness’ (Gen. 1:26). The divine image is engraved upon humanity. We can now add that midrashic doctrine applied this to physiognomy as well! However, the exact lineaments of the divine visage were passed on by Adam to Jacob only, and thus it can be said that the image of Jacob is the same as that engraved on the countenance of the Divine Presence.

An unexpected corroboration of this interpretation can be derived from the following Hekhalot text:

It was said about the High Priest R. Ishmael ben Elisha that he was one of the seven most handsome men who ever lived, these being: Adam, Jacob, Joseph, Saul, Absalom, R. Abahu, and R. Ishmael (Midrash of the Ten Martyrs) (Eisenstein, 1915, 445).

The presence of R. Abbahu is incontrovertible evidence of the dependence of this passage on the Talmudic tradition cited above. The Hekhalot text:

[Notes]

38 ‘Spit and image’ was the original form of ‘spitting image’, ‘spit’ meaning ‘the exact likeness’ (see Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage, Springfield 1994, p. 867).

39 The grafting of the talmudic sages onto the biblical genealogy is, for example, reminiscent of medieval grafting of the French royal house onto biblical monarchal genealogy on the stained glass windows of the Saint Chapel in Paris.

40 Although mentioned in talmudic literature, it has long been noted that a priest of this name is not directly recorded in Second Temple literature, although separate components appear in one form or another. See most recently, M. Benovitz, 2006 (Hebrew with English summaries).
halot passage revamps the talmudic list with the transparent purpose of including Ishmael, the ‘High Priest’ hero of *hekhalot* literature.

If this weren’t enough, a second passage from Midrash of the Ten Martyrs makes the issue crystal clear:

‘R. Ishmael purified himself through immersions and ablutions, wrapped himself in prayershawl and phylacteries, and explicitly pronounced the ineffable name. Immediately the spirit carried him and brought him up to the sixth firmament, where he met the Angel Gabriel. He said to him, ‘Are you the Ishmael in whom the Creator prides Himself each day, saying that He has a servant on earth whose looks are like His facial features?’ He responded, ‘I am he’ (Eisenstein, 1915, 440).

Despite attempts both by medievals and moderns to avoid the clear anthropomorphic message of the Jacob’s Ladder passage in Bereshit Rabba, our conclusion is inescapable, both in light of the simple meaning of the passage itself, and the more explicit later parallels. Just as the idea of explaining ‘ascending and descending upon it’ to mean upon him, seems to be is taken from a source like the Gospel of John (*bo* = upon him/it), so the entire thrust of the *midrash* itself may be a rabbinic response to the NT claim that Jesus assumed the status of God’s first-born son and was the sole carrier of the image of God:

Giving thanks unto the Father, which has made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. Who has delivered us from the power of darkness, and has translated [us] into the kingdom of his dear Son. In whom we have redemption through his blood, [even] the forgiveness of sins. Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature (Colossians 1, 12–15).

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to [his] purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren (Romans 8:28–29).

The plural in Genesis 1, 26 ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ was interpreted as God speaking to Jesus, anticipating his features and reflecting them in the creation of Adam.41

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41 ‘When God said ‘let us make man in our image’ Genesis 1:26, He was not speaking to another person in the godhead. He was looking forward 4,000 years to the birth of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the image or body of that invisible God, Col. 1:15’ (www.keytotheendtimerevival.com/wasjesuscreated.html). Rabbinic sources also struggled with the meaning of the plural in Gen. 1, 26: R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonathan’s name: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN, etc.,
Christian doctrine claimed the birthright of first-born and the image of God for Jesus (Kittel, vol. 2., 395–6). However, the Hebrew scriptures declare: ‘Thus sayeth the Lord, Israel is my first-born son’ (Exodus 4, 22). It is not surprising then that Jacob/Israel as God’s chosen, was portrayed in rabbinic teachings as bearing the divine image in a unique sense, including exact facial features—the ‘spit and image’ of his Creator. A polemic with the Christian doctrine supplies the rational for this innovative midrash, reading into the text much more than the transference of the angelic traffic upon Jacob demanded. Jesus was said to sit at God’s right hand, but Jacob himself is the identical child of His eternal image.

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42 The concepts were already tied together by Philo: ‘but they who have real knowledge, are properly addressed as the sons of the one God, as Moses also entitles them, where he says, ‘Ye are the sons of the Lord God’ (Deut. 14, 1). And again, ‘God who begot Thee’ (32, 18) and in another place, ‘Is not he thy father?’ (32, 6)…And even if there be not as yet any one who is worthy to be called a son of God, nevertheless let him labour earnestly to be adorned according to his first-born word, the eldest of his angels, as the great archangel of many names; for he is called, the authority, and the name of God, and the Word, and man according to God’s image, and he who sees, ‘Israel’…For even if we are not yet suitable to be called the sons of God, still we may deserve to be called the children of his eternal image, of his most sacred word; for the image of God is his most ancient word’ (On the Confusion of Tongues, 145–47).

43 Romans 6, 34; Acts 2, 33 (see v. 25; originally reading nymyνw in Psalms 16, 8).


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