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Conversation in Nauvoo about the Corporeality of God

*The formative documents of Judaism's dual Torah reveal
God as a corporeal being with whom we may relate—
one cannot pray to a philosophical principle.*

Jacob Neusner

Imagine, if you will, the age, in the middle of the nineteenth century, when seekers after truth wandered the world. Part of that renaissance of the religious quest for truth encompassed the prophet who brought forth the Book of Mormon. It was a time of quest everywhere, with Westerners off to India and China to seek the wisdom of the East, Jews in Germany founding Reform Judaism, and those in Poland and Russia reinventing the very foundations of the sacred sciences in Talmud study. One of the marks of the age was a quest for truth beyond the limits of one's own circumstance. Leaving home for distant lands, a generation of searchers thought to find somewhere else what they could not locate at home: truths others had discovered, insights in alien tongues.

The return to Jerusalem in the Land of Israel on the part of Latter-day Saints marked one such wandering: a purposeful mission called by the highest authorities of the LDS Church itself. That is why it is easy for Latter-day Saints to imagine such people, since the early generations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sent not only missionaries, but also apostles bearing the task simply to pray, even in Jerusalem, for the return of Israel to Zion. To the merit attained by the dreaming of that dream and the saying of that prayer, we of holy Israel have to respond. And I take it as my task on this occasion to do so.

Accordingly, the moving story of that initial Mormon mission to Zion provokes me to wonder, what would have happened had a

great rabbi in Poland in the same period heard rumors of a new revelation, a Torah vouchsafed to a young American born in Vermont. His curiosity aroused, he might have sent to the new land a disciple who by chance had learned the English language. There, in the burnt-over lands of upstate New York, the new revelation was taking place. But by the time our disciple of the sages of blessed memory reached the area, the locus of revelation and prophetic teaching had moved westward, and he could catch up only when the hegira to Illinois had taken place. So the disciple would have found his way to Nauvoo, where, he heard, quite remarkable events in the realm of religion were to be witnessed. Were I the man, what would I have found striking, what news would I have wanted to bring back to my rabbi and teacher in Poland? A single point of acute interest, one that I think would have been worthy of long and serious discussion in a Polish yeshiva of the nineteenth century, would have been Joseph Smith's doctrines about God and godhood.

In reviewing the possibilities—the occasions, the revealed scriptures, the public teaching—that might have defined a nascent-Mormon encounter with Judaism as a counterpart to the prayer mission to Zion—my attention comes to rest upon a particular day and a particular teaching, and the reason is important. The day is April 7, 1844, the place is Nauvoo, and the subject is critical to both Mormonism and Judaism: how do we conceive God? That is not an abstract doctrine, but a concrete encounter, one engaging our power of vision and hearing and much of our capacity of thought and contemplation. The single most important truth that religions have to share with one another is what each claims to know about God, and that is particularly critical in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. For all three maintain that there is only one God. The three monotheisms therefore must concur that that one and only God is the one and the same God whom all of us aspire to worship and serve. Hence if we wish to learn from another religion or about it, the starting point should be, how do we conceive of God?

That is why the King Follett Sermon, delivered on that April in 1844, would have found me off at one side, listening carefully, trying to find in the resources of my religion the foundations for

understanding this religion that even now was coming to full expression and realization. Here I would have heard one of the final statements of Joseph Smith, shortly before his death, about what must be for people outside of the LDS Church one of its most striking doctrines.

Now the Joseph Smith I should have met that day was not one to mince words. He spoke to the point and without ambiguity, writing what we might call “a punch in the nose prose,” that is, in unadorned and powerful language. So let me remind you of the language he used to set forth his doctrine of God—the exact words I should have brought back to my Yeshiva for study concerning news from the new world. Among the many things that he said on that day, I would have grasped only a few. His doctrine of how God in council undertook creation would have made me think of the reading of Genesis in the Midrash-compilation, *Genesis Rabbah*, which goes over much the same ground. Indeed, were my mission merely one of scholarship, I would have gone home and written a long footnote about parallels between Joseph Smith’s reading of Genesis and that of our Jewish sages of blessed memory. But I would have had a more important focus of interest, and that is the one defined by Joseph Smith’s quite remarkable insistence on the corporeality of God, a view of matters that, for Christianity as for Judaism, did not survive the philosophical movement of the Middle Ages and their encounter with Aristotle. This is what Joseph Smith said:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another.¹

Much that he said that day would have left me puzzled, but the main point—the doctrine of the corporeality of God—“we may converse with Him as one man converses with another”—would have firmly stuck on my mind.

I should have found his doctrine important for two reasons. First of all, as I said, it ran counter to the received wisdom of philosophers, including philosophers of Judaism, that God must be conceived as not physical, not corporeal. We had long been taught that all references to God as a person like us, with physical traits and qualities analogous to ours, were to be treated as metaphors. The entire heritage of philosophy, entering into Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in medieval times, had insisted that God is not to be represented in human form, despite the explicit scriptural statement—which Joseph Smith cited that day in Nauvoo—“let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26).

But there is a second reason that the doctrine would have made a mark upon my memory and would have won my attention. It is that, in the formative documents of the Torah in its oral version, that same conviction of God’s corporeality—a being we can see and know as we know one another—governs. Since an encounter between religions commences with the like and progresses to the unlike, that is the point at which, as a curious onlooker, I should have paid closest attention. In the doctrine taught by Joseph Smith, I should have found a remarkable reversion to teachings of the oral Torah, the documents written down in the early centuries of the Common Era out of the unwritten tradition of Sinai. So anthropomorphism in the teaching of Joseph Smith would have represented to a learned Talmudist from Poland a conception not to be dismissed, but to be carefully considered.

To wander from this narrative setting to a more propositional one: here I want to demonstrate that precisely the same conception of God comes to expression in the King Follett Sermon and in the oral Torah that came to written form in the first six centuries of the Common Era, namely, the conception of God “with whom we may converse as one man converses with another.” I claim, and I shall try to prove, that important stories in the Talmud and related writings make the same point that Joseph Smith made in Nauvoo, and that his language there, properly mediated into the language and thought of our sages of blessed memory, will have found a ready hearing among the sages of the oral Torah. These are considerable claims. Therefore, before I proceed, let me cite a single source that shows I do not exaggerate.

It concerns a meeting between Abraham and God in the Temple just after the ninth of Ab—corresponding to early August—in the year 70 C.E., when the Temple was destroyed. Seeing the ruin and witnessing the exile, Abraham reproached God for what he had done, and a conversation ensued, “just as one man converses with another”:

Said R. Isaac, “When the temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be he, found Abraham standing in the Temple. He said to him, ‘What is my beloved doing in my house?’”

“He said to him, ‘I have come because of what is going on with my children.’”

“He said to him, ‘Your children sinned and have been sent into exile.’”

“He said to him, ‘But wasn’t it by mistake that they sinned?’”

“He said to him, ‘She has wrought lewdness’ (Jer. 11:15).”

“He said to him, ‘But wasn’t it just a minority of them that did it?’”

“He said to him, ‘It was a majority’ (Jer. 11:15).”

“He said to him, ‘You should at least have taken account of the covenant of circumcision [which should have secured forgiveness despite their sin]!’”

“He said to him, ‘The holy flesh is passed from you’ (Jer. 11:15).”

“And if you had waited for them, they might have repented!”

“He said to him, ‘When you do evil, then you are happy’ (Jer. 11:15).”

“He put his hands on his head, crying out and weeping, saying to them, ‘God forbid! Perhaps they have no remedy at all!’”

“A heavenly voice came forth and said, ‘The Lord called you “a leafy olive tree, fair with excellent fruit”’ (Jer. 11:16).”

“‘Just as in the case of an olive tree, its future comes only at the end [that is, it is only after a long while that it attains its best fruit], so in the case of Israel, their future comes at the end of their time.’”²

Another version of the same story is explicit in assigning to God a hand:

[“Why should my beloved be in my house, who executes so many vile designs? The sacral flesh will pass away from you, for you exult while performing your evil deeds” (Jer. 11:15):] Said R. Uqba, “On the night of the ninth of Ab Abraham, our father, went into the Holy

of Holies. *The Holy One, blessed be He, took him by the hands and walked him back and forth.*"³

The emphasized language seems to state precisely the position outlined in Nauvoo in 1844. It is, then, no exaggeration to maintain, as I do, that to readers of the documents of the oral Torah—the Mishnah, the Talmuds, the Midrash compilations—the doctrine of the corporeality of God presents no surprise. To the contrary, had I brought back such an account from Nauvoo to my yeshiva in Białystok, my rabbi would have approved and found satisfaction with the lessons I had heard in Illinois. In fact, as I shall try to show, the belief in the incarnation of God, the corporeality of God, characterized Judaism in its authoritative documents beyond scripture. We address two issues, anthropomorphism in general, incarnation or corporeality in particular.

The Issue of Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism forms the genus, of which incarnation or corporeality constitutes a species. Anthropomorphism denotes forming religious concepts and ideas in human terms, in accord with the shapes and metaphors of this world and the human experience of it.⁴ Essential to anthropomorphism is the appeal to a God in human form, as R. J. Z. Werblowsky maintains, "since otherwise one would have to deal with representations and manifestations of the divine in all possible material forms."⁵ Anthropomorphism may appeal to physical or corporeal traits or may refer to what is called "mental or psychological anthropomorphism," also called anthropopathism, encompassing not human form or shape, but human feelings such as love, hate, desire, anger, and the like.⁶ But as Werblowsky further argues, "The ultimate residual anthropomorphism . . . is the theistic notion of God as personal, in contrast to an impersonal conception of the divine. Also, verbal imagery, no matter how metaphorical it is supposed to be, preserves this basic anthropomorphism."⁷ So much for the genus.

A subdivision of anthropomorphism, the incarnation of God, in general entails the representation of God as consubstantial with the human person in, first, corporeal form; second, traits of emotions and other virtues; and, third, action. God is represented in incarnate

form when God looks like a human being (in the case of Judaism as in the King Follett Sermon, a man), exhibits virtues and expresses emotions like those of mortals, and does concrete deeds in a corporeal manner, pretty much as do human beings. The conception of God as a human being in the history of the Judaisms of antiquity is standard and conventional. The representation of God incarnate will not have surprised the authors of a variety of Judaic documents, beginning with the compilers of the Pentateuch. Some speaking explicitly, others in subtle allusions, prophets and apocalyptic writers, exegetes and sages, mystics and lawyers, all maintained that notion. No single genre of writing—law, prophecy, wisdom, history—ever exercised a monopoly over the presentation of God as a man. The authorities who made decisions about canonical writings—it is commonly held—took the view that the Song of Songs spoke of God’s love for Israel, and, it follows, the view that God took the form of a young man, stated as we shall see in *Pesiqta deRab Kahana*, will have proved entirely acceptable in those many circles that received the Song in their canon of Scripture.

The Talmud of Babylonia, or *Bavli*, the final statement of the formative period of the Judaism of the written and oral Torah, represented God in the flesh in the analogy of the human person, hence accomplished for that Judaism, from antiquity to modern times, the incarnation of God. In that Judaism, prior to the *Bavli*, the faithful encountered God as an abstract premise, as unseen presence, as a “you” without richly defined traits of soul, body, spirit, mind, or feeling. The *Bavli*’s authorship for the first time in the formation of Judaism presented God as a fully formed personality, like a human being in corporeal traits, attitudes, emotions, and other virtues, in actions and the means of carrying out actions. God then looked the way human beings look, felt and responded the way they do, and did the actions that they do in the ways in which they do them. And yet—I hasten to add—in that portrayal of the character of divinity, God always remained God. The insistent comparison of God with humanity “in our image and likeness” comes to its conclusion in one sentence that draws humanity upward and does not bring God downward. But that is the point of Joseph Smith as well: the exaltation of man, by reason of Him whom we resemble, in his image, after his likeness.

But even before the Bavli, the verse in Genesis that states, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” prompted our sages of blessed memory to come close to the same conception of the corporeality of God, of God and man looking much alike, as Joseph Smith said in Nauvoo. That verse yielded an explicit statement of the matter for the Judaism of the dual Torah in its later stages, which we find in the following passage from the *Genesis Rabbah*:

Said R. Hoshaiah, “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, holy is the Lord of hosts].’”

“To what may the matter be compared? To the case of a king and a governor who were set in a chariot, and the provincials wanted to greet the king, ‘Sovereign!’ But they did not know which one of them was which. What did the king do? He turned the governor out and put him away from the chariot, so that people would know who was king.”

“So too when the Holy One, blessed be he, created the first man, the angels mistook him [for God]. What did the Holy One, blessed be he, do? He put him to sleep, so everyone knew that he was a mere man. That is in line with the following verse of Scripture: ‘Cease you from man, in whose nostrils is a breath, for how little is he to be accounted’ (Isa. 2:22).”⁸

In light of this reading of Genesis 1:9, we may hardly find surprising the power of diverse heirs of scripture, framers of various Judaic religious systems, to present portraits of the incarnation of God, corporeal, in affects and virtues consubstantial with humanity, doing things human beings do in the ways in which they do them.

The incarnation of God—corporeality in the most concrete form—forms a commonplace for Judaisms from the formation of scripture forward. All biblical writers invited precisely that exercise of remarkable imagination. Not only so, but given the exegesis of the Song of Songs as a love song between God and Israel, on which basis that book found its way into the canon of Judaism, we must suppose many accepted the invitation. That reading of the Song of Songs goes to extremes in formulating the doctrine of corporeality that represent God’s and Israel’s relationship as that of teenage lovers (in the formulation of Andrew M. Greeley).⁹ Nonetheless,

however routine for ancient Israel the conception of the incarnation of God may have been, it did not come to full literary expression in every document of every Judaism. The history of how diverse Judaisms imagined God contains more than a single, uniform chapter about God portrayed as a human being (ordinarily, a man).

Let us move on to clear instances of anthropomorphism, in which God is portrayed in the model or paradigm of a human being. In the following, I see an explicit comparison of God's traits to those of a human being. The premise of comparison is that both exist within the same continuum of attitudes and emotions, but the one is superior to the other. On that basis I invoke the conception of consubstantiality and allege that God and human beings are treated as emotionally comparable or—more to the point—consubstantial. God is now not wholly-other but the same, even if better:

Take note of how the trait of the Holy One, blessed be he, is different from that of mortals. In the case of a mortal, when he is conquered, he is unhappy. But when the Holy One, blessed be he, is conquered, he rejoices, as it is said, "Therefore he said that he would destroy them, had not Moses chosen one stood before him in the breath to turn back his wrath." (Ps. 106:23)¹⁰

Here the contrast between the human and the divine trait in response to defeat treats the two as opposites, but within the same continuum. God is not wholly other, for example, without emotions or with emotions altogether different from those displayed by a human being. God and a mortal share the same emotional framework, which is why we may draw a contrast between how each one responds to the same thing. But while anthropomorphic in the strict sense, the passage may hardly be held to accomplish the incarnation of God. Whether or not God is represented as forming the corporeal image and likeness in accord with which humanity has been shaped is not a question to be settled by a passage such as the foregoing.

But what about the concrete representation of God? The general notion of the incarnation of God reaches quite specific formulation in yet another document of the same general time, namely, the middle of the fifth century. The passage derives from a document that came to closure in the later stages of the formation of

the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah, around 450–500 C.E. Here again, were Joseph Smith to have come to a Polish Yeshiva and learned this passage, he would have found himself right at home:

Because the Holy One, blessed be he, had appeared to them at the sea like a heroic soldier, doing battle, appeared to them at Sinai like a teacher, teaching the repetition [of traditions], appeared to them in the time of Daniel like a sage, teaching Torah, appeared to them in the time of Solomon like a lover.

The passage opens with an allusion to the incarnate forms taken by God. True, we have no detailed account of the feelings and actions of God incarnate. Such concrete accounts of the incarnation of God, as we shall see, first make their appearance in the Bavli. But for the present purpose of definition, it suffices to point to the statement at hand as an illustration of the precise meaning of incarnation when it comes to God: the representation of God as teacher, warrior, lover (of the congregation of Israel, it is, of course, understood).

[Because of those appearances, it was necessary for] the Holy One, blessed be He, to say to them, “You see me in many forms. But I am the same one who was at the sea, I am the same one who was at Sinai, *I [anokhi] am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt* (Ex. 20:2).”

The qualification of the foregoing yields no difficulty. God appears in diverse models of incarnation. It is one and the same God. The document then goes on to restate the same matter:

Said R. Hiyya the Elder, “It is because through every manner of deed and every condition he had appeared to them [that he made that statement, namely:] he had 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: *His aspect is like Lebanon, young as the cedars* (Song 5:15), so at Sinai he appeared to them as a teacher, teaching Torah: *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt* (Ex. 20:2).”¹¹

When portrayed as a warrior, teacher, sage, and lover, God is represented in incarnate form. Incarnation now is fully exposed, and

an explicit and intentional statement of God in human form is set before us. Let me now generalize on the foregoing examples to state what I conceive our sages' conception to yield: *it is the description of God, whether in allusion or narrative, as corporeal; it is the account of God's exhibiting traits of emotions like those of human beings; doing deeds that women and men do, in the way in which they do them.* That is why I claim that we deal with the incarnation of God, just as in the King Follett Sermon, Joseph Smith represents the matter. It is for the oral Torah and the King Follett sermon alike the representation of God as a human being who walks and talks, cares and acts, a God who not only makes general rules, but also by personal choice transcends them and who therefore exhibits a particular personality.

The Issue of Incarnation

The broad definition of the genus of anthropomorphism leaves ample space for speciation. And that is what carries us from anthropomorphism to incarnation, for the God of the oral Torah is incarnate, as corporeal in conception as the God of the King Follett sermon is corporeal. And that point is important to my argument here, for God may be given personal traits of definition without emerging within the representation of a human being "in our image and likeness." But that phrase does require us to speak of incarnation in particular, that is, the representation of the human being as in the image of God, hence the conception of God in incarnate form.

As to the species, by incarnation I mean the representation of God in the flesh, as corporeal, consubstantial in emotion and virtue with human beings, and sharing in the modes and means of action carried out by mortals. Defined by Manabu Waidea as "the act or state of assuming a physical body . . . by a nonphysical entity such as the soul, the spirit, the self, or the divine being,"¹² here incarnation refers specifically to God. When—to review—God is represented in corporeal form, with arms, legs, cheeks, and the like, or is assigned emotions out of the repertoire of human feelings, attitudes, and virtues, or is portrayed as doing things human beings do in exactly the ways in which mortals do these deeds,

such as kick, butt, laugh, clap hands, and the like, then we have a case of the incarnation of God.

The issue of incarnation in the formative centuries of the Judaism of the dual Torah concerns not the invention of an essentially new conception of God, but the recovery of what was among other Judaisms an entirely conventional one. What we find is numerous stories that represent God's emotional structure and other virtues. Showing that it is a virtue to be humble, the storyteller provides a narrative of how God showed humility:

Said R. Joshua b. Levi, "When Moses came down from before the Holy One, blessed be he, Satan came and asked [God], 'Lord of the world, Where is the Torah?'"

"He said to him, 'I have given it to the earth . . . ' [Satan ultimately was told by God to look for the Torah by finding the son of Amram.]"

"He went to Moses and asked him, 'Where is the Torah which the Holy One, blessed be he, gave you?'"

"He said to him, 'Who am I that the Holy One, blessed be he, should give me the Torah?'"

"Said the Holy One, blessed be he, to Moses, 'Moses, you are a liar!'"

"He said to him, 'Lord of the world, you have a treasure in store which you have enjoyed every day. Shall I keep it to myself?'"

"He said to him, 'Moses, since you have acted with humility, it will bear your name: "Remember the Torah of Moses, my servant" (Mal. 3:22).'"¹³

God is represented by our sages of blessed memory as a sage, a man who participates like other sages in the study of the Torah. And in that study, God takes a back seat and acknowledges the superior powers of reasoning that sages possess in the Torah (a view that, properly translated into his idiom, Joseph Smith explicitly adopts):

In the session in the firmament, people were debating this question: if the bright spot came before the white hair, the person is unclean. If the white hair came before the bright spot, he is clean. What about as case of doubt?

The Holy One, blessed be he, said, "Clean."

And the rest of the fellowship of the firmament said, "Unclean."

They said, "Who will settle the matter?"

It should be Rabbah b. Nahmani, for he is the one who said, "I am an expert in the laws of plagues and in the effects of contamination through the overshadowing of a corpse."

. . . A letter fell down from the sky to Pumbedita: "Rabbah b. Nahmani has been called up by the academy of the firmament."¹⁴

God plays a role here as an ordinary sage. But God's part in the story is minimal and even the representation of God as incarnate is tangential. It is a story about the sage in the heavenly academy; the sage is like God, doing the things that (by the way) God is represented as doing. God is not the hero, nor even part of the detail; God is a mere backdrop.

Other descriptions of things God says and does follow suit. People refer to God, but God does not emerge richly characterized as the centerpiece of narrative. One last example of the numerous allusions to God, whether in the form of narrative or in other forms altogether:

Said R. Isaac bar Samuel in the name of Rab, "The night is divided into three watches, and over each watch, the Holy One, blessed be he, sits and roars like a lion. He says, 'Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I have wiped out my house and burned my palace, and whom I have exiled among the nations of the world.'"¹⁵

"I said to him, 'I heard the sound of an echo moaning like a pigeon and saying, "Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I have wiped out my house and burned my palace and whom I have exiled among the nations of the world. . . ." 'And not only so, but when Israelites go into synagogues and schoolhouses and respond, "May the great name be blessed," the Holy One shakes his head and says, "Happy is the king, whom they praise in his house in such a way! What does a father have, who has exiled his children? And woe to the children who are exiled from their father's table!"'¹⁶

While represented as a fully formed personality in these stories, God nonetheless does not enter into the narrative as an actor, a person who walks and talks among human beings. We may say very simply that when the authorships at hand wished to make their points about God as a personality, they found no strong reason to tell stories about God as they told stories about sages.

When God is represented in negotiations with mortals, engaged in exchanges and gaining his wishes through give and take, God enjoys a more active role in the narrative. Unlike the

foregoing pericopes, in the following one we have God as a hero and principal actor:

Rabbah bar Mari said, “What is the meaning of this verse: ‘But they were rebellious at the sea, even at the Red Sea; nonetheless he saved them for his name’s sake’ (Ps. 106:7)? This teaches that the Israelites were rebellious at that time, saying, ‘Just as we will go up on this side, so the Egyptians will go up on the other side.’ Said the Holy One, blessed be he, to the angelic prince who reigns over the sea, ‘Cast them [the Israelites] out on dry land.’”

“He said before him, ‘Lord of the world, is there any case of a slave [namely, myself] to whom his master [you] gives a gift [the Israelites], and then the master goes and takes [the gift] away again? [You gave me the Israelites, now you want to take them away and place them on dry land.]’”

“He said to him, ‘I’ll give you one and a half times their number.’”

“He said before him, ‘Lord of the world, is there a possibility that a slave can claim anything against his master? [How do I know that you will really do it?]’”

“He said to him, ‘The Kishon brook will be my pledge [that I shall carry out my word. Nine hundred chariots at the brook were sunk, (Jud. 3:23) while Pharaoh at the sea had only six hundred, thus a pledge one and a half times greater than the sum at issue].’”

“Forthwith [the angelic prince of the sea] spit them out onto dry land, for it is written, ‘And the Israelites saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore’ (Ex. 14:30).”¹⁷

The pericope is a story, not merely an allusion to a fact or a syllogistic proposition or an exegesis. Taking its own course, the narrative commences with a crisis, the problem of the Israelites at the sea. God intervenes as the hero to solve the crisis. The tension in the story derives from the response of the Lord to the angelic prince and is worked out in the exchanges that follow. We have a beginning, middle, and end. There is a point of tension and conflict, ending in a resolution. But there is a very considerable point of difference between this narrative and the sage-story, and it is in the critical role, beginning and end, of verses of scripture. The story is spun out to explain Psalms 106:7. Its climactic moment is Judges 3:23, then Exodus 14:30.

The following story represents God as a critical actor, that unfolds from beginning to middle and end, that involves action,

that sets up a point of tension and then resolves that tension, and that does not invoke a verse of scripture or provide a proposition concerning the meaning of such a verse. In all its indicative traits, this story treats the incarnation of God in accord with conventions characteristic of sage-stories in *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan*:

Said R. Judah said Rab, “When Moses went up to the height, he found the Holy One, blessed be he, sitting and tying crowns to the letters [of the Torah].”

“He said to him, ‘Lord of the universe, why is this necessary?’”

“He said to him, ‘There is a certain man who is going to come into being at the end of some generations, by the name of Aqiba b. Joseph. He is going to find expositions to attach mounds and mounds of laws to each point [of a crown].’”

“He said to him, ‘Lord of the universe, show him to me.’”

“He said to him, ‘Turn around.’”

“[Moses] went and took his seat at the end of eight rows, but he could not understand what the people were saying. He felt weak. When discourse came to a certain matter, one of [Aqiba’s] disciples said to him, ‘My lord, how do you know this?’”

“He said to him, ‘It is a law revealed by God to Moses at Mount Sinai.’”

“Moses’ spirits were restored. He turned back and returned to the Holy One, blessed be he. He said to him, ‘Lord of the universe, now if you have such a man available, how can you give the Torah through me?’”

“He said to him, ‘Be silent. That is how I have decided matters.’”

“He said to him, ‘Lord of the universe, you have now shown me his mastery of the Torah. Now show me his reward.’”

“He said to him, ‘Turn around.’”

“He turned around and saw people weighing out his flesh in the butcher shop. He said to him, ‘Lord of the universe, such is his mastery of Torah, and such is his reward?’”

“He said to him, ‘Be silent. That is how I have decided matters.’”¹⁸

Here God is the protagonist of the story; Moses the straight man. The story unfolds with a marked beginning, the tension created by Moses’ question about the details of the letters in which the Torah is written. The middle is worked out initially when Moses’ spirits

were restored. But then there is then a second point of tension—Moses cannot understand the message—and then comes a final resolution. Everything Aqiba says begins with Moses. But that produces the third and most intense point of tension, leading to the story's real point, which unfolds at the end. So we move in stages, conflict, resolution, then to a higher level of conflict.

What we lack is the resolution of the final point of conflict; it is open-ended: Be silent. That is how I have decided matters. That statement hardly marks a happy ending, and it assuredly does not answer the question with which the passage commences. The story merely restates the question in a more profound way. So the one truly striking story about God in the form of not a human being in general but a sage in particular, a sage engaged in debate and argument, turns out to make precisely the opposite of the point of every other sage-story. All other such stories tell us how sages resolve points of tension and sort out conflict, bringing to a happy resolution whatever problem has generated the action of the story. But this story tells us the precise opposite, which is that God decrees and even the sage—even our rabbi, Moses, the sage of all sages—must maintain humble silence and accept the divine decree. Turning matters around in a secular direction, we may state the proposition in this way: the sage is like God, but, like all other human beings, subject to God's ultimately autocephalic decree.

A story built on the premise of the incarnation of God, fully exposing God's traits of personality and portraying God like a sage, engaged in argument with a man as master engages in argument with a disciple, serves a stunning purpose, which contradicts its academic form. It is to show that God, while like a sage, is more than a sage—much more. And, even in this deeply human context, that “more” is to be stated only in the submission expressed through silence. This I take to be the final statement of the incarnation of God of the Judaism of the dual Torah. God incarnate remains God ineffable. When the Judaism of the dual Torah wishes to portray the character of divinity, it invokes in the end the matter of relationship and not tactile quality and character. If we wish to know God, it is through our relationship to God, not through our (entirely legitimate and welcome) act of the incarnation of God in heart and mind and soul, deliberation and deed. And the way to

engage with, relate to, God, in the face of (in the suggestive instance at hand) the Torah and torture of Aqiba, is silence.

In an age struck dumb by horror and Holocaust, in anguish seeking God's face in a time of the hiding of the face, incarnation takes its unanticipated forms, just as at the Sea, just as at Sinai. In response to God's self-revelation, whether at the Sea, whether at Sinai, whether in sickness or in health, whether in moments of despair and disappointment or in an hour of exultation and ecstasy, what is to be said?

"He said to him, 'Be silent. That is how I have decided matters.'"

"And Abram put his faith in the Lord, and the Lord counted that faith in him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Going Home

From Nauvoo I would have headed home to report on what I had learned. I would have told my teacher about a new religion, like traditional Christianity in many ways but also different in some. And one of those ways would have been the doctrine of God being "like ourselves": "like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image, and likeness of God, and received instruction and walked, talked, and conversed with Him, as one man talks and communes with another." And, impressed but always skeptical, my rabbi would have replied, "Very good, very good—so what else is new?" What I reported from Nauvoo, my rabbi already knew in the Talmud.

But I would argue, what I have said is something new. My presentation of the facts of how the Judaism of the dual Torah accomplished the incarnation of God may possibly surprise two sorts of people. First, there are those who have long taken for granted the utterly aniconic and nonanthropomorphic character of "Judaism," by which they meant the one at hand, the one of the dual Torah. Many theologians of Judaism have built their theological apologetic upon that single characterization of "Judaism," meaning this kind, and I here show that that characterization is not valid. As we noted at the outset, an entire philosophical movement in medieval times within Judaism proposed to explain in other than concrete and corporeal terms the anthropomorphic representation of God

in the Hebrew scriptures, including rich accounts of the incarnation of God. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century apologists of Judaism, particularly in Reform Judaism and its associated scholarly circles, carried forward that same insistence upon the utter incorporeality of God in “Judaism,” by which they meant the Judaism represented in scripture and in the canon of the dual Torah. So there is ample reason to anticipate a measure of puzzlement on the part of readers within contemporary Judaism.

Both Judaic and Christian believers and also historians of religion, form the second class of listeners apt to find my results puzzling. They are those who have deemed to be absolutely unique the Christian belief in humanity and divinity united in Jesus Christ, God incarnate. They have further held that conception of God to be utterly incompatible with that of Judaism—any kind of Judaism. Christians may find in the Israelite scriptures a rich legacy of anthropomorphism in general, and evidence for the conviction of the incarnation of God in particular. They may maintain that in Jesus Christ, humanity and divinity united and incarnate, the “Old Testament legacy” has reached its natural and necessary climax. Hence finding in the Judaism that became normative, the one of the dual Torah, a continuation of that mode of meeting God—the mode of the incarnation of God—may prove jarring for Christian as much as for Judaic readers.

To both classes of readers, I say very simply that I mean no disrespect in treating the incarnation of God as profoundly characteristic of the scriptural representation of God, on the one side, and the Judaism of the written and oral Torah, on the other. The conception of the incarnation of God I offer was idiomatic to a variety of Judaic authorships (though here I treat only the one I have specified). That Joseph Smith set forth the same revelation seems to me beyond argument. That the particular framing of that conception in reference to Jesus Christ, God become man, is unique to Christianity I in no way call into question. I cannot imagine a more self-evident fact of the history of religion than that one. We all recognize that one powerful modern theological apologetic for Judaism has contrasted Christian-pagan anthropomorphism with the “more spiritual” conception of God provided by Judaism. Those who lay a heavy burden of faith upon the structure of theological

apologetics will simply have to judge for themselves whether the evidence I set forth justifies my claim that, in the Bavli in particular, God is portrayed as incarnate, in body and soul, attitude and deed.

The Judaism of the dual Torah was, and is, a religion of the here and now—and so was, and is, its God. And, I should maintain, on that basis we are able to pray—but only on that basis. We cannot—and we do not—pray to philosophical principles, theological doctrines, but to the Person who (speaking out of the Torah, that is, the religion that the world calls “Judaism”) made himself manifest in the Torah. And, as the Midrash says, “When the Holy One, blessed be he, created the first man, the angels mistook him [for God].” At the end of the twentieth century, in which no angel would confuse man with God but only with Satan, it is important to contemplate divine images of Man, just as Joseph Smith did on April 7, 1844—just a century before the very height of the Holocaust.

Questions from the Audience and Answers by Professor Neusner

Q: What factors, motives, or reasons drive mainline Christian and Jewish theologians to interpret anthropomorphic scriptural passages metaphorically?

A: The Greek philosophical tradition reaching Christianity in late antiquity and Judaism in the Middle Ages found difficult the representation of God with positive attributes, let alone physical and emotional points of congruity with man. To trace the rejection of the Rabbinic understanding of God as person, one would best follow the history of the exegesis of the pertinent verse about man’s being made “in our image, after our likeness.”

Q: Given man’s demonstrated propensities for pride, sin, and horrifying evil, as in the Holocaust, why isn’t it blasphemous to conceive of God being humanlike?

A: “What is man, that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that thou thinkest of him?” (Ps. 8:4). That verse captures the paradox of man. It would be blasphemous to think of man not in God’s image, which would represent surrender to pure evil.

Q: What is the conception of man within the Judaism of the dual Torah? What is his purpose in relationship with God?

A: Rabbinic anthropology is a subject that requires study in its own terms, and I do not know any systematic theological work on the subject. But as to the purpose of man in relationship with God, the Torah is explicit about the purpose of man: “It has been told you, O Man, what is good, and what the Lord wants from you, which is to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” The Babylonian Talmud, tractate Makkot 13B, puts matters this way:

R. Simelai expounded, “Six hundred and thirteen commandments were given to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five negative ones, corresponding to the number of the days of the solar year, and two hundred forty-eight positive commandments, corresponding to the parts of man’s body. . . .”

“Isaiah came and reduced them to six: ‘He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly, he who despises the gain of oppressions, shakes his hand from holding bribes, stops his ear from hearing of blood and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil, he shall dwell on high’ (Isa. 33:25-26). . . .”

“Micah came and reduced them to three: ‘It has been told you, man, what is good, and what the Lord demands from you, only to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God’ (Micah 6:8). . . .”

“Habakkuk further came and based them on one, as it is said, ‘But the righteous shall live by his faith’ (Hab. 2:4).”¹⁹

Q: What implications does the corporeality of God have for ethics?

A: We come closer to God when we can think of God in human terms, which provides for us an accessible model for behavior and values.

Q: Are the two tasks of knowing God through reason and of knowing him by means of personal relationship forever irreconcilable?

A: We as Judaic believers know God because God is made manifest in the Torah. That represents an act of grace, God’s self-revelation at Sinai. The Torah spells out the media by which we work out personal relationships with God; these come about through study of the Torah, through obedience to the commandments, and through undertaking our own acts of grace, in imitation of God’s. That answer does not deal with the conflict

that some perceive between knowing God through reason and knowing God through worship and devotion, because I do not understand the source of such a conflict. Reason unaided by revelation can tell us that there is a God, but it cannot tell us any of the truths that come to us through revelation (the Torah). The “personal relationship” to which the question refers corresponds to acts of prayer and service that obedience to the commandments makes possible.

Q: Are the sages reacting to possible inroads of Christian incarnational theology by one-upping Christians by claiming a corporeal God was both a sage and lawgiver at Sinai? Wouldn't this serve to validate Torah and Rabbinic Judaism?

A: The fourth century marks the first point at which we may posit response on the part of our sages of blessed memory to the claim of Christianity to a share in the blessing of God to Israel. It was with the triumph of Christianity in Constantine's conversion that sages formulated doctrines remarkably suited to the coming struggle with Christianity; prior to that time, Christianity received little attention from them. But the corporeal God, whom we may know and love—the God represented as walking and talking with Abraham in the ruins of the Temple, the God at the Sea and at Sinai, the God in whose image and after whose likeness we are made—comes to us through both the written Torah (“Old Testament”) and the oral Torah as well, and none of the doctrines outlined in my presentation originate only in the documents of the fifth and later centuries by any means.

Q: Given your claim that the God of the Judaism of the dual Torah is corporeal in nature and “human-like” in his interactions with humanity, how might you respond to the argument that God appears in human form and acts in human ways with humanity in general so that we can understand Him when, in fact, he is not like us at all. After all, Isaiah said God's ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts.

A: I am sure that to make himself manifest to us, God presented his teachings to Moses and the prophets in language that they could grasp and convey to us. I am equally sure that God transcends

us. That underscores my conviction that the very knowledge of God that we possess represents an act of grace on God's part, an act of love, such as giving the Torah through Israel represents an act of grace and love. The "in fact" part of the hypothetical question is impenetrable to me. The only facts we have about God come to us through revelation, in the Torah, or are to be read through the prism of revelation or the Torah.

Q: Hasn't the danger been perceived as fashioning a likeness of God after our image? If you're a sage, perhaps that would not be threatening. But if you are a king, a soldier, a dictator, a madman?

A: We always err, committing an act of idolatry, by representing God in our likeness and after our image. The enduring challenge of faith for Judaic and Christian believers is to remember that we are like God but God is not like us. But as everyone knows, the cardinal sin in the religious heritage of Judaism and Christianity is to turn matters upside down.

Q: How is the concept of an anthropomorphic God received generally among a society so steeped in Western philosophical metaphysics? It would seem to be a radical religious view.

A: Philosophically people reject what in active piety they take for granted. No one prays to the Unmoved Mover, and no one loves and worships the God lacking all positive attributes with whom philosophy makes its peace. The God of the philosophers responds to certain problems of philosophy. The God who speaks to us through revelation and the Torah and whom we know through prayer and service vastly transcends the conceptions of philosophy. God is not merely an idea, a conception that serves to resolve dilemmas. I am sure that the God who is made manifest, who reveals himself in the Torah, made heaven and earth, called Abraham, and at Sinai brought Israel, the Holy People, into being for his service, watches over us in the here and now, and will send his messiah to redeem us all at the end of time. To Western philosophical metaphysics, that God is alien, but it is that same God, unknown to philosophy, whose very presence, for the faithful, makes life possible.

Q: It seems obvious that Philo of Alexandria has little influence on early Talmudic literature. This picture seems to have changed by the time of Maimonides. What happened?

A: The greatest scholar of Judaism of our century, Harry A. Wolfson, argues in his *Philo*²⁰ that the Judaic religious system of our sages of blessed memory and that of Philo cohere and are congruent. But I am sure he would concur that it was with the advent of Aristotelianism that philosophy entered into scientific modes of thinking about God. And it was through the rise of Islam and with the Judaic, Christian, and Muslim appropriation of Aristotle's challenge to religious faith that critical thought elicited the response of a philosophical theology from Maimonides and Aquinas in turn.

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NOTES

¹Joseph Smith, "The King Follett Discourse," April 7, 1844, Nauvoo, Illinois, in Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 345; see also Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, *The Prophet Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse: A Six Column Comparison of Original Notes and Amalgamation* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1983), 27; and David L. Paulsen, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996): 7-94.

²Bavli Menahot 53b; see also Jacob Neusner, trans., *Tractate Menahot*, vol. 29, pt. B, of *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1984), 72. This article contains original translations by Jacob Neusner. References to other Neusner translations are given here for the ease of the reader.

³Lamentations Rabbah 35:1.1; see also Jacob Neusner, *Lamentations Rabbah: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 125; italics added.

⁴R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Anthropomorphism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 1:316-20.

⁵Werblowsky, "Anthropomorphism," 1:317.

⁶Werblowsky, "Anthropomorphism," 1:317.

⁷Werblowsky, "Anthropomorphism," 1:317.

⁸Genesis Rabbah 8:10; see also Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, 3 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 1:82-83.

⁹See Andrew M. Greeley's chapter "The Lovers in the Song—Creation," in Andrew M. Greeley and Jacob Neusner, *The Bible and Us* (New York: Warner, 1990), 31-48; or in Andrew M. Greeley and Jacob Neusner, *Common Ground: A Priest and a Rabbi Read Scripture Together* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1985), 30-43.

¹⁰Bavli Pesahim 119A.

¹¹Pesiqta deRab Kahana 12:24; see also Jacob Neusner, trans., *Pesiqta deRab Kahana: An Analytic Translation*, 2 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 1:216; italics in original.

¹²Manabu Waida, "Incarnation," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 7:156.

¹³Bavli Shabbat 89A; see also Neusner, *Shabbat*, vol. 2, pt. C, of *Talmud of Babylonia*, 86.

¹⁴Bavli Baba Mesia 86A; see also Neusner, *Tractate Bava Mesia*, vol. 21, pt. D, of *Talmud of Babylonia*, 36.

¹⁵Bavli Berakhot 3A, 7; see also Neusner, *Tractate Berakhot*, vol. 1 of *Talmud of Babylonia*, 38.

¹⁶Bavli Berakhot 3A, 8; see also Neusner, *Tractate Berakhot*, vol. 1 of *Talmud of Babylonia*, 38-39.

¹⁷Bavli Arakhin 15A-B; see also Neusner, *Tractate Arakhin*, vol. 32 of *Talmud of Babylonia*, 126.

¹⁸Bavli Menahot 29B; see also Neusner, *Tractate Menahot*, vol. 29, pt. A, of *Talmud of Babylonia*, 148.

¹⁹Bavli Makkot 13B; see also Neusner, *Tractate Makkot*, vol. 24 of *Talmud of Babylonia*, 114, 115.

²⁰Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).