

Jewish Images of God

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Anthropomorphism as a Form of Idolatry

How shall we picture God? Some prominent medieval philosophers held that we can know with certainty of the existence of God, but the limitations of human intelligence and the infinite character of God make it impossible for us to know the nature of God altogether. Maimonides, for example, claimed that we can only know that God is *not* characterized by any finite attributes such as the ones that humans possess.

Indeed, the problem goes even deeper. Not only is it philosophically unreasonable to expect to know the character of God; it is also, according to some interpretations, religiously forbidden to depict God in human terms. This stems from the biblical laws against idolatry.

Three related, but distinct, matters are included in these prohibitions: the worship of idols, the worship of God with pagan rites, and the making of idols. The first of those, the worship of idols, includes prohibitions against idol worship conforming to pagan rituals; bowing down to an idol; offering a sacrifice to another god, including those

The following abbreviations apply to all endnotes below:

M. = Mishnah (edited by Rabbi Judah, the President of the Sanhedrin, c. 200 C.E.).

B. = Babylonian Talmud, edited by Ravina and Rav Ashi c. 500 C.E.

M.T. = Maimonides' law code, the *Mishneh Torah*, completed in 1177 C.E.

S.A. = Joseph Caro's law code, the *Shulhan Arukh*, completed in 1565 C.E.

The books ending in the word *Rabbah* (the great, or expanded) series – e.g., *Genesis Rabbah*, *Numbers Rabbah*, *Song of Songs Rabbah* – follow the order of the biblical text, but they contain rabbinic interpretations and expansions of the Bible. Citations of those books are to the chapter and subsection of the midrashic text, not to the biblical verse on which they are a commentary.

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represented by an idol; and paying homage to an idol.¹ The second injunction, that against worshiping God with pagan rites,² reflects the biblical view that only divinely ordained methods of worship can be assured of according with God's will. And finally, making idols is explicitly prohibited, although only images to be used for worship.³ This reflects the common practice in the ancient world of requiring a ceremonial consecration before a graven image could become an embodiment of a god.⁴

It is the last of these biblical prohibitions that addresses our issue, in particular the later rabbinic and philosophic expansions of it. The Rabbis proscribed making idols for anyone's worship, not just one's own,⁵ but they also went beyond the context of worship in prohibiting the making of any human image:

Why has it been taught: "All portraits are allowed except the portrait of a human being"? Rav Huna, the son of Rav Idi, replied: "From a discourse of Abaye I learned: 'You shall not make with me' (Ex. 20:20) [implies] you shall not make Me."⁶

Since human beings were made "in God's image,"⁷ making a human image would be tantamount to making a likeness of God. The later codes restrict this prohibition to sculpted images that protrude like idols (excluding those on indented or flat surfaces) and to representations of the full human being and not just the head or a part of the body,⁸ but the principle remains the same: since human beings partake in the likeness of God, to create a graven image of a human being would be, as it were, to create a likeness of God.

Modern Jews may be startled by the prohibitions described here, both because even the most observant Jews take photographs of one another; in fact, children in the ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) community trade "rebbe cards" with photographs of famous rabbis prominently displayed in much the same way that many children trade baseball cards. Moreover, many understand these laws to prohibit only intentional representations of God. The fact that the Rabbis prohibited images of human beings under these laws underscores the importance they ascribed to the biblical verses attributing a divine image to human beings. It also makes it clear that the Rabbis conceived of God, in turn, in human form.

While the injunction against making images of human beings is perhaps the starkest expression of the classical tradition's belief that God is to be conceived in

¹ Prohibitions against idol worship conforming to pagan rituals: Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 12:30; cf. B. *Sanhedrin* 61b. Prohibitions against bowing down to an idol and against paying homage to an idol in other forms: Exodus 20:5. Prohibition against offering a sacrifice to another god, including those represented by an idol: Exodus 22:19.

² Deuteronomy 12:31.

³ That making idols is prohibited: Exodus 20:4, 20. That this applies only to objects used for worship: cf., for example, Lev. 26:1.

⁴ I have used here the categorization found in Faur (2007), 8:1231.

⁵ *Sifra* 7:1, end.

⁶ B. *Rosh Hashanah* 24b; B. *Avodah Zarah* 43b.

⁷ Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1; 9:6.

⁸ M.T. *Laws of Idolatry* 3:10, 11; S.A. *Yoreh De'ah* 141:4–7. They follow the Talmud (B. *Avodah Zarah* 43b), although *Mekhilta*, Yitro, Ch. 6 on Ex. 20:4, seems to prohibit indented representations too. Cf. *Hagahot Maimoniyot* on M.T. *Laws of Idolatry* 3:10.

human form, it is by no means the only one. In both biblical and rabbinic literature, God is portrayed in human images. In the Bible, God has a face, nose, mouth, eyes, ears, hands, fingers, an arm, and feet.⁹ The Rabbis continue this use of human imagery to describe God. For example, they assert, in one of my favorite Rabbinic passages, that on the occasion of the wedding of Adam and Eve, God plaits Eve's hair and serves as best man for Adam to indicate God's intimate involvement in their wedding and, by extension, in every couple's wedding. In other passages, God wears phylacteries and wraps Himself in a prayer shawl; He prays to Himself and studies the Torah during 3 hours of each day; He weeps over the failures of His creatures, visits the sick, comforts the mourner, and buries the dead.¹⁰

This stands in sharp contrast to the rationalist tradition in medieval Jewish philosophy. Maimonides, perhaps most of all, cannot tolerate depicting God in human form lest that limit God. Bodies and bodily parts, after all, are finite in extension and ability. Therefore any ascription of a body to God, however strongly one qualifies the comparison, implies a limitation on God's extent and power. Instead, according to Maimonides,¹¹ one must read the Bible's bodily descriptions of God as negative attributes and, as he summarizes in his 13 Principles of the Faith, one must believe in a God who "is no body and...who is not affected by bodily characteristics."¹²

One does not have to adopt Maimonides' position to appreciate the problematic that motivates it. If we depict God, either physically or mentally, as having human form, are we not simply writing ourselves large? Are we not engaging in an act of human hubris and divine diminution at one and the same time? God, after all, must be infinite and omnipotent in order to be God, or so it would seem, and that effectively precludes God's having any shape, human or otherwise.

⁹ A *face*: e.g., Exodus 33:20, 23; Numbers 6:25, 26.

A *nose*: e.g., Exodus 15:8; 2 Samuel 22:9, 16=Psalms 18:9, 16.

A *mouth*: e.g., Numbers 12:8; 14:41; 22:18; 24:13; Deuteronomy 8:3; Isaiah 1:20; 40:5; 45:23; Jeremiah 9:11; Psalms 33:6.

Eyes: e.g., Genesis 6:8; Deuteronomy 11:12; 32:10; Isaiah 43:4; 49:5; Psalms 17:8; 33:18.

Ears: e.g., Numbers 11:1; 14:28; 1 Samuel 8:21; Ezekiel 8:18.

Hands: e.g., Exodus 3:20; 15:6; 1 Samuel 5:6; Psalms 8:7; Job 12:9.

Fingers: e.g., Exodus 8:15; 31:18; Deuteronomy 9:10.

An *arm*: e.g., Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 26:8; 33:27; Isaiah 40:11; 51:9; 52:10; Jeremiah 21:5; 27:5; Psalms 77:16; 79:11; 89:22.

Feet: e.g., Exodus 24:10; 2 Samuel 22:10=Psalms 18:10; Nahum 1:3; Habbakuk 3:5; Isaiah 60:13; 66:1; Psalms 99:5; 132:7.

¹⁰ God plaits Eve's hair and serves as best man for Adam: B. *Berakhot* 61a. God wears phylacteries and wraps Himself in a prayer shawl: B. *Berakhot* 6a; B. *Rosh Hashanah* 17b. He prays to Himself and studies the Torah during 3 hours of each day: B. *Avodah Zarah* 3b. He weeps over the failures of His creatures, visits the sick, comforts the mourner, and buries the dead: B. *Haggigah* 5b; B. *Sotah* 14a; *Genesis Rabbah* 8:13.

¹¹ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part One, esp. chs. 1, 26, 28, 31, 35, 46, 50–60.

¹² Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction to Sanhedrin, Chapter 10 (*Ha-Helek*), Section 5, Fundamental Belief 3.

On the other hand, though, the rationales behind the biblical and rabbinic depictions of God in human form are also clear. If we cannot picture God in some form, how are we to conceive of the Eternal at all? Moreover, what is to distinguish a believer from a non-believer if both assert that God cannot be conceived? Surely the belief in God must have *some* cognitive content for believers to assert it so strenuously and for non-believers to deny it just as vigorously. Moreover, God becomes awfully abstract and distant if we can only say what He is not; the God of the Bible and Rabbinic literature is so much more alive and emotionally real for us.

For all of the problems that the Rabbis had with idolatry, they thought that it had been conquered. “God created two evil inclinations in the world, that toward idolatry and the other toward incest. The former has already been uprooted, [but] the latter still holds sway.”¹³ This undoubtedly reflects the historical fact that after the Maccabees, there was little tendency on the part of the Jews to succumb to idolatry in its physical forms. The Rabbis clearly did not mean that psychological forms of idolatry had vanished, for human beings in all ages have made a whole host of objects of finite worth their gods, including especially money, fame, power, and, particularly in modern America, work. People may not physically bow down to such things or even call them gods, but they surely treat them as such with equally devastating effects. Nothing matters in such people’s lives except their idol; all other worthy things and relationships are ignored or even dismissed as insignificant.

When viewed from the standpoint of the conceptions that motivate us to act in given ways, this kind of idolatry is at the root of much of the immorality and decadence in modern society, just as it was in ancient society. Confusing the unimportant with the important, the finite with the infinite, leads us mistakenly to devote our time and energy to what are at best only partial or instrumental goals. Only getting a grasp on what is ultimately important in life – in theological terms, learning to discern the difference between idols and God – can save us from such serious mistakes. In practice, we human beings are all too often tempted by the sirens of temporary and improper goals, and it is the ongoing function of religion to remind us of what is really important.

One can readily recognize the practical problems entailed in avoiding idolatry and instead living lives directed to appropriate goals; we struggle with that each day. Idolatry, though, is an intellectual challenge just as much as it is a practical one. We gain knowledge of God through the various avenues I discuss in my book, *Knowing God: Jewish Journeys to the Unknowable*, and that knowledge presumably suggests that certain understandings of God are more apt reflections of such experiences than others. Because both the Jewish tradition and our own experiences attest to a God who is infinite, though, we can never gain a total understanding of the Divine. Instead, we must formulate images of God based on our own, limited experience of the world and of God. Our epistemological position – our capacity to know and the limitations on that ability – gives us no choice in this; we simply have no other way to assimilate the knowledge our experiences give us of God. The same, of course,

¹³ *Song of Songs Rabbah* 7:8; cf. B. *Yoma* 69b.

was true of the authors of the Bible and Rabbinic literature: they too had to translate their experiences into images they could understand, feel, and communicate to others. How, then, do we judge whether we have done this as appropriately and accurately as possible? And how do we avoid mistaking our image of God – whatever it is – for God? That is, how do we protect against idolatry in our very conception of God?

In this essay, then, I shall address the cognitive status of Jewish images of God. Are they properly understood as literal descriptions of God, as totally metaphoric language, or as something in between? If we choose the last of these alternatives, how is that usage of language to be construed, and into what context of life does it best fit? How does it signify anything in that context? And finally, if God remains beyond human comprehension, can we at all distinguish proper images of God from idolatrous ones and between belief and unbelief? If so, how?¹⁴

How Images Mean

How, then, do we understand the meaning of religious images? Paul Tillich claimed that everything we say about God is symbolic,¹⁵ but, as Wilbur Urban has maintained, without “some literal knowledge of divine things, symbolic knowledge is an illusion.”¹⁶ Without the ability to translate, however inadequately, the meaning of symbols to more literal language, one has no way of determining whether they refer to anything at all and can certainly not discriminate between more or less adequate symbols for a given datum of experience.¹⁷

Tillich and many others who speak of the symbolic nature of our discourse also neglect the difference between the meaning of religious symbols when contemplated philosophically and when used in religious acts. Theologians have been worried about limiting God through anthropomorphic images, and some have therefore sought to interpret religious images allegorically. The classic Jewish instance of this among the rationalists is, as I mentioned earlier, Maimonides; but Jewish mystics were at least as reticent to depict God in anything but metaphors, claiming that even their descriptions of the Godhead as divided into specific spheres told us some important things about the nature of God and how we should interact with Him but did not actually describe the Infinite, the *Ein Sof*.

When religious people use images, however, they *want* to depict God in concrete language in order to make the experience of God vivid and at least partially intelligible

¹⁴ See Chapter Seven of Dorff (1992), which is an earlier formulation of what I am wrestling with in this paper. There I discuss the differences between images, creeds, and symbols, but I have eliminated that section here due to limitations on space.

¹⁵ Tillich (1957), Vol. 2, p. 9. Cf. Vol. 1, pp. 237–86 *passim*.

¹⁶ Urban (1951), p. 238.

¹⁷ In one critic’s words, “Tillich’s *via symbolica* becomes a *via negativa*.” See Ford (1966), p. 244. Cf. also Fenton (1965), p. 79; Edwards (1974), pp. 186–205.

in the terms of their daily lives. They therefore literally picture God as their father – or, perhaps, their grandfather or some other powerful and sagacious-looking man – when they use the father image to refer to God, and they have an ordinary rock in mind (albeit an impressive one) when they talk of God as their rock. For the religious person using these images, the experience of God, however indescribable ultimately, is like that of a father and a rock in some ways.

Moreover, religious people are generally not bothered all that much by conflicts in their images of God. Is God a just or merciful judge, hard like a rock or flexible and vibrant like water, majestically transcendent or affectionately immanent? For the religious Jew, God is all of these things.

The inconsistencies are not disturbing for religious people using such images for one or both of two reasons. First, God can be manifest in one characteristic on one occasion and its opposite on another, just as parents can appear to their children as almost different people depending upon the child's age and the particular way in which the parent is interacting with the child now in contrast to yesterday. Moreover, religious people assume that no ascription of a characteristic to God can possibly be adequate in describing the Eternal. Not only is our knowledge limited; our very language, drawn from human experience as it is, is inevitably incapable of capturing that which is beyond it.

As a result, in practice religious people have little difficulty in making a tangible use of images without being idolatrous. Of course, any word or object can be used for idolatrous purposes by those who wish to do so, and virtually any human expression has most probably been abused that way at one time or another. The strong emphasis on God's transcendence, however, particularly in Judaism and Islam, have meant that historically vast numbers of believers in the West have used concrete images without mistaking them to encompass God. In widespread practice, then, the use of concrete imagery is *not* tantamount to idolatry; it is, instead, a way of making the experience of God immediate and vivid.¹⁸

The Truth of Images

Even if we can discern what an image means, how shall we determine its truth or falsity? All human statements, whether intended to be taken literally or metaphorically, will, of course, be limited in their truth to what human beings can know, but how can we know whether a given image reflects reality more than it distorts it? That is, how can we decide whether a particular image is helpful or harmful in revealing the truth to us?

¹⁸ See Barbour (1974), Chapter 4, for a discussion of how religious language is analogical in its meaning, and see Chapter 5 there for a discussion of how conflicting images can complement each other without negating the quest for a unified, coherent, integrated model.

Some have thought religious images should be treated as metaphors expressing hypothetical claims awaiting further confirmation. Their truth value would then be assessed according to the usual procedures for testing scientific propositions.¹⁹ So, for example, God pictured as a rock might be construed as a claim that God is strong. That claim would then be confirmed if our experiences of God showed that to be true.

This approach, however, misconstrues the meaning of the images in the first place. They are not stated in the hypothetical mood; on the contrary, those who use them want to make declarative statements about their faith, not hypothetical ones. Moreover, one wonders how scientific methods would apply to the analysis of religious images. How, for example, can you definitively determine on scientific grounds whether or not God is a rock or water or a fire?

At the other end of the spectrum, other thinkers have asserted that religious language, presumably including religious images, never intends to describe. It instead is used to evoke emotions and/or moral behavior.²⁰ Picturing God as a rock, for example, is not expected to describe God in any way. The user of the image rather wants to make us feel overawed by God's power and comforted by God's ability to protect and sustain us. For those of these thinkers who take a moral rather than an emotional tack, the purpose of the image is to confirm our assurance that we must be moral because the divinely ordained moral standards that govern the world are as reliable and unchangeable as bedrock and because God, like a rock, will steadfastly enforce them.

As Dorothy Emmett has said, however, religion "loses its nerve when it ceases to believe that it expresses in some way truth about our relation to a reality beyond ourselves which ultimately concerns us."²¹ We certainly are moved emotionally by many images of God, and sometimes such images reinforce our desire to act morally. They can do this, though, only if we believe that in some manner they describe the reality of God. Moreover, the people who use them *intend* to describe such a reality. The people of the Bible and the Rabbis who used images certainly wanted thereby to convey the truth about the world – or at least their perception of it – and the same is true for religious people today. If religious people pretend that they do not aim to denote the real world through the images they use, they have both deceived themselves and lost their nerve, for they are then backing away from claims they really want to make.

Denying these extreme positions, though, brings us back to our original questions: how do religious images carry a truth value (that is, make a claim that is either true or false), and how are we to judge that claim? When people say, "God is our father," they are saying that reality as they perceive it has some characteristics of a father.

¹⁹ For example, MacCormac (1976), p. 93, Lundeen (1972), pp. 192–193.

²⁰ Emotive: Ayer (1936), ch. 6. Ethical: Braithwaite (1955), reprinted in many anthologies of articles in contemporary philosophy of religion.

²¹ Emmett (1957), p. 4.

They may be referring to the fact that their needs are provided for, or that they are protected from harm in parts of their lives, or that there are rules to be obeyed, or that they feel personally related to the larger reality they sense – all aspects of their relationship to their own, human father that they experience with regard to the transcendent element of experience as well. When they say that God is a fire, they are saying that ultimate reality enlivens us (“fires us up,” as it were) and that it is both warm and dangerous. A similar analysis could be made of all other religious images, for, after all, they all come from human experience.

As an initial description, then, determining whether a given image by which God is described is true would amount to deciding whether ultimate reality is as the image describes. “God is our Father” would then be true if ultimate reality is, indeed, providing, protective, and so on, and false if it is not. Similarly, “God is our Mother” – one of the feminine images of God that have taken on new meaning with the rise of feminism – is true to the extent that reality as we know it manifests characteristics that we associate with human mothers. In both cases, of course, we must recognize that human fathers and mothers differ among themselves in their nature and that the very project of identifying some characteristics as fatherly and others as motherly is, in our time, fraught with difficulties – although not, I think, ultimately meaningless.

The problem, of course, is that ultimate reality is many things, including some that are contradictory. That is why God is described in conflicting images. Moreover, while most people acknowledge the fullness of human experience, most also emphasize one or another aspect of reality in their visions of the world. For people like the seventeenth-century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, for example, the world is generally a nasty place with only a few, transient glimmers of something better, while for people like twentieth-century American philosopher John Dewey the world is a positive, growing place whose negative characteristics are equally few and transient.

This has an immediate effect on the truth of images. Hobbes and anyone who shares his view of life might say that God is not much like a rock and that that image does not ring true, for life is “nasty, brutish, and short,” as Hobbes said, and there seems little surety in it, even from God. The image of fire to describe God, on the other hand, might come closer to the truth for such people, but only in fire’s destructive aspects and not in its warm and enlivening character.

For Dewey and like-minded people, in contrast, God depicted as a rock would truly convey the confidence that one can have in God and in objective moral standards. The rock image would, however, hide the dynamic character of God and of life in general. It would thus articulate only a partial truth – but so do many, if not most, images and propositions. It would still be valuable for the truth it communicates, but it must be used with its limitations in mind. God described as a fire would have fewer shortcomings in the eyes of such people, for fire correctly discloses the warm and enlivening character of life, together with its potential for destruction. It does not, however, reveal life’s stationary, dependable aspects as the image of God as a rock does, and so we would need both to transmit a relatively full picture of reality.

Consequently, we must modify our criterion for the truth of an image to read as follows: Determining whether a given image by which God is described is true

would amount to deciding whether ultimate reality is as the image describes *in the perspective through which the world itself is seen*. We must also recognize that, as with propositions, images often tell the truth, but not the whole truth, and, depending upon how they are understood, they may even mask some truths while revealing others. Nevertheless, one *should* speak of the truth of specific religious images to emphasize that in religion one is still, after all, focusing on reality and that religion's claim to truth is no weaker than that of any of the social sciences and humanities where broad perspectives influence what one sees and how one assesses that.

Even recognition of the role of one's viewpoint, however, is not enough. Language, like rituals, laws, and customs, is a *social* phenomenon. A large part of the power of images is a function of how they are understood and used in a community. Human beings can communicate across communal lines, and hence some images are intelligible in multiple communities or even in a general, human context. God imagined as a rock, for example, would immediately appeal to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, although it probably would make less sense, if any at all, to Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, and Jains. Some images communicate effectively, however, only in the context of one community's vision of the world. God plaiting Eve's hair and serving as Adam's best man provide examples of this. The Eastern religions do not speak of Adam and Eve. I am honestly not sure how Catholics would respond to such an image, for, on the one hand, in Catholicism a celibate clergy is held out to the ideal for human beings and the Rabbinic world of *midrash* is foreign and may be seen as making God too familiar, but, on the other, marriage is a sacrament, vested with significant theological meaning. For Islam (except, perhaps, for Sufi Islam), God is too unequivocally transcendent to be involved in this way in the wedding of any couple, even the original one.

Therefore we must say this: To determine whether a given image by which God is described is true one must decide whether ultimate reality is as the image describes it to be in the *communal* perspective through which the world is seen. This revised formulation of our criterion of truth communicates that judgments of the truth of images are functions of *both* the intersubjective experiences we all have *and* the communal, metaphysical glasses through which we see and understand our experiences.

There is yet one other important component in the truth of images. It is indicated, in part, by the fact that religious people in the West do not generally speak of "ultimate reality," but rather of "God." There are theoretical reasons for doing that. Religious Jews, for example, name ultimate reality "God" to say, in part, that ultimate reality, as they perceive it and interact with it, is personal. In recognition of this personal quality they have traditionally called it "He," and they conceive of God as having an intellect, conscience, will, and emotions. God's personhood enables Him to ordain the commandments recorded in the Torah and to act in history. Religious Jews are often also asserting that God is transcendent. Philosophically, they mean that He is beyond the limits of possible experience and hence beyond human knowledge and/or that God exists apart from the material universe.

The distinction between "ultimate reality" and the term "God" as used in religion, however, is greater than these philosophical points describe. In the practice of religion, "God" signifies that the speaker is not just *contemplating* ultimate reality,

but *relating* to it personally, usually in the context of a *convictional community*.²² What makes a perspective religious is, as the etymology of the term indicates, the fact that it binds (Latin, *ligare*) the perceiver to the content of his or her perception and to the community that shares it. In theology, one emphasizes the intellectual component of this link, sometimes, unfortunately, to the exclusion of other forms of relationship; but the ongoing practice of religion does not stress any component of our being over any other. On the contrary, according to the Torah, one is to love God “with all one’s heart, all one’s soul, and all one’s might.”²³

Thus, to continue our example, religious people encounter God’s transcendence most not in the context of theology but rather in worship, where it denotes God’s continuing adverse judgment of people’s false centers of loyalty, their idolatry. In this setting God’s transcendence is referred to as His holiness, and, as such, it takes on implications for action. The proper responses to God’s holiness are not only recognition of the limits of our intellectual understanding of God, but also commitment to fix the brokenness of the world, to education, to family, and to community, together with humility and repentance, for all these taken together are the means by which one gains a proper center for one’s life.²⁴

The truth of a religious image, then, will depend not only on its ability to reflect an aspect of our experience, but also on its coherence with a communal framework of belief *and action* to which the particular experience is linked and through which it is understood. As I have discussed in my book, *Knowing God*, experiences and actions are revelatory of God if, and only if, a given community perceives and interprets them to be so.²⁵ This means that the truth of religious images will depend not only upon their correspondence to reality as we all experience it, but also upon their compatibility with the world view of a particular religious community and with the actions through which it gives expression to its philosophy. Issues of truth in religion are thus ineluctably and indissolubly connected with issues of authority.

The Authority of Images

How does an image become authoritative for a community – say, the Jewish one? In essence, in much the same way as a law does. Although the Bible acts as an original source for Jewish images and laws, it is not the final authority. What ultimately

²² Cf. McClendon and Smith (1975), esp. ch. 1.

²³ Deuteronomy 6:5. This is part of the *Shema*, one of the core prayers of Jewish liturgy.

²⁴ See Holbrook (1984), pp. 202–11. I have been greatly influenced by chapters 4 and 14 of his book, especially pp. 61 and 192–198, in writing this section of this paper.

²⁵ I make this point most explicitly with regard to God’s words in Chapter Four of Dorff (1992), but it carries over also to human actions (Chapter Three), human words (Chapter Five), and divine actions (Chapter Six). See also an earlier expression of this thesis in Dorff (1976–77), pp. 58–68, although there I did not acknowledge that actions in accordance with communal laws and customs can be revelatory.

matters is *how the community has interpreted and applied the Bible in their lives*. To determine that, one must pay attention to all of the following: what the community has, over time, selectively chosen to ignore and, in contrast, to emphasize in its educational and liturgical life; how passages are narrowed or extended in the community's interpretations of them in the face of new circumstances or new sensitivities; what new images or practices have been appended by the legal and literary leaders of the people; and the extent to which all of this affects the actual thinking and practice of the masses and, conversely, the extent to which the conceptions and customs of the masses affect the decisions and creativity of the leaders. While this process may be strange to fundamentalist Protestants, it should be familiar to Jews, for it is nothing but the ongoing work of *midrash*, the biblical interpretation and expansion that is at the heart of rabbinic Judaism.

The authority of images, then, like the authority of law, rests upon an *interaction* between the constitutive text (in the case of Judaism, the Bible) and the community that lives by it. The text gives all subsequent discussion focus and coherence. Interpretations may vary over a wide range, but they can still be Jewish if they are based on the Bible. As the classical Rabbis maintain:

Lest a person say, "Since some scholars declare a thing impure and others declare it pure, some pronounce a thing forbidden and others pronounce it permitted, some disqualify the ritual fitness of an object while others uphold it, how can I study Torah under such circumstances?" Scripture states, "They are given from one shepherd" (Ecclesiastes 12:11): One God has given them, one leader [Moses] has uttered them at the command of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He, as it says, "And God spoke *all* these words" (Exodus 20:1)... Although one scholar offers his view and another offers his, the words of both are all derived from what Moses, the shepherd, received from the One Lord of the Universe.²⁶

An image or a law must also, however, gain social confirmation to become authoritative for the community. It may not be easy to discern whether or not an image has gained social acceptance, especially in a community like the Jewish one that lacks a centralized body to make decisions, but it is not impossible. In any community – even highly centralized ones like that of Roman Catholics – the authority of a law or image depends ultimately upon its acceptance by the community as a factor in their thought and in their lives. Old and new images are subjected to continuing evaluation of their rationality, their truth, their theological coherence, their adequacy, their ethical probity and effectiveness, and their practicality. This process may last for a long, indeterminate period of time, but it may also be rapid and final. Imagining Jesus as the Messiah is a clear example of an image that was proposed and quickly rejected by most of the Jewish community in the first century of the Common Era, and discussion in the 1960s of God as dead was also either ignored or roundly rejected in Jewish discussions because of its heavy Christian connotations.²⁷ On the other hand, the rabbinic image of God as one who

²⁶ *Numbers Rabbah* 14:4.

²⁷ Even Richard Rubenstein, who denies a God who acts in history, has trouble with the imagery of God as dead because it is, in his eyes and those of all other Jewish writers, much too Christian; see his 1966, ch. 14, with further references to this point in ch. 13.

studies and the Kabbalistic development of the picture of God as the *Shekhinah*, a warm presence with a distinctly feminine feel, are examples of how a new image can become implanted in the consciousness of a community.

Ultimately, the authority of an image of God rests in its ability to evoke experiences of God. An image may have impeccable biblical and/or rabbinic authority, but it will not influence thought and behavior for long if it fails to link people with God. Then it is a broken image, one that no longer functions to remind individuals and the community as a whole of the facts and values embedded in their perspective of reality and to motivate them to try to actualize their vision of what should be. Images come from the devotional needs of the religious individual and community and, when clearly formulated and emotionally alive, they command our allegiance. As Clyde Holbrook has said, “Awe, wonder, adoration, and the elevation of the human spirit are ...[their] milieu, perhaps better confessed in song than trivialized by rote repetition as prose or made the subject of the proddings of an inquisitive reason.”²⁸

Good and Bad Images

We have probed the workings of images, their meaning, truth, and authority. Ultimately, we have no recourse but to think of God in images. The only real question is how we choose the images we use. In that process we must be on guard against images that are ineffective because they do not touch us; those that distort or falsify our experience; and those that undermine the community’s cohesiveness. On the other hand, we must seek images that have an immediately clear meaning (in contrast to creeds and symbols, which can be more enigmatic and lend themselves to multiple interpretations); we want images that evoke the emotions and actions that powerful images should; they must be true to our experience, even if they cannot be totally so; and they must enjoy the community’s validation in thought and action, motivating us to do morally good things, to, indeed, fix the world as much as we can and in as many ways that we can. Above all, we must make sure that our images are not idolatrous, that they do not represent the part for the whole, for that would be to undermine their truth and to give up Jews’ special mandate to be a people true to God.

For your own sake, therefore, be most careful – since you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire – not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever, having the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to the other peoples everywhere under heaven; but you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people. (Deuteronomy 4:15–20)

²⁸ Holbrook (1984), p. 223. See also p. 218.

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