

# The Body and Voice of God in the Hebrew Bible

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of the voice of God in the Hebrew Bible and in early Jewish interpretations such as the Targumim. In contrast to the question as to whether God has a body, which is enmeshed in theological debates concerning anthropomorphism and idolatry, the notion that God has a voice is less controversial but evidences some diachronic development.

## KEYWORDS

body of God, voice of God, Torah, Targumim, Talmud, anthropomorphic

## BIOGRAPHY

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In Judaism and Christianity, which both hold the Hebrew Bible canonical, the question as to whether God has a body is more sensitive and more contested than the question as to whether God has a voice.<sup>1</sup> The theological consensus now tends to be that God is incorporeal, and yet the most straightforward interpretation of numerous Hebrew Bible passages is that God is conceived of in bodily, anthropomorphic terms – though often there also exist attendant possibilities of ambiguity and ambivalence. The familiar divine statement “let us make humankind *in our image, according to our likeness*” (*b<sup>e</sup>tsalmēnû kidmûtēnû*; Gen. 1:26), for example, seems to envisage – particularly in

1 A version of this paper was presented at “I Sing the Body Electric”, an interdisciplinary day conference held at the University of Hull, UK, on 3 June 2014 to explore body and voice from musicological, technological, and religious studies perspectives. The envisaged readership is eclectic and not always specialised in Biblical Studies. Hence, I transliterate and translate all biblical Hebrew. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. The primary purpose of this paper is to provide a general and diachronic overview of the topic.

the case of the first term, “image” (*tselem*) – a physical form, not least because in the Hebrew Bible *tselem* most often pertains to concrete hewn images, including idols. This association is very clear at 1 Samuel 6:11, where the people are instructed to make (from *śh*, a verb pertaining to crafting and shaping) models of mice and tumours<sup>2</sup>, as well as at Numbers 33:52, with its reference to molten images (cf. 2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chron. 23:17), and also in the Aramaic account of Daniel 3:1, where a cognate (*ts<sup>e</sup>lēm*) refers to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden idol. In two occurrences at least, however, the physicality of *tselem* is undermined: in Psalms 39:73 and 73:204 the noun pertains to elusiveness, possibly to a semblance or phantom. If *tselem* refers more widely to either a seeming form (i.e. a phantom) or to a more inclusive, not-only-physical form or image, this could indeed complicate matters for interpreting Genesis 1:26–27. At Genesis 5:3 “likeness” (*d<sup>e</sup>mût*) and “image” (*tselem*) again occur together: here Adam fathers a son, Seth, in his likeness (*bidmûtô*) and according to his image (*k<sup>e</sup>tsalmô*). The most straightforward interpretation again pertains to resemblance,<sup>5</sup> including (though perhaps not exclusively) physical resemblance.

Ambivalence is also in evidence elsewhere. In Exodus 33:11 God speaks to Moses “face to face” (*pānîm ‘el-pānîm*), as would a man with his associate or friend. Descending like a pillar of cloud (33:9), God also agrees to reveal to Moses “[my] goodness” (*tûbî*; 33:19), concealing God’s face, which no human can see and live (33:20), while permitting “[my] glory” (*kebôdî*) to pass by Moses, while covering him with “the palm of his [lit. my] hand” (*kappî*; 22:22), to reveal “his [lit. my] back” (*‘achôrây*; 33:23). So, here God is described in terms of power, in abstract terms (God’s goodness, God’s glory), and in non-anthropomorphic terms (as a pillar of cloud), but also in terms of having body parts, namely a face, a hand, and a back, the last of which is visually apprehended by Moses.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of this singling out of Moses for special treatment and divine protection, lest he see more than is humanly manageable, rather astonishing is the statement some chapters earlier, in succinct and direct terms, that Moses and Aaron, Na-

- 2 The verb *śh* occurs elsewhere, too, with *tselem*: Ezek. 7:20 (of making abominable images), Ezek. 16:17 (of making male images) and Amos 5:26 (of making images of astral deities). In all cases the images appear to be concrete and three-dimensional. It is not clear whether all are anthropomorphic.
- 3 In English bibles the reference is Ps. 39:6. The expression here is *‘ak-b’tselem yithallek -îš*, which might be translated along the lines of “surely a man goes about in apparent form” (NRSV translates *betselem* “like a shadow” – “in shadow” would be closer). The idea that *tselem* refers here to something shadowy and non-solid is strengthened by its being in parallel with the abstract noun *hebel* (“nothingness”).
- 4 The Hebrew is *kach’lôm mēhāqîts ‘dōnāy bā’r tsalmām tîbzeḥ*, “like a dream on awaking, O Lord, in the city their phantoms you despise.” The Hebrew is not straightforward but the clear reference to a dream indicates that *tselem* probably refers here to something illusory (cf. NRSV, “They are like a dream when one awakes; on awaking you despise their phantoms”).
- 5 At Ezek. 23:14 the whoring *Oholibah* is described as looking upon men carved into a wall, which is qualified with “depictions of Chaldeans” (*tsalmê kasdîm*). Again, *tselem* refers here to something concrete and visible.
- 6 A comprehensive investigation of God’s body and body parts is to be found in a recent monograph by Andreas Wagner (2010).

dab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel “saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God” (Exod. 24:10–11, NRSV).

The prophet Isaiah is anxious when he sees the Lord, sitting on a throne, his flowing garments filling the temple (Isa. 6:1). Reflecting the Torah<sup>7</sup> tradition from Exodus 33 just referred to, Isaiah appears to fear for his life, having set eyes on the deity. Ezekiel, another of the prophets, gives a much longer, though rather tongue-tied, account of his theophany. Following an elaborate description of moving creatures and a chariot throne, Ezekiel hesitates when he reaches the figure on the throne. He refers to “the likeness of a throne” above which was what “seemed like a human likeness” (*d<sup>e</sup>mût k<sup>e</sup>mar’eh ’adâm*; Ezek. 1:26).<sup>8</sup> Dazzled by the being’s loins and the blaze and firelight around them, Ezekiel is able to conclude only with the convoluted, “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (Ezek. 1:28, NRSV). The effect of the theophany is powerful – Ezekiel falls on his face. What emerges from all these Hebrew Bible examples is that God looks like *something*: God can be seen. Moreover, although seeing God is sometimes dangerous and dazzling and overpowering, even possibly deadly, God seems to have human features: hands and a back and a face; God sits on a throne.

Elsewhere, quite markedly different from these examples, such anthropomorphism is not in evidence. In the first creation story the description is of God’s wind, breath, or spirit (*rû<sup>e</sup>ch*),<sup>9</sup> hovering or sweeping over the primordial waters (Gen. 1:2). In Exodus 3 the messenger of God (v. 2), or God, appears in the flame of a bush that seems to be blazing yet is not consumed. Reflecting on this disembodied vision Deuteronomy 4 is most emphatic of all: “YHWH<sup>10</sup> spoke to you from the midst of the fire sound of words” (*qôl d<sup>e</sup>bārîm*). You heard but form (*t<sup>e</sup>mûnâ*) there was not – only a voice (or, a sound, *qôl*). ... Be very mindful of yourselves, because you did not see any form (*t<sup>e</sup>mûnâ*) on the day YHWH spoke to you in Horeb from the midst of the fire, lest you be corrupted and make for yourselves an idol (*pesel*) in the form of any image (*t<sup>e</sup>mûnat kol-sâmel*)” (Deut. 4:12, 15–16).<sup>11</sup> Here the notion of divine corporeal-

7 “Torah” refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Pentateuch.

8 Here once more is the noun *d<sup>e</sup>mût*, used of both divine (Gen. 1:26) and human (Gen. 5:3) likeness. In this verse it pertains very definitely to visual experience.

9 In his commentary Ephraim Speiser comments that the Hebrew word “means primarily ‘wind, breeze,’ secondarily ‘breath,’ and thus ultimately ‘spirit.’ But the last connotation is more concrete than abstract” (Speiser 2007, 5). Again, this complicates whether what is described is more disembodied and abstract or more physical and concrete.

10 “YHWH” is a transliteration of the consonants of the primary divine name of the God of the Hebrew Bible. In English bibles it tends to be rendered “the LORD”.

11 A similar expression *pesel hasseme* (“the idol of an image”, cf. NRSV “the carved image of an idol”) occurs at 2 Chron. 33:7, also in a context of disapproved idolatry. Deuteronomy 4:16–18 elaborates that such an idol can be anthropomorphic or theriomorphic. Wagner specifies that *pesel* refers to a plastic, three-dimensional hewn form or idol; see Wagner 2010, 26.

ity is linked to idolatry. Idolatry is a much-condemned major transgression<sup>12</sup> – hence, conceiving God in corporeal terms is acutely problematic. This passage from Deuteronomy, however, is almost singular in the explicitness of its emphasis on divine formlessness; just a chapter later, where YHWH is speaking face-to-face with Moses (Deut. 5:4), form is again implied. The dominant depiction of the Hebrew Bible, therefore, is of divine corporeality, but the situation is far from univocal. God is imagined with a body, moreover a humanlike one, in many passages; elsewhere God's formlessness is suggested and occasionally forcefully asserted.

Over time, it seems, divine corporeality becomes increasingly veiled and obscured. According to source critics,<sup>13</sup> indications of this shift exist already within the Hebrew Bible. A direct expression such as “the form of YHWH he [Moses] looks upon” (*ût<sup>e</sup>munat<sup>e</sup> YHWH yabbîṭ*, Num. 12:8)<sup>14</sup> is attributed to an earlier source. Comparable but less direct expressions derive from a later time and different source and reflect subsequent sensibilities, as in Exodus 16:7, which has in place of “you shall see YHWH” the buffered expression “and you shall see *the glory of YHWH*” (*ûr<sup>e</sup>ṭem 'et-kebôḏ YHWH*; see also Exod. 16:10). Intertextually such an approach might be said to be self-fulfilling,<sup>15</sup> but this tendency indeed becomes increasingly pronounced extratextually over time, as clearly evident when we compare the Hebrew Bible with subsequent Jewish writings.

One of the arguments of classical source criticism is that the earliest source (J) typically uses divine anthropomorphism – God walking in the garden (Gen. 3:8) or inhaling the scent of sacrifice (Gen. 8:21); a later source (E) characteristically recruits intermediaries – the angel (rather than God) who calls from heaven (Gen. 22:11); and the latest source (P) depicts God as remote and non-anthropomorphic – as the apparently formless wind, or breath (*rû<sup>a</sup>ch*), hovering above the waters (Gen. 1:2). The

12 In the Babylonian Talmud idolatry is one of three exceptional sins (alongside certain acts of sexual immorality and murder) (Sanhedrin 74a). Giving up one's life is preferable to committing any of these sins.

13 Source criticism proposes that all or parts of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. the Torah) are composite bodies of text, combining sources that were once independent. The most famous example is the Documentary Hypothesis associated above all with Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), which argues that the Torah shows traces of at least four once discrete sources (J, E, D and P – the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly sources), alongside major editing processes. Each of J, E, D, and P is associated with characteristic vocabulary, as well as with a distinctive historical setting, theology, and ethnographic bias. Source criticism has its detractors and is not relevant to many forms of so-called higher criticism, such as literary criticism, which works with a final version of the biblical text. None the less, source criticism remains influential, and while which texts are allocated to which sources is widely debated, its basic tenets are very widely accepted.

14 Numbers 12 is using the very word for the divine form (*t<sup>e</sup>munâ*) that is used in the aforementioned refutation of such in Deut. 4. Source-critically speaking, Num. 12 would be from an earlier source and Deut. 4 from a later source (presumably the D-source).

15 In the absence of proof for the arguments of source criticism (i.e. of discrete, once independent sources), it too often becomes a case of deciding criteria and then allocating textual units to particular times and sources on the basis of these. Hence, divine anthropomorphism is routinely assigned to the earliest (J) source and divine abstraction to the latest (P) source, suggesting a linearity of development for which there is little evidence. In fact, even in unambiguously later texts, as we will see, anthropomorphism sometimes persists.

distinctions, however, are seldom quite so neat. As noted, Exodus 33 mixes strongly anthropomorphic with non-corporeal imagery, and Genesis 22 (the attempted sacrifice of Isaac) has both God speaking directly to Abraham (vv. 1–2) and the intervention of God’s angel (vv. 11–12). The steps of progression over time are therefore not as clearly signposted or as linear as source criticism sometimes suggests – again the result is polyphonic.

Let me next turn to the Targumim, Aramaic interpretive, or paraphrastic, and sometimes flexibly expansive “translations” of parts of what we now call the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Torah and the Nevi’im.<sup>16</sup> In the Targumim the arguably later intra-Hebrew Bible concealment of divine anthropomorphism is clearly in evidence. The Targumim appear to have served in the first instance (probably from the century before the emergence of the Jesus Movement, i.e. from the last century BCE) as orally delivered explanations in the vernacular Aramaic, following recital of the canonical Hebrew text. From the first century CE these explanations were written down, with Targum Onqelos (of the Torah) and Targum Jonathan (of the Nevi’im) gaining some degree of authority.

One very striking feature of the Targumim tradition is the eschewing of divine anthropomorphism.<sup>17</sup> Targum Onqelos thus routinely refers to God’s presence (*shek-inâ*), instead of to God directly. Even more commonplace is reference to God’s word (*mēmṛâ*), the creative or the directive spoken word of God as God manifests his power in the world. The tendency in the Targumim is to dilute or mitigate, even eliminate, anthropomorphism and directness and to move from physical to abstract imagery, even where the original intention is likely to have been metaphorical all along. Hence, Deuteronomy 30:6 says (clearly metaphorically) “YHWH your God circumcises your heart”, but Targum Onqelos has (the considerably less visceral) “the Lord your God will remove the foolishness of your heart”.<sup>18</sup> Where Numbers 12:8 (cited above) has “the form of YHWH he [Moses] looks upon”, Targum Onqelos has the more distanced “he beholds the likeness of the glory of the Lord”.<sup>19</sup> Where Exodus 15:3 has “YHWH is a man of war”, Targum Onqelos has “the Lord is the lord of victory in battles”. In place of “face to face”, Targum Onqelos has “word with word”. Parts of the divine body, too, are reinterpreted with more coyness – while, curiously, “hand” seems to remain

16 In the Jewish ordering of the Hebrew Bible, Nevi’im (Prophets) forms the second major literary division following Torah.

17 For a full and accessible discussion, which also provides an abundance of linguistic information, see Schochet 1966. Analogously, first-century Jewish philosopher Philo (c.20 BCE to c.50 CE), who explicitly merged Judaism with Greek philosophy, renders Hebrew Bible anthropomorphisms in allegorical terms. Philo speaks of Jews shunning the notion that God has actual human form but explains such depiction in terms of human limitation, because we cannot conceive anything apart from ourselves, see *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain* 29.95–96.

18 Schochet 1966, 11. See also Targum 2016.

19 For a very full examination, with Aramaic text, see Drazin 1998.



“hand” in most cases, God’s “arm” routinely becomes “strength” and God’s “mouth” routinely becomes “word”.<sup>20</sup>

Dwelling briefly on the hand of God – which, as just noted, tends to remain “hand” in the Targumim, whereas “arm”, “mouth”, and other divine body parts tend to be “translated” into non-corporeal entities – it is interesting that while pictorial depictions of God in Jewish art are still unorthodox,<sup>21</sup> visual depictions of the hand of God are found repeatedly. The most notable are the five examples from the mid-third century Dura Europos synagogue of Syria, the only ancient synagogue with a comprehensive extant decorative scheme.<sup>22</sup> In these lively paintings, the hand of God motif is used repeatedly to represent divine intervention or divine approval, including in representations of Moses and the burning bush and the divine intervention at the attempted sacrifice of Isaac (fig. 1a and 1b). That such depiction may have been a more



Fig. 1a (left): The Tora niche of the Dura Europos Synagogue.

Fig. 1b (above): Detail – the hand of God prevents Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. Stähli 1988, 73.

20 For examples, see Schochet 1966, 17–21.

21 Even in Christian art pictorial images of God become commonplace only in the Renaissance. The depiction of God as an old bearded man is particularly familiar from the paintings of Michelangelo and Paolo Veronese, for instance. In Jewish and Israeli art God tends to be depicted in abstract terms, as is seen clearly in a 2006 exhibition held at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (see [http://www.imj.org.il/exhibitions/2006/divine\\_image/panoramaE.html](http://www.imj.org.il/exhibitions/2006/divine_image/panoramaE.html)) and also in Weisner-Ferguson/Sorek 2006.

22 Images of the synagogue’s art are widely available online. For a comprehensive and illustrated account of the historical significance of Dura Europos, see Chi/Heath 2011.

widespread Jewish convention, persisting for hundreds of years, might be confirmed by the Beth Alpha synagogue mosaics (cf. fig. 2), located near Beit Shean in northern Israel, which date to the sixth century CE.<sup>23</sup> The existence of these Jewish pictorial images from disparate times and settings may dispel too narrow an interpretation of historical prohibition of visual images of God, for it appears that there has existed some scope within Judaism to depict divine action pictorially and anthropomorphically.



Fig. 2: Bet Alpha Synagogue – the hand of God prevents Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. Stähli 1988, 63.

As Jewish tradition developed through the centuries and into the medieval period, influential sages like Maimonides (1135–1204) would re-emphasize a notion so clearly indicated in the interpretation of the Targumim: any suggestion of God’s body or human appearance is to be regarded as purely allegorical. The third of Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles, a distillation of essential Jewish beliefs as drawn from Torah, stresses Jewish belief in God’s non-corporeality and that God is unaffected by any physical occurrences, including movement, rest, or dwelling.<sup>24</sup>

Alongside this discomfort with divine corporeality, pronounced emphasis on the voice of God and its authority remains central in this later period. The voice of God is already powerfully present in the Hebrew Bible. Its accentuated prominence in the Targumim is indicated by the common substitution of “the Lord” or “YHWH” with *mēmṛā*, “the (divine) word”. In the rabbinical writings of the Tosefta, Mishnah, and

23 Again the hand of God appears here in a visual representation of the attempted sacrifice of Isaac. The *manus dei* (“hand of God”) or *dextera domini* (“right hand of God”) was also a prominent motif in pre-Renaissance Christian visual art.

24 For a full discussion of the Thirteen Principles and the complex history of their interpretation, see Shapiro 2004.

Talmud, moreover, this emphasis is reconfirmed by the prominence of the expression *bat qôl*, literally “daughter of a voice”. God, over time, thus becomes less visible and increasingly more auditory.

Let me make this clearer. Ostensibly, the voice of God seems less controversial than the body of God – without, however, explaining how a voice exists in the absence of a body. God’s voice throughout the Hebrew Bible is resoundingly prominent. In Genesis 1 God is rather active – he creates, hovers, sees, separates, calls, makes, sets, and blesses – but above all he *says*, and his speaking brings into being. Psalm 33, referring back to the events of this majestic chapter, intones, “by the word of YHWH heavens were made ... because he spoke, and it was so” (vv. 6, 9). Psalm 29 is almost entirely about the voice (*qôl*) of YHWH, which is over the waters (v. 3); it is powerful and full of majesty (v. 4); it breaks the cedars (v. 5) and flashes forth fire (v. 7), shakes the wilderness (v. 8) and causes either the oaks to whirl or the deer to calve (v. 9) (the Hebrew is difficult and ambiguous). Elsewhere, memorably, God’s voice calls from the burning bush (Exod. 3:4) and booms from Job’s whirlwind (Job 38). God’s prophets, while sometimes called seers, who report visions, also receive God’s messages aurally, frequently stating “so says YHWH” (*kôh ’amar YHWH*), which punctuates, for instance, the first chapter of Amos (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 13), or “hear the word of YHWH” (*shim’û d’bar-YHWH*, e.g. Isa. 1:10; cf. “the word of YHWH came to me”, e.g. Jer. 1:11, 13). Moreover, the Torah and *Nevi’im* express particular disgust at false gods, or idols, with bodies of stone and wood “that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell” (Deut. 4:28) – that is, they have a body but no life and no speech (cf. Deut. 29:17; Hab. 2:19). It is ambivalent and contested whether God *has* a form or body, but unambiguous that God has a powerful voice.

The human voice has the capacity to be imbued by the divine. When called to prophesy Isaiah has his guilt removed and is rendered fit for duty by a live coal from the altar touched to his mouth (Isa. 6:6–7). The hand of God touches the prophet Jeremiah’s mouth (Jer. 1:9) and the prophet Ezekiel is raised to his feet by God’s voice (Ezek. 2:2) and is given a scroll to consume (Ezek. 3:1–3). All become channels for God’s words.<sup>25</sup> In Proverbs God’s mouth imparts knowledge and understanding (Prov. 2:6) and wise teachers pass it on with their words (Prov. 4:10; 7:1). Much of didactic material in the Hebrew Bible is concerned with proper speech and with controlling speech, notably in the book of Proverbs. The wise have judicious speech (Prov. 16:23), and pleasant words are like honeycomb, healing for the body (Prov. 16:24). Rash words are harmful (Prov. 12:18). Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives (Prov. 13:3), and those who spare words are judicious (Prov. 17:27) – plus, my favourite, to be heeded by academics in particular, “even fools keeping mum are considered wise; in closing their lips, they are deemed intelligent” (Prov. 17:28).

25 Moses’ shining face (Exod. 34:29–35) transmits something of God in a visual and striking way. The transmission of God’s *word* is depicted more regularly with reference to prophecy.



The Thanksgiving Hymns<sup>26</sup> even suggest that there is within the human voice something of the divine. The Hymns state,

It is you who creates breath for the tongue and you know its words; you establish the fruits of the lips before they exist. You set words on the line and the movement of breath from the lips you measure. You bring forth sounds according to their mysteries, and the movements of breath from the lips according to its metre, so that they may tell of your glory and recount your wonders in all your works of truth and in all your righteous judgments; and so that your name be praised by the mouth of all, and so that they may know you according to their understanding and bless you forever (col. IX, ll. 25ff in Vermes; Unit 5 of 9:1–10:4 in Harkins).<sup>27</sup>

This extrabiblical passage unequivocally expresses that the human voice is envisaged as a divine creation, a tool for teaching about God, and a vehicle to praise God.

The voice of God then, less controversially<sup>28</sup> than the divine form, emerges from the Hebrew Bible as manifesting divine power. While in the Hebrew Bible the dominant impression is that the divine voice is not separate from a divine body, the corporeality of God is undermined by some few passages in the Hebrew Bible, notably Deuteronomy 4. This tendency to emphasise voice and mitigate divine form – with the striking exception of the hand – emerges clearly in later literature, post-dating the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Targumim and also the rabbinical writings. In Proverbs and in the Thanksgiving Hymns from Qumran, the human voice rather than the human form reflects God, or maybe God’s likeness, which in Genesis 1 and 5 seems more straightforwardly to pertain to the physical likeness of God and of humans.

Let me conclude with a delightful story from the Talmud, featuring the “daughter of a voice” (a literal translation of *bat qôl*), an expression that appears very frequently in post–Hebrew Bible Jewish writing. The expression can refer to a “sound” or “resonance” more generally but is used widely in rabbinic writing to refer to a heavenly or divine voice, proclaiming God’s judgment or will – either to individuals or to groups

26 The Thanksgiving Hymns, or *Hodayot*, were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls near the site of Qumran. They have some similarity with the biblical Psalms. Their date of composition is difficult to establish. Geza Vermes proposes that the collection “attained its final shape during the last pre-Christian century”, but individual compositions may be considerably older. See Vermes 1997, 244.

27 Adapted from the translations of Vermes 1997, 255, and Harkins 2013, 2039–2040. Harkins points out that here “the hymnist describes the primordial origins of speech and thus praise. These lines presume a scenario like that found in Ps. 19:2–5, which describes the divine creation of speech” (Harkins 2013, 2039).

28 There may, however, be scope for controversy here too. Hence, in Boyarin 2004, Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin argues in a chapter entitled “The Crucifixion of the Memra: How the Logos Became Christian” that the notion of division of the godhead, which came to be associated with Christian logos-theology, had its counterpart in Judaism with Torah or Memra having some degree of autonomous divine status. Boyarin argues that logos-theology was “a living current within non-Christian Judaic circles from before the Christian era until well into late antiquity, when the Palestinian Targums were produced” and that only a “complex process of splitting ... ultimately gave rise to Judaism and Christianity” (131–132). The potential theological problem here is the suggestion that in Judaism there may have existed the notion of divine power that is also to some extent distinct and separate from God.

of people, sometimes whole nations. While the expression does not mean echo, it seems to pertain mostly to a smaller voice, even a murmur, and sometimes to a muffled sound coming from the netherworld. According to the Tosefta,<sup>29</sup> following the death of the final prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel but the *bat qôl* was still heard occasionally (Sotah viii.2). The suggestion is that not only a prophet but also his generation has to be worthy to receive the voice of God, or of God's holy spirit, but the smaller *bat qôl* persisted beyond the period of prophecy into the rabbinical period, issuing pronouncements of the divine will. *Bat qôl* is a lesser gift but it is not less reliable.

One story recorded in both Talmuds<sup>30</sup> recounts a rabbinical argument about the purity or otherwise of a new oven. After Rabbi Eliezer has called up a series of miracles to prove the oven's purity but has still failed to persuade the other rabbis, the *bat qôl* (coming from heaven and accepted as divine) decrees that the view of Rabbi Eliezer is correct and should be adopted. At this point Rabbi Joshua points to the Torah passage at Deuteronomy 30:12,<sup>31</sup> which states that divine commandments are present (by implication, here on earth) and need not, therefore, be retrieved with great difficulty from heaven. He goes on to declare that because the Torah is not in heaven, there is no cause to pay heed to the *bat qôl*. In other words, the *bat qôl* has been relegated below the authority of Torah in legal decisions: God may speak out loud, but God is overruled by his Torah (see Babylonian Talmud, *Nezikin*, *Baba Metzia* 59b).

The postscript to this story is that another rabbi, Rabbi Nathan, a mystic who from time to time met with Elijah the prophet, God's messenger, who had been taken up to heaven, asked Elijah, "and what did God do next?" – that is, after that moment when Rabbi Joshua pushed divine pronouncement out of the ruling. Elijah replies that God laughed with mirth, because God's children had defeated God. In other words, God gave the Torah and along with it the capacity to interpret it, and even God cannot interfere in that process. God's voice can be heard and is correct – but it cannot overrule. Such a concession to human activities of interpretation and exchange is rather heartening and affirming in any analysis (such as this one) of the multifarious depictions of the body and voice of God.

29 Tosefta (meaning "supplement" or "addition") is a compilation of Jewish oral law, in many respects a supplement to the Mishnah (the written down Jewish oral law). The Tosefta uses the same orders, or divisions (*sedarim*) as the Mishnah.

30 The Talmud is a wide-ranging record of rabbinical discussions on Mishnah. There are two Talmudic traditions: *Yerushalmi* (the Jerusalem Talmud) and *Bavli* (the Babylonian Talmud).

31 This passage is also of interest on the topic of voice. Here divine commandment is said to be near (rather than far and inaccessible). It is called "the word" (*haddâbâr*) and is located in the mouth and heart (Deut. 30:11–14).

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