

**ANTHROMORPHISM IN THE CHRISTIAN REPROACH OF THE
JEWS IN SPAIN (12TH–15TH CENTURY)**

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I. Introduction

A fundamental role in the religious controversies of the Middle Ages was played by the accusations of the Christian polemicists that the concepts of God held by the Jews was anthropomorphic. On the Jewish side, the debate was directed towards the fundamentals of Christianity — namely, the Trinity and the Incarnation — whose defense by the Church was essential for the conversion of the Jews and the Moslems.¹

None of these subjects was new to the Medieval polemicist, who could invoke arguments established by the Church Fathers, as well as from the teachings of the Sages of the Talmud, as the case might be. Thus, we find in the Talmud that R. Johanan, referring to the polemic concerning the Biblical expression, “image and likeness” of God, as well as to certain evidently polytheistic texts, stated: “In all the passages which the *minim* have taken as grounds for their heresy, their refutation is found near at hand.”²

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1. A good part of the extensive literary production of Ramon Lull (c. 1232–1315) answers to this apologetic end. Cf. *Disputatio raymundi christiani et Homar sarraceni*, known also under the title of *Disputatio de fide catholica contra sarracenos et contra quoscumque negantes beatissimam Trinitatem et Incarnationem*, MS. 728 of the Biblioteca Universitaria de Barcelona, and the *Liber predicationis contra judeos*, ed. Jose Ma Millas Vallicrosa (Madrid–Barcelona, 1957).

2. Sanhedrin 38b.

We read in the Midrash concerning the dogma of the Trinity that R. Abbahu, interpreting the verse, “I am the first and I am the last and besides Me there is no God” (Isa. 44:6), says: “This is to be compared to a human king, who may rule, but he has a father or a brother or a son; but God says: I am not thus; ‘I am the first,’ for I have no father; ‘I am the last’ for I have no brother, and ‘besides Me there is no God,’ for I have no son.”³

Testimony to this fiery polemic appears in the words of Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) who, in his *Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo*, tells his Jewish interlocutor that he would in no way deny what he had already demonstrated — namely, that Christ was God’s Messiah — although he could not demonstrate that he was simultaneously also the son of the Creator of the Universe, the preexisting God, and a man born from a Virgin mother.⁴

In the body of this paper, we shall not limit ourselves to those anthropomorphisms found in the classical apologia — that is, the well-known arguments taken from Scriptures⁵ — but shall refer to the accusations taken from post-biblical Jewish literature, along the lines introduced by Agobard, Bishop of Lyon (779–840), who imputed to the sages strong anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms.⁶

II. Authors and Works Cited

In spite of the fact that Agobard was the first to level the accusation that the Jews had an anthropomorphic conception of God, referring not only to Scripture but also to post-biblical literature, he did not discuss specific sources, contenting himself to say *dicunt*. Nonetheless, it is clear that he was referring to the Midrashim, to the *aggadot*, and to the Talmud itself. This polemic was first initiated as such in Spain by the converted Jew Petrus Alfonsi (1062–c. 1140),⁷ who utilized his broad knowledge of Rabbinical literature, referring mainly to the Talmud and the midrashim.

Petrus Alfonsi did not treat the Midrash merely as an homiletic interpretation of Scriptures, but as if it were obligatory doctrine; that is, if these sources state that

3. Exodus Rabba 29:5. R. Abbahu makes another polemic allusion in J. Taanit 65b to the Incarnation and Ascension of Jesus.

4. PG VI, 579.

5. For example: Gen. 1:27, 8:21; Lev. 6:26; Deut. 11:12; II K, 19:17; Isa. 1:20, 59:17; Ps. 34:17.

6. Agobard, Episcopi Lugdunensis, *De iudaicis superstitionibus*, PL CIV. 86–87.

7. Author of the *Disciplina clericalis* (ed. A.G. Palencia, Madrid, 1948) and of the *Dialogus Petri, cognomento Alphonsi, ex iudaeo christiani et Moysi iudaei*, PL CVII 535–671, a work in which he defends his own conversion in a pretended dispute with himself.

God has a head and hands, this implies that Jews must believe that God has a bodily form.⁸ According to Alfonsi, this is the result of the Jewish sages' superficial interpretation of the words of the prophets, who read the aggadot as personifications of God, rather than as allegories, thereby contradicting Scripture: "Now your sages did not know God as they should have, therefore they erred in Him when they expounded the words of the prophets rather superficially. Thus, because of this and many other similar things, I said that I understand better the words of the prophets in their proper meaning."⁹ The *Dialogi* of Petrus Alfonsi, being one of the oldest apologias pertaining to our subject, was much used by later theologians and apologists, including Raymond Martini, Fr. Jaime of Voragine (1228–1298) in his *Flos Sanctorum*, as well as by Petrus Venerabilis of Cluny, who apparently largely based his *Contra Judaeorum inveteratam duritiem* upon the work of Petrus Alfonsi.¹⁰

Raymond Martini (1220–1285) expanded upon the work begun by Alfonsi, converting it into a source for the polemicists of later centuries. The second and third parts of his master-work, *Pugio Fidei adversus Mauros et Judaeos*,¹¹ completed in Barcelona in 1278, constituted a refutation of the fundamentals of Judaism by means of passages extracted from Rabbinical literature, cited in their original with such perfection and mastery¹² that some think that the Barcelonese Dominican might have been a converted Jew.

The theme of anthropomorphism reached its peak in Spain with Geronimo Santa Fe (Joshua Lorki), physician and former rabbi of Alcañiz, who in his treatise *De Iudaicis Erroribus ex Talmud*¹³ wished to discredit the teachings of the Talmud, which he considered the major obstacle to the conversion of the Jews, by attempting to demonstrate that the Jewish religion maintained an

8. *Dialogi*, 543.

9. *Ibid.*, 553. He continues: "Corporea accidentia quae Deo ascribitis, non nisi corporeae substantiae et rei imaginariae congruunt. Deum autem hujusmodi esse, indecens est credere. Non igitur convenit quae de Deo tanquam corporeo dicta sunt ad litteram solam exponere. Si enim quis hoc sentiat, et Scripturae pariter et rationi contrarius exstat."

10. A. Lukyn Williams, *Adversus Judaeos* (Cambridge, 1935), 393; Saul Lieberman, *Sheqi'in* (Jerusalem, 1939), 27–32 (Heb.); Ch. Merchavia, *ha-Talmud be-re'i ha-Nazrut* (Jerusalem, 1970), 149–152.

11. Ed. Corpsov (Leipzig, 1678).

12. For a discussion of how Martini applied Rabbinical sources to the Jews, pretending to back Christianity, see A. Neubauer, "Jewish Controversy and the Pugio Fidei", *Expositor* (3rd. ser.) 7 (1888), 81–106, 179–197 and R. Bonfil, "The Image of Judaism in Raymond Martini's *Pigion ha-Emunah*" (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 40 (1970–71), 360–371.

13. *Maxima Bibliotheca Veterum Patrum*, XXVI, cols. 545–554, of which we shall shortly publish a critical study. See also M. Orfali, "Jeronimo de Santa Fe and the Christian Polemic against the Talmud," *Annuario di Studi Ebraici* 10 (1980–1984), 157–178.

anthropomorphic conception of God in the worst sense of the word, with its conceptual limitations, an argument that he presents again in the Dispute of Tortosa (1413–1415),¹⁴ of which he was the main protagonist. In the course of this dispute, Geronimo made abundant use of Jewish sources, demonstrating his solid Rabbinical training as well as a wide knowledge of Christian exegesis, again attempting to argue that the doctrine of the midrashim was normative for Jews.

In the mid-15th century, the figure of Fr. Alfonso de Espina (1412?–1495) stands out for his aversion to the Jews; his possible Jewish origin is discussed by historians.¹⁵ In any event, his work, *Fortalitiūm Fidei contra Iudaeos, saracenos aliosque christianae fidei inimicos*, completed between 1459 and 1460, contains extensive documentation based upon Arabic and Hebrew texts, as well as on Christian theology; the third volume of this work, *De Bello Iudaeorum*, is exclusively devoted to anti-Jewish polemics.¹⁶ The anthropomorphic conception of God figures among his accusations against them, in which he presents a series of midrashim and aggadot illustrative of the human qualities attributed to God by the Talmudic sages. These midrashim were mostly borrowed from the works of Petrus Alfonsi, Raymond Martini and Geronimo de Santa Fe, as has been shown by B. Netanyahu.¹⁷

III. The Accusations

1. Improper Sentiments. According to our authors, the Jews desecrate and demean God by ascribing to Him human qualities, sometimes pejoratively so. Among the Talmudic teachings on God, Petrus Alfonsi cites one in which “they say that once every day He weeps, and two tears drop from His eyes and flow into the Great Sea, and they say this is the lightning coming down at night from the stars.¹⁸ According to that idea, God is said to be composed of the four elements, since tears are but abundant humidity descending down the head.”¹⁹

14. Cf. A. Pacios, *La Disputa de Tortosa*, 2 v. [I: Estudio histórico crítico-doctrinal; II: Actas (Madrid, 1957)].

15. Among others, the following biographers and historians consider him a Jewish convert: J. Rodríguez de Castro, *Biblioteca de los escritores Rabinos y Gentiles españoles y la de los Cristianos* (Madrid, 1781–86), 354; J. Amador de los Ríos, *Estudios históricos políticos y literarios sobre los judíos de España* (Madrid, 1948), 434; G.M. Vergara, *Ensayo bibliográfico de autores segovianos* (Guadalajara, 1903), 488; C. Sanchez-Albornoz, *España un enigma histórico* (Buenos Aires, 1948), 255; A. Castro, *España en su historia Cristianos, moros y judíos* (Buenos Aires, 1948), 355; H. Beinart, *Conversos on Trial by the Inquisition* (Tel Aviv, 1965), 17.

16. We quote from the Nuremberg ed., 1485.

17. In his article “Alfonso de Espina — was he a New Christian?” *PAAJR* 43 (1976), 124–138 and Appendix, 156–165. His analysis coincides with Baer’s theory that Espina’s knowledge of the Hebrew texts was deficient, and came exclusively from the authors whom we are studying.

18. *Dialogi*, 550. Cf. *Fortalitiūm*, III, consid. VIII, fatuitas 4, CLIVro and Berachot 59a.

19. *Dialogi*, *ibid.*; *Fortalitiūm*, loc. cit.

On this point, Alfonsi challenged his interlocutor Moyses (his Jewish counterpart, or possibly alter-ego, who appears throughout his polemical writings):

This same weeping which they shamefully ascribe to God is, they say, because of the captivity of the Jews, and because of His sorrow they assert that three times a day He roars like a lion and shakes the Heavens with his feet like heels in a press, or emits a sound like a humming dove, and He moves His head from side to side, and says in a lamenting voice: “Woe to me! Woe to me! That I have made my house into a desert and have burned My Temple, and exiled My children among the nations?²⁰ Woe to the father who has exiled his children and woe to the children who have been exiled from their father’s table!”²¹

Alfonsi also imputes to them the statement that God beats His feet against each other like a parturient, and that He claps His hands to console Himself.²² This argument is also extended by Raymond Martini, citing R. Ketina, who says that whenever the Holy One, Blessed be He, claps His hands this is for the captivity of His children, as stated in Ez. 21:7; he adds, citing R. Nathan, that the thunder is His sigh. R. Abba says that God presses His feet together beneath the Throne of Glory, which substitutes for the throne, based upon Is. 66:1.²³ Another midrash expressing God’s pain on the destruction of the Temple is brought by Raymond Martini, citing the aggadah in which, according to R. Samuel b. Nahman, a lamenting celestial voice was heard the day the Temple was destroyed.²⁴

Anger is another human feeling which, according to Petrus Alfonsi, the Jews attribute to God through their misinterpretation of Scripture: “You say that some days He gets angry once a day, citing as testimony David, who said, ‘the Lord judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked everyday’ (Ps. 7:12). You say that he gets angry in the first hour and that the reason for this anger is that at that time the wicked kings rise, wear their crowns and worship the sun. Do you not see how absurd is this sermon, and how silly are those who hold it, who are ignorant of the (true) nature of anger? For if they knew it, they would not feel thusly about God.”²⁵ Alfonsi adds to this the aggadic passages in which the Jews say “that nobody knew the exact time of His anger except for Balaam son of Beor”²⁶ and that “He burst into this anger because He cannot take revenge, for if He could His anger would cease”.

2. Corporeality. Attempting to demonstrate that Judaism asserts the corporeality

20. *Dialogi*, *ibid.*; *Pugio*, 347, 928; *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 547gh, *Actas*, 562.

21. *Dialogi*, 550–551. Cf. Berakhot 3a, 59a.

22. *Dialogi*, *ibid.*; *Fortalitium*, III, consid. VIII, fatuitas 4, CLIVro. Cf. Berakhot 59a.

23. *Pugio*, 473. Cf. Berakhot, *loc. cit.*

24. *Pugio*, 350–351. Cf. Bereshit Rabbati of R. Moshe ha-Darshan, par. 73 on Gen. 30:38.

25. *Dialogi*, 549; *Fortalitium*, III, consid. VIII, CLIII vo-CLIVro.

26. *Dialogi*, 550; *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 549h; *Fortalitium*, *loc. cit.* Cf. Berakhot 7a; Rashi on Sanhedrin 105b and Avodah Zarah 4a.

of God, Petrus Alfonsi makes polemical use of the midrash in which the Talmudists allegorically state that God wears tefillin:

About the tefillin (corrigias), which according to you He has on His head, I put before you two things: His tefillin are either His or someone else's. If they are His, then you have a divided God; but if they are of another one, the other is either a creator or a creature. Now, if he is a creator, then there are two creators, and if it is a creature, then a certain creature is greater than a certain part of the creator, which is not logical. Again I ask: does He wear them on the head and on the arm out of some necessity or for no reason? If it is for some necessity, it means that the creator is in need of some creature, which is also illogical. Well then, you might as well openly recognize what I have proved to you with the arguments you have requested, namely, how lowly is this matter of tefillin in which you believe.²⁷

Geronimo de Santa Fe, giving another example of the anthropomorphic conception of God in the Talmud, cites the midrash stating that the Holy One Blessed be He, wrapped in a tallit like the prayer-leader, revealed to Moses the order of prayers, saying to him: "Whenever Israel will sin, and will turn to Me and will pray in this way, I shall forgive them."²⁸ The Midrash concerning God's supposed participation in the burial of Moses is also cited by Petrus Alfonsi and by Geronimo de Santa Fe to show that God was thought to need purification, just like a human being. To this end, they quote the Talmudic discussion: "With what did He purify Himself? Should you say with water, as it is said: 'Who hath measured the waters with the hollow of His hand' (Isa. 40:12)? Said R. Abbahu: 'He purified Himself with fire.' Is purification by fire effective? He answered: 'Exactly so, most of the purification should be done with fire, as it is written: 'That which resists fire, you will wash with water.'" (Num. 31:32)"²⁹ Yet another example of the corporeality of God is found in the midrash according to which God created five men, each one of whom resembled Him in a different respect: Samson, in his strength; Saul, in his beauty (*cervicis pulchritudine*); Absalom, in his hair; King Zedekiah, in his eyes; and King Assa, in his feet. According to the midrash, they were fated to die because of these similarities, from which Geronimo de Santa Fe and Alfonso de Espina inferred that God was envious of them.³⁰

27. *Dialogi*, 543; *Fortalitium*, III, consid. VIII, CLIIro-vo. Cf. Berakhot 6a.

28. *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 548f and *Actas* 548; *Fortalitium*, III consid. VIII, CLVI vo. God's prayer has been an object of discussion since Pedro Alfonso, *Dialogi*, 541; and *Pugio* 506. Cf. Rosh ha-Shana 17b and Pesiqta Rabbati 15:21: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl".

29. *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 548d-e; *Fortalitium*, III, consid. VIII, CLVIro. They bring two accusations referring to God: a) that they considered Him a priest, and b) His need of purification through immersion (tevillah) before Moses' burial. Cf. Sanhedrin 39a.

30. *Ibid.*, 548f: "Patet ergo quia invadebat eis"; *Fortalitium*, III consid. VIII, CLVI vo. Cf. Sota 10a.

Raymond Martini argues from the statement of R. Eliezer in the Mekhilta, who teachers: “From whence do you say that a mid-servant saw at the Sea (i.e., during the Exodus from Egypt) what Isaiah and Ezekiel never saw? It is said, ‘The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God’ (Ez. 12:11). But when God revealed Himself at the Sea, it was not necessary for anyone in Israel to ask ‘who is this King?’ for as soon as they saw Him, they recognized Him, opening their mouths and saying, ‘This is my God and I will glorify Him.’ (Ex. 15:3)”³¹

Another striking example of the corporeality of God in other midrashim brought by Martini shows God as riding. According to a midrash aggadah relating the tasks with which God occupies Himself, the Talmudistic ask: “What does He do by night? You may say, the kind of thing He does by day, or you may say that he rides on one of his light cherubs and crosses eighteen thousand worlds, for it is said: ‘The chariots of God are thousands upon thousands’ (Ps. 68:19),”³² or the midrash on Cant. 1:9: “‘I have compared you to a mare in the chariots of Pharaoh.’ Pharaoh rode a golden horse and a black one, and according to this passage it may be said that God rode a white, black or golden horse, since it is said (Heb. 3:15): ‘Thou didst walk through the sea with thine horses.’”³³ He quotes to similar purpose the midrash in which R. Johanan says, “What is meant by (Zach. 1:8 ff), ‘And I saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse and he stood among the myrtle trees,’ etc.?... I saw in the night: God, the Holy One Blessed be He, wished to turn the world into night, but behold a man riding a red horse. It is not a man in this place, but it is God, the Holy One Blessed be He, as it is said (Ex. 15:3), ‘The Lord is a man of war,’ etc. ‘Among the myrtles.’ These are not myrtles but the Righteous...”³⁴

3. God’s Presence. According to the authors quoted, the Divine Presence is said to be limited both on earth and in Heaven; thus, for instance, Petrus Alfonsi taunts Moyses in this respect, saying: “Again your doctors assert in the Book of Doctrines that God is present in the west, and they confirm it on the authority of Nehemiah, saying ‘this host of heaven kneel to you’ (Neh. 9:6).”³⁵

Raymond Martini refers to the midrash on the verse: “And I will walk among you, and I will be your God and ye shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12). The Sages interpret this by means of the following parable:

31. *Pugio*, 731–732. Cf. Mekhilta Shira 84.

32. *Pugio*, 931. Cf. Avodah Zara 3b.

33. *Pugio* 733. Cf. Shir ha-Shirim Rabba 1:9; 10:64.

34. *Pugio*, 846. Cf. Sanhedrin 93a.

35. *Dialogi*, 543; *Fortalitium*, III, consid. VIII, fatuitas 2, CLIIvo–CLIIIro–vo. Cf. Baba Batra 25a: R. Abbahu states: “The Shekhinah is in the west” but according to R. Oshaya and R. Yishmael: “The Shekhinah is everywhere”.

It is like a king who went walking with his gardener in an apple orchard, and that gardener frequently separated himself from the king. The king said to him: "Why do you separate yourself from me? Look, I am exactly like you." The same will happen when the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will walk with the righteous in Paradise — that is to say in that garden of pleasure — in the time to come, but the righteous, seeing Him, will fear His presence. Then the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will tell them, "Why do you fear my presence? Look, I am exactly like you..."³⁶

In the same sense, he quotes the well-known midrash brought by R. Eliezer in the name of R. Helbo, stating that in the Time to Come God will be in the center of a circle made by the Righteous in Paradise, who will all point with their finger, saying, 'this is the Lord for whom we have waited, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation' (Isa. 25:9).³⁷ Geronimo de Santa Fe, claiming to show that the Sages of the Talmud contract the Divine Presence in their teachings, quotes the midrash in which R. Hiyya b. Ami states in the name of Ulla: "After the destruction of the Temple, the Holy One, blessed be He, was left with naught in the world but the four cubits of the halakhah."³⁸

Raymond Martini brings out another aspect of this limitation in citing a midrash describing the daily routine of God: "R. Judah says in the name of Rav: The day consists of twelve hours; during the first quarter of the day, the Holy One Blessed be He sits and studies the Law; during the second quarter, He sits and judges the whole world; when He sees that the whole world is guilty, he descends from the seat of Justice and sits on the seat of Mercy; during the third quarter he sits and feeds the whole world from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin. During the fourth quarter he sits and plays with Leviathan, as it is said, 'that Leviathan, whom You have made to play with therein' (Ps. 104:26)."³⁹

4. Denial of Omnipotence. Such a typically human activity as prayer is also used as an argument against the omnipotence of God. Thus, Petrus Alfonsi alludes to the midrash from which it is deduced that the Holy One Blessed Be He, prays,⁴⁰ stating that, according to the Talmud, God daily prays that His Mercy overcome His anger and that He approach His people with kindness. Our author interrogates Moyses:

36. *Pugio*, 732. Cf. Sifra, c. 3, IIIb.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 548b. Cf. Berakhot 8a.

39. *Pugio*, 930; *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 548b–549a, 550f; *Fortalitiium* III, consid. VIII, CLVIro. Cf. Avodah Zara 3b and Shabbat 107b.

40. *Dialogi*, 551. Cf. Berakhot 7a. According to Isa. 56:7: "I will bring them to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer." It is not said "in His house of prayer", but "in My house of prayer".

Tell me, O Moyses, when God prays, whom, I ask you, does He worship? Himself or someone else? If someone else, then the one He worships is mightier than He. If Himself, then either He is able to do what He prays for, or not! If He is not able, then He worships Himself vainly, but if He really is able, then either He wants what he prays for, or not. If He does not want it, He prays for nothing. If He wants it — it is not necessary to pray. Do you not see then, O Moyses, how completely alien these people are to Divine knowledge?⁴¹

According to Petrus Alfonsi, the Jews' anthropomorphic conception of God goes so far as to attribute imperfections to the creation, as in the statement: "When God created the firmament, He did not want to complete it, and left the quarter facing north open; His purpose was, that if at any time anyone would appear and want to make himself God, He would say to him: If you are a God like Me, close this space in the firmament."⁴² Raymond Martini cites the midrash on the injustice done by God to the moon, and His need to expiate for it:

R. Simeon b. Pazi asks: it is written (Gen. 1:16), "And God made two great lights," and it is written "and the lesser light." The moon said before the Holy One, Blessed Be He: "Sovereign of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to wear one crown?" The Holy One Blessed be He told her: "Go then, make thyself smaller." She said before God: "Sovereign of the Universe, because I have said something that is proper, must I then make myself smaller?"... (There follows an argument between God and the moon) So the Holy One Blessed Be He said, "Go and bring an atonement for Me for making the moon smaller." R. Simeon b. Lakish said: "That is the he-goat of the New Moon, about which it is said (Num. 28:15), 'for a sin offering unto the Lord.' The Holy One Blessed Be He, said: 'Let this he-goat be an atonement for Me, for making the moon smaller.'" This from the Talmud.⁴³

God's lack of wisdom is another result of the anthropomorphic interpretations of the Sages, as emphasized by Geronimo de Santa Fe, quoting the legendary dispute in the Heavenly Academy on a certain case of leprosy. In this dispute, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, rules one way, while the entire Academy decides the other way. Finally, Rabba b. Nahmani mediates, saying: "the halakhah follows the former in cases of leprosy, the latter in cases of impurity."⁴⁴ Geronimo refers in the same sense to another halakhic dispute in which the Holy One Blessed Be He is overruled and answers with a smile: "My children have defeated me, My children have defeated Me."⁴⁵

41. *Dialogi*, 551. Concludes: "Si vero verum est Deum pro vobis plorare, ut leonem rugire, coelum pedibus pulsare, more columbae gemere, caput movere, et prae nimio dolore heu mihi clamare, ipsum praeterea prae dolore pedes collidere, manibus plaudere, et quotidie ut vestri misereatur orare, quid ergo vestram ne liberemini impedit captivitatem? Au a vobis, an ab ipso procedit haec mora?" Cf. *Fortalitium*, III, consid. VIII, fatuitas 4, CLIVro.

42. *Dialogi*, 564. *Fortalitium*, III, consid. VIII, fatuitas 5, CLIIIvo–CLVro. Cf. Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer, III.

43. *Pugio*, 931; *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 548c; *Fortalitium*, III, consid. VIII, CLVIro. Cf. Hullin 60b and Shevuot 9a.

44. *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 550g. Cf. Baba Mezia 86a.

45. *De Iudaicis erroribus*, 547d. Cf. Baba Mezia 59b.

Petrus Alonsi criticizes harshly the negation of omnipotence, just as he detaches himself from the teachings of the Sages of the Talmud: “You attribute to God a lack of wisdom by saying that He has determined and sworn something which He subsequently regrets having sworn and confirmed.⁴⁶ The best sign of this is that He constantly grieves for you in various ways, for had He known it He would not have decreed it. Therefore, according to you, He lacked wisdom. And if this is so, you should forgive Him, and not bother Him with constant prayers, for the more you pray, the more you renew His pain, and the less you worry Him by stopping your prayers the more you allow Him to console Himself. But say to me, Moyses, please tell me: is there any one who believes himself obliged to believe those doctors and conform his faith to their treatments.”⁴⁷

IV. The Phenomenon of Anthropomorphism: Necessity and Limitations

Anthropomorphism is manifested to some extent in all monotheistic religions, as is inevitable in our human condition, for our knowledge, stemming as it does from the senses, cannot directly apprehend or understand the spiritual being of God. For this reason, no monotheistic religion has been able to completely free itself of the tendency to mold the image of its Divinity from human elements; absolute purification of the deity from anthropomorphisms, or at least from anthropopathisms, would be the end of religion and mark its transformation into philosophy (i.e., pantheism).

Thus, both the Old and New Testaments abound in anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms,⁴⁸ which are already criticized by the prophets, as may be inferred from the tendency towards de-anthropomorphism in Amos and Hosea.⁴⁹ This process is continued by the *soferim*, who revised the text of the Scriptures by modifying the excessively anthropomorphic sense of certain expressions, at times by the mere change or interpretation of a vowel. For instance “seeing the face of God” is transformed into “appearing before God” (הִרְאָה instead of הִרְאָה), while in

46. *Dialogi*, 552. Cf. Baba Batra 74a and Rashi’s commentary.

47. *Dialogi*, *ibid*.

48. See, for example: *face* (Ex. 33:11; Matt. 18:10; I Pet. 3:12); *eyes* (Deut. 11:12; Gen. 38:7; Ben Sira 23:19; I Pet. 3:12); *nose* (Deut. 33:22); *mouth* (Deut. 8:3; Isa. 1:20; Matt. 4:4); *ears* (Num. 11:18; 14:28; II Sam. 22:7; I Pet. 3:12); *hand or arm* (Ex. 3:20; 6:6; 7:4–5; 9:3; Deut. 2:15; 4:34; Luke 1:51; John 12:38; Acts 13:17); *heart* (Gen. 6:6; Hos. 11:8; Isa. 63:4; Acts 13:22); *soul* (Lev. 26:11); *feet* (Ex. 24:10; Isa. 60:13; 66:1; Matt. 5:35; 22:44). Likewise, anthropopathisms such as: *love* (Deut. 4:37; 7:8, 13; 10:15, 18; 23:6); *hate* (Deut. 9:28; 12:31); *anger* (Deut. 1:34, 37; 4:21; 9:8, 19:20; I Sam. 5:25; II Sam. 24:1); *compassion* (Ex. 33:19; Deut. 13:18; 30:3); *repentance* (Gen. 6:6–7; Ex. 32:12, 14); *jealousy* (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Num. 25:11; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; 25:19); *abhorrence* (Lev. 26:11; 30:44) and other active verbs of the roots attributed to God.

49. J. Alonso Díaz, “Proceso antropomorizante y desantropomorizante en la formación del concepto bíblico de Dios”, *La Idea de Dios en la Biblia* [Semana Bíblica Española. 28. (Madrid: CSIC, 1971), 147–159.

the LXX פני ה' (the face of God) and עיני ה' (the eyes of God) are changed to prepositions. Generally, however, anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms are translated literally, with the exceptions of I K. 8:46; Jud. 10:16; 2:18 and 15:15, 11.⁵⁰

The Aramaic Targumim of Onkelos and Jonathan went much further in completing the process of de-anthropomorphism. To accomplish this purpose, they continued the process initiated by the *soferim* (the change of verbs into the passive; the particle “in front of” interposed before the Divine Name; etc.); transformed certain expressions; and introduced substitute expressions for others, such as Glory (*yeqara*), Presence (*shekhinah*), Word (*memra*), etc.⁵¹ By this method, they succeeded in eliminating whatever similarity to man there could be supposed to be in God, which would have been unsuited to God’s transcendence and spiritual nature.⁵²

The Midrash and Aggadah abounds in anthropomorphisms, as does Scripture. It is interesting, however, that alongside this tendency to anthropomorphize God, we find an opposing, counterbalancing tendency. On the one hand, the school of R. Akiba and his disciples (adhering to the *peshat*) accepted anthropomorphisms; on the other hand, the rationalist school headed by R. Ishmael defined the Divine attributes as terms used to describe certain qualities analogically, teaching on this point that “the Torah speaks in the language of man.”⁵³ Aggadic literature thus preserves the two tendencies to which the idea of God was subjected in the Bible; in the same way as the idea of God became deeper and purer throughout the Old Testament, so do harsh criticisms appear in the halakhic midrashim, purifying the anthropomorphic notions of the aggadic midrash which are not seen as binding from the Jewish theological view-point.⁵⁴

50. Ch. T. Fritsch., *The Anti-anthropomorphisms of the Greek Pentateuch* (Princeton, 1943).

51. D. Muñoz León, “Soluciones de los Targumim del Pentateuco a los antropomorfismos,” *La Idea de Dios en la Biblia* (op. cit.), 167–177 and notes. See also R. Saadya Gaon, *Emunot ve-De’ot*, 49 and Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:27, who emphasize the importance of the Targumim translators in the anti-anthropomorphic process.

52. As, for example, Onkelos uses to translate the Divine Name by the circumlocutions דחלתא ‘דה; מימרא דה; יקרא דה’ and the sight or the wisdom of God by: וגלי קידמיה. God descended: ואתגלי and heard: שמרע קדמוהי.

53. Berakhot 31b. Cf. Hullin 4b and Maimonides, *Guide* I:26, 29, 33, 46, 47, 53.

54. Concerning the theological value of these sources, Lukyn Williams says (op. cit.), epilogue, 417–418: “Jews never attributed to such midrashic and haggadic methods the force of proof in the strict sense. Interpretations derived by Midrash and Haggada had, no doubt, their own benefit for devout souls, but could not possibly serve as proofs to establish any doctrine”. Cf. I. Heinemann, *Darkei ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem, 1949); *idem.*, “Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature”, *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), 100–123.

Indeed, two of the leading authorities of the Middle Ages, one of whom preceded the period in which the polemic under discussion here developed, distinguished between these two groups of midrashim, adding a totally anti-anthropomorphic dimension. Saadyah b. Joseph Gaon (882–942), referring to primitive anthropomorphism, stated that, when the Bible mentions the head of God, it refers to His sublimity; to the eye, it refers to His providence; to the face, to favor or disfavour; to the hand, power; the heart, compassion; the feet, submission or conquest, etc.⁵⁵

Maimonides (1135–1204) severely condemned as heretics any Jew who believed in the bodily form of God in any way; those who say that there is one God, but that He has body and form, “have no place in the World to Come, but are cut off and lost and judged on their great evil and sin forever and ever.”⁵⁶

In his *Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead*, Maimonides criticizes those Teachers who maintained an anthropomorphic idea of God, stating that “those who are totally lost and outcast consider themselves to be the Sages of Israel, and these are (in reality) the dumbest of the human race and more mistaken in their way than animals; their minds are filled with the craziness of old women, and their imagination is wrong like blind men and women.”⁵⁷ Maimonides was recognized by his contemporaries, as by subsequent generations, as the final spokesman of the mission of purifying the image of God in Rabbinic literature.⁵⁸

V. Evaluation of the Arguments

An echo of the accusations of the polemicists with which we have dealt here appears already in Moses Ibn Ezra (ca. 1055–ca. 1135), who laments:

We cannot defend ourselves against the Gentiles who rule us, when they see these metaphors in the Torah and say that we believe that they are a true description and not metaphors, and because of the strong hand they hold over us we cannot silence them with clear answers... Jewish dissenters, too, have joined them in this evil thought in their wickedness and impertinence, talking highly on the words of the holy ones, when they saw that most of their saying were metaphors.⁵⁹

55. S. Rawidowicz, “Saadya’s Purification of the Idea of God,” in his *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia, 1974), pp. 246–268.

56. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:6–7.

57. *Kovez Teshuvot ha-Rambam ve-iggerotav* (ed. Lichtenberg), II 8a. Cf. *Guide* 49a and H.A. Wolfson, “Maimonides on the Unity and incorporeality of God”, *JQR* 56 (1965), 124 ff.

58. *Teshuvot ha-Rashba* (Jerusalem, 1976), 57b, where he establishes that his work makes clear forever that the Creator has neither dimension nor image. He also mentions the influence of Maimonides on the anti-anthropomorphic ideas of Nahmanides; cf. *Teshuvot Moshe Alshakar*, 117.

59. *Liqqutim mi-Sefer 'Arugat ha-Bosem le-R. Moshe b. Ezra*, in *Zion* II (1802) (ed. Just Kreinzach), p. 137.

The polemical writings of Profiat Duran (d. 1414) include a critique of Christianity containing a refutation of these accusations, alongside censure of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation.⁶⁰

R. Judah b. Barzillai al-Bargeloni, rabbi of Barcelona during the late 11th and early 12th century, emphasizes the Maimonidean principles of faith, and implores Divine vengeance for these calumnies: “We see the dissenters who persecute the Jews and are among us, who dare say that the Sages of Israel gave our Creator a real form and body, which is blasphemous, and none of the holy race think it to be true. God will take revenge against these wicked heretics, His revenge and ours, that of His servants Israel who believe He is One.”⁶¹

The renowned Bible commentator, Abraham Ibn Ezra (1164–1089) declared that “The Torah and the Sages have spoken of the Creator in human terms, as parables and examples so that the ear can hear what it can hear, and all that is said in the Torah and the Prophets on the honor of God is just to make it easy on the ear.”⁶²

The true objective of the Talmudic Sages in propounding different anthropomorphic midrashim was essentially didactic. Thus, when they say that God has compassion for the suffering of His children, their intention is to inculcate compassion; the midrashim in which God studies the Law, or wears tefillin, or prays, are likewise aimed to educate people towards the study of the Law, or towards the fulfillment of these commandments. The same is true of God’s self-purification, penitence, etc.⁶³

The Christian authors discussed here utilized the authority that could be attributed to the midrashim and the aggadot in order to strengthen their polemic against Judaism, forgetting (or ignoring) the fact that the manifestations of God in imagery are far more central in the religion which they themselves defended. As Ireneo himself stated: “Because in former centuries we have said that Man had

60. In his essay, *Kelimat ha-Goyim*[The Reproach of the Gentiles, ed. F. Talmage (Jerusalem, 1981), chap. 2 and 3. On Duran’s anti-Christian polemic generally, see F. Talmage, “The Polemical Writings of Profiat Duran,” *Immanuel* 13 (1981), pp. 69–85. Cf. H. Crescas, “The Refutation of the Christian Articles of Faith” (Heb.), in A. Posnanski, *Ha-Zofeh me-Erez Hagar* 3 (1914), 103, 149, 171.

61. W. Bacher, “Materiex pour servir a l’Histoire de l’exegese biblique en Espagne,” *REJ* 17 (1888), 279, n. 5. Cf., with the tenacious answer of Shimon b. Zemach Duran (ca. 1361–1444) in his *Qeshet u-Magen*, 20a and *Seirat Emunat ha-Nozrim*, 26a.

62. W. Bacher, *ibid.*, 281.

63. Cf. *Sotah* 5a; *Sukkah* 5a; *Mekhilta* 4; *Shabbat* 133b; *Sotah* 14a; *Sifra* 11:22; *Haggigah* 16b; *Berakhot* 6a.

been made in the image of God, but this did not manifest itself, because the Word, in the image of which Man had been made, was still invisible. That is why he easily lost the likeness. But when the Word of God became flesh it confirmed both, because not only did the image appear in its truth-made-person whose image it was, but it also firmly established the likeness, making man similar to the invisible Father through the visible word.”⁶⁴

Raymond Martini and Geronimo de Santa Fe openly admitted that they did not believe in anything in the midrash apart from that which favoured them, and only insofar as it served their polemical aims.⁶⁵ They were not ignorant of the actual place of the midrashim and the aggadot in Jewish belief. It is clear from the Dispute of Tortosa that these same Jews considered as imaginary and inauthentic certain sources and other passages of the Talmud and Rabbinic literature, stating that they are under no obligation to believe them.⁶⁶ By ignoring the clear distinction between midrash aggadah and midrash halakhah, our authors made it appear as if the aggadot are imbued with a theological authority which in fact they have not.

To evaluate properly the scope of the haggadic midrash, we shall conclude with the words of H. Slonimsky:

The Midrash is an art put to the service of religion, but above all art. It is here that the repressed creative instinct of Judaism flourishes, finding absolute liberty and possibility of expansion. The vital and fecund principle which flourishes in this infinite garden is a repressed instinct. Plastic arts were forbidden to Jews because the Divinity could not be represented by statues or paintings, and the mythoplastic desires were generally badly viewed. But the creative fantasy of the myth and of the mytho-poetic desire, have found here an escape value. And so we see how this repressed and stumped force emerges here in its infinite plenitude, from simple stories to images of tragic beauty and the supreme flight of creative fantasy.⁶⁷

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64. Irenaei. “Contra haereses” (V, 16,2); *PG* VII, 1167–1168.

65. *Pugio*, 432; *Actas*, ses. 12, 82; 13, 93.

66. “Hanc enim auctoritatem et quam plurima alias similes, quas in pluribus locis libri almut, velut fabulosas iudei nec auctenticas nec auctorizabiles iudicant... et ymo, protestatione premissa, respondet iudeus quod huic verbo vel simili, nullatenus fidem prestare tenetur”. *Actas*, ses 10, 65.

67. “Levendo el Midrash”, cited by E. Iusim, “El Talmud”, in *Cuadernos de Temas Judaicos* (Buenos Aires, 1966), 9.