

# IN GOD'S IMAGE

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*Myth, Theology, and Law  
in Classical Judaism*



YAIR LORBERBAUM



## **In God's Image**

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The idea of creation in the Divine image has a long and complex history. While its roots apparently lie in the royal myths of Mesopotamia and Egypt, it was the biblical account of creation presented in the first chapters of Genesis and its interpretation in early rabbinic literature that created the basis for the perennial inquiry of the concept in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Yair Lorberbaum reconstructs the idea of the creation of humanity in the image of God (*zelem Elohim*) in the Midrash and the Talmud. He analyzes meanings attributed to *zelem Elohim* in early rabbinic exegesis and thought, as expressed in Aggadah, and explores its application in the normative, legal, and ritual realms, namely in Halakhah.

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## Preface

In this book I have attempted to reconstruct the meaning attributed by the early Sages, or tannaim (10–220 CE), to the idea of the creation of man in the Divine image (Hebrew: *zelem Elohim*; henceforth referred to as Imago Dei, *zelem*, or “creation in the Divine image,” “the image of God,” or simply “the Image”). Our inquiry will focus upon two interdependent axes, one ideational-theological and the other normative-juridical. My goal is not only to present the meaning attributed to *zelem Elohim* in rabbinic thought as expressed in the aggadah, but also to demonstrate its practical application in the legal and ritual realm of halakhah. But halakhah and aggadah are not two separate, autonomous realms. On the contrary, the more deeply we delve into the literary sources of aggadah and of those halakhot dealing with the creation of man in God’s image, the more apparent it becomes that these two realms are inextricably intertwined on both the literary and the conceptual levels, each illuminating and explicating the other.

The idea of creation in the Divine image has a long and complex history; it was discussed and expounded over the generations by numerous thinkers belonging to a variety of circles and philosophical disciplines. While its roots appear to lie in the royal myths of Mesopotamia and Egypt, it was the Biblical account of creation presented in the first chapters of Genesis that provided the basis for the perennial inquiry into this concept in the Judeo-Christian tradition. From the Bible, the idea found its way into various sources in Second-Temple literature, and it was given a broad and original treatment in the writings of Philo of Alexandria. The concept of Imago Dei subsequently emerged as a powerful idea in rabbinic literature, particularly in its tannaitic stratum. Contemporaneously, it also appeared in early Christian writings, initially in Paul’s epistles and thereafter in early patristic literature. From that point on, it emerged as a pivotal foundation of Judeo-Christian thought and theology over the centuries, albeit with ever-changing meanings and implications and varying degrees of significance and centrality.

If the *zelem* idea seemingly all but disappeared from Jewish thought during the amoraic period (third–sixth centuries CE in Palestine and Babylonia), and even more so in the Geonic period (ninth–eleventh centuries), it reappeared at the forefront of medieval Jewish thought. Maimonides begins his philosophical work, *Guide*, with a comprehensive explication of Imago Dei, one that had a profound affect on numerous aspects of his philosophy and served as the basis for many of his halakhic formulations. Parallel to its development in Jewish philosophy, the concept enjoyed a renaissance in the early Kabbalah, constituting a basic thought structure in the Kabbalistic-mystical schools of Provence and Spain from the twelfth century on, when it was adopted by such mystics as Rabad (R. Abraham b. David of Posquières) and his son, Isaac the Blind, followed by the Gerona Kabbalists (R. Ezra, R. Azriel, and R. Asher b. David), Nahmanides, and his disciples. It likewise appears as a central doctrine in the Zohar literature. The idea was equally powerful in Lurianic Kabbalah, in Hasidism, in the writings of the Gaon of Vilna, and in those of R. Hayyim of Volozhin – to mention but a few of the schools and major figures of Jewish thought from the fifteenth century onwards – nor is it absent from modern Jewish thought.

Imago Dei, in its varieties and offshoots, is a constitutive concept in Christian thought as well. As mentioned, it is central in the writings of the early Church Fathers, as well as among later Church Fathers, such as St. Ambrose, St. Athanasius, and St. Augustine, as well as in St. Thomas Aquinas, in such Reformation figures as Luther and Calvin, and among Christian theologians from the Enlightenment until the twentieth century.

Nor is the influence of Imago Dei confined to theological and religious writings. From the Judeo-Christian tradition it found its way into the European Enlightenment, and it is also present in contemporary Israeli cultural and political discourse.

The idea of creation in God's image is a crossroad at which fundamental issues in religious thought intersect. It integrates conceptions relating to God and his attributes (theology) and to man (anthropology) with a conception of representation (relating to the icon, *zelem*), illuminating the connections among them. Indeed, there is perhaps no other idea that brings humanity and God into such a close "encounter." Moreover, the concept of man being made in the divine image bears directly upon ethics, jurisprudence, and halakhah, to the extent that it has been argued that these are its central foci. In this book I have endeavored to shed light upon the varied and complex aspects of the concept of *zelem Elohim* in tannaitic sources, devoting particular attention to its halakhic ramifications. My decision to study this topic in tannaitic literature, specifically, was based not only on the immense wealth of ideas found there, but on the fact that, insofar as we are concerned with the concept of man's creation in the image of God, tannaitic literature serves as the source and foundation for all of the later development of ideas and norms in the Jewish tradition.

This book originated in a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, subsequently published in expanded form in Hebrew under the title *Zelem Elohim: Halakhah ve-Aggadah* (Jerusalem–Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004). The present English translation is based upon that version, albeit in somewhat abridged form, omitting primarily those sections and notes which were deemed less relevant to the English-speaking reader. My thanks go to Michael Praver, who translated the text, and to Yehonatan Chipman, who edited it.

Quotations of Biblical texts were taken from the Revised Standard Version. Other classical Jewish texts – Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, etc., – were taken from standard translations, as cited in the notes. In both cases we took the liberty of altering the published translation in light of our own understanding of the texts and their use in the context of our discussion.



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Yair Lorberbaum  
Jerusalem  
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# Introduction

## I. “BELOVED IS MAN, FOR HE WAS CREATED IN THE IMAGE” – THE PROBLEM

He [R. Akiva] also said: Beloved is man, for he was created in the image [of God]; a greater love was bestowed upon him, [that] he was created in the image, for it is written, “In the image of God made He man.” (Genesis 9:6)<sup>†</sup>

According to R. Akiva, not only was man created in the Divine image – a factual Biblical determination; he adds that his being created in God’s image is the reason for man’s being beloved: furthermore, “he was accorded a greater love.” To prove this conclusion, R. Akiva cites the verse “In the image of God made He man.” R. Akiva’s statement raises questions on a number of levels. We will begin with the exegetical one: How does man’s creation in the divine image teach us that man is beloved? Moreover, who is it (he) that loves him and accorded him that “greater love”: man, God, or perhaps both?

R. Akiva’s homily is based on a dual emphasis: (a) God’s creation of man, and (b) his being created in His image. In Akiva’s view, the mere fact that God created man attests to His affection for him, for it is only natural for God to have particular affection for a creature that was shaped, by divine fiat, in His own image. As Rashi comments *ad loc.*, rewording Akiva’s dictum: “With greater love did He love him, for He created him in His own image.” This provides an answer to the second question as well: It is *God* who has bestowed this greater love on man. And why does *man* merit God’s greater love? Because God loves the one who resembles Him – the one He created in His own image. The core of R. Akiva’s dictum is God’s love for Himself and, by extension, His love for those who resemble Him, as a result of which “man is [more] beloved” than other creatures. It thus follows that R. Akiva’s observation is at least as

<sup>†</sup> M. Avot 3.14.

much concerned with God's love for man and the reason for that love as it is with the status of human beings as being beloved.<sup>2</sup>

This dictum raises questions of a more general nature. First: how did R. Akiva understand the term *zelem* ("image")? What type of relationship between Man and God does it convey? Second, what is meant by the term "beloved" (*haviv*): Is it a component of a sort of festive, abstract encomium to mankind and his intrinsic value, or was R. Akiva giving concrete expression to the Creator's love for mankind, in the sense of God's love being the source of a normative imperative? In other words, how serious was R. Akiva in his statement? Was it to remain an abstract ideal, "an idea destined to exert an influence only momentarily, not one sustained over time," to use Zunz's characterization of the Aggadah,<sup>3</sup> or does it reflect a worldview with normative – that is, halakhic – ramifications as to how life ought to be lived? If the idea does in fact have halakhic ramifications, in what realms is its influence felt? What was the meaning conferred to it in the halakhic context and what was its significance in the overall spectrum of halakhic and theological principles?

The central argument that I have attempted to substantiate in this book is that R. Akiva's teaching encapsulates a comprehensive worldview. R. Akiva's fundamental conception was that the Biblical idea of creation in the divine image means that the human being is an *eikon* of God – an icon in the sense prevalent in the ancient world, particularly in the Hellenistic and Roman cultures.<sup>4</sup> According to that view, the object, usually a divinity, is not only represented by its image, but is actually *present* in that image.

The uniqueness of Akiva's understanding, compared with the Hellenistic-Roman mindset and practices, does not lie in the meaning he ascribed to the term *zelem*. Both approaches shared the iconic understanding of the term, ascribing it an ontology of presence. The difference lies in the subject to which the term was applied. In the pagan world it typically referred to the relationship between a god and an icon made of wood, stone, silver, or gold. On the other hand, R. Akiva and his school – who according to certain midrashic sources were continuing an ancient tradition that dated back to Hillel the Elder – employ it to describe the relationship between God and man. According to that tradition, the human being – every human being – is an image of God, a veritable "extension" of the Deity.

Our reconstruction of the idea of Imago Dei in tannaitic literature demonstrates that it developed into a complex theosophical thought structure, diverse

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of R. Akiva's statement, see *infra*, Chapter 7.III.

<sup>3</sup> The citation is taken from Leopold Zunz in his description of "aggadah". See Zunz, *Sermons*, 32: 6.

<sup>4</sup> The Biblical parallels to the Greek term *eikon* (*ikonin* in rabbinic Hebrew) are *zelem* and *demut*. For its semantic parallels in Akkadian and other Semitic languages, see Loewenstamm, "Beloved," and Clines, "The Image of God," 74. The claim that the Biblical concept of *zelem* has a similar iconic meaning has some merit and will be examined later in this study. In general, the vast corpus of exegesis that has grown up around the Imago Dei passage in Genesis does not explicate it in that way. See, however, Barr, "Theophany," 38.