1 | Dissimilar Similarities

This chapter takes its cue from a Hebrew liturgical poem (*piyyut*) composed at some point during the sixth century by the Jewish poet Yannai. Recently translated into English and analyzed by Lieber, the poem offers a good introduction to the broader set of issues that this chapter and the rest of the book are going to address. The poem belongs to a genre of Hebrew liturgical poetry known as the *qedushta*.[1] It was composed to accompany the reading of Exodus 19:6 on one of the Sabbaths of the Pentateuch's triennial reading cycle, customary among the Jewish communities of late Roman and early Byzantine Palestine. In correspondence with the reading that it accompanies, the poem deals with the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai and the encounter between God and the people of Israel that took place in the process. The opening stanza of the *qedushta* depicts the events at Sinai as a wedding ceremony between God and Israel. The stanza reaches its climax with a statement addressed directly to God: "[T]hose who cleave to You, You shall make God [תאלהיו]."[2] As noted by Lieber, this phrase has been the subject of some unease on the part of *qedushta*'s earlier commentators. While Zevi M. Rabinovitz includes the consonants of תאלהיו in his edition but leaves the word unvocalized, Nahum Bronznick abandons this reading altogether as an alleged scribal error. Lieber

[1] For a detailed study of the genre and its history, see Elizur, *Sod Meshalshei Qodesh*. Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis*, 35–64, offers an excellent introduction to the subject.

[2] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 318, line 5; trans. Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 94, with modifications.

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is right to reject Bronznick's emendation as unconvincing, but her own interpretation of the phrase as merely a possible "reference to converts" also strikes me as being somewhat evasive.[3]

In what follows, I will attempt to situate Yannai's use of תאלהיו within the broader context of the theory of image as it developed in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries, the era when, in Cameron's words, "a massive intellectual adjustment was necessitated by the final demise of the classical world and the new circumstances of the early medieval one."[4] This period, Cameron argues, witnessed the process of conceptual realignment, as a result of which the new forms of religiously authoritative knowledge gradually replaced the epistemic systems of classical antiquity, the theory of images being one such new form. Cultural idioms that emerged in the process of realignment are available to us today in literary and artistic readings produced by a variety of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and social groups that populated the late Roman and early Byzantine world. It would make good sense, then, to approach the poetry of Yannai as another such reading and investigate it, in Cameron's words, "in relation to the intellectual and imaginative framework" of that poetry's cultural milieu.[5]

It is hard to pinpoint the dates of Yannai's life with any certainty. There are good reasons to place him in sixth-century Roman Palestine, but how early or how late in the sixth century he lived must remain an open question.[6] Most of the manuscript evidence for his works comes in the form of medieval copies stored away in the Cairo Genizah, the Jewish communal depository for out-of-use documents in Old Cairo in Egypt. The earliest of these copies are palimpsests dating from the early centuries of Muslim rule and

[3] See Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 94–95, n. 22, and, more broadly, 81–82. Cf. Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 318, line 5, and Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 1, 148, and vol. 2, 71.

[4] Cameron, "Language of Images," 40.

[5] Cameron, "Language of Images," 40.

[6] For a good introduction to the historical context of Yannai's work, see Lieber, *Yannai*, 1–16, 282–84, and "'You Have Skirted This Hill,'" 63–73.

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written over sixth-century Greek biblical texts. During the Middle Ages, Yannai's writings gradually lost their liturgical and, more broadly, aesthetic relevance. They became a cultural nontext, that is, a meaningless collection of symbolic forms no longer considered useful or even, as Jewish linguists of medieval Spain would argue in connection with late antique *piyyutim* in general, grammatically correct.[7] As a result, these writings simply stopped being copied. Most of Yannai's poems are available to us today owing to their chance discovery in the Cairo Genizah, rather than their deliberate transmission as part of Jewish liturgical collections. The corpus uncovered so far suggests uniform and consistent textual history with relatively few variations across manuscripts. It is probably fair to argue that the texts we have in front of us represent more or less accurately what was composed by the *payyetan* during his lifetime. It makes good sense, then, to start the book with a chapter on Yannai's poetry, one of few Jewish textual witnesses that in their present form can be dated with a degree of confidence to the late Roman and early Byzantine period in the Near East.[8]

Searching for Context

The form תאלהיו, used by Yannai to describe Israel's status in relation to God, is a verbal construct based on the noun אלהים (*elohim*). As noted by Lieber, Yannai uses the word *elohim* to designate Israel in several places across the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6, and, therefore, his choice of תאלהיו falls within a consistent and deliberate semantic

[7] See Baron, *History*, vol. 7, 57–59, and 101–4. For the cultural context of changing attitudes toward the *piyyut*, see Scheindlin, "Merchants and Intellectuals," 327–34, 349–51, and 361–77. On Yannai, in particular, see Lieber, *Yannai*, 8–10, and 14–15.

[8] For an introduction to relevant manuscripts, their circulation, and the history of their discovery, see Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 16–28 (Hebrew pagination) and 3–7. For a balanced review of the rabbinic context of Yannai's work, including references to earlier literature, see Lieberman, "Hazzanut Yannai," 221–50, Lieber, *Yannai*, 139–90.

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pattern.[9] A biblical source behind Yannai's choice of language comes in the form of Psalm 82:6, "I said, 'You are *elohim* and sons of the Most High, all of you,'" explicitly quoted by the poet immediately following the first stanza. If we were to search for a broader late antique Jewish context of Yannai's *elohim* reference, much of that context would come from biblical commentaries (midrashim) composed between the third and sixth centuries CE.[10] Like the *qedushta*, midrashic tradition in circulation during the time of Yannai's life associates Psalm 82:6 with the revelation at Sinai. *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael*, a third-century commentary on the book of Exodus, brings up the psalm's reference to *elohim* as a prooftext for the legend that the angel of death no longer held power over the Israelites while they were standing at Sinai. That was the case until the Israelites had "ruined their deeds," an apparent reference to the golden calf debacle, and, as a result, returned to their mortal condition. In a similar manner, *Leviticus Rabbah*, a fifth-century commentary on the book of Leviticus, uses the same verse to illustrate the point that God "acted in favor of them" (צידקתים), that is, Israel, and "called them divinity" (קראתי אותן אלוהות) prior to the calf affair.[11]

Both texts associate the godlike status of Israel at Sinai with Israel's adherence to the Torah. The breaking of the law results in Israel's lapse back to the human condition. Another third-century commentary, this time to the book of Deuteronomy, makes this connection explicit:

> Therefore, if man lives by the Torah and performs the will of his Father in heaven, he is like the heavenly creatures, as it is said, "I

[9] Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 94–95, n. 22.

[10] Kister, "Son(s) of God," 191–99, offers a good introduction to the theme of Israel's divine sonship in biblical and Second Temple literature. The extent, immediacy, and precise nature of the impact of these traditions on Yannai, however, remain uncertain.

[11] See *Mek. Bahodesh* 9 (Horovitz and Rabin, 237), and *Lev. Rab.* 4.1 (Margulies, vol. 1, 77; my translation). For a broader literary context, both Jewish and non-Jewish, see Kister, "Son(s) of God," 202–3, and, especially, "'First Adam,'" 356–59.

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> said, you are *elohim*, and sons of the Most High, all of you" (Psalm 82:6). But if he does not live by the Torah and does not perform the will of his Father in heaven, he is like the creatures of the earth, as it is said, "Nevertheless you shall die like Adam" (Psalm 82:7).[12]

There is no indication in this fragment that the comparison to "heavenly creatures" is more than a metaphor for the Torah observance and righteous behavior that results from such an observance. In the words of Menahem Kister, "the Jewish godlike ideal status of humans attached to this verse [Psalm 82:6] should not be conceived as deification in the strict sense and should be distinguished from Christian statements, the phraseological similarity notwithstanding."[13] The midrashic interpretations of the *elohim* reference in Psalm 82:6 emphasize the value of the Torah-centered ethics, rather than Israel's collective status as God's earthly alter ego.

There is no easy transition, therefore, from what we find in early rabbinic literature to Yannai's significantly more ambitious interpretation of *elohim*.[14] Stanza 4 of the *qedushta* is particularly important in this regard. It runs as follows:

With eternal love / You have loved an eternal people // for were it not for this eternal people / the world would be no more
Nothing resembles You / but You made them resemble You // Nothing equals You / but You made them equal to You
You were, and shall be // and You said: "You were, and shall be"
In every way they praise You, You praise them // and by every name they call You, You call them
You are *elohim* / and they are *elohim* // You are King / and they are a kingdom

[12] *Sifre on Deuteronomy* 306 (Finkelstein, 340–41; trans. Hammer, 307, with modifications).
[13] Kister, "Son(s) of God," 207–8.
[14] I disagree, therefore, with Bronznick's suggestion that early rabbinic texts can explain Yannai's use of *elohim*. See Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 1, 148.

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You are one God / and they are one people // You are a great God / and they are a great people
You are a holy God / and they are a holy people[15]

Yannai then, once again, uses the word *elohim* to describe Israel in the opening lines of stanza 5:

"You are *elohim*," You said to us // with the strength with which we affirmed You, You affirmed us
At the sea we made You king / at Sinai You made us kings // before we hallowed You / You made us holy[16]

Stanzas 4 and 5 offer us a broader context within which we can situate the *elohim* reference of the first stanza, and in relation to which this reference can now accrue meaning. The *qedushta* is designed to merge the identity of its listeners with that of the mythical community of Israel standing at the foot of Sinai. The alternating "we" and "they" that Yannai uses throughout the poem to reference the collective Israel articulate this fusion of identities. But the fusion of identities takes place in another register as well. At the moment of the revelation, God becomes isomorphic with Israel, both the people of Israel receiving the Torah at Sinai and the liturgical community of Israel personified in Yannai's audience. At Sinai Israel becomes God's unique image (*demut*).[17]

Otherwise, God is beyond comparison. In Yannai's words, "nothing resembles You [אין דומה לך], but You made them [Israel] resemble You [ודימיתם לך], nothing equals You [אין שווה לך], but You made them [Israel] equal to You [והשוויתם לך]." God's epistemic loneliness is completely outside the referential systems available to us as human beings. The only frame of reference that makes God's

15 Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 319, lines 12–18; trans. Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 95–96, with modifications. Cf. Novick, "Who Resembles You," 274.

16 Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 319, lines 19–20; trans. Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 96, with modifications.

17 On the *qedushta* as "performed theology" and the dynamics of the first and third person addresses, see Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 88–92, esp. 90–92.

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radical otherness commensurate with human senses and human knowledge is Israel. In Israel, God acquires form that makes God visible and thus intelligible within the epistemic parameters of our universe. The *qedushta* is an invocation of God's presence in Israel for, as Peter Brown notes, "images were not messages. They were presences."[18]

The poem belongs among several of Yannai's compositions in which, as noted by Tzvi Novick, "the poet contends, repeatedly and variously, that God's transcendent singularity is simultaneously mirrored, produced, and checked by Israel's own singularity."[19] This parallelism between God and Israel and "the notion that Israel resembles God," Novick argues, "is hardly Yannai's innovation."[20] Leviticus 19:2 calls on Israel to "be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." 2 Samuel 7:22–24 and 1 Chronicles 17:20–22 praise first God's and then Israel's uniqueness, thus correlating the two within a single rhetorical formula. Rabbinic midrashim further explore possibilities created by this rhetoric.[21] The third-century midrash *Sifre on Deuteronomy* juxtaposes a series of biblical verses that deal respectively with God's uniqueness in the universe and Israel's uniqueness among the nations.[22] The juxtaposition comes in the form of a carefully structured antiphonal litany and, according to Michael Fishbane, results in "a theological correlation of

[18] Brown, "Images," 24. On the understanding of an image as a site of its referent's presence as well as absence, see Elsner, "Iconoclasm," 369–70, with literature. For the development of this theme in early medieval midrashic anthologies, see Kister, "Son(s) of God," 214–17.

[19] Novick, "Who Resembles You," 265. Jewish liturgical poetry does not always qualify God's absolute uniqueness through a comparison to Israel. Sometimes, God's otherness is powerfully asserted as being completely beyond comparison. See Sokoloff and Yahalom, *Jewish Palestinian Aramaic Poetry*, 130, line 44.

[20] Novick, "Who Resembles You," 264.

[21] See Hayward, *Interpretations of the Name Israel*, 252–54, for a review of some of the relevant texts.

[22] *Sifre on Deuteronomy* 355 (Finkelstein, 422–23). On the rhetorical function of this text and its comparison to the diatribe, see Marmorstein, "Background of the Haggadah," 186–87. On the content, see Fishbane, *Exegetical Imagination*, 57–62, and 70.

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God and Israel."[23] The litany belongs within a larger rhetorical unit that invokes but then purposefully leaves unresolved the tension between God's utter transcendence and God's special relationship with Israel. The unit's second half offsets the litany by emphasizing the gap between Israel and God. In contrast to Yannai, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* is not prepared to call Israel *elohim*.

Yannai is aware of these precedents. In the *qedushta* for Leviticus 19:1, analyzed by Novick, the *payyetan* explicitly references 2 Samuel 7:22–23 to construct his own rhetoric that qualifies "God's transcendence by reference to Israel's own exalted status."[24] The formal structure and some of the key themes in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6 appear to draw directly or indirectly on the litany from *Sifre on Deuteronomy*. Yannai, however, also goes a step beyond his sources by characterizing Israel as God's image, which participates in its archetype's properties, or, in Yannai's words, "resembles" its archetype and "is equal" to it. In this sense, Israel can be legitimately articulated as *elohim*. This theme, while central to Yanni, is missing from biblical and earlier rabbinic texts. The latter, therefore, are necessary yet insufficient to fully contextualize Yannai's interpretation of Israel as God's image, as well as the range of meanings that the *payyetan* reads into such an interpretation. To find additional contexts, one has to turn to Christian explications of the Greek term *eikon* ("image"), composed between the early sixth and early seventh centuries, that is, within the broad chronology of Yannai's own lifetime.

The Function of Image in Pseudo-Dionysius

Sometime between the late fifth and early sixth centuries, Yannai's younger contemporary known today only as Pseudo-Dionysius

[23] Fishbane, *Exegetical Imagination*, 59. Elliot R. Wolfson's comment that Israel in the midrash "represents the angelic Jacob who is comparable to the deity," goes well beyond what the text says. See Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 6.

[24] Novick, "Who Resembles You," 266.

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worked to address a set of issues similar to the one explored by the Jewish *payyetan*. Pseudo-Dionysius is about as enigmatic a figure as Yannai. There is little we know about him for certain. The Christian tradition has attributed his writings to Dionysius the Areopagite, mentioned in Acts 17:34 as one of Paul's converts in Athens. This traditional attribution has long since been discarded by modern scholarship, but the author's real identity still eludes us, and so far no attempt to identify him with any known figure has been entirely satisfactory. He must have lived at some point between the last quarter of the fifth and first quarter of the sixth century and probably resided in Roman Syria. Pseudo-Dionysius was well versed in the Christian as well as Neoplatonic teachings of his day. Indeed, his own work represents a synthesis between the two. His doctrinal affiliation remains a matter of debate, as both the Miaphysites and the Orthodox claimed him for themselves. Incidentally, this proves just how artificial and imprecise the "Miaphysite" and "Orthodox" categories are as hermeneutic tools for understanding the continuum of intellectual life in late antiquity. The Dionysian heritage was sufficiently multivalent to satisfy a broad variety of theological doctrines developing in the early Byzantine commonwealth. In the course of the sixth century, it was taken up and interpreted by the Miaphysites, Origenists, and Orthodox alike. Within the several decades of its composition, the Dionysian corpus was translated from Greek into Syriac. The translation also involved a good deal of adaptation, whose exact relationship to the original text remains somewhat of a mystery. It is significant, however, that virtually from the first decades of its circulation, the Dionysian corpus existed as a range of linguistic, cultural, and doctrinal adaptations spanning a spectrum of communities in the Roman East.[25] What interests me in the context of the present study is not the uniqueness of

[25] For a good introduction to the early history of the Dionysian corpus and its reception, see Perczel, "Earliest Syriac Reception," 27–41, and Louth, "Reception of Dionysius up to Maximus the Confessor," 43–53, with the literature cited there.

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Pseudo-Dionysius as a thinker but, on the contrary, the extent to which his writings may reflect the norms of a broader conceptual koine spoken at the time. In that sense, the Dionysian corpus, a characteristically pseudepigraphic body of writings that a range of religious and linguistic groups could identify with, offers a promising point of reference.

Unlike Yannai's poetry, Dionysian writings were not intended for liturgical performance. They belonged to a genre described by René Bornert as "une *theoria liturgique*," a contemplation of liturgy intended to discover meanings hidden behind the symbolism of church ceremony.[26] Pseudo-Dionysius seeks to interpret signs, not to perform them, the way Yannai does. Whereas Yannai's audience is a congregation assembled in a synagogue, the nature of the Dionysian audience is less clear. He probably wrote for an intellectual elite well versed in Neoplatonic modes of thinking. The purpose of Dionysian works was to apply these modes to the understanding of Christian liturgy. It is remarkable, therefore, that these two otherwise very different bodies of texts use similar language of God's material image to formulate identities for Jewish and Christian liturgical communities. By tracing this language in its applications by Yannai and Pseudo-Dionysius, I hope to uncover some of the ways in which image served the function of symbolic self-articulation in the early Byzantine world.

For the chapter's purpose, I will concern myself primarily with *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the first two of the four surviving Dionysian treatises. These two works (or, as some scholars would argue, two parts of the same work) set out to describe the way in which an otherwise hidden and unknown God reveals Godself within the parameters of the created universe. The universe itself is understood as theophany, a mode of articulating the divine unknown in spatial and temporal categories. The revelation takes place through the medium of "hierarchies," which

[26] See Bornert, *Commentaires*, 90, and, more broadly, 90–97.

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consist of the intelligible angelic or celestial hierarchy and the sensible human or ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the words of Pseudo-Dionysius, "a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine. And it is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments divinely given to it."[27] A more expanded definition of "hierarchy" is then offered as follows: "If one talks of hierarchy, what is meant is a certain perfect arrangement, an image of the beauty of God which sacredly works out the mysteries of its own enlightenment in the orders and levels of understanding of the hierarchy, and which is likened toward its own source as much as is permitted."[28]

For Pseudo-Dionysius, light provides a central metaphor to talk about God, "une 'métaphore absolue' de Dieu," in the words of Sergej Averincev.[29] The two hierarchies serve, on the one hand, to translate the light of God's presence downward through their ranks and, on the other, to uplift created beings to God in accordance with creatures' inherent receptivity to the divine light. Pseudo-Dionysius describes hierarchy as "an image [*eikon*] of the beauty of God," which is "likened to its own source as much as is permitted." Following in the footsteps of his Neoplatonic forerunners, he understands the image, to quote Eric D. Perl, as the "differentiated presence or appearance of the transcendent form," that is, a hermeneutic situation in which the transcendent form makes itself available to sense perception "as the character of this or that particular instance."[30] The main function of the image is to achieve the closest

[27] *CH* 3.1 (Heil and Ritter, 17; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 153).

[28] *CH* 3.2 (Heil and Ritter, 18; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 154). For a good introduction to the text, see Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 58. For a more detailed analysis, to which my own understanding of Pseudo-Dionysius is greatly indebted, see Perl, *Theophany*, 17–34, and 65–81. Cf. Cohen, *Formes théologiques*, 130–49.

[29] Averincev, "L'or dans le système des symboles," 55, and, more broadly, 54–57, in conversation with Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, 14–17. For a recent discussion, see Schibille, *Hagia Sophia*, 6–8, 23, and 177–97.

[30] Both quotations are from Perl, *Theophany*, 21.

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possible resemblance to God by rendering itself transparent to the divine light. “The goal of a hierarchy,” writes Pseudo-Dionysius earlier in the chapter, “is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him.”[31] Angels and humans achieve this likeness by making themselves “pure mirrors” that reflect transcendental luminosity radiating from the divine center: “A hierarchy bears in itself the mark of God. Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself.”[32] By serving as mirrors, the members of the hierarchy transmit the flow of the divine light from one level to the next. They become members of the externalized divine presence constantly maintaining that presence’s outflow.

Dissimilar Similarities

Even though Yannai never refers to Israel as God’s mirror, his understanding of Israel’s role as God’s image is not dissimilar from what we find in Pseudo-Dionysius. In the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6, with which I started my analysis, and elsewhere in his *piyyutim*, Yannai uses a set of two verbs, דמה and שווה, to talk about Israel as God’s image or *demut*.[33] Whereas the verb דמה serves to indicate resemblance between God and Israel, pairing this verb with שווה adds further semantic nuance by emphasizing equality and a form of shared identity between the two. Existing outside any referential system available to us as human beings, and, as a result, epistemically opaque to us, God becomes known only in relation to Israel. Israel translates God’s invisibility into sensorial and, hence, legible

[31] *CH* 3.2 (Heil and Ritter, 17; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 154).

[32] *CH* 3.2 (Heil and Ritter, 18; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 154).

[33] The *qedushta* for Leviticus 19:1 describes likeness and equality between God and Israel by further exploring valences of the same vocabulary. See Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 444–45, lines 2–4.

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forms that render God visible within the created world's structures of meaning. Similarly, Pseudo-Dionysius understands angelic and ecclesiastical hierarchies as a "certain perfect arrangement, an image of the beauty of God," which, to use René Roques felicitous phrase, functions as "un *compromis* entre le silence de Dieu et le langage des hommes."[34] In their capacity as God's image, members of the hierarchy constitute "clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed God himself." It is worth noting in this context that the root שווה used by Yannai, in addition to indicating the "equality," can also mean "seeing" or "placing before one's eyes." In a manner similar to the Dionysian hierarchies, the verb describes Israel as being equal to God as well as facing God in a mirror-like fashion.[35] Both authors share the same understanding of image as a hermeneutic situation in which God's transcendental being could be described by means of material signs. In both cases, to quote Cameron yet again, the image serves as "one of the signs by which the impossibility of understanding God through language could be circumvented."[36]

The symbolism of mirrors, however, is ambiguous. A mirror implies not just translucency but also the perennial acts of recoding. The latter takes place in the process of movement from one set of mirrors to the next "by way of natural reflections suited to the human intellect."[37] A mediating space between the intelligible and the material, the image, to quote Gombrich, "is a transposition, not a copy."[38] Images serve to translate knowledge between the otherwise incongruous sign systems of the material and heavenly

[34] Roques, *L'univers dionysien*, 223.

[35] I would like to thank Mira Balberg for calling my attention to this aspect of the root's semantic range.

[36] Cameron, "Language of Images," 30.

[37] *EH* 2.3.1 (Heil and Ritter, 73; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 204). Pseudo-Dionysius may be referencing here 1 Corinthians 13:12. On the transmission of light as an act of recoding, see also *CH* 13.3 (Heil and Ritter, 44–45).

[38] Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 48. On the Dionysian mirrors as a hierarchy of *metaphors*, see Averincev, "L'or dans le système des symboles," 56–57.

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realms, rather than merely replicate this knowledge on the different levels of cognition. Hence, in the further development of the theory on analogical relationship between the symbol and its referent developed by the fifth-century Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius understands image as a "dissimilar similarity," the space in which one sign system is transcribed by means of another.[39] The two systems are identical and nonidentical at the same time: "For the very same things are both similar and dissimilar to God. They are similar to Him to the extent that they share what cannot be shared. They are dissimilar to Him in that as effects they fall short of their Cause and are infinitely and incomparably subordinate to Him."[40]

Reading the image requires, to use Paul Rorem's terminology, an act of "hermeneutical transfer" between the semiotic systems in which the same information is coded through the material language of the senses and, alternatively, the immaterial (and, as a result, sensorily incomprehensible) language of the heavenly realm.[41] Image is not a copy; it is a translation. Image does not replicate its source but rather articulates it in an alternative code system: "In reality there is no exact likeness between caused and cause, for the caused carry within themselves only such images of their originating sources as are possible for them, whereas the causes themselves are located in a realm transcending the caused."[42] The Dionysian hierarchies are thus *both* luminous reflections of the divine presence on lower, and progressively more material, levels of existence *and* acts of

[39] On Proclus's theory, see Coulter, *Literary Microcosm*, 47–57, and Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 238–52. For a good introduction to the Neoplatonic context of Pseudo-Dionysius, see Schibille, *Hagia Sophia*, 205–12, with literature.

[40] *DN* 9.7 (Suchla, 212; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 149). For the term "dissimilar similarity," see *CH* 2.2–4 (Heil and Ritter, 10–14). See Roques, *L'univers dionysien*, 115, n. 2, for a succinct but thorough explication of the term, and, more recently, Cohen, *Formes théologiques*, 121–30. My analysis here develops in dialogue with Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 54–57, and 159–60.

[41] See Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 55, and *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols*, 66–73, 80–83.

[42] *DN* 2.8 (Suchla, 132; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 64).

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recoding, through which this presence becomes transcribed every time it enters a new level.

"The paradoxical implication is that God's transcendence is realized precisely in Israel's transcendence," notes Novick in his analysis of Yannai's apophatic language.[43] I rather would argue that God's transcendence is realized precisely in Israel's immanence. Unlike Pseudo-Dionysius, Yannai never explicitly deals with the category of dissimilar similarity. Central to both authors, however, is the paradox of *imaging* the transcendental deity by means of a sign system legible to human beings. In contrast to Pseudo-Dionysius, Yannai does not use the dichotomy between the material and intelligible, but the function of Israel as God's *demut* is similar to the function of Dionysian material images. In both cases, we deal with a scenario of hermeneutical transfer that allows the epistemically opaque deity to become legible within an alternative set of signifiers. These signifiers "share what cannot be shared" with the object of their signification, that is, God. In Bornert's words, "si le signe et l'objet signifié sont réellements distincts, ils participent l'un à l'autre. La dimension invisible du signe se manifeste à travers son revêtement sensible."[44] It should come as no surprise, then, that the language of signification features prominently in Yannai. Israel's role as God's *demut* manifests itself primarily in how the two of them share names, attributes, and designations. "In every way they praise You, You praise them // and by every name they call You, You call them," states the *payyetan* as he elaborates on the Israel's relation to God. "With the strength with which we affirmed You, You affirmed us," he continues a few verses later, "before we hallowed You, You made us holy."[45]

[43] Novick, "Who Resembles You," 275.

[44] Bornert, *Commentaires*, 55: "Even though the sign and the object which it signifies are in reality different, they participate in one another. The invisible dimension of a sign manifests itself through its sensible cover" (my translation).

[45] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 319, lines 15, and 19–20; trans. Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 96.

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Pseudo-Dionysius, notes Bissera Pentcheva, "depicts mirroring as the energy structuring the cosmos."[46] For him, the divine likeness of either angelic or human hierarchy is directly linked to that hierarchy's imitation of God's activities (*energeiai*). As mentioned earlier, the Dionysian hierarchy "is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity (*energeia*) approximating as closely as possible to the divine."[47] The goal of every member of the hierarchy, therefore, consists in "imitating God as far as possible" and becoming "a reflection of the workings of God": "Indeed for every member of the hierarchy, perfection consists in this, that it is uplifted to imitate God as far as possible and, more wonderful still, that it becomes what scripture calls a "fellow workman for God" [cf. 1 Corinthians 3:9, and 1 Thessalonians 3:2] and a reflection of the workings of God."[48]

In keeping with the concept of "dissimilar similarity," the hierarchy offers a situation in which God's activities articulated in the language of human senses become an important mode of hermeneutical transfer.[49] By transcribing God's *energeiai* within an alternative sign system, the human hierarchy creates a condition in which God becomes semiotically and semantically "approximated" to the language of human senses, and, as a result, the imitation of God's workings becomes possible.

For Yannai, the common designation of God and Israel also manifests itself through a series of common attributes, which are functionally similar to the Dionysian *energeiai*. The *payyetan*, Lieber notes, understands holiness as "an attribute of action."[50] In both cases we deal with a new hermeneutic condition in which God

[46] Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia*, 156.

[47] *CH* 3.1 (Heil and Ritter, 17; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 153). On the Neoplatonic and patristic context of the term *energeia*, see Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 138–42, and 172–78, Schibille, *Hagia Sophia*, 208–9, and Larchet, *La théologie des énergies divines*.

[48] *CH* 3.2 (Heil and Ritter, 18; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 154).

[49] See Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 58.

[50] Lieber, *Yannai*, 246, and, more broadly, 241–47.

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can be transcribed in accordance with a new set of semiotic norms. A *qedushta* intended for recitation in the time of Passover lists a series of attributes applied interchangeably to God and Israel:

Being that He is a holy God / and they are a holy people // Being that He is a great God / and they are a great people
Being that He is a unique God [אל מיוחד] / and they one people [גוי אחד] // Being that He resembles [דומה] them / and they resemble [דומים] Him
Being that He is called by their name / and they are called by His name // His name is like their name [שמו כשמם] / and their name like His name [ושמם כשמו]
He will rejoice in them / and they will rejoice in Him // In the joy of the holy Sanctuary[51]

Here, as in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6 and with the help of the same toolkit of formulas, Yannai describes Israel by using language otherwise associated by Scripture with God and, at the same time, describes God by using language, associated with Israel. The two of them share the same name, as well as the attributes of greatness, holiness, and oneness. Yet another *qedushta*, this time expounding the promise in Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy," also invites the audience to consider the relationship between God and Israel in terms of their semblance: "Who is like you, and who is like your people? Who resembles you? But they resemble you."[52] Novick interprets the phrase as indicative of "the possibility that Israel's incomparability paradoxically limits God's own incomparability," but I think the implications here go beyond that.[53] Israel's and God's names are equal (ושמות שוים לך ולהם),

[51] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 278, lines 50–53; trans. Lieber, *Vocabulary of Desire*, 221–22, with modifications. Cf. Novick, "Who Resembles You," 264. Lieber's commentary offers an excellent introduction to the poem's setting and main themes. See Lieber, *Vocabulary of Desire*, 251–63, esp. 258–59.

[52] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 444, line 2; trans. Novick, "Who Resembles You," 267.

[53] Novick, "Who Resembles You," 267.

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continues the *payyetan*, since Israel is named after God (נקראו לשמך), and God is named after Israel (ונקראתה לשמם). The two, moreover, share the same attribute of holiness.[54] In the Dionysian language, the two "share what cannot be shared" by sharing common *energeiai*. Israel becomes the signifier, through which God can be inscribed within a new sign situation.

In the course of the sixth and seventh centuries, this technique would become well established in rabbinic prose as well. A midrashic commentary to the Song of Songs, composed during that period and known as *Song of Songs Rabbah*, uses similar rhetoric to describe God and Israel through a long list of attributes and activities that situates the two of them within a semantic field defined by a series of shared characteristics. The midrash applies the same vocabulary (some of it closely related to the vocabulary used by Yannai) to both protagonists, although, in contrast to Yannai, it never refers to Israel as God's image.[55] In another and seemingly unrelated section, however, the midrash describes God as Israel's "twin sister" (תאומתי), one of them not being greater than the other, and thus intimates the image-like relationship between the two.[56] What emerges, as a result, is a semiotic and semantic field in which the two otherwise incommensurate beings can be reciprocally identified and, hence, formed by means of common attributes. Yannai's decision to refer to Israel as *elohim* in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6 must be understood in this broader rhetorical and conceptual context. Like other designations shared by God and Israel, the name

[54] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 445, lines 4–7. On these lines, see Rabinovitz, n. 4–6, Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 1, 240, and vol. 2, 118, and Yahalom, *Poetry and Society*, 194–95.

[55] See *Song Rab.* 2.16.1 (Dunsky, 227–31). Cf. Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 83–84, on midrash.

[56] *Song Rab.* 5.2.2 (Dunsky, 375; the reading is consistent across manuscripts, see the online Midrash Project of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies: www.schechter.ac.il/mifalhamidrash). For a similar theme in Yannai, see Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 282, lines 105–9. On Israel as God's twin, see Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 164–65, 365, and Lieber, *Vocabulary of Desire*, 259.

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elohim represents a case of hermeneutical transfer that allows God and Israel to be imaged through one another.

Image's Many Aspects

Pseudo-Dionysius and Yannai were writing at a time when church and synagogue communities across the Roman East increasingly used image as a rhetorical device to narrate and perform themselves. The *Cherubic Hymn*, which according to the twelfth-century historian George Kedrenus was added to the eucharistic celebration by Justin II in 573–74, illustrates this tendency. Sung as the gifts are being transferred to the altar in the ceremony of the Great Entrance, the hymn establishes the celebrating community as an image of God's heavenly retinue: "We who mystically represent the Cherubim [*hoi ta Cheroubeim mystikos eikonizontes*] and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity, let us lay aside all worldly care to receive the King of All escorted unseen by the angelic hosts. Alleluia." In the transfer of the gifts, the community becomes a reflection and assumes the identity of angelic procession. When Pseudo-Dionysius and Yannai describe their respective audiences as God's liturgically performed image, they do so within the same horizon of expectations.[57]

The two versions of image discourse offered by Pseudo-Dionysius and Yannai realize two scenarios, two possibilities, which are, to quote Sewell, "shaped and constrained by the structurally available forms of thought and practice."[58] The two authors do so, however, in distinctly different rhetorical formats. The attention of Pseudo-Dionysius to biblical and liturgical symbols is only one aspect of his much broader ontology concerned primarily with the relationships

[57] Kedrenos, *Compendium Historiarum* (PG 121:748B). On the hymn, see Krueger, "Christian Piety," 295–96, Gador-Whyte, *Theology and Poetry*, 158–59, and, in more detail, Taft, *Great Entrance*, 53–118. For a broader liturgical context, see Muehlberger, *Angels*, 176–202, on Christian texts, and Ahuvia, *On My Right Michael*, 124–33, on Yannai.

[58] Sewell, *Logics of History*, 251.

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between God and the created universe. Despite their interest in the workings of liturgical community, his writings were never intended for actual performance in the liturgical setting. Nor, in fact, did they have the liturgical community as their focus.

As Pseudo-Dionysius contemplates the hierarchies' meaning, his narrative unfolds with the outflow of the divine light. The author follows the light's emergence from its source, the descent through the ranks of the angelic and human hierarchies, associated with the variety of light's hermeneutic modes, and finally the return to God. This dynamic of "procession and return" has long been recognized as central to the Dionysian oeuvre, helping situate the author within the context of Neoplatonic thought of his day. It also helps shape the hierarchies' rhetoric. The opening line of *The Celestial Hierarchy* sets the tone for the rest of the treatise: "Inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously toward us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in."[59]

The narrative's vantage point is that of the divine Source, from and back to which proceeds the outflow of light. Described from the perspective of God's transcendental being, the hermeneutic situations, in which God's beauty finds itself on its descent through the cosmos's increasingly material layers, are necessary accommodations to the limited capacity of the human mind to perceive the intelligible. Material symbols and images are there to guide human minds upward, but at some point during the ascent these images have to be transcended to allow for the increasingly more intelligible means of encountering the divine.

For Pseudo-Dionysius, the intelligible is infinitely superior to the material in its ontological status. The purpose of image is to create

[59] *CH* 1.1 (Heil and Ritter, 7; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 145). On the Neoplatonic context, in addition to Perl's and Cohen's works, mentioned earlier, see Wear and Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 51–73. Cohen, *Formes théologiques*, 15, n. 10, provides a helpful list of references to earlier literature.

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a hermeneutic circumstance in which the materiality of symbol is gradually eliminated. The beholder's goal always remains to "recognize the stamps of which these things are impressions and the invisible things of which they are images."[60] The principle of "dissimilar similarity," laid out earlier in the chapter, is important not so much because it allows us to transcribe the intelligible within an alternative sign system, but because, through its incongruity, it helps the human mind overcome that system's material signifiers. The transposition of the intelligible is there not because of its own intrinsic value, but as the necessary means of elevating the otherwise unwieldy human mind to the intelligible Source of all being.[61]

Yannai wrote his poetry for synagogue services. In contrast to Pseudo-Dionysius, his texts were designed to be part of the material performance of liturgical signs, rather than a philosophical exposition of meanings behind such a performance. As Lieber notes in connection with the *qedushta* for Deuteronomy 6:4, on which more shortly, "the assertion that 'the Lord is one' is not passively accepted but affirmed through enactment – as the community responded with 'one,' it became one. Instead of being spoken to, the congregation here speaks even as they are spoken for."[62] The programmatic inferiority of the material vis-à-vis the intelligible was not the language in which Yannai's audience chose to perform its identity. Whether this had to do with the general lack of familiarity with the basic categories of Neoplatonism, or the conscious choice to eschew these categories, must remain an open question. For Yannai, the vantage point is unambiguously human. The *payyetan* speaks as a

[60] *EH* 2.3.2 (Heil and Ritter, 74; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 204).

[61] See *CH* 2:3 (Heil and Ritter, 12–13). For discussion, see Roques, *L'univers dionysien*, 200–9, and Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols*, 89–90, 103–5, and 110–16. The Dionysian discourse on the function of material images does not easily translate into the Byzantine image theory as the latter developed in the course of the seventh and eighth centuries. See Meyendorff, *Christ*, 176, Thümmel, *Bilderlehre*, 34, and Louth, "St. Denys the Areopagite," 329–39, esp. 329–32.

[62] Lieber, "Rhetoric of Participation," 126.

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messenger of the liturgical community of Israel, addressing both the community and God and seeking to identify the two by invoking their reciprocal relationship.

Yannai's poetry, therefore, is an invocation rather than a description. To paraphrase Lieber, image for him "is not an idea but an enacted reality."[63] Rather than merely imagining the community as God's reflective mirror, a hermeneutic receptacle of divine light, the *payyetan* invents language that constructs both God and the community in their relation to one another, so that God becomes the object of community's constitutive gaze. To that end, the poet uses one and the same vocabulary to describe God and collective Israel. Just as God is one and eternal, so too Israel is one and eternal people; just as God is a great God, so too Israel is a great people; and just as God is holy, Israel is a holy people. The actions of God and Israel are also described through the language of reciprocity: In every way Israel praises God, God also praises Israel; by every name Israel calls God, God also calls Israel; and just as Israel proclaims God king at the crossing of the Red Sea, so too God crowns Israel at Sinai. Yannai seeks to create language that would allow the liturgical community to self-identify as God's material image, "resembling Him" (ודימיתם לך) and "equal to Him" (והשוויתם לך).

At a later uncertain date, a midrash, associated with the late antique and medieval corpus of exegetical traditions known as the *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, would further develop some of the themes central to Yannai. The midrash comments on Genesis 1:1, the verse traditionally understood to mean "in the beginning God created heaven and earth," but which can also be read literally as "in the beginning created God heaven and earth":

> "In the beginning God created" (Genesis 1:1). Fools say: "God created the beginning." But it is not so. Why? God said: "The owner of a ship is not called *naukleros* unless he has a ship. Thus I cannot be

[63] Lieber, "Rhetoric of Participation," 127. For observations on broader liturgical context, see Neis, "Embracing Icons," 53–54.

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> called God unless I have created a world for Myself. Thus, "In the beginning created," and then "God."[64]

The midrash interprets Genesis 1:1 to mean that God can be recognized as such only in relation to the created world, or, as Michael D. Swartz puts it, "that God in fact needs to be created in order to be God."[65] Swartz further notes that this view of the created nature of God's existence is directly related to the *piyyutim*'s portrayal of God as someone who is in need of liturgically performed praise. Yannai's poetry plays precisely such a role, as it constructs God in relation to Israel and Israel in relation to God by situating the two of them in the common field of signs. Like M. C. Escher's *Drawing Hands*, God and Israel create each other in the simultaneous and reciprocal act of signification.

For Pseudo-Dionysius, by contrast, the image makes no impact on God's transcendental being, even though it does create a modality in which God exists in relation to human cognition. Within the broader principles of Neoplatonism, God can be said to exist *only* when He can be cognitively apprehended, for, in the words of Perl, "the foundational principle of Neoplatonic thought is the doctrine that to be is to be intelligible."[66] Otherwise, God is beyond being. In that sense, the image offers a situation in which the divinity beyond existence emerges into existence, both epistemic and ontological, through the constitutive human gaze, just as midrash's God does. And yet the purpose of the Dionysian system is to transcend this material mode of God's self-articulation by going back, as far as possible, to its superessential Source. There is no intrinsic value attached to the material and, hence, always inadequate transposition of the divine. In accordance with the principle of dissimilar similarity, "we cannot say that God is similar" to his material images and likenesses

[64] Urbach, "Seride Tanhuma-Yelamedenu," 12; trans. Swartz, *Signifying Creator*, 27, with modifications.

[65] Swartz, *Signifying Creator*, 26.

[66] See Perl, *Theophany*, 5, and, in general, 5–16.

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"any more than we can say that man is similar to his own portrait."[67] The relationship between the portrait and its original, in other words, is the exact opposite of Escher's *Drawing Hands*. Whereas Israel, in its capacity as God's image, becomes constitutive of the "Original," by transcribing the Original within its own mode of self-narration, the Dionysian transposition is meant to negate itself, as it enables the human mind to ascend to the intelligible (and, for Pseudo-Dionysius, ontologically superior) levels of existence. Our authors speak a common conceptual language but, as they do, actualize different valences contained within it.

The Mystagogy

In the early 630s, Maximus Confessor, a prominent Christian thinker of the day and admirer of Pseudo-Dionysius, wrote a commentary on the eucharistic liturgy. Called *The Church's Mystagogy*, the commentary belongs to the same genre of liturgical contemplation as the Dionysian *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. As time went on, Maximus's *Mystagogy* was destined to become one of the classics of this type of literature that would help shape much of the subsequent eastern Christian discourse on the subject.[68]

Maximus was born in around 580 and thus could very well be Yannai's late contemporary. The first several decades of his life remain a mystery. There are two radically different accounts of Maximus's early years, one of which identifies Constantinople as the place of his birth and early career, and the other places him in Palestine. He became a monk, probably early in his life, although the circumstances are described differently in each account.

[67] *DN* 9.6 (Suchla, 211–12; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 117).

[68] Bornert, *Commentaires*, 90–97. On the *Mystagogy*'s date, see Jankowiak and Booth, "A New Date-List," 30. For further observations on the genre of *theoria*, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 488–93.

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Consequently, Maximus's own thought would develop in conversation with distinctly monastic themes, as well as broader theological and philosophical concerns of the day. He spent extended periods of time living in Palestine, North Africa, and Rome. As a result of his active involvement in the controversy about the respective role of human and divine wills in the person of Christ and his refusal to support an emperor-sponsored doctrine, Maximus was exiled to Lazica (present-day Georgia), where he died in 662.[69]

In the introduction to the *Mystagogy*, Maximus describes his tractate as following in the footsteps of the Dionysian *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, a claim that has been received with a degree of skepticism in modern scholarship.[70] The relationship between the two works is complex and reflects the changing intellectual landscape of the eastern Roman world between the early sixth and early seventh centuries. This complexity, however, allows us to trace the concept of image in early Byzantine thought as a range of modulations across the writings of several generations of authors. Yannai's liturgical poetry adds another vector to this range. In form and function, the works of Yannai and Maximus belong to different genres. Maximus composed the *Mystagogy* as a transcript of his lecture about the symbolism of the eucharistic liturgy, following a request from a listener who wanted to have the written text "as a remedy against forgetfulness and as an aid for the memory."[71] Intended for performance during the service, Yannai's poetry is different from Maximus's exposition of liturgy's symbolic meanings, just as Yannai's poetry is different from the Dionysian *Hierarchy*, Maximus's most immediate forerunner. I would argue, however,

[69] For a good introduction to sources on Maximus's biography, see Allen, "Life and Times," 3–18, esp. 10–14, and Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 143–55. Booth offers a forceful argument in support of Maximus's Palestinian origins. On the importance of monastic context, see Plested, "Ascetic Tradition," 164–76.

[70] See Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 121–22, Louth, "Reception of Dionysius in the Byzantine World," 60–63, and De Andia, "Pseudo-Dionysius," 186–91.

[71] *Myst.* (Boudignon, 4, lines 14–15; trans. Berthold, 183).

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that some of the methods and underlying concerns behind Yannai's and Maximus's work are similar. For both Yannai and Maximus, actions, gestures, and signs performed during liturgy become an object of interpretive contemplation, which, in both cases, draws heavily on exegetical methods initially developed for the elucidation of Scripture's hidden meanings. By doing so, Yannai and Maximus construct language in which their respective liturgical communities can describe themselves. For both authors, the rhetoric of image constitutes an important part of that language.

The *Mystagogy*'s first chapter opens with a reflection on the church as God's material image. In the words of Maximus, "Holy Church bears the imprint [*typon*] and image [*eikona*] of God since it has the same activity [*energeian*] as he does by imitation [*kata mimesin*] and in figure [*typon*]."[72] In the letter on the physical composition of the resurrected human body, written in around 628 and thus roughly contemporaneous with the *Mystagogy*, Maximus offers his definition of image. He does so by partly repeating and partly amplifying the definition provided two and a half centuries earlier by Gregory, bishop of Nyssa in Cappadocia (ca. 335–ca. 394). When talking about the relationship of likeness (as opposed to *sameness*) between the human mind and the divine nature, Gregory notes:

> That which is made in the image of something else must keep in every respect a similarity to its archetype. The likeness of the intellectual is intellectual. The likeness of the bodiless is bodiless, freed from all weight and escaping all dimensional measurement like its archetype, but different from it according to the particular property of its nature. For it would not be an image if it were the same as its original in all respects.[73]

[72] *Myst.* 1 (Boudignon, 10, lines 129–31; trans. Berthold, 186). For a good introduction to the concept of image in Maximus, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 151–65. For a brief but perceptive analysis of the passage, see Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia*, 84–85.

[73] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (Spira, 26, lines 12–17; trans. Roth, 45).

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Being an image of something else presupposes not just similarity but also distinction "according to the particular property of its nature [*ten tes physeos idioteta*]." Image is always the reinscription of an object from one condition to another, and therefore is never fully identical with its archetype. Gregory offers an example of glass reflecting the sunlight to illustrate his point: "Often in a small fragment of glass, when it happens to lie in the sunlight, the whole circle of the sun is seen, not appearing in it according to its own size, but as the smallness of the fragment allows the reflection of the sun's circle."[74] Just as the sun reflected in glass is not identical with the actual celestial body but represents a modulation of the sun's light reconfigured in accordance with the new set of optical principles, so too does the image represent a new semiotic configuration of the archetype. As Gerhart Ladner puts it, image is "a blend of like and unlike, same and other."[75]

Maximus adds further nuances to Gregory's statement. Image has the likeness of its archetype, and this likeness is understood by Maximus as a range of common characteristics by which the image and the archetype can be described. We identify the image by using the archetype's characteristics. Hence, the image of the immortal is immortal, the image of the invisible is invisible, and the image of the bodiless is bodiless. These characteristics are shared by the image with its archetype, yet the two are different by their nature (*physis*). Otherwise, says Maximus, the two would no longer be in the relationship of the archetype and image, but indistinguishable identity.[76] For Maximus, notes Bornert, "l'image reproduit toute la forme (*morphe*) de l'archétype; mais elle n'en contient pas l'espèce (*eidos*)."[77]

[74] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (Spira, 27, lines 1–4; trans. Roth, 45).

[75] Ladner, "Concept of the Image," 12.

[76] Maximus Confessor, *Ep*. 6 (PG 91:429B; my translation). On this passage, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 153–54. For similar observations in Maximus's other writings, see Larchet, 634. On the letter's date and provenance, see Jankowiak and Booth, "New Date-List," 31–32.

[77] Bornert, *Commentaires*, 115: "The image replicates the entirety of the archetype's form (*morphe*), but it does not contain its substance (*eidos*)" (my translation).

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Image is a material transposition of the divine archetype and, as such, while different in *eidos* (a polyvalent term, understood by Maximus to mean "kind" or "nature"), possesses the archetype's activity "by imitation and in figure." In the words of Lars Thunberg, "Maximus speaks about a relationship of transference between the intelligible and the sensible levels of the created order."[78]

What characterizes the church's status as God's image is precisely its participation in and display of God's activity (*energeia*).[79] "It is in this way that the holy Church of God will be shown to be working for us the same effects [*energousa*] as God, in the same way as the image reflects its archetype": Maximus reiterates his main thesis as he proceeds to describe that which constitutes, in his opinion, the foremost common activity of God and the church, that is, the state of unity among the church's members.[80] For Maximus, the activity generated by the church in imitation of the church's divine archetype manifests itself above all in the act of unification. God functions as a unifying principle behind his creation. In God, created beings come together in "a common and unconfused identity of movement and existence."[81] Just as God unifies the created universe around himself, so too does the church create a new type of unity out of its members' diversity. The unity of the church reflects

Zhivov, "'Mistagogiya,'" 117–20, adds important nuances to Bornert's observation. See also Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 404–5. The present analysis develops in dialogue with these works.

[78] Thunberg, *Microcosm*, 27.

[79] On the category of *energeia* in Maximus, see Larchet, *Théologie des énergies divines*, 331–421. On Maximus's views on *energeia* as a step toward the eighth-century image theory developed by John of Damascus in the midst of iconoclastic debates, see Zhivov, "'Mistagogiya,'" 349–51, and 373–74. Cf., however, Thümmel, *Bilderlehre*, 34, 45–46, 60–62, 98–99, and 105–6, who treats the *energeia* discourse of John of Damascus as a conceptual novelty triggered by the debates. Thümmel never mentions Maximus.

[80] *Myst.* 1 (Boudignon, 12, lines 163–65; trans. Berthold, 187). See Bornert, *Commentaires*, 119.

[81] *Myst.* 1 (Boudignon, 11, lines 138–39; trans. Berthold, 186).

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the divine unity and thus serves as a material transposition of the intelligible oneness. Maximus sums up his view as follows:

> Thus, as has been said, the holy Church of God is an image of God because it realizes [*energousa*] the same union of the faithful with God. As different as they are by characteristics, places, and customs, they are made one by it through faith. God is disposed to realize [*energein*] this union among the natures of things without confusing them but in lessening and bringing together their distinction, as was shown, in a relationship and union with himself as cause, principle, and end.[82]

Maximus's language here derives from the language of Pseudo-Dionysius, who also sees the liturgically performed unity of the church as an image of God's ontological condition. "Every sacred initiating operation draws our fragmented lives together into a one-like divinization," notes Dionysius in his exposition of the Eucharist; "it forges a divine unity out of the divisions within us. It grants us communion and union with the One."[83] In line with his broader line of argument, however, Pseudo-Dionysius understands the Eucharist as yet another symbol intended to uplift human beings through and beyond the material to the intelligible. For him, in the words of Rorem, "the sacramental descent into perceptible plurality results in a conceptual ascent to the simplicity and unity of the higher, divine realm."[84] With Maximus, there is a subtle shift in focus. The language of uplifting procession from the material to the intelligible so prominent in Pseudo-Dionysius is marginal in

[82] *Myst.* 1 (Boudignon, 14, lines 199–206; trans. Berthold, 187–88, with modifications).

[83] *EH* 3.1 (Heil and Ritter, 79; trans. Luibheid and Rorem, 209). See also *DN* 1.4 (Suchla, 112). On the Dionysian understanding of the Eucharist, see Roques, *L'univers dionysien*, 256–71, and Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 99–104. Cf. Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 261–72. Golitzin reads Pseudo-Dionysius anachronistically through Maximus's and post-Maximus conceptual lenses. In doing so, however, Golitzin highlights important dynamics in the development of some of the Dionysian themes. For a good summary of differences between Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus, see Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos*, 157–73.

[84] Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 104.

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the *Mystagogy*. When Maximus describes the church's unity as a material transposition of God's being, this transposition assumes independent value as a condition of God's existence, rather than just serving as a means to an end. Although different by nature, the church is isomorphic with its divine archetype and, as a result, shares in the archetype's activity of unification. The church's liturgical body, therefore, collectively constitutes God's image, a sign system within which the intelligible can be articulated in the language of human senses. The *Mystagogy*'s image theology reflects the process of gradual ontological legitimization that images witnessed in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries.

The Rhetoric of Oneness

Similar to the *Mystagogy*'s view of the church, Yannai considers Israel's inner cohesion to be a function of Israel's status as God's material image. The theme already appears, if somewhat cursory, in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6. There, Israel's unity as a people reflects God's ontological oneness, just as the other qualities of Israel serve as images of God's attributes. The same topic of God's and Israel's reciprocal oneness, however, becomes much more pronounced in the *qedushta* for Deuteronomy 6:4, the opening verse of another weekly Torah reading. Deuteronomy 6:4 is the proclamation of God's oneness: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one." Significantly for Yannai's interpretation, in addition to starting the Torah reading, the verse also serves as the opening statement in the recitation of the Shema, a string of three biblical texts, Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21, and Numbers 15:37–41, used as a creed and recited twice daily during morning and evening prayers. Consequently, the *qedushta* for Deuteronomy 6:4 focuses on the Shema and unfolds by unpacking a range of meanings associated with the Shema's recitation. "The overarching theme of this piyyut is God's oneness," notes Lieber in her commentary; "indeed, radical

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'oneness' unites God and Israel in a powerful, reciprocal fashion."[85] Structurally, the rhetoric of oneness unifies the poem by creating "a sense of ellipsis," as the same theme reappears "multiple times, acquiring new tonalities and nuances with each repetition."[86]

The *piyyut*'s vocabulary closely resembles that of the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6. In particular, the two compositions share interest in the theme of Israel as God's liturgical image (*demut*). The poem starts as follows:

You are one – who can dissuade You? // You are alone – none can I compare with You
The people that You made equal to its King // You made to resemble You in Your dwelling[87]

The first line opens with an allusion to Job 23:13: "He is one; who can dissuade Him? Whatever He desires, He does." The allusion serves to proclaim God's ontological otherness, an opening theme equally prominent in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6. In both poems, Yannai introduces God as being completely unique and beyond comparison, and hence incommensurate with human reason. The first line's second half now brings into conversation Deuteronomy 6:4: the opening verse of the weekly Torah reading and the Shema's statement of God's radical oneness. By juxtaposing Job 23:13 and Deuteronomy 6:4, Yannai makes clear to his listeners that it is precisely God's ontological solitude that puts him outside and beyond any reference model of human epistemology. God cannot be adequately measured

[85] Lieber, "Themes and Variations," 190. See also Lieber, "Rhetoric of Participation," 123–27.

[86] Lieber, "Themes and Variations," 183. For an alternative translation and analysis, cf. Van Bekkum and Katsumata, "Piyyut as Poetics," 83–107.

[87] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 138, lines 1–2; trans. Lieber, "Themes and Variations," 190, with important modifications. I follow here Rabinovitz's reading of the *qedushta*'s second line. Lieber, 190, follows Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 1, 350–51, and reads the line's opening phrase as "the nation that established You as its King." Novick, "Who Resembles You," 274, also follows Bronznick. He translates the line as "the people that made you its king."

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or described because nothing can be compared to him. God is a self-contained epistemic category lacking recourse to anything outside itself and hence completely opaque to human gaze.[88]

This initial statement about God's radical difference, however, only serves to introduce Yannai's further observation about Israel's unique role as God's material image. To talk about Israel as God's likeness, Yannai uses the same set of two verbs, דמה and שווה, as in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6 and other *piyyutim*, discussed earlier in the chapter.[89] Israel is the people that God "made equal to its king [גוי אשר מלכו שיוך]," and "made resemble You [דימיתה לך] in Your dwelling [ביישובך]." Rabinovitz's commentary recognizes the ambiguity of the reference, since the dwelling place in this context can be understood as both God's dwelling place in heaven and Israel's dwelling place on earth.[90] The space inhabited by Israel becomes, at once, a space inhabited by God, who is now spatially determined through Israel's medium, and hence becomes legible in relation to space that Israel inhabits. With Israel as God's image, God no longer seems as incongruous with the measuring systems of human epistemology as it appeared to be the case in the *qedushta*'s first line, a recurrent theme in Yannai's work explored also in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6.

Immediately after describing the people of Israel as God's image "equal to its King," Yannai introduces the language of oneness in the closing lines of the *qedushta*'s first stanza:

You established their unification equal to Your unification // You made their designation resemble Your designation

[88] For further details on the function of apophatic language in Yannai's works, including the *qedushta* for Deuteronomy 6:4, see Novick, "Who Resembles You," 269–74.

[89] Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 1, 350–51, recognizes the *piyyut*'s conceptual affinity with the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6.

[90] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 138, n. 2. Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 1, 351, followed by Lieber, 190, oversimplifies the meaning by reading the "dwelling" as a straightforward reference to Israel's dwelling on earth. Cf. Novick, "Who Resembles You," 274–75, n. 28.

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You admonished them to serve You in awe // In writhing and trembling to bear witness to You[91]

Israel's equality to its King, just announced by Yannai, translates on a more concrete level into Israel's unification made equal to God's unification (הישוויתה ייחודם לייחודך) and Israel's designation made to resemble God's designation (ודמיתה ייעודם לייעודך).[92] The word ייחוד, "unification," accrues meaning along two semantic vectors. On one level, it refers to Israel's inner unity formed in the moment of saying the Shema, and, on another, to God's ontological oneness declared in the Shema. The two meanings come together as the *payyetan* reads ייחוד in cross-pollinating semantic registers as, simultaneously, the unification of Israel and unification of God. The shared condition of oneness translates into God's and Israel's shared "designation" (ייעוד) in the line's second half. Bronznick interprets this statement as a reference to the fact that both God and Israel are called "one" in the Hebrew Bible. Lieber adds that the shared designation may also refer "to the inclusion of the theomorphic element –*el* ('God') in the name *Israel*."[93] The result, in either case, is a common semantic field in which the two beings become legible in relation to each other.

To use Pentcheva's language, both Yannai and Maximus understand the liturgical community as God's "performative image," that is, "an image engendered through a participation in the liturgy."[94] The liturgical community's coming together at the moment of

[91] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 138, lines 3–4; trans. Lieber, "Themes and Variations," 190, with important modifications.

[92] See Van Bekkum and Katsumata, "Piyyut as Poetics," 97–98. Van Bekkum and Katsumata, however, translate ייעוד as "destiny," rather than "designation." As a result, the focus of their analysis shifts to God's and Israel's "mutual need for each other" (98), rather than the process of God's and Israel's mutual signification. The latter, in my opinion, constitutes a central theme of this verse.

[93] See Lieber, "Themes and Variations," 207, n. 140, and Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 1, 351. Cf. Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 138, n. 3.

[94] Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia*, 76, and, more broadly, 76–85.

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either the recitation of the Shema or the Eucharist functions as the image of God's ontological condition of unity. The ranges of meaning that Yannai and Maximus associate with the concept of unity, however, do not entirely overlap. Maximus's God exists in relation to the created universe, and God's activity of unification manifests itself in relation to all the created beings by drawing them together: "Maintaining about himself as cause, beginning, and end all beings which are by nature distant from one another, he makes them converge in each other by the singular force of their relationship to him as origin."[95] It is this activity of unification, drawing God and creation together, that becomes replicated in the church. The latter, in the words of Maximus, gives to its members "a single, simple, whole, and indivisible condition which does not allow us to bring to mind the existence of the myriads of differences among them, even if they do exist, through the universal relationship and union of all things with it."[96] The activity of unification that binds together the multitude of church members serves as the image of the divine activity of unification that draws creation together.

Yannai's understanding of unification is more complex. Israel's unity performed in the recitation of the Shema involves the activity of drawing together individual community members, just as the church's unity performed in the Eucharist involves the activity of drawing together individual members of the church. In contrast to the *Mystagogy*, however, this activity of unification performed on the level of Israel finds no parallel in Yannai's description of God. In the divine register, oneness implies solitude, uniqueness, but never the activity of uniting the creation. Maximus's language goes back to the Dionysian and, more broadly, Neoplatonic image of

[95] *Myst*. 1 (Boudignon, 11, lines 135–38; trans. Berthold, 186). Cf. the image of God as the center of converging lines, used by Maximus later in the chapter (Boudignon, 13–14, lines 187–98).

[96] *Myst*. 1 (Boudignon, 12–13, lines 174–78; trans. Berthold, 187). Cf. *Ambig. Io*. 7 (PG 91:1092C Constas, vol. 1, 120).

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God as the center of the circle.[97] In this view, God exists in relation to the creation as the center exists in relation to the circle's periphery. The activity of unification draws the periphery toward the center and the creation toward God. Yannai shares the language of community's unification, but not the language of God as the center of the circle and, hence, the created universe. Yannai's God is absolutely nonrelational except when revealed in Israel.

As a result, Israel's condition of oneness is not exclusively determined by activity of unification among the community members. In parallel to God's ontological and semiotic solitude, Israel is also completely unique and self-referential. This notion of uniqueness is an important semantic nuance implied in the forms of *ehad* and *yahid*, used by Yannai to describe both God and Israel.[98] Except for God's radical oneness, there is no other frame of reference in relation to which Israel could be adequately known, just as, except for Israel's radical oneness, there is no frame of reference in relation to which God could be adequately known. Israel's status as the unique people becomes the only means of placing God's nonreferential being within a referencing system that would make God epistemically recognizable to human gaze. By accruing meaning in relation to Israel, God's uniqueness turns from a form of concealment into a form of revelation.

The semantic interplay between "unification" and "uniqueness," characteristic of Yannai's *yahid*, is missing from the *Mystagogy*'s language. The nuance of nonreferential oneness, important for Yannai's rhetoric, does not register for Maximus. Whereas the work of the two authors develops within the same culturally delineated horizon of possibilities, the specific scenarios they choose to explore are different.

[97] *DN* 5.6 (Suchla, 185). See Berthold, 217, n. 29, for further references.

[98] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 282, lines 105–6, explicitly associates God's and Israel's respective solitude and uniqueness. See Van Bekkum and Katsumata, "Piyyut as Poetics," 97, n. 9, and 99, and Lieber, *Vocabulary of Desire*, 259.

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Liturgical Community as God's Image

Yannai and Maximus use the category of image – called either *eikon*, in the case of Maximus, or *demut*, in the case of Yannai – to formulate identities for their respective liturgical audiences. For Maximus, addressing the Christian community, "Holy Church bears the imprint and image of God." For Yannai, the liturgical community of Israel becomes "the people that You made equal to its king" and "made like You in Your dwelling place." God's *demut*, in the case of Yannai, like God's *eikon*, in the case of Maximus, is more than a signifier indicative of, but otherwise unrelated to, the essence of God's ontological being. Rather, in the words of Bornert, "l'image est d'une certaine façon ce qu'elle représente et, inversement, la chose signifiée existe dans sa représentation sensible."[99] The two authors understand image as a way for the radically transcendental God to be reinvented within a spatially delineated mode of existence. Both scenarios recognize what David Bradshaw describes as "a kind of reciprocal exchange of identities between God and man," that is, the situation in which the human and the divine sides of the relationship become articulated in each other's language.[100] The attributes used by Yannai to describe God's and Israel's isomorphism are, therefore, functionally similar to Maximus's *energeiai*, even though Yannai never uses the term itself. Just as the church is identified as God's new modality, so too is Israel.

Yannai shares with Maximus the fundamental understanding of how God's image, embodied in a liturgical community, relates to its archetype. For both authors, to quote Maximus, "the image reflects its archetype" by "working the same effects." The activity of unification performed by either the church, at the time of the Eucharist, or Israel, at the moment of saying the Shema, comes to be seen as an example

[99] Bornert, *Commentaires*, 113: "In some way, the image is what it represents and, vice versa, the signified object exists in its sensible representation" (my translation). See, more recently, Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 6–7, and 163–64.

[100] Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 199. On the language of reciprocity in Maximus, see also Thunberg, *Microcosm*, 23–36.

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of such an effect. In both scenarios, the two entities become isomorphic in their attributes and activities. In both scenarios, this isomorphism allows for a material transposition of the transcendental deity in the form of either Israel or the church. To use the words of Viktor Zhivov, Maximus and Yannai "affirmed something more than a representative relationship between icon and archetype: namely that the icon had the same force or energy as the archetype."[101]

The two authors single out the activity of oneness and use it to imagine a sign system within which otherwise incommensurate beings can be described through a set of common characteristics. In both cases, a common activity is synonymous with a common designation. Yannai's reference to Israel's designation resembling God's designation (ודמיתה ייעודם לייעודך) echoes almost verbatim Maximus's description of the church in the *Mystagogy*'s first chapter: "To all in equal measure it gives and bestows one divine form [*theian morphen*] and designation [*prosegorian*], to be Christ's and to carry his name [*to apo Christou kai einai kai onomazesthai*]."[102] What is different by nature becomes identical in "form and designation," that is, within a common field of signifiers in which the name and activity of Israel become like the name and activity of God, whereas the church "carries" Christ's name and realizes Christ's unifying activity.

In stanza six of the *qedushta* for Deuteronomy 6:4, Yannai further develops the theme of a shared designation of God and Israel, announced but never fully explored in the *qedushta*'s opening stanza:

A nation whose name is called "Jews" // because they give thanks in the name of God
In truth they are surnamed the only ones // because they constantly unify the Only One[103]

[101] Zhivov, "Mystagogia," 349–50.
[102] *Myst*. 1 (Boudignon, 14, lines 173–75; trans. Berthold, 187).
[103] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 143, lines 55–56; trans. Lieber, "Themes and Variations," 193, with modifications. Cf. Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 203, for a slightly different rendering.

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As noted by Lieber, Yannai interprets the name "Jews" (יהודים) by associating it with both the root יחד (to unify) and ידה (to give thanks).[104] Jews acquire their name and being as a liturgical community that "gives thanks in the name of God." "They are surnamed the only ones [יחידים]," continues Yannai, "because they constantly unify the Only One [ליחיד מייחדים]." The *payyetan* reads the attribute of oneness on three levels as simultaneously the characterization of Israel ("the only ones"), God ("the Only One"), and the act of unification, performed in the Shema ("they constantly unify"). Toward the end of the *qedushta*, the theme is taken up one more time in a litany of mirror-like reflections. There Israel appears as "the holy ones and the hallowed ones who hallow You and are holy to You, hallowing the One and Unique in the mouth of the unique ones who unify."[105] What emerges is a sign system in which Israel and God become identified through a common set of attributes. To construct this system, Yannai uses a continuous range of modulations of a limited number of isomorphic linguistic forms.[106]

Like Maximus, Yannai understands image to be a semantic register identical with itself but also with the reality that exists outside that register's structural boundaries. There is no indication that God's and Israel's shared characteristics imply full identity between the two by essence or, as Maximus would put it, by *physis*. Israel is not physically transformed into God. Rather, the identity is semiotic in character. It is the identity of activity, designation, and naming,

[104] Lieber, "Themes and Variations," 212, n. 196. Cf. Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 1, 354.

[105] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 147, lines 95–96; trans. Lieber, "Themes and Variations," 195, with modifications. Cf. Novick, "Who Resembles You," 275, for a slightly different rendering.

[106] On Yannai's technique of exploring "the semantic possibilities of a single root," see Lieber, *Yannai*, 70, and, more broadly, 104–11, 122–24, and 266. As Lieber notes in connection with a different section of the same *qedushta*, "the poet uses the power of repetition to explore manifold aspects of unity" (Lieber, "Rhetoric of Participation," 127). For further modulations of the same roots in Yannai's other compositions, see Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 257, line 53, and 282, lines 105–7.

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not unlike an imprint (the Greek *typos* or *sphragis*) that infuses matter with divine *energeia*.[107] The nation's *name* is *called* (נקרא שמם) Jews, because they give thanks in the *name* of God (בשם יה מודים). Jews are *surnamed* (ניתכנו) the only ones, because they unify the Only One by reciting the Shema. It is the identity of attributes and activities, the attribute of oneness and the activity of unification being the most important ones. Jews are surnamed the only ones, because they *unify* the Only One (ליחיד מייחדים); in other words, they perform the activity of unification.

Sacrifices that were once offered in the temple in Jerusalem, Yannai tells us, also provided the means for the material reenactment of the divine. The *qedushta* for the holiday of Shemini Atzeret interprets the activity of sacrificing a bull and a ram, mandated in Numbers 29:36 for the eighth day after the holiday of Sukkot, as a series of cross-referential signifiers:

> Therefore, its offering is a unique one / of one bull and one ram // To unite together / into one people
> Those who unify You together / with one shoulder / one mouth / and one heart / one holy God[108]

The stanza is constructed, in Yannai's hallmark fashion, around the modulations of the roots *ehad* and *yahid*, each modulation highlighting a particular aspect of God's and Israel's oneness.[109] The sacrifice symbolizes the unity of the people of Israel, as they come together to unify one God, "with one shoulder, one mouth, and one heart." The reference to one bull and one ram (בפר אחד ואיל אחד), offered in a "unique sacrifice" (קרבנו מיוחד), presents another level of description and another set of codes through which the same notion of oneness is conveyed. To paraphrase Herbert Kessler's characterization of Byzantine visual art, the poem encompasses multiple

[107] See Pentcheva, *Sensual Icon*, 28–36, 72–77, 83–88, and *Hagia Sophia*, 83, 154–55.

[108] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 2, 230, lines 33–34; my translation.

[109] On the language of reciprocal oneness between God and Israel in the rest of the *qedushta*, see Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry*, vol. 2, 226.

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symbolic registers in a coherent and plausible narrative.[110] Yannai interprets the sacrifice as a process of signification, a series of gestures, through which God's ontological oneness can be materially reenacted, reinscribed, and staged as a performance, that is, in the words of Derek Krueger, "as reenactment with the power to reproduce the results of the original."[111] The sacrifice acquires a semiotic value. What emerges as a result is akin in its function not only to the recitation of the Shema in the *qedushta* for Deuteronomy 6:4 but also to the *Mystagogy*'s Eucharist. For Yannai, as for Maximus, the common designation and common activity imply the common form.

In his *Ambigua to John*, another composition roughly contemporaneous with the *Mystagogy*, Maximus interprets the figure of Melchizedek, the enigmatic king of Salem who greets and blesses Abraham in Genesis 14:18–20, as a precursor of the model Christian saint. The king of Salem, Maximus says, "was named from those divine and blessed characteristics in the image of which he remade himself."[112] "Having been imbued with divine virtue," adds Maximus later in the text, Melchizedek "was deemed worthy to become an image of Christ God."[113] The common attributes shared by God and God's earthly image constitute that image as participating in God's name and form, just as Yannai's Israel participates in the name and oneness of God by virtue of its own unity publicly performed in the recitation of the Shema.

"God and man are paradigms [*paradeigmata*] of each other," remarks Maximus earlier in the same ambiguum, "so that as much as man, enabled by love, has divinized himself for God, to that same extent God is humanized for man by His love for mankind; and as much as man has manifested God who is invisible by nature through virtues, to that same extent man is rapt by God in mind

[110] See Kessler, "'Pictures Fertile with Truth,'" 54.

[111] *Ambig. Io.* 10 (PG 91:1141A; Constas, vol. 1, 218; trans. Constas, 219). On the date, see Jankowiak and Booth, "New Date-List," 28–29.

[112] Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 168.

[113] *Ambig. Io.* 10 (PG 91:1141C; Constas, vol. 1, 220; trans. Constas, 221).

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to the unknowable."[114] The two systems otherwise incommensurate by nature (God and human beings) become "paradigms one of another," so that they can be articulated in each other's language and assume a new mode of existence through that articulation. Each of these systems is defined ("circumscribed," "delineated," in the language of Maximus) by the other system's qualities rather than by the qualities of its own, "in the same way that air is thoroughly permeated by light, or iron in a forge is completely penetrated by fire."[115] God and human beings transcend their respective essences by being constituted in an alternative mode of activity or description.

The respective roles of human and divine agents in the formation of God's material image, however, are different. For Maximus, human beings become God's image through assimilation to the divine attributes:

> Like an image that has ascended to its archetype, corresponding to it completely, in the way that an impression corresponds to its stamp, so that henceforth it has neither then inclination nor the ability to be carried elsewhere, or to put it more clearly and accurately, it is no longer able to desire such a thing, for it will have received the divine *energeia*, or rather it will have become God by divinization.[116]

This formula draws on the fourth-century church father Gregory of Nazianzus and ultimately goes back to Plotinus. The Dionysian language of images as reflective mirrors also plays a prominent role in Maximus's rhetoric. To become a material form of God's properties, human attributes have to let themselves be taken over by these properties. Transposition involves a form of passive

[114] *Ambig. Io.* 10 (PG 91:1113B-C; Constas, vol. 1, 164; trans. Constas, 165). For an in-depth analysis of the concept of deification in Maximus, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 582–612. The present discussion develops in conversation with this work.

[115] *Ambig. Io.* 7 (PG 91:1073D-1076A; Constas, vol. 1, 88; trans. Constas, 89). On this and similar texts, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 529.

[116] *Ambig. Io.* 7 (PG 91:1076B-C; Constas, vol. 1, 90; trans. Constas, 91, with slight modifications). On this and related passages, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 537.

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deification, although Maximus is careful to emphasize that the deification never alters the human essence but rather involves the assimilation of human attributes. As a result, while different by *physis*, God and deified humans become isomorphic in their properties. It is, however, always a human being who undergoes the transposition, never God.[117]

This concept of God as the sole agency in the relationship is missing from Yannai's work. His reference to Israel as God's *demut* does not imply that Israel's essential humanity is taken over by divine *energeiai*. Israel remains an active partner in the conversation. "In every way they praise You, You praise them, and by every name they call You, You call them," says Yannai in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6. "With the strength with which we affirmed You, You affirmed us," he continues later in the same poem. Rather than being a reflective mirror of God's attributes, or in the words of Maximus, "a seal rightly adapted to its archetypal stamp," Israel's liturgical body never relinquishes its agency. In Novick's words, "the Jewish worshipper qualifies transcendence in her own embodied self, as a member of the people Israel. There is no self-emptying, but rather self-assertion."[118] Israel offers a sign situation in which God's transcendent being is articulated and, hence, transposed within a radically different mode of description. God quite literally becomes *embodied* in Israel and constituted within the new mode through Israel's material attributes. The two parties to the process find themselves reinscribed and reinvented in each other's language; although in both cases we deal with a similar attempt to identify a symbolic modality in which, in Maximus's words, "God and man are paradigms one of another," Yannai and Maximus go

[117] See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 28 (Gallay, 134), and Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.11. For the Dionysian language of reflective mirrors, see *Myst.* 23 (Boudignon, 54–55, lines 876–82), and discussion in Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 431–32, and 542. On the programmatically passive nature of deification experience in Maximus, see Larchet, 527–53.

[118] Novick, "Who Resembles You," 282–83.

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about constructing this modality by exploring alternative configurations within the common horizon of possibilities.

The Birth of God

In conclusion, I would like to circle back to Yannai's reference to Israel as *elohim*, a subject with which this chapter started. It has been my argument all along that Yannai's choice of vocabulary can best be understood in light of his broader interest in Israel's function as God's earthly image or *demut*. In line with the prevailing views of the time, Yannai approaches image as a hermeneutic system that serves as a transposition of its archetype, shares in archetype's activities, attributes, and properties, but also embodies a new material situation of archetype's otherwise intelligible existence. The reference to Israel as *elohim* was another way to articulate Yannai's belief in the mimetic relationship between God and God's earthly image.

Christian authors of Yannai's day used a similar conceptual language to communicate a related set of ideas. In the writings of the *payyetan*'s contemporaries, the description of the church's collective body as "gods" was not uncommon. As Pseudo-Dionysius observes in his work *Divine Names*,

> The theologians say that the transcendent God is inherently similar to no other being, but that he also bestows a divine likeness [*homoioteta theian*] on all those who are returning to him in imitation as far as possible, of what is beyond all definition and understanding. It is the power of the divine likeness [*tes theias homoiotetos*] which returns all created things toward their Cause. These things must be reckoned to be like God [*homoia Theo*], and in accordance with the divine image and likeness [*kai kata theian eikona kai homoiosin*].[119]

[119] *DN* 9.6 (Suchla, 211). I follow here the translation in Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 135, which I find to be more accurate. Cf. Luibheid and Rorem, 117, for a different rendering.

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The nouns "divine likeness" and "image" appear here, as elsewhere in Pseudo-Dionysius, to describe the creaturely imitation of an inherently dissimilar God and portray the material universe as a sensible form of God's otherwise transcendental being. The "divine likeness," however, also implies for Pseudo-Dionysius a form of deification. Earlier in the same work, the author notes, "Through the deification [*theosei*] that derives from Him, there come to be many gods [*theon pollon*] by means of the deiformity [*theoeidei*] proper to the potential of each."[120] Originally, this language was not confined to the liturgical community alone but applied to a broad range of elements within the creation, insofar as they served as articulating modalities of divine unity. In that sense, Pseudo-Dionysius was once again a successor to the earlier Neoplatonic understanding of the universe's hermeneutic function.[121] During the sixth century, however, the Dionysian imagery became specifically associated with the liturgical community. The sixth-century *Scholia* (a running commentary) to the Dionysian corpus by John, the bishop of the city of Scythopolis in Roman Palestine, illustrates this evolution:

> The divinity of the only God, which is hidden from all, is a "thearchic power," because it is the source [*archousa*] of those who are called gods, whether angels or holy persons, as also it is the creator of those who become gods by participation, in so far as it is in truth divinity itself, from itself and without cause.[122]

Within the context of John's commentary, the Dionysian "gods" are identified unambiguously as the Christian community composed of angelic and human beings. By the time of Maximus's *Mystagogy*,

[120] *DN* 2.11 (Suchla, 136; trans. Golitzin, 135). Cf. Luibheid and Rorem, 67, for a different rendering. On the use of this and related terminology by Maximus, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 631–33.

[121] On the meaning of "gods" in Proclus, see Perl, *Theophany*, 67.

[122] *SchDN* (Suchla, 116, lines 5–8; trans. Rorem and Lamoreaux, 185). On John of Scythopolis and his work, see Rorem and Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis*, 23–45.

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this language would be fully established. As he interprets the distribution of the sacrament at the Eucharist's climax, Maximus describes the participants as those who "can both be and be called gods by adoption through grace [*thesei*] because all of God entirely fills them and leaves no part of them empty of his presence."[123] The sacrament, therefore, "transforms into itself and renders similar [*homoious*] to the causal good by grace and participation those who worthily share in it."[124] Yannai's reference to Israel as *elohim* should be understood as being in conversation with the same set of ideas. As God's image, whose identity is constituted in relation to God by the verbal pair of דמה and שווה, Israel can be legitimately described as "god" in the same sense as the Christian liturgical community can be described as "gods" or "deiform" by Pseudo-Dionysius, John, and Maximus.

Like Pseudo-Dionysius before him and Maximus after, John understands God's ontology within the parameters of two different epistemic models. According to one model, God is described as "hidden from all," that is, existing beyond any frame of reference available to the created beings. In a similar way, Yannai usually starts his *qedushta'ot* on Israel as God's earthly *demut* with the acclamation of God's radical incommensurability.[125] Both John and Yannai, however, immediately qualify their statements about God's otherness by reading God in a different language with a different set of rules. In John's words, "the divinity of the only God, which is hidden from all," appears on an alternative level of description as "the thearchic power," which is a collective corporeal entity consisting of "those who become gods by participation," that is, angelic

[123] *Myst*. 21 (Boudignon, 48–49, lines 772–75; trans. Berthold, 203, with slight modifications). On the term *thesis* as used by Maximus, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 601–3.

[124] *Myst*. 21 (Boudignon, 48, lines 769–71; trans. Berthold, 203). Cf. *Myst*. 24 (Boudignon, 58, lines 932–35). On meanings associated with the term *homoious*, see Larchet, *Divinisation de l'homme*, 431.

[125] See Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 319, line 13, and vol. 2, 138, lines 1–2, discussed earlier in the chapter.

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and human beings. By the same token, in its capacity as God's image, Israel creates a new epistemic model, another level of description, on which an otherwise incomprehensible God can be successfully known. "In every way they praise You, You praise them, and by every name they call You, You call them: You are *elohim*, and they are *elohim*; You are King, and they are a kingdom," says Yannai in the *qedushta* for Exodus 19:6.[126] God "is the source of those who are called gods, whether angels or holy persons," John echoes him. In both cases, by sharing its name with God, the liturgical community emerges as a new register, a new situation, in which God's ontology can be transcribed and made legible in accordance with a new grammar. When Yannai's *qedushta* calls on God "to make those who cleave to you [דביקיכם] God,"[127] it parallels John's words about God as "the creator of those who become gods by participation" almost verbatim. In both cases, the liturgical community becomes "God" as a consequence of either "cleaving to" (so Yannai) or "participating in" (so John) the divinity and, hence, by realizing itself as another transposition, another semantic configuration, in which God's ontology is articulated.

In another one of the *Scholia*, this time to the *Celestial Hierarchy* 4:4 (181B), John of Scythopolis uses the figure of Mary, the Mother of God, or the Theotokos of Byzantine tradition, to further elaborate his idea of thearchy as the embodied situation of God's existence. John offers the following comment on the Dionysian observation that, at the time of the Annunciation, the archangel Gabriel revealed to Mary "how in her would be born the thearchic mystery of the ineffable formation of God":

> Notice also how he says that in the holy Theotokos Mary "was born the thearchic mystery of the ineffable formation of God." By the

[126] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 319, lines 15–16; trans. Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 96, with modifications.

[127] Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 318, line 5; trans. Lieber, "Exegesis of Love," 94, with modifications.

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> expression "formation of God" he shows that God was formed and thereby became human. As it is said: "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). The mystery of the Incarnation was thearchic in so far as God was the cause and source of those called gods, i.e. angels and righteous, Jesus being the first whom he called "God."[128]

For John, thearchy describes a mode into which God "is formed" through the mystery of human birth from Mary. The formation of God, however, goes beyond the individual person of Christ. Through the human birth God acquires a new form, a new condition, as "the cause and source [*arche*] of those called gods, i.e. angels and righteous." God and the collective body of the church, "those called gods," become isomorphic with one other. The church becomes another hermeneutic situation of God's existence. Mary gives birth not only to the individual Christ but also to the collective body of God's new modality.

Peter Schäfer's *Mirror of His Beauty* identifies a series of intriguing parallels that exist between medieval Jewish discourse on God's female aspect, the *shekhinah*, and the Christian Mariology of the time.[129] Here and later in the book, I am going to expand on Schäfer's argument by suggesting that many of these parallels can be traced back to the common conceptual universe of the late Roman and Byzantine milieu and, in particular, that milieu's fascination with paradoxical forms that could mediate between divine and human forms of knowledge. Several late antique and early medieval Jewish exegetical anthologies offer evidence that within the early Byzantine cultural environment the congregation of Israel could sometimes describe itself as "God's mother" in a sense of a sociomystical entity that (metaphorically?) gives birth to God. As

[128] *SchCH* (PG 4:57.2; trans. Rorem and Lamoreaux, 156). On a related theme in Maximus, see Thunberg, *Microcosm*, 326–27. On rhetorical strategies that identify the voice of Mary with the congregation's collective voice in the poetry of Romanos the Melodist, see Arentzen, *Virgin in Song*, 150–53.

[129] Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 169–72.

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far as I can tell, the earliest anthology to include this tradition is the fifth- or early sixth-century midrash *Pesiqta of Rav Kahana*. The midrash takes as its starting point a verse from the Song of Songs: "O maidens of Zion, go forth and gaze upon King Solomon, upon the crown with which his mother has crowned him on his wedding day" (Canticles 3:11), and then proceeds to interpret the meaning of the phrase "upon the crown with which his mother has crowned him on his wedding day," as follows:

> R. Isaac said: "We have reviewed the entire Scripture and have not found evidence that Beth Sheba made a crown for her son, Solomon. This refers, rather, to the tent of meeting, which is crowned with blue and purple and scarlet." R. Hunia said: "R. Simeon b. Yohai asked R. Eleazar b. Yose, 'Is it possible that you have heard from your father, what was the crown with which his mother crowned him?' He said to him: 'The matter may be compared to the case of a king who had a daughter, whom he loved exceedingly. He did not desist from expressing his affection, until he called her, "my sister." He did not desist from expressing his affection, until he called her, "my mother." So, at the outset, the Holy One, Blessed be He, expressed His affection for Israel by calling them "my daughter": "Hear, O daughter, and consider" (Psalm 45:11). He did not desist from expressing his affection, until he called them, "my sister," as it says: "My sister, my love" (Canticles 5:2). He did not desist from expressing his affection, until he called them, "my mother," as it says: "Hearken to Me, O My people, and give ear to Me, O My nation [ולאומי]" (Isaiah 51:4). It is written, however, "and to my mother" [ולאמי].' R. Simeon b. Yohai stood up and kissed him on his head. He said to him: 'Had I come only to hear this teaching, it would have been enough for me.'"[130]

[130] *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 1:3 (Mandelbaum, vol. 1, 7; trans. Neusner, vol. 1, 6, with modifications). A slightly different version of this midrash appears in *Song Rab.* 3.11.2 (Dunsky, 283–85), and *Tanh. Pequde* 8 (Buber, 133). See Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 85–86, for an excellent introduction to the parable, and 130–32, for the use of this parable in the early Kabbalah.

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The midrash opens by establishing an allegorical framework within which it then interprets the Song of Songs 3:11. The verse, so the midrash goes, does not speak of Solomon and his mother, Beth Sheba, at all. It describes, rather, the construction of the tent of meeting, the place of private audiences between God and Moses, pitched outside the Israelite camp in the wake of the golden calf affair, according to Exodus 33:7–11. If we accept the allegory, then, the tent of meeting becomes the crown, whereas the identity of Solomon's mother, who makes the crown, remains somewhat blurred. She can be interpreted either as the people of Israel as a whole or as Moses, who gets charged with constructing the tent of meeting in Exodus 33:7.

The parable that follows leaves no doubt that the intended reference is, indeed, the people of Israel. The parable goes through three symbolic representations of the relationship between God and God's beloved: those of father and daughter, brother and sister, and, ultimately, son and mother. The last meaning is based on isomorphism between the two Hebrew words ולאומי ("my nation") and ולאמי ("and to my mother"), which is taken by the midrash to indicate that the reference to "my nation" in Isaiah 51:4, when written without the *waw*, can also be read as "and to my mother." As morphology translates into semantics, the initial reference to King Solomon's mother bestowing the crown on her son accrues an additional meaning as a reference to Israel bestowing the crown on God.[131] At this point, I would like to revisit a section from *Song of Songs Rabbah*, mentioned earlier in the chapter. It describes God and Israel by drawing a list of attributes that apply interchangeably to both. By doing so, the midrash creates a common field within which God accrues meaning through the semantic medium of Israel and vice versa. The list opens with the statement, "He is my God and I am His nation" (הוא לי לאלהים ואני לו לאומה), followed by the prooftext from Isaiah 51:4. One wonders whether the choice of

[131] See Rabinovitz, *Liturgical Poems*, vol. 1, 319, line 20, discussed earlier in the chapter, for a similar motif of Israel crowning God.

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the word אומה to describe Israel, along with the choice of scriptural reference, indicates that here too the midrash alludes to the exegetical tradition that reads "my nation" and "my mother" as isomorphic and, hence, semantically interchangeable categories. The statement, "He is my father and I am His son," following immediately afterward, only strengthens this impression, as it creates a modulation among references to mother, father, and child, which is very similar to the rhetorical structure of the crown parable.[132]

If, indeed, the reference to Israel as God's "nation" also implies Israel's role as God's "mother," then the list of interchangeable attributes, applied to God and Israel by the midrash, acquires an additional significance. Israel gives birth to God's new situation delineated by a set of common attributes that the two of them share. Through Israel's medium God receives an epistemic body that makes God legible within the parameters of human knowledge. The crown parable unfolds along similar lines. Each subsequent definition, offered by the parable, reflects a stronger form of affection on the part of God to God's people. These definitions also reflect a gradual role reversal in the relationship between the two. Whereas in the first instance God dominates Israel by virtue of being Israel's "father," the two become equals in the second instance, and finally God becomes a derivative being by accepting birth through the community of Israel. The focus of the discourse shifts from the benevolent superiority of heavenly deity to the paradox of divine self-contraction and birth into a new condition. The tent of meeting, mentioned in the beginning of the midrash as the crown's allegoric reference, comes to play a new role as a material space into which God is born and in relation to which God's new condition

[132] *Song Rab.* 2.16.1 (Dunsky, 227–29; the reading is consistent across manuscripts, see the online Midrash Project of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies: www.schechter.ac.il/mifalhamidrash). I wonder, furthermore, whether the reference to God as Israel's "twin sister" (תאומתי), one of them not being greater than the other, has to be situated with the same web of isomorphic references as "nation" and "mother." See *Song Rab.* 5.2.2 (Dunsky, 375), discussed earlier in the chapter.

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can now be meaningfully described. It is probably no accident that in the late antique and early medieval midrashic anthologies of *Pesqita of Rav Kahana* and *Song of Songs Rabbah*, the crown parable appears within a larger editorial unit that deals with the building of the tabernacle and the reinvention of God within a new space and new mode of description. I will come back to this unit in Chapter 4, where I hope to demonstrate its conceptual affinity with a contemporaneous role of the Theotokos as an epistemic function that helps imagine the deity who is simultaneously finite and infinite.

In the meantime, however, I am going to conclude this chapter by observing that, just as through John's Theotokos a new "formation" of God as "the cause and source of those called gods" takes place, so too, in the midrash, the people of Israel is portrayed as the mother in whose womb God is formed anew. For John, the formation of God leads to the establishment of new "thearchic" reality, that is, the reality in which the new condition of God's existence is defined by the reciprocal divinization of creation and incarnation of the deity. In the midrash, God's multiple hermeneutic conditions become articulated on the multiple levels of description, as God appears simultaneously as the father, brother, and son of the people of Israel. The individuality of the Theotokos dissolves in the collective body of Israel, but the structural elements of the narrative – including the human birth of God, the figure of God's mother, either individual or collective, and, finally, the liturgical community through which God's new mode of description is formed – remain the same. Jewish and Christian texts offer two different configurations of fundamentally the same theme, as they both seek to collapse a rigid dichotomy between the Creator and the creation, so that, in a paradoxical leap of thought, the father also becomes the son and the birthgiver becomes the one who is born.

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