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The Image of Jacob on the Throne of God and the Construction of Liturgical Space in Late Antiquity

The motif of Jacob's face engraved on the Throne of Glory has been an object of continued scholarly attention for the past several decades and has been studied in a variety of literary contexts, from Second Temple and early Christian to medieval.[1] More recently, two excellent contributions by Rachel Neis and Ra'anan Boustan have done a lot to situate this motif specifically within its eastern Roman context by mapping out the motif's place within the broader Byzantine discourse on images and relics.[2] In this article, I expand on Neis's and Boustan's work by analyzing the place of Jacob's image within the semiotics of late Roman and early Byzantine liturgical performance.

The earliest references to Jacob's image engraved on the Throne of Glory appear in 5th- and early 6th-century Midrashic collections, such as Lamentations Rabbah and Genesis Rabbah, making this particular segment of Jacob lore almost certainly a late antique development. The motif takes multiple forms both thematically and linguistically. Among the most common terms used for Jacob's image are *iqonin* (so *midrashim* and *targumim*), *demut* (so Yannai's *piyyutim*), and *qelaster panav* (so Hekhalot Rabbati). In a word, there is no uniform or standardized terminology associated with Jacob's image. The motif's thematic variety is equally broad. Rather than talking about a uniform established tradition, therefore, it would be more appropriate to talk about a cluster or range of themes associated with Jacob's image and independently developed in a variety of local Jewish settings.

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[1] See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 1–62, including references to earlier works.

[2] Rachel Neis, "Embracing Icons: The Face of Jacob on the Throne of God," *Images* 1 (2007): 36–54, and Ra'anan Boustan, "Jewish Veneration of the 'Special Dead' in Late Antiquity and Beyond," in *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. Cynthia Hahn and Holger Klein (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 2015), 61–81, esp. 77–78.

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It is also misleading, in my opinion, to trace Jacob's image to a single parallel within the contemporaneous late Roman and Byzantine milieu. Instead, this motif should be studied within a broad field of referential connections and approached as another configuration of themes and forms otherwise ubiquitous within the language of late antique culture. Such themes and forms could be deployed in countless new combinations to communicate a variety of narratives by different religious, social, ethnic, and language groups. In what follows, I attempt to reconstruct a culture-specific range of meanings within which Jacob's image could become recognizable and legible for a late Roman audience.

Third-Century Background

The deathbed scene in Genesis 49, where Jacob-Israel gives final blessings to his sons, constitutes the rhetorical pinnacle of the entire book of Genesis and the gateway to the rest of the Torah. It also offers a visually captivating image for Israel's collective memory and self-narration. The blessings are staged so as to invite all the later generations of those reading or listening to the story to emplot themselves into the scene and identify with the family assembled at the bedside of the dying patriarch and, ultimately, with Jacob-Israel himself. It seems only natural, then, that by the 3rd century CE (and probably much earlier than that) the scene of Jacob blessing his sons acquires special prominence in Jewish liturgical settings.

Two 3rd-century works, in particular, reflect this prominence. One is a fresco depicting Jacob and his sons on the western wall of a synagogue in Dura Europos, a small town on the border between the Roman and the Sasanian empires on the Euphrates. The other is a reference to Jacob in Sifre Deuteronomy's commentary on the commandment to recite the Shema. Before I focus on the significance of Jacob for late Roman and early Byzantine Jewish texts, the main topic of this chapter, it will be worthwhile to say a few words about the representations of Jacob in these two 3rd-century samples of Jacob lore. Some of the themes introduced there will form the basis for later interpretations of Jacob's figure in Byzantine Jewish literature. At the same time, several key concepts central for later works do not yet appear at this earlier stage. As we move from the Roman to the late Roman and early Byzantine periods, the figure of Jacob will embody the dynamics of continuity and change in the Jewish segment of Roman culture.

Dura's fresco depicting Jacob and his sons is part of a larger composition in the central section of the synagogue's western wall. Located in the area right above the Torah niche, the composition occupies the most prominent place within the synagogue.[3] During services it most certainly served as the focal point of the community's attention. The composition's pictorial program, therefore, is highly important for understanding

[3] See Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue: The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), plates XXIV–XXV.

how Dura's liturgical community pictured itself in relation to key figures and episodes of Israel's sacred history. The Jacob fresco belongs to the second stage of the synagogue's decoration, during which figurative representations of characters from Israel's history came to dominate the synagogue's pictorial program.[4] During this stage, a once uniform area above the Torah niche was divided into two horizontal registers. The upper register focuses on the figure of an enthroned dignitary surrounded by twelve standing figures. The scene has been variously interpreted as representing David (or the Davidic messiah) and the twelve tribes of Israel gathered together around their king, Jacob and his sons, or the blessing of Moses. In the lower register, the reclining Jacob is portrayed twice, as he blesses Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh in the lower right-hand corner of the fresco and, again, all of his sons in the fresco's lower left-hand corner. All three groups are superimposed on the earlier fresco depicting a vine or a tree, a symbol that could be read simultaneously in multiple complimentary ways. Among other things, the vine or tree could be understood as a genealogical symbol for the Davidic dynasty and its messianic offspring, but also as a reference to the people of Israel as a whole. The subsequent pictorial program articulates and further elaborates precisely these two meanings. In their present arrangement, the two scenes involving Jacob and his sons take place at the level of the tree's or vine's massive stem, whereas the seated dignitary and twelve standing figures (whoever they might be) are placed among its top offshoots.[5]

There is no doubt that these three scenes were intended for a cross-referential reading. In the words of Herbert Kessler's interpretation of the frescoes, they "present the prophetic blessings of Jacob as the recapitulation of the Abrahamic covenant and a foretelling of the Davidic kingship."[6] The two registers that portray Jacob blessing his sons most likely follow what Kurt Weitzmann, in his work on the origins of text illustrations, describes as the "cyclic method" of representation. "By conceiving each changing situation of the text as a picture in itself," Weitzmann notes, "the artist creates now a series of consecutive compositions with separate and centered actions, repeating the actors in each and so observing at the same time the rules of the unity of time and place."[7] A single, overarching picture comes to the viewer through a series of dis-

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[4] Ibid., 220–227, and plates XXXIII–XXXV, and LXXIV–LXXV.

[5] Ibid., 62–65, and plate XVII. For a helpful summary of possible interpretations, see Lee I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 102–104. On messianic themes in particular, see Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 94–102.

[6] Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1990), 180.

[7] Kurt Weitzmann, *Illustrations in Roll and Codex: A Study of the Origin and Method of Text Illustration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 17. Weitzmann's understanding of the cyclic method both develops and critiques Franz Wickhoff's earlier theory of the continuous method of pictorial narration. See Franz Wickhoff, *Roman Art: Some of its Principles and their Application to Early Christian Painting*, trans. and ed. S. Arthur Strong (London: W. Heinemann, 1900), 8–13, 154–158, and 163–167, and Weitzmann, *Illustrations*, 35–36.

crete scenes that depict the same character in consecutive postures or circumstances. The scenes may unfold within the same pictorial space or constitute a sequence of individual pictures similar in their structure to modern-day sequences of movie frames or comic strips. Whereas Weitzmann emphasizes the consecutive nature of discrete iconographic units, which, sometimes, could be intentionally conflated to produce a single scene, Oskar Wulff and Boris Uspensky argue in their works on the principles of medieval Russian art that the medieval viewer was generally expected to read these units synthetically by summarizing the results of individual visual impressions within a continuous picture formed through a single interpretive framework.[8] The cyclic approach to representation and viewing, already present in ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern art, became increasingly popular in the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, medieval Russian, and medieval Italian iconography. Dura's Jacob frescoes were intended to be read precisely through the act of viewing that merged the two discrete scenes of Jacob's blessing into a single picture.

Moreover, as noticed already by Carl Kraeling, the sons of Jacob, depicted as they are gathered behind their father's deathbed to receive his blessing, are depicted again in the composition's upper field as, according to Kraeling's interpretation, the twelve tribes united around the throne of King David.[9] There is a direct semantic progression leading from one gathering at the beginning of Israel's sacred history to another at that history's high point and, if the messianic interpretation of the fresco is accurate, its messianic fulfillment. All three registers in the area above the Torah shrine are designed to be read in an act of summarizing, cross-referential viewing. They unfold into a single narrative and have to be viewed within a single interpretive framework. The bodies of Jacob and the seated dignitary, just like the bodies of Jacob's sons and the twelve standing figures, appear as discrete scenes which the viewer is expected to read synthetically. Indeed, the ambiguous identity of the enthroned figure could very well be intentional. Is he Jacob? David? Davidic Messiah? The seated figure is an empty sign that offers itself to multiple readings. At the same time, it is clear that the standing figures have to be understood as the collective body of Israel in one capacity or another. Equally important is the fact that the lower registers depicting Jacob and his sons appear to replicate Jacob's body lying on a couch with the bodies of his sons standing behind their father. Jacob's individual distinctiveness becomes blurred in this collective personhood of Israel read in multiple registers. It is not so much an individual Jacob any more but a collective Israel, Jacob's body infinitely multiplied in his descendants, who matters in the liturgical program of Dura's fresco. It is this body perpetuated through history that reaches its fulfillment in the triumphant enthronement scene in the upper register.

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[8] See Ibid., 17–46, esp. 24–26, on the conflation of discrete scenes. Cf., however, Oskar Wulff, "Der Ursprung des kontinuirenden Stils in der russischen Ikonenmalerei," *Seminarium Kondakovianum* 3 (1929): 25–40, and Boris Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, ed. Stephen Rudy (Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1976), 49–57, for important nuances.

[9] Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 226.

The entire composition in the area over the Torah niche is designed to draw into its pictorial space the liturgical community that faces the Torah niche and the fresco. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that the synagogue's pictorial program as a whole serves to construct a semiotic space jointly inhabited by the biblical characters and the Jews of Dura, "whom," in the words of Steven Fine, "the paintings quietly assert wore the same clothes, shared the same hairstyles, reclined on the same kinds of furniture, and most importantly, read scrolls publically and shared the same names."[10] Consequently, our fresco acquires a third dimension or vector that stretches into the synagogue's nave and integrates the viewer into the fresco's semiotic structure. The liturgical community that faces the fresco becomes part of a cross-referential system that brings together the two scenes with Jacob and his sons and the scene with the enthroned dignitary and twelve surrounding figures. The twelve sons standing behind Jacob translate not only into the twelve figures in the upper register but also into the liturgical community of Israel standing in front of the Torah shrine. Weitzmann correctly notes in his analysis of Jacob's fresco that "there is no visible communication between Jacob and his sons, and he is neither talking to them nor extending his blessings."[11] This lack of communication inside the fresco's own space, however, can be explained by the fact that Jacob and his sons are intentionally portrayed facing and acting toward an outside audience. Their function is not to engage one another within the isolation of a self-contained and self-referential pictorial space, but to expand this space to include the liturgical community of Israel. The frontality of Jacob and his sons, as well as the dignitary and his retinue, helps establish eye contact between them and the onlookers, thus drawing the onlookers into the fresco's own space and ensuring, to use Otto Demus's excellent formula, "the reality of the icon in the space of the naos."[12] The characters on the fresco resemble actors who face in the direction of, and thus have active relationship with, their audience, even while addressing and communicating with one another on stage. The past in the form of Jacob's deathbed scene, the present in the form of Jacob's descendants standing in front of the Torah shrine *hic et nunc*, and, depending on one's interpretation, the future in the form of the twelve tribes of Israel gathered around David or the Davidic messiah, come together in the timeless

[10] Steven Fine, *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 112.

[11] Weitzmann and Kessler, *Frescoes*, 25. It has to be noted, parenthetically, that this lack of interaction among characters also distinguishes Dura's fresco from most renderings of the same scene in Christian art, as thoroughly reviewed by Weitzmann on pp. 21–26.

[12] Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (London: Kegan Paul Trench Trubner, 1948), 43. See pp. 13–14 on the relationship between the pictorial space of the icons and the physical space inside the church. I disagree, therefore, with Kessler's interpretation of Dura's frescoes as attempting to avoid "the viewer's direct communication with the figured person," and focusing on narrative contexts instead. See Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 2–4. Indeed, even when placed in narrative contexts, most figures on Dura's frescoes face the viewer in a frontal orientation, thus engaging him or her (or, perhaps, the community as a whole) in direct communication.

moment of liturgy. The fresco's space expands into the synagogue's nave and includes the liturgical community of Israel in its semiotic field.[13]

Our second text comes from the 3rd-century Midrash Sifre Deuteronomy and resonates in significant ways with Dura's visual program.[14] There is no evidence, however, that the Midrash and the frescoes originate in the same circles or exist in any sort of intentional dialogue with one another. Most likely, we have here another case of common forms shared across a wide spectrum of 3rd-century Mediterranean Jewish cultures. In interpreting the commandment to recite the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4, the Midrash compares God's oneness to the unity among Jacob's descendants as follows:

> "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4): Why was this said? Because Scripture says elsewhere, "Speak unto the children of Israel" (Exodus 25:2). It does not say, "Speak unto the children of Abraham," or "Speak unto the children of Isaac," but rather "Speak unto the children of Israel." Our father Jacob merited such a declaration to be directed to his children, because all his days he was troubled by fear, (for he said,) "Woe is me, perchance such unworthy ones will issue from me as they did issue from my forefathers."[15]

The Midrash opens with a question: Why does Deuteronomy 6:4 address its declaration of God's oneness to Jacob-Israel, as opposed to Abraham or Isaac? The answer is that all his life Jacob worried that any of his children could follow in the footsteps of Abraham's and Isaac's unworthy offspring, namely Ishmael and Esau. In the course of the two generations preceding Jacob, one brother stayed faithful to God while the other went astray. The Midrash continues by imagining what Jacob must have pondered: "Ishmael issued from Abraham, and Esau from Isaac, but as for me, such unworthy ones shall not issue from me as they did from my forefathers."[16] This worry made Jacob assemble his sons at his bedside as he was about to pass away and extract from them what amounted to a declaration of faith:

> Thus also you find that when our father Jacob was about to depart from this world, he called his sons and reproved each one of them individually, as it is said, "And Jacob called unto his sons... Reuben, thou art my first-born... Simeon and Levi are brethren... Judah, thee shall thy brethren praise" (Genesis 49:1–8). Having reproved each one individually, he again called them all together and said to them, "Do you have any doubts

[13] On the lack of interaction between figures as a characteristic of Byzantine pictorial space, see Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, 7–10, and Uspensky, *Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, 59–62. For a fruitful comparison between icons and the conventions of theatrical performance, see Uspensky, *Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, 62 and 65.

[14] For a good introduction to Sifre Deuteronomy, see Hermann L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 270–273, with literature.

[15] Sifre Deuteronomy 31. See Louis Finkelstein, *Siphre ad Deuteronomium* (Berlin: Jüdischer Kulturbund in Deutschland, 1939), 49, as translated in Reuven Hammer, trans., *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 55.

[16] *Sifre Deuteronomy* 31 (Finkelstein, 52); trans. Hammer, 57.

> concerning Him who spoke, and the world came into being?" They replied, "Hear, O Israel, our father! Just as you have no doubts about Him who spoke, and the world came into being, so we have no doubts. Rather, 'The Lord, our God, the Lord is one'" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Hence it is said, "And Israel bowed down upon the bed's head" (Genesis 47:31). Did he actually bow upon the bed's head? Rather, he gave thanks and praise to God that unworthy ones had not issued from him.[17]

The Midrash interprets the opening verse of the Shema as an address to Jacob by his sons who declare their complete agreement and unanimity in respect to one of the main postulates of Judaism – the belief in God's oneness and uniqueness. Such a declaration assuages Jacob's fear that some of his children may follow in the footsteps of their wayward ancestors. None of Jacob's children doubts God. The patriarch's offspring are finally completely unanimous about their faith.

The narrative space of the Midrash is constructed similar to the visual space of Dura's fresco. In fact, differences notwithstanding, the fresco can serve as an illustration of Sifre Deuteronomy's narrative. The Midrash's audience finds itself drawn into the scene of Jacob's deathbed address to his sons just as the viewers of the fresco do. Both texts presuppose a liturgical setting of some sort. Dura's fresco is intended to be viewed during the liturgy, whereas the Midrash creates a narrative setting for the recitation of the Shema. Those who follow the commandment of reciting the Shema are invited to imagine themselves as being present at Jacob's bedside along with Jacob's sons, in a way strikingly similar to how the liturgical community of Dura's synagogue is invited to join the scenes depicted on the fresco. In both cases, the narrative space is designed to expand so as to include its audience. One can almost imagine Jacob and his sons in the moment of their declaration of God's oneness addressing not one another but their viewers, just as they do on the fresco. Just like the fresco, the Midrash's narrative is staged as an act of performance intended to draw the onlookers into its world. Just like Dura's congregation, the audience of the Midrash is presumed to be the descendants of Jacob and his sons. By declaring God's oneness and uniqueness this audience not only addresses God, but also takes part in the timeless liturgical moment in which all generations of Israel find themselves at Jacob's bedside, addressing him: "Hear, O Israel, our father! Just as you have no doubts about Him who spoke, and the world came into being, so we have no doubts. Rather, 'The Lord, our God, the Lord is one.'" In both Dura and the Midrash, the liturgical community of Israel finds itself sharing narrative space with Jacob's sons and the common ancestor of them all – Jacob-Israel.

As we enter the world of late antiquity, we will encounter many of the same elements already prominent within the 3rd-century Jewish context. We will also witness, however, the introduction of new themes reflective of the changing epistemic horizon of the late Roman and early Byzantine cultural milieu.

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[17] *Sifre Deuteronomy* 31 (Finkelstein, 52–53); trans. Hammer, 58.

The Name of Jacob and the Name of God

The 6th-century poetry of Yannai inherits many of the same *topoi* already present in Sifre Deuteronomy and Dura Europos's fresco. Most significantly, just like the fresco and the Midrash, Yannai seeks to erase boundaries between the textual space of his poems and the space inhabited by his listeners as he invites the latter to emplot themselves into the Jacob narrative. As Laura Lieber notes in connection with a different composition by Yannai, "a signature element in the *piyyut* is its theatricality, which entails a collapsing of the distance between historical figures and audience."[18] The *payytan*, however, also introduces a new central theme unattested in 3rd-century settings. This theme has to do with isomorphism between God's and Jacob-Israel's name. Whereas in 3rd-century art and literature, there is no attempt to span the semiotic gap separating the divine and the human, Yannai's poetry seeks to create a language in which the transcendental and the corporeal become mutually transparent. In this program, to quote Patricia Cox Miller, Jacob-Israel's name "occupied a signifying field that mediated between matter and spirit and so subdued the potential dichotomy between them."[19]

Despite its apparent similarity to the well-known and frequently discussed Second Temple traditions of Jacob as an angelic being, Yannai's portrayal of Jacob is in fact very different. I have to disagree, therefore, with the argument, common in Second Temple and early Christian studies, that there was a seamless progression of Jacob's representation "as a divine or angelic being" from Second Temple Jewish texts to the late antique traditions of Jacob's image and, some would argue, all the way into the Middle Ages.[20] In the works of Yannai, in contrast to the Second Temple texts, Jacob's humanity is essential to the patriarch's special role. Instead of privileging the supernatural world by interpreting the figure of Jacob as an angel or some other kind of divine being, the *payytan* sees the conjoining of God's name with the name of Jacob-Israel as a way to produce what Boustan has aptly described as "the semiotic forms that mediate between the divine and the human."[21] Yannai's project would be impossible without Jacob's programmatically human nature. It what follows, I will attempt to read this proj-

[18] Laura S. Lieber, "The Rhetoric of Participation: Experiential Elements of Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry," *The Journal of Religion* 90 (2010): 133.

[19] Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 64.

[20] Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 6. For a helpful summary of earlier scholarship on Jacob as an angelic being in Second Temple and early Christian literature, see notes 29–34 in the same work. Many of the works referenced by Wolfson in notes 29–30 treat traditions of Jacob's image as an offshoot of the Second Temple Jacob lore. See, for example, Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Prayer of Joseph," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough,* ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 284–287, Jarl E. Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995), 138–145, and, more recently, Andrei A. Orlov, "The Face as the Heavenly Counterpart of the Visionary in the Slavonic *Ladder of Jacob*," in *From Apocalypticism to Merkabah Mysticism: Studies in the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 265–271.

[21] Boustan, "Jewish Veneration," 76.

ect as part of a broader 6th- and 7th-century Byzantine interest in epistemic transparency between the human body and the incorporeal God.

Yannai's *qedushta* for Genesis 35:9 is a good place to begin due to the prominent role that Jacob's name and his engraved image play in this *piyyut*'s rhetorical program. Since Genesis 35:9–10 contains one of the stories in which God famously changes Jacob's name into "Israel," the very nature of the biblical text, interpreted here by Yannai, makes this focus on Jacob's name appropriate. However, whereas in the Bible Jacob's new name is reflective of special powers granted to him by God or, as some Second Temple commentators would argue, of the outright divinization of Jacob, Yannai's interpretation of the events centers on the semiotic and epistemic co-inherence between the human and the divine, expressed through God's and Jacob's shared name. In a sign that their names are truly isomorphic, it is no longer Jacob alone who is blessed by the name of God, as Genesis 35:9 would have it, but also God who is blessed by the human name of Jacob. Yannai puts it as follows:

> In his going forth and return, Jacob was blessed // By whose name You are blessed, God of Jacob,
> Mentioning his name and blessing Your name // For You recalled his name in the mention of Your name.[22]

Jacob's new name "Israel" incorporates God's name "El" within itself, but it does not lose its own humanness. Instead, the two names become one and create a semiotic field within which the figures of God and Israel can exist in the same register and hence become commensurate with each other. God's divinity finds itself in isomorphic relationship with Jacob's humanity. The shared name establishes space for communication between God and Israel through a mutually translatable and mutually transparent sign system. Once Jacob's name is entwined with the name of God, it also becomes God's name with which God is blessed and praised, and through which God becomes knowable to all creatures, angelic and human alike. "For," Yannai continues, "by the name of Israel You will be blessed, Blessed and Holy."[23] In a new reality, captured in Israel's name, human and divine attributes are intended to be read through each other's semiotic media. In contrast to Sifre Deuteronomy and Dura's fresco, Yannai is interested in exploring forms which are simultaneously corporeal and divine.

When it comes to the relationship between the person of Jacob-Israel and the liturgical audience of the *piyyutim*, there is a complex interplay of continuity and change between Yannai and earlier representations of Jacob in Jewish literature and art. Similar to Jacob in Dura's fresco and Sifre, Yannai's Jacob serves as the personification of the collective Israel gathered together in the act of liturgy. Just as the depiction of

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[22] Zvi M. Rabinovitz, *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai According to the Triennial Cycle of the Pentateuch and the Holidays: Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1985), 1:216, lines 30–31 [in Hebrew]. Translation follows Laura S. Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2010), 642, with revisions.

[23] Rabinovitz, *Poems*, 1:216, line 34.

Jacob surrounded by his sons in Dura Europos draws the worshipping community into its pictorial space, so too Yannai's poems function as a participatory icon within which the worshipping community identifies with Jacob-Israel and his name. Both the rhetorical space of Yannai's poetry and the pictorial space of Dura's fresco work in line with the pre-iconoclastic theory of representation, according to which, as Charles Barber notes, "rather than simply looking through the icon, one is asked to imagine oneself in the icon and to understand this space as a site for imaginary encounter."[24] Throughout the *qedushta* for Genesis 35:9, the name "Israel" refers interchangeably to the person of Jacob and the liturgical community of Israel. The addressee, in Lieber's words, is "both Jacob-Israel, the patriarch, and his descents, the children of Israel – that is, the Jews, including those actually listening to this poem when it was performed in the synagogue."[25] Yannai invites his listeners to savor this interplay of meanings and, by doing so, to situate themselves in Jacob's story. The poem reaches a crescendo when the name "Israel" is used as a refrain in the concluding sections of the *qedushta*.[26] There, Yannai follows what Henry Maguire has once described as the method of "ambivalence" characteristic of Byzantine narrative constructs in both art and literature. In this method, Maguire argues, "a given image is repeated two or more times, but it carries a different meaning with each repetition," and, as a result, "the organization of images can be compared to a jeweled necklace, in which the same stone is repeated in linear sequence along a chain, but at each repetition it reflects the light in a different way."[27] By stringing the name "Israel" through different contexts and by situating it in relation to different referents, the refrain creates a narrative space that allows Yannai's audience to identify with the people of Israel throughout its generations, going all the way back to and culminating in the person of Jacob-Israel. In parallel to the depictions of Jacob on Dura's fresco, Yannai reads "Israel" in multiple registers as the sum of relations among the name's many referents.

At the same time, Yannai significantly alters and expands the fresco's program by reading the name of Israel as not only the name of Jacob, the people of Israel as a whole, and the liturgical community listening to the *piyyut* at the moment, but also the name of God. By introducing God as another vector in relation to which the name of Israel accrues meaning, Yannai suggests that God becomes visible and epistemically available to all creatures, human and angelic alike, precisely in the form of that name. The *qedushta* leads to the moment when angelic and human liturgical communities jointly perform the praise of God of Israel and, as they do so, come together to inhabit the space created by God's and Israel's shared name:

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[24] Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 32.

[25] Lieber, "Rhetoric of Participation," 142.

[26] Rabinovitz, *Poems*, 1:219–220, lines 69–79.

[27] Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), 11.

For Your blessing is in the name of Israel // And Your holiness is in the name of Jacob
And the hosts above and below // This one calls out the name of Jacob / And that one confirms the name of Israel.[28]

At this moment of joint praise, angels and humans find themselves on the same ontological plane. They both have epistemic access to God only as the God of Israel, i.e. within the semiotic parameters established by God's association with Jacob-Israel's name. Moreover, by sharing in the name "Israel," Yannai's listeners recognize themselves as God's human form and image, within which alone the knowledge of God is possible. "His descendants, when they appear, are blessed // The hosts of angels bless themselves by them," notes Yannai slightly earlier in the *qedushta*.[29] Here, again, the *payytan* radically alters the meaning of the biblical verse that he expounds. In Genesis 35:11–12, God blesses Jacob's descendants to be fruitful and multiply, and inherit the land. In Yannai's version, however, the descendants of Jacob themselves become the source of blessing for the angels. Their special status is a direct result of isomorphism between the name of God and their name. It is not Jacob alone, in other words, whose name offers an alternative to the dichotomy between the corporeal and the divine, but the community of Israel as a whole. Israel is superior to the angels and serves as a source of blessing for them, for it is through the name and the collective body of Israel that the act of knowing God becomes possible for the rest of the world – angels included.

Compared to what we find in Dura Europos and Sifre, this vision is a new development, one that likely reflects the language of 6th-century Byzantine culture. In contrast to Yannai, neither Dura's fresco nor the Midrash attempts to establish a shared semiotic space in which God and Israel become mutually legible. In the fresco as well as the Midrash, the events unfold strictly on the plane of Israel's history. There is no attempt to bridge the epistemic gap between the sensible and the intelligible, the corporeal and the noncorporeal, the human and the divine, by creating a sign system that would allow for communication between these otherwise incommensurate fields. As we enter Yannai's world, however, we find ourselves in conversation with a new set of issues. The 5th- through 7th-century debates about the exact relationship between the human and the divine natures in Christ, which shaped the cultural and symbolic universe of the late Roman Empire, were as much about the semiotics, horizons, and limitations of anthropomorphic knowledge in relation to God as they were about theology in the narrow sense of the word. The debates produced a highly elaborate discourse on the epistemic function of the human body or, to use Barber's felicitous language, on "the incarnate knowledge of the one God."[30] Aside from framing this discourse through a medium of Christian theological categories, as it traditionally has been, I suggest that we approach

[28] Rabinovitz, *Poems*, 1:220, lines 80–81; trans. Lieber, *Yannai*, 650.

[29] Rabinovitz, *Poems*, 1:218, line 55; trans. Lieber, *Yannai*, 646.

[30] Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, 58. My own thoughts on the matter have developed in dialogue with Barber's argument. For a similar approach, see also Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 11–14.

the questions it raised as fundamental cultural codes independently explored by a variety of ethnic, religious, and language groups within the empire.

In one of his earliest surviving letters, written about 626 and addressed to John the Cubicularius, a member of the imperial court in Constantinople, Maximus Confessor, a leading figure in the 7th-century polemic on Christ's human will, notes:

> God is thus manifest in those [who possess this grace], taking shape according to the specific character of the virtue of each through love for humankind, and condescending to be named from humankind. For it is the most perfect work of love and the goal of its activity, to contrive through the mutual exchange of what is related that the names and properties of those that have been united through love should be fitting to each other. So the human being is made God, and God is called and appears as human, because of the one and undeviating wish (in accordance with the will) and movement of both, as we find in the case of Abraham and the other saints. And this is perhaps what is meant when it is said in the person of God, *I have been likened in the hands of the prophets* (Hosea 12:11): God takes form in each, through his great love for humankind, out of the virtue that is present in each through the ascetic struggle. For the "hand" of each just man: that is his ascetic struggle in accordance with virtue, in which and through which God receives his likeness to human beings. Love is therefore a great good, and of goods the first and most excellent good, since through it God and man are drawn together in a single embrace, and the creator of humankind appears as human, through the undeviating likeness of the deified to God in the good so far as is possible to humankind.[31]

In this passage, in the process of discussing the relationship between God and righteous human beings, Maximus identifies several key themes also shared by Yannai. Both authors use the figure of a biblical patriarch to illustrate their argument. Whereas Maximus mentions Abraham as an exemplary saint, Yannai singles out Jacob for a similar role. Both authors are interested in finding a semiotic field in which "God receives his likeness to human beings," or, in other words, God and human beings become mutually transparent within each other's epistemic horizon. Both authors explore ways in which God, in the words of Maximus, "is manifest, taking shape according to the specific character of the virtue of each [saint] through love for humankind, and condescending to be named from humankind." By "taking shape according to the specific character" of saints' virtues and by "condescending to be named from humankind," God enters the field of mutually legible forms and becomes "manifest," i.e. visible, within the parameters of human senses and knowledge.

Whereas for Maximus God condescends "to be named from humankind," in the case of Yannai God is named after Israel, and Israel is named after God. For Yannai, "the God of Jacob" and "the God of Israel" are the two names by which "the hosts above and below" know and address God. These names allow God to take form among his creatures, and thus make God visible within the epistemic horizon of human and

[31] Maximus Confessor, *Ep*. 2 (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 91:401A–C), as translated in Andrew Louth, trans., *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), 89–90.

angelic beings. God acquires both names by joining his name with the name of Jacob-Israel, just as, in the words of Maximus, God "takes form" and "receives his likeness to human beings" "through the mutual exchange of what is related," i.e. through the mutual exchange of human and divine attributes and properties. Maximus's language echoes Yannai's reference to the shared name of God and Israel almost verbatim.

Yannai refers to the joining of God's name with that of Jacob-Israel as "mixing." This theme is ubiquitous throughout Yannai's treatment of Jacob. "My name I have mixed (ערבתי) with your name," says God to Jacob in the *qedushta* for Genesis 31:3.[32] "Your [God's] name with his [Jacob's] name You mixed (עירבתה)" reiterates the *payytan* in the *qedushta* for Genesis 35:9.[33] Later in the same *piyyut* Yannai talks about the power of God's name "intermixed and completed" (ניבלל וניכלל) with the name of Jacob, and the name of Jacob "going forth and proclaimed" as a result of that.[34] Indeed, Yannai repeatedly exploits the ambiguity involved in the use of the pronoun "his/His," making it unclear whether the text concerns God or Jacob. Similar to Maximus, Yannai envisions "the mutual exchange of what is related" between God and Jacob. The result is that, in the words of Maximus, "the names and properties of those that have been united through love [become] fitting to each other," or as Yannai puts it in the conclusion to the *qedushta* for Genesis 35:9, "for Your [God's] blessing is in the name of Israel and Your holiness is in the name of Jacob."[35] The conjoining of names brings about the conjoining of properties. Israel's holiness is in the likeness of God's holiness, Israel's greatness is in the likeness of God's greatness, Israel's oneness is in the likeness of God's oneness, in a word, God is like Israel and Israel is like God.[36]

The works of Yannai and Maximus offer two possible vectors along which the same late Roman epistemology could fundamentally present itself. The shared space of God's and Israel's name, in the case of Yannai, and God's condescension "to be named from humankind," in the case of Maximus, are two scenarios that play out within the same late Roman and early Byzantine symbolic universe. In both cases, the isomorphism and, hence, mutual translatability of human and divine features are central to the author's vision. Both authors invite their audiences to contemplate simultaneously God's divinity through the human form that God takes in the saints and patriarchs, and the saints' or patriarchs' humanity through their divinization in God.

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[32] Rabinovitz, *Poems*, 1:189, line 84.

[33] Ibid., 1:215, line 18.

[34] Ibid., 1:219, line 67, my translation. The word "power" is reconstructed by Nachum M. Bronznick, *The Liturgical Poetry of Yannai: Explanations and Interpretations with Suggestions for Textual Emendations and Completion of Lacunae* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2000), 1:90 [in Hebrew].

[35] Rabinovitz, *Poems*, 1:220, line 80.

[36] For this language, cf. Yannai's *qerova* for Passover in ibid., 2:146–147, lines 90–95.

Jacob's Image on the Throne of Glory

The earliest references to Jacob's image engraved on the Throne of Glory appear in 5th- and early 6th-century Midrashic collections. In these texts, the image serves to visually embody the community of Israel in a way that closely resembles the use of Jacob's figure in Dura's fresco and Sifre Deuteronomy. Unlike the latter two, however, Jewish traditions on Jacob's image situate his *iqonin* on God's throne, thus adding God as another vector in relation to which the collective body of Jacob-Israel can now be explored. Compared to the 3rd-century representations of Jacob, this visibility of God is a new development. Both the fresco and Sifre Deuteronomy imply God's involvement but never introduce God as an articulated presence into their narratives. In contrast, a parable from the 5th-century Midrashic collection known as Lamentations Rabbah makes God's presence central to the plot:

> "He has cast down from heaven to earth the glory of Israel (תפארת ישראל)" (Lamentations 2:1).
>
> R. Joshua of Sikhnin said: It is like the inhabitants of a province who made a crown for the king. They provoked him but he bore with them; they provoked him again, but he bore with them. He said: "The inhabitants of the province provoke me only because of the crown that is placed upon my head. Here, I cast it down in their faces!"
>
> Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "The Israelites anger Me only because of the image of Jacob (איקונין של יעקב) that is engraved on My throne. Here, I cast it down in their faces." This is what is written, "He has cast down from heaven to earth the glory of Israel."[37]

David Stern offers a convincing interpretation of Jacob's image in this passage by comparing it to "actual iconic images, usually in the form of medallions portraying the Roman emperor or the Roman consuls, that were used throughout the empire to decorate imperial and consular chairs."[38] The purpose of Jacob's image, in Stern's opinion, is "to situate a figurative representation of Israel upon the divine throne," and, by doing so, satisfy "Israel's wish to be literally at God's right hand."[39]

In what follows, I would like to expand on Stern's analysis by reading Jacob's image in light of a roughly contemporaneous discussion of the relation between an emperor and an emperor's image by Basil of Caesarea. In his tractate *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil uses what appears to be a culturally established understanding of the emperor's image as an analogy to explicate the relations between Father and Son within the Trinity:

> The image of the emperor is also called the emperor, yet there are not two emperors. Power is not divided, nor is glory separated. Just as the ruler who has power over us is also a single power, so too is our praise one and not several, for the honor giv-

[37] Lamentations Rabbah 2.1. See David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 270–271, as translated by Stern, 109–110, with revisions. On the Midrash, see Strack and Stemberger, 283–287, with literature.

[38] Stern, *Parables*, 111.

[39] Ibid., 112.

> en to the image crosses over to the prototype. Therefore, one who is an image here by means of mimesis is there the son by nature. Just as likeness according to form is for artists, so also is the union in the communion of the divinity for the divine and unconfused nature.[40]

Here, as noted by Barber, the emperor's image, "understood as a form of visual contact between copy and original, maintains a trace of its origins in the act of representation." As a result, the image "reiterates the emperor."[41] Athanasius of Alexandria, another 4th-century Church Father, conveys essentially the same understanding of the relationship between the emperor and the emperor's image by noting that, "there is the form (*eidos*) and shape (*morphe*) of the emperor in the image, and in the emperor is that form which is in the image."[42] In a similar way, Jacob's image shares "the form and the shape" with the collective body of Israel. In parallel to the emperor's image, Jacob's image participates in the reality of what it represents. Therefore, just as Basil describes the properties of the emperor's image by using the language of "power" (*kratos*) and "glory" (*doksa*), so too does the Midrash refer to God's decision to cast down the "glory of Israel" (*tiferet yisrael*) as a decision to cast down Jacob's image.[43] Just as the emperor's image serves as a figural representation of the emperor's body, intimately associated with its prototype, so too does Jacob's *iqonin* serve as a figural representation of Israel's collective body and a symbolic projection of that body onto God's throne.

Significantly, however, the Midrash offers no sign that Jacob's image serves to bridge the epistemic gap between God and Israel. There is no indication that God becomes isomorphic with Israel through the medium of Jacob's *iqonin* in a way that, for Yannai, God becomes isomorphic with Israel through the medium of their shared names. It is only in Yannai's work, composed later in the 6th century, that Jacob's image (now rendered as *demut* rather than *iqonin*) acquires new significance as another form of semiotic space intended to mediate between the sensible and the intelligible, the corporeal and the incorporeal, the human and the divine. In the context of Yannai's poetry, Jacob-Israel's image offers a visual equivalent to Jacob-Israel's name.

As noted earlier in the chapter, Yannai treats Israel's name as if it were an icon: a unique kind of space within which one can read God's divinity through the semiotics

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[40] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 18. See Basile de Césarée, *Sur le Saint Esprit*, ed. Benoit Pruche (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 406, as translated by Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, 74.

[41] Ibid., 34–35. See also James A. Francis, "Living Icons: Tracing a Motif in Verbal and Visual Representation from the Second to the Fourth Centuries C.E.," *The American Journal of Philology* 124 (2003): 584–590, and Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 150–151.

[42] Athanasius, *Third Oration against the Arians* 5 (*PG* 26:332A; trans. Francis, "Living Icons," 587, no. 33, with revisions).

[43] In this sense, Stern significantly misreads the culturally embedded language of the Midrash when he states that "by interpreting the phrase *tiferet yisrael* not as 'the majesty of Israel' but as 'the icon of Jacob,' R. Joshua effectively defused the verse's most threatening and dangerous meaning" (Stern, *Parables in Midrash,* 113). Cf. Neis, "Embracing Icons," 47, no. 72, for a perceptive critique of this part of Stern's argument.

of a human form. Yannai's reference to the image of Jacob engraved on the Throne of Glory articulates the same idea in a different register. Whereas the name alone may be too abstract and immaterial, the image makes the semiotic middle ground on which communication between God and Israel takes place even more corporeal. It is only natural, then, that the previously discussed *qedushta* for Genesis 35:9 introduces its audience to Jacob's image within the context of its broader discussion of Jacob-Israel's name:

> Your name will be known and Your people will know your name // And all who are called by Your name [will make known] Your name
>
> "The Prince," whom You created for Your glory // And You fashioned his image on Your Throne of Glory
>
> "Jacob" he was called, and You are "the God of Jacob" // "Israel" he was called, and You are "the God of Israel."[44]

Just like the other parts of the *qedushta*, this section blurs the boundaries between biblical Jacob and the collective personhood of his descendants, the people of Israel. Yannai invites his listeners to focus on Jacob as the personification of the listeners' own liturgical community. Yannai also asserts the isomorphism of God's and Israel's name. The people of Israel are the people who know God's name and who are called by God's name. The relationship, however, is reciprocal, for God is also named after Jacob and Israel: "'Jacob' he was called, and You are 'the God of Jacob' // 'Israel' he was called, and You are 'the God of Israel.'" The figures of Jacob, the people of Israel, and God of Israel accrue meaning in accordance with their triangular relationship to one another.

In the context of this broader discourse on Jacob's name, the image of Jacob "fashioned" on the Throne of Glory offers a visual equivalent to the name of Jacob. Together, the name and the image form the semiotic space within which human and divine natures become mutually legible. In the same way as Yannai invites his listeners to identify with the name of Jacob, he also invites them to identify with the image of Jacob engraved on the Throne of Glory. Indeed, the semantic connection between Jacob's image and Jacob's name is ubiquitous in Yannai's poetry. In the *qedushta* for Genesis 28:10, Yannai portrays the two as the focal point of angelic praise:

> For Your faith is in Jacob and testimony in Israel // For (You) see the image of Jacob.
>
> They sanctify You, the Holy One of Israel, and as they recall the name of Jacob // They praise You, the God of Israel.
>
> You are called "the God of Jacob" and also "the God of Israel" // And at the show of the camps of Your angels:
>
> One proclaims the name "Jacob" and another proclaims the name "Israel," // And the first one says, "Holy is He!"

[44] Rabinovitz, *Poems*, 1:215, lines 23–25; trans. Lieber, *Yannai*, 640, with minor revisions. The Hebrew *nin*, translated here as "prince," could also mean "son." On the translation and its rationale, see Bronznick, *Liturgical Poetry of Yannai*, 1:87.

And the second one says, "Blessed is He!" and this one calls out to the other // And this one listens to the other. [45]

The language of this text is similar to the language of the *qedushta* for Genesis 35:9, but also expands on it. The *piyyut* identifies God through the name and image of Jacob-Israel not only from the perspective of God's human worshippers, but from the perspective of angelic ones as well. God becomes available to angelic praise precisely as "the God of Jacob" and "the God of Israel." "By depicting the angels taking on the names of the patriarch," observes Lieber, "Yannai blurs the very identity of the angelic hosts into that of the patriarch and his descendents. In some way, the angels become (or wish to become) Jacob-Israel (both the patriarch and his latter-day descendents)."[46] I would like to take Lieber's argument one step further by noting that the blurring of the identity of the angelic hosts into that of the patriarch and his descendents occurs precisely within the semiotic field that makes God available to human and angelic knowledge through the epistemic media of Jacob's name and image. The reference to the constant presence of Jacob's image in front of God's eyes, in conjunction with the references to God being named after Jacob and Israel, invites Yannai's listeners to read the isomorphism between God and Israel simultaneously in the two different registers of the name and the visual form. The name and the image of Jacob create God's liturgical persona, just as, in the words of Maximus, God "takes form" and "acquires his likeness to human beings" through human asceticism. Yannai's human audience finds itself concelebrating with the angels within the semiotic space centered on the name and the image of Jacob, with whom this audience identifies itself.

The figure of enthroned Christ dominating the altar space was a common feature of church interiors in late antiquity. The late 4th- or early 5th-century mosaic in the apse of Santa Pudentiana in Rome depicts Christ sitting on a majestic golden throne adorned with precious stones. A similar throne carries little Jesus in the scene of the Adoration of the Magi on the 5th-century triumphal arch around the apse of Santa Maria Maggiore. In the apse of the 6th-century church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Christ is depicted sitting on the globe. The image of the *hetoimasia*, prepared throne of the Apocalypse, bearing the symbols of Christ's power, such as the golden crown, the cross, or the book was equally important. It appears on mosaics in Santa Maria Maggiore, the two baptisteries in Ravenna, and St. George in Thessaloniki. As suggested by André Grabar, the prepared throne and the symbolic objects placed on it often served as a substitute for the image of the regal Christ in the art of the 5th and 6th centuries.[47] Whether occupied by Christ or not, the throne served as a focal point of adoration, both within the picto-

[45] Rabinovitz, *Poems*, 1:168–169, lines 14–18; trans. Lieber, *Yannai*, 532, with revisions. On this text, see Lieber, "Rhetoric of Participation," 137–140, and Neis, "Embracing Icons," 46.

[46] Lieber, "Rhetoric of Participation," 139.

[47] See André Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantine. Recherches sur l'art officiel de l'empire d'Orient* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1936), 199–200, and 214–216, and Beat Brenk, "The Imperial Heritage of Early Christian Art," in *Age of Spirituality: A Symposium*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 45–48. For a good summary of available pictorial evidence and

rial program of the church and for the liturgical community assembled there. Similar to the synagogue in Dura Europos, the church's physical space was perceived as continuous with the pictorial space of the church's mosaics. The adoration of the throne or enthroned Christ performed within the narrative space of the mosaics drew the Christian congregation into itself, just as the scene of Jacob in the company of his sons drew the Jewish community into its narrative space.

We do not know what was depicted on the walls of late antique synagogues. Did their pictorial programs, in any way, reflect the broader cultural interest in the depiction of an enthroned God or God's throne? The poetic program of Yannai's compositions certainly did. The enthroned God of Jacob drew the mental gaze of Yannai's listeners in exactly the same way as the enthroned Christ of late Roman mosaics drew the spatial gaze of Christian congregations. The image of Jacob engraved on the Throne of Glory takes its place among other objects and symbols placed on the "vacant" thrones of church mosaics. Just as the throne carrying the symbols of Christ served as an object of adoration for both angels and human beings within the visual program of late Roman church buildings, the throne with the image of Jacob engraved on it served as an object of adoration for angels and human beings within the rhetorical program of Yannai's *piyyutim*. In both cases, there was an attempt to construct a semiotic space that would allow for communication between sensible and intelligible realms. In both cases this space was centered on the figure of God rendered translatable into the language of human senses by means of a human form, a human name, or the very possibility of God's localized presence framed by the throne.

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references to literature, see Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129–132.