

# Man as Symbol of God

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It is a well-known fact that Judaism and Zoroastrianism, being prophetic religions with a monotheistic character, present many affinities (Winston, Hultgård). One point of similarity is a clear tendency towards aniconic representation of the Divine, which, from the beginning, was the mark of Judaism as well as Zoroastrianism, being religions with a nomadic background. As a result of the confrontation with the agricultural and urban civilisations of the ancient Near East, attempts were made to introduce iconic representations of the Divine to be used in the cult. Many groups within Judaism, and most probably also within Zoroastrianism<sup>1</sup>, levelled a vigorous resistance to these attempts. As a consequence, there arose in both religions a strong movement to prohibit cult-images, which in Judaism also tended to develop into a prohibition of figurative art in general<sup>2</sup>. This movement became victorious in the end and its aniconic conception of the Divine has ever since remained the normative attitude of both Jews and Zoroastrians. What were the reasons for these attitudes in Judaism and in Zoroastrianism? And were there theological ideas that could function as a substitute to cult-images of the Divine? These are the questions that briefly will be discussed in this paper.

As to Judaism, it is important to point out that from the time of the Second Temple and onwards, the prohibition of making any image of YHWH was beyond all dispute. It is during the Second Temple period also that a resistance to all forms of man-like representations is taking shape and receives some of its clearest expressions. Thus, the Hasmonaeans never put their effigies on the coins they issued and the same is true of Herod the Great<sup>3</sup>, although he introduced figurative art and freestanding sculptures in the non-Jewish parts of his kingdom<sup>4</sup>. In the first century A.D., the attitude towards human images became more rigorous and was linked to a growing opposition against the Roman rule<sup>5</sup>. The Jewish historian Josephus reports some incidents which bear witness to a strong reluctance felt by the Jews against

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<sup>1</sup> It is the merit of Mary Boyce, 98 ff., to have called attention to an iconoclastic movement within Zoroastrianism.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this development, cf. the studies of Gutmann 10 ff.; Roth 505 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the documentation of ancient Jewish

coins found in Reifenberg, 10 ff., and Meshorer, 41 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. for example Josephus *Antiquities* XV,364; cf. also Roth, 507.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Roth, 507.

any form of images<sup>6</sup>. It seems, however, that a distinction was made in this respect between the holy city of Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine<sup>7</sup>. From the middle of the second century and up to the sixth, a more tolerant attitude concerning figurative art appeared. This is demonstrated by some sayings in the Talmud<sup>8</sup> and above all by the lavishly decorated synagogues of Palestine and Syria constructed during this period<sup>9</sup>. Here, we find animal figures and, what is more remarkable, representations of human and angelic beings<sup>10</sup> which probably meant more than pure decorations to the Jews who gathered in these synagogues for prayer and religious instruction<sup>11</sup>. However, from the late sixth century, a more rigorous attitude towards images of human beings can be observed, which also seems to have produced iconoclastic movements<sup>12</sup>. When coming under the rule of Islam, most of the Jewish communities rejected any form of figurative art<sup>13</sup>.

The reason put forward by classical Judaism for an objection to images of the Divinity and representations of human figures is that it is forbidden by the torah. This is the answer given already by Josephus in various passages of his works<sup>14</sup>. But it must be borne in mind that the rejection of the making of iconic figures of man was based on an interpretation of the Second Commandment (*Exodus* 20,4, *Deuteronomy* 5,8; see also *Deut.* 4,15). These passages, however, were in need of a precision since they could be interpreted in different ways according to varying contexts and historical situations<sup>15</sup>. The main theological reason for not representing YHWH in any

<sup>6</sup> Pilate introduces into Jerusalem Roman standards which had the images of the emperor attached to them. This was felt as a violation of the law against the making of an iconic figure of man and caused an immense excitement among the Jews and Pilate was forced to remove them, see *Antiquities* XVIII,55 ff., and *War* II,169 ff. The whole Jewish world is stirred up by the attempt of Caligula to have his statue set up in the temple of Jerusalem, see *Ant.* XVIII,261 ff. and *War* II,184 ff.

<sup>7</sup> In *Ant.* XVIII,55 the incident mentioned above is explained by Josephus with a reference to the Second Commandment: "our law forbids the making of images". In *War* II,170 he gives a precision by stating that the law permit no image to be set up in Jerusalem. According to *Ant.* XV,277 images of men could not be tolerated in Jerusalem. Cf. also *Talmud Yer. Avodah Zarah* 3,1 which seems to hint at special laws for the holy city when reporting that before the destruction 70 A.D. all likenesses were to be found in Jerusalem except those of man.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Talmud Yer. Av. Zar.* 3,3; 4,1; cf. also Roth, 508.

<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that the synagogue of Dura Europos, constructed in the middle of the third century, was preceded by an earlier one whose pictures were without figures of man and animals.

<sup>10</sup> Let us mention as examples the synagogue of Dura Europos, of which Goodenough 12,158 ff., gives a detailed description. Further, Beth Alpha (Saller 23 ff.) and Gerasa (Saller 43 f.) with their rich mosaics depicting also human figures. In Chorazin there can still be seen *in locu*, as was by the present author in 1978, a sculptured column representing a human face, probably an angelic being.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Jewish symbols found in the synagogues, cf. Goodenough 12,64 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Some synagogues in Galilee show traces of iconoclastic activity, as for instance those of Bar'am and Capernaum (Loffreda, 60).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Roth, 521.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Antiquities* XVIII,55 and 121, XV,277 *War* II,195 and *Against Apion* II,75 and 191.

<sup>15</sup> The opposition against Rome favoured a rigid interpretation of the Second Commandment. In Babylonia at a later period, however, the rabbis could frequent synagogues

image was no doubt to preserve his transcendental character, but this reason could apparently not be applied to the prohibition of representations of man. However, the idea found in *Genesis* 1,26–27 and 9,6 that man was made in the image of God, would constitute an excellent theological argument against the use of iconic figures of man, because in that case something of the Divinity would also be represented. The idea of man as created in the image of God is, however, as far as I have been able to ascertain, never explicitly connected to the objection of making images of human beings. One ground for this may be that rabbinic Judaism tends to interpret the statement of *Genesis* 1,26–27 in the sense that man is not an image of God but of the angels or of Adam as primordial man<sup>16</sup>. Neither intertestamental nor rabbinic sources enlarge on the interpretation of the idea of man's godlikeness<sup>17</sup>. But some texts from the Second Temple period offer a more precise meaning, which seems to stress an identity between God and man. Here, we may speak about man as symbol of God. The *Testament of Naphtali* thus states: "There is no inclination and no thought (of man) which the Lord knoweth not, for He created every man after his own image."<sup>18</sup> We read in the *Wisdom of Salomon* 2,23 that: "God created man for immortality and made him the image of His own eternal self."<sup>19</sup> These passages reveal the intimate relation thought to exist between God and man. It seems to me probable that, to many Jews in the time of the Second Temple, man could function as a symbol of God which would tacitly imply an objection to iconic figures of man.

Zoroastrianism, as well as other forms of the ancient Iranian religion, is characterized by an aniconic conception of the Divine. Herodotus records that it is not the custom of the Persians to make and set up statues, temples and altars. Instead, they ascend to the peaks of the mountains and there offer sacrifice to the God of heaven<sup>20</sup>. The negative attitude towards cult-images is reflected in many actions performed by the Achaemenians<sup>21</sup>.

where, for patriotic reasons, statues of the ruler were erected, see *Talmud Babli Av. Zar.* 43b and *Rosh Hashanah* 24b. The archaeological evidence from the synagogues of the third to the sixth centuries must be explained in the light of a less rigid interpretation of the Second Commandment.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the texts and the discussion given by Jervell, 84 ff., 96 ff.

<sup>17</sup> This idea appears mostly as a quotation from *Genesis* without any precise interpretation. Cf. for instance of earlier texts: *Sir.* 17,3; *Jub.* 6,8; *Pirqe Aboth* 3,14. In *Jub.* 16,26 we find the interpretation that Israel is created in the image of God. For all the passages from the Second Temple period which allude to *Gen.* 1,26–27, cf. Jervell, 21 ff. One reason for passing over *Gen.* 1,26f. without

an interpretation seems to have been the rabbinical view not to instruct the common people in the meaning of the first chapter of *Genesis*.

<sup>18</sup> *Test. Napht.* 5,2: ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι πᾶν πλάσμα καὶ πᾶσα ἔννοια ἦν οὐκ ἔγνω κύριος πάντα γὰρ ἀνθρώπων ἔκτισε κατ'εἰκόνα ἑαυτοῦ.

<sup>19</sup> The Greek text runs as follows: ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἔκτισεν τὸν ἀνθρώπον ἐπ' ἀφθαλαῖα καὶ εἰκόνα τῆς ἰδίας ἀϊδιότητος ἐποίησεν αὐτόν.

<sup>20</sup> *Hist.* I,131.

<sup>21</sup> When Xerxes destroys a temple with pagan idols (*daivadāna*), most probably in Babylon, he proclaims on a rock relief: "the idols (*daivas*) shall not be worshipped." The text is found in Kent, 151. The violent attacks of

But, on the other hand, it is precisely the Achaemenians who introduce a symbol of the highest god, Ahura Mazda, in the form of a winged disc in which the god himself appears as a human being<sup>22</sup>. The iconography is clearly based on Assyro-Babylonian models. It is not easy to decide whether these images, found on reliefs, were worshipped as deities or were made for the glorification of the king of the kings only. Anyhow, we do not find free-standing images or temples at this stage. With the reign of Artaxerxes II (404–359) something new is being introduced: the making of images of the goddess Anahita that were housed in temples erected in the principal cities of the empire<sup>23</sup>. No doubt, the introduction of fire-temples also goes back to the same period<sup>24</sup>. According to Strabo<sup>25</sup>, there were in Parthian times two kinds of temples: sanctuaries (ἱερά) for a particular deity, most often Anahita, in which the image of the goddess (or god) was worshipped, and fire-temples (πυραϊθεῖα) where only the holy fire was burning. Against the background of primitive Zoroastrianism with its aniconic conception of the Divine, the image-cult established by Artaxerxes must have provoked a fierce opposition from many Zoroastrian groups. Owing to the lack of sources for this period, we do not know anything about an anti-iconic movement within Zoroastrianism in late Achaemenian and Parthian times. When we come to the Sasanian period however, the objection to images for adoration marks the Zoroastrian religion, now being that of the state itself. But the kings continue to represent the principal Zoroastrian deities on the rock reliefs showing their royal enthronement accomplished by the gods<sup>26</sup>.

Mary Boyce has recently shed some light on the history of the anti-iconic attitude which has been inherited by modern Zoroastrianism. She maintains that the term *uzdēs*, traditionally interpreted to mean “idol”, may instead refer to cult-images of Zoroastrian deities<sup>27</sup>. Even if the etymology proposed by Boyce is correct, only the context in which the term *uzdēs* is found, will help us to decide whether pagan idols or images of Iranian gods are meant. The exhortations found in the Pahlaviliterature to keep away from *uzdēz-paristišnēh* are recorded in a context which strongly suggests an image-

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Kambyses on Egyptian and Phoenician temple cults must be seen as an expression of the Iranian aniconic conception of the Divine. These actions of Kambyses are recorded in Herodotus *Hist.* III,13, 16, 27 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Sometimes the winged disc is found without a human figure (examples Hinnells, 100, 103), which indicates that the winged disc could function as a symbol of the god even without the human figure. It seems clear to me that the figure in the disc represents Ahura Mazda and not the king or his genius. The rock relief of Behistun 73 makes it very clear that it is the god who is represented by the figure in the disc.

<sup>23</sup> The evidence is given by Berossos as quoted in Clemens Alexandrinus *Protrepticus* V,65,3 and in Agathias II,24. Cf. also Wikander, 61 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Wikander, 60; Boyce, Mary, 98.

<sup>25</sup> *Geography* XV,3,15.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the documentation in Ghirshman, 119 ff.

<sup>27</sup> Boyce, Mary, 96. She proposes an etymology from the Avestic root *daes-* “show”. *Uzdēs* should thus mean a “showing forth, representation”.

worship inside the Zoroastrian community and makes it clear that this was looked upon as a danger for the faithful<sup>28</sup>. A comparison between certain Avestan traditions and the Pahlavi-texts dependant on them shows that the problem of image-worship became a matter of great concern during a fixed period and some time after. The beginning of the seventh book of *Dēnkart* describes the transmission of the Divine Word (*vaxš*) from Ahura Mazda to Zoroaster by the intermediary of some mythical figures. With regard to the Avestan *Taxma Rupa*, the text follows first the statement of *Yašt* 19,28 that this hero conquered demons and wizards mastering even the Evil Spirit himself. It then adds, however, that *Taxma Rupa* also fought against image-cult and propagated among mankind the cult of fire and the worship of the Creator<sup>29</sup>. The passage clearly alludes to the aniconic conception of Ahura Mazda, who is instead represented by his creation and by fire, and contrasts to this the iconic representation of the Divine. The coming saviours, as described in *Yašt* 19,88–96, are in some later texts also said to be the destroyers of those who within the realm of Iran serve these images<sup>30</sup>. This redaction and reinterpretation of ancient Zoroastrian traditions should probably be dated to the time when the veneration of images was introduced and was flourishing, that is the late Achaemenian, the Seleucid and the Parthian periods. In the beginning of the Sasanian period temples with images of Zoroastrian deities were still in existence but they were gradually transformed into fire-temples<sup>31</sup>. By the end of the Sasanian period, the use of cult-images was wholly suppressed.

There seem to have been several motives involved in the rejection of cult-images of Zoroastrian deities. The aniconic conception of the Divine, professed by primitive Zoroastrianism as part of its Indo-european heritage, has certainly favoured the resistance to image-worship. However, theological arguments were no doubt more influential in this respect. The distinction made in Zoroastrian theology between the non-material (Avest. *mainyava-*, Pahl. *mēnōk*) and the material (Avest. *gaēθya-*, Pahl. *gētik*) is fundamental to Zoroastrianism<sup>32</sup>. Ahura Mazda and the *yazatas* (spiritual beings worthy of worship) belong to the non-material, intangible existence. To make and consecrate an image of God or his *yazatas* meant to transfer something from an immaterial sphere into a material, which should not be there. It could also be considered as a violation against the prerogative of

<sup>28</sup> In addition to the passages with *uzdēs* and its compounds, given by Mary Boyce, the following are worth quoting: *Mēnoi i xrat* 2,93: *hac uzdēz-paristišnēh i dēv-izakēh dūr pahrēc*. Further the same writing 36,11, which tells us that the one who serves the idols commits one of the heaviest sins. The Pahlavi text of those passages is found in Nyberg 71,82,

<sup>29</sup> *Dēnkart* VII,1,19: *u-š apāc apaḡand*

*uzdēs-paristakēh ud ravakēnīt andar dāmān nīyāyišn ud parastišn i dātār*. The term *nīyāyišn* is used particularly to denote the worship of fire.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Mēnoi i xrat* 2,93 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Boyce, Mary, 105.

<sup>32</sup> For this distinction, cf. the analys given by Lommel 93 ff.; Shaked, 59 ff.

God who is the sole creator. Furthermore, because the evil powers do not possess a material form, they would use an image in which to appear and “misappropriate the worship intended for the divinity.”<sup>33</sup>

If then Ahura Mazda is not permitted to be represented in a material form as a cult-image, he is nevertheless thought to reveal himself to mankind on the earth. According to Zoroastrian belief, God is made manifest by His creation and in particular by the fire, which is invoked as “the son of Ahura Mazda”. But there is in Zoroastrianism an idea which corresponds to the *imago Dei* theology of Judaism. *Bundahišn*, a theological compendium based on Avestan traditions states in 26,10 f.: “His (sc. Ohrmazd’s) material sign is the righteous man, he who brings joy or affliction to the righteous man, has also brought joy or affliction to Ohrmazd.”<sup>34</sup> A kind of identity is here presupposed and we may thus consider the righteous man as the earthly symbol of God. But who is understood to be a righteous man? Man himself is for Zoroastrianism the foremost creation in the material world<sup>35</sup> and man reaches his perfection in the righteous man, embodied in Gayomart, the primordial man, and in Zoroaster the prophet himself<sup>36</sup>. At the same time, the pious Zoroastrian may be regarded as a representative of the righteous man. In the royal ideology the same idea is to be found. The king representing by his position the righteous man can be styled as the image of God. The Iranian king is, according to a passage from Plutarch, “an image of the God who saves the universe”.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, in both Judaism and Zoroastrianism, a similar theological idea of man as created in the image of God appears, which may have been felt as a corrective counterpart to image-worship and, for Judaism, also to representations of human figures. Man means in this respect to Judaism either the Israelite as a member of the chosen people or man in general. To Zoroastrianism man is above all the perfect man as represented by the primordial man, the prophet, the king and the faithful of the Zoroastrian community.

<sup>33</sup> The wording is that of Boyce, Mary, 97.

<sup>34</sup> The Pahlavi-text runs: *u-š gētik daxšak mart i ahrāv, kē mart i ahrāv ramēnēt ayāp bēšēt, adak-iš Ohrmazd ramēnēt ayāp bēšt bāt*. This passage alludes by its wording to another passage in *Bundahišn* (chapter 4) where Gayomart is the righteous man who is attacked by the whoredemon Jeh: *beš apar mart i ahrāv*. According to *Zātspram* 35,13 Zoroaster was made in the likeness (*handā-zakēh*) of Ahura Mazda.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. for instance *Dēnkart* 124,14f.; cf. also Bailey, 87.

<sup>36</sup> For Zoroaster as *mart i ahrāv* cf. especially *Dēnkart* VII, 2,20.

<sup>37</sup> Plutarch, *Themistokles*, 27, reproduces an Iranian conception put in the mouth of an Iranian nobleman: ἡμῖν δὲ πολλῶν νόμων καὶ καλῶν ὄντων ἀλλιστος οὗτός ἐστι, τιμῶν βασιλεία καὶ προσκυνεῖν ὡς εἰκόνα θεοῦ τοῦ τὰ πάντα σώζοντος.

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