“THE GODS OF MY FATHER TERAH”:
ABRAHAM THE ICONOCLAST AND POLEMICS WITH
THE DIVINE BODY TRADITIONS IN THE
APOCALYPSE OF ABRAHAM

Introduction

It has been previously noted that the Apocalypse of Abraham exhibits subtle polemics against an anthropomorphic understanding of God. The second part of this pseudepigraphic text deals with Abraham’s celestial ascent to the realm of the divine Chariot. While drawing on some features of the traditional Ezekielian account of the Merkabah, the authors of the apocalypse appear to carefully avoid any references to anthropomorphic portrayals of the Deity, prominent in the classic prophetic account, and instead repeatedly try to depict the divine Presence as the formless Voice proceeding in the stream of fire.

While the anti-corporeal tendencies discernable in the second, apocalyptic part of the text have already been established in previous studies, no sufficient explanation has been offered of how the first, haggadic part of the pseudepigraphon (chs 1–8), which depicts the patriarch as a fighter against the idolatrous statues of his father Terah, fits into the anti-anthropomorphic agenda of the text’s authors.

---


2 Scholars previously noted that the seer’s vision of the divine Throne found in the Apocalypse of Abraham “draws heavily on Ezekiel and stands directly in the tradition of Merkabah speculation.” Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination, 183. See also I. Gruenwald, Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism (AGAJU, 14; Leiden: Brill, 1980) 55–57; Rowland, The Open Heaven, 86–87.

3 In his comparative analysis of the accounts from Ezekiel and the Apocalypse of Abraham, Rowland demonstrates that the author of the Slavonic apocalypse, while preserving the angelic depictions of Ezekiel’s account, carefully avoids the anthropomorphic description of the Kavod, substituting it with the reference to the divine voice. Rowland concludes that “there appears here to have been a deliberate attempt made to exclude all reference to the human figure mentioned in Ezekiel 1.” Rowland, The Open Heaven, 87.

4 See Orlov, “Praxis of the Voice,” 53–70.
It is possible that this haggadic portion of the apocalypse, which envisions the hero of the faith as a tester and destroyer of human-like idolatrous figures, plays a pivotal role in the anti-corporeal polemics employed by the authors of the pseudepigraphon. It does not seem coincidental that the arguments against the divine body traditions were situated in the midst of the story of the patriarch known in Jewish pseudepigraphical and rabbinic materials for his distinctive stand against idolatrous figures. It has been observed that besides the Apocalypse of Abraham other texts of the Abrahamic pseudepigrapha, such as the Testament of Abraham, also deny the possibility that God has a human-like form. Philip Munoa notes that “the Testament of Abraham studiously avoids physical description of God when describing Abraham’s heavenly ascent and tours of heaven explicitly identifying God with invisible….” Munoa further argues that the Testament of Abraham clearly exhibits anti-anthropomorphic tendencies in highlighting God’s invisibility, repeatedly emphasizing his unseen (ἀόρατος) nature.

It appears that the iconoclastic thrust of the patriarch’s story, elaborated already in the Book of Jubilees, offered an ideal literary setting for the unfolding of polemics with traditions of divine corporeality. It is no coincidence that these anti-anthropomorphic developments also appear in the Apocalypse of Abraham, the pseudepigraphon written in the name of the hero of the faith known in Jewish lore for his opposition to idolatrous figures of the divine.

In view of these tendencies it is likely that in the distinctive depictions of Abraham’s struggles with idolatrous anthropomorphic figures manufactured by his father Terah, whose features are strikingly reminiscent of the corporeal portrayals of the Deity found in the Book of Ezekiel and some other biblical and pseudepigraphical accounts,

6 Here the constraints on the visual representation of the Deity are even more demanding than in the Apocalypse of Abraham, since the authors of the Testament of Abraham render the Deity as completely invisible, lacking any visible representation.
7 Munoa illustrates these tendencies by referring to the passage from chapter 16 where the following tradition about the invisibility of God can be found: “When Death heard, he shuddered and trembled, overcome by great cowardice; and he came with great fear and stood before the unseen Father, shuddering, moaning and trembling, awaiting the Master’s demand. Then the unseen God said to Death…” (T. Abr. 16:3–4).