CHAPTER FOUR

PRK’S THEMATIC CONCERNS:
A THEOLOGY OF INTIMACY, HUMILITY
AND INDULGENCE

This chapter will focus its thematic analysis of PRK specifically on theology, pointing to some general trends in the way that PRK depicts God. What we will find is a theology of intimacy, humility and indulgence; PRK midrashim depict a God who is unassuming and down-to-earth, personal, forgiving and undemanding in His relations to humans. These themes fit well with the forms studied in the previous chapter. The personal relationship narratives of the mashal, the intimate statements of the Holy One blessed be He and the personal dialogue all contribute to a sense of intimacy. They also imply a relationship between God and Israel that is down-to-earth and indulgent as God responds to every concern of the Israelites, speaking to them in a tender, colloquial voice. The petihta, too, contributes to the feeling of intimacy as it allows the principal subject of midrashim to be based on the personal dialogue of the Song of Songs (for instance) rather than the authoritative dialogue of Leviticus (for instance).

Exegesis and theme are famously hard to untangle in midrash.¹ A thematic emphasis in midrash may simply be due to a trend in the biblical text. The way to circumnavigate this issue is to point to thematic trends and emphases that are not present (or not present to the same extent) in the biblical text, at least not in the biblical text immediately under study by the midrash. Here as elsewhere we can often see the influence of certain parts of the Prophets and the Writings on the theology developed in PRK. However, the Prophets and the Writings offer a variety of theological alternatives to choose from so that PRK’s particular choice still tells us something about its darshanim. Moreover, when we find the same theological emphasis across various exegetical contexts in PRK, then the case can be made for a significant thematic trend. If the emphasis were purely exegetical, one would expect it to vary with the text under study;

¹ See David Stern’s discussion of this issue. Stern, Midrash and Theory, 73.
when it does not, it can be said to reflect something about the author(s) of the midrashic text.

One of the claims of this chapter is that this down-to-earth indulgent theology is fairly new in the history of midrash. Related to this theology of a God who comes down to earth and takes active and intimate part in human affairs is the notion of anthropomorphism. Arthur Marmorstein and Jacob Neusner have both shown, in different ways, that what Marmorstein calls rabbinic Judaism’s anthropomorphic trend becomes more pronounced and influential specifically in the amoraic period. Before that, there is some controversy over anthropomorphism between the literalist R. Akiva group and the allegorical R. Ishmael group. According to Marmorstein, in the amoraic period, “victory fell to R. Akiba and his disciples,” who read the Bible literally and therefore often anthropomorphically. PRK’s interest in a God who is down-to-earth and acts on earth may be part of this phenomenon, part of the amoraic movement toward a more human-like depiction of God.

The Tisha b’Av lectionary cycle also seems to have been created at about the same time or just before the redaction of PRK in the fifth-sixth century, and, according to Elsie Stern, we find in this lectionary cycle the development of a theology of intimacy as well, a general movement from a powerful God to an intimate, romantic one. Stern also studies PRK’s chapters dealing with these weeks of rebuke and consolation and finds in them the articulation of similar themes. Both the lectionary cycle and PRK are creations of the rabbis from approximately the same period and both have an eye toward a wider synagogue audience, so that it makes sense that these two creations would bear witness to a similar development within rabbinic Judaism toward a more intimate, less awesome God.

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2 Arthur Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God, II. Essays in Anthropomorphism* (New York: Krav Publishing House, 1968). Jacob Neusner calls the shift a move toward incarnation. He traces a trajectory of belief about God from premise to person to personality (the amoraic period) to incarnation (the Babylonian Talmud). Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992). See also David Stern’s discussion of these scholars and his suggestion that we consider anthropomorphic images in rabbinic literature from a literary perspective, not as an expression of belief but as a form of poetry or figurative language. Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 76–78. My analysis here does not rely on the assumption that these figures actually represent what the rabbis believed about God. Rather, I understand their expressions about God as a way to speak about themselves. The shift in the way they speak about God is therefore worthy of study as it suggests a shift in the rabbis’ self-understanding.


4 Elsie Stern, *From Rebuke to Consolation*. 