Chapter Four showed that PRK’s theology was distinctly down-to-earth, its God, immanent and intimate, humble and indulgent. This chapter will support chapter 4’s claim to the novelty of this theology in the amoraic period by contrasting it to the more distant and awesome God of tannaitic midrashim.

The method will be the same as in the previous chapter, making use of quantitative evidence based on searches using the Bar Ilan Responsa CD-ROM as well as the anecdotal evidence of certain specific textual comparisons and the views of other scholars. On the whole, however, I rely more heavily on anecdotal and scholarly evidence in this chapter; quantitative searches are less useful for thematic issues since they usually tell us little about the use of the term and therefore little about a midrash’s approach to an issue.

The tannaitic midrashim are generally more resistant to thematic analysis than amoraic midrashim, because of their verse-centeredness. The content of tannaitic midrashim tends to be much more closely related to the content of the Scriptural verse they are commenting upon, so that to speak of their content is sometimes merely to speak of the content of Scripture. Neusner writes about Sifra and Sifre to Numbers in this way, saying that they are so verse-focused that it is hard to define any particular topical program other than an interest in the hermeneutical question of whether reason or Scripture triumphs.\(^1\) Boyarin has similarly argued that Mekhilta should not be viewed as importing extra-textual issues but rather as reflecting the natural manifestation of a serious rendering of Scripture’s own intertextuality.\(^2\) Amoraic midrash, on the other hand, generally has a stronger thematic program, as is manifest in its ability to remain aggadic even while interpreting halakhic parts of Scripture.

Tannaitic midrash’s weaker thematic program is not a problem for our analyses. First, it is not a problem because, although it may be weaker, all commentaries have some of their own thematic emphases, even if it

\(^1\) Neusner, *Sifra in Perspective*, 136ff. Note that Neusner sees Sifre Deut as more amenable to thematic analysis and less strictly verse-centered.

is only manifest in their choice of verses to make larger or smaller comments upon. Second, even if and when tannaitic midrash is found to be reflecting Scriptural ideas rather than its own, if those ideas are in contrast to those of amoraic midrash on the same topic, then the sense of amoraic midrash’s novelty is still established; in fact, if anything, it is more clearly established in this way, as one gets a sense of a continuity of ideas from the Scriptural to the tannaitic periods, a continuity which is then specifically broken by the new ideas of amoraic midrash.

The chapter will be divided into two sections, the first dealing with questions of immanence and transcendence, and the second, with questions of rebuke, authority and indulgence.

Immanence and Transcendence

As mentioned in chapter four, scholars such as Marmorstein and Neusner have shown that anthropomorphism, or, according to Neusner, the move toward God’s personhood and incarnation, are ideas that become stronger and more popular in the amoraic period. Marmorstein traces this amoraic development back to the views of R. Akiva’s school in the tannaitic period. Indeed, Heschel, whose book *Theology of Ancient Judaism* traces the lines of debate between the Ishmael and Akiba schools in the tannaitic period, argues that R. Akiva has a more immanent and anthropomorphic view of God, imagining Him as accessible to humanity and as acting in certain human-like ways. R. Ishmael, on the other hand, according to Heschel as well as Yadin, maintains a more distant, transcendent and wholly other view of God.3

The historical argument for the ascendancy of the immanent, anthropomorphic view of God in the amoraic period generally assumes that it emerges as a continuation of the Akiba school of thought, and in opposition to the Ishmael school. In what follows, I will both support and question this line of thinking. On the one hand, we will indeed see evidence for certain lines of continuity between Akiba thinking and the thinking of amoraic midrash with respect to God’s image. On the other hand, there are also important ways in which amoraic midrash is discontinuous with Akiba thinking, and Akiba thinking bears a closer

---