



Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism
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Mark Sheridan, an expert in early Christianity, explores how ancient Christian theologians interpreted Scripture in order to address the problem of attributing human characteristics and emotions to God.

Hellenistic Jewish Interpretation of the Scriptures

By the time of Jesus Christ, the Jews had become well established in the Greco-Roman world. There were Greek-speaking Jewish communities living in cities throughout the Mediterranean area. Two of the most important of these were located in Antioch and Alexandria, the capital cities first of the Greek kingdoms of Syria and Egypt and then of the Roman provinces of Syria and Egypt. Already in the third century before Christ the Jews of Alexandria seem to have translated the law of Moses into Greek. This meant that it became known to non-Jews as well in the Hellenistic world. One result of this was the need to defend the Jewish Scriptures and to explain them to a cultured, philosophically oriented, non-Jewish public such as that of Alexandria.

Such is the background for the earliest Hellenistic Jewish writings that explain or present the law of Moses. The document known as the *Letter of Aristeas* (or Pseudo-Aristeas, written about 170 B.C.) describes how the law of Moses came to be translated into Greek supposedly at the request of the king of Egypt, Ptolemy, who wished to have it in his famous library at Alexandria. The translation according to this account was made somewhat miraculously by seventy translators sent from Jerusalem for this purpose. In addition the letter contains an apology for the law of Moses and some indications as to how the law is to be interpreted. The author is particularly concerned to explain the dietary laws and the distinction between clean and unclean animals. First of all he lays down a general principle regarding the law: "In general everything is similarly constituted in regard to natural reasoning, being governed by one supreme power, and in each particular everything has a profound reason for it, both the things from which we abstain and those of which we partake." Then he gives various examples. He admonishes: "Do not take the contemptible view that Moses enacted this legislation because of an excessive preoccupation with mice and weasels or suchlike creatures. The fact is that everything has been solemnly set in order for unblemished investigation and amendment of life for the sake of righteousness." The birds that are forbidden and called "impure" are wild and carnivorous and behave unjustly toward the domesticated birds. Their prohibition is in fact a way of teaching a moral lesson.

By calling them impure, he has thereby indicated that it is the solemn binding duty of those for whom the legislation has been established to practice righteousness and not to lord it over anyone in reliance upon their own strength, nor to deprive him of anything, but to govern their lives righteously, in the manner of the gentle creatures among the aforementioned birds which feed on those plants which grow on the ground and do not exercise a domination leading to the destruction of their fellow creatures.

In other words, it would be unworthy of the one supreme power to be concerned merely about mice and weasels. These merely represent the higher moral principles with which the

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supreme power is concerned. They are symbols for the true and more profound moral teaching of the law. Similarly the permission to eat cloven-hoofed animals is in fact an exhortation to remember God, for “all cloven-footed creatures and ruminants quite clearly express, to those who perceive it, the phenomenon of memory.” The author seems to be anxious that the non-Jewish readers should not think that the laws of the Jewish Scriptures manifest a trivial concept of God. Implicitly (and to a certain extent explicitly) it is the concept of God that governs his explanations. “So he exhorts us to remember how the aforesaid blessings are maintained and preserved by divine power under his providence, for he has ordered every time and place for a continual reminder of the supreme God and upholder of all.”

The early Christian writers had a high regard for these Jewish Hellenistic authors, and we know of others like Aristobulus because they were quoted by Christian authors such as Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea. The fragments preserved by Clement and Eusebius come from an apologetic and didactic work addressed to the young king Ptolemy VI Philometor (184–145 B.C.). This second-century Jewish interpreter likewise seems to have felt it necessary to defend Moses from the charge of *alogia*, that is, unreasonable or senseless interpretations, especially taking literally the many anthropomorphisms found in the Scriptures. Eusebius reports that in his work dedicated to Ptolemy the king, Aristobulus “explained why indications are given of hands and arms and face and feet and walking about throughout our Law with respect to the divine power.” He states: “And I wish to exhort you to receive the interpretations according to the laws of nature and to grasp the fitting conception of God and not to fall into the mythical and human way of thinking about God.” Again it is the conception of God that provides the key to interpreting the Scriptures correctly. For Aristobulus it is clear that one must search for a deeper meaning in these writings. They cannot be taken at face value. As a programmatic statement he notes that Moses uses “words that refer to other matters”: “For our lawgiver Moses proclaims arrangements of nature and preparations for great events by expressing that which he wishes to say in many ways, by using words that refer to other matters (I mean matters relating to outward appearances). . . . But to those who have no share of power and understanding, but who are devoted to the letter alone, he does not seem to explain anything elevated.” This may be directed against Jews who opposed allegorical interpretation as well as against non-Jews who mocked the unsophisticated and anthropomorphic representations of the supreme being in the Jewish Scriptures.

– Excerpt taken from chapter three, “Hellenistic Jewish Interpretation of the Scriptures”