Recontextualizing the Trinity and the Incarnation Within Judaism: Two Approaches Compared

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1 INTRODUCTION: TONGUE-TIED BY A HASID

In the summer of 2017, I spent three evenings in the living room of a Brooklyn-based Hasidic rabbi known for his opposition to belief in Yeshua.[1] I had been invited to the rabbi's home with two Messianic Jewish friends to discuss two lines of argument: the historical credibility of the chain of tradition in Pirke Avot and the evidence for the resurrection of Yeshua from the dead.[2] Surrounded by Talmudic tractates lining the walls, and often interrupted by guests coming by the house, we presented the minimal facts argument for the resurrection as popularized by Gary Habermas and William Lane Craig.[3]

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1. The rabbi was Moshe Shulman, who operates the website Judaism's Answer.

2. These friends were Jonathan and Erik, who were serving as interns that summer for my apologetics project, *Chosen People Answers*.

3. Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004). William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000). See also Robert B. Stewart "On Habermas's Minimal Facts Argument," in *Raised on the*

After hearing the argument, the rabbi responded that it is *possible* that God raised Yeshua from the dead. However, God would have done so only to test whether Israel would follow Deuteronomy 13 by rejecting a false prophet *even if* he had been raised from the dead. My colleague Jonathan replied that raising a false prophet from the dead would have been deceptive on God's part, if the prophet had claimed that his resurrection would validate his identity (cf. Mt. 16:21–23). The God of truth (Isa. 65:16) would not tell a lie by validating a false prophet's claims.[4] With a smile on his face, the rabbi asked us why God would not tell a lie. Why believe that God has a nature that is essentially truthful? Instead, God is only truthful to us in *this world*, whereas he could be something else in another world. Moreover, God has no limits whatsoever—his infinity precludes the idea of saying that he could be this or that, including being essentially demarcated by the concept of "truthful."[5]

This was a line of discussion that took us by surprise. My friends and I attempted to appeal to a variety of passages in the Torah and Amidah where God is described as having attributes, including the famous passage in Exodus: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and *emet* (truth or faithfulness)" (Ex.

Third Day: Defending the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus, edited by W. David Beck and Michael R. Licona (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 1–14. Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; Apollos, 2010).

4. Jonathan has since published on this argument: Jonathan William, "The Resurrection of Jesus: Another Jewish Perspective," *Kesher*, no. 37 (2020), https://www.kesherjournal.com/article/the-resurrection-of-jesus-another-jewish-perspective/.

5. In his review of an early draft of this paper, Rabbi Shulman clarified that he believes that God is without limit *in potentia*, but that after he willed to create the world, then all the limits on God's actions and being, as described by Maimonides, come into force. This position calls into question the classical understanding of God's immutability and his transcendence from his creation.

34:6). This was to no avail, because according to the rabbi, Scripture only tells humans how God is *experienced* in this world and says nothing about who God actually *is*. The rabbi refused to describe God using attributes and denied the concept of God having a nature, which he said was a holdover from Plato and Aristotle.[6] "I'm not a Platonist," he said, in responding to our claims about God's nature being essentially truthful. Unfortunately, nothing in my prior theological education or evangelistic experience had prepared me for these positions, despite courses in the Talmud, Jewish history, and rabbinic theology.

Although I did not know it at the time, this discussion became a turning point in how I approached theological matters in evangelizing the Orthodox. It became apparent that my conception of God—even before getting to Trinitarian or incarnational matters—was vastly different than that of the rabbi's, and his conception was foreign to me. I had never been exposed to apophatic theology, also known as negative theology, whereby it is claimed that one cannot know anything positively about God, who can only be described by what he is not.[7] Likewise, I had little exposure to Plato or Aristotle or how their metaphysical categories of nature and

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6. In his review of an early draft of this paper, Rabbi Shulman clarified that he is not a Platonist or Aristotelian in the sense of accepting realism about universals. Instead, he is aligned more closely with Wittgenstein's language games and nominalism. Such positions leave no room for there to be a universal such as divine nature. For an overview of realism and nominalism, with a defense of the former, see J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 187–207.

7. For an overview of negative theology in Judaism, see Michael Fagenblat, ed., *Negative Theology as Jewish Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017) and Elliot Wolfson, "Via Negativa in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," Maimonidean Studies 5 (New York, NY: Michael Sharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, 2008), 393–442. For an overview beyond Judaism, see Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015) and A. W. Moore, *The Infinite*, Third Edition (New York: Routledge, 2018).

attributes had crossed over into theological discourse.[8] Finally, I had never encountered the idea that Scripture reveals mere appearances and experiences of man with God and cannot be seen as a guide to know God himself.[9] In short, I was unprepared.

A year after this encounter, I began writing a major defense of the incarnation for my apologetics project, *Chosen People Answers*. At first, I intended to write about ancient Jewish precedents for the incarnation idea, including the Logos, Memra, and Shekinah, an apologetic strategy I now call, "The Historical-Textual Approach." However, as I was reading Orthodox Jewish critiques of the incarnation, the positions shared by the rabbi in his living room kept reappearing, and I still did not know how to respond. I concluded that my intended strategy was limited and could not adequately address the positions of theologically and philosophically minded Jewish people. I needed to take a different approach. In this paper, I intend to introduce a second way of recontextualizing the Trinity and incarnation, which I have entitled, "The

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8. For an overview of Western philosophy, including the use of these metaphysical categories, see Anthony Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy*, 3rd edition (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018). For an insightful overview of Platonism in Christian theology, see Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, ed. Gerald Bray, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 28–52.

9. The division between reality and experience is a key Platonic concept. For Plato's classic analogies teaching this concept, such as the *Allegory of the Cave*, see *Republic* 507–20. In Jewish discourse, this dynamic is seen in the division between the exoteric (common experience and interpretation) from the esoteric (secret knowledge). See Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Maimonides' Exoteric and Esoteric Biblical Interpretations in the Guide of the Perplexed," in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Tel Aviv: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), 137–64. Aviezer Ravitzky, "Maimonides' Esotericism and Educational Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin, Kindle Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Chapter 11. Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Philosophical Implications*, trans. Jackie Feldman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Theological-Philosophical Approach."[10] I believe this approach is important because it

recognizes that the objections some Jewish people have about Yeshua are not only due to textual

disputes concerning messianic prophecies or the particulars of Hebrew exegesis, but rather due to

having a vastly different worldview derived, principally, from theological and philosophical

authorities outside of Scripture.[11] In my opinion, both approaches complement each other and

are beneficial for Jewish evangelism. However, the Jewish missions movement may need to

become more proficient in the second approach as American Judaism becomes increasingly

Orthodox according to current population trends.[12]

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10. I credit J.P. Moreland and Garry DeWeese for introducing me to the world of philosophy and training me to integrate it with an evangelical theological worldview. Their training, in conjunction with Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*, opened me to beautiful new horizons. The second approach, which I will outline in this paper, is not a new approach, developed by me, but rather an application of the great conversation to Jewish evangelism. See footnote 33.

11. This does not imply that evangelicals or Messianic Jews ought to refrain from integrating extrabiblical authorities into their worldview. There are many pathways to knowledge in human experience, including the senses (empirical knowledge), logic, metaphysics, probabilistic inference, and Scripture. However, in an evangelical and Messianic epistemology, the teachings of Scripture have the highest and controlling priority over all other sources of knowledge. Orthodox Jewish epistemology does not operate with this type of epistemological priority for the Tanakh, leading to extrabiblical sources having controlling priority in matters that Scripture speaks about. See footnote 27.

12. Orthodox Judaism will have an increasing influence in the American Jewish experience in the decades to come, according to population statistics in *Jewish Americans in 2020* (Pew Research Center, 2021), 9. For an optimistic Chabad perspective on these statistics, see David Eliezrie, "US Jewry Is Shifting Profoundly and Chabad Is on Rise - Pew Research," The Jerusalem Post, May 30, 2021, https://www.jpost.com/opinion/pew-us-jewry-is-shifting-profoundly-chabad-is-on-rise-669549.

2 THE HISTORICAL-TEXTUAL APPROACH

It was once common for critical scholars to view the historic claims of Jesus' divinity as a holdover from a Greek religious paradigm that expected the gods to come to earth. In Jewish evangelistic contexts, this line of thought reinforced the common Jewish idea that belief in Jesus is pagan and non-Jewish. Surprisingly, since the late 1970s, this assumption has been turned on its head. Modern scholarship has recontextualized divine embodiment from the Tanakh itself,[13] from Second Temple Judaism,[14] and from rabbinic works,[15] showing Jewish precedents for the concept. For example, scholars have coined the word *binitarianism,* a theology positing a unity of two divine entities, to describe a well-represented Jewish belief present in both the Second Temple and post-Temple eras.[16] Some Jewish exegetes of these periods asserted God's essential

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13. Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Michael Wyschogrod, "A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation," *Modern Theology* 12, no. 2 (April 1996): 195–209.

14. Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013). Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004). Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020). Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, Third Edition (New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

15. Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, Reprint edition (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012). Daniel Boyarin, "Two Powers in Heaven: Or, the Making of a Heresy," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 331–70. Daniel Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism: In the Persian Hellenistic & Roman Period* 41, no. 3 (July 2010): 323–65. Daniel Boyarin, "Enoch, Ezra, and the Jewishness of 'High Christology,'" in *Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch*, ed. Matthias Henze and Gabriele Boccaccini (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology : Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2014), 45–70.

16. In the literature cited previously, some scholars define binitarianism loosely (emphasizing continuity between Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament), and others

incorporeality (or bodyless-ness) while *also* asserting that God had a divine Son or Angel united

with him who was uncreated and could manifest himself physically. The presence of divine

intermediaries in ancient Judaism was so widespread that Talmudist Daniel Boyarin writes,

"There is significant evidence (uncovered in large part by [Alan] Segal) that in the first century

many–perhaps most–Jews held a binitarian doctrine of God."[17] Elsewhere, Boyarin explains,

> The road to Nicaea had been well cleared and paved and neither Trinity nor
> Incarnation can be said to represent a departure from Israelite religion but rather
> an unfolding of it. Jews came to believe that Jesus was God, because they already
> believed that the Messiah would be a divine redeemer incarnated in a human
> being; they just argued about who that human being was.[18]

As evidence for this claim, fruitful incarnational parallels may be found in Philo's idea of

the *Logos*,[19] the Targums' *Memra*[20] and *Shekinah,*[21] the Apocrypha's *Sophia*,[22] the

define it strictly (emphasizing discontinuity). The citations below by Boyarin and Sommer
represent Jewish scholars who employ a more loose definition of binitarianism. On the other
hand, Larry Hurtado has emphasized (with a Nicene *homoousios* insight) that a true bi-unity
would imply that both figures in the binity could receive worship. Hurtado points out that the
Second Temple Jewish divine intermediaries never accept worship, and instead reject such
worship when it is offered to them. Because of this phenomenon, Hurtado is unwilling to
describe pre-New Testament divine intermediaries as evidence of binitarianism. Instead, he cites
them as *partial* precedents that provided conceptual categories that underwent "mutation" after
the religious experiences of Jesus' followers. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 38–9.

17. Daniel Boyarin, "Two Powers in Heaven: Or, the Making of a Heresy," in *The Idea of
Biblical Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 334.

18. Daniel Boyarin, "Enoch, Ezra, and the Jewishness of 'High Christology,'" in *Fourth
Ezra and Second Baruch*, ed. Matthias Henze and Gabriele Boccaccini (Brill, 2013), 352.

19. See Philo *Flight* 101, *Confusion of Tongues* 146, *Questions in Genesis* 2.62, *On
Dreams* 1.238–239.

20. Targum Onkelos: Gen. 3:8, Deut. 5:24. Targum Neofiti: Gen. 18:1, Dt. 31:15.

21. Targum Onkelos: Ex. 33:3, 34:6, Num. 23:21 (with Memra), Dt. 32:40. See also Avot
de Rab. Natan 38.

22. Sirach 24:1–9, Wisdom of Solomon 7:25–28, 9:1–2.

Pseudepigrapha's *Son of Man*,[23] and the rabbis' *Metatron*.[24] By appealing to these passages, one can begin with the biblical text, cite ancient Jewish interpreters, and then make the case that an incarnational reading is plausible because of concurring Jewish opinions. Commenting on ancient Jewish thought, Benjamin Sommer of Jewish Theological Seminary writes,

> No Jew sensitive to Judaism's own classical sources, however, can fault the theological model Christianity employs when it avows belief in a God who has an earthly body as well as a Holy Spirit and a heavenly manifestation, for that model, we have seen, is a perfectly Jewish one.[25]

The evidence here is strong and should be used in Jewish evangelism and apologetics.[26]

However, in my view, the Historical-Textual Approach has at least six significant drawbacks.

First, sharp-witted Jewish people may be quick to reply that widespread ancient popularity does not equate to truth. Just because some ancient Jews believed something, it does not make it true. They could have been heretical, schismatic, or naïve Jewish people who should not be cited as having knowledge of theological truth.

Second, this approach does not address the philosophical developments in Judaism since the Middle Ages, namely the contributions of Maimonides and the Kabbalists. These medieval thinkers were aware of biblical texts that imply divine embodiment, and they embraced

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23. 1 Enoch 46, 62:5–9, 69:29, 4 Ezra 13.

24. b. Sanhedrin 38b, 3 Enoch 10–11, 12:5, 48C.7–8.

25. Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 135.

26. However, Hurtado's clarification on the uniqueness of the New Testament's claims ought to be kept in mind (see footnote 16). The Jewish precedents were only *partial* precedents, and there is not strict continuity between pre-New Testament Judaism and the teachings of the New Testament. The Son of God indeed introduced a *new* way of interacting with God through his incarnation.

philosophical frameworks that countered the idea that God could become embodied in a New Testament sense.

Third, the historical-textual approach argues on the basis of texts that contemporary Jewish people either do not read (Second Temple literature, Pseudepigrapha) or do not read without medieval and modern commentary (Hebrew Bible, Talmud). An Orthodox Jewish thinker today would find it dangerous to appeal directly to biblical texts without consulting the sages who commented upon them, a judgment that reflects their epistemological hierarchy.[27] Moreover, if the text in question is an extrabiblical text that the sages do not discuss, such as in the case of Philo or 1 Enoch, the text is treated as inadmissible and foreign to Judaism.

Fourth, the epistemology of secular, Reform, and liberal Jewish people is incompatible with the historical-textual method. They tend to see all historical works, the Bible and Second Temple Jewish literature included, as human-produced literary works that probably have little relation to ultimate theological reality, if there even is such a reality.[28]

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27. Epistemological hierarchy refers to which sources of knowledge are believed to be more, or less, authoritative than others. The sources that are high in a hierarchy are those that have controlling influence on those that are lower. Sources that are low in a hierarchy may only be accepted when judged to be free of conflict with higher sources. This hierarchical structure of knowledge is known as *foundationalism*. Although Orthodox Judaism holds to the supreme theoretical authority of the written Torah, epistemologically, the written Torah is below many other traditional sources, for it is taught that the written Torah may not be understood without them. For an overview of foundationalism, and the competing position *coherentism*, see Garrett J. DeWeese and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophy Made Slightly Less Difficult: A Beginner's Guide to Life's Big Questions*, Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: 2021), 57–64.

28. For a discussion between a Reform rabbi and an Orthodox rabbi on the nature of biblical historicity and authority, see Ammiel Hirsch and Reinman Yosef, *One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues That Divide Them* (New York: Schocken, 2002).

Fifth, when followers of Yeshua place too much emphasis on continuity with Jewish precedents, while neglecting theological and philosophical analysis, they can unwittingly advocate a devaluation of Scripture or the promotion of theological heresy.[29]

Sixth, the Hebrew Bible examples of divine embodiment and theophany—and even Second Temple "binitarian" positions—are not exactly what the New Testament is referring to with the man Jesus having a human nature (Heb. 2:17) and a divine nature (Heb. 1:3). The incarnation of the Son of God—best articulated by Chalcedon[30]—is a heightened claim that

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29. Three examples of this include C.H.W. Pauli (nineteenth century), Paul Levertoff (twentieth century), and Izhak Shapira (twenty-first century). Each of these men uncritically accepted theological and metaphysical claims of Kabbalah that contradict or subvert the teachings of the Tanakh or the New Testament. Pauli claimed that the so-claimed "ancient" teachers of Kabbalah "undoubtedly preserved the pure doctrine of the blessed Godhead." Christian William Henry Pauli, *The Great Mystery; or, How Can Three Be One?* (London: William Macintosh, 1863), 92. This is unsustainable, as Kabbalah's vision of God is panentheistic and Neoplatonic, even including evil within the divine. Anglican Jewish believer Levertoff (in *Love and the Messianic Age*) accepted the substance of much of Chabad Hasidism, including the following: God created the universe by *tzimtzum* (p. 35), the human soul is a part of God (p. 40, 61), one should practice soul flight to see God (p. 57), God lost control of the universe and needs man's help to fix it (p. 40), evil will ultimately be absorbed by God (p. 38), and man is a microcosm of the universe (p. 52). Each of these have antecedents in some form of Neoplatonic, Gnostic, or Neopythagorean thought. Paul Philip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, Second Edition (Marshfield, MO.: Vine of David, 2009). Itzhak Shapira's insistence that Yeshua is a reduced *tzimtzum*, rather than a full divinity, tends towards Arianism and a rejection of the *homoousios* (consubstantial clause) of Nicaea. Shapira denies that one can worship the man Jesus, only the divine *tzimtzum* inside him, thereby tending towards docetism and denying the hypostatic union of Chalcedon. Shapira employs "manifestations" as a substitute for "persons," and he states that he espouses *many* manifestations, not merely three. Unfortunately, "manifestation" is an inadequate synonym for Nicene "persons," and his use of the term results in modalism, whereby there is only one person in God who shifts his form at will. Itzhak Shapira, *The Return of the Kosher Pig* (Clarksville, Maryland: Lederer Messianic Publications, 2013), 267–75.

30. Some who are skeptical of Greek philosophical influence on Christian theology may take issue with this approving citation of Chalcedon. I join in lamenting the influence of Platonic thought (and especially Neoplatonic) in Christian theology. The Platonic stream has often set the ground rules in Christian theology and hermeneutics over and above the Scriptures themselves. Christian theologians often talk about concepts like perichoresis or eternal generation without

requires more theological justification than the divine embodiments in the Tanakh, which did not

involve any union of the two natures in one person. Additionally, as the late Larry Hurtado has

pointed out, no ancient "binitarian" figure encouraged or accepted worship of himself.[31] Thus,

the incarnation has no strict continuity with ancient Jewish theology, only partial precedents.

Because of these drawbacks, the Historical-Textual Approach cannot be recommended as

the *only* way to recontextualize the Trinity and the incarnation in a Jewish setting. Theologically

and philosophically inclined Jewish thinkers may easily dismiss the opinions of ancient Jewish

interpreters because the binitarian and embodiment beliefs they held were a combination of

heresy, metaphysical impossibility, and naïveté. Mere proof-texting appeals to biblical texts or

ancient Jewish interpretations will not do. The question, "Can God become incarnate?" deserves

more than just historical-textual responses about ancient Jewish opinions; the underlying

philosophical and theological issues ought to be addressed.

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showing any awareness of their Platonic roots. Such terms have become so commonplace in
Christian discourse that the original epistemological source is obscured. This is dangerous
because it can lead the Gospel of Platonism rather than the Gospel of Messiah. However, I
believe that the formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon escape from this criticism. While the
metaphysical terms they use (*hypostasis*, *ousia*) originated in Greek philosophical discourse
(primarily Aristotelian), they were also modified from their Greek precedents to be brought in
line with the New Testament. In addition, I believe that any attempt to move away from the
meaning of the metaphysics in the creeds will not adequately align with *all* the teachings about
Messiah in the Scriptures, only *some*. For examples of Christian theologians who are cognizant
of how concepts originating in Greek philosophy must be modified in Christian theology, see
Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 115, 279, 805–6. Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The
Doctrine of Christ*, ed. John S. Feinberg, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 256–9. Adrian Pabst,
Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy, ed. Conor Cunningham and Peter Candler (Grand
Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 65–66.

31. In Hurtado's view, the early Christian devotion to Jesus was a "mutation" away from
binitarian precedents, and thus the earlier precedents do not deserve to be called "binitarian."
Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*,
Third Edition., The Cornerstones Series (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 97–130.

3 THE THEOLOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

The Theological-Philosophical Approach to recontextualizing the Trinity and the incarnation involves entering into a realm of discourse that is often unfamiliar to Messianics and Protestant evangelicals, but is very familiar to Catholics and Orthodox Jews.[32] Instead of only reading and commenting upon the Bible, this approach involves reading the Bible while joining the "great conversation"[33] on systematic theology, cosmology, metaphysics, ontology, physics, and ethics, while also making an apologetic case about why some theological models are more faithful to Scripture than others.

Kabbalah presents a good example of the need for this approach. The Jewish mysticism called Kabbalah is a syncretistic conglomeration of many different ideologies, drawing at once upon metaphysical teachings best known in Neopythagoreanism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and

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32. For historical, sociological, and theological reasons for this unfamiliarity in evangelicalism, see Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994) and J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), 13–41. Unlike Noll, I do not believe that dispensationalism necessarily leads to anti-intellectualism.

33. This is a phrase used by Britannica to describe the multi-layered and interconnected discourse contained in its series *Great Books of the Western World*. The great conversation is "the continuous discussion that runs through the thirty centuries of western civilization." Mortimer J. Adler, ed., *The Syntopicon: An Index to the Great Ideas*, Second Edition., vol. 1, Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1990), xiii. See Adler's two-volume *Syntopicon* within the series for excellent handbooks on the history of great ideas.

Hermeticism. From *gematria*,[34] to reincarnation,[35] to incantations,[36] to esoteric soul flight,[37] Kabbalah is derived principally from Greek mystery philosophies now conveyed in Hebrew garments. Kabbalists generally interpret reality through these schools of thought, with the Tanakh very far down their epistemological hierarchy.

For example, Kabbalah holds to a fascinating cosmology whereby the universe came into being after a catastrophe took place within the complex unity of God.[38] God, called *Ein Sof* ("He who is without end") in Kabbalah, was once an undifferentiated infinity, but after emanating

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34. The practice of assigning numerical meanings to the Hebrew letters and using mathematical formulas to calculate the hidden meanings of words and phrases. This practice was first known in Greek as *geometrikos arithmos* (perhaps the origin of the term *gematria*) and *isopsephos*. Kieren Barry, *The Greek Qabalah*. (York Beach, Maine: Red Wheel Weiser, 1999). Kindle Edition. Chapter 2.

35. The belief that after death, the soul is prepared for a new body that reflects the soul's moral quality. The more purified souls are given new bodies and positions of stature, whereas the less purified souls are not. Antonía Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 43.

36. Magical formulas using secret words and phrases. "Jews undoubtedly played an important role in the transmission of astrology, hermetism, magic and astral magic from the Arabic into the Latin world, just as they did in many other fields of medieval science: astrology and astral magic have strongly influenced the thinking of medieval Jewish philosophers like Yehudah ha-Levi (1085-1145), Abraham bar Hiyyah (died ca. 1136) and in particular the famous exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra (1093-1168), whose scientific astrological works were also translated into many medieval European languages…. In these texts, many of the traditions commonly linked with Hermes Trismegistus or Apollonius of Tyana are attributed to Adam, Enoch or Solomon." Reimund Leicht, "Jewish Influences II: Middle Ages," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. W.J. Hanegraaff (Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 638.

37. The practice of seeking separation from one's body to unify one's soul with higher realities, often using mystical meditation practices. Antonía Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 122–5.

38. This catastrophe is called "The Shattering of the Vessels." For an excellent primer on Lurianic cosmology, see Jacob Immanuel Schochet, "Mystical Concepts in Chasidism," in *Likkutei Amarim, Tanya*, by Rabbi Schneur Zalman (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society: 2014), a35–116.

lower realities called *Sefirot*—with which he is united—some of the *Sefirot* shattered, and their

waste parts fell to the lowest level of reality.[39] The final *Sefirah*, *Malchut*, created the universe

by speaking secret Hebrew words, fusing the eternal light of *Ein Sof* with the waste parts of the

divine catastrophe. Based on this cosmology, Kabbalists believe that everything in the universe

has dual natures—both infinite and finite—mysteriously united as one. To use a Christological

analogy, in Kabbalah the creation is consubstantial with the Creator.[40] In this divine drama, there

is crossover with Scripture at one point—the spoken words of Genesis 1—whereas the rest of the

cosmology is derived from the panentheism[41] of Neoplatonism,[42] the numerical metaphysics of

39. The sequence words in this sentence (once, after) are understood in Kabbalah to be mere metaphors for a process that took place in eternity and should not be understood as a literal sequence. Kabbalist thought, grounded in the infinite, does this often.

40. For example, the Tanya states, "While you see yourself as apart from God, God sees you as a part of God." Rami Shapiro, tran., *Tanya, the Masterpiece of Hasidic Wisdom: Selections Annotated & Explained*, SkyLight Illuminations Series (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing; Skylight Paths Publishing, 2014), 153. The word "consubstantial" was chosen to illustrate how Kabbalah takes the incarnation as defined by Chalcedon and makes it writ large across the cosmos. Kabbalah makes the incarnation of the Son of God redundant, for everything is God incarnate.

41. The cosmological position that "all is in God," meaning the universe has eternally emanated from God (creation *ex Deo*) and remains "in God" as a part of his being. This should not be confused with pantheism, which states that God *is* the universe. In panentheism, God's being extends beyond that of the universe. For a historical overview of panentheistic beliefs, see John W. Cooper, *Panentheism—the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

42. The classic text for Neoplatonism is Plotinus' *Six Enneads* (third century CE). Subsequent Neoplatonic thinkers in Late Antiquity included Porphyry, Iamblicus, and Proclus. Neoplatonism retained an underground mystical existence in the West through Pseudo-Dionysius' works, such as *The Divine Names* and *The Celestial Hierarchy,* and to a lesser extent, in St. Augustine's works. In the Islamic Middle Ages, Neoplatonism came to prominence with the publication of *The Theology of Aristotle*, which was actually a misattributed translation of portions of Plotinus' *Six Enneads*. It was through the *Theology* that Maimonides and perhaps the Kabbalists were introduced to Neoplatonic ideas. Sarah Pessin, "The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/maimonides-islamic/.

Pythagoreanism,[43] and the spheres cosmology of Aristotle and Ptolemy.[44] It is likely that an

evangelist equipped with only biblical knowledge will be outmatched, confused, and frustrated

when speaking to Jewish people of the mystical stream.[45]

The same observation may be true for those evangelists who encounter educated Jewish

people from a more rationalist mode of Jewish theology. For example, in his book entitled, *The

Refutation of the Christian Principles*, medieval Jewish philosopher Hasdai Crescas remarked,

> Man's uniting with God is impossible since it would involve a contradiction. This
> is clear since man is finite and God, may He be blessed, is infinite. Therefore, no
> other case is so replete with an affirmative and a negative…. God has no power
> over things from which a contradiction would follow.[46]

Returning to our own century, American Orthodox Rabbi Meir Soloveichik writes,

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For an overview of Plotinus' thought, see Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

43. Kieren Barry, *The Greek Qabalah* (York Beach, Maine: Red Wheel Weiser, 1999), Kindle Edition, Chapters 2–3. Carl Huffman, "Pythagoreanism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2019 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/pythagoreanism/, Accessed 12-13-19.

44. The classic spheres cosmology is modified in Kabbalah to reflect a metaphysical system of spheres, not the visible sun, moon, planets, and stars. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.8, *On the Heavens*, 2.12. Ptolemy, *Almagest*, 3.4-9. For the intelligence of the spheres in Neoplatonism, see Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.2, 3.5, 4.4.

45. In his review of an early draft of this paper, Rabbi Shulman replied that Kabbalah uses the listed Greek philosophies as a language to describe things as a parable or analogy, not as literal reality. He stated that Christian theology errs in taking philosophical concepts as reflective of reality (namely, nature, person, essence), whereas Kabbalah only does so figuratively. This reply illustrates how the very nature of reality is at stake in this controversy, and the only recourse to addressing this directly is through showing why some metaphysical worldviews are better than others.

46. Hasdai Crescas, *The Refutation of the Christian Principles*, Translated by Daniel J. Lasker, Edited by Kenneth Seeskin (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 50.

For Jews, incarnation seems not so much to bridge the gap [between God and man] as to abolish it. In the Jewish understanding, finitude is absolutely untrue to God's incorporeal, infinite nature…. Turning toward a God-man, an infinite Almighty in finite form, does not assist us in relating to God, because such an image of God ceases to be God.[47]

According to these claims, there are limits to divine omnipotence, and incarnation is one of the things that God simply cannot do while remaining God. This logic is best known in Maimonides' brilliant *Guide for the Perplexed*, where he says, "[I]t is impossible that God should produce a being like Himself, or annihilate, corporify, or change Himself. The power of God is not assumed to extend to any of these impossibilities."[48]

The realm of these arguments has been theology, logic, and metaphysics. While Scripture is within the horizon of each of these authors, Scripture is not the driving force behind their opinions. For example, Maimonides spent the majority of the first part of his *Guide* teaching his readers how *not* to read the Tanakh according to its grammatical-historical meaning whenever it speaks of God, including passages that imply divine embodiment.[49] In his view, the Tanakh's God-talk should not be read exoterically—that is, according to the plain meaning of words—but rather esoterically, according to the dictates of higher philosophical truths.[50] In Maimonides'

47. Meir Soloveichik, "Torah and Incarnation," *First Things*, October 2010, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/10/torah-and-incarnation.

48. *Guide* 3.15. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer, Second Edition, Revised. (New York: George Routledge & Sons Ltd.; E. P. Dutton & Co., 1919), 279.

49. See *Guide* 1.1–48 for a comprehensive list of words and phrases that Maimonides said must be viewed as equivocal (metaphorical) language when applied to God. Some words include: image, form, pattern, verbs of seeing, place, throne, spatial terms, verbs for rising and sitting, verbs of proximity, filling, being high, passing, coming, going, walking, dwelling, eating, nouns of face, back, heart, air, soul, eyes, verbs of hearing and understanding.

50. This is a fundamentally Platonic hermeneutical pattern. See footnote 9.

case, those higher philosophical truths were to be derived from the genius of Aristotle and Plotinus the Neoplatonist.[51] In other words, the Greco-Roman philosophers, not Moses, tell people who the God of Israel can and cannot be. Maimonides' second and third principles of faith, which disallow the Trinity and the incarnation, are the doctrinal effects of his philosophical worldview.

In response to these obstacles, the Theological-Philosophical Approach to defending the Trinity and the incarnation recognizes that the sophisticated theological systems of religious Jewish people often nullify the epistemological power of the Scriptures to deliver truth about God and reality. It is unlikely that an evangelist's simplistic biblical proof-texting or even *sophisticated* biblical reasoning will have much effect on a Jewish thinker whose mind and heart are fortified by Plotinus, Pythagoras, and Plato before they ever allow themselves to understand Moses.[52] Of course, the Holy Spirit can and does penetrate those defenses with his ray of truth,

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51. Maimonides' exposure to the Greek philosophers came through the medium of medieval Neoplatonic-Aristotelian-Islamic philosophers such as Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, whom he admired beside their Greco-Roman predecessors. Also see footnote 42 concerning the medieval misattribution of Plotinus' ideas to Aristotle. Sarah Pessin, "The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2016 Edition, accessed April 17, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/maimonides-islamic. Micah Goodman, *Maimonides and the Book That Changed Judaism: Secrets of "The Guide for the Perplexed"* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 192–3. Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Stocksfield, England: Routledge, 2008), 200.

52. It is likely that most Orthodox Jewish people are unaware that they are holding to Greek philosophical positions in their ostensibly Jewish theology. Gentile sources for ideas are often missing in Jewish works, especially in mystical works like *Sefer Yetzirah* or the *Zohar*. Non-mystical works are often missing Gentile sources as well. For example. although Maimonides often cited Aristotle for his metaphysical and theological ideas in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, in Maimonides' ethical work *Eight Chapters*, he never mentioned Aristotle, even though Maimonides' ethical system was principally drawn from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides sometimes mentioned that his teachings were in line with unspecified "philosophers," but their identity was obscured, such that a reader unaware of

but he often uses ways and means by his faithful servants to deliver that truth. Many Orthodox Jewish people consider the Scriptures at the *end* of a long line of reasoning; in response, an evangelist to the Orthodox likely needs to learn how to interact with that long line of reasoning, namely, the modes of thought in classical philosophical and theological categories.

The Theological-Philosophical Approach recognizes that some Jewish people need a significant amount of pre-evangelism before the concepts of the Gospel, Trinity, incarnation, or even the explicit teachings of the Tanakh are intelligible to their ears. Before a Kabbalist can adequately understand what is meant by the Son of God becoming incarnate, the evangelist may need to be conversant with panentheism and the biblical *and* extra-biblical reasons why one

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Nicomachean Ethics would likely conclude that Maimonides' position was more original (and Jewish) than it was. Moses Maimonides, *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics*, ed. Joseph I. Gorfinkle, trans. Joseph I. Gorfinkle, vol. VII, Columbia University Oriental Studies (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912). As a personal example of this playing out in real life, in 2018 I attended "Torah New York," an annual Modern Orthodox conference. One of the speakers, Charlie Harary, gave a moving message about the power of habit in character formation, citing Maimonides for his source. The audience walked away thinking that they had just heard a brilliant discourse on Maimonides' ethics, which was true. They also, unknowingly, were introduced to Aristotle, who was left uncited during the presentation. I walked away wondering if Harary was aware that he had just taught the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which, in my opinion, is an excellent work read in conjunction with Proverbs and the Sermon on the Mount.

should hold to creation *ex nihilo*[53] and a strict Creator-creation distinction.[54] The same may be true for witnessing to a Jewish New Ager, who derives his mysticism from a wider array of sources than Kabbalah. If a Jewish rationalist appeals to Maimonides' second and third principles as a reason for rejecting the Trinity and incarnation, the evangelist would be greatly assisted if she were conversant with Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, as well as theological interpretive frameworks such as *via negativa*, *via positiva*, and *via analogia*.[55] Although education in biblical studies is foundational in Jewish evangelism, and studies in Second Temple Judaism and rabbinics are helpful tools, if we are to reach the Orthodox segment of Jewish people that is growing in percentage each year, then we may need to increase our proficiency in theological and philosophical discourse.

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53. Creation *ex nihilo* means "creation out of nothing." Properly defined, *nothing* is not a thing, as if it is the medium through which the universe has been composed. Nothing does not have potential to become being. Rather, it is metaphysical non-being that lacks all conceivable and inconceivable concepts, definitions, properties, and potential, such that the word "is" in this sentence becomes null by necessity, since nothing cannot have anything predicated about it. Kabbalists claim to hold to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, but they do so by redefining "nothing" to something other than metaphysical nothingness. Michael McClymond explains: "Because God as *En Sof* was often identified as 'nothing'—that is, 'not-a-thing' nor anything named or nameable—it became possible in both Jewish Kabbalah and later Christian Cabala to make creation *ex nihilo* equivalent to creation *ex Deo*. God was the 'nothing' from which all reality emerged. Through this interpretive twist, two views regarded as antithetical in rabbinic Judaism and in mainstream Christianity were merged." Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 1:162–163.

54. For a defense of these foundational cosmological concepts, see Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

55. For brief definitions of the three *vias*, see the corresponding articles in Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001).

4   FINAL REFLECTIONS

Some Jewish people have insignificant worldview baggage when approaching the claims of Scripture. They are reverently attracted to its message and are willing to consider its teachings straightforwardly, without imposing predetermined and sophisticated theological or philosophical frameworks upon the text. In other words, they esteem Scripture with a high epistemological priority, tending in the direction of *sola scriptura*. When an evangelist directs them to read that *Adonai* spoke to Abraham in the form of a man near the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18), they may see this as affirming something surprisingly similar to Jesus. At the same time, they may be aware that this idea is not acceptable according to their experience of Judaism. When faced with this common hesitation, the evangelist would be wise to employ the Textual-Historical Approach, recontextualizing the incarnation by illustrating how ancient Jews lent plausibility to incarnation as a Jewish and biblical idea. This may lead to increased curiosity about the New Testament and a willingness to consider what it says about Jesus.

Other Jewish people have a well-developed theological and philosophical worldview, including training on how to interpret Scripture as suggesting something other than its grammatical surface meaning. They interpret Genesis 18 as Abraham's experience with a created angel, or perhaps a visionary mystical experience with the divine. These Jewish people may dismiss an evangelist who quotes biblical passages as evidence for a messianic or evangelical worldview, saying that the evangelist is putting the cart before the horse. In Judaism, the tradition must come first, and exegesis second. In this case, the evangelist would benefit by

learning how to enter conversation about the tradition—especially its theological and

philosophical premises—in order to illustrate how some traditions are better than others.[56]

As I reflect on my experience in the living room of the Hasidic rabbi, I am struck by his

assertion, "I am not a Platonist." I neither knew what he meant by that, nor what Plato had to do

with his denial of divine attributes. As I relisten to the recording of our conversation now four

years later, I recognize that I was outmatched, not due to my lack of biblical or Talmudic

knowledge, but because biblical and Talmudic knowledge was almost all I had to give. After

several years of diagnosing what went wrong, I can now agree that my Hasidic friend was indeed

no Platonist—in the sense of assigning attributes like goodness to God—rather, he was a

Neoplatonist in Hasidic garb.[57] Had I been equipped with knowledge of Greek mystery

philosophies back then, as well as their integration into Orthodoxy, my response to the rabbi

would have been quite different.

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56. "Better" includes making a case for why some worldviews and doctrines correspond more closely with Scripture, observation/science, experience, and philosophy than alternatives.

57. The Neoplatonist label is referring to Rabbi Shulman's insistence about the utter limitlessness of God (he cannot be delimited by anything else), his belief in the incongruity of experience and reality, and his denial that God has any attributes. Each of these concepts may be found in their classic and most influential form in Plotinus' *Six Enneads*. In his review of an early draft of this paper, Rabbi Shulman denied being a Neoplatonist but clarified that he will use whatever philosophical language suits the points he is trying to make (with Wittgenstein's language games in mind). In any case, I do not think it can be avoided that his preferred language for understanding God, even in a figurative way, has a Neoplatonist shape. Philosopher A.W. Moore summarizes Plotinus' views on God: "He called it self-sufficient, perfect, and omnipotent, a complete and pure unity, utterly beyond our finite experience. He also said that it was 'supremely adequate, autonomous, all transcending, most utterly without need'. Sometimes he spoke of it in a Parmenidean way, implying that it had internal limits. 'Its manner of being is settled for it', he said, 'by itself alone'. But elsewhere he emphasized its lack of limits, either external or internal. Indeed, in line with this, he insisted that all our attempts to talk about it or define it were strictly speaking, and inevitably, inadequate." A. W. Moore, *The Infinite*, Third Edition (New York: Routledge, 2018), 45.