

## THE SECOND PERSON

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WHEN CHRISTIANS IN THE WESTERN CHURCHES read the Old Testament, they assume that it is about One God, the God of Israel, whose Name was revealed to Moses in the burning bush:

YHWH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob has sent me to you. This is my name for ever.... (Exodus 3:15)

The sacred name YHWH was rarely pronounced; it was usually replaced by 'the LORD', and even today, when the Hebrew text is read, the Name is not pronounced. In most English versions of the Bible, the Name is still indicated by 'the LORD', but the Jerusalem Bible chose to leave the Name as 'Yahweh'.

When Christians began to speak of the Trinity, what happened to YHWH? How was it possible for the first followers of Jesus, who were good Jews, to talk of Three? Paul, also a good Jew, explained that other nations had many gods, but the Christians had One God, the Father, and One Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8:6). How was it possible for good Jews to *worship* a human being, someone they had known as a Friend and Teacher? For people did 'worship' Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

This way of putting the question suggests that the Christian belief about Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity sprang from nowhere

<sup>1</sup> See, for example Matthew 14:33: 'And those in the boat worshipped him saying "Truly you are the Son of God"'; also Matthew 22:22; Matthew 28:9; Mark 5:6; John 9:38. *Proskunein*, the verb used in these texts, means to fall down and worship, and is used in connection with the gods or their images. It is also used of temple worship, for example of the Greeks who came to worship at the temple (John 12:20), and the early Christians used this word to translate Deuteronomy 6:13: 'Worship the Lord your God ...' (Matthew 4:10; Luke 4:8). The Septuagint uses a different verb—*proskunein* must have been the Christians' own choice of verb.

during the first century CE.<sup>2</sup> Modern research, however, has shown that the religious scene in Palestine at that time was very diverse. Monotheism had been a feature of Jewish tradition for centuries, but only as one feature among others: there had been other ways of describing God. The usual Hebrew word for God is *'elohim*, which is a plural form, although the point is so familiar that it passes without comment. Until the end of the seventh century BCE, when a movement influenced by the ideals of Deuteronomy came to dominate the religion of Judah and Jerusalem, there had been not only God Most High but also his sons, the great angels. The Firstborn of these angels was YHWH, who was appointed the guardian of Jacob/Israel.

When the Old Testament is read with the presupposition that it is about One God, it is assumed that all the various titles—God Most High, YHWH, *El*, *'elohim* and so on—refer to the One God. But this is not the case. Texts in the Second Isaiah, who lived shortly after the changes in Jerusalem introduced under King Josiah at the end of the seventh century BCE (2 Kings 23), show that both the names and the theologies were changing. Belief in God Most High *and* his son YHWH was being *replaced* by the monotheism that we now regard as familiar.<sup>3</sup> In the older faith, YHWH had been present with his people in the person of the king, who had been known as Immanuel, ‘God with us’ (see for example Isaiah 8:8). The promised royal child had the same title (Isaiah 7:14). The psalmist described a procession going into the temple in which, among the singers and musicians, he saw ‘My God, my King’ going into the sanctuary (Psalm 68:24). In some way, the human king was divine.

The king was also the ‘priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek’ (Psalm 110:4). Solomon *blessed* the people (2 Chronicles 6:3) and he *consecrated* the temple courts (2 Chronicles 7:7). The account of the high priest’s regalia confirms that he had been YHWH with his people. On his forehead he wore the Name YHWH engraved on a small golden tablet (Exodus 28:36).<sup>4</sup> The worship of the temple

<sup>2</sup> CE stands for ‘common era’, and BCE for ‘before the common era’—this terminology is to be preferred to the more conventional BC and AD.

<sup>3</sup> We shall return to this.

<sup>4</sup> Thus for example Philo, *Life of Moses*, II. 114; *Aristeas*, 98; also Josephus, *Jewish War*, 4. 164 has the high priest say ‘I am called by the most venerable Name’. The standard translation of Exodus, as ‘... engrave on it like the engraving of a signet “Holy to YHWH”’, is misleading. In the time of Jesus it was

replicated the worship of heaven; the priests were the angels,<sup>5</sup> and the high priest was the chief of the angels, the LORD. About 300 BCE the Greek writer Hecataeus said that the Jewish high priest was an angel, and that when he spoke, 'they [the Jews] immediately fall to the ground and *worship* the high priest as he explains the commandments to them'.<sup>6</sup> It was possible, then, for a Jew to worship a human being: the LORD, the high priest.

The older faith was not forgotten, even though we cannot be certain exactly how it was preserved and by whom. Traces of it can be found in many of the ancient texts which did not become part of the Hebrew Bible, texts such as those preserved among the scrolls found at Qumran and other sites near the Dead Sea, or those preserved only by Christian scribes even though they were written long before the time of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> The study of this background material, such as the Enoch texts,<sup>8</sup> is now the fastest growing area in biblical studies. This older faith illuminates many aspects of Christian origins, and shows that much of what had been thought to be additions from Greek culture or accretions from Greek philosophy were no such thing. They were drawn from the faith of the Jerusalem temple. Suddenly our patterns of worship and tradition fall into place as a development of the ancient temple practices, and our understanding of Christology is revolutionised. We also have a new basis for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

**Christology  
is linked  
to an older  
faith in Israel**

### **Early Christian Understandings of the Old Testament**

The fifth-century Christian historian Sozomen explained why Constantine had a basilica built at Mamre, and why it was a Christian holy place, even though it is not mentioned in the Gospels:

It is recorded that here (the oak of Mamre) the Son of God appeared to Abraham, with two angels, who had been sent against Sodom and foretold the birth of his son ... (Constantine)

understood to mean that the high priest simply wore the four letters of the Name, and so the Hebrew would have been read as 'Engrave on it YHWH like the engravings of a holy seal'.

<sup>5</sup> See Malachi 2:7 which says, literally, 'a priest ... is the angel of the LORD of Hosts'.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Diodorus of Sicily, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 40.3.5-6. 'Worship' here is again *proskunein*.

<sup>7</sup> Many of these texts can be found in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 volumes (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983 and 1985).

<sup>8</sup> 1 Enoch, quoted in verse 14 of the Letter of Jude, was Scripture for the early Church.

commanded the bishops ... to erect a church worthy of so ancient and so holy a place.<sup>9</sup>

The account of Abraham at Mamre (Genesis 18) says that ‘the LORD’ appeared to him, that is, that Abraham had a vision of the God of Israel. Yet in the fourth century, the Christians of Palestine were holding an annual celebration at Mamre, because ‘*he who was born of a Virgin*’ appeared there to a godly man’. The Palestinian Christians had been celebrating the appearance to Abraham of the Second Person of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> Constantine rebuked the bishops of Palestine for allowing this celebration to become an unseemly carnival; instead, a great church was to be built there.

**The Second  
Person and  
the Old  
Testament**

It was, then, established practice amongst ordinary Christians in fourth century Palestine to identify the One who appeared in the Old Testament as the Second Person of the Trinity, and not—as we might spontaneously imagine today—as God the Father. It was in fact the universal belief of the earliest church that the Old Testament recorded appearances of the Second Person of the Trinity; this is the position assumed by the New Testament and attributed to Jesus himself. Losing sight of this has created huge problems for the understanding of Christian origins. John’s Jesus declared that the Old Testament bore witness to him (John 5:37); Isaiah had seen him enthroned in the temple (John 12:41); Moses had written about him (John 5:46); Abraham had known him and seen him (John 8:56-58). Paul, too, applied to Jesus texts from the Old Testament which had originally referred to the God of Israel. Thus ‘Everyone who calls upon the name of the LORD’ (Joel 2:32) was used of Jesus (Romans 10:13); as was ‘Blessed is the one against whom the LORD will reckon no sin’.<sup>11</sup> When Israel had been wandering in the desert, the rock accompanying them had been Christ (1 Corinthians 10:1-11)—and ‘the rock’ is one of the names of the LORD in Deuteronomy.<sup>12</sup> In Romans 10:20-21, Paul used prophecy

<sup>9</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church*, 2.4.

<sup>10</sup> See John 8:57: “... have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “... before Abraham was, I am”. This is but one example of how John has an authentic record of Jesus.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 32:2 translating the Hebrew literally, quoted in Romans 4:8.

<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 32:4,31.

to show that Israel's rejection of the LORD in former times had been repeated in their rejection of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

The early Christians understood the appearances of the LORD in the Old Testament as appearances of the pre-incarnate Jesus. Justin, born in Palestine but writing in Rome in the middle of the second century, had no doubt that that the Old Testament appearances of the LORD or of the angel of the LORD had been theophanies of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Messiah. He concluded his long list of examples by saying:

Therefore neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor Jacob, nor any other man, saw the Father and ineffable Lord of all, and also of Christ; but [saw] Him who was according to His will His Son, being God, and the Angel because He ministered to His will.<sup>14</sup>

Irenaeus, writing at the end of the second century CE, had been a disciple of Justin in Rome and read the Old Testament in the same way. Since he also saw himself as a guardian of the true faith—he wrote a massive work *Against Heresies*—this way of reading the Old Testament must have been what he considered the norm. Novatian, writing in Rome in the mid third century, had the same understanding of the Old Testament theophanies:

He who calls to Hagar out of heaven was God, and yet He is called Angel.... The only intelligible explanation is that He is both Angel and God. Such a description cannot be appropriate and suitable to the Father, who is God only: but it can appropriately be applied to Christ, who has been declared to be not only God but also Angel. It is obvious therefore that it was not the Father who spoke to Hagar in this present passage, but Christ....<sup>15</sup>

The clearest exposition of this understanding of the Old Testament theophanies is found in the writings of Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea early in the fourth century. Throughout his massive works *The Preparation of the Gospel* and *The Demonstration of the Gospel*, he both

<sup>13</sup> Paul interprets (and modifies!) Isaiah 65: 1-2. The LORD had been found by those who did not seek him, but his own people had been rebellious. This was true in the time of the Third Isaiah, and it was true in Paul's own time.

<sup>14</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho*, 127.

<sup>15</sup> *On the Trinity*, 18. The reference at the beginning is to Genesis 16: 7-14.



Yahweh introduces Adam to Eve, from the frescos in St Mark's, Venice  
(Note how Yahweh is wearing a cross-halo.)

assumes, and argues systematically for, the belief that the God of the Jews was the Second Person of the Trinity, who appeared in human form throughout the Old Testament, and was finally and fully manifested in Jesus:

Remember how Moses calls the Being, who appeared to the patriarchs and often delivered to them oracles written down in Scripture, sometimes God and LORD, and sometimes the Angel of the LORD. He clearly implies that this was not the Omnipotent God, but a secondary being, rightly called the God and LORD of holy men, but the Angel of the Most High his Father.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Demonstration of the Gospel*, 1.5.

There are plenty of similar texts,<sup>17</sup> and it would be unwise to dismiss them as curiosities, influenced by what was later to be labelled the Arian heresy—the teaching that the Son was not eternal but a creature. This is how the first Christians understood the Old Testament. This is why Constantine had a great church built at Mamre, where the LORD appeared to Abraham.

### ***Evidence in Jewish Sources***

This way of understanding the Old Testament was not invented by the Christians. Philo, an exact contemporary of Jesus, was a highly regarded Jewish scholar living in Alexandria. He was chosen as a spokesman for the city's Jewish community before the Roman emperor, and so it is unlikely that the Judaism he expounded was regarded as heretical. Commenting on Genesis 9:6, 'In the image of God (*'elohim*, the plural form) made he man', Philo wrote: 'Nothing mortal can be made in the likeness of the Most High One and Father of the universe, but [only] in that of the Second God, who is his Logos'.<sup>18</sup> The Judaism of Philo is remarkable for the fact that it has a Second God, to whom he gives various names and titles: Word (Logos), Image of God, Covenant, Seal of the Universe, the High Priest, King, Shepherd, Archangel, Firstborn Son.<sup>19</sup> Scholars tend to assume that Philo had introduced a substantial amount of contemporary Greek thought into his Judaism, rather than considering the alternative possibility: that he was expressing in the Greek language an ancient form of Judaism which can be traced to the priests of the first Temple.<sup>20</sup>

Philo's titles seem to have originated in the first Temple, when there were priest-kings (called messiahs!) in Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> For Philo, the Logos was appointed 'judge and mediator, set before the Face'—the

<sup>17</sup>Theophilus of Antioch (*To Autolytus*, 2. 10. 22), Hippolytus of Rome (*On Daniel*, 10), and Clement of Alexandria (*The Instructor*, 1. 2, 7 *passim*) all read the Old Testament in this way.

<sup>18</sup>*Questions on Genesis*, 2. 62. The Genesis text here is quoted in the Authorised Version, which renders the Hebrew accurately and agrees with the Septuagint. The NRSV 'In his own image God made humankind' imports an interpretation into the text, since there is no 'his own' in the Hebrew. The Hebrew *'adam*, here 'man', means 'human' rather than 'male'.

<sup>19</sup>For further details see my book *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 114-133.

<sup>20</sup>See my *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2003), 262-293.

<sup>21</sup>There were no anointed Davidic kings in the second temple, from the sixth century BCE until its destruction in 70 CE.

Face of God, situated within the Holy of Holies that only the high priest could enter. The Logos was at once 'high priest and king'; his temple was the whole universe.<sup>22</sup> The Logos also 'pleads with the Immortal as suppliant for afflicted mortality, and acts as ambassador of the ruler to the subject', which was Philo's flowery way of saying what we find also in Hebrews 3:1: Jesus is 'the apostle and high priest'. These titles could well preserve valuable information about the faith in Jerusalem during the era of the anointed kings. For Philo, the Logos was, as we have seen, the Second God, implying that wherever Philo's titles originated, there had been the Second God who was king and high priest, the Firstborn and the Image of God. Philo even warns against confusing the two Gods:

For just as those who are unable to see the sun itself see the gleam of the parhelion and take it for the sun, and take the halo around the moon for that luminary itself, so some regard the Image of God, His Angel the Logos, as His very Self.<sup>23</sup>

The Targums (the Aramaic versions of the Hebrew Scriptures), also suggest that there are aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures which we no longer understand. They often render the Hebrew LORD by 'Memra of the LORD', and 'Memra' is then rendered into English as 'Word'. Scholars have debated the significance of this word 'Memra', and have often only drawn the conclusion concealed in their premises: namely, that it cannot have represented a Second God like Philo's Logos, because such a concept was unknown in Judaism (except in Philo, who is said to have been contaminated by Greek ideas). It must, however, be significant that Logos, 'Word', is the only one of Philo's titles with no obvious basis in the Old Testament—it would seem that both Logos and Memra represent an understanding of the Old Testament which we have lost.<sup>24</sup> Since the Targums were made to help ordinary people understand the Scriptures, any term in them must have been in

<sup>22</sup> *Questions on Exodus*, 2.13; *On Flight*, 118; *On Dreams*, 1.215.

<sup>23</sup> *On Dreams*, 1.239. A parhelion is 'a spot on a solar halo ... formerly supposed to be a reflected image of the sun' (OED).

<sup>24</sup> Memra in the Targums indicates the presence of YHWH, and may in fact derive from the Hebrew for 'appearance', *mar'eh*. In theophanies, the appearance is distinguished from the 'form', e.g. Ezekiel 1:26, 28. See my books *The Great Angel*, 135-136 and *The Great High Priest*, 178-184. The Memra in itself is not evidence of the Second God, since it indicates the presence of YHWH rather than his emissary.



common use and readily understood. Our difficulty with 'Memra' shows how little we actually know about the beliefs of ordinary people in the time of Jesus, especially what they believed about YHWH.

It is no longer wise to assume that the Judaism of the later rabbis was the Judaism that Jesus knew. Many things changed after the advent of Christianity and the war against Rome which resulted in the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. The Rabbinic writings dating from the early Christian centuries reveal a bitter controversy. Their unnamed opponents taught that there were 'two powers in heaven'. They lived in Palestine; they taught about a far God and a near God; and one of their key texts was the vision of the Man in Daniel 7.<sup>25</sup> These unnamed people must have been the Christians, with their claim that YHWH, the Son of God Most High, had been incarnate and then returned to heaven. The complexity and duration of the debate shows that there were indeed texts in the Hebrew Scriptures which needed explanation if the claim that there were 'two powers in heaven' was to be refuted. The result of this controversy can be detected even in the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, which had existed in a variety of forms before the advent of Christianity, but which was 'stabilised' around 100 CE when certain key texts were excluded. We shall return to this.

***A debate  
about two  
powers in  
heaven***

There are also echoes of the controversy in some ancient Jewish mystical texts, known as *merkavah* texts because they record visions of the *merkavah*, the heavenly chariot throne. These were expanded so as to exclude any support for Christian claims. One of them describes the vision of Aher—a word which means simply 'the other one'. This rabbi was regarded as so heretical that his real name (Elisha ben Abuya) could not be spoken. In a vision he saw, enthroned in the heavenly court, the great angel Metatron, who in his earthly life had been the prophet Enoch. Aher claimed that he had seen the second power. Then the text describes what happened:

<sup>25</sup> 'As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed' (Daniel 7: 13-14). The first major treatment of this problem was A.F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

When Aher came to gaze upon the vision of the *merkavah*, he looked at me [Metatron] and was afraid and trembled before me.... At that moment Aher opened his mouth and he said, 'It is true—there are two powers in heaven'. (3 Enoch 16)

There were terrible consequences. The voice of God was heard, saying 'come back to me, apostate sons, apart from Aher', and the great angel Metatron was removed from his throne.

'Apostate sons' shows that those who believed in two powers *were* regarded officially as Jewish apostates. Yet this account of the demotion of Metatron is contrary to everything else in 3 Enoch, which describes how Enoch became the great angel Metatron and was given the most glorious place in heaven. The *merkavah* tradition must have had pre-Christian origins. How could a Jewish group, after the advent of Christianity, originate ideas so similar to the Christian claims for Jesus? There must have been ancient beliefs about a human figure who became divine and was enthroned in heaven, beliefs like those in Daniel's vision (Daniel 7:9-14). In reaction to Christianity the tradition was modified by the account of Metatron's demotion. But the fact that these traditions were not obliterated is an interesting indication of their abiding status in the Jewish community.

### ***The Texts of Scripture***

Traces of this conflict over the plurality of divinity can also be seen in the development of the text of Scripture. There have long been problems as to how the Old Greek text of the Scriptures, often called the Septuagint (LXX—the name derives from a tradition that there were seventy translators) relates to the Hebrew text (known as the Masoretic text) on which most modern English translations are based—a text that dates from after the time of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> These problems have increased with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, among which have been found pieces of the Hebrew Scriptures which correspond to the Old Greek text rather than to the Masoretic Hebrew. This suggests that there had been various different versions of

<sup>26</sup> The Masoretic text on which English translations of the Old Testament are based is the Leningrad Codex of 1008 CE. The *Masorah* is the system of signs written around the Hebrew consonants to fix the pronunciation and meaning of the words. The consonantal text, and the content of the Hebrew canon, was fixed about 100 CE.

the Hebrew Scriptures, and that the text which became the ‘standard’ Hebrew text was one which disagreed at several points with the version used by the first Christians.

Let us take two examples from Deuteronomy 32. Deuteronomy 32:8 says, in the Old Greek version:

When the Most High divided the nations, as he dispersed the sons of Adam he established the boundaries of the nations *according to the number of the angels of God*. The LORD’s portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.

The Qumran Hebrew text<sup>27</sup> has ‘according to the number of the *sons* of God’—simply a change in formulation, since the sons of God are the angels. The Masoretic Hebrew, however, says something different: ‘according to the number of the sons of Israel’. This reading makes little sense in the original context, but it can be explained as a reaction against the idea of a Son of God. When the original continues, ‘the LORD’s portion was his people’, it implies that the LORD was one of the sons of God; the point is obscured by the Masoretic Hebrew. A key text for understanding Gabriel’s words to Mary that her son ‘will be called the Son of God Most High’ (Luke 1:32) has not survived in the Hebrew Scriptures after the time of Jesus.

***The Dead  
Sea Scrolls  
and their  
importance***

The second example is Deuteronomy 32:43, which describes YHWH coming on the Day of Atonement to bring judgement and healing. It is twice as long in the Old Greek as in the Masoretic Hebrew: the texts are 8 and 4 lines long respectively. A Qumran fragment of Deuteronomy in Hebrew has the longer text,<sup>28</sup> which we find also in NRSV:

Praise, O heavens, his people,  
worship him all you gods (*‘elohim*),  
for he will avenge the blood of his children  
and take vengeance on his adversaries;  
he will repay those who hate him  
and cleanse the land for his people.

<sup>27</sup> 4Q Deut<sup>j</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> 4Q Deut<sup>q</sup>.

This last line should probably be 'atone the land for his people'.<sup>29</sup> The Authorised Version was based on the shorter Masoretic text:

Rejoice, O you nations, with his people:  
for he will avenge the blood of his servants,  
and will render vengeance to his adversaries,  
and will be merciful unto his land and to his people.<sup>30</sup>

Crucial elements are different in the shorter text: the *'elohim* worshipping YHWH, and the children (literally 'sons'), are missing; the description of atonement is obscured. Yet this text in its longer version was a crucial messianic proof text for the Christians; it is quoted in Hebrews to prove that the One who was to come on the Day of Judgement, the LORD, was Jesus:

For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him'. (Hebrews 1:5-6)

There is no way of making this link using the present Hebrew text, and until the Qumran text was found, there had been a suspicion that the Christians had expanded the text of Deuteronomy 32:43 to suit their own purposes.

Another example comes with the figure of Melchizedek. The ancient Melchizedek, priest of God Most High (Genesis 14:18-22), was a key figure for the Christians, since Jesus was declared to be like Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:15-22). All the ancient versions except the Masoretic Hebrew say that Melchizedek was the priest of God Most High. The Masoretic text, however, has 'priest of the LORD God Most High', conflating the LORD and God Most High; it imposes a monotheism, and obscures the true identity of Melchizedek's God.

Analyses such as these raise a broader question. The earliest acclamation of the first Christians was 'Jesus is the LORD'<sup>31</sup>—they believed that Jesus was the God of Israel. How many other Old

<sup>29</sup> Compare Leviticus 16: 19, which suggests that 'atone' must mean 'cleanse and hallow'.

<sup>30</sup> This reading makes the best possible sense of the Masoretic Hebrew. The verb *kpr* is the root for the word translated 'mercy seat', hence 'be merciful'. A better rendering is 'atone', and so 'mercy seat' is the 'place of atonement'.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:3; Philippians 2:11.

Testament texts did the first Christians use to demonstrate this belief, in ways now lost to us because the versions available to them did not survive into the Hebrew text underlying our Old Testament?

In the early centuries, when Christians tried to discuss their faith with Jews, they were accused of having false Scriptures. Around 100 CE, when the form and content of the Hebrew Scriptures was settled, several texts which were important for the Christians were not included. For example, the form of Deuteronomy 32:43 which was found at Qumran did not survive in the Masoretic text, but there can be no doubt that it was in use. Early in the third century CE, the great Christian biblical scholar Origen set out to establish the true text of the Old Testament, as the basis for Jewish-Christian discussion. He took the post-Christian form of the Hebrew text as the norm. Jerome (around 400 CE) opted for the post-Christian Hebrew text as the basis for his Latin translation which eventually became the Vulgate. He believed it to be *hebraica veritas*. Thus 'our' Old Testament, in which we look for the antecedents of Christianity, is translated from a Hebrew text that was established partially *in reaction to* Christianity.

**Our 'Old Testament' represents a reaction against Christianity**

### **The Older Faith**

A careful study of the ancient materials shows, therefore, that Judaism had not always been monotheistic in the way that we now understand that word. There had never been dynasties of warring gods such as we find in the Greek legends, but there had always been ranks of angels and beings known as the sons of God, some of whom had rebelled. In Genesis 6 we glimpse the rebellion of some of the sons of God, and how they came to earth, corrupted it and brought disaster. The rebel sons of God were used to explain the conflicts in society and in politics. Isaiah begins, 'Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me' (Isaiah 1:2), and the prophet depicts his own society under the influence of the fallen angels. Jesus spoke of the devil and his angels, and of the judgement that awaited them (Matthew 25:41). There was, as we have seen, sensitivity about the term 'sons of God' in the period after the advent of Christianity. The Targums translated it 'sons of nobles' or 'sons of judges',<sup>32</sup> and Rabbi Simeon ben

<sup>32</sup> Onkelos and Ps Jonathan 'sons of nobles': Neofiti 'sons of judges', but Neofiti margin has 'angels'.

Yoçai in the middle of the second century CE cursed all who called the angels sons of God.<sup>33</sup>

The older faith of Israel had known God Most High and the mighty angels described as the sons of God Most High. The Firstborn of these sons had been the LORD, the God of Israel, sometimes described as ‘the Holy One of Israel’ (Isaiah 1:4), ‘Holy One’ simply meaning ‘angel’. The LORD and the angel of the LORD were the identical.

It was not until the end of the seventh century BCE that some declared God Most High and the LORD to be One. There are verses in the Second Isaiah can only mean that the LORD was proclaiming himself to be *El*, the High God. ‘I am *El*, there is no other ...’.<sup>34</sup> What we think of as *the* religion of the Old Testament, monotheism, originated at this point, but not everyone accepted the changes. Traces of the conflict—for conflict it was—can still be found in the texts, as we have seen.

The idea of ‘God the Father’ was not invented by Jesus or by the early Christians; it was a retrieval of the older faith of Israel that is largely suppressed in the Old Testament we now read. The older role of God Most High as the *Father* of heaven and earth came to be replaced by the declaration that the LORD was the *Maker* of heaven and earth, obscuring the idea of divine fatherhood and sonship. The ancient title had been ‘God Most High begetter of heaven and earth’ (translating Genesis 14:19 literally). In the Psalter and in Second Isaiah it became ‘the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth’.<sup>35</sup> Just as the ‘sons of God’ were removed from the tradition, so the image of fatherhood was abandoned. Christianity can be seen as having recovered it.

**‘God the  
Father’ is  
not a  
Christian  
discovery**

The names and titles of Philo’s Second God—high priest, archangel, king, firstborn son, shepherd, seal, covenant—go back to a time before ‘God Most High’ and ‘the LORD’ had been merged. They suggest that the Second God had been present in the person of the Davidic king, one of whose titles had been Immanuel, God with Us (Isaiah 7:14; 8:8). The royal figure had been the Great Angel, the divine Son and the shepherd of his people. The familiar titles of Isaiah 9:6—‘wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting

<sup>33</sup> *Genesis Rabbah*, 35. 15.

<sup>34</sup> Isaiah 45: 22; 43: 12-13—there are many other examples.

<sup>35</sup> See for example, Psalms 115: 15; 121: 2; 124: 8; 134: 3; 146: 55-56; Isaiah 44: 24; 51: 13.

Father, prince of peace’—were translated into Greek simply as ‘the Angel of Great Counsel’. In 1 Enoch we see that ‘shepherd’ was the title given to the guardian angels of the nations (1 Enoch 89:59); and so Jesus’ claim to be the good shepherd (John 10:11) was his claim to be the Guardian Angel, the God of Israel. A passage attributed to Peter explained that God Most High divided the nations among 72 angel princes, and allotted Israel to the greatest of these angels.<sup>36</sup>

### **Coronation and Deification**

When they became kings, the Davidic monarchs were ‘born’ as divine sons or angels in the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies housed not only the anointing oil but also the golden chariot throne of the cherubim, the throne of the LORD.<sup>37</sup> It represented a state outside time and matter, ‘beyond’ the visible creation. The king would enter the Holy of Holies as a mortal and emerge as the Angel of Great Counsel, having been transformed by the anointing oil. He would then pass through the great hall of the temple which represented the visible and temporal creation, ‘our’ world. His passage was an act of purification and renewal, ritually enacted in ceremonies marking the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Here may well lie the roots of some central Christian ideas: a Son of God generated in eternity, and then emerging into the visible creation as a royal and priestly figure to renew the world and take away the effects of sin—this was the original meaning of atonement. It is against this background that the early Christians could call Jesus the ‘Author of Life’ (Acts 3:15).

One of the Enoch texts has preserved a remarkable account of entering the Holy of Holies. When Enoch as high priest ‘ascended to stand before the throne’, the LORD commanded the archangel Michael to remove Enoch’s earthly clothing—that is, his mortal body—and to dress him in garments of the LORD’s glory—that is in his high priestly vestment of white linen, and in a body that was a resurrection body. Enoch was then anointed:

The appearance of that oil is greater than the greatest light, its ointment is like sweet dew, and its fragrance like myrrh. Its shining

<sup>36</sup> *Clementine Recognitions*, 2. 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Tosefta Kippurim*, 2. 15; 1 Chronicles 28: 18; 29: 23.

is like the sun. I gazed at myself and I had become like one of the glorious ones. (2 Enoch 22)

Enoch the high priest, anointed and vested, had become an angel—Jesus described angels as ‘children of God, children of the resurrection’ (Luke 20:36), and a white garment was the symbol of the resurrected state, hence a garment of glory. Enoch then returned to the world of time and matter, the high priest emerging from the Holy of Holies as the Angel, the resurrected and anointed (*Messiah*) son of God. The idea of resurrection has its roots in the liturgy of the Temple, and signified chiefly a transformation from the human to the divine state, *theosis*. It was not necessarily something which happened after death. It is against this background that we can read, for example, the exhortation in Colossians:

If you *have been raised* with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is.... (Colossians 3:1)

So too, Jesus can respond to his critics by describing himself as the great high priest:

Do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world ‘You are blaspheming’ because I said ‘I am the Son of God?’<sup>38</sup>

The temple process—‘sacrament’ would be an appropriate word—of resurrection as the Messiah, the divine son, was the setting for several psalms. Psalm 110—one of the most frequently quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament—describes how the king was begotten as the divine son in the glory of the holy ones, in other words among the angels of the Holy of Holies: the human king had become ‘a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek’. In Psalm 89 the anointed one is made the Firstborn, and calls on God as his Father:

Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said: ‘I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people. I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him ... He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’ I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. (Psalm 89: 19-27)

<sup>38</sup> John 10:36—‘consecrated’ here is the technical term for making the high priest used in Leviticus 8:12.



**I HAVE FOUND MY SERVANT DAVID;  
WITH MY HOLY OIL I HAVE ANOINTED HIM.  
HE SHALL CRY TO ME,**

**YOU ARE MY FATHER,  
MY GOD, AND THE  
ROCK OF MY SALVATION!**

**I WILL MAKE HIM THE FIRSTBORN,  
THE HIGHEST OF THE KINGS  
OF THE EARTH.**

It was on such an occasion that the angels sang in the Holy of Holies:

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called ... the Angel of Great Counsel.<sup>39</sup>

The account of the coronation of Solomon shows clearly that when the king sat on the throne of the LORD, he became the LORD, and was *worshipped* by his people: 'all the assembly blessed the LORD, the God of their fathers, and worshipped the LORD, the king'.<sup>40</sup> Solomon had become 'the LORD'.

It is quite clear that the early Christians were aware of these ideas. This is how Bishop Eusebius, writing in the fourth century CE, understood the difficult passage, 'Thy throne O God is for ever and ever ... wherefore God thy God has anointed thee ...'<sup>41</sup> He discusses the nuances of the Hebrew at this point and concludes:

The Anointer, being the Supreme, God, is far above the Anointed, he being God in a different sense. And this would be clear to anyone who knew Hebrew. Therefore in these words you have it clearly stated that God was anointed and became the Christ.... And this is he who was the beloved of the Father and his Offspring

<sup>39</sup> Isaiah 9:6, LXX.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Chronicles 29:20, literally translated.

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 45:6-7, Authorised Version.

and the Eternal Priest and the being called the Sharer of the Father's throne.<sup>42</sup>

The human king was enthroned and became 'the LORD'. This was all part of the ancient ritual of the New Year, when the king was (re-) enthroned and when he symbolically offered his life to renew the creation.<sup>43</sup> Too much has disappeared for us to be able to reconstruct the detail with any confidence, but there are patterns in surviving texts. The Man figure in Daniel 7 ascends to the throne, that is, enters the Holy of Holies, and is then 'offered before the Ancient of Days'.<sup>44</sup> The Man is then enthroned and given an everlasting kingdom. 1 Enoch 47 describes the blood of the Righteous One being offered in the Holy of Holies, and then the judgment beginning. A more familiar example is the scene at the beginning of Revelation, where John sees the slain Lamb enthroned. The Lamb becomes the One on the throne, and later verses use singular forms of 'the-one-who-is-seated-on-the-throne-and-the-Lamb'.<sup>45</sup> There is also the passage in Philippians 2, where Paul seems to be quoting something well known to the recipients of the letter:

He humbled himself and became obedient unto death.... *Therefore* God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the Name which is above every name that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD.... (Philippians 2:9-11)

'The Name' bestowed here must be the Sacred Name, YHWH, bestowed on the king before he was enthroned and acknowledged as the LORD.

Other Christian ideas, too, can be traced back to these early kingship rituals and symbols. The king becoming the presence of the Second Person at his enthronement, which was his resurrection and his divinisation, is the deepest root of the Eucharist. The throne in the Holy of Holies, which corresponded to the mercy seat in the desert tabernacle,

<sup>42</sup> *Demonstration of the Gospel*, 4. 15.

<sup>43</sup> For further elaboration, see my *Temple Theology* (London: SPCK, 2004—forthcoming).

<sup>44</sup> Daniel 7: 13, literally translated.

<sup>45</sup> Singular forms at 7:11; 11:15; 20:6; 22:1, 3. See my *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2000), 140-141.



became the Christian altar; and the temple rituals of the altar and the Holy of Holies became the most sacred rites of the Church.

Similarly, at the root of our Christian belief that we are all one in Christ there probably lies the ancient belief that the Great Angel was a pluriform figure. The *Shema* implies something similar. In English we say, 'The LORD our God is one LORD' (Deuteronomy 6:4)—but the term used for God, 'elohim, is plural. When the Jewish writer Josephus, a younger contemporary of Jesus, retold the story of the

theophany at Mamre, he said that Abraham saw three angels; 'the LORD' is not mentioned.<sup>46</sup> This implies that in the time of Jesus the presence of three angels was considered to be the presence of the LORD. The seven-branched lamp in the temple was also a symbol of the presence of the LORD.<sup>47</sup>

This article can only be the briefest of introductions to a vast area. Recovering the original understanding of the claim 'Jesus is the LORD' is essential to any meaningful dialogue with Jews and Muslims, as is recovering the temple understanding of divine sonship, resurrection and atonement. It is unfortunate that the Jerusalem Bible uses 'the Lord' in the New Testament, but 'Yahweh' in the Old Testament, (rather than the traditional 'the LORD'), because in so doing it obscures an important continuity in the Scripture that modern Christians have in any case been conditioned to overlook. Traditional icons of Christ, however, have 'HO N' in the halo, the Greek form of the Name revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14):

<sup>46</sup> *Antiquities*, 1. 11. *Genesis Rabbah*, 50. 2 is similar—Michael, Gabriel and Raphael came to Abraham.

<sup>47</sup> *Numbers Rabbah*, 15. 9: 'The holy One, blessed be He, was constrained to dwell with mortals in the light of a lamp'.

Christ is represented as the YHWH of the Old Testament. Conversely, the God of the Old Testament is depicted as Christ; in the mosaics of the creation story in St Mark's, Venice, 'the LORD' in Eden has a cross in his halo.

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