

Response to
“Jewish History and the Deity of Yeshua”
Rich Robinson

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First let me thank my colleague for his paper. He has managed to touch on most areas of relevance for the messianic movement’s discussions of Yeshua’s deity. Among the many points covered, it was especially helpful to rehearse the elements in Jewish and biblical thinking that were the “raw materials,” so to speak, for the acceptance of Yeshua’s divinity. And the author draws on the important work of Larry Hurtado and Oskar Skarsaune in highlighting respectively the early date and the Jewishness of this belief.

Also helpful was the discussion on the various factors that led to what scholars often call the “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity, with the result that the Jewish and Christian (that is, Jewish and Gentile Yeshua-believing) communities increasingly drew ever-firmer border lines—though we note that that picture is also being challenged among scholars, who increasingly nuance the picture, distinguishing the official, harder positions from what the man in the street might have thought. But it remains the case that it has been the keepers of the border lines that have institutionalized the “official” Jewish response to the gospel, the doctrine of the Messiah’s deity included. Therefore the author was right to highlight Maimonides’ thirteen articles of faith, and perhaps in the future he can develop the additional point of the Rambam’s substitution of *yachid* for *echad* in describing God’s unity.

Finally the author mentions some recent factors that may again help to gain entrance for the idea of Yeshua’s deity in the Jewish community. Time will tell if this actually happens.

For this response, let me offer a few suggestive comments to add on to what he has written. The deity of the Messiah is integrally related to the idea of the Tri-unity of God as well as the incarnation, because it really can only be understood in the networking of all three doctrines. So let me speak about a few trends in Judaism past and present that may make the ideas of deity/Triunity/incarnation less foreign than they appear to be at first sight. They may even find a place in our apologetic in days to come.

Kabbalah and the Sefirot

First, the author mentions the increasingly popularization of kabbalah. It is interesting to note what the original opponents of kabbalah had to say centuries ago.

To be sure, opponents of kabbalah viewed the mystical doctrine of the Sefirot, the ten aspects, or powers, of the Godhead, in the same way as the Trinity, namely, as a violation of God’s absolute unity and thus idolatrous. In a famous responsum, R. Isaac ben Sheshet (1326–1407) quotes a philosopher who argued that, whereas the Christians believe in ‘three’, the kabbalists

believe in ‘ten’. The renowned kabbalist R. Abraham Abulafia (thirteenth century) agreed with the philosophers in this regard, seeing the standard kabbalistic understanding of the Sefirot as even worse than the concept of the Trinity.¹

“Even worse”—what an interesting comment. And then too, there are similarities or parallels to addressing prayer to different persons of the Godhead, namely the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For example, R. Jacob the Nazirite (twelfth century) claimed that the first three and last three benedictions of the Amidah prayer are directed to the Sefirah Binah. The middle blessings are directed to Tiferet during the day and to Binah at night.²

As if that is not enough, one thinks of Yeshua praying to the Father, while

there were some kabbalists, such as R. Joseph ben Shalom of Barcelona (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) . . . who even believed that the Sefirot pray to Ilat Ha’ilot [the Supreme Deity].³

Shapiro believes we here have an idea that makes it quite hard to believe that the Sefirotic system does not violate the unity of God. Moreover, he cites others who claim that the Sefirot had a beginning in time, which on the other hand is *dissimilar* to biblical conceptions of the three persons.

It is not that these kabbalistic notions are the same as what we find in the Scripture. Long ago Samuel Sandmel warned about “parallelomania.” And it is unlikely that these esoteric ideas of (only) some kabbalists have made their way into the popular kabbalah of today. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to pursue some of these directions if only to underscore that biblical faith finds echoes in strands of Judaism. While that is not an apologetic for the truth of Scripture, it may help the “comfort level” or “plausibility quotient” with some Jewish seekers. And frankly, we may even discover that these sorts of ideas in Judaism reflect Christian influence, as the reverse is also the case.

The Incarnation and God’s Corporeality in Judaism

Second, while Maimonides stated the incorporeality of God in his Thirteen Principles, Shapiro tells us that

it must be stressed that, contrary to popular belief, the notion that God is incorporeal was not always a unanimously accepted Jewish (or Christian or Muslim) view. . . . Indeed, *nowhere* in the Bible does it state that God is incorporeal (or invisible for that matter.)⁴

By the way, he means in the Tanach; the New Testament explicitly states that “God is spirit” (John 4:24) and that he is invisible (Col. 1:15, 1 Tim 1:17, Heb 11:27).

Maimonides took the Scripture’s anthropomorphisms figuratively, as did the Targums and as most Orthodox Jews would today. However, in the midrash and

Talmud, it appears to be otherwise: in *b. Berakot* 6a, God wears *tefillin*, for instance. Such statements the Rambam also took to be nonliteral, but Shapiro for one remarks that

there is little doubt that a popular view in rabbinic times was that God indeed had a form. Because medieval theology [i.e., Maimonides and others] has been so influential, this statement will no doubt surprise many. ... Furthermore [quoting Alon Goshen-Gottstein], ‘there is absolutely no objection in all of rabbinic literature to the idea that man was created in the image of God’s physical form.’⁵

Just one example here:

Goshen-Gottstein also calls attention to *Avot derabi natan* 2:4, where, in a list of people born circumcised, Adam is listed first; the prooftext is that he was created in the image of God. ‘This prooftext would only work if the correspondence between man’s body and the divine body is understood to be exact.’

This view—that there was an idea that the God of Israel had a physical form, a physical body—was also held by scholars such as Meir Bar-Ilan and Arthur Marmorstein, all cited in Shapiro’s book. Shapiro gives many other examples. Even in the second century, Justin Martyr said that the Jews believe God “has hands and feet, and fingers, and a soul like a composite creature.”⁶ When Maimonides articulated his belief in incorporeality, he was in fact opposed by a number of medieval “corporealists”—even Rashi was a corporealist, according to some scholars.

Shapiro then cites a recollection of Adin Steinsaltz, of *The Steinsaltz Talmud* fame. This story, if true (Shapiro wonders), would testify to a belief in God’s corporeality even in the 20th century. Steinsaltz relates:

When I was a young man I met someone in Israel who was at the time a very important political personality. We were talking, and he asked me, ‘Where does God put his legs?’ For a moment I didn’t understand. I thought he was joking, but he was asking this question seriously. When I tried to tell him that, as far as I knew, God has no legs, he told me that I did not know what I was talking about as a religious person, because his father truly believed that God has legs! I tried to remonstrate. I opened the Siddur and showed him that not only do we not believe that, but we should not: it is forbidden. He ended the conversation by telling me that he was very friendly with the *rosh yeshivah* of Mir and that he would warn him that there was a person in Jerusalem who should be destroyed!⁷

If Shapiro and the others he cites are correct, we have a rather astonishing phenomenon in Jewish history to deal with, one which could help to make the incarnation something more plausible, both in its original acceptance and in our apologetic today. But equally clear is the fact that Maimonides and the medieval philosophers pretty well set the agenda for what Jews think today, whether they are religious or secular.

And More on the Incarnation

A third example. Michael Kogan is a Jewish professor of Philosophy and Religion at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Not long ago he wrote a book called *Opening the Covenant*. It was basically a call for Judaism and Christianity to recognize that they had much to learn from one another, but Kogan's call was more thorough-going than anything to date, with one caveat: if either conversation partner believes in absolute truth, then dialogue is not possible. Well. By the end of his book, he in fact ends up advocating a full blown religious pluralism, but the tent is evidently not wide enough to include absolutists. (I actually knew Kogan when I was a college student and a new believer at Syracuse University in the early 70s. We hung out at Hillel and sometimes had discussions. I'm sorry to say that I remembered him, but he did not remember me.)

Along the way Kogan talks about the doctrine of the incarnation. Though he denies that Jesus himself ever spoke of his divinity, he goes on to say:

To Jews today the claim that God took on human form may seem utterly incredible, but the Torah may tell a different story. Genesis 38 tells us of "the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of day"; Genesis 18:1 states that "the Lord appeared to him [Abraham]" in human form. This is not a vision. God, together with angelic companions, eats real food during this encounter. Genesis 32:24 reports that "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him." He concludes, "I have seen God face to face." Exodus 24:9-11 states, "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up [to Sinai], and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire ... [and] they beheld God."

For Jewish believers [he means religious Jews], then, the thought may come to mind that, if God can take human form in a series of accounts put forward in one's own sacred texts, one would be unjustified in dismissing out of hand the possibility that the same God might act in a similar fashion in accounts put forward in another text revered as sacred by a closely related tradition.

He continues:

Beyond this we cannot and need not venture. What is proclaimed in the Christian doctrine of incarnation (in its several variations) is certainly not the same message we find in the Torah, nor are the accounts cited above central to Judaism in the way the "Christ event" is to Christianity. We do not claim that what is described in the Hebrew Scriptures is exactly the phenomenon at the heart of Christian faith. The appearances of God in human form referred to above are not identical to the Christian account of God's or God's Word's being conceived, born, and living and dying as a man. *However, the similarities between Jewish and Christian accounts should lead Jews away from precipitous denial of the possibility of the latter. Again, I wish to emphasize that, whatever we make of the Christian claim, it can have no impact on our belief or practice. If it happened, it happened for the sake of the gentile mission of the church.*⁸ [my emphasis]

So while Kogan is prepared to say that the incarnation was a possibility, he also maintains that *it doesn't matter for Jews anyway*. With this dismissal—we could call it the doctrine of the Great Whatever—the *fact* can be affirmed without any *significance* for Israel. But surely if the God of Israel incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, he intended for Jews to take notice as well as non-Jews. Do we know of any other time when the God of Israel acted without reference to His own people?

Perhaps Kogan's viewpoint will be another entrée into the incarnation for our Jewish people. Now that would be an interesting conversation to have at Christmaseason cocktail parties: was the incarnation good for the Jews?

Notes

1. Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised*. Oxford: Littmann Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004, p. 40. He fully documents these references in the notes.
2. Ibid., pp. 42-43.
3. Ibid., p. 43.page 3
4. Ibid., p. 47.
5. Ibid., p. 49.
6. Ibid., p. 53, citing *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 114.page 4
7. Ibid., p. 67.page 5
8. Michael S. Kogan, *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 115-16.