

MAL'AKH ELOHIM, MIKHAEL:
MANIFESTATIONS OF THE ANGEL OF GOD
IN THE NARRATIVES OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES
AND THEIR MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Over the last several decades of relatively peaceful Jewish-Christian dialogue it has become apparent that the person of Jesus no longer presents the main point of disagreement between Judaism and Christianity. According to a summation given by Rabbi Zev Garber, PhD, President of the National Association of Hebrew Professors, during a dialogue at last year's SBL session between Orthodox rabbis and Messianic Jewish theologians entitled Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism: Ten Years Later; it is the Christian teaching of the Trinity which presents the major point of contention between Jews and Christians. By extension for Christian missiology, a similar issue exists between Christians and Muslims. Both mission fields require focused theological reflection if we are to make headway in these challenging contexts.

The objective of this paper is to present a case study seeking to investigate the significance and the implications of unusual anthropomorphic features¹, which can be observed in the appearance of the Angel of God found in the narratives of the book of Judges chapters 6 and 13. This research raises specific questions concerning the possible ways to bridge the difference in the perception of the Trinity between Christians and Jews and subsequently Muslims.

¹ There is also a need to investigate anthropomorphic features of the Glory of God found in the theophany of Ezekiel 1 and 8-9. Such an investigation will require a separate paper and presentation.

Introduction

The God of the Old Testament vs. the God of the New Testament

It is obvious that the explicit Hebrew equivalent of Greek expressions such as τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος (in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost) Matt 28:19 or Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος (the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit) 2 Cor. 13:13, which directly mention the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, do not exist in the Old Testament. Indeed, in the OT, the term אֱלֹהִים in reference to God can explicitly be attested only 7 times in Ps. 67:9, 88:27, 102:13, Isa. 63:16, 64:8, Mal. 1:6 and 2:10 whereas the New Testament, especially the Gospels, contain numerous references to God as the Father. However, while the term υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (Son of God) occurs at least 36 times in the New Testament, the Old Testament does not have any equivalent of this phrase. Nevertheless, the Aramaic section of Daniel contains the following expression דְּמַהּ לְבְרִיאָאֵלְהִין (Dan 3:25) which can be literally translated as ‘likeness of a son of gods’, rendered ὁμοίωμα ἀγγέλου θεοῦ², the ‘likeness of a divine angel or messenger’, in the Rahlfs edition of the Septuagint. The context of the phrase tells the story of how Nebuchadnezzar looks at three friends whom he decreed to be thrown into the furnace and sees another individual who looks to him like בְּרִיאָאֵלְהִין.³

Unlike the Son of God, the Hebrew term מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה (angel of the Lord) occurs 58 times throughout the Hebrew Bible while its synonym מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים or מַלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים (angel of God) occurs 13 times. It was this same מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה who appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Gen. 3:2).

² In Rahlfs' text it is vs. 92.

³ Out of 9 occurrences of this Aramaic plural form it is not clear which one of them can be translated in singular as an analog for the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים. Since it is used only in the speeches of the Babylonian kings, who are pagans, it is not clear whether they mean ‘God’ or ‘gods’. However, Greek does render the word angel in singular.

According to Jewish tradition the Angel of the Lord which appeared to Moses was Michael.

The homiletical Midrash Exodus Rabba sites presents it as follows:

And the Angel of the Lord appeared. R Jonathan said: This is Michael; R Hanina said it was Gabriel. Whenever they saw R. Jose the tall, they used to say: There goes our holy Rabbi, so whenever Michael appeared it was realized that there was the Glory of the *Shechinah*. (Sh^emot Rabba 2:5)

Apparently, the narrative of Exodus 3 also presented challenges for medieval Jewish commentators. While vs. 2 states ‘וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלֶבֶת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה’ (lit. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in the heart of fire from within the bush), vs. 4 reads ‘וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה בְּיָסָר לְרֵאזוֹת’ (and the Lord saw that he turned and God called him from within the bush). In other words, based on these two texts, it is clear that both מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה and אֱלֹהִים are present inside the burning bush. Accordingly, we can infer that the terms מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה and אֱלֹהִים are used interchangeably. However, in his commentary on the Torah, Ibn Ezra suggested that אֱלֹהִים in this case refers to an angel of God.

This is similar to other places, where we find this term applies to any incorporeal being. Although, we read in verse 6: “And He said, ‘I am the God of your father...’” this does not mean that it was literally God speaking to Moses, but that His messenger was speaking his name. Thus, God saw that Moses had ‘turned to see’, and He commanded the angel to call Moses.⁴

RAMBAN does not agree with Ibn Ezra. In his commentary he specifically states:

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra explained that *Elohim* mentioned here [in the second verse] is the angel [in the first], as the verse, *For I have seen ‘elohim’ face to face.* (Gen. 32:31). The expression, *I am the G-d of thy father,* is a case of a deputy speaking in the name of Him Who sent him. But this is not correct. Moses the greatest in prophecy, would not have hidden his face from an angel [as is related in vs. 6]. Our Rabbis have said in Bereshith Rabba: “*Angel.* this refers to the Angel Michael. Wherever Rabbi Yosei ha’aruch was seen people would say, ‘There is Rabbeinu Hakadosh.’ Similarly, wherever the angel Michael appears, there is also present the Glory of the Divine Presence.” The Rabbis intended to say that at first the angel Michael appeared to Moses,

⁴ *MIQRAOT GEDOLOT: Shemoth, a New English Translation.* Vol. 1. (New York: Judaica Press, 1995), 29

and there was also the Glory, of the Divine Presence, but Moses did not see the Glory, as he had not duly prepared his mind for prophecy. When he duly prepared his heart for it *and he turned aside to see*, then the vision of the Divine Presence revealed itself to him, *and G-d called unto him out of the midst of the bush.*⁵

Even though RAMBAN does not agree with Ibn Ezra's metaphoric reading of the theophany, he does not accept here the interchangeability of the terms מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה and אֱלֹהִים. However, in his comment on vs. 6 RAMBAN gives another explanation which follows the Kabbalah: In this instance the word מַלְאָךְ does not mean the angel, but God Himself, known as מַלְאָךְ because of his work (מְלָאכָה) He performs guiding the world.⁶

Such an indirect admission, made by a famous medieval Jewish commentator, that in the theophany described in Exodus 3, the Angel of the Lord, believed by Jewish tradition to be Michael, could also be God Himself definitely attests to the correctness of the conclusion made in our earlier comparison of the Hebrew text of Exodus 3:2 and 4. Indeed, interchangeability between the terms angel of God/the Lord and God/the Lord manifests itself elsewhere in the book of Exodus. In particular verse 21 of chapter 13 which states:

וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם הַלְלוֹת לְפָנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן לְנַחֲתָם הַלָּיְלָה וְלַיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ לְהָאִיר לָהֶם
לְלַכֵּת יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה

And YHWH was going in front of them *during* the day in the pillar of cloud guiding the path and *during* the night in the pillar of fire illuminating them in order that they would be going day and night.
(Literal translation)

On the other hand, Ex. 14:19 states,

1 וַיֵּצֵעַ מַלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים הַהֹלֵךְ לְפָנֵי מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם
2 וַיֵּצֵעַ עַמּוּד הָעָנָן מִפְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲמֵד מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם:

And the Angel of God who was going in front of the camp of Israel began to move and went behind them,
and the pillar of cloud began to move from being in front of them and stood behind them. (Literal translation)

⁵ Nachmanides, *Commentary of the Torah: Exodus*. Translated by Rabbi C. Chavel. Vol. 2. (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 2004), 25-26.

⁶ *Miqraot Gedolot*, 29.

The two sentences delineated in Ex. 14:19 by the Masoretic symbol *atnahta* create a micro-parallelism, where both line 1 and 2 use the same predicates and adverbials. However, the subject of the first sentence is the Angel of God, whereas the subject of the second sentence is the pillar of cloud. In other words, the text is clear about the fact that the Angel of God, מַלְאָכֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ, is the one who is going in the midst of the pillar of cloud. If this is the case, then, based on Ex. 13:21, YHWH is the one who goes in the midst of the pillar of cloud in front of the camp of the Israelites. Therefore, it becomes evident that similarly to the case of the theophany in Exodus 3, in Exodus 13 and 14 the Angel of God is also used interchangeably with YHWH, indicating that, in this case of the narrative of the crossing of the Red Sea, it was YHWH himself who was that Angel of God who separated between the camp of the Israelites and the chariots of Pharaoh.⁷

Based on these two examples found in the book of Exodus, it is definitely reasonable to concur with a number of both Christian and Jewish commentators who conclude that, in the Old Testament, God presents Himself as the Angel of the Lord or Angel of God. And, as Jewish tradition states regarding this Angel, his name could be Michael.⁸ The name Michael, ‘Who is like God’ occurs in Daniel 12:1-2 in connection with two resurrections. A similar text is found in John 5:26-29. There, the two resurrections happen after those who are in the tombs hear the voice of the ‘Son of Man’. Using this intertextual connection, we can concur with the statement that “a careful examination of the Scripture references to Michael points to the conclusion that he

⁷ In his commentary on Exodus Durham states: “As Yahweh made provision for Israel to cross the sea blocking the way of exodus, so also he made obstinate the minds of Pharaoh’s force, so that they would attempt the otherwise unthinkable maneuver of pursuing a company on foot through the middle of a sea...” sf. John I. Durham, *Exodus*, vol. 3, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 193.

⁸ Sf. Aaron Rothkoff, *Michael and Gabriel: In the Aggadah*. Vol. 14, in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, edited by Fred Skolnik, & Michael Berenbaum, (New York: Thomson&Gale, 2007), 168-169.

is none other than our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”.⁹ However, while it is from the NT perspective that scholars can present a compelling case that Jesus is portrayed as both human and divine,¹⁰ from the perspective of the Old Testament and Jewish tradition such a conclusion is not that obvious. so explicit

Consequently, Judaism is especially opposed to any attempt to represent God in human form. In his book *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides specifically states:

People have thought that in the Hebrew language *image* denotes the shape and configuration of a thing. This supposition led them to the pure doctrine of the corporeality of God, on the account of His saying, *Let us make man in our image, after our likeness* (Gen. 1:26). For they thought that God had man’s form... Now with respect to that which ought to be said, in order to refute the doctrine of corporeality of God and to establish his real unity – which can have no true reality unless one disproves His corporeality – you shall know the demonstration of all of this from this Treatise.¹¹

As one can see, Maimonides connects the question of God’s unity with the issue of corporeality. This stance is influenced firstly by the Muslim environment of medieval Spain, where he studied Aristotelian philosophy under the guidance of Islamic scholars.¹² But secondly, Maimonides uses this background as a tool to refute Christian Trinitarian ideas and establish his theology of YHWH as יהיך and not אהך, as stated in Deuteronomy 6:4.¹³

Setting aside different philosophical and theological aspects of the Jewish – Christian

⁹ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 809.

¹⁰ Sf. Gulley, Norman. *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity*. Vol. 2. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Maimonides, Moses, *The Guide to the Perplexed*, Translated by Shlomo Pines, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 21.

¹² See the introductory essay of Leo Strauss, *ibid.*, xi-lvii.

¹³ Maimonides sees the term יהיך, one and only, used in Gen 22:2 as the way to prevent Jews to think in the direction of Christianity. This is why he suggested to use the term יהיך instead of אהך as a way to narrow down the definition, since in Hebrew אהך can function as both numeral or adjective and in its adjectival form it can be interpreted more broadly. Sf. Norbert Lohfink and Jan Bergman, “אהך,” ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 193.

debate which has been going on for centuries, from the missiological perspective, Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* raises a crucial issue of whether or not Jews and Christians actually believe in the same God. If the God of Judaism, as presented by Maimonides as the One and Only, who absolutely cannot have any tangible body or form; and the God of Christianity, as presented by Tertullian,¹⁴ as three separate persons, one of whom has a corporeal body, then building any kind of bridge between the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity will be very difficult, as indeed it has proven to be these past two thousand years.

However, in our investigation, we would like probe if such a bridge can indeed be built. If it is at all possible to find commonality between the perception of God in Judaism and Christianity as Rabbi Garber has challenged us. For this reason, focus on the God of the Old Testament versus the God of the New Testament rather than on the 'God of Christianity versus [the] God of Judaism'¹⁵. Therefore, in Chapter 1 of this paper, we will direct our probing to theophanies where, like Moses, various Old Testament characters encounter the appearance of the Angel of God. Particular attention will be given to the stories of Gideon and Manoah and his wife in Judges 6 and 13. Analyzing these Old Testament texts will help us to examine the validity of Maimonides' position of the absolute incorporeality of God and set the stage for a possible bridging of the gap between Christianity and Judaism in the understanding of the nature of God based not on Aristotelian philosophy but on the text of Scripture. Chapter II of this research will focus on origin and development of the gap that exists between Judaism and Christianity regarding the understanding of the nature of God.

¹⁴ See further discussion in ch. 2 of this paper.

¹⁵ At the end of Chapter 1 of his *God as Trinity* Norman Gulley has two appendices, one called 'The Christ of the Jehovah's Witnesses' and the other 'The God of Islam'. By presenting the subjects in this way, Gulley argues that JW's de-facto believe in a different Christ and accordingly, Islam presents a picture of a different God. By analogy we use the term 'God of Judaism' in order to raise a question of whether or not the theology of Judaism presents a God which is different than the one portrayed by Christian theology. Sf. Gulley, 37-40.

CHAPTER 1
Exegetical Approach to the Understanding of God of the Old Testament:
The case of Mal'akh YHWH/Elohim in the Book of Judges.

The language of the story of the encounter between Gideon and the Angel of YHWH described in Judges 6:11-22 clearly resembles the narrative of Exodus 3.¹⁶ Similar to Moses,¹⁷ who was doing household chores and tending the sheep of his father in law, Gideon is found threshing his father's wheat. Both narratives begin with the statement 'and the Angel of YHWH appeared to him' (וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה in Ex. 3:2 and וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה in Judg. 11:12).

In both stories, there is a sudden and subsequent switch of subject from מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה to יְהוָה/אֱלֹהִים. Specifically, in the theophany of Ex. 3 מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה appeared to Moses from the burning bush in vs. 2 and then in vs. 4 we find that it was YHWH who saw Moses ~~and from there on during~~ continuing the entire conversation as Elohim/YHWH¹⁸ who calls and speaks to Moses.

Angel of the Lord in Judges 6

In the theophany¹⁹ of Judges 6 we read that the Angel of the Lord appears to Gideon (vs. 12) but then vs. 14 states that it was YHWH who replied: “וַיִּפֶן אֵלָיו יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר” (lit. and YHWH looked at him and said...). However, while for Moses, it was clear that he was talking to God,²⁰ for Gideon, from the outset it apparently wasn't clear whom he was having a conversation

¹⁶ This was noted by the number of commentators sf. Lilian Klein, *Triumph and Irony in the Book of Judges*, (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 1988), 51.

¹⁷ The numerous links this account bears with the call of Moses in Exodus 3–4. Sf. Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 257.

¹⁸ The divine names of YHWH and Elohim are used simultaneously in Ex. 3:4, which is viewed by the traditional critical school of Wellhausen as Yahvist sf. Kenneth M. Montville, *The Pentateuch: A Source Critical Version of the Five Books of Moses* (2012), 106ff and Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Reprint at San Bernardino, CA: 2016). On the other hand Moore argues that the theophany of Ex. 3 is purely Elohist George Foot Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1910), 183. In case, critical scholars fail to explain the reason for the appearance of YHWH in the 'Elohistic source' as well as Elohim in 'Yahvistic source'.

¹⁹ Moore, 183.

²⁰ Vs. 6 says: וַיִּסְתֵּר מִשֶּׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יָרָא מִהַבִּיט אֶל־יְהוָה (lit. ...and Moses hid his face from looking at God).

with.²¹ In fact, in vss. 13 and 15 Gideon replies to the Angel of the Lord as בִּי אֲדֹנָי,²² ‘pardon me, sir’, which is ‘a strictly polite address’²³ to a man of higher status²⁴. More so in vs. 13, Gideon speaks to the messenger²⁵ about God in the third person. Despite the remarks made by a number of commentators, who believe that the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon as a human,²⁶ the story does not seem to mention this fact directly. Clearly, based on the manner with which Gideon speaks in vss. 13 and 15, one can presume that he is speaking to someone whom he perceives as human. As Moore expresses it, “We may suppose either that Gideon took his visitor for a man of God (cf. 13:6), or, more probably, that the author lapsed from strict dramatic propriety...”²⁷

There is a split of opinion among scholars concerning the purpose of the young goat that Gideon offered to the messenger. On the one hand, after YHWH’s promise to be with Gideon so that he could conquer the Mediantes (vs. 16), it could be plausible to think that Gideon was intuiting the divine²⁸ nature of the messenger, thus he is using the goat as a testing probe to reassure himself²⁹ that he is talking with God. In other words, Gideon is trying to see whether or not the goat will be treated as a sacrificial animal thus clarifying the divine nature of the

²¹ A number of scholars point to the similarities between the call of Moses and the Call of Gideon. The detailed comparative stylistic analysis was published by Habel in his article, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” 297–305; E. Kutsch, “Gideons Berufung und Altarbau Jdc 6, 11–24,” *TLZ* 81 (1956): 75–84. However, not very many scholars point to the differences that exist between the two theophanies.

²² בִּי אֲדֹנָי the pronunciation, in distinction from אֲדֹנָי v. 13, means to intimate that Gideon now recognizes his visitor as divine, see Moore, 186.

²³ Robert G. Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, vol. 6A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 131.

²⁴ Block does not seem to agree with Boling’s idea of politeness in the expression בִּי אֲדֹנָי and prefers the NIV’s take on this as ‘but sir’. Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 261.

²⁵ The noun מְלָאָךְ is found in Heb. only in a concrete, personal sense, ‘messenger’; or, as we might perhaps translate, ‘agent’, thus making the relation of the word to מְלָאָכָה more obvious. Sf. Moore, 185.

²⁶ For example, Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 291-293.

²⁷ Moore, 186.

²⁸ For further discussion, sf Bluedorn, *Yahweh versus Baalism: A Theological Reading of the Gideon-Abimelech Narrative*, (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2001), 84

²⁹ ...the food was not an act of hospitality, but a means of ascertaining the guest’s identity Sf. Amit, 85.

messenger. On the other hand,

...this conclusion may be questioned as an unnecessary exclusion of a double motif. Gideon does not necessarily expect the food he brings to result in a sign, though it does. Rather, he wants to carry out Near Eastern hospitality rituals to create an atmosphere favorable for a sign. Gideon knows that proper etiquette of his day has not been completed. He needs to give his guest a gift or offering (Heb. מנחה).³⁰

Walton further asserts that “The fact that the kid is prepared as meat and brought to the place rather than brought live and slaughtered there suggests more a meal than a sacrifice”.³¹

Conversely, Block insists that Gideon is bringing an offering by first requesting the divine visitor not move until he comes back with an offering, which he purposes to lay before him.³² Block’s arguments are based on the Levitical cultic usage of the noun מנחה³³, which is a cultic sacrifice composed of the meat of a young goat, unleavened bread, and a broth libation, exactly the components presented by Gideon to the divine messenger.

In any case, vss. 20 and 21 unravel the drama of theophany, when the Angel of God requests Gideon to furnish a makeshift altar, the food is converted into an offering,³⁴ and Angel of the Lord³⁵ disappears from the scene. The sacrificial act described in these verses definitely

³⁰ Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, vol. 8, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville; Dallas; Mexico City; Rio De Janeiro; Beijing: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 203.

³¹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews & Mark W. Chavalas, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 254.

³² Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 262–263.

³³ For further discussion of the cultic implication of this term see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 196-197.

³⁴ Moore, 188.

³⁵ In this verse the names YHWH and Elohim are used interchangeably, see note 15. As noted by Boling, “The reversion to ^e*lōhīm* at this point, together with the two words for “rock” in vss. 20 and 21, indicate something of the manner of transmission, but can scarcely be taken as source critical keys when ^e*lōhīm* thus abruptly intrudes into the hypothetical *J* story (vss. 11–24) while the divine name “Yahweh” is the only one to be found in the alleged *E* story (vss. 25–32)”. This is another demonstration of the flaws in the documentary hypothesis.

points to the fact that מַלְאָכֵי יְהוָה, who required such a sacrifice, could be YHWH Himself.³⁶ At least Gideon realized that such a face to face encounter could bring death (compare Gen 32:30; Exod 33:20; contrast Exod 24:11; Num 20:6).³⁷ In all these passages cited by Butler, the term Angel of the Lord does not appear. They deal strictly with the encounter between man and God. However, in case of Judges 6:22 Gideon fears death because of his sighting of מַלְאָכֵי יְהוָה. This could be a strong indicator in favor of the suggestion that the term Angel of the Lord and Lord in Judges 6 are used interchangeably.

Connection Between the theophany of Gideon and Theophany of Abraham

Despite the different opinions regarding Gideon's intent in bringing the מנחה, the scene feeding the מַלְאָכֵי יְהוָה presented in vs. 18 and 19 resembles the scene of feeding the שְׁלֹשֵׁה אַנְשֵׁים, the tree men, described in Gen.18:18, which Abraham saw when God appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre (NASB). The discussion about the nature of the theophany in the narrative of Gen. 18 requires a separate detailed research and therefore is beyond the scope of this paper. For almost two centuries a general consensus³⁸ was formed among different scholars regarding the fact that the three 'men' mentioned here do not represent the three persons of the Godhead,³⁹ as was believed by some early church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Ambrose, or Cyrill. As the SDA Bible Commentary argues, "This view seems unwarranted, since two of the three are referred to as angels (Gen. 19:1,15; Heb. 13:2), and as men (Gen. 19:10,12,16). It seems best,

³⁶ In his comment on vs. 20 Block uses the following wording: 'As Gideon presents the food, the messenger/Yahweh seizes the initiative, commanding Gideon to lay the meat and the bread on the rock next to him and to pour the broth over them'. Sf. Block, 263.

³⁷ Butler, 204.

³⁸ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Genesis*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 240.

³⁹ For detailed exegesis of Gen. 18:1-3 sf. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 6.

therefore, to see in the three “men” the Lord and two angels”.⁴⁰

It is also quite natural that a similar opinion would be held among Jewish commentators. For example, interpreting Gen. 18:3 and 4, RASHI emphasizes that all these three men were angels and thus Abraham addresses them in plural,⁴¹ which, throughout the entire conversation in chapters 18 and 19 is not always the case.⁴² On the other hand, RAMBAN referring to the statement in Genesis Rabba 48:9 states in his commentary, that Abraham spoke to the chief of the angels. “And it is possible that he said to the chief, pass not away I pray thee, [in the singular sense], and thou and thy companions who remain with thee wash your feet,’ [the verb ‘wash’ being the plural form].⁴³ In support of RASHI, Hirsch proposes that the word *גִּבְרֹתַי* can be used in the secular meaning and translated as ‘my masters’. Therefore, according to Hirsch, God was not physically present with Abraham and the three men were just mere guests, because receiving guests, according to the Sages, is greater than receiving the Divine presence. In other words, God appeared to Abraham in a vision, while at the same time three men came to him, giving Abraham an opportunity to exercise the commandment of hospitality.⁴⁴

Having summarized the position of the early and medieval Jewish commentators, Sarna states his own exegetical conclusion about the correlation between the appearance of YHWH in vs.1 and the ‘three men’ in vs. 3.

Their arrival as a group of three is without analogy in the Bible. Chapter 19:1 mentions “the two angels,” which suggests that the third was manifestly different. Indeed, Abraham speaks to, and is in turn addressed by, one of them directly (vv.

⁴⁰ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), 326.

⁴¹ Rabbi Yisrael Iesser Zvi Herczeg, *The Torah with Rashi's Commentary*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn, NY:1999), 174-175.

⁴² Hamilton, 6ff.

⁴³ Nachmanides, *Commentary of the Torah: Genesis*. Translated by Rabbi C. Chavel. Vol. 1. (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 2004), 235.

⁴⁴ Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Hirsch Chumash: the Five Books of Moses*, Sefer Bereshis (New York: Feldheim Publishers & Judaica Press), 408-409.

4, 10). Perhaps the other two are his attendants.⁴⁵

It is true that Ex. 19:1, referring to the two out of the three ‘men’ which visited Abraham, calls them *הַמַּלְאָכִים*, the angels, which definitely does not suggest any reference to Godhead. However, Sarna, as well as the other Jewish commentators mentioned above, seem to overlook a change of predicate, which occurs in the plural form in 18:9 ‘וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אַיֵּה שָׂרָה’ (and they said, where is Sarah) to the singular in 18:10 ‘וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֵשׁוּב אֵלַיְךָ’ (...and he said, ‘I will certainly return to you’ ...). While vs.10 does not have a nominal subject, the subject of vs. 13 is YHWH, which compels Sarna to recognize that, God and His angels often speak interchangeably.⁴⁶

However, Genesis 18-19 uniquely differs from all other passages cited by Sarna in his excursus on angelology by the mere fact that the term *יְהוָה מַלְאָךְ* or *מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים* does not occur here. This is why we concur with the position of the SDA Bible Commentary that the two ‘men’ who visited Abraham were angels while the third one was YHWH Himself.

However, unlike the case of Gen 18:8, where it says that they, i.e. the three men, ate under the tree, the Angel of God in Judg. 6 did not eat. He touches the meat with the staff and the fire consumes the meal at which point the messenger disappears. If the plural verbal form *אָכְלוּ*, which occurs in Gen. 18:8, includes all three ‘men’, then YHWH who is among them is also eating the meal. In other words, the theophanies presented in Judges 6 and Genesis 18 manifest two different patterns of divine behavior. In Gen. 18 YHWH, who appears to Abraham as human, behaves as human in regard to the food, whereas in Judg. 6, YHWH, who is described as the Angel of the Lord/Angel of God and presumably perceived by Gideon as human, does not eat the food but rather causes the fire to consume it. Nevertheless, unlike Gen. 18, the theophany

⁴⁵ Nahum M Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, (New York, Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 128-129.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, see his comment on vs. 13 and the excursus on ‘Angelology’.

narrative of Judg. 6:11-22 contains some ambiguity in regard to the anthropomorphic features and manifestation of the Angel of the Lord, which is absent in the theophany to Manoah and his wife described in Judges 13:3-23.

The Angel of God in Judges 13

In the beginning of the story, vs. 3 states that it was the Angel of the Lord who visited the barren wife of Manoah with the message of hope. But in vs. 6 the woman tells her husband that she saw a man of God, the term regularly used in relation to the prophet (compare for example Josh 14:6; 1 Sam 2:27; 9:6–8; 1 Kgs 13:1; 17:18–24). However, in her own words, the wife of Manoah said: “איש האלהים בא אלי ומראהו כמראה מלאך האלהים” (a man of God came to me and his appearance was like appearance of the angel of God” (Judg. 13:6). “The term *mal'āk* is the same as in 2:1 and 6:11. How she knew what a messenger/angel of God looked like we may only speculate. Whereas the narrator identifies him as “the messenger/angel of the LORD” (v. 3), she, however, uses the generic designation for God”.⁴⁷

It is interesting that Block sites the text from Judges 2:11 which reads:

וַיַּעַל מְלָאֲךְ-יְהוָה מִן-הַגִּלְגָּל אֶל-הַבְּכִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֶעֱלֶה אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם וְאָבִיא אֶתְכֶם אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם וְאָמַר לְאַאֲפֶר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם לְעוֹלָם

And the Angel of the Lord came up from Galgal and said I brought you out of Egypt and to the land which I swore and said ‘I will not break my covenant with you forever’.

In the context of this passage of Judg. 2:1-5, מְלָאֲךְ-יְהוָה speaks from the first person about the actions that God did by leading the Israelites out of Egypt. While the prophets often carry divine speech in the first person, the term מְלָאֲךְ-יְהוָה as a designation of the human occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible in the postexilic period of Haggai 1:13. More so, the text specifically states

⁴⁷ Block, 404.

that Haggai speaks בְּמִלְאָכּוֹת יְהוָה, by commission of the Lord, whereas the text of Judg. 2:1-5 doesn't mention any commission. A good example of the difference between a message delivered by a prophet and one delivered by the angel of the Lord may be seen by comparing ch. 6:8 with ch. 6:11–16.⁴⁸ On the other hand, in his speech in Judg. 2:1, the Angel of the Lord claims that he actually was the one leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, as recorded in Ex. 23:20, 23, 33:2 and 14:19. As concluded above, based on the parallel between Ex. 14:19 and 13:21, the terms Angel of God and YHWH/God are used interchangeably. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that similarly to the theophany of Gideon, it is YHWH himself who appears to the wife of Manoah. As stated by Younger:

She describes the angel of Yahweh as “a man of God [*’iš hā^elōhîm*] ... [who] looked like an angel [or messenger, *malak*] of God, very awesome.” In this, she speaks better than she knows. As in other contexts, the divine name is used in narrative description, and the generic noun “God” is used to signal a subjective conviction. Thus there is irony in saying that “the man of God” (previously introduced by the narrator as “the angel [messenger] of the LORD”) looked just like God’s angel (messenger). Thus, Manoah’s wife only perceives this to be a divine being but does not comprehend that this *is* the angel of Yahweh, Yahweh himself.⁴⁹

However, as clearly stated in vs. 8, Manoah understands that his wife spoke with the man of God and asks YHWH in prayer to send that man again. God (Elohim) hears the prayer and מְלָאֲכָהּ הָאֱלֹהִים comes back again to his wife. Now according to vs. 11, both Manoah and his wife speak to the man, who, according to vs. 13 is the Angel of God. Unlike the description of the Angel of the Lord in the story of Gideon, where anthropomorphic features of an Angel could be ascertained only implicitly, Judges 13 unambiguously describes the human appearance of the

⁴⁸ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Judges*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 18.

⁴⁹ K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 288.

Angel of God.

The scene, which follows in vss. 15-22 closely resembles the food offering which turns into a sacrifice described in Judg. 6:18-23. Upon the request of the Angel, the young goat and the bread are placed on the rock where fire consumes them and the Angel disappears. At this point, both Gideon and Manoah realize that they have seen the Angel of the Lord and fear for their life. However, the statements made by Gideon and Manoah, which describe their reaction to the sighting of מְלָאךְ יְהוָה have one important difference. In Judg. 6:22 Gideon, addressing יְהוָה, says to Him that he saw the Angel of the YHWH מְלָאךְ יְהוָה, whereas in Judg. 13:22 Manoah says to his wife that they will surely die כִּי אֱלֹהִים רָאינוּ (because we saw Elohim, God). More so, Judg. 13:21 literally reads:

וְלֹא־נָסַף עוֹד מְלָאךְ יְהוָה לְהִרְאוֹת אֶל־מְנוּחַ וְאֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲזַי נָדַע מְנוּחַ כִּי־מְלָאךְ יְהוָה הוּא
The Angel of the Lord stopped being visible to Manoah and his wife and thus
Manoah found out that he was the Angel of the Lord.

It is obvious that the antecedent of the pronoun הוּא can definitely be traced from the preceding texts to the ‘man of God’ with whom both Manoah and his wife were speaking. But when this ‘man’ refuses to eat the meat but instead, as vs. 20 describes, goes up in flame from the makeshift altar toward heaven, then Manoah realizes whom he saw⁵⁰ מְלָאךְ יְהוָה, which is also called God (Elohim) in vs. 22.

Summary

Based on the sequence of descriptions presented in the theophany of Judges 13, we can observe the following progression. At first, the woman and her husband think that they speak to a

⁵⁰ The student of the famous Medieval Spanish kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla states in his treatise *Ginat Egoz*, “an angel appears and disappears suddenly, since his purpose is only for his mission (Gen. 18:2). However, a human being gradually approaches and departs. Thus the man of God’s abrupt disappearance was evidence that he was the angel. Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg, *Miqraoth Gedoloth: Judges*, (Brooklyn, NY: The Judaica Press, 1979), 115.

man of God, possibly a prophet who brings them good tidings. Secondly, after this supposed man rises up in flames, Manoah realized that he has encountered the Angel of the Lord. Thirdly, Manoah states to his wife that they saw God. Unlike any other passages, which describe the encounters between men and the Angel of the Lord/Angel of God discussed in this paper, Judges 13 in our opinion presents the most ‘airtight’ connection between מַלְאָךְ הַאֱלֹהִים/מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה and אֱלֹהִים/יְהוָה. While, in all other occasions, the interchangeable occurrences of the Angel of the Lord/Angel of God and God/Lord could be explained by medieval Jewish commentators⁵¹ and some modern scholars⁵² as a mere act of agency, where the angel is speaking to people on behalf of God who isn’t necessarily present, the text in Judg. 13:21-22 makes a clear statement of the fact that God indeed was present and Manoah saw Him⁵³ and not merely an angel.

The connection between the theophanies, which manifested as the appearance of the Angel of God described in Gen. 18, Ex. 3, and Judg. 6 and 13 significantly impact our understanding of the essence of the God of the Old Testament in the following ways:

1. If the text of Ex. 3 has a demonstrative proof that the Angel of the Lord who appeared to Moses and believed by Jewish tradition to be Michael is indeed God YHWH, this can be a bridge with the New Testament. Observing the parallel between the actions of Michael the Prince in Dan. 12:1-2 and the Son of man in John 5:26-29 it becomes plausible to suggest that the One who talked to Moses from the burning bush and introduced Himself as אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים could be the same as the One, whose name will be called Ἰησοῦς.
2. The connection between the theophanies of Ex. 3, and Judges 6 and 13 present an important contribution to the argument about the nature of the Angel of the Lord/God. If the terms מַלְאָךְ הַאֱלֹהִים/מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה are interchangeable with the term אֱלֹהִים, as Judges 13:22 appears to state, then God Himself is that Messenger, who appeared to Moses, Gideon, Manoah and lead the Israelites in the pillar of cloud and fire during their exodus.
3. The connection between the theophanies of Judges 6 and 13 and the theophany of Gen. 18 is significant to demonstrate that angels are not the only ones who can take human

⁵¹ Sf. Rashi and Ramban.

⁵² Sf., Sarna, Butler and others whose commentaries were cited earlier.

⁵³ In his commentary on the prophets known as Metzusat David, 18th-century Rabbi David Altshuler following Targum Jonathan, amends the text of Judges 13:22 to say ‘we saw the Angel of God.’ Such textual variation is not attested in either the Masoretic text or in the LXX.

form. The God of the Old Testament can present Himself in human form. While in the case of Gideon and Manoah, He chose not to eat the food prepared for him but rather let the sacrificial fire consume the meat and bread as an offering, in the case of Abraham, God chose to eat the food, demonstrating the possibility for him to be corporeal. And while these human appearances of God explored in our paper cannot in any case be viewed as the incarnation, they can disprove the philosophical position of Maimonides that God cannot be corporeal.

It was clearly seen throughout the course of this chapter's probe that the differences in the understanding of the essence of God which exist between Christians and Jews are not caused by different approaches to the exegesis of the original biblical text, but rather by the influence of, the mainly Aristotelian philosophy utilized by Maimonides and other medieval Jewish commentators. On the other hand, the investigated theophanies definitely demonstrate the incomprehensible complexity of the nature and essence of God that cannot be deduced beyond the bounds of Scripture. While traditional Medieval Jewish commentators in their efforts to refute Christian ideas often utilized Aristotelian philosophy, the followers of the mystical tradition in Judaism, the Kabbalah, in their quest to grasp the nature of God relied mainly on Neo Platonism. Unfortunately, Christianity also did not avoid the harmful influence of Hellenism and particularly Platonic thinking, on its perception of God and His essence. In their debates with Jews, which often became aggressive, early Christian apologists overstepped the boundaries of Scripture and reasoned beyond revelation. It is this appeal to Hellenistic philosophical reasoning which induced the formation of the gap between Judaism and Christianity.

While the present chapter demonstrated an exegetical approach to the reconciliation of the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, and thereby a bridging of the gap between the understanding of the essence of God in Christianity and Judaism; the following chapter will examine the ongoing contribution of the philosophical approach to this widening of the gap in the understanding of God.

CHAPTER 2

Philosophical Approach to the Nature of God: The Case of Absolute Singularity versus Social Trinity

As stated in the introduction, for more than a millennium after the end of their formation, Christianity and Judaism have been caught in a controversy over the nature and essence of God. One side believes in a single God who cannot present Himself in human form whereas the other side worships three separate persons of the Godhead, one of which besides being divine is also fully human. While, in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, the Hebrew text of the Old Testament⁵⁴ does not support the absolute singularity of God⁵⁵ and, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Pentateuch does indeed make room for the corporeality of God, how far can we stretch our understanding of the precise nature, composition and function of our Creator? Is it proper that humans should even attempt to pry into the nature of the One who is beyond human comprehension? If so, which methods and worldviews should dictate that inquiry?

With the exponential growth of the Gentile church and its separation from its Jewish moorings⁵⁶ in the 2nd Century CE, the appeal to western philosophical methods and Hellenistic worldview overtook Christian thought and rhetoric. From Tertullian to Augustine, Luther and Calvin, this Hellenistic philosophical propensity to divide and conquer, dissect and analyze the mysteries of God have persisted, ultimately leading to the presumption of speculation upon those mysteries to which the Word of God is silent or unclear. In contrast, while the sages of Israel surely plumbed, debated, and midrashed the depths of Torah and the Will of the Eternal One; the

⁵⁴ The obvious example is the usage of the plural form of אלהים as a subject of a verb in singular such as ויומר אלהים.

⁵⁵ As in the statement in Gen. 1:26 ויאמר אלהים נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו (And God (plural) said (singular) let us make man in accordance with our image and our likeness); or as in Gen 11:7 והקב נרדה ונבלה שם שפתם (... let us come down (1st common plural) and confuse (1st common plural) there languages). Explaining the plurality of the verbage in Gen. 1:26 Genesis Rabba suggests that God spoke with his own heart.

⁵⁶ Sf. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Semitic mind has always possessed a certain peace with regard to the mystery of God and His workings in human history. That is to say, Semitic thought⁵⁷ has been, as it is today, at peace with the silence of God⁵⁸ on certain topics and with contradictions for which no reconciliation exists. For the Hebrew mind, the question: “Can you fathom the depths of God or discover the limits of the Almighty?” (Job 11:7 HCSB) is the answer to the sage’s desire to probe beyond that which God has revealed to humanity. To probe where one is not bidden to probe risks misunderstanding and misrepresenting the Holy One of Israel⁵⁹. Certainly, for the sages, as for all mere mortals, no more delicate and presumptuous inquiry of God can be made than the inquiry into His Divine nature.

This has been the temptation and the substance of the western church’s disputation and decree for millennia. One which has caused among believers; schism, excommunication, vitriol, hatred—and tangentially, genocide to the Jews. Surely, this history of disunity is, among other things, a direct result of the probing of subjects for which the Semitic comfort with uncertainty may better serve. Today, the major eastern and western branches of Christianity continue to fundamentally disagree on the nature of the Godhead⁶⁰ and yet we feel compelled to make this unfathomable aspect of God’s nature the touchstone of Christian orthodoxy.

From the perspective of missiological engagement with the Jewish people, this internal and schismatic debate, this striving to know that which is unknowable, to stretch the imagination and to superimpose the human condition in “personal” and “relational” and “social” Trinities has

⁵⁷ For detailed discussion on the subject see Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 1970).

⁵⁸ Jacques Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (University Press of America, 1993).

⁵⁹ Which can be a violation of the second commandment of the Decalogue, when one creates an inadequate image and begins to worship it.

⁶⁰ “Western theology began with the one God who is also three Persons, whereas eastern theology began with the three Persons of the one God. In this system we begin with the three Persons in the one God.” Gulley, Norman. *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity*. Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2011, xx

done more harm than good. For those working among the Jews, in terms of the silence of the full revelation of the nature of God, it would be preferable to be content with uncertainty and to not continue to probe the unknowable on the basis of philosophical speculation. A brief history of the development of Trinitarian thought will help to remind us that our current theories of the nature of God are indeed steeped in philosophical supposition which had its origin in non-Semitic thought.

A Personal Trinity Leads to a Loving Trinity

Early in Christian history, beginning with Tertullian in the 3rd Century, the western, Greek, philosophical need to dissect, in this case, the Godhead, quickly resorted to inferences from within the human experience:

Owing to his Stoic leanings, Tertullian had difficulty in describing essence apart from any kind of bodily ramifications, as the following citation from *Against Praxeas* 7 clearly illustrates “For who will deny that God is a body, although ‘God is spirit?’ For Spirit has a bodily substance of its own kind, in its own form.”⁶¹

And so, from this foundational supposition, Tertullian launched the premise of a “personal” God—a God in three “persons”—a *Trinitas*⁶² Kärkkäinen continues:

“Thus we can speak of God’s one “substance” and three distinct yet undivided “persons.” This is the emergence of the Western church’s semi-canonized way of expressing its faith in the Trinity, coined by Tertullian: “one substance in three persons” (*una substantia, tres personae*). Tertullian is said to be the first to apply *persona* and *Trinitas* to the Christian God.⁶³

However, the term *persona* itself presents challenges, a term which Kärkkäinen admits the “contours” of which, “are both obscure and wide.”⁶⁴ In antiquity, *persona* carried the connotation of an actor’s “mask”—a representation of something else, perhaps something real,

⁶¹ Karkainen, Veli-Matti. *The Trinity: Global Perspectives*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. 30

⁶² Ibid. 28

⁶³ Ibid. 29-30

⁶⁴ Ibid. 30

but not the thing itself. In modern usage, *persona* has come to mean something very different. It has come to mean the reality of the object, the human being itself.⁶⁵ Kärkkäinen believes that “Tertullian probably meant something like a concrete individual.”⁶⁶

A Loving Trinity Leads to a Relational Trinity

Once the appellation of *persona* had been attributed to the Godhead, the logic of relationality and love naturally followed. Indeed, this was both Augustine’s and Aquinas’ contribution to the argument who taught “that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son and is their mutual love.”⁶⁷ From this love, logically flows the relationship between the persons of the Godhead and indeed it is clear from the New Testament, that Jesus’s appellation of “Father” suggests a familial relationship however we must be careful not to superimpose the experience of human relationship upon the Godhead. God must not be limited by our human experience nor logic and we should not assert that God is three persons, therefore they must be in relationship, and therefore they must love one another in the same way that humans do. While these attributes may certainly be present, they may not be causative as humans understand causation. The Jesuit scholar, Sylvester Joseph Hunter, in his 19th Century text *Outline of Dogmatic Theology* admits this very same fact:

St. Ambrose (*De Fide*, lib.2, *Ad Gratianum*, cap. 5) testifies that it is impossible to know the secret of Generation, the intelligence is at fault, language fails. The theological reason of the truth for which we contend is found in this, that in spite of the profound speculations of Plato, and other heathen philosophers on the nature of God, they never had a glimpse of truth: the nearest approach made by them was the recognition that in God there is Knowledge and Love, but the essence of the mystery lies in the Personality of the Three, which heathen never suspected. Also, all knowledge goes either from cause to effect, or from effect to cause: but the first has no place in God, who is uncaused; and all the effects of God are His creatures, the work of His Power, and this Power is an Attribute of

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid. 50

the Divine Substance, having nothing to do with the Relations by which the Persons are distinguished.⁶⁸

Hunter admits that these uses of Substance, and Person, etc. from the “Metaphysics which are employed by theologians in treating of the Blessed Trinity, and which by their precision aid much to the understanding of the mystery”⁶⁹ themselves had their origin in Aristotelian and Platonic thought.

A Relational Trinity Leads to a Social Trinity

By the Middle Ages, the Latin term *persona* came to be understood increasingly more individualistically.⁷⁰ At the same time, a student of the spiritual and mystical theologian Hugh of St. Victor, Richard of St. Victor, following the lead of Augustinian, became the “developer of social Trinitarianism in his highly acclaimed *De Trinitate*.”⁷¹ Richard St. Victor reasoned that while two can indeed love one another, it remains a form of mutual self-love, therefore there must be a third object of their love in order to have shared loved. Consequently, the Holy Spirit must be present in the Trinity in order for love to be perfected. Again, the application of human logic becomes an imposition upon God. Even in our human reasoning, we can counter that God need not have stopped with just one additional member of the Godhead, wouldn’t further members be a higher expression of that love?⁷² From the 12th to the 19th Century there is little unique development in Trinitarian ideas until the social theory of the Trinity is again expounded by Frederick Denison Maurice, founder of the Christian Socialist movement in England and then by Leonard Hodgson in the 20th Century having developed a “full-blown social

⁶⁸ Hunter, Sylvester Joseph. *Outline of Dogmatic Theology Vol II*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1895. 170

⁶⁹ Ibid 175

⁷⁰ Karkainen, Veli-Matti. *The Trinity: Global Perspectives*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. 59

⁷¹ Ibid.60-61

⁷² Ibid. 61

Trinitarianism.”⁷³

⁷³ Ibid. 63

Modern Developments

In the 20th Century a number of developments in relational and social Trinitarianism emerged. From Schleiermacher's strict monotheism on the one hand to Moltmann's social Trinitarianism on the other and Barth purportedly in the middle, we find that Peters can make the following startling observation:

One implication is this: Christian Trinitarianism is not a subspecies within monotheism. Barth is not applying for a membership card to join a club in which Judaism and Islam are members. Christian theology, he says, does not measure its understanding of God by the broader idea of monotheism. . . . Moltmann follows Barth's lead and goes further, even to the extent of pitting monotheism against Trinitarianism. He repudiates the former and affirms the latter; but in so doing denies that Trinitarianism is tritheism or polytheism. Rather than multiple gods, Moltmann says that the one God has alienated himself from himself in the cross and is returning to union through the Spirit. God's love for the world has precipitated a division within God's being. It is this internal diremption of the divine being that distinguishes the Christian from what others know as monotheism.⁷⁴

How is it possible for modern Christian theologians to arrive at such divergent conclusions except by way of the application of imperfect human reason to a divinely unfathomable Mystery? In fact, Moltmann's reasoning goes so far as to equate monotheism with monarchism along the lines of Liberation Theology and demands "that Christianity repudiate monotheism."⁷⁵ How have we come this far and how can one reach out to the monotheistic religions of the world with the Gospel in the presence of such conjecture so far removed from its Semitic roots?

⁷⁴ Peters, Ted. *God as Trinity*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993. 39

⁷⁵ *Ibid* p.40

CONCLUSION

A Need for Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine?

Keith Ward suggests that after two thousand years of debate, creed, and tradition, it is high time that Christians reformulate the Trinitarian doctrine. Contrary to the modern movements toward relational and social Trinitarianism, Ward reasons that:

there is often a commitment to the implausible philosophical doctrine that persons are essentially and wholly constituted by their social relationships and that self-knowledge is only possible if an ‘other’ is posited in which the self can be objectified and reflected. These doctrines, which are mostly Hegelian and Marxist in origin, are illuminating when applied to social and historically developing animals such as human beings. But it is very difficult to take them as definitive of all possible types of personal realities. The consequent notions of ‘personhood’ and of what a divine being must necessarily be like are, I argue, unduly dogmatic and restrictive.⁷⁶

If Ward is correct in his observation, then the implications of such are that nearly two thousand years of Trinitarian debate have brought us no nearer to an understanding of God’s nature because we have limited our argument to that which is known about the world and human relationships. Of course, being human, we can do no other and this is precisely the point—we cannot experience God’s reality and therefore it must, in essence, remain a Mystery to us. In other words, the assumption that God’s relational reality is the same as ours was an early logical presumption that risked leading us to misconstrue the essential nature of God’s being. If this is the case, then we do indeed find ourselves back at the beginning. We may be guilty of building our original argument upon a false premise:

It is generally agreed that the New Testament does not contain a clear statement that God is a Trinity, certainly not in the sense that came to be defined in the fourth- and fifth-century councils of the Church. Nowhere in the Gospels can we find a statement that God is three persons in one substance, all co-eternal and co-equal, and that Jesus is in some sense identical with one of them. Tertullian is

⁷⁶ Ward, Keith. *Christ and Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. x

generally taken to be the originator of the expression ‘three persons in one substance’ – *una substantia, tres personae*. Jesus never said, ‘I am the second person of a co-eternal and co-equal Trinity’, so this has to be taken as a later attempt to work out what was only implicit in Jesus’ teachings and acts.⁷⁷

This does not mean to say that we have completely missed the mark. There are clear statements in Scripture about the Godhead which merit investigation and synthesis. As much as possible it is proper for us to understand that nature in as much as it has been revealed to us within the framework of the worldview in which it was revealed. However, leaning upon a tradition whose philosophical roots emerge from a foreign and polytheistic religious worldview to interpret such a precious truth is dangerous if not folly as Ward unapologetically states:

that the idea of God as other-creating dynamic love is an illuminating one and is fully consistent with many central strands of Biblical insight. But the idea of God as a sort of society is a bad idea. It is repugnant to Jews, Muslims, and many monotheists (including me), and it has great disadvantages that its proponents have not fully recognized.⁷⁸

While it is not our intent to advocate a return to Arianism, Modalism, Sabellianism or other such extremes, in terms of the Gospel commission and the Three Angels’ Messages, it is important, that we do not, however, hinder our closing work among the Jewish and Muslim people by building our theology upon deterministic philosophical syllogisms which are, in fact, inconclusive. It is the assessment of Jewish ministries workers that, while a small percentage of Jews and Muslims have accepted the Messiah, the vast majority will not do so, so long as the nature of God is couched in terms of *personae and trinitas*. While it is true, as Gulley points out, that “there is internal evidence for God as a plurality in the Old Testament;”⁷⁹ we must endeavor to resist the temptation to philosophize the trinity beyond that which the Bible reveals and to continue our exegesis of the underlying Greek and Hebrew within the context of Judeo-Christian

⁷⁷ Ibid. 33

⁷⁸ Ibid. xiv

⁷⁹ Gulley, Norman. *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity*. Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2011. 23

norms. To do otherwise harms and retards the Gospel commission. The implication of this being that, while there is a strong pull within the denomination to move toward mainstream Christianity with regard to defining the nature of God in traditional Trinitarian terms, we must recognize that any attempt to describe God in our humanness will never fully achieve its aim and risks misrepresenting God. In the end, it would serve our mission better to resist the temptation to follow Church tradition and to loosely define the Godhead in terms that do not place barriers to monotheists acceptance of the Gospel.

In the Gospel of Mark is recorded an interesting conversation between Jesus and a scribe which summarizes the complexity of our dilemma:

One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that He is One, and there is no one else besides Him; and to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as himself, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions. (Mark 12:28-24, NASB)

To this very day in Judaism, the Shema resounds in the hearts and the minds of the people. Indeed, some have called it the great creed of Judaism. Here, in Mark 12, we see Jesus' wisdom in carefully reiterating the Shema as the "foremost" of the commandments. By Jesus example and teaching, the Oneness of God, must remain the most important element of any expression of the nature of God. While the Divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not in question, to push the exposition of the nature of the Godhead to the limit of human reason without due sensitivity to this declaration of Oneness and the Mystery of the Godhead, serves only to sate our curiosity and imagination.