

Research notes

‘Were the First-Century Jews Strict Monotheists?’

Some references

By C White, 2005, 2006

It was great to read the section on 'Were the First-Century Jews Strict Monotheists?' in UCG's latest paper. Indeed, a minority of Jews did indeed believe in a second Divine Being.

Alas, there is a rapidly expanding belief that Christ did not have pre-existence. This is taught by the Christadelphians, Church of God (Abrahamic Faith), Ken Westby (ACD) and Ron Weinland (Church of God – PKG).

Some CoG7 affiliates have readopted this belief in recent years, reviving what was a doctrine almost dead within the CoGs (it had some life in the 1930s, but was still very much a minority belief in those days).

Even Messianics are going to war over it. On one end some Messianics are compromising more and more with Protestantism. On the other extreme others are becoming so 'Old Testament only' as to minimise Christ - the war is over Christ's true identity and I wonder where it will all end?

This variation of Unitarianism is known as Socinianism after Laelius Socinus and Faustus Socinus. The latter formed the Unitarian Church in Poland in the 1500s. Although this extreme form of Unitarianism predated them by centuries. Some are even trying to attribute this belief to Dr Arius. Although I have seen quotes by him which are clearly Unitarian. But at other times seem Binitarian.

My recommended references to people are:

- Margaret Barker - *The Great Angel, A Study of Israel's Second God*
- Alan Segal - *Two Powers in Heaven*
- Matthew Alfs - *Concepts of Father, Son and Holy Spirit*
- Daniel Boyarin - "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John," *Harvard Theological Review* 94:3 (July, 2001), 243-284
- Brian Fulton - "Two Powers in Heaven. The Nature of God Controversy in First-Century Judaism"
- James McGrath and Jerry Truex – "Two Powers' and Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism"

The Great Angel, A Study of Israel's Second God is a remarkable work that I somehow came across in the early or mid-1990s. It is highly recommended reading. The *Two Powers in Heaven* is another excellent work I stumbled across in the University of Sydney library, around the early or mid-1990s. And *Concepts of Father, Son and Holy Spirit* is one I found advertised somewhere and ordered it around 1987 or 1988. While the article "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John" I came across last year (2005) but could not find a copy in Australia. However, a kind member in the USA found the article in a library and scanned it for me.

Here are some quotes from *Two Powers in Heaven* which demonstrates that Binitarianism was a minority view amongst the Jews:

"Though it was difficult to date the rabbinic traditions accurately in many cases, the results showed that the earliest heretics believed in two complementary powers in heaven ... At its beginning, Christianity was rather more "Binitarianism" than Trinitarian, emphasizing only Christ and the Father as God ... There is warrant to believe that "two powers" heresy was manifested in some kinds of Christianity in the first century. The evidence seems to show that Johannine Christianity, at least, was condemned by Jews as "ditheism" and would have considered itself to be "Binitarian" " (pp. x, 7, 218).

Some trinitarians even accept that the early Church was Binitarian and not Trinitarian:

"The **binitarian formulas are found** in Rom. 8:11, 2 Cor. 4:14, Gal. 1:1, Eph. 1:20, 1 Tim 1:2, 1 Pet. 1:21, and 2 John 1:13 ... No doctrine of the Trinity in the Nicene sense is present in the New Testament ... There is no doctrine of the Trinity in the strict sense in the Apostolic Fathers..." (Rusch W.G. in *The Trinitarian Controversy*. Fortress Press, Phil., 1980, pp. 2-3) (emphasis mine)

Now, I just hope we don't over-react to Socianism so that we put greater emphasis on Christ than the Father. For instance, some have said that the sabbath-observing groups over the ages chiefly proclaimed Christological connections to the holy days - this is inaccurate:

1. The onus is on those making such claims to prove it;
2. What we know of what was taught was more on they are a ceremonial requirement and prophetic connections;
3. IF they taught mainly Christological connections in the past, why should we go back? We must go forward with deeper understanding because during this century we have witnessed an explosion in Biblical knowledge.

The Scriptures indicate that knowledge shall increase in the end time (Dan. 12:4). This is often accomplished by building on the understanding, knowledge and research of predecessors. Not only is raw knowledge increased, but so is qualitative value-adding to doctrine with deeper and more meaningful insights.

4. Finally, it is the few Protestants that take an interest in feast day typology who chiefly see Christ in them. Not us! And it is those within our various fellowships that have watered-down so many of our beliefs that want to preach Christ. He is indeed in the Holy Days, but that is not the Biblical emphasis: He is the agent for the Father to guide His Plan which is outlined in the Holy Days.

That is the chief emphasis for these days. Diminishing the Father is not an option – yet it is being pushed from certain quarters. Why? What is their agenda? Who has authorized such a change in doctrinal emphasis anyway?

The Nature of God and Christ

Doctrinal Study Paper

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Appendix E

Were the First-Century Jews Strict Monotheists?

One of the arguments against the deity of Christ is the argument from silence. This argument assumes that the Jews of Christ's day were strictly monotheistic and if Christ had professed to being God in the flesh this would have been a big issue at that time. But is it true that the Jews of the first century believed in "strict" monotheism?

There is no question but that the Jews were monotheistic, but how were they monotheistic? In the past 30 years much new information has come to light that sheds doubt on the traditional view of Jewish belief about the Godhead. More and more evidence shows that the Jews did struggle with the issue of plurality in the Godhead.

The Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament: Second Commonwealth Judaism in Recent Study by J. Julius Scott, Jr. of the Wheaton College Graduate School shows clearly that it is a mistake to believe that the Jews of

the New Testament period were “strict monotheists” and they would never have accepted Jesus as God. Scott shows that the idea of “strict monotheism” did not develop until the Middle Ages and was an attempt to stop the encroachment by Christianity. Here are some quotes from Scott:

The immediate Jewish background of the New Testament was shaped by three cataclysmic events and their results as various groups of Jews reacted to them differently.

First came the destruction of the Jewish state by the Babylonians in 587/6 BCE. The Hebrews lost their land, monarchy, holy city and temple and were scattered throughout the world. Consequently, they faced a theological crisis involving the nature, power, and goodness of God. They were also threatened culturally, racially, and ceremonially as they were thrown into proximity with other peoples and religious groups. In addition, the absence of recognized prophets left the Hebrews without divine guidance at a time when they felt most in need of support and direction.

Debate and disagreement continue about many facts and interpretations of the remains of Second Temple Judaism. Yet, something of a general agreement on a number of significant points has emerged. This includes new understandings, recognitions of previously obscure facts and emphases, and changed opinions. Some of the more important elements in this “new consensus” may be described as follows.

1. Intertestamental Judaism is a descendant of the Old Testament Hebrew faith and culture but is not identical with it... [Also we] must distinguish it from Rabbinic Judaism, which developed after the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the Jewish state. This distinction must be carefully noted in, among other things, attempting to use certain types of source materials, especially the Old Testament and Rabbinic writings, as witnesses to the faith and practices of this period.

2. Although Second Commonwealth Judaism had cardinal tenets, such as monotheism [which was not clearly defined], covenant, Torah, and the implications of these, it was essentially a religion of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. Behavior and practice, not precise theological subscription, demonstrated faithfulness to the national or sectarian commitment.

3. The society, culture, faith and practice of Intertestamental Judaism were far from a monolithic whole. As we have already mentioned diversity was a major characteristic of the society and period; accordingly it is folly to seek a mainline or correct position or to assume that one particular group or trajectory can be identified as the “normative Judaism” of the period. The diverse elements which made up the fabric of Intertestamental Jewish society must be taken into account, both individually and together, in attempting to understand the period.

4. Our “new consensus” sees Second Temple Judaism, not as a “holding pattern” between the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, but as a dynamic

civilization which faced and was given form by its response(s) to genuine tensions arising from political, cultural, sociological, existential, and religious situations and issues. This challenge took place within the context of commitment, on the one hand, to the abiding relevance of Jewish socio-nationalistic-religious heritage, as it was then understood, and, on the other hand, to the need to face realistically the changing circumstances of life in the world in which they lived.¹[64]

Samson H. Levey, in *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation: The Messianic Exegesis of the Targum* published by Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1974, further confirms this diversity in Jewish thought in the time of the first century when it came to the Messiah. There is evidence that would include the Messiah being “divine” or God.

The diversity of this period is probably nowhere more evident than in eschatological expectations. Would the Consummation be simultaneous with or subsequent to the arrival of the Final Age? Would there be a divine agent (a Messiah), or would God personally intervene? If the former, would the Messiah be human, spiritual-angelic, or divine? Is the “Messiah” a personal, corporate, or idealized figure? Would there be a single Messianic figure or several? Would the role or task of the Messiah or Messiahs be primarily political, military, social, or religious? Would he be concerned solely for the affairs of the Hebrews or would he also benefit Gentiles and the natural order? What would be the status of Temple and Torah during the Final Age, of various Jewish groups, of the Gentiles? Although the majority of common people in The Land of Israel (the “Am Ha-Eretz” or “Average Jews”) seem to have held to some loosely defined hope of an essentially military-political-nationalistic Messiah(s) who would both deliver from enemies and enable God’s people to “serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness,” it is impossible to speak categorically about “*the single pre-Christian Jewish belief*” of almost anything [emphasis added].²[65]65

Survey of the New Testament—Intertestamental Judaisms by Thomas L. Long has this to say about Judaism of the first century and just prior:

The period between the second century BCE and the second century CE is known to biblical historians as the “Intertestamental Period,” that is it marked the closure of the canon of the Hebrew scriptures and the formation of the canon of the Christian scriptures.

This period is important to Jews because it includes the devastating Jewish revolt against the Roman empire, which resulted in the destruction of the Second Temple and the end of sacrificial worship, and it is important to Christians because it represents the matrix in which Jesus of Nazareth and his earliest disciples were formed. Because it was a period of tremendous theological diversity within Jewish practice, recent scholars of religion have

¹[64] J. Julius Scott, Jr., *The Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament: Second Commonwealth Judaism in Recent Study*.

²[65] Samson H. Levey, *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation: The Messianic Exegesis of the Targum*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1974.

tended to characterize it in the plural—Judaisms—rather than representing it as a single monolithic religious orthodoxy. What we know about this period comes from several sources: the Christian scriptures (not a particularly reliable historical document because they were often hostile to Jewish authorities), the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus and the philosopher Philo of Alexandria, the Dead Sea Scrolls, archeological remains, and inscriptions.³[66]

In “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?” Peter Hayman states:

In the academic world of twenty or thirty years ago it was conventional to hold that the story of Judaism was one of a gradual, but inexorable, evolution from a Canaanite/Israelite pagan and mythological environment into the pure light of an unsullied monotheism. It is hardly ever appropriate to use the term monotheism to describe the Jewish idea of God, that no progress beyond the simple formulas of the Book of Deuteronomy can be discerned in Judaism before the philosophers of the Middle Ages, and that Judaism never escapes from the legacy of the battles for supremacy between Yahweh, Ba'al and El from which it emerged.⁴[67]

It is also quite revealing to read the writings of the early writers as to how they viewed Christ. Ignatius (A.D. 110 to 117) wrote in his epistle to the Ephesians: “By the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ, our God... God Himself being manifested in human form.” In his epistle to the Trallians he writes: “Jesus our God.” In his epistle to the Romans: “Jesus Christ our God.” In Magnesians 6, Ignatius writes: “Jesus was with the Father before the beginning of time...”

Polycarp was another early writer. In his epistle to the Philippians he wrote about Jesus Christ as “God and our Lord.” This is further proof that the Jews and the Christians of the first century did have a grasp of the concept of plurality in the Godhead. While they were monotheistic, one needs to explain exactly what is meant by the term. There was clearly room in their theology for Christ to be God.

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³[66] Thomas L. Long, Survey of the New Testament—Intertestamental Judaisms.

⁴[67] Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 42, 1991.