

Storytelling and Complex Monotheism in Judaism: Jacob the Wrestler

Another passage that highlights Jewish interaction with the notion of complex monotheism is Genesis 32. The episode with Jacob and the “man later revealed to be God” provides a messy history of interpretation that more often than not is framed in angelomorphic terms.¹ While the Targums seem to soften the blow by making the man an angel, even they retain the proper name ‘Peniel’ and allow for an interpretation of the angel to be a divine figure. The Greek and Hebrew texts of Genesis demand that we see, even if only in a literary sense, this foe as both God and man (Gen 28:24-25, 31). The first century document *Prayer of Joseph* is of the utmost importance in analyzing how monotheistic Jews were reading texts that clearly spoke of a complex divinity.² While in the Targums and *Prayer of Joseph* the door is left open to a merely modalistic form of complexity, the possibility of a complex hypostatic understanding of a single God remains. That is to say the Word-become-flesh does not have to be a ‘mode’ of the Divine on earth, nor does Spirit have to be merely an emanation of the Divine. Rather, these various expressions of the Divine may indeed have their own personalities.

The biblical text itself is clear that a man appears and wrestles with Jacob until morning. When asked his name, the man refuses to do. Jacob, presumably because the man’s name was the unpronounceable divine name and because with a simple touch he dislocated his hip, concludes that he had seen God face to face. The immediate importance of this is, of course, that

¹ Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 60–61. Michael, 126-131; Uriel, 136-137; and Israel, 137-142.

² J.Z. Smith, “Prayer of Joseph,” in James Hamilton Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha 2: Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 699–714. While Smith, “Prayer of Joseph,” 711 concludes “In its present form, the Prayer of Joseph remains a tantalizing fragment that has left no discernible impact on subsequent literature,” in a different treatise he writes that “the fact that only so small a remnant remains, that testimonies to the work rare sparse and quotations from it even rarer should not be allowed to obscure the interest or importance of the text.” Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 25.

Jacob saw God and did not die. Compare this with the mercy shown to Moses and the 73 nobles of Israel in Exodus 24.

Jacob saw God face to face and, because of the mercy of God, he was spared from death. With this conclusion comes several subsets that have found their place among orthodox interpretations of the Scriptures, the most prominent being that the “God” he saw was actually an angel, and that ‘God’ is a perfectly acceptable way to describe an angel in the Hebrew Bible. The reverse is slightly more profound, that “Angel” is a perfectly acceptable way to describe God in the Hebrew Bible.

Even with the Targumic emendations to change the foe to an angel, and even with changes to Jacob’s confession of who he had seen face to face, topographical history demanded that the place remain named “Face of God” (Gen 28:19). We are then left with a simple, yet confusing text that demands either consultation with later developing (Second Temple) thought, or hermeneutical gymnastics.

Targum Onqelos, one of the earliest of the Targums, leaves the episode relatively unchanged. Jacob wrestles with a man (גְּבִרָא) who refuses to state his name, but upon receiving the blessing Jacob confesses “For I have seen the angel of the Lord (מַלְאָכָא דִּיִּי) face to face, and my life has been delivered.”³ Thus, one of the earliest interpolations of Genesis 32 includes a de-anthropomorphizing of God, as is often typical in targumic literature. What is interesting though is that in appearing like a man, the Angel (or messenger) of the Lord is now capable of manifesting himself as a man and, given that he can wrestle, bless, and willfully refuse to speak

³ Smith, “Prayer of Joseph” 710 notes that “The Palestinian Targumim are unanimous in rendering Peniel as “I have seen angels of the Lord face to face” rather than the usual singular circumlocution, “ange of the Lord.” This most probably refers to the angels in the “ladder” vision.” Targum Onqelos prefers the singular. While Fleisher argues that Onqelos is Palestinian, Smith was likely working from the then-orthodox position that it was Babylonian. The distinction is not ultimately relevant to this paper, though Smith sees the parallels with the Ladder vision as pertinent to interpretation of *Prayer of Joseph*.

his name, demonstrates that there is a mutability and a personality of angels.⁴ Such personalities only grow stronger as the interpretations continue.

“Michael” in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

Targum Pseudo Jonathan, in its own unique form of storytelling, identifies the foe of Jacob as Michael. The meturgeman also seeks to find a way to explain why it was that Jacob had to wrestle with the heavenly creature. In this episode, “an angel in the image of a man fought with him and said, “Indeed, you said you would tithe all that is yours [and yet you have not],” (TgPsJ Gen 32:25). After Jacob set aside his children as tithes, TgPs-J identifies the character when he notes that “Michael answered and said, ‘Master of the universe, this one is your lot,’” (TgPsJ Gen 32:25). Then Michael waits until the pillar of dawn comes and strikes Jacob’s thigh during their fight.

Then he said, “Release me, for the pillar of dawn has come up, and the time that the angels on high praise the Lord of the World has arrived, and I am one of the angels who praise, and from the day when the world was created, my time has not come to praise except this time.” And he said, “I will not release you except you bless me.” (TgPsJ Gen 32:27)

Michael needs to be released at dawn so that he can return to his duty as part of the angelic choir. In the expansion of the Scriptural episode, Michael almost seems exasperated at Jacob’s request. Michael is in a hurry to return to heaven and needs to know Jacob’s name for the sole purpose of pronouncing a valid blessing, he then departs. There is a curiosity that the angel is named by the author and yet himself refuses to speak his name to Jacob. We now have two major details that carry over from the biblical text: a refusal to speak the name, and the name of the place being called “Face of God.” It is particularly noteworthy that TgPs-J identifies the angel as Michael not

⁴ Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 76–77. and throughout notes that an Angel can be the bearer of the Divine Name. The episode at Jabbok in particular demonstrates the power of a name and we ought to conclude that the refusal to speak the name, which is presumably Divine means that the bearer of the Name was himself Divine.

only because he is an archangel and often identified as protector of (the nation of) Israel, but also because Michael is the named angel most often identified as the hypostasized Divine Name in Jewish Literature.⁵ Michael became so associated with the Divine Name that the rabbis had to forbid praying to Michael and Gabriel (*Ber.* 13a; *Abod. Zar.* 42b).⁶

“Sariel” in Targum Neofiti

Neofiti identifies the angel who wrestles with Jacob as “Sariel, who was in the image of a man.” Sariel is an odd character in Angelology. Like the character of Michael in Pseudo-Jonathan’s rendition of the episode, Neofiti’s Sariel must leave at dawn so that he can return not only to sing in, but to lead the heavenly choir:

Then he said, “Release me, for (the time) has arrived, the pillar of dawn has come up. Behold, the time has arrived that the angels of the height give praise, and I am the head of those who praise [ריש למשבחיא].” (TgN Gen 32:27)

Smith notes in his commentary on *Prayer of Joseph* that the four archangels usually consists of Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. Though, when the list is altered it is usually Uriel whose name is dropped and replaced with Sariel, Phanuel, or Istrahel.⁷ This is likely due to the fact that Neofiti sees a parallel between שרר and ישראל, but it is noteworthy that both Sariel and Uriel are often identified as the Angel that tries to kill Moses in Exodus 4. As Smith points out, “these bits of evidence are obscure and fragmentary, but there is a striking “family of resemblance” among

⁵ Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 126-131 cf. especially 127, fn. 16. While some of the Jewish thought surrounding Michael as the bearer of the Divine Name appear in heretical, namely Gnostic circles, such interpretations “should be understood as founded upon earlier Jewish tradition that Michael was the possessor of the Divine Name which carried the creative power.”

⁶ As cited in Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 129.

⁷ Smith, “Prayer of Joseph”, 708-709.

these details, largely centered in Aramaic materials, which hint at a connection between the Uriel of the Prayer of Joseph and the figure Sariel-Phanuel-Suriel in Palestinian tradition.”⁸

Continuing the distancing from the MT, Targum Neofiti also alters the explanation of the name Israel: “Your name will not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel, for you have striven with angels from before the Lord (מִן־קִדְמָה יְיָ),⁹ and with men, and have overcome them.” While the name remains Peniel, Jacob has no longer seen God but instead has “seen angels from before the Lord face to face, and my life has been delivered.” It is noteworthy that the further from the original text, the stronger the de-anthropomorphisms have to become.¹⁰ Alongside this still remains the foothold that divine and angelic hypostases had on the formative Jewish mind. Thus, even allowing for a theological departure from their origins, these Targums still cannot help but speak in a way that allows for a complex monotheism.

We see not only a very early angelomorphic possibility of divine hypostasis, but also a later developing reaction against such a hypostatic theology. When contemporary theologies are taken into account (for example, Philo, the Gospel of John, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Apocalypse of John, Sifré to Deuteronomy, and Sifré to Numbers), a growing argument in favor of a personal and complex God, and implicitly an argument against a merely modalistic understanding of God begins to solidify not only as an orthodox position, but as an inescapable literary reality.

⁸ Smith, “Prayer of Joseph”, 709.

⁹ A common de-anthropomorphism in the Targums.

¹⁰ Somewhat as an aside, it is noteworthy that while the Logos theology of Philo and the so-called neo-platonic influences of early Christian literature allow for hypostatic relationships, it was actually the post-Christian Jewish authors that ran with the (actual) neo-platonic notion that Word/Memra could only be descriptors of a monad as opposed to persons of God.

Divine Angels and Prayer of Joseph

For the sake of comparison, *Prayer of Joseph* ought to be treated as a secondary piece of literature. Like most Second Temple documents, it was not intentionally written to usurp biblical thought, but as an interpretive aid for the more difficult passage of the Scriptures. The narrative stands as is, but a community's theology is known more through its secondary literature than its primary. Since Genesis contains no extensive discourses on the Law, there was no need for the Rabbis to write a Halakhic treatment on Genesis.¹¹

The presence—and explicit naming—of Uriel as an angel is noteworthy, especially given that Neofiti names Sariel (Uriel) as the opponent of Jacob. But the most shocking notion of the document is its bluntness and its brevity. Noting a “community and a continuity of tradition” with Philo's *Logos*, the rabbis' Michael, the mystics' Metatron, and the Christians' Jesus, Smith identifies that the titles ascribed to Jacob-Israel, while initially shocking, are not altogether unknown to the monotheistic world. Noteworthy especially is that while Angel Jacob is identified in Manichaean circles, in the *Prayer of Joseph* there is a singular character whose Angelic (Divine?) name is Israel and whose human name is Jacob.¹²

Archangel Israel is not only greater than Abraham and Isaac, but he is even above Uriel who—if identified with Sariel—is the chief of the angelic choir.¹³ Israel reminds Uriel that he is to be counted eighth after him. Israel is the first minister before the face of God and he called upon God by the inextinguishable name. In this brief document we have a description of an angel who is not only powerful, but is the firstborn of every living thing to whom God gives life. And

¹¹ As opposed to *Sifré to Numbers* or *Sifré to Deuteronomy*.

¹² Smith, *Map is Not Territory*, 31-32, especially fn. 14 for a bibliography of Manichean treatments of Angelology.

¹³ It is, somewhat humorous that if engaging with proto-Targum Neofiti or a similar school of thought, the author of *Prayer of Joseph* corrects the false etymology and explains exactly what Israel means, that man sees God.

amidst all of these powerful and majestic titles is still yet a minister from before the face of God. In his ministering to God he boldly calls upon God by the inextinguishable name (ὄνομα ἄσβεστος).

Perhaps the most striking parallel between all the texts analyzed above is the concept of singing. Both Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan mention that the angel has to return so that he can sing, although they do not agree which angel must do this task. Smith points out that, in some Jewish mystical literature, the earthly Israel chanting the *Kedusha* (Trisagion/Sanctus) becomes personified in a heavenly Israel.¹⁴ The heavenly choir does not begin until the earthly Israel begins singing it below, and is led by an angel named Israel who stands in the midst of heaven.¹⁵

Here we see a bifurcation between heavenly and earthly in one man, clearly distinguished by how he is called. “I, Jacob, who is speaking to you, am also Israel, and angel of God and a ruling Spirit . . . But I, Jacob, *who men call Jacob but whose name is Israel* am he who God called Israel.” This same Jacob-Israel descended to earth, he came down from heaven, and tabernacled among men – that is to say, he became man. Yes, Jacob came after Abraham, but before Abraham was Israel. This, and other extra-canonical angelophanies, even if they exist only as literary descriptions and not as historical events, point to something greater. Just as Israel was the πρωτόγονος, Jesus was the μονογενής. Again, Neusner:

A comparison here of incarnation and of the union of humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ, as Christians read matters, would begin with a simple thesis: For Christianity incarnation is limited to a single case; the species is the genus, so to speak. In the passage before us, by contrast, no one incarnation of God completes the matter. But this is only a suggestion.¹⁶

¹⁴ Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 35. It is also worth noting that in some traditions this heavenly Israel is identified as Metatron or Michael.

¹⁵ Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 36 “The antiquity and distribution of this tradition has recently been unexpectedly confirmed by the Coptic Codex II from Nag-Hammadi which presents a description of the heavenly throne. In this Merkavah text there stands, amidst Cherubim and Seraphim, near to Sabaoth, “a firstborn whose name is Israel, the man who sees God.”

¹⁶ Neusner, *Incarnation of God*, 16, fn. 7

In *Prayer of Joseph*, species and genus are most certainly not one and the same in terms of incarnation. The Jewish literature of the Second Temple Period challenges the Christian notion that incarnation is limited to a one-time event in the person of Jesus. Nonetheless, it does raise questions concerning the unity of the Divine in that same Second Temple Period.

Is the Lord One in Judaism?

For Jewish thinkers in the first century, God is capable of taking on human form. This does not carry with it a systematized theology of what it means that God can ‘incarnate.’ Even within Christian thought, it would take hundreds of years to formulate a clear and concise Christology, and arguably it was not until the Reformation that a precise description of what it meant that divine and human attributes were communicated was articulated in a systematic way. What we are left with, at least in *Sifré to Numbers* and *Sifré to Deuteronomy*, are contemporaneous documents that have a varied understanding of God.

So too, texts like the Prayer of Joseph and its accompanying history of interpretation demonstrate that some non-Christian Jews affirmed a very complex understanding of monotheism by testifying about a figure closely linked to YHWH becoming enfleshed while they continued worshipping YHWH by way of choral singing. The reception history of Genesis 3, especially in Targum Neofiti, show that there may have been an understanding among first century readers of Genesis that the Messiah himself was meant to be the Son of YHWH.

There were Jewish contemporaries of John and Paul who believed that God could be man. While it is possible that many of these thinkers ultimately converted to Christianity, that there

was a teaching of an incarnate God into the rabbinic period shows that some non-Christian Jews held fast not only to the possibility, but even the reality of a God taking on human flesh.

Complex Monotheism as a Parting of the Ways

If, then, concepts of incarnation and a singular God consisting of multiple hypostases is not uniquely Christian, how then can the incarnation of God serve as a parting of the ways? To echo Boyarin, if the distinguishing factor between Jews and Christians is the man Jesus, then all we are left with is a tautology.¹⁷ There is, however, some truth in this tautology. Some Jews held to a doctrine of incarnation; the notion that God could be “incarnate” with humans, in a philosophical sense. Early Christians believed that God had become incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and was consubstantial with man to the point of being born, and even dying. Several Jewish doctrines of incarnation were actualized at different points in the story of Israel, but the God who makes himself visible in the forms of Angels, or sometimes prophets, did not qualify the divine persons as “Messiahs,” nor did it directly challenge the strictly held monotheism of Judaism. Incarnation, as a doctrine, existed to inform Jewish hearers of the consubstantiality of God and man. The earliest Christian writers sought to tell the story of incarnation, not as potential or as dogmatic truth, but as an actual event in the person of Jesus. While both Christianity and Judaism allow for a complex monotheism—and possibly a divine messiah—it was Christians alone who confessed that the potential had been realized. For John and Paul, the notion of an incarnate God was steeped in soteriological implications. If their Christology could be isolated, it may properly be called “Jewish,” but the story of God becoming man *in Jesus of Nazareth* served as a bridge too far for non-Christian Jews and was a major catalyst in the eventual parting of the ways

¹⁷ Boyarin, “Semantic Differences; or, ‘Judaism’/‘Christianity,’” in Becker and Yoshiko Reed, *The Ways That Never Parted*, 65.

Jesus, so as to part ways between himself and the Ἰουδαῖοι, quotes the Scriptures, “You are Gods” (John 10:34; Ps. 82:6). John understands the Psalm to allow for a complex understanding of monotheism as well as—in some sense of the word—divinization. If John is invoking the same sort of “incarnation” that Neusner identified in *Sifre to Deuteronomy* and *Sifre to Numbers*, then Jesus is in fact speaking in a way that is not altogether unfamiliar to Ἰουδαῖοι. It is their refusal to see Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, that demonstrates their inability to read the Scriptures properly (John 5:39). Complex monotheism, as a concept likely did not part ways, as there may have been a shared understanding of a complex and even potentially incarnate God. That those doctrines were realized in Jesus made for two radically different stories.