

# Christology and Jewish–Christian Dialogue

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**Abstract:** It is generally assumed that Christian confessions concerning the person and nature of Jesus Christ represent an irreconcilable divide between Judaism and Christianity. On the surface, a cursory examination of Christian religious language would appear to confirm this assumption. However, given that Christianity arose out of the religious worldview of First Century Judaism, a deeper examination shows that most Christian Christological beliefs have parallels in Judaism and offer an opportunity for greater connection than for division. This paper explores key Christian Christological concepts and analyzes their compatibility or incompatibility with Jewish thought. This exploration reveals two religions that have far more in common, even on questions of Christology, than is generally assumed.

**Keywords:** Christianity; Judaism; Christology; Messiah; Son of God; incarnation; theology

## 1. Introduction

It has been said that Judaism and Christianity share a dirty little secret: Jesus was a Jew.

Indeed, Jesus was born a Jew, lived a Jew, and died a Jewish pilgrim to Jerusalem. [1] Given this, it is a great irony that the Jewish founder of the Christian faith, who should have been “a bridge of reconciliation between Israel and the world of the nations,” [2] has instead been a point of division and bitter contention.

In the nearly two thousand years since Jesus’ earthly ministry, the church and synagogue have gone their separate ways, often belying the fact that the two share a common origin. How is it that a church founded upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth should have such a hostile relationship with the people out of whom Jesus came?

## 2. The Problem of History

Christian polemic against the Jewish people begins in the developing Gospel narratives. From Mark to Matthew to Luke to John, there is an increasing focus on the Jewish culpability for the crucifixion of Jesus. This polemic continued in many of the writings of the church fathers, who espoused a supersessionist theology that claimed the church had superseded Israel as the beneficiary of God’s promises and God’s blessings.

As Christianity sought to claim primacy over the Jewish tradition, it began to develop theologies that made it very difficult for Jews to accept Christian faith. These emerging theologies can be seen in the earliest Second Testament<sup>1</sup> writings—the Pauline Epistles, which contain evidence that even in the very early church, Jesus was being worshipped or at least venerated. [3] These theological developments represented a sudden and significant shift in character from customary Jewish devotion, even though the cultic veneration of Jesus grew out of Jewish monotheism. As one scholar notes: “the devotional attention Jews characteristically reserved for God now included the risen Christ.” [3]

Much of this early theological development was still within the bounds of Jewish thought. For example, Paul’s writing referring to Jesus as “Lord” and attributing to him the role of Divine Wisdom stretched Jewish language and categories, but it still found its place within the Jewish understanding of God. [3] This “augmented monotheism” arose from Jewish interest in and reverence for heavenly figures in the Second Temple



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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the terms “First Testament” and “Second Testament” will be used in place of the customary “Old Testament” and “New Testament.”

period.<sup>2</sup> [3] Nevertheless, it set the church on a trajectory that would have profound theological consequences:

(1) Those who followed Jesus experienced God in their lives; in encountering the human being Jesus, they also encountered the reality of the one true God, the God whom Jesus addressed as “Father;” (2) In reflecting on their experience, they concluded that through Jesus of Nazareth, the one true God had been revealing Godself to them; (3) Thus, the human Jesus was God’s self-communication, self-revelation—God’s own Word; (4) If God truly is as God reveals God’s own self to be, then Jesus is identical with God’s eternal self-communication, with God’s Word. [3,4]

### 2.1. Christian Theological Development

Although this development from Paul’s letters to later church doctrine followed a simple logic, the movement from the Road to Damascus to the Council at Nicea would ultimately prove disruptive for Jewish–Christian dialogue. Before the fourth century C.E., Christians and Jews could be said to agree on the identity and knowable characteristics of God but to differ about Jesus’ messiahship and the extent of his divinity. [5] However, after the Nicene Creed (See, A.1) and the Cappadocian formulation, this was no longer the case, and it appeared that Christianity had made a decisive break from its parent faith. [5] It did not help the cause of Jewish–Christian relations that the champions of the theology espoused at Nicea—Athanasius and Constantine—held Judaism in very low regard; Athanasius considered it “an offensive, anti-Christian faith,” and Constantine detested it. [5]

Theological innovation combined with outright hostility among church leaders toward Judaism contributed to the breakdown in communication between church and synagogue that has only been re-established in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Over the two millennia that the church and synagogue have been separated, Christian understandings of Jesus Christ have contributed to the infliction of much pain in the Jewish community, and various formulations of Christology have led to the mistreatment and persecution of Jews. [6]

### 2.2. Jewish Responses

The hostility over the Jewish–Christian divide was not limited to the Christian side. Most classical Jewish theological teachings express a negative view of Jesus, often referring to him as **אֱלֹהֵי הָאִישׁ** *otoh ha-ish*, a derogatory term for “that man.” [6] In effect, Jewish thinkers excommunicated Jesus from the Jewish faith as an apostate who subverted Judaism and as a false messiah. [6] The presentation of Jesus in the Talmud is far from flattering and were it to be read by unsuspecting Christians, it would cause great consternation. [7] In fact, it became customary in some later Jewish writings to spell Jesus’ name not as **יֵשׁוּעַ** *Yeshua*, but **יֵשׁוּ** *Yeshu*, which resembled the Rabbinic abbreviation **יֵשׁוּ** short for **יְמַח שְׁמוֹ וְזִכְרוֹ** *Y’makh sh’mo v’zichro*: “May his name and memory be blotted out.”

Additionally, we can glimpse a Jewish response to Christian theology in other theological and liturgical developments. At the conclusion of the Orthodox Jewish daily morning service is a recitation of Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith, among which are the following affirmations:

- “I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be his name, is a Unity, and that there is no unity in any manner like unto his, and that he alone is our God, who was, is, and will be.”
- “I believe with perfect faith that to the Creator, blessed be his name, and to him alone, it is right to pray and that it is not right to pray to any being besides him.”

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., “Lady Wisdom” of Proverbs 8:22-31; the Logos of Philo of Alexandria; and Moses and Enoch, as exalted “agents of God.”

<sup>3</sup> The disputations that occurred in the Middle Ages cannot count toward dialogue in this regard.

- “I believe with perfect faith that this Law will not be changed and that there will never be any other law from the Creator, blessed be his name.” [8]

These affirmations are a response to particular Christian doctrines and practices, namely, the Trinity, the practice of praying to Christ, and Christian rejection of the Jewish law, respectively.

### 2.3. *The resultant impasse*

Is this theological impasse permanent? Has the trajectory Christian theology has taken brought us too far from the Jewish faith to make any meaningful dialogue possible? Is there any way to stay faithful to Christian tradition and teaching and move beyond the sins of supersessionism and anti-Judaism?

Many have concluded that to move beyond supersessionism, the church must retreat from its classic Christological teaching.<sup>4</sup> [9] Others have steadfastly maintained that the Christological claims essential for Christian identity can be maintained while conquering supersessionism and triumphalism. [10]

### 2.4. *Paper Outline*

Given the long history of Christian anti-Semitism, the hostility with which the church has treated the synagogue, and the responses elicited in the Jewish community, we—Jew and Christian alike—are required to ask, along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” Can we come to understandings that heal rather than divide?

The remainder of this paper will explore the various issues of Christology with an eye toward dialogue between the Church and Synagogue, examining possibilities for new, shared understandings between both communities to overcome the historic sins of Christian anti-Semitism and inter-religious intolerance. In the following sections, I will explore the concepts of Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, and Incarnation, before discussing possible common ground and making conclusions.

## 3. Issues in Christology

### 3.1. *Messiah*

When Christians utter the words “Jesus Christ,” they speak more than the name of the founder of their faith. They are making a confession of faith. For Christ (Greek Χριστός *Christos*) means “the anointed one” and is a translation of the Hebrew מָשִׁיחַ *Mashiah*, which we know as “messiah.” Thus, the name “Jesus Christ” is a confession of Jesus as the Messiah. But what does it mean to confess Jesus as Messiah? The title is not without context.

The term *messiah*, as mentioned above, means “the anointed one” and initially was a signifier of royal power since, unlike the kings of Europe, the kings of Israel and Judah were anointed with oil by a prophet. Thus, referring to someone as the “LORD’S anointed” conveyed no more than an affirmation of that person’s royal authority.

However, the meaning of the term *messiah* would change over the centuries and develop certain expectations associated with it. Those expectations arose from particular experiences in Jewish history and concrete experiences of suffering and exile. As a result, the expectations around the term *messiah* were also concrete and grounded in real-world hopes and needs. In Judaism to this day, the fundamental element of the messianic vision has remained in a concrete redemption and was never spiritualized away. [11] The salvation of the Messiah is in the here and now, fulfilling the vision of Isaiah 2:4 that “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” Until peace, justice, and compassion reign, the Kingdom of God is, in the Jewish view, a future reality yet to come. [6]

This real-world messianic expectation is the basis for the Jewish “no” to the Messiahship of Jesus. As theologian Jürgen Moltmann points out, the Jewish “no” is not the

<sup>4</sup> Jenson, himself, rejects the proposition that the church must abandon its traditional Christology to conquer supersessionism.

result of unwillingness or hard-hearted defiance toward Christian claims; instead, it is because Jews, in Martin Buber's words, "are not able to believe this." [12] Buber, who had a profound respect for Jesus, made the point clearly: "We know more deeply, more truly, that world history has not been turned upside down to its very foundations—that the world is not yet redeemed. We sense its unredeemedness." [12] Because of this, Jews cannot accept Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah as Christians proclaim.<sup>5</sup>

This view is closer to Christian thought than we might think at first. Indeed, honesty requires admitting that the Christian proclamation of Jesus as Messiah rests not only on what Jesus has done—reconciling God and humanity through the resurrection—but also on what Jesus *will* do: establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The Christian "yes" to Jesus Christ is not a finished or complete "yes"—it is open for the messianic future; it is an eschatologically anticipatory and provisional "yes." [12] Despite the Christian "yes" to the messiahship of Jesus, Christians and Jews find themselves "partners in waiting" for the coming Kingdom of God, [13] a fact evidenced by the continuing Christian hope voiced in the ancient prayers: *Maranatha* ("Come, Lord") and "thy kingdom come."

### 3.2. Son of Man

The Son of Man is an end-times figure belonging to Jewish apocalyptic thought and may or may not have originated with the hopes for a Davidic Messiah. [12] The Son of Man is seen most clearly in the Book of Daniel and the Apocryphal Book of I Enoch. Unlike the human, royal deliverer that the Messiah is often portrayed to be, the Son of Man is portrayed as a cosmic figure in human form. Daniel 7:13 (see, Appendix B) describes this figure as one *כְּבָר אִנָּשׁ k'bar enash* "like a son of humanity," meaning "like a human being." [14] In later tradition, hopes for the Messiah and the Son of Man fused into a single expectation. [12]

Concepts of the Messiah and the Son of Man were certainly linked in Christian understandings of Jesus from the very beginning. The term "Son of Man" occurs 85 times in the Second Testament, 82 of which are in the Gospels. It is Jesus' most used self-identification, and the Gospels link it to the concept of Messiah:

But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'" (Mark 14:61-2)

Here, the Son of Man figure of Jesus' self-confession is very much like the apocalyptic figure from Daniel and I Enoch.

Jürgen Moltmann maintains that the Christological figures of Messiah and Son of Man are united—along with the figures of priest and prophet—in the coming of the Word in Jesus. [12] By linking these two figures, Moltmann connects Christology with eschatology, linking Israel's particular hope for restoration brought by the Messiah with the restoration of the entire cosmos at the coming of the Son of Man. Moltmann argues that combining these two eschatological hopes "corresponds to the link between the creation of mankind and Israel's particular history of the promise." [12]

There is a necessary balance in linking the particular hope of Israel with the universal hope of the whole world. Focusing on the Son of Man apocalyptic would be a universalizing and "disastrous dissolution" of Israel, whereas transforming the universal expectation of the Son of Man into Israel's messianic expectation would put an "excessive and destructive strain" on Israel. [12] Both are required to satisfy Israel's and the Nations' hope and bring about the "coming of God himself." [12] Thus, in one figure is united the particular and the universal.

<sup>5</sup> Sherwin, in his article "A New Jewish View of Jesus" proposes that Jews consider Jesus a Jewish messiah, a "Messiah Son of Joseph," a preparatory figure, rather than the final "Messiah Son of David." While such a demotion would probably not be satisfactory for most Christians, those considerations are secondary for Sherwin to those of Jewish theology.

Is Jesus this figure? The answer to that question is still a matter of faith for Christians since the definitive proof—the coming of the Kingdom of God—has not yet arrived in its fullness. Christians affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of Man because we have faith that he is the Messiah, and for Christians, the two individuals are inextricably linked. For Jews, who have not come to the same conclusion about Jesus' Messiahship, the determination as to whether Jesus is the Son of Man is, at best, an open question that cannot be answered in the course of ordinary history.

### 3.3. Son of God

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." So begins the Gospel account according to St. Mark.<sup>6</sup> From the earliest years of the Christian movement, Jesus has been proclaimed not only as Christ/Messiah but as the Son of God. The term *Son of God* occurs no less than 39 times in the Second Testament. As was the case with the word Messiah, it is not a term without context.

In Israel's understanding, the one anointed with God's Spirit is also called a "Son of God."<sup>7</sup> The title was not limited to a given human being, however; Israel saw itself as God's son: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1). Moreover, Israel's use of the term in the First Testament did not imply any supernatural identity but a special relationship and intimacy. The term did not describe a metaphysical category but a relational one.<sup>8</sup> This understanding continues in Jewish thought, and we can see it in Israeli Professor Pinchas Lapide's belief that Jesus was one of several "sons of God" as in the Hebrew tradition. "But," he continues, "an 'only begotten Son of God' I do not know." [15]

However, a Christology defined by special relationship is not what Christians mean when they confess Jesus as the "Son of God," however long the idea has been around in Judaism.<sup>9</sup> When Christians confess that Jesus is the Son of God, they are confessing something very much more. Christian belief confesses faith in a Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—a God known in three persons, whose nature is defined by the love among the Father, Son, and Spirit. (See, Figure A1) When Christians proclaim Jesus as the Son of God, they do not mean that he is a demi-god or the human offspring of a divine-human encounter. They mean that he is a manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity; he is the Incarnate Word of God, through whom "All things came into being... and without him not one thing came into being." (John 1:3).

#### 3.3.1. The Word of God

As strange as these ideas are for most Jews (and a fair number of Christians!), they are not wholly alien to Jewish understandings of God. Jews, like Christians, believe in the God of Israel, who "created the universe through His word." [16] According to the Biblical narratives, that creation also saw the *רוח אֱלֹהִים ruach Elohim* "spirit/breath of God" hovering over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:2) The presence of the creating "word" alongside God's "spirit" or "breath" is compatible with Moltmann's formulation that God's creative activity represents a unity of breath (*רוח ruach*) and voice (*דבר davar* "word"): "all are called to life through God's Spirit and Word." [17]

This unity of word and breath is visible in the Hebrew Scriptures, notably in the Psalms: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth." (Ps. 33:6). Indeed, Judaism has long affirmed the idea that God creates

<sup>6</sup> Some of the more ancient manuscripts, including the Sinaiticus, lack the phrase *υιους θεου hyios theou* "son of God."

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Psalm 2:7 "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'"

<sup>8</sup> This element of the word "son" can be clearly seen in Hebrew scripture in the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). Isaac is referred to as *בן ben* "son" throughout until it is time for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, at which point he becomes *נער na'ar* "the boy," signifying a distancing between the two.

<sup>9</sup> To be sure, this relational Christology has always occupied a minority position in the Christian tradition, from Arius to the Ebionites to the Liberal Protestants of our own day.



all life with God's Word and animates all life with God's Spirit. Moreover, the Word and Spirit are understood to be of God in God's self. In the words of one Jewish theologian: "The Jewish concept of God's being author of the divine speech is analogous in Trinitarian theology to the Father's begetting his divine Son." [16] Both concepts see God giving birth to his Word.

### 3.3.2. The Suffering God

The identification of Jesus as the Son of God might cause some observers to wonder how it is that God could suffer, given Jesus' suffering and torment on the cross. However, the concept of the suffering God is not alien to Judaism.

The Jewish tradition attests to a God who suffers with his creation. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Exodus 3:7:

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their suffering."

In Hebrew, the verb יָדָע *yada* "to know" implies more than intellectual cognition; it implies knowledge by experience.<sup>10</sup> God does not coldly and rationally understand human suffering—God experiences it and suffers with afflicted humanity. This knowledge works both ways. We can only know God by encountering and experiencing God. Still, at the same time, the "experience of God" also points toward God's experience of us. [18]

Furthermore, the idea that God suffers with humanity is tied directly to the affirmation that God is love. Because of God's willingness to love, God renounces his impassability and becomes able to suffer. [17] Indeed, as anyone who has ever loved can attest, suffering comes with the experience.

In all of the preceding theology, there is little a Jew could find to argue with. Instead, the biggest problem with the Christian affirmation of the Trinity is not that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, nor that God suffers with God's people. The biggest problem is that the Son of God, the Eternal Word of God, should become incarnate in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth.

### 3.4. Incarnation

Michael Wyschogrod, a noted Jewish scholar, has observed that the doctrine of the Incarnation is "undoubtedly the most difficult in the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity." [19] Indeed, Jews willing to grant that God is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—akin to the doctrine of the Trinity—will draw the line at the notion that God could become "enfleshed" in a particular human being. But is Incarnation so wholly opposite from the God of the Hebrew Bible?

Taken to its logical extreme, the very opposite of an incarnate God—an entirely spiritual, non-corporeal God, a God without spatial location—is also inimical to the God of Biblical faith. As Wyschogrod notes,

Once we understand that this is the kind of God who is the extreme opposite of the incarnated God, we must conclude that this extreme opposite of the incarnated God is also not the God of the Hebrew Bible. The God of the Hebrew Bible does have spatial location. He walks in the Garden of Eden. He has a dwelling place in the world. The whole history of the tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem is a history of a concept of a home for God in the world, a dwelling place for God. [19]

Indeed, to Wyschogrod's point, how else could we make sense of the understanding preserved in a statement like "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever" (2 Kings. 21:7) or in many such similar statements throughout the First Testament? The God of the Hebrew Bible is not removed

<sup>10</sup> Indeed when Adam "knows" his wife, he experiences her in the most intimate fashion.

from the physical world. Instead, the God of Biblical faith walks “in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen. 3:8), appears to Abraham and eats with him (Gen. 18:1), wrestles with Jacob (Gen. 32:24, 30), and appears to Moses (Ex. 24:9-11). [13] This presentation of God is not limited to the Hebrew Bible; it is found in subsequent Rabbinic literature and Jewish tradition, which describes the *שכינה* *Shekhinah* as the Divine Presence of God himself, present at a particular place and at a particular time. [17] Although it is by no means as central to such faith as it is in the Christian context, the idea of God taking human form is not alien to the Jewish faith. [13]

As part of Israel’s election, God had chosen to dwell in Israel. In a very real sense, God was already incarnate in the people Israel. As a Jew, Jesus would be part of the very people in whom God had decided to dwell. [19] In Judaism, God’s incarnation is expansive.

In contrast, the church has traditionally concentrated “all of the incarnations of God into the people of Israel in one Jew, Jesus of Nazareth.” [19] The church has stated that it has “known that its physical bond with God is through a Jew and that the killing of that Jew constituted a central event in the relation between God and humanity.” [19] The problem, Wyschogrod points out, is the “severing of this Jew from his people.” [19] It is not troublesome from a Jewish point of view that the world might come to experience the God of Israel through the Jew Jesus of Nazareth; the idea of a Jesus outside of his Jewish context, however, is.

#### 3.4.1. Affirming the Incarnation

Is it realistic to expect Jews to embrace the incarnation, even in this limited fashion? Perhaps, perhaps not. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is for Jews to embrace the possibility of the truth of Christian claims—for the sake of the gentile nations. After all, if God is the author of the Christian faith and the Jewish, as many Jewish teachers have maintained, the question must be asked: “Would God act in such a way as to bring the nations to know God employing fraudulent claims?”<sup>11</sup> [13] Through this lens, Jews could re-evaluate the truth of Christian claims without altering the faith and practice of Judaism. Doing so could allow the Jewish community to see God’s purposes and perhaps even God’s miraculous action in Christianity.

### 4. Common Ground

In many ways, it is only possible to have meaningful, constructive Jewish–Christian dialogue by addressing the questions of Christology. Moltmann notes:

“[At] the centre of all Jewish–Christian dialogue is the inexorable messianic question: ‘Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ The messianic hope leads us to Jesus, but it also hinders Jews from seeing Jesus as the expected messiah who has already come.” [12]

Moltmann identifies the tension between the Christian “yes” and the Jewish “no.” He gives great deference to Buber’s assertion that Jews are incapable of believing in Jesus as the messiah because the brokenness of the world testifies as to its unredeemed character (See, 3.1, above). Moltmann beautifully resolves this tension by stating:

“Anyone who confesses Jesus as ‘the Christ of God’ is recognizing the Christ-in-his-becoming, the Christ in the way, the Christ in the movement of God’s eschatological history; and that person enters upon this way of Christ in the discipleship of Jesus.” [12]

Jesus is, in the tension between the Jewish “no” and Christian “yes,” a saving figure for each for the sake of the other. As Israel’s Messiah, Jesus becomes the savior of the gentiles. In Jesus, the nations experience all of Israel’s salvation history. Indirectly, in Jesus, Israel encounters the savior of the nations, the one who brings the peoples of the earth to

<sup>11</sup> Kogan’s thesis is that while Jews need not affirm Christian claims as true, they no longer need to insist on their falsity.

the knowledge of the God of Israel. [12] With this understanding, while still maintaining its Jewish “no,” Israel can begin to look at Christianity as the *praeparatio messianica*, the messianic preparation, of the nations and recognize in it Israel’s own hope for the messiah now brought to the world. [12]

Such a reinterpretation would be a major development from the Jewish side in its relationship with Christianity and would necessitate that Christianity renew and reexamine its theology of Israel in return.[12]

#### 4.1. The Servant

I want to examine one possibility. For centuries, the Servant Songs of the Book of Isaiah have informed Christian understandings of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> In these prophetic passages, we find a description of the Servant of God, who suffers redemptively for the people:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are  
healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

These passages have become so identified with Jesus that they suggest the carpenter of Nazareth even outside the Christian community.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is difficult for most people to read these verses and not hear strains of Händel’s *Messiah* playing in the background. But Biblical scholarship and liberal Christians have long acknowledged that the subject of Isaiah’s prophecy is not an individual but Israel as a whole. In the commentary on Isaiah from the *New Revised Standard Version*, of these songs, the reader is told, “The position taken here is that the songs should be read in context and that the servant is the nation Israel. . . The language point to the identification of Israel as the servant (41.1-8; 44.1-2; 44.21).” [20] Noted Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann notes:

Here it is enough to assume, as is generally the case, that “my servant” is the people Israel. That appellation draws upon the entire memory of ancient Israel that affirms that Israel is related to Yahweh as a servant to master (king) and that the life of Israel consists in obedience to the will and command and purpose of the king.” [21]

The question of the Suffering Servant’s identity echoes an age-old debate: is God’s chosen Israel or Jesus (and through him, the church)? This question, however, is a false dichotomy. It is like asking, “Is God’s presence in Jerusalem or the Temple?” The answer is: yes, both!

Michael Wyschogrod argues that Christianity is “the gathering of peoples around the people of Israel.” [19] Through the person of the Jew Jesus, he reasons, the nations come to know Israel and Israel’s God. St. Paul would agree. When Paul states that the mission to the nations is “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in” (Rom. 11.25), we might very well ask, “Come in where?” The only logical answer from Paul’s writings is: into the covenant God has established with Israel. The blessing that Christians claim through Jesus is centered around Israel.

In the Servant Songs of the Book of Isaiah, we encounter a servant who suffers for the sake of the nations. As Moltmann notes, the identity of the Servant of God is left open—perhaps deliberately—in the Isaiah text, requiring us to ask the question continually. [12] I propose that both Israel and Jesus are the Suffering Servant, that Jesus, in

<sup>12</sup> The Servant Songs are found at Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12.

<sup>13</sup> In an interfaith Biblical discussion group I led, one of the Jewish students, upon reading these passages, remarked, “That does sound like Jesus!”



addition to the other Christological titles discussed so far, is the Personification of Israel to the world.

Jewish thinkers have long recognized the redemptive pattern of Israel's suffering in the life of Jesus. Marc Chagall's painting, "White Crucifixion," superimposes the icon of the crucified Christ, loins wrapped in a blue and white *tallith*, or prayer shawl, over a background containing images of pogroms, burning synagogues, and fleeing Jews—emphasizing the parallels between the experiences of Jesus and his people Israel. [13]

In Jesus, then, the nations experience Israel and, in so doing, come to know Israel's faith and the Father's love toward his Son. Through Christ, the nations are brought into the faith of Israel, into a covenant relationship with Israel's God.

## 5. Conclusion

Christians and Jews can be in dialogue without having to betray the fundamental tenets of their respective faiths. To require as much would be to remove the essential characteristics of each religion.

For Jews, the confession that God is One is not simply custom or tradition; it is essential for the very self-identity of the people Israel. It is that which distinguished them from among the nations and which has served as a great gift to the human family.

Likewise, whatever the historical processes that yielded it, Christian understandings of the Triune God cannot be discarded for the sake of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. The confession of the Triune God comes directly out of the Christian experience, responding to the need to comprehend the testimony of the history of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The history of Jesus the Son cannot be grasped except as part of the history of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. [18] Further, for the Christian, the doctrine of the Trinity carries with it not simply doctrinal consequences but ethical and social as well, as Christians contemplate the significance of God's passion and indwelling with humanity. [18]

Christians and Jews can be in more than simply dialogue; they can be in authentic partnership for the Kingdom of God. To create this partnership, Christians and Jews must move on both sides, but not so far as to invalidate the fundamentals of each community's faith.

For its part, the church must continue to affirm the ongoing covenantal relationship between God and Israel. The church must put behind it the evils of supersessionism and all the attendant horrors it brings and affirm with St. Paul that "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable." The church must understand that asserting an ongoing covenant with Israel does not undermine the church's claim to uniqueness—God is capable of accomplishing God's purposes in various ways simultaneously. Most importantly, the church must continue to affirm Jesus of Nazareth not only as the Son of God and Son of Man but as a pious and faithful Son of Israel. We can no longer afford to allow the Jewishness of Jesus to be our "dirty little secret." As Sherwin writes: "It is time for Christians to accept Jesus as a Jew." [6]

For its part, once the church has made it clear that Judaism's continued existence is not a contradiction to the Christian message, the synagogue can begin to acknowledge that Christianity may be a part of God's divine plan for the redemption of the world.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it has long been noted in Jewish thinking that, far from being an idolatrous religion, Christianity has helped to fulfill Malachi's prophetic words, "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations." (Mal. 1:11) [13] This necessitates that as Christianity comes to accept Jesus' Jewishness, Judaism must follow by reclaiming Jesus as a "legitimate and honored member of the Jewish people—as a brother."<sup>15</sup> [6]

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, as long ago as the middle ages, Jewish thinkers were acknowledging a role from Christianity and Islam in the divine plan for human redemption. See, [6]. One wonders at the ability of a persecuted minority faith to allow for the participation in God's plan by two religions that were at that very moment preaching Judaism's obsolescence.

<sup>15</sup> Sherwin quotes Rabbi Leo Baeck, the most important Jewish leader in Nazi Germany, that in beholding Jesus: "we behold a man who is Jewish in every feature and trait of his character, manifesting in every particular what

As to the person of Jesus, Judaism might even acknowledge that God was present in this person in some unique way, as he is in the people Israel: just as God was present in all the land of Israel, but especially so in the Temple and in the Holy of Holies, so too might God be “incarnate” in Israel, and especially so in Jesus of Nazareth, through whom the nations are evangelized to the God of Israel. This is not to say that Jews and Christians will conceive of God’s presence in Jesus in the same manner—Christian Trinitarianism and Jewish Strict Monotheism will be in dialogue for a long time exploring this issue.

But if both communities can see themselves as part of the broader community of faith, with Jesus as God’s chosen bridge between Jew and Gentile, then perhaps both communities can be about the work of the Kingdom together, witnessing to all of creation. And in doing the work of the Kingdom, we—Jew and Christian—can await the fulfillment of that Kingdom and the coming of our long-awaited Messiah as “partners in waiting” together.

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### Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

C.E.	Common Era or Christian Era (~ AD)
Gen.	Genesis
Mal.	Malachi
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

### Appendix A. The Nicene Creed

#### *Appendix A.1. First Council of Nicea, 325 CE*

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father (the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,) Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;

By whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

But those who say: ‘There was a time when he was not;’ and ‘He was not before he was made;’ and ‘He was made out of nothing,’ or ‘He is of another substance’ or ‘essence,’ or ‘The Son of God is created,’ or ‘changeable,’ or ‘alterable’— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

#### *Appendix A.2. First Council of Constantinople, 383 CE*

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (æons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

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is pure and good in Judaism. This man could have developed as he came to be only on the soil of Judaism; and only on this soil, too, could he find his disciples and followers as they were. Here alone, in this Jewish sphere, in this Jewish atmosphere... could this man live his life and meet his death—a Jew among Jews.”

who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

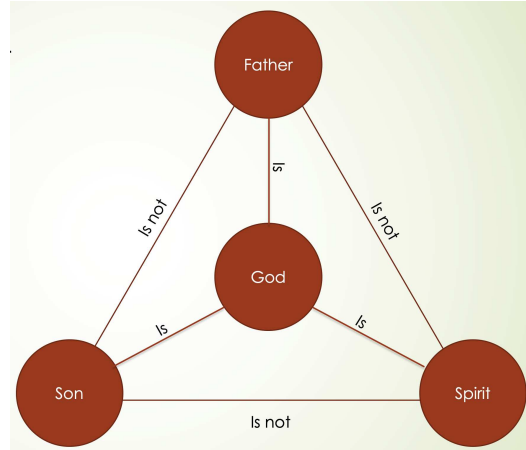
In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

### Appendix B. Daniel 7:13–14 (NRSV)

As I watched in the night visions,  
I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.  
And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.  
To him was given dominion and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away,  
and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

### Appendix C. The Trinity

#### Appendix C.1. The Relationship Among the Persons of the Trinity



**Figure A1.** A traditional representation of the Trinity. The three persons of the Godhead all share in divinity, represented by lines connecting them to the word *God* labeled “Is.” However, each person is distinct, represented by the lines connecting them to each other, labeled with the words “Is not.” In Christian understanding, the Son is also known as the Word.

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