

Early Christian Binitarianism: the Father and the Holy Spirit

The word “binitarian” is typically used by scholars and theologians as a contrast to a trinitarian theology: a theology of “two” in God rather than a theology of “three”. I believe that it is accurate to offer the judgment that most commonly when someone speaks of a Christian “binitarian” theology the “two” in God are the Father and the Son. In the classic scholarly articulations of binitarianism, the Holy Spirit is collapsed into the person of the Son, either by stressing the possessive genitive – the spirit *of* the Son - or by offering a kind of “spirit Christology,” in which “spirit” refers to the divine in Christ.

As the title of this article suggests, I am going to argue something slightly different. However provocative or hyperbolic the title may seem my fundamental thesis has its beginning in the close reading of a text – in this case, Justin’s *Dialogue With Trypho*. The *Dialogue* consists predominately of an extended series of exegetical arguments by Justin showing that Jesus does indeed fit the descriptions of the Messiah found in the books of the Prophets. Justin gets Trypho to agree that there are two aspects of the Messiah: the triumphant and the suffering. Once Trypho agrees to this Justin can then identify the “suffering” aspect of the prophesied Messiah with the crucifixion and death of Jesus, and identify the triumphant with Jesus’ Resurrection and Second Coming. Trypho gives ground on christology only when he is forced to by Justin’s extensive and detailed exegesis of select texts which both of them hold to be Scripture.

The complex, extended and combative character of the argument between Justin and Trypho over the nature and identity of the Christ is important for my purposes because it throws into relief one other feature of the exchange between the two men (one wants to say, the “two Rabbis”): Justin and Trypho regularly refer to the Holy Spirit, neither of them question this terminology, and they both seem to understand what the other means by this term. This agreement is my point of departure: Justin and Trypho don’t argue over “Spirit” because they share - in a broad but functional way - a pneumatology. For my conclusion to be true, it must be the case that there is in Judaism of the hellenistic era a theology of the Holy Spirit, and that there are discernable continuities between such a Jewish pneumatology and early Christian pneumatology. The full variety of pneumatological continuities between Judaism and Christianity can be documented only in a monograph, and so I will here limit myself to two themes or topics which treat of Jewish doctrines of the existence of a Holy Spirit– namely, *angel pneumatology* and, secondly, *the arrival of the sent Spirit*.

Angel Pneumatology

A number of scholars have documented a Jewish angel pneumatology in writings stretching from First Temple works like Exodus (23:20-23) and I Samuel to Second Temple works like Haggi, Nehemiah and the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS).¹ “Angel pneumatology” is thus a wholly Jewish phenomenon, that is to say, it predates Christianity and, in the Common Era, sometimes parallels Christian theology of the Holy Spirit. The most famous Christian mention of a doctrine of angel pneumatology – Origen’s in his *Peri Archon* – makes it clear that this doctrine has been received from the Jews.

¹ See, in particular, John Levinson’s “The Angelic Spirit in Early Judaism,” *SBL 1995 Seminar Papers*, 464-492.

Jewish pneumatology seems to be greatly indebted to the exegesis of several key texts in *Isaiah*, especially *Isaiah* 63:9-10,² which reads (in one rendering):

In all their affliction he [God] was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them: he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit....

The pneumatological significance for Judaism of this passage and others in *Isaiah* has been studied most recently by Charles Gieschen - and before him, Levinson, Sekki,³ and Isaacs.⁴

As one might expect, the first Christian articulation extant of an angel pneumatology is in the writings of Luke. Leaving aside for the present the thorny question of whether the annunciation narrative is -or once was - the first Christian statement of an angel pneumatology, traces of a primitive angel pneumatology can be found in *Acts* 8:26-40, where the language for who or what is whisking the deacon Phillip from place to place shifts back and forth between “angel” and “spirit”. We should note, first, that the eunuch is reading *Isaiah*, and second, that this portrait of the Holy Spirit as the one who carries people to and fro’ occurs again in the very Jewish *Gospel of the Hebrews*, where Jesus is carried through the air by his mother, the Holy Spirit.

In the *Ascension of Isaiah*, Isaiah encounters the Son and the Holy Spirit, angels both of them. Arriving in the Seventh Heaven, Isaiah is brought before the Son, who in turn shows him the Holy Spirit:

And I saw the Lord and the second angel, and they were standing, and the second one whom I saw (was) on the left of my Lord. And I asked the angel who led me and I said to him, ‘Who is this one?’ And he said to me, ‘Worship him, for this is the angel of the Holy Spirit who has spoken in you and in the other righteous.’ [9:36]

Several things need to be remarked about this passage. First, the angel escorting Isaiah exhorts him to “worship this one, the angel of the Holy Spirit”. A substantial amount of recent scholarship has been devoted to exploring the implications of the fact that Jesus was *worshipped* by those first Jewish Christians, since in Judaism “worship” seems to be limited to the worship of God. Here, in the *Ascension*, we have an early example of the Holy Spirit being worshipped.⁵ Secondly, Isaiah’s description of the Lord and the second angel as “standing” recalls the vision of Stephen in *Acts* 7:55, which says that he gazed into heaven and saw both the Glory of the Lord and Jesus *standing*. Finally, again apropos of Stephen’s vision, “the *Glory* of the Lord” is, of course, the *Doxa* of the Lord – and the *Doxa* of the Lord is the *Shekinah*, all synonyms for the *Spirit* of the Lord.

² See his *Angelomorphic Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 114-119.

³ Arthur Evertt Sekki, *The Meaning of Ruah at Qumran* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation No 110.

⁴ Marie Isaacs, *The Concept of the Spirit: A Study of Pneuma in Hellenistic Judaism and its Bearing on the New Testament* (London: ?, 1976)

⁵ The priority of the Son in this ancient literature is, among other things, a function of the polemical status between Jews and Jewish Christians of Messiah-exegesis.

As I remarked earlier, it is Origen's reference to the Son and the Holy Spirit as angels that is the best known example of such a doctrine. Twice in *Peri Archon* Origen speaks of his "Hebrew master" telling him

... that the two six-winged seraphim in *Isaiah* who cry one to another "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord," were the only-begotten Son of God and the Holy Spirit. [Is. 6. 2 f.]

Origen then immediately adds

And we ourselves think that the expression in the song of Habbakkuk, 'In the midst of the two living creatures thou shalt be known' is spoken of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Scholarly judgments on the identity of that "Hebrew master" have – in the main – followed the conclusions of the French scholarship typified by Lanne: the Hebrew in question is Philo. Whether or not Philo was Origen's Jewish source, the evidence that he could have been gives *prima facie* evidence of an angel pneumatology in Philo.⁶ Moreover, Stephen Halperin has more recently argued that Origen is here referring to a Jewish contemporary, Joshua ben Levi.⁷ Again we are given evidence of a Jewish angel pneumatology – this time in a rabbinic Jew living in Origen's time, thus showing that a Jewish angel pneumatology did not cease when Christians began to make their own claims upon that exegetical tradition.

Before I pass to my second major case of Jewish-Christian pneumatology, I have some last comments to make about these examples of a Jewish *angel pneumatology*. First, it is well known that the book *Isaiah* was an important Scripture for the early church, and that for centuries it was the first text given to catechumens. Scholars have tended to attribute this influence to the christological content of the prophecies in the work. I would like to point out, however, that we have evidence that *Isaiah* was being read by Jews and Christians for its *pneumatological* content, and that thus the work is, for early Christianity, a *trinitarian* proof-text. Secondly, given that all we can say for certain about late Second Temple Jewish angelology is that *an angel is the presence of the Lord somehow existing separately, locally, or discretely*, we can hazard that "angel" may be a conceptual forerunner of the notion of divine person, that is to say, it sometimes carries the same theological freight as *perigraphe* and *hupostasis* will later carry. And finally, the more seriously one takes the presence of an angel at the fertilization of Mary, the more important it would be to clarify the relative status of that angel. In other words, given the broad context of a theology of the Watchers as well as the strong influence of *First Enoch*,⁸ over time any doctrine of Mary's virginity is going to be tied to making it clear that the angel did not "overshadow" Mary, indeed to insisting quite positively that real Christians know that angels have no interest in earth women because the angels *neither marry nor are given in marriage* (Lk. 20:35-37): Genesis 6:2 to the contrary, angels are not sexual beings.

The Arrival of the Sent Spirit

⁶ See also Levinson's "The Prophetic Spirit as an Angel According to Philo," *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995), 189-207.

⁷ David J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1988).

⁸ The issue of the angels' sexuality is treated in Philo's *On the Giants*; he is there emphatic that there are indeed angels who suffer passions such as lust and act upon them.

Another important case of Jewish pneumatology can be found in Second Temple treatments of prophecy and inspiration, namely *the presence of the Spirit in humans*. This subject is useful to analyze not only because it was an important feature of the Jewish understanding of prophecy and inspiration, but, as well, because it is here that we can find the intersection of concerns among Jews – both Second Temple and Rabbinic – Pagans and Christians. In those Second Temple texts which later became canonical for both Jews and Christians there is a regular connection between the Spirit of God and the act of prophecy. This connection is, I think, too well known to need documenting or even illustrating here. The association of the Spirit with prophecy continues in late second Temple and post-Temple Jewish literature, such as the DSS and the Targums.⁹ However, for my present purposes the most important example of a Jewish association of the Spirit with prophecy occurs in the writings of Josephus. John Levenson has shown that in the *Antiquities* Josephus first introduces the figure of the Spirit in the story of the inspiration of Balaam and his ase.¹⁰ Like Luke writing the story of Phillip at *Acts* 8, Josephus moves back and forth between calling this agent of inspiration “Spirit” and “Angel”. As Levenson points out, in his retelling of the Balaam story Josephus enters into a discussion which is already a topos in hellenistic culture, namely: in the ecstatic and inspired state which produces prophecies or oracles does the prophet remain rational, or does the inspiration reduce the human to an irrational state?

This is but one of the aspects of the then-contemporary debate on the nature of prophecy. Alternately, we could move to consider a point of detail, such as the commonly assumed vaporous state of the inspiring spirit – and here one can recall *Ben Sirach*’s description of Wisdom as a “vapor of the most high” as well as Tertullian’s understanding of a material soul. Or we could move to consider a broader, over-arching question, such as the problem of the disappearance of prophecies and oracles. This disappearance is recognized to be a problem by both Jews and Pagans of the early Common Era. For Jews, this disappearance is tied to the destruction of the Temple, and the question of “Who now prophecies?” becomes re-stated as the question, “Where does the Spirit of God now dwell, given that the Temple has been destroyed?”

These various aspects of the topos of Spirit and prophecy are to be found in much the same constellation in early Christianity: the most conspicuous example being the New Prophecy movement. A key claim of the Phrygian Montanists seems to have been that prophecy inspired by the presence of the Spirit continues in that day in the persons of Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla. Tertullian, too, wants to maintain the continuing reality of Spirit-generated prophecy. Yet, as Ernest Evans pointed out,¹¹ Tertullian’s articulated theology of Montanism is remarkably un-radical: the one point that Tertullian does make substantial effort to establish is that the apparently irrational or mantic character of inspired prophecy does not stand as a criticism of the oracles of the New Prophecy. Dennis Groh argued that what was at stake in the Montanist

⁹ Observe, for example, this very association in the quotation from *Ascension of Isaiah* included in this article.

¹⁰ “The Debut of the Divine Spirit in Josephus’ *Antiquities*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), 123-138.

¹¹ *Tertullian’s Treatise Against Praxeus*, Ernest Evans, ed. and trans. (London: SPCK, 1948), pp. 79-82.

controversy was the rational or irrational character of the exegesis of Scripture.¹² With this understanding we can further locate the controversy within broader hellenistic concerns about the lack of then present-day prophecy or oracles.

The question of the rational or irrational character of the indwelling of the spirit comes to a peculiarly Christian expression due to Jesus's promise to "send" a Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. Luke's description of Pentecost as that sending offers one solution to the troublesome and long-lived question of "In what form will this sent-Spirit appear upon arrival – and when will this happen?" The first two centuries of Christianity are filled with a variety of answers to these two related questions. There was a broad expectation that the Holy Spirit would appear in a form not unlike the Son's – namely, as a human. The proffered candidates for this unique inhabitation included (alphabetically) Simon Magus, Mani, Melchizedek, Montanus, and Paul.¹³ What unites these different theologies of an inhumanized Holy Spirit is that in each case those producing such doctrines and making such claims are all Christians of a markedly Jewish-Christian character who, moreover, identify arrival of the Spirit with the inhabitation of one human. It is a mark of catholic Christianity that the Spirit's inhabitation is not identified with the inhabitation of one human, but is understood rather to be an event for all Christians. Indeed, it is in the unquestionably Jewish-Christian writing, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, where we find a classic articulation of the great church's understanding of Spirit-inhumanization. I would like to quote this passage for its succinctness:

The preexistent Holy Spirit, which created the whole creation, God caused to live in the flesh that he wished. This flesh, therefore, in which the Holy Spirit lived served the Spirit well, living in holiness and purity, without defiling the Spirit in any way. So, because it had lived honorably and chastely, and had worked with the Spirit and cooperated with it in everything... he chose it as a partner with the Holy Spirit, for the conduct of this flesh pleased the Lord, because while possessing the Holy Spirit it was not defiled upon the earth..... [A]ll flesh in which the Holy Spirit has lived will, if it proves to be undefiled and spotless, receive a reward.¹⁴

Conclusion

If my thesis that early Christianity appropriates a standing pneumatology from Judaism is true, one would expect to find that Christian theologies with a strong doctrine of the Holy Spirit will tend to be of a pronounced Jewish-Christian character. With a smaller order of probability, one would also expect it to be the case that anti-Jewish-Christian theologies would possess a less vigorous pneumatology. I think that one does indeed find these expectations borne out. At the

¹² Dennis Groh, "Utterance and Exegesis: Biblical Interpretation in the Montanist Crisis," in *The Living Text: Essays in Honor of Ernest W. Saunders*, pp. 73-95.

¹³ Paul himself did not claim to be the Paraclete, but Origen reports a later sect that understood him as such. However, Paul's experience of *Jesus the Christ* is fundamentally like that of Isaiah or Enoch, and that heavenly vision provides the source of his identity as an "apostle". See J. W. Bowker, "Merkabah' Visions and the Visions of Paul," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 16 (1971), 157-173.

¹⁴ *Parable 5*, 6.59.

end of the second century the strongest pneumatology seems to be that of a Jewish-Christian sect which Origen provides us with the evidence in Book 2 of his *Commentary on John*. There are those, he says, who believe that the Holy Spirit is “unbegotten” [agenetos], and that the Spirit *with the Father* sends the Son (this on the basis of Is. 48.16, “And now the Lord has sent me, and his spirit.”). This priority of the Holy Spirit over the Son is recorded, these Christians say, in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which includes the logion, “My mother, the Holy Spirit, took me just now by one of my hairs and carried me off to the mountain Tabor.” Origen replies to this hyper-pneumatology and its subordination of the Word with a theology which unfortunately strongly subordinates the Spirit to the Word, for, according to Origen, the Spirit is created by the Son (this Origen says on the basis of John 1.3, “... all things were made through him,” i.e., the Word.)

But the most important case of a Christianity of a pronounced Jewish-Christian character having a strong doctrine of the Holy Spirit is Syriac Christianity. Till at least the beginning of the fifth century Syriac Christianity retains the feminine gender of the Spirit and continues the “partnership” model that one finds, for example, in Wisdom 7.¹⁵ The linear model of causality in the Trinity which is dominant in the Christianity of the Roman Empire after Origen and Tertullian is not the norm in Syriac trinitarian theology, which instead tends to feature a “T”-shaped model, as may have been the case in the Annunciation for Luke. In particular, the “family” model of the Trinity is quite clear in Syriac Christianity, as my colleague, Fr. Alexander Golitzin, has pointed out.¹⁶

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¹⁵ For a history of this “partnership” model, see Gilles Quispel, “Jewish Gnosis and Mandaeen Gnosticism,” *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi*, Jacques-E. Menard (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 82-122.

¹⁶ Alexander Golitzin, “Adam, Eve, and Seth: Pneumatological Reflections on an Unusual Image in Gregory of Nazianzus’ *Fifth Theological Oration*,” *Anglican Theological Review*, forthcoming. See also: Sebastin Brock. “The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature,” *After Eve*, Janet Martin Soskice, ed. (Collins Marshall Pickering, 1990), 73-88. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, *The Odes of Solomon*, and Early Syriac Tradition,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 37 (1993), 111-139.