JEWISH–CHRISTIAN RELATIONS AND RABBINIC LITERATURE—SHIFTING SCHOLARLY AND RELATIONAL PARADIGMS: THE CASE OF TWO POWERS

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Introduction

The present discussion seeks to query some of the assumptions that govern much of how Jewish–Christian relations are considered in the context of scholarship of rabbinic and early Christian literature. We find a wealth of references in scholarship to this formative period of Jewish–Christian relations. In fact, for some scholars, Jewish–Christian relations are a major lens through which the rabbinic materials are to be read. I will seek to pose some fundamental questions regarding both the centrality of Jewish–Christian relations as a scholarly enterprise, in particular as it pertains to the understanding of rabbinic materials, and to describe different paradigms of how rabbinic materials have been and can be understood in the context of changing Jewish–Christian relations. I will attempt to suggest there is a correspondence between various scholarly paradigms and corresponding relational paradigms, as these find expression beyond scholarship, in a variety of contexts—the academy, society at large, and conscious theological articulations of Jewish–Christian relations. Thus, adopting a particular scholarly paradigm is never divorced from broader patterns governing Jewish–Christian relations, and changes in these relations constitute an invitation to re-examine some of the assumptions that have governed scholarship for over a century. I thus seek in this article to bring to light our hidden assumptions in working in this field and to explore that which is implicit, and often goes unstated, in scholarship.

On the Relative Importance of 'Jewish–Christian Relations'

Underlying the present collection of essays, the series in which it is featured, and a budding industry of academic enterprises is the assumption that 'Jewish–Christian relations' are important, perhaps very important. We recognize the importance of this field from the manifold institutions devoted to its study. In the United States alone the number of academic centers that are somehow dedicated to Jewish–Christian relations is large enough to have led to the creation of a council of such institutions, called Council of Centers on Jewish–Christian Relations.[1] The importance of this area of study is assumed, but rarely discussed. Why, actually, are 'Jewish–Christian relations' as important as their manifold academic expressions suggest?

To begin exploring this question, it might be worth comparing 'Jewish–Christian relations' to 'Jewish–Muslim relations', on the one hand, and to 'Jewish–Zoroastrian relations', on the other. There is no doubt that 'Jewish–Christian relations' play a far more important role in the international intellectual community, in its manifold expressions, than do 'Jewish–Muslim relations'. If the principle was purely historical, one could argue that at least as much importance should be attached to the latter, given that for so much of Jewish history, Jewish life and creativity took place in the shadow of Islam. Similarly, if historical roots and formation were key, we should expect much more attention to be paid to 'Jewish–Zoroastrian relations'. That only a handful of scholars worldwide are able to address this field of studies suggests that something other than historical interest in origins and influences is driving contemporary interest in 'Jewish–Christian relations'. The obvious alternative to historical interest would be contemporary efforts at coexistence and peace. But that itself makes the gap between 'Jewish–Christian studies' and 'Jewish–Muslim studies' almost inexplicable. The proverbial Martian would surely deem 'Jewish–Muslim relations' to be of far greater urgency in today's world. We are led to the conclusion that contemporary interest in Jewish–Christian relations is the product of processes that are broader and more complex than the detached reflection on what areas of study should be cultivated, in order either to do history justice or to best serve today's pluralist society.

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[1] www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/sites/partners/ccjr/Intro.htm

It seems to me that we can point to several factors that jointly contribute to the cultural centrality of Jewish–Christian relations as an academic field of study:

A. Questions of coexistence. These are fuelled not only by contemporary concerns, but above all by the memory of the Shoah, that led to a major recasting of Jewish–Christian relations. Indeed, it is worth noting how many of the academic centers mentioned above are actually devoted to the study of the holocaust and its lessons.
B. Interest in Jewish–Christian relations seems to play an important role in identity construction. Jews and Christians seem to be increasingly stating their own religious identity not only within their own communities but also in relation to a significant other. The significant other for Jews and Christians are each other, rather than Islam, despite its demographic prominence. Christians obviously need Jews for purposes of their own identity construction, inasmuch as Christian roots are found in Judaism, and any restatement of Christian identity in some way necessitates a restatement of its relation to Judaism. This need is not reciprocal. Jewish involvement in such projects is thus best understood in light of Christianity's role in Western society and the role it has played in recent Jewish (European) history.
C. I would like to propose that to a significant degree, the centrality of Jewish–Christian relations as an area of study is not the product of a reasoned process, but rather is part of a contemporary mindset that is self-validating. Academia and society at large, in a mutually reinforcing process, have both adopted this area of study as an important area of study. This adoption could only happen through collaboration with those forces in society that make things happen, and above all through financial support. Jewish–Christian relations seem to have the kind of sex appeal that Jewish–Muslim relations lack. They therefore sell.

   This is as true of the ability to identify donors for chairs, academic centers, and publications as it is for the students who are consumers of the products of Jewish–Christian studies. The following quote by Steven Fine, from a recent lecture at the Society of Biblical Literature, is in point: 'As one who scheduled Jewish studies courses at a major American university for some time, I always knew that the history of Jewish–Christian relations was sure to fill, where Talmudic studies or other issues not of interest to contemporary Christians

would probably not. As an author, I have long known that a book that includes the J or C words—Jesus and Christians—is far easier to market than a Jewish studies book that does not.' (Fine, 2006).

D. The self-perpetuating and self-justifying aspects of the cultural and academic centrality of Jewish–Christian relations impact on scholarly tendencies and trends. Accordingly, Jewish–Christian relations become increasingly the hermeneutical lens through which phenomena are understood and interpreted. This, at least, is the case in rabbinic scholarship. One notes recent studies by such scholars as Yisrael Yuval (Yuval 2006) in which the Jewish–Christian lens becomes a defining feature of rabbinic literature and a key to its understanding, possibly to an unprecedented degree.

Thus, multiple factors feed the perception of the academic centrality of Jewish–Christian relations, even as these are in turn reinforced by the academy. Contemporary social and historical needs combine with issues of hermeneutics, the reading of ancient sources, and the reconstruction of history in complex ways. These serve the needs of identity construction of both groups and individuals, thus adding more weight to the entire process. The multiple factors operating often make it hard to assess to what extent texts are read in and of themselves and to what extent a heavy baggage is imported to them that could in principle lead to a misreading of the sources. In conclusion, the totality of factors operating and undergirding the importance of Jewish–Christian relations as an academic enterprise may be greater than the sum of its individual parts. In other words, it is conceivable that we are operating with a bias that is heavily culturally weighted. This bias might lead us to attribute exaggerated significance to the field, certainly in the rabbinic context, and it might influence the results of our textual readings and historical investigations, in line with the conceived importance of this area of study.

How Much Christianity in Rabbinic Judaism

I am indebted, for the following section, to the work of Steven Fine, cited above. His own methodological reflections dovetail so closely with my own concerns in this area, that I am happy to share his unpublished observations on this question. As the title of the section suggests, one of the often unexamined assumptions concerns the relative importance of Christianity as a means of understanding rabbinic Judaism. To assume

Christianity's importance in the overall interpretation of rabbinic Judaism and its texts is a hermeneutic choice that is at the same time based on a historical reconstruction. One must assume Christians and Christianity figure heavily in the Talmud and rabbinic literature in order to construct this particular lens for reading the literature. Fine questions this assumption by posing first of all the question how much explicit and uncontested knowledge about Christians and Christianity we are actually able to obtain from the Talmud. The sum of materials that can be unequivocally identified as referring to Christians falls short of even the two short chapters that we find in the smaller tractates on Samaritans, in the tractate called *Kutim*. What we have is little. Key issues in Jewish–Christian theology that would be central to the purported Jewish–Christian dispute are never explicitly discussed in the Talmud and rabbinic literature. What we have are dozens of scholarly conjectures that read a variety of texts in light of the prominence of Jewish–Christian relations. However, these must be recognized for what they are: conjectures and speculations. In other words, what we know by conjecture far exceeds our undisputed and unequivocal knowledge. That a clear distinction is not kept between the two is itself a result of the present paradigm, that favors Jewish–Christian relations as a hermeneutic lens for understanding rabbinic literature. It thus becomes a self-validating academic enterprise that draws upon perceived cultural centrality in order to reinforce this centrality with additional data, where it is lacking. The circularity of the enterprise is based on the core assumption that Christians and Christianity are indeed central to rabbinic literature. This assumption must be seriously questioned. Fine illustrates the present situation in the academy, with the help of the following Talmudic story:

> Rabbi Abbahu praised Rav Safra to the Minim that he is an important man.
> They released him from taxation for thirteen years.
> One day, they came upon him, and said to him:
> It is written: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.' (Amos 3:2)
> One who has anger, does he oppress he whom he loves?
> He [Rav Safra] was silent, and said absolutely nothing to them [in the face of this taunt].
> They took the scarf from his [Rav Safra's] shoulders and made him miserable.
> Rabbi Abbahu came and found him.
> He said to them: Why are you making him miserable?

> Did you not tell us that he is an important man [and he couldn't even tell us the interpretation of this verse]?
> He [Rabbi Abbahu] said to them: I referred to [his knowledge of] Tannaitic traditions, I made no mention of Scripture!
> They said to him: Why are you [Palestinians] different, knowing [Scripture]?
> He said to them: We who are present among you, we make it a point to study [Scripture].
> They [in Babylonia] make no effort in this regard. (Bavli Avoda Zara 4a)

Fine offers this story as a parable to contemporary interest in Christianity as a lens through which to interpret Jewish phenomena. For the rabbis, being amidst Christians meant learning their way of doing business—in other words, engaging in Scripture. For us, being in a Christian milieu means favoring Jewish–Christian relations as our way of doing business. In Fine's reading, our scholarly activity today resembles the social placement of the ancient rabbis. Because 'we are present among you', in other words, because Jews operate in a Christian academic milieu—there is a tendency to read rabbinic materials against such a Christian background. Where a considered assessment of the background needed to understand Talmudic sources might have led to a more intense interest in Zoroastrianism, the cultural context in which today's study is carried out predisposes us to the reconstruction of an imagined Christian context, in light of which the rabbis are understood. Hence, Fine offers a more careful methodology: 'The degree to which Jewish–Christian relations is close to the pulse of contemporary culture creates a challenge to the historian. In my own work, I search out every other possible interpretation and weigh these carefully before ultimately accepting or rejecting the Christian influence model—fully cognizant of the baggage that comes with that model.'

Reconstructing Jewish–Christian Relations: Three Models

In light of the broader considerations spelled out above, I would like to present three models of how Jewish–Christian relations in the Talmudic period may be approached. Each of these, especially the first two, have figured in the history of scholarship. Each of them represents an emotional and existential stance, as much as a scholarly methodology. Accordingly, I will seek to spell out not only the particular scholarly methodology but also the corresponding emotional and existential attitude, especially as it concerns Jewish attitudes to Christianity.

The Competitive-Polemical Model

This is the oldest model, and it has been part of Jewish scholarship for over a century. It assumes a basic situation of competitiveness between Judaism and Christianity and finds the competition between these two religions in its reading of ancient sources. One may speak of two waves of polemics. The first focuses on contemporary polemics, as refracted through different readings of rabbinic literature, while the other makes polemics the subject of the rabbinic materials themselves.

Polemic, comparison, and competition were formative elements of the modern study of rabbinic literature, and in particular rabbinic theology. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century saw much scholarly activity that was born of contemporary religious polemics. Thus, Christian scholars viewed the Judaism of Jesus' time, prior to his coming, as inferior in comparison. Historical reconstruction of the inferiority of ancient Judaism and the superiority of Jesus' teaching thus served a theological purpose. This, in turn, led to a series of readings, mostly by Jewish scholars, who attempted to counter those Christian tendentious readings of rabbinic literature. Thus, contemporary theological concerns dictated scholarship on both sides of the fence. The process has been amply documented by Ed Sanders (Sanders 1977, 33–59).

If the first wave of polemics was initiated by Christian scholars, the second wave is primarily the work of Jewish scholars. Again, since the end of the nineteenth century, but with increasing prominence around mid-century, Jewish scholars have read a variety of rabbinic statements through a polemic lens. The polemic lens was part of a broader historical orientation that has informed much of Jewish scholarship since its inception (see Goshen-Gottstein 2003, 119–123). Polemic provided a historical anchor through which texts could be grounded in a particular time and context. While the reconstruction of Jewish–Christian polemic served principally an academic purpose, it could not be divorced from the worldview at large and the enduring competition between the two religions. An apex of this methodology of reading is found in Urbach's *The Sages* (Urbach 1987). Urbach made polemic the primary interpretive strategy, in light of which rabbinic materials were read. Urbach reconstructed dozens, perhaps hundreds of polemics, through his interpretation of sources. Various sources were read in a context provided by Urbach and accordingly had as their imputed audience the other religion. The quantitative achievement of identifying so many polemical

statements throughout rabbinic literature amounted to a qualitative view of the rabbis and their theological project in polemical terms. Thus, one of the main characteristics of the rabbis was how they defined and upheld their view of Judaism in dialogue and polemic with Christian authors of the early centuries. Most of Urbach's reconstructed polemics were directed towards Christianity, thereby both assuming and providing additional proof for Christianity's prominence in rabbinic literature. Urbach's lens was historical, and much of his history of ideas is constructed through the attempt to bring the rabbis into conversation with major voices of antiquity. Polemic allows Urbach to situate the words of the rabbis in a specific time and place.

While Urbach's project seems to be strictly historical, it is obviously also informed by a worldview and colored by an attitude toward Christianity. Even though I have not encountered express rejection of Christianity or looking down upon it in Urbach's writings, it would seem fair to assume that his worldview is thoroughly informed by the understanding of these two religions as placed in permanent competition with one another. His own proud identification as an orthodox Zionist would naturally make him identify strongly with the one side, though such identification remains implicit and does not color his scholarship. Indeed, in a recent review of Urbach's oeuvre, he is portrayed as striking a balance between highlighting the importance of Jewish–Christian polemics and seeking to limit the influence of Christianity on the formation of rabbinic thought (Irshai 2006).

Urbach's scholarship is primarily informed by the keen intellectual interest in noting differences between the two religions and between their teaching and highlighting it through scholarship. While one does not note hostility in Urbach's writings, nor the kind of superiority that earlier Christian writers such as Bousset, Bultmann, and others exhibit, one cannot divorce this kind of scholarship from the theological premises that informed the theological relations of Judaism and Christianity. The polemical model was formed at a time when the fundamental tenor governing relations between the traditions was indeed competitive. It was not until the mid-sixties that the Catholic Church made its historic about-face in relation to previous teachings on Judaism. By that time, Urbach's work had been more or less completed. He certainly did not have the time to reconsider his worldview and methodology in light of significant changes in Catholic theology in relation to Judaism. While Urbach's work has continued to enjoy influence in Israeli academic circles, it seems fair to say that it was far less influential in the English

speaking world, where this type of reading of sources has generally also been less dominant.

The Identity Constructing Model

The second model shares with the polemical model the basis of conscious contrast. Contrast, however, is different than contest. What informs the second model is not the quest for argument, that leads to uncovering disagreement in a myriad of specific details, but the attempt to identify and characterize wider structures that bring to light the profound differences between the two religions. Accordingly, it focuses on questions of identity and how Jewish and Christian identities are constructed in different ways, as this difference is made manifest through the study of the deeper structures of the religion and thought of both religions. We may be able to distinguish two branches of this model of approaching Jewish–Christian relations, as these find expression in the study of rabbinic literature.

A. The phenomenological or comparative approach. The phenomenological approach seeks to highlight the differences between the traditions by presenting them alongside one another. Accordingly, a variety of key topics is studied, with Jewish views on the subject presented alongside Christian views. The points of historical contact are less significant than the contours of difference, primarily theological difference, as these emerge from the systematic presentation of both religious systems. Presenting the two religions alongside one another allows the unique profile and identity of each to emerge more clearly. All this can be done without recourse to historical reconstruction of points of conscious disagreement between members of both faiths. It seems that many of the projects that Jacob Neusner has initiated with Bruce Chilton since the 90s fall under this category. (See Chilton and Neusner 2000a, 2000b, and 2004; for continued use of the language of 'debates' in the work of these scholars, see Chilton and Neusner 1998. These are, however, contemporary debates and not reconstructions of classical debates.) Properly speaking, the methodology that serves such studies is that of comparative theology. This provides a clear contrast with history, that is the primary methodology that serves the polemical model. The comparative theological project is significant not only because it is inherently interesting, but because it allows one to tackle issues of identity formation, especially in the formative period of both religions, while

avoiding to a large degree the confrontation that characterizes the first model.

B. The historical-evolutionary model. I use this characterization to describe some of the recent work of Daniel Boyarin, who presents a unique theological analysis that serves the historical project, radically reconceived. In a series of articles and books, Boyarin has offered a new reading of the parting of the ways and of early Jewish–Christian relations. In Boyarin's view, the first centuries saw a broader common basis between the two religions. Both religions came into being, in their present form, through a mutual process of separation from one another that lasted up to the fourth century (see Boyarin 1999, 2004a and 2004b). The historical reconstruction of the coming into being of these distinct religious systems touches on the core of identity formation: what is it that makes Judaism Judaism and what is it that makes Christianity Christianity?

   Boyarin consciously replaces the polemical model that characterized earlier scholarship with the identity constructing model, in light of which sources that were previously read in relation to a polemic that was supposed to have taken place in the first century are now read as representing the parting of the ways centuries later. Judaism and Christianity come out much closer to each other than they do according to the polemical model. They were jointly born of the same matrix. However, their differences are no less profound, inasmuch as they express systemic differences, rather than disagreement on cardinal points of view. Most importantly, while the polemical model implicitly validates only one side, this model consciously validates both sides, inasmuch as both are presented as legitimate heirs of the earlier stage of Judaism, in which both phenomena existed without clear borderlines demarcating one from the other. Both religions are thus perceived as valid choices from a reservoir of religious options that the earlier unseparated stage represents. It is thus much harder to speak of truth and falsehood, according to Boyarin's model.

Both branches of the identity constructing model have developed within the American academy, while the polemical model developed first on European soil and then in the Israeli academy. The American context seems appropriate for the development of the identity constructing model. The American academy is based on a pluralistic ethos, where members, often representatives, of different religious traditions work

alongside one another in a way that maintains their religious identity while sharing a broader framework of the humanities or of religious studies. This social situation lends itself to the production of this type of scholarship. While there is no explicit relationship between changes on the theological level in Jewish–Christian relations and academic scholarship, one cannot however assume these two areas are completely divorced from one another. I think one may legitimately consider these scholarly explorations as being indebted, if indirectly, to the new theological formulations of Jewish–Christian relations and to the climate they produce. (For brief allusions to the social and theological context of their projects, see Chilton and Neusner 2004 on p. 9 as well as at various other points in the introductions to their collaborative projects.)

It is also interesting to note the emotional stance that characterizes Boyarin's work. His preface is striking in how honest and revealing it is of his innermost feelings:

> As long as I can remember I have been in love with some manifestation of Christianity… For an oddly gendered teenager, St. Francis the Sissy proved an incredibly tantalizing figure of a man.… I find this world endlessly moving and alluring, even when at its most bizarre to me… Some Jews, it seems, are destined by fate, psychology, or personal history to be drawn to Christianity. This book won't let me be done with it, or so it seems, until I come clean and confess that I am one of those Jews. I cannot, of course, deny the problematic aspects of that desire; desire is frequently unruly and problematic… The question is, then, what creative use can be made of problematic desire—not only what pleasures can it engender but also what *utile* can it be in the world? (Boyarin 2004b, ix)

I believe there is a correspondence between the emotional stance that Boyarin describes here and the kind of scholarship it engenders. If the emotional stance of distance and disdain kept up clear boundaries that constituted the frontiers of polemics, the more complex emotional attitude also leads to a more complex viewing of historical relations. Finding oneself within the other and the other within oneself, in an ambivalent movement that seeks to establish identity and difference simultaneously, yields precisely the kind of history that Boyarin has written. Scholarship is thus conducted in a context that is neither theologically nor emotionally neutral.

The Parallel Spiritual Activity Model

Following the first two models, I would like to present a third model. Referring to it as a model of parallel spiritual activity seeks to highlight the fact that in this view one seeks to minimize the contact between Judaism and Christianity, and their activities are viewed instead as parallel activities that do not rely directly upon one another, but rather upon a common source or activity, primarily scriptural interpretation. Both the first and second models assumed contact. The second model assumed such intense contact as to envision a time when the two religious realities were inseparable from one another, and only gradually over time did their separation become a historical fact. What distinguishes the present model is the attempt to cast Judaism and Christianity as parallel religious phenomena, while minimizing their historical contact. It should be acknowledged that constructing a model of Jewish–Christian relations that minimizes contact and maximizes the recognition of parallel activities accords with the methodological call for care and minimizing contact sounded above by Steven Fine.

In my article on polemics in rabbinic literature and early Christian literature, I suggested criteria by means of which we could recognize polemics within rabbinic literature (Goshen-Gottstein 2003, 138–148). More important than the positive criteria for identifying polemics is, in my view, the attempt to establish the clear distinction between conscious polemics and the natural activity of two religious communities engaging in similar activities in parallel. Therefore, much like Fine's own hermeneutical principle, I suggested that one should not suggest a polemical interpretation if there is another explanation that readily accounts for the formation of a particular text. Even more importantly, a polemic cannot be reconstructed out of activity that is primarily hermeneutical if it is not explicitly marked in a polemical manner. As both communities engage in the interpretation of Scripture, there would be nothing easier than constructing every instance of different interpretation of biblical texts as an act of conscious polemics. However, such a reading would turn the entire literature into an extended polemic and would detract from what seems to be its primary purpose: edification of the religious community within and engagement in the reading and interpretation of Scripture as religious activity, as practiced by either Judaism or Christianity. I thus argue that in our reconstruction of the historical past of both communities, we must leave more room for each community to exist on its own terms, without attempting to draw all of

its activities into the orbit of Jewish–Christian relations, polemical or otherwise. This, of course, would necessitate looking at the two communities and their literary output less through the lens of historical influences and more through the lens of comparative theology. Not surprisingly, most of the work of Chilton and Neusner is indeed conceptualized in terms of comparative theology and could have therefore also been treated under the present rubric.

Towards the end of my 2003 article, I raised the question of the relationship between the type of reconstruction of early Jewish–Christian relations and the hermeneutics I recommend to my own engagement in contemporary interreligious relations in general and Jewish–Christian relations in particular (Goshen-Gottstein 2003, 189–190). Even though the different projects are seemingly distinct from one another and grew out of parallel academic and professional activities, I could not avoid considering the relations between these two branches of my own activity and creativity. Blunting the historical-polemical dimension of rabbinic texts meant the rabbis were not constantly battling the very religion with which I was presently engaged in dialogue. In that sense, I was not being unfaithful to tradition by engaging in such dialogue, nor did such dialogue require a restatement or reconfiguration of Jewish–Christian relations, at least not in relation to the formative rabbinic period. With conscious rejection and opposition muted, more room opened up for acceptance of the other. While this was not the explicit purpose of my scholarship on the rabbis, and I genuinely believe it was not designed as a move to make more contemporary space for dialogue or for recognizing Christianity in a Jewish context (one would still have to deal with the legacy of later generations' attitudes to Christianity, so some revision and restatement would be needed, no matter what), I note with interest the possibilities for dialogue that this scholarship opened up. It seems to me that the degree of legitimation is even greater than that made possible by Boyarin's scholarship. Boyarin shows that at some early point in time the two traditions were inseparable. Nevertheless, they did part ways, and to overlook this parting of the ways in the context of recognizing the other would require leaping over most of history. The parting of the ways did take place in the crucial and formative rabbinic period, even if some centuries later than usually described. In my case, if the rabbis were mainly disinterested, then there is little that the formative literature can actually teach us about Christianity. Later developments could, in theory, be more readily telescoped, in a

movement of uncovering the rabbinic foundations of attitudes to Christianity, even if such attitudes turned out to be 'non-attitudes'.

But what seems to me the most important upshot of my own presentation is not its potential gain as far as reducing the amount of conscious contact and friction between Judaism and Christianity. Rather, the greater the envisioned distance and the more the activities of both communities are viewed in parallel, the greater is the possibility for present-day contact, based on respectful mutual study and understanding. If the core texts of the formative period are not locked into a hopeless competition with one another, it seems easier to pose the question of what the other could teach me. That both Jews and Christians are engaged in similar though different activities, through parallel processes of scriptural interpretation, constitutes an invitation to learn from one another how to go about the business of interpretation and how one's interpretation may enrich the other. I am aware of the fact that to date there has been great asymmetry in this respect. Christians have shown much interest in early Jewish scriptural exegesis, while Jews have shown little interest in how Christians read the common Bible. However, there are signs that this is changing, as some of the scholarship mentioned above also suggests. How we understand the formative period could facilitate this kind of mutual learning and enrichment. My own historical reconstruction thus has its practical implications for a contemporary program of study and dialogue.

If Boyarin has described his own emotional stance as a hidden and somewhat forbidden love towards Christianity, I would describe my own as a profound spiritual recognition that comes from the security of my own tradition as it is able to gaze outwards. Clearing the path from reconstructed historical tensions is obviously helpful in making the space for such a gaze. In my study of Christian sources, I have little need for the kind of security that a polemical reading of the other might offer me by somehow leading me to identify with the 'right' side. I also do not feel the need to highlight how I am different from the other, nor to construct my identity as distinct from the other. The more my self-identity is grounded in the depth of my own religious commitment and belonging to a particular community, the more I am liberated to learn from the other in an open way that does not need to keep issues of identity and otherness at the forefront. Indeed, in this context I would see the possibility of learning from Christianity as not much different from the possibility of learning from Eastern religions, despite the fact that we do not share Scriptures. The asymmetry noted above, according

to which Christians need Jews for the construction of their own identity in ways that Jews do not need Christians, ends up playing itself out, for me, in such a way that I am as able to learn from the Christian, despite centuries of feud, as I am to learn from members of traditions with whom there has been little historical contact. Thus, true respect and openness are born from distance, rather than from the attempt to increase contact in our reconstruction of the past. Letting each side be is accordingly the foundation for a more open, dialogical encounter that shows the deepest respect through willingness to learn and receive from the other without the constant anxiety of identity construction and maintenance.[2]

Applying the Three Models: The Case of Two Powers in Heaven

According to the criteria I suggested in my earlier work, the case of Two Powers in Heaven should be recognized as a case of rabbinic polemics. It fits the criteria of a valid polemic, on account of the polemical formulae that accompany its usage. The present discussion draws on a still unpublished study of the use of the formula, and some of its insights will be shared below. Closer examination of this instance of seemingly unequivocal rabbinic polemics suggests that even that which we may think is polemical is also part of rabbinic literary conventions and is better understood in light of rabbinic hermeneutical practices. Its proper context is thus the Bible and its interpretation, rather than the historical conflict between competing religious groups, primarily Judaism and Christianity. The case of Two Powers in Heaven also allows me to present how all three models could be applied to it and how my own preferred model opens up new ways of reading the sources. These, as will be suggested below, have direct theological implications to a Jewish view of Christianity.

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[2] I would consider this self-disclosure to be a fair assessment of the reasoning and logic that correspond to my hermeneutical approach. The suggestion made by a reader of this essay that this position is more or less the orthodox Jewish approach, that considers Judaism immune to the influence of Christianity, does not seem to me an appropriate way to characterize my perspective. The reason is that Orthodoxy is actually highly polemical in its attitudes toward other religions to this very day. As Irshai 2006 points out, Urbach's is in many ways actually an Orthodox view.

The Polemical and Identity Constructing Readings of Two Powers in Heaven

The classical scholarly understandings of rabbinic sources referring to 'Two Powers in Heaven' are that they are historical reports and as such reflect rabbinic polemics with groups outside the rabbinic fold. Half a century of scholarship finds its culmination in Alan Segal's detailed examination of all reports of this heresy and in his attempt to contextualize them within the current religious landscape (Segal 1977). Many of the reports, in Segal's reading and those of his predecessors, relate to Christianity. Thus, 'Two Powers in Heaven' is seen as an important topos in early Jewish–Christian relations. For Segal, this subject is a crucial distinguishing point between Judaism and Christianity, inasmuch as it determines the parameters of Jewish orthodoxy. What lies at the heart of the difference between Judaism and Christianity is thus theological in nature and revolves around different understandings of the divinity. Clearly, this construction of the parting of the ways is very different from many common presentations that highlight praxis and ethnic identity, rather than theology, as the dividing issues. Thus, while Segal's argument is significant for Jewish–Christian relations, it is equally important for Jewish self-understanding and for establishing the parameters according to which proper Jewish faith is defined.

Daniel Boyarin's identity constructing model draws heavily on Segal's work, while reversing its historical significance (Boyarin 2004a and 2004b). Boyarin basically accepts Segal's readings, including the heavily anti-Christian emphases of 'Two Powers' sources. However, these are read by Boyarin not as historical reports, but as later retrojections, seen from the viewpoint of the later historical process through which Judaism and Christianity separated from each other. In that process, Judaism expunged what were previously acceptable beliefs in a second divine power, while these became the hallmark of the newly constructed Christian identity. In the context of his argument, Boyarin explores the meaning of heresy for the two groups and how each group defined heresy according to its particular emerging worldview. Boyarin follows Segal not only in many of his readings, while standing them on their head, so to speak, but also in the importance he assigns to the Two Powers issue. Just as for Segal this was seen as a defining issue, at the root of the split between Judaism and Christianity, so too for Boyarin this issue stands at the heart of the parting of the ways, even if the specific historical reconstruction of the parting is radically different.

One should note that Boyarin does not rely exclusively on the rabbinic reports surveyed by Segal. His work relies also on a reading of several sources in related literatures—Targum, New Testament, etc. Therefore, in tackling Boyarin, it is not sufficient to consider the readings of rabbinic sources referring to Two Powers. Nevertheless, as these do form the heart of his argument, and inasmuch as his work is closely indebted to Segal's, for the present purpose of highlighting different approaches to the same sources, I will limit my comments to how Boyarin handles the rabbinic sources containing the trope of Two Powers in Heaven.

Difficulties with Existing Interpretations of Two Powers in Heaven

It is not possible in the present context to enter a detailed analysis of either Segal's or Boyarin's work. Their work relies on the one hand on particular readings of the sources and on the other hand on a conceptual model through which these readings are interpreted. I take issue with these two scholars on both scores. While I cannot spell out here why I find their specific readings problematic, I will attempt to present an alternative framework in which the data can be interpreted. This alternative framework questions some of the fundamental assumptions that led to the construction of the alternative hypotheses and seeks to undermine their probability. Lowering the probability of these two reading strategies opens the way for me to present a third strategy for reading the sources which, as I suggested above, draws heavily on the hermeneutical dimension of the rabbis' activities and corresponds to the third model spelled out above.

According to the third way of reading the sources that refer to Two Powers in Heaven, what these sources present to us is a hermeneutic response to certain exegetical triggers, rather than a historical response to concrete situations involving other religious communities. What leads me to this conclusion is the attempt to not only read the relevant sources, but also to assess their relative importance in the overall economy of rabbinic literature. The more we attach significance to the discussions of Two Powers in Heaven in the context of Jewish and Christian self-definition, the more weighty the following considerations become, in light of which I am forced to reject both Segal's and Boyarin's readings. I am led to search for other ways to account for the data, in response to the following issues:

A. A quantitative examination of references to Two Powers in Heaven reveals the relative paucity of reference to the theme. If, as Boyarin

and Segal claim, this issue stood at the heart of the Jewish–Christian divide, one would expect the phrase to have much greater currency. I shall discuss the quantitative dimension of the use of the formula in greater detail below.

B. Almost all references to Two Powers in Heaven occur in hermeneutical contexts, in the process of the interpretation of Scripture. This poses the question to whom these sources are addressed. The question of intended audience is the focus of Segal's work. Following his working assumption that the sources are polemical, he is led to identify in each and every instance who the referent of the polemic might be. In view of the predominance of interpretative activity in conjunction with the use of the formula, Segal is led time and again to see Christians and gnostics as the conversation partners and to weigh the effectiveness of the specific rabbinic readings as polemical arguments. In so doing, Segal follows the trend of earlier scholars, such as Buchler and Marmorstein, who undertook a similar project of identifying the opponents in the polemic through a consideration of the usefulness and applicability of the *derashot* to the polemic. It is worth noting that while Segal explores a wide range of options, in his attempt to pinpoint the polemic, Boyarin seems to have narrowed the battle to one principal opponent: the Christians. I have not found in Boyarin's work an account of why, in reconfiguring Segal's earlier work, he limits its relevance to Christianity, while ignoring gnostics, whom Segal sees as serious contenders for the title of polemic partners in most of the rabbinic sources he discusses. In any event, understanding how interpretation of Scripture figures in polemics has shaped the entire discussion of the earlier polemical model and indirectly contributed to the identity-constructing model's analysis of these materials.

C. Not only are almost all uses of the Two Powers trope hermeneutical, but we also note that there is little else besides use of Scripture in the so-called polemics. One could have imagined, for instance, that the Two Powers polemic would be enhanced by contextually appropriate arguments, as relevant to the specific opponents it seeks to address. Thus, if gnostics were the object of the polemic, one could have expected to find references to God's goodness, alongside affirmation of his unity; if Christianity were considered the object of polemic, statements rejecting divine sonship, incarnation, or any other doctrinal specificity that would complement the core argument against Two Powers in Heaven would have been in place. The fact

is that nowhere does the Two Powers in Heaven trope go beyond the basic statement of rejecting the two heavenly powers. Any supportive argument that could also point with greater precision to the object of the polemic is lacking. Thus, all we have are verses and a fixed formula, rejecting the existence of Two Powers in Heaven.

D. Reading the Two Powers in Heaven sources as directed against Christianity poses an obvious question: Christianity is Trinitarian, not binitarian. Why, then, would the rabbis chose to confront Christianity by means of a formula directed at the wrong theological formulation of faith? A partial answer is provided by the examination of the evolution of Christian doctrine. Moore already attempted to tackle this question in his brief but excellent treatment of the Two Powers sources (Moore 1927, I, 364–368; III, 115–116). Moore argues that earlier Christian faith was dualistic and that Trinitarian belief only became a dogma at a later point in the evolution of Christian faith (Moore 1927, 115), presumably when the formula had already been established. Boyarin would share this understanding. However, this explanation still leaves us with major difficulties. The first is that even if Trinitarian faith only becomes part of Christian dogma in later centuries, it is clear that less formalized understandings of the Trinity (which as such is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament) are already an important part of Christian faith and piety in the first century, as we see in such key passages as Matthew 28:19 and 2 Cor 13:14 (Schowalter 1993). Our own views of dating sources have advanced since Moore's time. The earliest and key texts in which the Two Powers 'polemics' appear belong to the editorial stratum of the Tannaitic midrashim, in other words to the early to mid-third century. Regardless of the focus of Christological debates and their evolution, it would seem that combating Christianity in the third century by means of a binitarian formula would seem ill suited. Furthermore, if somewhere in the course of the period reflected in rabbinic literature a major theological shift occurred within Christianity on a subject that is a defining feature of Jewish–Christian relations, and on whose account the parting of the ways occurred, regardless of which narrative for this parting we adopt, how come there are no traces of this theological transformation within the rabbinic polemics? It seems odd that the same formulae would simply be quoted from generation to generation without any attempt to

update and adapt them to changing theological circumstances.[3] Certainly if the rabbinic sources provide us with a window onto contemporary debates, we would be hard pressed to account for why these debates seem so frozen and out of touch with contemporary developments, if they indeed play an active role in the theological battles of the here and now. In fact, I am not aware of a single rabbinic text that expressly treats Trinitarian belief. Let us assume, for argument's sake, that Two Powers in Heaven had become a routinized trope that could no longer be adapted and adjusted; given rabbinic literary conventions, surely some new way of expressing displeasure with emerging Trinitarian belief could have been found. How is it that rabbinic literature is silent on such a major issue, if indeed Jewish–Christian relations loom so large on the rabbinic horizon, as some scholars would wish us to recognize?[4] Of course, we could argue that the rabbis were not so interested in theology. But that would undermine the entire argument of both Segal and Boyarin. With no reference to Trinitarian faith and with continuing application of the Two Powers trope, the rabbis seem doomed to fighting a losing battle with Christianity. Or perhaps we should consider the possibility that they were fighting no battle at all.

E. Both Boyarin and Segal assume that the core issue dividing Judaism and Christianity concerns the theological understanding of the godhead, whether alongside God one recognizes an additional divine presence, another God within the Godhead. While this is certainly an issue worth considering, one wonders why the rabbis would focus their attention on this issue in particular, in an attempt to combat Christianity or to distinguish themselves from it. It would seem that Christianity could be tackled from several angles, some of which might prove more powerful and more relevant. For example, the

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[3] The only theoretical answer might be that the texts were originally polemical, but then ceased to serve a polemical purpose. But this would require articulating a theory of what polemics is, when it operates internally and when it operates *externally*, and what changes in historical relations could account for a shift from real polemical engagement at an earlier point in time to frozen literary usage that is no longer polemical. I find such an imagined view of polemics very forced.

[4] The comparison with general rabbinic disinterest in history (Herr, 1976) is unhelpful. While key historical events, such as the Bar Kokhba revolt, may not figure in a clear enough way in rabbinic literature, it will not do to simply consider Christianity a historical event. Once rabbinic literature is seen as polemical, this assumes active engagement with and statement of one's own identity in relation to Christianity. Silence is not an adequate tool in such a battle, inasmuch as it indicates lack of interest.

claim that divinity became flesh and blood or that a human being became God would seem unacceptable to the rabbis. These claims touch upon the heart of Christian belief and would be excellent foci for polemical activity. They are also issues the rabbis treat expressly in relation to various biblical figures (see Urbach 1987, 90–91, who significantly does not read these texts in relation to Christianity). Why not battle Christianity through these arguments, rather than through the seemingly inappropriate and ill-focused trope of Two Powers in Heaven? In fact, we have been able to identify very few explicitly anti-Christian theological polemics in rabbinic literature. One of the few instances of what seems a clear polemic against Christianity deals with the notion of human claims to divinity, rather than with the Trinity or with multiple persons within the Godhead (Irshai 1982). With almost no explicit polemics against Christian faith, scholars seeking to identify polemics against Christianity were forced to relate to the sources on Two Powers in Heaven as relevant to the Jewish–Christian polemic. However, the reconstructed polemic seems not only ill suited but also doomed to failure, as it lacks the needed specificity to target Christianity and as it is couched in terms that are sufficiently far removed from actual Christian faith to make it ineffective.

F. The failure of the rabbinic polemic is underscored by Boyarin himself, who notes that despite the best rabbinic efforts, binary belief persisted within Judaism in a variety of forms (Boyarin 2004b, 144 and sources noted on 138). Now, not all polemics succeed; perhaps none can fully do the work. That, however, brings us back to the question of the intended recipient. If the polemic is addressed against Christians, then we can assume they would not be unduly impressed with rabbinic hermeneutics and their attendant polemics. But surely the polemic should bear fruit within. If, as Boyarin demonstrates, binitarian belief persists within the rabbinic fold, then we are drawn to one of two conclusions. Either an ill-framed polemic could never have done the work in the first place, not within and certainly not in relation to the outside. But the more radical conclusion would seem to be that the persistence of certain views within normative rabbinic literature might indicate that the failed polemic was never a polemic in the first instance, and hence the legitimate perseverance of certain beliefs within the rabbinic corpus.

Presenting the Hermeneutical Reading of Two Powers in Heaven

The sum total of the difficulties encountered in relation to the two existing theories leads me to formulate a third way of approaching these materials, which I believe is as relevant for this case as for much of what has been constructed in over a century of scholarship as Jewish–Christian polemic. I propose that sources employing the Two Powers formula do so as part of rabbinic hermeneutical activity and that therefore the appropriate context for understanding these sources is hermeneutical and not historical, and consequently also not polemical. Both the context and the content of these uses suggests that they were formulated in response to textual triggers and as an answer to textually based questions, primarily biblical texts and secondarily earlier rabbinic texts. Accordingly, one would seek in vain to identify to whom or against whom these texts are addressed, as there is no specific recipient. This would also account for how ill-suited the texts actually are for doing polemical work and why the supposed polemical arguments lack any of the specificity that might make their polemic effective. What we have are hermeneutical reflections, and these, by their very nature, are internal statements, rather than statements directed to the outside. In this context there is, of course, a purported outsider who believes in Two Powers and in relation to whom the biblical texts are read. However, for the sake of constructing the hermeneutical argument, little more is needed than the vaguest awareness that there are others and that these others believe in something that can be summed up under the Two Powers trope. The lack of any further specificity is due to the fact that the imagined outsider's work is referenced by simply positing his existence. If there is an imaginary outsider, the verses have a referent in relation to whom they are formulated. However, this outsider is an imagined reality that serves simply as a hermeneutical trigger and not a concrete other in relation to whom some concrete ideological struggle or polemic takes place. Of course, in this broadest sense the imagined other does affirm identity: the others believe in Two Powers, while we believe in only one power in Heaven. However, this is a much lower level of identity affirmation. Identity is not defined or articulated in relation to a concrete other. Rather, who we are is affirmed by projecting an imagined other who has the basic traits that are the opposite of our own faith. If we believe in one God, the imagined other believes in Two Powers. Our own identity as well as our own faith are affirmed through the Scriptures that are made to address our own identity and

faith by means of the imagined other. Thus, it is not Scripture that serves polemics, but an imagined polemic that brings out the full meaning of Scripture as part of ongoing exegetical activity.

There are at least two ways in which the description of rabbinic reference to Two Powers in Heaven as hermeneutical may be understood, and the different sources that resort to the formula mostly do one of two things. The first is to paraphrase a biblical verse, with the help of the Two Powers formula. In that case, the verse provides the impetus for the use of the formula and its message is somehow amplified with its help. Some of the key Tannaitic sources exhibit this kind of usage (see Mechilta Bahodesh 5 and Sifrei Deuteronomy 320). The second way in which the formula fulfills a hermeneutical function is through its use as a rhetorical device. Accordingly, hermeneutical statements that could be trivial assume new life and meaning when their significance is highlighted in contrast with the imagined other, who believes in Two Powers. Polemic thus functions as a literary device that transforms the obvious into the exciting. In a sense, the same kind of excitement that a century of scholarship found in reconstructing historical polemics was already known to the rabbis, who realized that polemics, as a literary device, add spice to otherwise bland teachings (for example Qoheleth Rabba 2:11).

The image of the rabbis as it emerges from this reconstruction, indeed as it emerges from the model of parallel spiritual activity, is to a large extent the opposite of the image commonly portrayed in scholarship. Rather than a group of people who are constantly dealing with outside realities (primarily Christian), combating them, defining themselves in relation to them, and waging an ongoing war for their own existence and self-definition, the rabbis emerge as a class of scholars whose primary concerns are internal to their own religious life and to the value they hold dearest, the study and interpretation of Scripture. Their existence is to a large extent insular, and in the instances considered here, external reality penetrates their world only through its vague and secondary reflections. For the most part, their hermeneutical activity is divorced from the outside world, and it is that which stands at the heart of their inner world and creativity.

Two Powers—Examining the Claim of Centrality

To support the novel reading I am offering for the Two Powers sources, I would like to offer some specific observations that will, I hope, make

my reading more credible. At the heart of other scholars' work, particularly that of Boyarin, regarding Two Powers in Heaven is the claim that this is a topic of major significance for rabbinic thinking and that consequently it stands at the heart of the parting of the ways and plays a major role in issues of identity construction. Centrality and prominence of Two Powers arguments within the rabbinic corpus are thus foundational to both Boyarin's and Segal's arguments. Boyarin tells us time and again what major efforts the rabbis undertook in order to expunge the faith in Two Powers, what a strenuous process it was, how much energy was invested in the process, and how it is a major phenomenon of the period (see Boyarin 2004a, 337, 340, 351). Boyarin's explicit affirmation of centrality is nowhere supported by any statistical evidence that would measure, quantify, or qualify the occurrences of the phrase. In what seems like a circular argument, Boyarin constructs the theoretical structure in which Two Powers arguments would indeed play a central role, and his overall construction gives the impression that this is indeed a subject of major concern for the rabbis. That Boyarin himself only analyzes a handful of sources does not seem to detract from the claim that much energy was invested or from the consequent implications for the centrality of the subject to Jewish–Christian relations. I believe a closer look at some core facts will cast serious doubt on the claims for centrality of the Two Powers argument and of the entire subject, and will thereby undermine the ensuing reconstruction of historical and theological development. The following facts should be noted:

A. The number of actual occurrences of Two Powers sources in rabbinic literature is minuscule. In Tannaitic literature we have only three or four sources. In amoraic literature, similarly, we find three or four uses of the formula. A slightly larger number of reworkings of earlier materials appear in some of the later midrashim. It is extremely hard to argue for huge efforts or for ideological centrality with such a limited number of sources upon which to base the claim.
B. To the quantitative element, we should add an important observation regarding how Two Powers sources are spread between the different rabbinic corpora. In Tannaitic literature the trope is completely absent from both mishna and Tosefta and appears only in the Tannaitic midrashim. This fact itself speaks volumes and obviously points in the direction of the hermeneutical reading I propose. Thus, it is explicitly in the context of interpretation and in its service that

Two Powers formulations are found, suggesting they are best understood in a hermeneutical context.

Also, the amoraic sources that refer to Two Powers are almost exclusively interpretative. Indeed, the formula is almost absent from both Talmuds. The exceptions, upon closer scrutiny, provide further proof. In one instance, the formula is used to interpret a mishna, rather than a verse (Bavli Berachot 33b). As the interpretation seems reasonable in context, it teaches us more about the range of probable understandings of earlier materials than about actual contemporary ideological tensions.[5] The other occurrence is, in my understanding, completely playful and teaches us nothing about contemporary beliefs or actual polemics. (For a detailed reading of Bavli Hagiga 15a, see Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 89–162, curiously ignored by Boyarin 2004a, 355ff.)

C. The argument for centrality should, it seems, not only appeal to the number of occurrences, but should also seek to illustrate the centrality of a theme in diverse contexts. The broader the spread an idea has and the more diversified the contexts in which it appears, the more we may claim centrality of an idea. Given the claim for the centrality of the battle against Two Powers theories, one is struck by how thin the actual spread of sources is. We do not find halachot that are directly and unequivocally relevant to this battle, except for the above mentioned attempt to account for one particular halacha in terms of Two Powers. Similarly, we lack stories that can credibly prove the importance of this issue. Perhaps some customs would have emerged that could illustrate the importance of rabbinic rejection of Two Powers understandings. Most importantly, we could reasonably expect to find reports of actual polemics that employ the formula. What we find are almost exclu-

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[5] Though the interpretation is certainly possible, it is also possible to understand Mishna Berachot 5:3 in and of itself without appeal to the Two Power understanding, as Bavli Berachot 33b does. The absence of this explanation from the Yerushalmi is telling, and the Yerushalmi's quote of Ps 63:12 is suggestive of another line of interpretation for this mishna, whose elaboration is beyond the scope of the present note. The interpretation of the first lemma in Mishna Megilla 4:9 by the Yerushalmi seems a likelier candidate for identification with Two Powers. Still, the fact that 'Two Powers' only comes up in the interpretation and not in the mishna itself is telling. Reuven Kimelman, in a volume on rabbinic polemics that I am editing, discusses rabbinic tendency to explain phenomena that have their own conceptual evolution by appeal to polemics. The present case accords with such an understanding.

sively hermeneutical applications of the formula, small in number and limited in scope of application.

Even within the interpretative context, we could have found the formula functioning, like key rabbinic concepts do, eisegetically. The degree to which the rabbis interject a concept or a verse, whether it belongs or not, indicates how important it is to them. The fact is that the few sources that do employ the formula do so through exegesis, not through eisegesis; in other words, the formula is applied in a very reasonable and limited manner, in accordance with what seems to be its hermeneutical purpose, without in any significant way exceeding it.

Thus, the absence of the formula from key documents, its limited quantitative and qualitative use, and its almost exclusive hermeneutical application all lead me to reject the claim that the battle over Two Powers in Heaven was a central and important one for the rabbis. Its origins must be sought not in historical relations between the rabbis and other religious groups, but in the workings of interpretation and in the way that rabbinical interpretation could use and apply, in a local and limited scope, the formula to underscore specific points relating to individual biblical verses with which it engaged.

Implications for Contemporary Theology and Dialogue

I have tried, throughout this presentation, to point to the relationship between the views we take of early Jewish–Christian relations and how contemporary Jewish–Christian relations are viewed and practiced. The case of Two Powers in Heaven is an opportune moment to illustrate the suggested relationship between my reconstruction of early sources and their implications for contemporary theology and dialogue. The key insight that emerges from my reconstruction of sources is that rabbinic references to Two Powers in Heaven were never intended as a reaction to Christianity, or for that matter to any other specific religious group. If so, they are also not relevant to their view of that group. According to Segal this is the point of contention between the rabbis and Christianity. According to Boyarin this issue is at the core of the divide. Even if belief in Two Powers in Heaven was acceptable at some point in history, the recovery of such a moment would seem to be of little value for contemporary relations. One would be hard pressed to undo such a major move as the expunging of faith in Two Powers from Judaism in

order to recover an earlier stage in which such faith was legitimate. Christianity's very coming into being is related to the core of Jewish identity, and those demarcation lines can no longer be erased.

By contrast, my own reading has consequences to a contemporary Jewish view of Christianity. In my view, the rabbis were never interested in the theological details that lend Christian theology its definition. The case of Two Powers cannot address these concerns. Consequently, we cannot glean any theological instruction from the rabbis regarding how a view of the Christian Godhead can or cannot be constructed and what kinds of views of the Godhead may be upheld from a Jewish theological context, while others must be rejected. If the sources teach us of a knee-jerk hermeneutical response, rather than a concrete historical polemic, this response cannot provide an answer to the many questions that we would need to explore, were we to seriously engage a Two Powers understanding from a theological perspective. For example: is the problem in Two Powers related to tension and conflict between them; how would one view two powers that enjoy fully harmonious and complementary relations between themselves; does it assume some hierarchical relationship between the powers, and would there be a difference between two powers conceived as equal in power or as one being subordinate to the other; would there be a difference in viewing the Two Powers issue in an intra-divine or an extra-divine context? Our sources cannot answer any of these questions. In view of the hermeneutical context from which the teachings are derived, there is little positive that we can glean from rabbinic references to Two Powers in Heaven. At the end of the day, they only tell us what we already know from other contexts: there is only one God. But when it comes to understanding the one God in more complex ways, as indeed Christianity seeks to do, discussions of Two Powers become irrelevant.

The benefits of the suggested approach for contemporary Jewish–Christian relations are obvious. It liberates the discussions of Two Powers from the Jewish–Christian polemical baggage with which they had become associated. It thereby also liberates us to launch a fresh reflection on the types of understandings of the divine that could or could not be recognized from a Jewish context, both ancient and contemporary. While it may be pushing the case too far, in theory the lack of explicit reference to Trinitarian doctrine in all of rabbinic literature might suggest that the problems that later generations associated with this belief were not shared by the rabbis. The rabbis may have been able to deal with this aspect of Christian belief in the same way they

recognized modalities within the divine. Here Boyarin's discussion is so helpful in showing us the arbitrariness of what is recognized as theologically acceptable in the history of how God is understood and how that history has been played out in the context of Jewish–Christian relations. If this is the case, we would be forced to look for the origins of these profound theological differences in other contexts, such as the rise of philosophy, changing political circumstances, the application of force, power, and coercion in Jewish–Christian relations, and more. What seems to be a theological abyss may actually be related to other factors than the fundamental faith of both traditions.

Paradoxically, the more contact we identify in ancient sources, the harder our present-day theological challenge is. Thus, Fine's methodological warning is not only sane advice for the historian, it is also a needed call for the theologian. As we let go of some of the treasured points of reconstructed contact, we may actually be opening the way for new and enriching points of contact in contemporary Jewish–Christian relations.

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