

JUDAISMS AND INCARNATIONAL THEOLOGIES: MAPPING OUT THE PARAMETERS OF DIALOGUE*

Alon Goshen-Gottstein

PRECIS

The present essay examines one of the cardinal doctrines of Christian theology from within the context of a Jewish-Christian conversation. For centuries of Jewish-Christian polemic, the incarnation was the object of scorn, objection, and argument. The present dialogical situation poses the challenge of developing a new conversation around this Christian dogma. After defining the change in historical paradigm that serves as background to the present essay, an attempt is made to listen to the meaning and religious message of the incarnation in a nonpolemical context. Various senses of incarnation in Judaism are presented. First, a weak sense of the incarnation is found in a variety of early rabbinic materials. Then, a stronger sense of incarnation, relating to God's incarnation, is examined. It is suggested that resources exist within kabbalistic and hasidic Judaism that, at the very least, make it possible to speak of such incarnation. While obvious differences between Christian and Jewish understandings cannot be fully bridged, these texts suggest that the gap may be narrowed. Thus, Christian religious language is not completely senseless in a Jewish context. Finally, the essay poses some questions to the Christian reader regarding the negative implications of the doctrine of the incarnation for Jewish-Christian relations.

I. The Incarnation—Changing Contexts for Reflection

A. The Context of Jewish-Christian Polemic

Looking at the incarnation in the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue allows us to assess how different the present situation is from the situation that

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Alon Goshen-Gottstein (Jewish) has, since 1997, been director of the Elijah School for the Study of Wisdom in World Religions and lecturer and director of the Center for the Study of Rabbinic Thought, Beit Morasha College, both in Jerusalem. He has also lectured at the Ratisbonne Pontifical Institute in Jerusalem, 1997-2001; the School of Overseas Students, Tel Aviv University, 1997-99; the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies (branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary), 1996-98; the Dept. of Jewish History, Track for Jewish Thought, at both Haifa and Ben Gurion universities, 1996; and guest lectured at the University of Uppsala, 1996-97. He taught in the Dept. of Jewish Philosophy at Tel Aviv University, 1991-95. Ordained a rabbi in 1977, he holds a B.A. and Ph.D. (1986) from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he did a preparatory year for a direct doctoral program. In 1982, he did a year of research on the New Testament and ancient religions at Harvard Divinity School. He was a member of the Shalom Hartman Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem, 1989-99. Stanford University Press published his *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach* in 2000; his *Israel in God's Presence: An Introduction to Judaism for the Christian Student* is forthcoming from Hendrickson Press. His nearly three dozen articles have appeared in edited collections and in leading scholarly journals. His "God the Father in Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity: Transformed Background or Common Ground?" appeared in *J.E.S.* 38 (Fall, 2001).

characterized Jewish-Christian relations for centuries and that continues to find expression in certain Jewish circles, as well as in certain forms of Christianity. The present essay examines a particular Christian doctrine from a Jewish perspective, in a dialogical context. This dialogical context is different from the arguments and disputations that were typical of Jewish-Christian encounters for centuries. The point of those disputations was to prove who was "right." The stakes were high. For a minority religion, constantly fighting against the forces attempting to convert and overpower it, interreligious encounters were a matter of survival. In the context of a polemic there is room for only one side to be right. Both sides approach the polemic ostensibly fully aware of the opponents' positions. The conversation that ensues is a competition out of which only one winner will emerge. Many earlier Jewish statements concerning the incarnation were articulated under such circumstances—both real historical disputations, such as the famous disputation of Nahmanides, and literary disputations, common enough to create a literary genre within Jewish writings.

From the perspective of polemics and disputations there is little to say concerning Judaism and its attitude to the incarnation. To quote but one statement, made in the context of such a disputation, taken from Nahmanides' famous disputation:

[T]he doctrine in which you believe, and which is the foundation of your faith, cannot be accepted by the reason, and nature affords no ground for it, nor have the prophets ever expressed it. Nor can even the miraculous stretch as far as this . . . The mind of a Jew, or any other person, cannot tolerate this; and you speak your words entirely in vain, for this is the root of our controversy.¹

For Jewish writers engaged in a polemic against Christianity the incarnation was one of the easiest targets of polemic. Unlike other issues of Jewish-Christian polemic that involved exegesis and the offering of adequate scriptural support, the issue of the incarnation could be fought on purely rational and philosophical grounds.² Daniel Lasker has documented the philosophical dimension of the proofs against the incarnation found in Jewish sources. On the whole, the Christian faith is presented as simply unreasonable. Furthermore, the incarnation can be belittled graphically by drawing out the implication of the presence of God

¹Hyam Maccoby, ed. and tr., *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Rutherford, Madison, and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982), pp. 119-120.

²See David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus, with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Judaism, Texts and Translations 4 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), pp. 351ff.; idem, "The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages," in Jeremy Cohen, ed., *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), p. 493; Daniel Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Ktav Publishing House and Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1977), pp. 105-134. See Michael Wyschogrod, "A Jewish Perspective on the Incarnation," *Modern Theology* 12 (April, 1996): 204, for a disclaimer of this position, on theological grounds.

within the womb of a woman. Thus, the idea is not only illogical but also outrageous.³ The idea goes clearly enough against primary Jewish intuitions not even to necessitate a full-scale rebuttal. Hence, a combination of philosophical impossibility and derision allows for the presentation of the incarnation as one more feature that makes Christianity incredible and unappealing.

B. The New Dialogical Context

The context in which this essay is written is different, and thought should be given to how the different context should affect the way in which the idea of the incarnation is approached. Let me state how I see the present context. My ability to reflect upon the present theme is directly linked to my perception of the changed nature of relations and of discourse. What is the meaning of our being in a situation of dialogue, rather than one of polemic?

It means first and foremost that there is more than one winner in the game, or, better yet, there are no winners. We are talking to each other not with an eye to convince or to change each other's religions. We have accepted the other, and, in terms of the paradigms current in the Middle Ages, the acceptance of the other means a renunciation of some aspect of our truth-claims. In the worst case we have settled for some relative understanding of the presence of multiple religious traditions. In the better case we have redefined the nature of our truth-claims to make space for the other. In either case, the tone governing the present-day climate is no longer the tone of those who feel they have the full truth at their disposal—a truth that is exclusive, total, and therefore universally compelling, even though they might continue to adhere to their faith with full conviction.

A second and related feature is that the present-day context is open and aware of the growing, changing, and ever-transforming manner in which we speak of God and of religious matters. Thus, it is not only that we make our faith statements with less absolute valuation but also that we are more aware of and more open to new ways of stating and formulating the core of our faith. One of the most important factors in how we think through and redefine our theological categories is the presence of the other. Much of contemporary theological thinking is done precisely in dialogue with others. The purpose of such dialogue is twofold: first, to correct imbalances that stem from a false perception of the other or from excluding the other from one's horizons; and second, the encounter with the other furnishes us with new ways of perceiving and presenting our religious convictions. Ultimately, the encounter with the other fashions our own self-perception, as well as our religious understanding.

A third factor that I see as constitutive of the present climate concerns our historical-critical awareness. Giving up some of our absolute truth-claims is the fruit of a long process in which we have all become aware of the contingency and the historicity of our religious traditions. This self-critical awareness allows us to take a certain critical distance in relation to our traditions. We are able to

³See Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, p. 44.

say that not all that has been said or done in our religious traditions has always been perfect or a full expression of God's will or guiding spirit. We can view some of the key players and some of the key moves made in our respective religious histories as expressing the conditions of their time and its understanding. Appreciating the past in its context creates the space in which we can think afresh in today's changed circumstances. Similarly, our historical-critical awareness has excluded certain forms of discourse. I assume my partners in conversation and reflection would deem it inappropriate to convince me of the veracity of a christological interpretation of a passage from the Hebrew Bible. Beyond the fact that we are not trying to convince one another on matters of faith, the dialogical context is characterized by its historical-critical awareness that governs its hermeneutics, its discourse, and its goals.

The sum total of these changes, by which I characterize the present context, is not the loss of faith or meaning. Rather, it is the opening up of faith to ever-new articulations, the discovery of the reality of God in newer and richer ways, and the hearing of God's voice through the presence of the other. It is in this light that I, as a Jew, address Christians, on what might be a Jewish reaction, response, or perspective on the incarnation. In saying all this, I willingly open myself up to the question of whether the changed circumstances might yield a different response than that articulated by the great polemicists of the Middle Ages. This is not to say that I might deviate from their position of faith. I do not suggest that, now that circumstances have changed, we Jews can start believing in the Christian concept of the incarnation. The point is, rather, that the new context enables things that may not have been possible previously. I see the significance of the present context as twofold:

(1) Listen to each other. Polemics are a mode of talking at each other, not of talking to each other. Even if no change results from such a listening process, the premise that we need to try to hear what each other is saying seems to me a fundamental principle. Thus, the first goal is to listen so we understand each other better.

(2) Through such listening, a new language becomes available. The presence of this new language allows us to explore ourselves and the other in a new light. In the present context the exploration of the meaning of the theological language of one religious tradition might allow for a deeper grasp and for the posing of new questions with regard to the self-understanding of another religious tradition—in this case, Judaism.

II. Listening to the Meaning of the Incarnation

We are engaged in a theological conversation. From a true conversation we might emerge with a different view of both ourselves and the other. The basic premise of such a conversation is that we have something to learn from one another and that, in learning of the other, we might learn about ourselves as well. Let me take this premise into the discussion of the incarnation. Classically, the

question has been framed by Jews with regard to this subject in the following manner: Is the Christian claim concerning the incarnation valid or not? Namely, did the incarnation really occur or not? As suggested, the question was dealt with by exploring the logical and philosophical feasibility of the doctrine. If the context of polemic dictated that *Fragstellung*, the present-day context might allow us to pose the question in a different way. Instead of asking whether the incarnation happened, or if it were possible that an incarnation might take place, we might ask what it means for a Christian to say that the incarnation took place. Framing the question in this way assumes from the start that we are dealing with a Christian belief. However, it also assumes that an outsider—in this case a Jew—might consider the significance of this belief for the Christian. Put differently, we are called to listen to what is being said, beyond the form through which it is being said.

Listening is the first step in understanding. In listening we indicate both that we care about the other and also that we have something to learn from the other. It seems to me that religious humility mandates listening as a basic mode of being in an interreligious context. Through such open listening we might be able to hear a dimension that a more argumentative and truth-minded perspective might exclude. What we hear might not be truth as a philosophical category. However, what we hear might be a testimony to the spiritual reality of the other. Through this testimony we might be touched by or, at the very least, come to appreciate the spiritual reality of the other, without having to assent to the other's beliefs or doctrines.

I would now like to pose the question: What do I, or should I, as a Jew, hear when listening to the Christian talk in the language of incarnation? It should perhaps be admitted that, in order to bring out the tones I shall emphasize, I, as a Jew, must first turn down the habitual overtones produced by my own religious tradition. I must set aside the philosophical critique, the derision, and the acquired responses that are typical of the Jewish response to the incarnation. In what follows I assume that truth-claims can be bracketed in favor of what might be termed the wisdom of religious traditions. Theology—especially the theology of wisdom incarnate—can be listened to for its wisdom value, a value that might transcend cultural boundaries and that might be meaningful even to those outside the particular religious system. In this light, it seems to me I can hear the following four tones in the Christian faith-claim:

1. God loves. It seems to me that this is the most fundamental message one ought to hear from the notion of the incarnation. It seems that we Jews have attuned our ears to the question of whether God can become human, whether Jesus was truly divine, etc. But, underlying the theological statement that God took human form is a more fundamental statement of a relational nature: God loves. Because God loves, says the Christian, God sent God's son. The Jewish ear is accustomed to hearing the christological statement as a form of self-aggrandizement on behalf of the Christian. It hears it as a mythical statement that is meant to justify and give value to a system or to a person. Indeed, the incarnational claim might function in such a way. However, I doubt the incarnational

claim was born simply in order to satisfy the needs of an ideology. The incarnational claim expresses a certain relation that, by the Christian's account, is grounded in love. I would therefore postulate that until I, as a Jew, am able to hear in the talk of the incarnation the ground of love from which it springs, I have not yet heard what the Christian is truly attempting to say. The incarnation for the Christian is the supreme expression of God's care for us, a care that finds expression through what might be taken to be the highest form of love, self-sacrifice.

2. The humility of God. For God to take human form is clearly an act of descent and limitation. The ancient hymn in Philippians 2, one of the earliest christological statements, speaks of the *kenosis*, the self-emptying, that accompanies the descent of Christ into the world. Once more, the issue is not whether God had or did not have other means at his disposal by which to save humanity (a question often enough echoed in the Scholastic debates). The question is what the religious sense is that finds expression in the talk of the incarnation. God's humility seems to be a central feature of this religious sensibility. God's humility and love extend to the point that God is willing to suffer on our behalf.

3. The presence and closeness of God. To say that God incarnates in a man whom we know and whom we follow is to acknowledge the great immediacy of God's presence. God is present to us in the most real and concrete manner, as real as the contact with any human. It certainly gives clear expression to the Christian's feeling that in Jesus he or she encountered God. I do not mean to reduce 2,000 years of christological speculations to a formula that might do injustice to the subtlety of Christian theology. Rather, it seems fair to say that the impetus governing so much of the formation of Christian doctrine has been to give expression to this basic religious sense: We have encountered God in Christ. If the evolution of Christian thought has been ever more in the direction of the assertion of the divinity of Jesus, this conveys the fundamental religious sense expressive of the Christian spiritual reality: The Christian feels he or she has encountered God in a direct and powerful way. For the Christian, Jesus is not simply a sage, prophet, priest, wise man, miracle worker, etc. He is not just the one who carries God's word but is God's word itself. Thus, Jesus' life, actions, and being present a direct contact with God; they are part of God's speech. Jesus is—whatever that might mean—God. Traditionally, Jews have not related to the enormous power contained in the religious sentiment that God has made Godself fully present in the person of the one we follow. Yet, it is this very power that gives the incarnation its appeal and vitality.

4. The incarnation is not only a statement about God. It is also a statement concerning the world⁴ and concerning human nature. This might not be the primary intent of the idea of the incarnation. However, much theological work, both in the Middle Ages and in modern times, has related the incarnation to the meaning of existence and creation and, more particularly, to the value of humanity,

⁴See Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 172.

not just to the value and meaning of God. That God incarnates in human form says something about human life, indicating its enormous value, to the point that God can take human form for Godself. This argument was already suggested by Aquinas.⁵ From another angle, human nature is transformed and changed through the incarnation. This notion is particularly relevant in the understanding of the Eastern Church Fathers.⁶ The incarnation transformed human nature and gave it the capacity of becoming divine. The incarnation is thus not only a statement concerning God. It also becomes a statement concerning the value, up to the point of potential divinity, of human life. This train of thought has been particularly significant in the present century. According to a certain philosophical-theological trend, through the incarnation all temporal goods and values have been ennobled and consecrated by the incarnation.⁷ To take one example, Jacques Maritain spoke of the full integration of the human being in all spheres of life and the consecration of all aspects of his life in light of the incarnation.⁸ It is important to note that, according to some contemporary developments, the incarnation serves as the basis of a spiritual path of living.⁹ It is certainly easier, within the interreligious context, to address the faith of the other from the perspective of its potential to shape and guide life, rather than from the perspective of its dogmatic content.

Often, Jews portray Christianity as disdaining this world and living in a polarized perception of reality, torn between body and soul. While this characterization certainly draws upon data of Christian life, Jews often fail to appreciate the significance of the idea of the incarnation as a unifying and integrating force that gives meaning to life, to the world, and to human nature. In speaking of the incarnation we must therefore hear the larger Christian message, which concerns the meaning of life and of humanity.

Clearly, there is nothing objectionable in any of the claims made above. Obviously, God loves, God is humble, God is present, and the world in which we live is positively valued. The first Jewish response to my presentation might therefore be: What need have we for incarnational language? So much of what I have presented as the underlying religious sensibility of the incarnation is, in fact, common to Jewish religious sensibility. If so, bringing to light the deeper shared understandings of Judaism and Christianity is itself a significant advance.

⁵See Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 218ff.

⁶See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 318; James Robertson, "Mystical Transformation of Consciousness in Symeon the New Theologian," *Diakonia*, vol. 19, nos. 1-3 (1984-85), p. 9.

⁷See D. J. Forbes, "Incarnationism," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. [with Catholic University of America], 1967), vol. 7, p. 417.

⁸Jacques Maritain, *Humanisme Integral* (Paris, 1936 [E.T.: *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, tr. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner, 1968)]), pp. 134ff.

⁹See Felice da Mareto, "Incarnato," in Marcel Viller with P. Cavallera and J. de Guibert, eds., *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire* (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1971), vol. 7, pt. 2, cols. 1639-1640.

Perhaps, then, the incarnation is just another way of getting at what Jews are saying in their own way. Thus, according to this line of reasoning, an exploration of the deeper assumptions and implications of the incarnation serves to highlight the common religious ground between Christians and Jews.¹⁰

However, we might want to suggest a more far-reaching approach. If we can separate the Christian dogma from its dogmatic content and isolate its basic religious sense, do we come up with the same sensibility as the Jewish sensibility, in which case Jews and Christians live in a common religious world, or is there something different in making the propositions stated above by means of the faith in the incarnation? Put differently, what does it mean to listen to one another's faith-experience? Do we attempt to translate one system into the language of the other, or do we allow for the uniqueness of each system to emerge? If we were to take the second tack, we might ask what we can hear and learn from this incarnational approach. Can we hear a new language, a different approach, to the reality of God? Is there an added dimension of depth that might deepen our understanding of God's love, humility, and presence? Might the Jew who bothers to listen deeply enough to incarnational language find her or himself gaining deeper appreciation for what it means to speak of God? If incarnation can be cast in terms of the wisdom of God, then might it not also have something to teach Jews in their approach to God? If we are willing to answer these questions in the affirmative, a path is opened to mutual enrichment that transcends the truth-claims that accompanied the bitter history of religious rivalry and coercion.

III. Judaism, Christianity, and Incarnation—Methodological Issues

In order for what we hear to bear fruit in us, there must be some echo to the language the other uses. If we cannot find any way of relating to the actual meaning of his or her language, we might grow in respect for the other's uniqueness, but we will remain untouched in our own understanding. Having attempted to listen to the language of incarnation within a Christian context, we are now called to reflect upon the meaning of such language within the Jewish tradition. We must now turn to an exploration of what Judaism might have to say with regard to the incarnation. Let me state at the outset that the task at hand is far greater than what one can accomplish within the scope of a single essay.

From one perspective, the issue is one of the history and philosophy of religion. Inasmuch as incarnation is a category that can be spoken of within the framework of the history of religions, we might be exploring the meaning of the

¹⁰Such an understanding would then have to account for how and why different religions adopt different religious languages to describe the same fundamental reality. Swinburne's *The Christian God*, p. 217, touches upon the issue of the necessity of the incarnation. We might translate into anthropological terms the position that the incarnation was not essentially necessary but a divine free choice; we might then say that belief in the incarnation might not be necessary but might be an expression of the freedom of the individual religious tradition to cast its religious sense in its particular language.

category from a wider phenomenological and historical perspective that transcends the framework of the Jewish-Christian conversation. However, at present we are interested in the idea in its particular christological context. Here, too, the issue demands attention from multiple perspectives. The issue is philosophical-theological. It entails both an understanding of the Christian doctrine and of possible Jewish responses to it. It is, however, also historical. It involves examination of the history of the evolution of the idea of incarnation and, in particular, an examination of its possible Jewish roots. It is at the same time an exercise in the history of ideas and a creative attempt to do theology—not only to study its history. Due to the vastness of the task at hand, I wish to consider the present exercise as a laying out of the issues that define the problem. Each of the points I shall raise can justify further in-depth study. My goal is not to make a definitive statement, as much as it is to demonstrate the complexity of the issues involved and to suggest some directions that future thinking might take.

Perhaps the first issue I must tackle relates to the very title of this presentation. Recent scholarship, following the lead of Jacob Neusner, often speaks of Judaisms, in the plural, in order to capture the sense of plurality of worldview, as well as practice and social structure that characterize different manifestations of the larger phenomenon of Judaism. With regard to our subject it makes a great difference what Judaism we portray. Scholars who have dealt with this subject have shown, in the way they have presented their materials, that, depending on the type of Judaism one turns to, the possibility of speaking meaningfully about the incarnation changes. For example, in Wyschogrod's treatment of the subject, he starts with a Maimonidean position, which does not enable him to speak meaningfully of incarnation. In order to find a way of relating to incarnational thinking, he is forced to turn to biblical thinking. We must, therefore, be aware of the type of Judaism we present and of the conscious choices we must make in order to make our creative theological moves.

While Christianity might seem to be a more defined entity—after all, one could simply refer to the discussions of Nicea and Chalcedon and legitimately consider them Christianity—here, too, one must avoid oversimplification. While it is true that Christianity believes in the incarnation, what this actually means can be variously understood. Senses of Christian variety emerge in two directions. New Testament scholarship has demonstrated the existence of a plurality of New Testament Christologies, not all of which are incarnational. In fact, as several New Testament scholars suggest, it is only in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel that we encounter a fullblown doctrine of incarnation.¹¹ Thus, incarnational Christology might be only one way Christians have at their disposal for talking about the reality of Christ Jesus, when mining the theologies of the New Testament for suitable religious language.

¹¹See James Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 257ff.; Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Cambridge: J. Clarke; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 23ff., 156ff.

A different kind of variety in Christian thinking is to be found in modern thinking about the incarnation. Modernity has grappled with the notion of the incarnation in significant ways. Its own grapplings with the idea obviously affect what type of Christology the Jewish partner to the conversation is called to reflect upon. In fact, one might say that the idea of the incarnation has come under more serious scrutiny and debate than almost any other aspect of Christian theology in recent years. Beginning in the late 1970's when *The Myth of God Incarnate*¹² was published, there has been a stream of continuous publications exploring the meaning of the incarnation and its continued feasibility in the modern context. John Hick's 1993 book, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*,¹³ sums up one direction within this stream, one that plays down significantly the meaning of incarnation and presents it in a weak sense, which Hick termed "metaphorical." This sense would obviously pose less of a theological challenge to a Jewish partner in conversation. Even prior to this recent intense discussion, various nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers have grappled with the idea. One movement of understanding Christology has been named "humanistic Christology" by John Macquarrie. In this camp we find such figures as Schleiermacher and others. A Christology that places the emphasis on Christ's humanity and the fulfillment of his human potential, which he shares with all, presents less of a challenge to the Jewish discussant.

Therefore, both Judaism and Christianity should be substituted in our discussion by more nuanced terms of reference. In the present context I will treat both Judaism and Christianity as dynamic units. Rather than ask how two static bodies relate or compare to one another, I would describe the question at hand, in a graphic manner, as how two rotating bodies, such as spheres, relate to one another. Their respective points of contact are a function of how we position the two spheres in relation to one another. It is only as we rotate both bodies that we can explore their various relations. Furthermore, everything we can say depends on how we position the spheres. If we were to shift or tilt one of the spheres, a different picture might present itself to us.

How, then, do we propose to present the relation of Judaism(s) to incarnation? The answer depends on the context from which we deem it relevant to pose the question. I see two ways in which the question can be posed—a weaker manner, and a stronger manner. Obviously, we need to be able to make the weaker case, in order to consider the stronger case. The weaker manner relates to incarnation as a category in the study of religion in general. The stronger manner concerns the particular use of incarnation within Christianity. The point of recognizing the weaker case would be that incarnation is a useful descriptive category, possessing a certain descriptive neutrality and objectivity, through which we might describe various phenomena. As these phenomena include both some Judaisms and Christianity, some kind of common descriptive ground is acknowl-

¹²John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

¹³John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (London: SCM Press; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

edged. This common descriptive ground might disregard many features that are particular to the respective teachings. Still, if we can find some sense of commonality, then the two traditions are not as far apart as one might have imagined.

The stronger question seeks to make another kind of gain. The question here is whether the way in which Christianity uses the incarnation has any meaning to Jewish ears. The common perception is that the answer is negative. Most presentations of Judaism, founded upon the articulations of Judaism in the great polemics of the Middle Ages, dismiss the idea out of hand, as having no meaning. Our question, at this point would be whether there is any meaning, from a Jewish perspective, to the sense in which a Christian refers to the incarnation. If there is the possibility of speaking about it in a meaningful way, then theological dialogue becomes possible. Further possibilities then open up. The language of the other may not only make sense but can also be respected as a legitimate way in which the other expresses a sense of the divine. Beyond this, as stated, recognizing the meaning of the other's language might open our eyes up to realizing what we have within ourselves, which we come to discover through the presence of the other.

IV. Incarnation in Judaism—The Weak Sense

Let us move to the actual issue of incarnation. Let us first explore the weak sense of incarnation, as a descriptive category in the study of religion. It seems to me there is little ground for denying this sense of incarnation to the Jewish tradition. In fact, here we can almost omit the plural from "Judaisms" and speak of Judaism as a univocal tradition. Incarnation is a process whereby some disincarnate reality takes a bodily manifestation. The most obvious case might be that of body and soul. If one believes in the preexistence of the soul, then any birth is an act of incarnation.¹⁴ This type of incarnation is naturally recognized within Judaism, at least from the rabbinic period onward. If we use preexistence as our yardstick, we note that various phenomena are said to be preexistent in rabbinic literature. I will spell out three examples, from a larger number of available cases: Torah, Israel, and the Patriarchs.

A. Torah

The preexistence of the Torah is commonplace within rabbinic literature. Following Proverbs 8, the Torah is identified with wisdom and is taken to be preexistent. The Torah is a heavenly being. Its coming into physical form can legitimately be viewed as an instance of incarnation. I might add that, from the perspective of the relative importance of the ideas I shall be presenting, this is

¹⁴The analogy of body and soul to the incarnation of Christ occupied much attention during the first centuries of Christian speculation. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, vol. 1: *Faith, Trinity, Incarnation*, 3rd ed. rev. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970 [1st ed., 1956]), pp. 366ff.

one of the most significant senses, if not the most significant sense, of incarnation in Jewish sources. Some of the Jewish sources I shall present might justify and legitimate the use of the language of incarnation. However, they do not suggest that those ideas occupied a central place in the overall structure of Jewish thinking. It is not sufficient to point to the mere existence of an idea. We must also consider its relative importance and the degree of its diffusion and acceptance. It may be that the most significant incarnating presence, within rabbinic literature, is the Torah. Neusner has given the notion of incarnation with regard to the Torah another slant, when speaking of the sage as "Torah incarnate."¹⁵ Thus, we might think of various levels and degrees in which the Torah comes into incarnation.

I consider the application of the category of incarnation to the Torah to be useful and an indication of the fruitfulness of presenting ideas in a cross-religious context. While I have argued that it is legitimate to describe Torah as incarnating, this is certainly not a common way of referring to the Torah. The reason is simply that incarnation is not a category one traditionally thinks in, perhaps because of its Christian overtones. However, if we think of the Torah as an incarnating presence, certain things might make sense to us. For instance, the meaning of the Torah's growth and elaboration in its earthly context, the ability of the earthly masters of the Torah to affect its celestial status, as well as some of the radical demands made in the context of the study of Torah—all might fit into a framework that is well described as incarnational. Adopting such a language might help us to perceive in a new light data to which we might not have paid sufficient attention and help us to organize the data into a new structure of meaning. If my suggestion that Torah is an incarnating presence is valid, we might at the end of the day find ourselves with the statement that the incarnational sense that Christianity attributes to Christ, Judaism assigns to the Torah. At the very least we can say this much, and I think this is already significant. For thereby we have pointed to the respective importance of the Torah and Christ in the two traditions and to the equivalence in their roles in the two traditions.¹⁶

B. Israel

A second preexistent reality that is also portrayed in Jewish sources as having an earthly as well as a celestial reality is Israel. One might therefore speak of Israel as incarnating. Such an incarnation could be portrayed as fulfilling a divine plan for the world. Such an incarnation would have to be intimately linked to the meaning of creation. It would be very easy to construct such a theology of Israel from rabbinic sources. The parallels with the salvific role of the incarnation of Christ are obvious. Both incarnations can be said to be mean-

¹⁵See Jacob Neusner, "Is the God of Judaism Incarnate?" *Religious Studies* 24 (June, 1988): 214.

¹⁶See Morton Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels*, Journal of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 6 (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1951; repr. 1968), p. 159.

ingful on the creation-redemption axis. While this might afford us another vantage point from which to converse with one another, I should once more point out that it is not common to speak of the incarnation of Israel. However, one of the fruits of the interreligious discussion is precisely the ability to open our eyes to new ways of understanding ourselves, in light of the other. In this sense, then, I find it useful to think of Israel as an incarnating presence.

C. Jacob

A third preexistent reality, according to midrashic sources, is the patriarchs. Here, I will concentrate on one of the patriarchal figures, Jacob. The incarnation of Jacob has provided Christian scholars with one of the possible parallels to the incarnation of Jesus. In the Prayer of Joseph, probably a first-century pseudepigraphic work, we have reference to the patriarch Jacob in terms that can be justifiably called incarnational.¹⁷ Jacob is not simply the incarnation of his preexistent self but an incarnation of the Angel Israel. Recently, Elliot Wolfson has suggested that various rabbinic and early mystical texts regarding Jacob should be understood in a similar manner.¹⁸ However, this parallel raises the question of the precise difference between the history-of-religions type of usage and Christian usage. Differently put, scholars examining the history of the New Testament's incarnational idea have pointed out that in all relevant Jewish sources it is never God who incarnates.¹⁹ This has led Maurice Casey to state that the idea of the incarnation was formulated by a gentile Christianity. Within the boundaries of Judaism, incarnation might be relevant to various beings but not to the person of God. Casey and James Dunn²⁰ both claim that only in the Fourth Gospel, composed by a gentile Christianity, do we find the notion of the word's becoming flesh—literally, "incarnation." This brings us, then, to the more difficult question that is associated with the particular and unique Christian claim: the claim that God incarnated.

V. Incarnation in Judaism—The Strong Sense: Previous Scholarship

One hundred years ago this question could not have occupied Jewish attention. The idea of incarnation was simply beyond the pale of ideas that could be considered. It is a sign of the changing times that during the past decade several

¹⁷See on this Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, p. 91; and Arthur Darby Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, sel. and ed. with intro., bibliography, and indexes Zeph Stewart (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), vol. 2, pp. 928ff.

¹⁸Elliot Wolfson, "Demut Ya'akov Hakuka Bekisé Hakavod," in M. Oron and A. Goldreich, eds., *Masut—Ephraim Gottlieb Memorial Volume* (Tel Aviv: University of Tel Aviv, 1994), pp. 131-185. See further Yair Lorberbaum, "Imago Dei: Rabbinic Literature, Maimonides, and Nahmanides," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1997 [in Hebrew], pp. 182-184, and n. 130.

¹⁹[John] C. O'Neill, in *Who Did Jesus Think He Was?* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1995), tried to argue to the contrary. His case is so unconvincing that to my mind he ends up inadvertently reaffirming the consensus he seeks to change.

²⁰See note 11, above.

studies have been conducted that discuss seriously, even if not necessarily successfully, the notion of the incarnation of God in Judaism. I will begin by mentioning briefly the fruits of these studies.

A. Neusner: The Incarnation of the Anthropomorphic God

In 1988 Neusner wrote *The Incarnation of God in Judaism*.²¹ The very willingness of a scholar of Judaism to present his subject matter in this way shows a new theological openness on the Jewish side. However, as Elliot Wolfson noted in his review of Neusner,²² Neusner used the term "incarnation" in a very particular sense. Most Christian readers, including his then-colleagues at Brown, judging by his introductory remarks, would not share this sense of the incarnation. Neusner described how anthropomorphic the rabbinic God is but provided no indication of what seems to constitute the heart of the incarnational case—the willful and purposeful taking on of human form, flesh, and life.²³ The rabbinic God may be portrayed as anthropomorphic but has not been enfleshed.²⁴

B. Redman: The Soul

In an essay that set out to bridge fundamental gaps between Orthodox Judaism and Christianity, Barbara Redman devoted a brief discussion to the incarnation.²⁵ She based herself on the teachings of Rabbi Menachem Schneerson of Lubavitch, who will figure in our discussion below. According to his teachings, the human soul is divine. Achieving a person's spiritual potential leads to the dwelling of divine presence upon him or her, bringing about integration with God's will or wisdom. Redman saw the notion as particular to Lubavitch hasidism and as a suitable counterpart to Christian belief in the incarnation. According to Redman, the significant difference between hasidic and Christian teachings concerns the scope of applicability of the teaching of incarnation. While Christianity limits it to Jesus, hasidic teaching recognizes its broad applicability. While appreciating the irenic note in Redman's essay, I have some reservations regarding the usefulness of her suggestions. The ideas she sees as unique to Lubavitch hasidism are actually quite common in kabbalistic circles. Though phenomenologically the divine soul's incarnation in a body does constitute a parallel to theologically more charged reference to God's incarnation,²⁶ the difference cannot be easily glossed over. Talk of union with God and the uncovering of the

²¹Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Diversity in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

²²*Jewish Quarterly Review* 81 (July-October, 1990): 219-222.

²³Therefore, Neusner's claim—that the idea of incarnation should be viewed as the "particular framing" of the conception of incarnation that was idiomatic to various Judaic authors—is mistaken.

²⁴Cf. my remarks in "The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 87, no. 2 (1994), pp. 171-173.

²⁵Barbara J. Redman, "One God: Toward a Rapprochement of Orthodox Judaism and Christianity," *J.E.S.* 31 (Summer-Fall, 1994): 311-314.

²⁶See note 14, above.

human person's divine potential is always focused upon the human person and the fulfillment of his or her spiritual potential. It does not lead, in theory or action, to the kind of adoration that an incarnate God would receive. The reason is that, ultimately, not God Godself has incarnated but something proceeding and emanating from God, the soul.²⁷

C. Wyschogrod: The Body of Israel

Michael Wyschogrod recently published an article titled "A Jewish Perspective on the Incarnation."²⁸ After surveying the various reasons for why Jews could not relate to the incarnation, he too suggested that there is a kind of incarnation of God in the body of the people of Israel. God dwells with them, and this close dwelling is a kind of incarnation. Once more, I am not sure Wyschogrod's statement fits what the common Christian perceives to be the incarnation. God does not become Israel. God dwells among them. Certain early theologies, which Jaroslav Pelikan termed "theology of the indwelling Logos,"²⁹ might be considered in this context as parallels to Wyschogrod's notion of the incarnation of God in Israel. However, there still remains a gap, in my opinion, between these early Christologies and the sense in which God might be said to incarnate in Israel. For the Antiochene Fathers, Jesus was God. To speak of a "theology of an indwelling Logos" was a way of making sense of that claim. By contrast, God's dwelling with Israel does not make the Israelites God. It only makes them God's dwelling place. While Wyschogrod's discussion might be significant from a Jewish perspective, I do not think it provides Christians with what they might consider to be an adequate parallel.

D. Wolfson: The Imaginal Body and Concentration in Prayer

In the same context, originally at a session of the American Academy of Religion, and later in an issue of *Modern Theology*, Elliot Wolfson attempted to bridge the gap between Jewish and Christian thinking.³⁰ While he admitted that what he provided was not incarnation in a sense that a Christian might recognize, he considered that his presentation would help to bridge the gap between the two. This is certainly true if we consider that the image of Judaism that is offered in interreligious dialogue must be more nuanced than conventional stereotypes. However, I doubt that Wolfson's suggestion gives a significant parallel to the

²⁷See also David Berger's brief critique in his *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London and Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), p. 105. I am not convinced that Redman's argument should be read, in retrospect, in light of Lubavitch theology of the Rebbe, as Berger claims, though certainly the teachings may be presented on a continuum.

²⁸See note 2, above.

²⁹See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 251.

³⁰Elliot Wolfson, "Iconic Visualization and the Imaginal Body of God: The Role of Intention in the Rabbinic Conception of Prayer," *Modern Theology* 12 (April, 1996): 137-162.