

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Précis Assignment: Two Powers in Heaven

Submitted to Dr. Thomas Lyons,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of

NT503

Reading the New Testament

by

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Précis 1

Adiel Schremer's "Midrash, Theology, and History: The Two Powers in Heaven Revisited" presents the Two Powers in Heaven theology as a Tannaitic rabbinic tradition formed in response to the destruction of the Second Temple. Schremer rejects the Two Powers theology of Alan Segal and Daniel Boyarin, which suggests "the existence of a second divine authority besides God" and acts as a sort of precursor to Christianity.¹ She defends her position through the midrash of Tannaitic *Sifre* and *Mekhilta*, which make reference to the destruction of the Temple at the hands of Titus Vespasian. Schremer asserts that the theology of the Two Powers, according to the midrash, is indicative of three possible beliefs concerning God: 1) that He was killed and no longer exists, 2) that He still exists, but no longer has the power to defend Himself, or 3) that He was defeated by other divine powers stronger than Him, even going as far as to conclude that Emperor Vespasian and his empire were the new Two Powers. Schremer's tone is pessimistic, which may help the reader to empathize with the position the Tannaitic rabbis found themselves in at the end of the Second Temple Period.

¹ Adiel Schremer, "Midrash, Theology, and History: Two Powers in Heaven Revisited," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39, no.2 (May 2008), p. 231. Accessed March 3, 2023.

Précis 2

Daniel Boyarin's "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John" (2001) argues that the Logos theology of the prologue of John's Gospel is not a uniquely Christian concept, but rather finds its origins in pre-Christian Judaism(s). Boyarin defends this claim through three pillars of evidence: 1) the prevalence of the concept of the Logos in the writings of Philo Ioudaios' and, to a broader extent, the philosophy of the pre-Christian Hellenistic Jewish world, 2) the significant parallels between John's Logos and the Memra of the Targums, and 3) the use of Old Testament and Second Temple Period Wisdom literature and personified Wisdom as the backdrop for the prologue of John's Gospel. Boyarin's purpose is to demonstrate that the author of John's gospel was informed by theological concepts and writings which predated the advent of Christianity, particularly the personification of the Logos, Memra, or Wisdom, which are representative of the *deuteros theos* theology of some pre-Christian Judaisms. Speaking as a scholar, to scholars, Boyarin's tone throughout the article is heavily critical when it comes to scholarship in opposition to his views, but each of his counterpoints and contentions are grounded in research rather than emotion.

Précis 3

Michael S. Heiser's "Co-Regency in Ancient Israel's Divine Council as the Conceptual Backdrop to Ancient Jewish Binitarian Monotheism" (2015) provides an ancient antecedent to Christianity's trinitarian monotheism. Heiser roots the first Christian's ability to harmonize their Jewish monotheism with Christ's claims to divinity in a Second Temple Jewish binitarian monotheism which was derived from ancient Ugaritic theology. The Ugaritic pantheon was conceived of as taking the form of a divine council, over which the deities El and Ba'al ruled as regent and co-regent, respectively. This co-regent possessed several qualities, the most noteworthy being his anthropomorphic portrayal. The ancient Israelites adopted this divine council model, but understood Yahweh as occupying both seats of the regency with the visible, anthropomorphized Yahweh occupying the seat of the co-regent. This *deuteros theos* concept, Heiser asserts, is a theme which runs throughout the corpus of the Hebrew Bible, was discerned by Second Temple Period Jews, and was the means by which the first Christians were able to conclude that God could indeed be in human form. Heiser's approach through the entire article is thorough; building upon the work of both past and contemporary scholars while presenting his own position as a valid interpretation of the available data.

Analysis

The précis show that the Two Powers in Heaven theology has several interpretations amongst scholars. Schremer views the the Two Powers theology coming out of the second-century as a rabbinic response to the destruction of the Temple and draws pessimistic perspectives on God being expressed by a defeated Jewish people undergoing an existential crisis. Boyarin finds evidence of the Two Powers theology in the Hebrew Bible, the Targums, and other pre-Christian, Second Temple Period literature which informed not only the theology of John's gospel, but parts of the Hellenistic Jewish world as well. Heiser, on the other hand, discerned a much older origin to Jewish binitarianism in the world of the ancient Israelites and evidenced the distinct Two Powers theology and its ancient parallels as present throughout the Old Testament.

Since both Boyarin and Heiser find evidence of the tradition's existence prior to the first-century, Schremer's claim to its origins in the second-century is found to be untenable. Additionally, Boyarin and Heiser's interpretations provide greater explanatory power and scope of the available data. The synthesis of Heiser and Boyarin's studies of the the Two Powers theology demonstrates a theological tradition with its origins amongst the ancient Israelites which survived well into the Second Temple Period and which informed the theology of the first Christians and enabled them to accept Jesus as divine without compromising their faith.

Bibliography

- Boyarin, Daniel. "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John." *Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (July 2001), p. 243-284, Accessed March 3, 2023.
- Heiser, Michael S. "Co-regency in Ancient Israel's Divine Council as the Conceptual Backdrop to Ancient Jewish Binitarian Monotheism." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 26, no. 2 (2016), p. 196-225, Accessed March 3, 2023.
- Schremer, Adiel. "Midrash, Theology, and History: Two Powers in Heaven Revisited" *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39, no.2 (May 2008), p. 230-254, Accessed March 3, 2023.