Binitariarism

Binitarianism is the belief in two persons within one godhead. This is usually distinguished from bitheism—belief in two gods, but this distinction is not always clear in the scholarly literature. In this entry we take the stance that binitarianism self-identifies as a form of monotheism—belief in one god—but one that reckons with a twofold division within that godhead. Its most well-known form, Christian binitarianism consists of a division between Father and Son in the one God.

The discussion about binitarianism in Judaism and Christianity in this entry focuses on antiquity. It starts with Second Temple Judaism (specifically 2nd cent. BCE–70CE), moving into early Christianity (1st–4th cent.), and rabbinic Judaism (ca. 3th–7th cent. CE), with special attention for the interaction between both "religions." These will be called such for convenience's sake, in the full awareness that the border lines between Judaism and Christianity, or even the existence of Christianity as a separate religion, may not have been evident for the earlier decades or even centuries of this period (Becker and Reed 2003; Boyarin 2004; Dunn 2006; Schäfer 2020, 5).

Contemporary scholars of ancient Judaism and Christianity have argued that some form of binitarianism already existed in pre-Christian Judaism (Segal 1977; Boyarin 1994; 2004; Schäfer 2012; 2020). Even while claiming strict "monotheism," Second Temple Literature attests to a plethora of figures and agents that display powers and engage in acts, such as creation, that are presently associated with the God of Israel alone. These are in the first place Wisdom, also known by her Greek name Sophia, and the Logos (Word).

All Jewish writings about Wisdom (Hokhmah in Hebrew), usually personified as a woman, go back to her description in the biblical Book of Proverbs, specifically chapters 1, 8 and 9. Based on Prov 8:22–23 and 30–31, Wisdom is attributed a role in the creation of the world, either as God's little daughter or as an independent "artisan," depending on the interpretation of the enigmatic word *amon* in Prov 8:30 (Fox 1996; Hurowitz 1999; Rogers 1997). Personified Wisdom, playing a role in creation, is also found in Job 28 and in the extra-(or deutero-) canonical books of Ben Sira, Baruch 3:9–4:4, and Wisdom of Solomon 7–9 (Lang 1975; Hurtado 1998; Schäfer 2020; Gore-Jones 2021; Anthonioz and Dogniez 2021). The depiction of Wisdom, operating more or less independently next to God, in a role that is traditionally reserved for God has been interpreted as a form of binitarianism (Ringgren 1947; Fossum 1985). Hurtado counters this by stating that Wisdom was never an independent deity in Second Temple Judaism (Hurtado 1998, 47). Daniel Boyarin disagrees with Hurtado in that he interprets the belief in, and possibly the worship of Wisdom (and the Logos and the Memra, see further) as binitarian (Boyarin 2004, 119). Here we are in the middle of the, usually unstated, discussion about what "binitarianism" really means: are we speaking about two gods, or rather about an attribute of the divine, albeit one with substantive agency?

Philo of Alexandria, who wrote in the same Greek-speaking Jewish milieu as Ben Sira and the author of Wisdom, developed an extensive theology which included, apart from Sophia, various roles for the Logos. Philo, being Jewish, is considered a strict monotheist, but his depictions of Sophia and Logos have been interpreted as binitarian because of their more or less independent agency. The Logos is even called *deuteros theos* (second god) by Philo in his QG 2, 62 (Segal 1977, 159–81; Boyarin 2004, 113–19; Schäfer 2020, 62-4). The notion of God's Logos derives from Greek philosophy and plays a role as a more or less separate force in many Hellenistic pagan, Jewish and gnostic documents, typically as the creator of the world. The rationale behind this is to keep the distance between God and the material word, a crucial idea in most Greek-Hellenistic thought (Mack 1973). In Philo, Sophia and the Logos take up similar roles, sometimes quite confusingly and with variations in Philo's distinct works. This includes, for both, an involvement in creation, either as the architect or as the father or mother of the world of ideas and/or the created world (Wolfson 1962, pt 1 184. 253–82 and passim; Schäfer 2020, 62).

In all of these Second Temple literatures, Wisdom and the Logos are presented as existing before the creation of the world. This can either mean that they were created before the rest of creation, or not created at all but having been with God since eternity, the difference between these to becoming the ground for extensive theological conflicts in the early Christian centuries, when the Logos became identified with Christ (Edwards 2020).

The Wisdom- and Logos theologies discussed so far, called "binitarian," posit a power that is complementary to the highest God, not antagonistic. It is always a benign power that mediates between the highest God and the world. Conversely, theologies that posit a second divine power that works in opposition to God and humanity, are as a rule called "dualistic" in scholarship. Such dualism is found in the religious thought systems called "radical gnosticism" by Alan Segal (Segal 1977, 244–62). These thought systems, as for example found in the *Untitled Work* (a.k.a *Origin of the World*) and the *Hypostasis of the Archons* from Nag Hammadi Codex II, dated to the 4th–5th cent. CE (Lundhaug 2021) reckon with a "demiurge," which in the radical gnostic (unlike the classical Greek) view is a creator responsible for the evil in the world and who believes, mistakenly, to be the only god. Because they are considered "dualistic," rather than binitarian, these thought systems and the literatures in which they appear will not be further discussed here.

Pre-Christian Jewish literatures feature yet other agents that are described as taking up certain "divine" tasks, or displaying "divine" behavior, such as sitting on a throne in heaven next to God (Newman, Davila, and Lewis 1999, 42–69) or even on God's throne, and that have therefore been called binitarian. These agents can be angels, often Metatron (Hurtado 1998, 71–92; Davila in Newman, Davila, and Lewis 1999, 3–20; Kister 2013-14), Adam, biblical patriarchs and other leading figures such as Enoch and Moses (Hurtado 1998, 51–65; Van der Horst 1983) and biblical prophets and priests, most notably Elijah (Alouf-Aboody 2020; Kadari 2021) and Melchisedek (Aschim in Newman, Davila, and Lewis 1999, 129–47). Even though the literatures in which these figures function do not describe them as gods on the same level as the one God of Israel, some of their attributes, even their names—in 3 Enoch Metatron is called "little YHWH" (Segal 1977, 65; Schäfer 2020, 110–113)—, can be considered divine.

Another candidate for (post-)Second Temple Jewish binitarianism is the semitic Memra of God, which displays some similarities with the Greek-Hellenistic Logos, both having the same meaning, i.e. Word (Hayward 1981). The Memra specifically features in certain Targumim—Aramaic expansive translations of the Hebrew Bible—as the typical translation of phrases that denote God's actions (McNamara 1968). "God said," for example, becomes in the targumic translation "The Memra of God said." The Memra of God as presented in some Targumim seems to be attributed with independent agency, notably in creation but also as a mediator between God and humans. Scholars are divided over the function of the Memra in the Targumim: some consider it, as has been said about the Logos, as a means to preserve the transcendency and even the unity of God (Brown 1966, 524). Others have typified this use of the Memra as binitarian, or as Boyarin has it "not just a name" (Boyarin 2004, 117).

The New Testament is our earliest source for the Christ movement, which, for the sake of convenience, we will call "early Christianity." The NT consists of various documents which relate in different ways to the issue of binitarianism. In John 1, the (Sophia and) Logos theology is applied one-on-one to Christ (Brown 1966, cxxii; Boyarin 2004, 93.107). Sophia christology is also found in other New Testament writings, specifically the gospel of Matthew (Deutsch 1986; 1987; 1996). The figure of the "Son of Man," already present in the biblical book of Daniel, is seen by many as the precursor for much of New Testament christology (Segal 1977, 205–19 and passim; Hurtado 1998, 53–54; Idel 2007).

Despite the fact that he sees it as a direct outgrowth of developments in Second Temple Judaism, Hurtado considers early Christianity as a serious *mutation* or *modification* of Jewish monotheism already in the earliest years after death of Jesus (Hurtado 1998, 93–124; 2003). His main argument is built on the evidence of *devotion* of the risen Christ. In the cultic veneration of Christ, he is exalted to a divine level "unparalleled in the Jewish treatment of chief angels" (Hurtado 1998, 97). Hurtado explicitly dubs this veneration "binitarian," and by this he implies that Jesus was considered god. Yet he was not a rival god: the divine status had been explicitly given to him by God the Father. This status, as well as the distinction between God the Father and God the Son is implied in the name "Lord" given to Jesus. This name, according to Hurtado is in fact the Greek translation of the name YHWH. A similar view is defended by Richard Bauckham (Bauckham 1998) for who "the actual binitarian revolution is reserved for Christianity" (Schäfer 2020, 143 note 18). Boyarin, in reaction to Hurtado, contends that the latter puts too much focus on worship and that the early Christian movement did not constitute a break with Second Temple Judaism. He posits that "the belief in an intermediary, a *deuteros theos*, and even perhaps binitarian worship was common to them and other Jews" (Boyarin 2004, 119; see also Schäfer, 2020, passim).

Moving from Second Temple Judaism, which includes the earliest decades of Christianity, into rabbinic literature, an important development is a "transfer [of] all Logos and Sophia talk to the Torah alone" (Boyarin 2004, 129; see also Schäfer 2002, 80-83). In rabbinic literature, Proverb's Wisdom is unanimously identified with the Torah, which in some rabbinic texts displays traits of personification as a woman, pre-existent, and playing a role in creation. The key text referenced mostly in this respect is the proem in BerR 1:1 (5th cent. CE), which contains an exegesis of Prov 8:22-23 and 30-31. In that midrash the Torah is interpreted, and self-identifies, as God's tool ("I was the artisan's tool of the Holy One"), the plan or blueprint used by the "artisan" or "architect" God, who is read, in an exegetical *tour de force*, as the referent of *amon* (Prov 8:30). Many scholars have read this midrash as a reaction to the Christological discussions about the divinity and pre-existence of Christ that raged in the 4th cent. (Edwards 2020 and the literature quoted there). A similar treatment of the Torah is found in contemporary Samaritan hymns (Lieber 2017). Yet in neither Samaritan nor Jewish rabbinic texts, this amounts to a presentation of the Torah in semi-divine terms.

At face value, rabbinic literature seems to condemn strongly everything that reeks of binitarianism. Nevertheless, certain features that can be considered binitarian pop up in a new disguise in later rabbinic texts. The exegetical reasonings used in earlier rabbinic polemics were sometimes reversed in later texts (Kister 2006). This is clear in the various exegeses of our key text Prov 8:30. In Midrash Tanchuma (Printed version) (ca 7–9th cent. CE) the personified Torah is presented, in yet another reading of *amon*, as being *herself* (and not God) the "artisan" (female Hebrew form!) of creation (Tan Ber 1:5). In the same midrash (Tan Ber 1:1) and in Seder Eliahu Rabbah (ca 8th cent.) it is stated that God took council with the Torah when He created the world (SER 29). In these late rabbinic texts, even more than in BerR, the option of a *female* force in creation seems to be present. Obviously, even in these late rabbinic midrashim, the Torah is not called divine.

Binitarian tendencies are also found in the (late-) rabbinic presentations of the Shekhinah, to which some of the features of Biblical and Second Temple Wisdom seem to be transferred. The presentation of the Shekhinah—a term that denotes God's presence on earth, based on the verb *shakhan* (Ex 25:6)—develops in the course of rabbinic literature from an aspect of God into a separate entity next to God, usually with specifically female attributes (Schäfer 2002, 79–102). This tendency towards a more explicit binitarianism will come to full fruition in medieval Jewish mystical texts, such as the Bahir (12th cent.), where the relation between God and the Shekhinah, or the "male and female potencies within God" (Schäfer 2002, 124), is presented in explicitly sexual terms (Wolfson 1995).

The polemic of the rabbinic Sages against binitarian ideas and practices is assumed to be especially visible in the statements against "two powers in heaven" that are found throughout the rabbinic chronological spectrum. Until Alan Segal's trailblazing study of this subject (Segal 1977), these had usually been interpreted as reactions against Christian ideas and devotion. Such texts include explicit warnings against using certain prayer formulae, the viewing of (certain) angels, and specifically Metatron, as divine, and criticism of the "mystical" *exegeses* of the Torah (rather than experiences) by certain rabbinic sages, such as most famously described in t. Hagiga 2:3-7 (Schäfer 2009, 196–213; Teugels 2022, 393–95). A special category form midrashic texts that warn against reading certain texts from the Hebrew bible in a way that could lead to assumptions that there are two or more gods, and discussions with, and the refutation of, the arguments of "heretics" and Roman philosophers about such texts (Kister 2006). These texts also include references to the various appearances (warrior, old man) and names of God (the tetragrammaton, and Elohim,

which, being a plural form, is in itself problematic), that are attributed to the "heretics" as evidence for the existence of two Gods. Segal traces the tannaitic (3rd cent.) and amoraitic (4th–6th cent.) rabbinic as well as extra-rabbinic evidence in order to establish which religious phenomena the rabbis were acting so vehemently against. He argues that most of the polemics against "two powers" were already established in the tannaitic period, and that these are almost entirely confined to Palestine. His most relevant conclusion for our topic is, that the rabbinic "two powers" polemics were, especially in the earlier period *not only* directed at Christianity but at a plurality of beliefs that circulated in first century Judaism (among which probably Philo), and that included forms of Christianity, specifically of the kind found in the Johannine literature. Moreover, he designates gnostic thoughts older than Christianity as the first target of the rabbinic "two powers in heaven" polemical texts, and posits a connection between the development of early Christian thought and (already existing) Gnosticism. Schäfer criticised Segal, and others, such as Menachem Kister (Kister 2012–13 and 2013–14), in that they remain stuck in the static model of separate, opposite, religions rather than reckoning with a more dynamic interaction between the various religious systems (Schäfer 2020, 6).

Yet another stance is taken by David Michael Grossberg who contends, in a answer to and follow-up on Segal, and in reaction to some of Schäfer's and Boyarin's works, that the rabbis in their "two powers in heaven" polemic did not so much polemicize against binitarianism, but rather against *subordinationism* (Grossberg 2022). The latter is a phenomenon inherent to the Jewish literatures and theological strands already discussed, notably Philo (Logos), certain Second Temple texts, and the Targumim (Memra). This is partially a discussion about terminology, because what his predecessors dubbed "binitarianism" is, according to Grossberg, not what binitarianism really is, i.e. a derivate from the (later) Christian trinitarianism, which holds that there are two divine persons in one godhead. Incidentally, some forms of christian trinitarian belief already existed before the fourth century (Kelly 1958, 110–15; Roukema 2010, 145–90). According to Grossberg, the term binitarianism implies the equal divinity of the secondary forces, which was, according to him, not a threat to rabbinic Judaism, which almost never expresses concerns for God's unity, or stresses the fact that there is only "one power." Rather, the attribution of certain divine qualities to secondary forces, turned these into *subordinate* forces, not equal to or completely independent from God, hence the term "subordinationism." Jewish subordinationism, in contrast to Christian binitarianism, would in fact have been a real threat to rabbinic Judaism *from within*. Whereas Philo explicitly warned against venerating divine expressions such as the Logos, "other Jews may not have been as scrupulous" (Grossberg 2022, 17). Therefore, when the rabbis polemicized against "two powers" or even "two gods," this was, according to Grossberg, a way of ridiculing fellow Jews by magnifying their behavior rather than seriously condemning them for ditheism or polytheism.

Binitarianism was eventually condemned as a heresy in Christianity in the fourth century CE, in the wake of the council of Nicea that promoted Trinitarianism and condemned Arianism which held that the incarnated Christ was not divine but human. Christians who remained binitarian were called "semi-Arians." Unrelated to these inner-Christian debates, late antique rabbinic literature addresses more specific polemics against the Christian beliefs about a son of God, in which Christianity is referenced with euphemistic names such as "Edom," and "Babylonians" (Teugels 1999, 2022).

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