Two Powers of the Godhead in Jewish Thought

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4 May 2013

It often comes as a surprise to many, especially those from a Jewish background, to learn that in Second Temple Judaism the concept of the Godhead included two Yahwehs. The Yahweh of the OT scriptures was invisible and unseen. At other times a visible manifestation of Yahweh appears, and sometimes both appear in the same passage. Does the concept of two Yahwehs compromise monotheism? No because:

* Yahweh is an Elohim, but no Elohim is Yahweh.
* Yahweh is ontologically unique-there is no other like Him.

Deut 6:4, the Shema, recited by Jews, is a reminder of Yahweh’s uniqueness. In John 1:18, John describes Jesus as “the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” This does not conflict with the Shema, as we will see, because Jesus and God are related in the same way as the two Yahwehs of Second Temple Judaism.

Prior to Jesus and the NT, the Jews had an established doctrine of Two Powers in heaven or Two Yahwehs. One was the invisible Yahweh in heaven and a second visible Yahweh appearing in human form (“Angel of the Lord”). This belief prepared some Jews to receive Jesus. Despite the fact Jewish theology accepted a second Yahweh figure, many could not accept Jesus as the embodiment of Yahweh because He was born as a human being from a woman. Another reason many did not accept Jesus was because He did not exercise divine glory, power and other attributes like the Angel of the Lord.

Some of the Two Powers passages include the following.

* Gen 19:24 Yahweh appears, but sends fire from Yahweh in heaven.
* Gen 22:11-12 God and the Angel of the Lord both appear and speak as God.
* Ex 3:2 The angel appeared to Moses in the bush and God spoke to Moses from the bush.
* Amos 4:11 God speaks in 1st person and refers to God in 3rd person.

Each of these reads sort of odd and seems to describe two figures. Some English translations obscure this distinction to smooth out the rendering of the Hebrew. Many early Rabbis interpreted these passages as examples of two divine powers or two Yahweh figures. The second Yahweh was identified as the Angel of the Lord. In some cases, God says His name is in the angel.

* Ex 23 God promised to send an angel and said, “my name is in him.” His name was in the angel and distinguished this angel from all others. They were to obey the angel and do what he said. Rebellion against the angel would not be pardoned. This angel was the visible presence of God.
* Deut 12 “The Name” refers to God’s presence and established His name-the Tabernacle.
* Ps 20:1,7 “The Name” is the presence of God and the same person as Yahweh. “We trust in the name of the Lord our God.”
* 2 Sam 6:1-2 The ark is called the Name-the place of meeting God and where His presence dwells among the people.
* Is 30:27 The Name, with an anthropomorphic description, appears to Isaiah.

There are two relevant issues about the appearance of the Angel of the Lord. First, Jews understood that they could not be in the presence of God and live. If He appeared to them in an unveiled form, they would die. The Angel of the Lord appears to people and communicates with them so they can interact with God and live.

The second issue has to do with having a clear indication of when God is present or working among them. If God is invisible, how can they know if He is present or when He works? The Angel of the Lord is the physical manifestation of God who is both the visible sign of His presence and person people communicate with directly. Other manifestations of God’s presence in the OT include fire, smoke, thunder and earthquakes.

God chose to appear in visible ways so people could discern His presence. Often, this was the Angel with God’s name in Him. When they saw the Angel, they recognized God was present and were assured they would not die. One example is when the Angel appeared to Abraham in Gen 18. Another is Joshua’s encounter with the Commander of the Host in Josh 5:13. Both Abraham and Joshua recognized the person was a divine figure.

Another term that is used frequently in the OT to refer to God is the word “presence” (Heb panim).

* Ex 33:13-14 God’s presence will go before them.
* Deut 4:35-37 God brought them out of Egypt with His own presence. In this same passage Yahweh, and the Angel are also involved.

In the OT, presence is used to describe God’s personal encounters or meetings with individuals. In Torah, God meets with Moses face to face-that is he sees God and speaks with Him.

In many passages the language alternates between Yahweh and the Angel of the Lord, God and the presence or the Angel and the presence. All of them refer to Yahweh, but there is ambiguity.

* Jud 2 The Angel of the Lord speaks, then Yahweh speaks, both using 1st person. The covenant made with God is said to be the covenant of the Angel.
* Gen 31:10-13 In Jacob’s dream, the Angel of the Lord identifies as being the God of Bethel Jacob encountered earlier.
* Gen 48:14-16 Jacob’s blessing of Joseph and his sons. The first line begins with The God, second line The God, third line The Angel. Each is a singular verb form. Finally, May He bless these boys-equates God with the Angel.
* Jud 6:11ff The Angel of the Lord said Yahweh is with you and then Yahweh turned and said to him. In vv19-21, Gideon brought a sacrifice to the Angel who reached out and consumed it and vanished from sight. In v23, God spoke to Gideon, who saw Him, and promised he would not die.

Both figures are Yahweh, but not the same individual and at times the text is ambiguous as to who is speaking. It is also a reminder that because Yahweh is unique, no human language is adequate to fully describe Him! It is the same challenge to comprehend the trinitarian relationships in the NT. The scripture passages illustrate how Second Temple Judaism understood the suggestions of Divine plurality (Godhead) and the identity of the two Yahweh figures. The “Name” is another way of referring to Yahweh who is within the Angel of the Lord. The Angel of the Lord is unmistakenly the appearance of Yahweh in human form.

Another term applied to God which also implies divine embodiment is the “word of the Lord.” This is obviously of great importance to the NT understanding of Jesus.

* Gen 15:1 The word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. God reassures Abraham so he must have seen God, not just a dream.
* 1 Sam 3:1 The word of the Lord was rare and there were no frequent visions. In v7, the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to Samuel. In v10, Yahweh came and stood=language of embodiment. God called to Samuel. In v19, Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and he was known as a prophet because the word of the Lord appeared to him often.
* Jer 1 The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. In v9, the Lord put out his hand and touched Jeremiah’s mouth to commission him as a prophet.

It is apparent this OT language is the background to John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John did not invent this concept he recognized Jesus as the word of the OT!

One final image that occurs in OT polemical passages is the description of Yahweh as the rider on the clouds of heaven. This phrase was an epithet of the pagan deity Baal who was the chief rival of Yahweh in the pre-exilic period. In texts from Ugarit, Baal is called the rider of the clouds and the driver of the heavenly chariot. The OT appropriated this imagery and ascribed it to Yahweh to express His uniqueness. Some OT examples include: Deut 33:26; Psalms 68:17; 104:3 and Is 19:1. In each, Yahweh is identified as the sovereign one who rides on the clouds.

Daniel 7:9-13 was the one passage where early Rabbis recognized two Yahweh figures who ride on the clouds. The first figure is clearly Yahweh enthroned. The second is the son of man who comes on the clouds and is presented before Him. It is clear from the context that this son of man is a divine figure and v14 describes the nature of his kingdom. Many Jewish theologians understood this second Yahweh figure to be Messianic. In Mt 26:63-65, at his trial before the Sanhedrin, Caiaphas puts Jesus under oath to tell them who he is. Jesus quotes Daniel 7:13 and it is clear from Caiaphas’ response he understood Jesus asserted His deity.

OT theology includes the idea that Yahweh can be present in two persons and sometimes simultaneously in the same scene. It also teaches that this second Yahweh figure appears in human form and is even physically embodied. This has clear parallels with the NT idea that Jesus is the unique son of God. The way the NT writers distinguish Jesus as Son of God and different from other elohim is by their choice of the term “monogenes” which means unique, one of a kind or type. It in no way suggests Jesus had a beginning like Jehovah’s Witnesses teach. The term is not describing origins, rather a characteristic trait of the person.

Further proof monogenes is not about beginnings is found in Hebrews 11:17 which refers to Isaac as the monogenes son of Abraham. He was neither Abraham’s first, nor only, son. Isaac was the unique son of Abraham and Sarah by promise. The monogenes language of the NT speaks to Jesus’ uniqueness and not His origin. Jesus is unique, like Yahweh, and is identified with Yahweh. Further, in John 17:11 Jesus is said to bear the name. The NT terminology doesn’t deny a divine plurality or ontological link with Yahweh. It is derived from the OT and all the names and titles of Jesus are found in the OT. In fact, Jude v5 identifies Jesus as the one who lead the people out of Egypt thus equating Him with the Angel of the Exodus.

What about the Spirit? Is there a Holy Spirit and a Trinity? Once you know the OT writers describe two Yahwehs that form a Godhead, you can detect certain passages where they are also used of the Spirit. The NT writers re-purposed the “one but two” ideas of the OT to link the Spirit to the two-person Godhead.

* Is 63:7 This chapter refers to all three persons of the Trinity. Yahweh appears in v7 and the Angel of His presence in v9. In v10 they grieved His Holy Spirit and v11 the Holy Spirit was in their midst.
* Ps 78 This psalm has verbal parallels to Is 63. Here, the people grieved Him, tested God and the Holy One. A different set of terms are used by the psalmist to describe God.
* Ez 8:2 Ezekiel sees the form of a man from the waist up and in v3 a form of a hand reaches out and the Holy Spirit lifted him up. This “man” spoke to him in vv5-6.

OT NT

Acts 16:6-7: The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus (Phil 1:19)

Rom 8:9: The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ (1 Pet 1:11)

Gal 4:6: God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts

Jesus is linked to the Spirit who is God. He is not the same person, but the same God. Which term is used is not as important because it is consistent with the OT usage illustrated earlier.

Some final observations. When you understand how the “two yet one” are revealed in the OT, you can detect when the Spirit is described with the same motif. The OT “two yet one, the two Yahwehs, are often interchanged in passages. The NT at times equates the Spirit with the second Yahweh figure who is Jesus. Ultimately, this lead to inclusion of the Spirit within the Godhead of the Two Powers doctrine.

The NT writers intentionally link Jesus with the OT Angel of the Lord and Yahweh because both are Yahweh. It is also common in the NT to find various terms used interchangeably in quoted OT passages. Paul frequently quotes the OT and inserts kurios (lord or God), Christos (Messiah, savior) and Jesus. In John 17:11, the name of God is given to Jesus which recalls the OT references to Yahweh’s name being in the Angel of the Lord. The same is true when Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13. Jesus unambiguously claimed to be Yahweh of the OT.

The doctrine of the two Powers in Heaven was declared a heresy by the Rabbis in the 2nd – 3rd centuries CE. In their attempts to preserve and reorganize Judaism in the light of the loss of the Temple in 70 CE, they recognized the doctrine was closely aligned with Christian trinitarian teaching. To distinguish themselves from the Christian movement, and remove a useful theological point for Christians, the Rabbis repudiated the doctrine and declared it heresy. The Jewish Godhead was restricted to Yahweh alone and Jews affirmed this by their creed, the Shema.