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‘TWO POWERS’ AND EARLY JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN MONOTHEISM

James McGrath and Jerry Truex

Our understanding of early Judaism and its relationship to Christianity has been significantly advanced by Alan Segal’s formative work on the two powers heresy.¹ This work demonstrated that belief in two heavenly powers was considered an intolerable heresy by the rabbis² and that Christians were among those indicted.³ Furthermore, Segal argued that the two powers debate could be traced back to the first century, as evidenced by certain christological passages of the NT⁴ and by Philo’s writings.⁵ Thus, according to Segal, the two powers controversy provides an important insight into the first-century context of the NT and, conversely, these early Jewish and Christian writings shaped rabbinic reports about those who claim “there are two powers in heaven.”

Segal’s study has widely influenced Jewish and Christian scholarship.⁶ Among its contributions, the study firmly placed early christological development and controversy in a *Jewish* setting. It also took a critical approach to the dating and redaction of rabbinic literature. However, Segal’s study is not without shortcomings. For example, Segal

¹The basic premise of the two powers heresy was “interpreting scripture to say that a *principal angelic or hypostatic manifestation in heaven was equivalent to God*”; Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven. Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977) x.

²E.g., *Mek. R. Ishmael, Bahodesh* 5; *b. Hag.* 15a; *3 Enoch* 16.

³E.g., *b. Sanh.* 38b, *Deut. Rab.* 2:33, *Eccl. Rab.* 4:8; Segal, *Two Powers*, 118-20, 139-141, 218.

⁴E.g., Mark 14:62; Phil 2:6; Gal 3:20; John 5:18, 6:46, 10:33 ; Rev 19:11-16; Segal, *Two Powers*, 205-19.

⁵E.g., *Som.* 1.227-233; *Quaest. in Gn.* 2.62; *Cher.* 27-8; *Fug.* 95, 101; Segal, *Two Powers*, 159-181.

⁶E.g., John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 158; James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (London: SCM, 1991) 228-9; Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) *passim*; Eric Osborn, *The Emergence of Christian Theology* (Cambridge

appears to maintain that there was a clear ‘orthodoxy’ in first-century Judaism,⁷ whereas the existence of a clearly recognizable ‘orthodoxy’ during this period is much debated.⁸

Segal hints at three possible ways of relating the ‘two powers’ debate to first-century Judaism. First, we have the interpretation which Segal himself appears to favour, stressing *continuity* or *consistent condemnation*.⁹ On this interpretation of the evidence, the belief that there were ‘two powers in heaven’ was condemned as a heresy in rabbinic literature just as the same belief was condemned as a heresy in first-century Judaism. This view maintains that there was continuity in belief (it was the same belief over the centuries) and continuity in rabbinic condemnation (it was not accepted at any time). A second possible way of conceptualizing the matter can be called *retrospective condemnation*. That is, certain first-century Jewish beliefs were later classified as ‘two powers heresy’ and retrospectively condemned in rabbinic literature.¹⁰ Here we have continuity in belief (the same belief), but not in condemnation (earlier the belief in question was accepted (or at the very least tolerated), but later it was not). A third

University, 1993) 24-29; John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah* (2nd ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 225; Stephen G. Wilson, *Related Strangers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 79.

⁷ Segal, *Two Powers*, x, and *Rebecca’s Children* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1986) 155, 159-60. Nonetheless, Segal recognizes that the rabbis may not have had sufficient power in the first century to enforce orthodoxy and censure heresy (*Two Powers*, 200), though he does not appear to take into account the fact that some would question whether rabbinic Judaism was ‘orthodox’ or ‘normative’ at all, or only became such much later.

⁸ See N. J. McEleney, “Orthodoxy in Judaism of the First Christian Century”, *JSJ* 4 (1973), 19-42; *idem*, “Orthodoxy in Judaism in the First Christian Century,” *JSJ* 9 (1978) 83-88; David E. Aune, “Orthodoxy in First Century Judaism. A Response to N. J. McEleney,” *JSJ* 7 (1976) 1-10; L. L. Grabbe, “Orthodoxy in First Century Judaism. What Are the Issues?,” *JSJ* 8 (1977), 149-153; Philip S. Alexander, “‘The Parting of the Ways’ from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Jews and Christians* (ed. James D. G. Dunn; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1992) 2-3, 16, 20-1; Jacob Neusner, *Judaic Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993) ch. 1.

⁹Segal writes, “It became clear that ‘two powers in heaven’ was a very early category of heresy, earlier than Jesus, if Philo is a trustworthy witness, and one of the basic categories by which the rabbis perceived the new phenomenon of Christianity”; *Two Powers*, ix; cf. 215.

¹⁰E.g., Segal asserts that Philo’s doctrine of the Logos would “eventually [be] called heresy”; *Two Powers*, 173. On anachronism as a form of apologetic in the Rabbinic literature see Jacob Neusner,

explanation emphasizes *development*: Particular first-century Jewish beliefs evolved into a form which became intolerable for the rabbis.¹¹ In this view, there is only partial continuity of belief (it changed over time), and there is discontinuity regarding condemnation (only the later form was rejected).

Segal's study has demonstrated that a similarity exists between some first-century exegesis (like Philo's) and later 'two powers' discussions in the rabbinic literature. However, he has not provided corroborating evidence for his overall conclusion in two ways. First, Segal has not provided evidence that Philo, for example, was regarded by his Jewish contemporaries as a heretic, which Segal's work might lead us to expect. This suggests that a *retrospective* explanation may be possible. Second, Segal has not demonstrated that specific first-century beliefs were *identical* with those later condemned. This opens the way for a *developmental* explanation. Thus, we believe there are grounds for questioning whether or not christological passages in the NT ought to be read in light of the 'two powers heresy' of rabbinic Judaism. Although various forms of 'two powers' conceptuality may have been present in first-century Christian and Jewish thought, we will argue that there is no evidence that they were identified as heretical during that century.

II. Methodology and Dating

Formative Judaism. Second Series: Religious, Historical, and Literary Studies (Chico: Scholars, 1983) 167.

The last couple of decades of study of rabbinic literature can almost be described as a revolution, as critical methodology, developed in the field of NT studies and other scholarly disciplines, has been applied to the relevant source material. Thus recent critical studies have eclipsed earlier rabbinic scholarship, which often took materials separated by many centuries to form a monolithic entity called ‘Judaism’.¹² However, the fact that this revolution has taken place so recently means that there is still uncertainty in many areas, particularly with respect to the dating of documents. On questions of dating rabbinic material, NT scholars can for the most part do little more than accept the results reached by scholars in the field of rabbinic studies, and where necessary note differences of opinion. Perhaps even more important for our purposes, however, is the question of the relationship between (1) the date assigned to a particular rabbinic document and (2) the date of the rabbis who appear in that work. It has long been axiomatic in NT scholarship that written documents tell us about the *Sitz im Leben* of the authors and only secondarily--and through critical study--about any earlier period described in those works. This axiom, increasingly recognized and accepted by scholars engaged in academic study of the rabbinic literature, informs our approach. So, for example, later documents which attribute to earlier rabbis views which are nowhere attested in earlier writings must be treated with some degree of skepticism.¹³

¹¹E.g., Segal muses that “even if the rabbinic evidence alone cannot demonstrate the existence of a heresy in the first century and before, it may yet give us hints about the earlier forms of the thought which were in the process of *becoming* heretical”; *Two Powers*, 28 (our italics).

¹²Recent titles reveal the shift to speaking about ‘Judaisms’. Jacob Neusner, William S. Green, and Ernest Frerichs (eds.), *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge University, 1987); Alan F. Segal, *The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987).

¹³See especially Philip S. Alexander, “Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament,” *ZNW* 74 (1983) 237-46; also James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (London: SCM, 1991) 13. Regarding dating see Ithamar Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988) 230;

Although we have no desire to exclude potentially valuable information from any quarter, this study limits itself to Jewish literature through ca. 600 C.E. when the Babylonian Talmud reached closure.¹⁴ While it is not impossible that later documents can tell us something about first-century Jewish-Christian relations, in any other discipline the use of documents dating from centuries after the time being studied would be considered methodologically suspect. This should be true of rabbinic studies as well.¹⁵ Although our study has as its primary aim to illuminate *first-century* Jewish-Christian theology in relation to two powers belief, we shall nonetheless investigate later traditions to determine what, if anything, can be traced to the first century.

III. Identifying the Start of the Controversy

A. Philo and the NT

Let us begin with the earliest evidence available to us, namely the writings of Philo and the NT. What is immediately striking is that there is no real indication in the writings of Philo and Paul that they felt their beliefs, which resemble the ‘two powers’ belief in rabbinic literature, were controversial. In dealing with Philo, Segal persuasively argues that Philo and the rabbis drew upon common traditions regarding the powers, names, and attributes of God. However, in contrast to the rabbis, Philo's identification of the Logos as ‘a second God’ and even ‘God,’ and his association of the Logos with the ‘two powers’¹⁶

Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 56-59; Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before AD 70* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), *passim*.

¹⁴So Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 185.

¹⁵Cf. Dunn, *Partings*, 13.

¹⁶While space will not allow a detailed discussion, it must be noted that Philo's two *dunameis* are not to be simply identified with the two *דְּנָמִים* of the rabbis. The Greek word *dunameis* is broader than the Hebrew term *דְּנָמִים*. While *dunamis* can bear the sense of *ruling* power (as e.g. in Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, *Moralia* 369 b-e), it does not always have this narrower meaning. In contrast, *ruling* power is the

of God, is conspicuously positive.¹⁷ It is also surely significant that Philo nowhere seeks to defend these beliefs against a charge of heresy.¹⁸ The fact that Philo gives no indication that he was departing from an already-existing Jewish ‘orthodoxy,’ or that his teaching on the Logos was met with objections, suggests that his views were not objectionable to his contemporaries. Although this is admittedly a form of argument from silence, it is not without force, since research into the sociology of knowledge indicates that when objections are raised against one's belief system, that belief system or worldview must be defended or legitimated.¹⁹

The same may be said in relation to Paul. While Paul engages in a great deal of legitimation for his view of Torah, there is no indication that he felt the need to defend himself against charges of ‘two powers’ heresy.²⁰ Paul's view of the exalted Christ's investiture with the divine name (Phil.2:9-11) must be viewed in relation to non-Christian

basic meaning of the Hebrew (see further Segal, *Two Powers*, 7-8 n.8). Philo is clearly referring to two potencies of the one God (cf. e.g., Philo, *Quaest in Ex.* 2.68; *Mos.* 2.99), and not to a single additional being placed on the same level as God himself. Philo's doctrine is close to the rabbinic concept of God's two *middot*. See further Segal, *Two Powers*, 174-181. The LXX had no problem with there being a number of ‘powers’ with Israel's God as ‘Lord of the powers’ (as e.g. in Ps. 24:10). Likewise, the Qumran doctrine of ‘two spirits’ is unlikely to have been identified as a doctrine of ‘two ruling authorities,’ since (however dualistic the idea may seem at times) both spirits are clearly ultimately subordinate to the one God.

¹⁷E.g., *Som.* 1.227-229; *Quaest in Gn.* 2.62; *Quaest in Ex.* 2.68; *Plant.* 85-89.

¹⁸The tension in Segal's own analysis of Philo is noteworthy. On the one hand, Segal writes, “It is impossible to speculate on how the Pharisees would have reacted to Philo's system” and yet he also says “that ‘two powers in heaven’ was a very early category of heresy ... if Philo is a trustworthy witness”; *Two Powers*, 261 and x.

¹⁹Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, New York: Penguin, 1966, 110-146.

²⁰Cf. Dunn, *Partings*, 205-6; *idem*, “How Controversial was Paul's Christology?” *From Jesus to John* (ed. M. C. de Boer, Sheffield Academic, 1993) 162-166; *idem*, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 252-260, 293; Donald A. Hagner, “Paul's Christology and Jewish Monotheism” *Perspectives on Christology* (ed. Marguerite Shuster and Richard Muller; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 28-30. Segal's reading of Gal. 3:19-20 is highly problematic (*Two Powers*, 210-11). It does not concern mediator figures diluting monotheism. Rather, Gal 3:19-20 concerns whether or not Moses can represent the one people of God which unites Jews and Gentiles and thus corresponds to the one God. For this exegesis see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 159-162. The other Pauline passages cited by Segal (Phil 2:6 and Eph 1:21) use language reminiscent of the later ‘two powers’ material, but without any indication that it is controversial.

Jewish texts such as the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. This work refers to an exalted angel, Yahoel, who bears the divine name (*Apoc.Abr.10:3,8*). There is simply no evidence that belief in a supreme mediator or agent of God, one that might later be called a 'second power,' was controversial at any point during the first century CE. This is not to be explained by the lack of any universally recognized authority which could speak for Jewish 'orthodoxy' in this period. Even within the context of first century Jewish diversity, parties in conflict with one another took seriously the objections of their opponents and sought to respond to them.²¹ In the case of Paul's claims about the exalted Christ and of Philo's view of the Logos as a *second god*, there is nothing to indicate that their contemporaries found them to be heretical or controversial.²²

The key witness usually appealed to as evidence for the existence of the 'two powers heresy' in the first century is the Gospel of John,²³ and many NT scholars would agree that the Johannine Christians had been accused of abandoning monotheism.²⁴ While it cannot be denied that John bears witness to an intense conflict regarding christology, this need not imply that it centred on monotheism *per se*. What is telling is that within the Gospel of John the opponents of the Johannine Christians do not use the phrase 'two powers' nor do they charge Jesus or the Johannine Christians with rejecting

²¹For examples of inner-Jewish polemic in early Judaism see Luke T. Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic," *JBL* 108 (1989) 436-441.

²²Frances Young notes the lack of awareness of a 'christological problem' on the part of the NT authors in "Christology and Creation: Towards an Hermeneutic of Patristic Christology" (now published in *BETL*; the authors are grateful to Prof. Young for allowing them to see a copy of her paper); also Dunn, *Partings*, 205-6.

²³Segal, *Two Powers*, 262.

²⁴That the Johannine Christians were accused of abandoning monotheism appears to be the consensus of recent scholarship. See J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2d ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 72; John Ashton, *Understanding*, 144-146; Robin Scroggs, *Christology in Paul and John* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 78-79; Dunn, *Partings*, 228-9; *idem*, "Let John be John: A

monotheism. There are only two clear references to monotheism in the Fourth Gospel and both affirm the oneness of God in rather axiomatic language, without defense or explanation (John 5:44; 17:3). If the Johannine Christians had been charged with rejecting monotheism, we would expect the writer to make a more vigorous and explicit defense. But it does not happen.

Rather, the controversies narrated in the Fourth Gospel are being fought on different theological ground. The conflict centres on the question of who is God's agent, who has God sent.²⁵ If Jesus is God's agent, then he speaks and acts on God's behalf (John 5:17-30). If he is not, he is demon possessed (John 7:20; 8:52), a deceiver (John 7:47), and a blasphemer (John 10:33). It is with these issues that the author appears to have been concerned, and his response is overwhelmingly clear. Fifteen times the Johannine Jesus is said to have been sent by God; twenty-three times Jesus refers to the Father as "the one who sent me"; seven times Jesus is said to be "from" God.²⁶ For the Johannine believer, the work of God is "to believe in the one whom he has sent" (John 6:29). But there is more to the Johannine claim for Jesus' divine agency. For John, Jesus functions, in practical terms, as *equivalent* to God, in accordance with the basic principle of agency that "the one sent is like the one who sent him."²⁷ Jesus does whatever the Father does (John 5:19), he gives life just as the Father does (John 5:21), he receives

Gospel for Its Time," *The Gospel and the Gospels* (ed. Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 316; Wilson, *Related*, 189-90; Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London: Routledge, 1996) 3, 30-1.

²⁵On agency and the Johannine Jesus see further Peder Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," *The Interpretation of John* (ed. John Ashton; London: SPCK, 1986) 67-78; A. E. Harvey, "Christ as Agent" *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 239-250; also Jan-A. Böhner, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg im 4. Evangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1977), *passim*.

²⁶*Concordance to the Novum Testamentum Graece* (3rd ed., Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1987). On the sending motif see further the recent book by Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 97-111.

equal honor to the Father (John 5:23), his teaching is God's teaching (John 7:16), to see him is to see God (John 14:9), he and the Father are one (John 10:30). The issue central to the conflict is whether Jesus "*makes himself* equal to God", rather than being God's appointed agent. The Johannine Jesus avidly denies that he is making himself anything; rather, he does the will of him who sent him.²⁸

Thus, notwithstanding John's strong language of continuity between the agent and the sender, John's presentation of Jesus fits well within the broad understanding of monotheism current within first-century Judaism.²⁹ The language used to describe the divine agency of the Johannine Jesus has close parallels in contemporary Jewish and Christian writings, works which are generally accepted as monotheistic. For example, it is widely recognized that John's concept of the Logos has similarities with Philo's.³⁰ As previously mentioned, Philo described the Logos as a 'second God,' and yet Philo did not

²⁷On the concept of agency in the ancient world see especially Borgen, "God's Agent," *passim*.

²⁸ The issue in John is thus not equality with God *per se*, but whether Jesus is "*making himself* God" (John 10:33) or "*making himself* equal to God" (John 5:18). John denies that Jesus "makes himself anything" (John 5:19; 8:28). See C. K. Barrett, "The Father is Greater than I' (John 14:28). Subordinationist Christology in the New Testament," *Essays on John* (London: SPCK, 1982) 24; Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1979) 47 n.80; Wayne A. Meeks, "Equal to God" in *The Conversation Continues* (ed. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa; Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 309-21; Jerome H. Neyrey, "'My Lord and My God': The Divinity of Jesus in John's Gospel," *SBL Seminar Paper Series*, 25 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986) 155-159. This point has been discussed and argued more fully in James McGrath, *John's Apologetic Christology* (SNTSMS, 111), Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp.69-147.

²⁹On first-century monotheism see especially Larry W. Hurtado, "What Do We Mean by 'First-Century Jewish Monotheism'," *SBL 1993 Seminar Papers*, (ed. David Lull; Atlanta: Scholars, 1993) 348-368; see also Peter Hayman, "Monotheism - A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *JJS* 42 (1991) 2-15; Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995) 15-21; Alexander, "Parting," 19-20.

³⁰Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge University, 1953) 276-7; Wayne A. Meeks, "The Divine Agent and His Counterfeit in Philo and the Fourth Gospel" *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; University of Notre Dame, 1976) 43-67; Craig A. Evans, *Word and Glory* (Sheffield Academic, 1993) 100-12.

feel that this undercut belief that *God is one*.³¹ Likewise John's view of Jesus as one who bears the divine name (John 8:24, 28, 58; 17:11) has parallels both in Jewish and in pre-Johannine Christian thought.³² The accusations of 'blasphemy' and of Jesus 'making himself (equal to) God' in John closely resemble the Synoptic tradition found in Mark 2:5-7. In Mark, some objected to Jesus claiming to do what God does, either because they felt this was something which God would not delegate to an agent, or because they did not accept that Jesus is God's appointed agent. John seems to develop these ideas, but there is nothing that indicates that John had taken "a step too far."³³ Rather, in John we have evidence of increased controversy over *the same issues that were sticking points between Christian and non-Christian Jews from the very beginning*. As we have already seen, there is no evidence of conflict over monotheism prior to John; we may now suggest that John more closely resembles the earlier conflicts depicted in the Synoptics than the later rabbinic 'two powers' material.

Before proceeding, we may note two further points about the rabbinic discussions of 'two powers' in relation to the first-century. First, it is interesting that there are no references within rabbinic literature linking 'two powers' with any of the first century tannaim. Second, the Babylonian Talmud and 3 Enoch in their present form date the origin of the two powers controversy to the early second century. Although we shall see that there are reasons to question the historical reliability of this tradition, it is noteworthy

³¹Compare, for example, Philo, *Quaest in Gn.* 2.62 with *Dec.* 65. Although Segal is a bit ambiguous, he seems to accept that Philo had no intention of compromising monotheism (*Two Powers*, 161, 166-8). See also Hurtado, *One God*, 41-48; Dunn, *Christology*, 227-8.

³²The Johannine use of 'the name' and 'I am' can be interpreted as a claim that he bears the name of God (John 17:11) in a way that is similar to the angel Yahoel in *Apoc. Abr.* 10:3, 8. See Ashton, *Understanding*, 143-4.

³³The phrase is used by Dunn, *Partings*, 228.

that no attempt was made by the tannaim to link the ‘two powers’ controversy to events or persons of the first-century, in the time of Jesus, Philo, Paul, and John.

B. Justin Martyr

An extremely important witness to early Jewish-Christian dialogue is Justin Martyr. His *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* was written around 160 C.E., although it purports to record a dialogue which he had around 135 C.E.³⁴ Whether a fictitious dialogue or not, what is important is that Justin seems to be concerned about interacting with the actual views and positions held by contemporary Jews. It is significant, therefore, that one of Justin's Jewish interlocutors agrees with Justin that there is be a second figure in heaven alongside God, who is also called *God* and *Lord*.³⁵ Trypho is portrayed as quite quickly reaching the same conclusion.³⁶ Thus, in this second century work, there is no hint that the belief in a ‘second god,’ a heavenly agent and vice-regent, is heretical or antithetical to Jewish monotheism. When Segal refers to Justin's interlocutor as a “heterodox Jew,” he is assuming what needs to be proved.³⁷ The question of when a Judaism that may rightly be called ‘orthodox’ finally emerged is currently the subject of much discussion and debate. Many would want to emphasize that, in spite of whatever impressions rabbinic literature may give, it was only a long and slow process that eventually led to the rabbinic definition of Judaism being accepted as ‘normative’ in some sense.³⁸

³⁴Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1993) 75.

³⁵*Dial.* 56.

³⁶*Dial.* 60.

³⁷Segal, *Other Judaisms*, 17.

³⁸Cf. Alexander, “Parting,” 3, 16, 20-1. We do not deny that the majority (if not all) who identified themselves as ‘Jewish’ in the first century held to belief in one God; rather, we deny that such belief was incompatible with belief in a supreme angelic or heavenly agent. See also Dunn, *Partings*, 12-3, and for a helpful alternative to monolithic classifications of religions see Jonathan Z. Smith, “Fences and Neighbors:

C. Mishnah and Tosefta

We may now turn to those passages in the Mishnah and Tosefta that are thought to contain allusions to ‘two powers’. It is noteworthy that the phrase itself never appears, a fact which is given more significance when one considers that the Tosefta contains several references to Christians as *minim* (‘heretics’).³⁹ The lack of explicit reference to ‘two powers’ cannot be explained as a lack of interest in Christianity, since the rabbis who composed the Tosefta took the trouble to polemicize against Christians. So, if Christian belief in ‘two powers in heaven’ was an issue at that time, it is quite surprising that the Mishnah and the Tosefta do not mention it.

Nevertheless, there are several passages from the Mishnah and the Tosefta which Segal takes to allude to the ‘two powers’ heresy, and these must be examined. The first passage refers to certain heretics who say there are ‘many ruling powers in heaven.’

M. Sanh. 4:5: “Therefore but a single man was created in the world ... that none should say to his fellow, ‘My father was greater than your father;’ also that the heretics should not say, ‘There are many ruling powers in heaven’”

The phrase used in this Mishnaic passage is not ‘two powers’ but ‘many powers’, which suggests a distinct set of beliefs.⁴⁰ While this brief pericope leaves a number of questions

Some Contours of Early Judaism,” *Approaches to Ancient Judaism. Volume II* (ed. William Scott Green; Chico: Scholars, 1980) 1-25.

³⁹E.g., *t. Hul.* 2.24; cf. Jack T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants* (London: SCM, 1993) 61-7. *Minim* included, but was not limited to, Jewish-Christians; cf. Reuven Kimelman, “*Birkat ha-Minim* and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity,” *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition, Vol. 2* (ed. E. P. Sanders, *et. al.*; London: SCM, 1981) 228-232.

⁴⁰While not settling the issue, it is worth noting that later rabbinic writings appear to distinguish between those who believe there is ‘no power’ in heaven (presumably atheists or Epicureans), those who believe in ‘many powers,’ and those who believe in ‘two powers’. Cf. e.g. *Sifre Deut.* 329, and Segal, *Two Powers*, 8-9.

unanswered, its meaning appears to be clear enough: If numerous human beings had been created, people might have concluded that this was evidence of several creators. The phrase ‘many powers’ sounds suspiciously like polytheism, and it may be that there were Jews (pagans cannot be in mind because of the use of *minim*) who believed that it was not God but the angels who created the world. Justin Martyr refers to Jews who hold such beliefs, and he calls it “heresy.”⁴¹ The evidence from Justin suggests that one could reject creation by angels and yet believe in the Logos (or a similar supreme mediator or personified divine attribute). It is the former sort of belief which the rabbis appear to refer to as ‘many powers,’ whereas it is the latter which eventually developed into or came to be regarded as heretical belief in ‘two powers.’ The two are not entirely unrelated, but neither are they simply to be identified.

The conclusion that lesser beings created the world was a key element in certain streams of Hellenistic Judaism and in Gnosticism, both of which were influenced by contemporary Platonism. These various groups all posited, in one form or another, a demiurge, distinct from the high God, who created the (evil) world, often with helpers.⁴² The Mishnah’s argument makes sense as a response to such views. It argues from the Biblical account that only one human being was created to be the origin of all human kind, which in turn implies that there was one creator, not many.⁴³ This is similar to the

⁴¹*Dial.* 62. Those who formulated such views may have been seeking to reconcile or harmonize Jewish beliefs with those of non-Jews, or to distance the highest God from creating directly in accordance with contemporary philosophy. Cf. Philo, *Fug.* 68-70; *Conf.* 179-182; *Op.* 72-72, and also the discussions in Jarl Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985) 197-204; Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 34-38.

⁴²Cf. the texts conveniently collected in Fossum, *Name*, 213-220. See also Philo, *Fug.* 69, who nonetheless elsewhere emphasizes that God alone is the creator (cf. e.g. *Cher.* 77).

⁴³This type of exegetical argument is also found in the later Targumic traditions, which draw parallels between the uniqueness of Adam and the uniqueness of God. The references to God are in the plural and explain them in terms of God speaking to the angels or to his *Memra*. See especially *Tg. Neof.* to

argument that, just as there is one temple and one nation chosen by God, so also there is only one true God.⁴⁴ Therefore, *m. Sanh.* 4:5 does not appear to identify the sort of Logos doctrine held by Philo and the early Christians as heretical; it is more likely aimed at beliefs which were moving in a gnostic direction.⁴⁵ Beliefs of this sort were an issue for Christians in the second century and may well have been for Jews as well.⁴⁶ Although we are probably dealing with something distinct from ‘two powers’ in this passage, it is quite possible that this early use of ‘powers’ language provided the basis for the use of ‘two powers’ beliefs later on. If so, the designation ‘two powers’ may have been used to stigmatize those who held such beliefs as little better than those who had polytheistic or gnostic leanings.

Next we may look at three passages from the Mishnah also thought to refer to the ‘two powers’ heresy. These warnings focus on what is acceptable and unacceptable prayer.

M. Ber. 5:3: “He who says [in a prayer]: ‘Even to a bird's nest do your mercies extend’ or ‘May your name be remembered for the good’ or ‘We give thanks, we give thanks’--is to be silenced”

Gen. 1:26-27; 3:22. The fact that *Targum Onqelos*, which is probably the earliest existing targum to the Pentateuch, mentions Adam’s uniqueness but does not emphasize the uniqueness of God, may suggest that the plurals in the creation stories were not the focus of intense controversy until after the interpretative traditions preserved in *Onqelos* had already taken shape.

⁴⁴See Josephus, *Contra Ap.* 2.193 and N. T. Wright’s discussion of “covenantal monotheism” in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 251-2.

⁴⁵Interestingly, Vermes reached the same conclusion about the identity on the *minim* when looking at another strand of tradition. Cf. Geza Vermes, “The Decalogue and the Minim” *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1975) 176-7.

⁴⁶ Cf. Neusner, *Formative Judaism: Religious, Historical, and Literary Studies. Fifth Series* (Chico: Scholars, 1985) 15-6, who suggests that the rabbis who composed the Mishnah were concerned, if not with Gnosticism, then at least with the same issues that concerned the Gnostics. Yet caution must be exercised in view of the lack of clear evidence, as Gruenwald notes, *Apocalypticism*, 242-251. See also Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Gnostic Imagination* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), esp. 36-47.

M. Meg. 4:9: "He who says "May the good bless you" - this is the manner of sectarianism"

M. Ber. 9:5: "Man is bound to bless (God) for the evil even as he blesses (God) for the good"

The meaning of the first prayer concerning 'a bird's nest' is obscure, as it was to the amoraic rabbis who discuss it in *b. Ber.* 33b and *b. Meg.* 25a.⁴⁷ The latter two prayers are associated with 'two powers' in the Babylonian Talmud, but this may very well represent an attempt either to understand an obscure decision by earlier rabbis, or to make an earlier decision relevant to the issues of their day. As it stands, the prayers which thank God for the good but not for the evil appear to imply an opposing dualism or Gnosticism: such prayers suggest that God is to be thanked for the good, but another power is to be blamed for the evil. The opponents in mind here are *unlikely* to be either early Christians or Jews with beliefs similar to those of Philo.

In the first prayer, we also find the repetition of 'We give thanks.' This is easy to associate with 'two powers' since it was the repetition of the name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures that 'two powers heretics' often appealed to in support of their beliefs.⁴⁸ However, as Segal himself acknowledges, "The amoraic traditions concerning the prayer do not clarify the heresy. Although they assume that such prayers are to be silenced because they manifest 'two powers in heaven,' they do not explain how. We may suspect that they themselves were guessing. We must also be prepared to allow that the tannaim in their day were worried by different phenomenon [*sic.*] from the amoraim."⁴⁹

⁴⁷Cf. Segal, *Two Powers*, 99.

⁴⁸ Cf. *y. Ber.* 12d-13a; *b. Sanh.* 38b; see also Tanhuma Kadoshim 4.

⁴⁹Segal, *Two Powers*, 100, 152.

In addition, Segal notes that the repetition of the words in the synagogue liturgy is unlikely to have been the real problem, since the rabbis came to require a repetition. He suggests that it may be the eucharistic prayers of Christians which are in view, since the Didache includes a double thanksgiving as part of the eucharistic service (Did 9:2-3).⁵⁰ This is highly speculative, but even if it is correct, there is no indication that the problem was prayer which mentioned a second power. The Didache has only prayer to the Father giving thanks for Jesus. The glory clearly goes to the one God for Jesus, without hint of ‘two powers.’ Alternatively, Gruenwald suggests that the problem may have been adding one’s own prayer alongside those which were part of the official liturgy. Introducing a personally-composed prayer with the same language as official liturgy (*modim*, ‘we give thanks’) would be in danger of claiming official status.⁵¹ In view of this uncertainty about what was being objected to in *m. Ber* 5:3, it seems prudent not to assume that the repetition of ‘We give thanks’ is a reference to ‘two powers’ unless further evidence is forthcoming.

Finally, we turn to a passage from the Tosefta, probably composed in the decades immediately after the completion of the Mishnah. Here a reference is made to *minim* who believe, or who might reach the conclusion, that God had a partner in creation, specifically *Adam*.⁵²

⁵⁰*Two Powers*, 101.

⁵¹Gruenwald, *Apocalypticism*, 249-50.

⁵²The issue here could possibly be the same as that mentioned in connection with the first text we discussed, namely that someone other than God was responsible for part of creation, thus resulting in an inferior material world. However, the specific association with Adam has little connection with such ideas. The Gnostics did believe in a God named ἀνθρώπου (‘man’), but this was the highest God rather than the inferior creator. The rabbinic polemic against ‘man’ creating would most likely have fueled Gnostic exegesis rather than countering it. Cf. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Penguin, 1979) 132; also Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 1.12.3; 1.30.6. At any rate, the use of the term ‘partner’ implies a co-operating rather than an opposing power.

T. Sanh. 8:7: Our rabbis taught: Adam was created on the eve of the Sabbath.

And why? So that the heretics could not say: The Holy One, blessed be He, had a partner in his work (of creation).

We know from a number of Jewish sources that, in some circles at least, Adam was believed to have been created as a great and glorious being. Philo even distinguished between a heavenly and earthly Adam, but it is unlikely that his sort of exegesis is the object of this polemic. Philo interpreted Genesis 1 as the creation of heavenly things, and thus for him the heavenly Adam, identified with the Logos, did in fact have a role in the creation of the earthly realm. Yet *t. Sanh.* 8:7 does not seem to address or to be relevant to the issues raised by this type of interpretation of Genesis 1.⁵³

The saying is perhaps best interpreted as a response to the traditions which glorify Adam and almost turn him into a divine being. However, the polemic is not against the idea that Adam was created as a splendid being *per se*, but against the idea that he was God's partner in creation. Thus the rabbis were placing a limit on the exalted status of Adam in order to check unbridled speculation: Adam, however glorious and exalted, did not create. It must also be pointed out that there is nothing which clearly indicates that any group actually held the views described here. It is possible that the rabbis are *hypothetically* addressing what heretics *might have said* if Adam had not been created on the sixth day. Nevertheless, if the *t. Sanh.* 8:7 tradition *is* related to the issue of 'two powers'--and this is far from clear--then it is, at best, one of the first indicators that 'two powers' belief is becoming problematic. Thus even if, for the sake of argument, we grant

⁵³Like *t. Sanh.* 8:7, Philo himself asserts that God had no need of a helper when he created (*Op.*, 23,46). Also see Hans-Friedrich Weiss, *Untersuchungen zur Kosmologie des Hellenistischen und Palästinischen Judentums* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966) 320-1.

that *t. Sanh.* 8:7 is related to the ‘two powers’ controversy, this does not provide grounds for dating the controversy earlier than immediately prior to the composition of the Tosefta around the beginning of the third century CE.

D. Babylonian Talmud

Since the Mishnah and Tosefta show no clear signs of the ‘two powers’ controversy, it is likely that the controversy only arose after the formation of these documents. Nonetheless, later rabbinic writings trace the origins of the ‘two powers’ controversy to the early second century CE. We will therefore discuss two key *baraitot* from the Babylonian Talmud which are connected with key rabbis from this period. The first passage reads as follows:

b. Hag. 14a. One passage says: *His throne was fiery flames* (Dan 7:9) and another passage says: *Until thrones were placed; and One that was ancient of days did sit*--there is no contradiction; One (throne) for Him and one for David: this is the view of R. Akiba. Said R. Yosi the Galilean to him: Akiba, how long will you profane the Shekinah? Rather, one for justice and one for mercy. Did he accept (this explanation) from him, or did he not accept it? -- Come and hear: One for justice and one for mercy; this is the view of R. Akiba.

Segal recognizes that “no one would suggest that these are Akiba's actual words.” He also acknowledges that, even if Akiba did hold to beliefs such as those represented here, the portrait of him recanting his earlier view may well be an attempt to bring him into line with later ‘orthodoxy.’⁵⁴ Thus, even if Akiba maintained some form of belief in ‘two powers,’ this would still would not demonstrate that his belief would have been regarded as objectionable *in his time*. Further, it is not entirely clear that this *baraita*, if it does

⁵⁴Segal, *Two Powers*, 49. It is interesting to note that the association of different names of God with the two divine attributes of 'justice' and 'mercy' is what Philo refers to as God's "two powers". This tradition, in a slightly different form and using different terminology, is also well attested in the Rabbinic corpus.

represent an authentic tradition about Akiba, was originally about ‘two powers.’ In its present position within the Babylonian Talmud, this story is situated in the context of a discussion of subjects related to ‘two powers.’ However, if the dialogue between R. Akiba and R. Yosi is taken on its own, the issue may simply be whether any human figure--even a unique human figure like the Messiah--is worthy to sit alongside God in heaven.⁵⁵ Such a discussion presupposes belief in the uniqueness of God, but does not necessarily deny or challenge it.

One should compare this *baraita* with the tradition concerning the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, in which the high priest is depicted as condemning Jesus to death for ‘blasphemy,’ because he asserted that they will see the Son of Man (with whom he implicitly identifies himself) seated at God's right hand. Here too there is no reason to think that Jesus was being accused of abandoning monotheism.⁵⁶ Rather, he was felt to have claimed for himself a status which was too high for a human being, especially one who was rejected by the leaders and condemned to death.⁵⁷ Akiba was remembered for having identified Bar Kochba as the Messiah, and this may have been part of the difficulty in the rabbinic passage: to have made messianic claims for someone who was put to death by the Romans may have been what was really

⁵⁵The idea of a figure other than God *sitting* in heaven is a point of controversy in later writings, and this may in fact have been objectionable to some even at an early stage (cf. Gruenwald, *Apocalypticism*, 238; Darrell L. Bock, “The Son of Man Seated at God’s Right Hand and the Debate over Jesus’ “Blasphemy,”” *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 189-90). Yet what is striking is that in the viewpoint attributed to Akiba, and in 3 Enoch, human figures are described as sitting in heaven, and it is only in later additions that such ideas are counterbalanced in an attempt to make them seem more ‘orthodox.’

⁵⁶So Dunn, *Partings*, 174-5. See also Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 259, on Jewish monotheism in this period.

⁵⁷This also appears to be a key issue in the disagreement between Justin and Trypho in *Dial.* 38. What is blasphemous is not what Christians claim *per se*, but the fact that they make such claims for a *crucified man*. See further also Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 2000, 208-9.

the sticking point.⁵⁸ On the other hand, to make extravagant claims for any human being in the present day may have met with resistance. There is probably a psychological aspect to this issue which is worthy of further investigation. It seems to be the case that people are often willing to make assertions concerning 'canonical' heroes and figures which they would be unwilling to make or accept concerning any one of their contemporaries. At any rate, the most we can say with certainty is that to make grandiose claims for a failed messiah was felt to be 'blasphemy' or 'profaning the Shekinah' in the sense of 'insulting to God.'⁵⁹ There is nothing which necessitates the conclusion that this tradition was originally connected with the issue of 'two powers' heresy.⁶⁰

The second passage from the Babylonian Talmud is the most famous 'two powers' tradition. It concerns the apostasy of R. Elisha ben Abuya, often referred to as 'Aher' (meaning 'other') in rabbinic tradition. The story is preserved in *b. Hag.* 15a and also (in a different form) in 3 Enoch 16. Regarding *b. Hag.* 15a, Segal acknowledges that "The tradition is a late addition to the Babylonian Talmud."⁶¹ This means that we are dealing with a gap of more than three centuries between the time Aher lived and the

⁵⁸This tradition is also relatively late, but there is nonetheless good reason for the early rabbis to have avoided mentioning it (embarrassment at the mistaken claims of a great rabbi and fear of reprisals from Rome may have been among their motives), and no real reason why it should have been invented.

⁵⁹'Blasphemy' need not imply some sort of challenge to monotheism; cf. Bock, "Son of Man," 184-186.

⁶⁰There does not seem to have been an opposition by the rabbis to messianic expectation *per se* in the period between the Jewish revolts. In fact, Joseph Klausner (*The Messianic Idea in Israel*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956, 392-396) notes that messianic and nationalistic fervour actually *increased* during this period. The problem in the case of the Christians was probably that, during this period of hope for a restored nation and temple, they claimed that a man who had threatened the temple and been killed by the Romans was the Messiah.

⁶¹Segal, *Two Powers*, 60. We presume that Segal means it was added in the latest stage of the redaction of Bavli, rather than being a much later interpolation. There are good form critical reasons for this conclusion, as shown by David J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980) 76, 92; see also Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1982) 309-312. On the generally unreliable character of the *baraitot* which are found in Bavli, see Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 198-9.

writing of this story in the Talmud. The authenticity of the tradition is thus at best questionable, and is certainly not to be taken for granted. In a similar vein, P. Alexander writes, in reference to the attribution of 3 Enoch to R. Ishmael (d. 132 C.E.), that “there can be no question of accepting this attribution at face value; the work is a pseudepigraphon and Ishmael is simply the authority the author or redactor of 3 Enoch wished to claim.”⁶² He dates 3 Enoch to the 5th-6th century C.E., while acknowledging that a later date is not impossible.⁶³ In addition, chapter 16, which contains the tradition concerning Aher’s apostasy, shows signs of being an interpolation into 3 Enoch and so can be dated even later.⁶⁴

The lack of any mention of ‘two powers’ in the Mishnah is thus highlighted by the fact that this important rabbi-turned-heretic is not associated with this heresy until hundreds of years after his apostasy is said to have taken place. The connection between Aher and the specific heresy of ‘two powers in heaven’ is thus problematic, and we have no way of knowing how early or late his name first became associated with this particular controversy. Even if the historical Elisha ben Abuya did hold views which were *later* censored, this still does not provide evidence that, *in his own day and age*, they would have been regarded as unacceptable. It would therefore be ill-advised to accept this

⁶²P. Alexander, “3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch,” *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol.1* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; New York: Doubleday, 1983) 226.

⁶³Alexander, “3 Enoch,” 226-229.

⁶⁴Alexander, “3 Enoch,” 268; *idem*, “The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch,” *JJS* 28 (1977) 178. See also Gruenwald, *Apocalypticism*, 229-30, who notes that the explanation given for Aher’s apostasy in *b. Hag.* 15a is not the earliest one; cf. *t. Hag.* 2.3-4; *y. Hag.* 77b; *Cant. R.* 1.4; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980) 90; John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge University, 1969) 149; Fossum, *Name*, 309 accepts the Bavli account over the earlier ones found in the Tosefta and Yerushalmi for no apparent reason other than he is already convinced of the early date of the ‘two powers’ material. Rowland’s suggestion (*Open Heaven*, 334) that Yerushalmi knew the story about Aher and Metatron but chose to suppress it is highly speculative (the citation of Eccl 5:5-6 is more likely to be the inspiration for the later traditions, rather than evidence that the Metatron story was known earlier and suppressed).

tradition as evidence of a controversy which involved these near-contemporaries of the NT authors. The story is explicable in terms of the tendency to attribute later heresies to earlier figures who were already regarded as heretics, and to attribute responses to those heresies to earlier, well-known, authoritative sources. Thus, in Gruenwald's words, "It is quite likely that the rabbis found in 'Elish'a ben 'Avuyah a peg on which they hung a variety of heretical views."⁶⁵

The evidence thus gives no support for dating the origins of the controversy even to the second century. It is of course possible that the controversy did in fact arise in the second century, but had not yet had sufficient impact to leave any clear or explicit trace in the traditions and literature from that period. However, in the absence of clear evidence, any suggestion that the 'two powers' controversy was already underway in the second century must remain hypothetical.

E. Midrashim

We find the first explicit reference to 'two powers' in the period after the composition of the Mishnah and Tosefta, in the so-called 'Tannaitic Midrashim.' The earliest reference is probably Sifre Deuteronomy 379,⁶⁶ which seems to have Gnosticism in mind. When the rabbis describe 'two powers' as antagonistic, Gnosticism is indicated; when the 'two

⁶⁵Gruenwald, *Apocalypticism*, 242. There is some evidence which suggests that the 'heresy' of Aher was Gnosticism; see Pearson, *Gnosticism*, 24; Deutsch, *Gnostic*, 46-7, 55. However, L. Ginzberg, "Elisha ben Abuyah," *JE* 5, 138-9, notes the unreliable character of the later Aher stories, and suggests that Elisha was in fact a rabbi who became a Sadducee (i.e., he was an apostate from Pharisaism but not from Judaism) and only later had extreme heretical views attributed to him. See also Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 337-8, and the forthcoming book by Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arach*, Stanford University Press, 2001.

⁶⁶Rightly George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1927) 365-6. On dating Sifre, see Stemmerger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 272-3.

powers' are complementary, it is something else.⁶⁷ With this distinction in mind, Sifre Deuteronomy 379 seems to be combating a Gnostic version of 'two powers' belief because it argues against the view that one power is responsible for life and another power for death.⁶⁸ The reference in Mekhilta de-R. Ishmael is also probably aimed at Gnosticism of some form.⁶⁹ The point which it attributes to R. Nathan (c.135-170)--that when the Holy One claimed "I am the Lord thy God" no one protested--suggests an opposition between the two powers, and recalls the Gnostic stories of the God of the Jews claiming to be the only God when he was in fact ignorant of the true God.⁷⁰ The earliest use of the term 'two powers' thus appears to be as a reference to Gnosticism. This is exactly the opposite of the conclusion which is reached by Segal.⁷¹

F. The Third Century Context

This reevaluation of the tradition history of the 'two powers' material, and of the controversies which formed them, may explain the continuity that exists between the exegesis of the 'two powers heretics' and earlier traditions and views. Scholars have long noted that writers like Philo share some views in common with Gnosticism, probably

⁶⁷Segal, *Two Powers*, 17.

⁶⁸Regarding *Sifre Deut 379*, Segal argues that the identity of the heretical group is "elusive" and that the passage could have several groups in mind. While this seems true in characterizing the passage as a whole, it is also obvious that an antagonistic form of 'two powers' is particularly in view. See Segal, *Two Powers*, 85.

⁶⁹As is noted by Segal, *Two Powers*, 57. On dating Mekhilta, see Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 253-255.

⁷⁰See the relevant passages reproduced in Pearson, *Gnosticism*, 30-1; Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 55-6; Segal, *Other Judaisms*, 27.

⁷¹Segal, *Two Powers*, 262. This is not to say that Gnosticism (belief in two opposing powers) is older than other 'two power' traditions (which maintain belief in two complementary powers). Rather, it is to say that resistance to Gnosticism is found in the rabbinic literature before resistance to other two power traditions emerged. The term 'two powers,' therefore, was probably first used as a reference to Gnostics, and only subsequently to Christians and others with beliefs similar to theirs.

because of their common Platonic heritage rather than through direct influence.⁷² It is likely that other Platonizing Jews were responsible for developing Gnosticism, and thus they may have been influenced either by Philo's own writings or by the Hellenistic Jewish traditions that influenced Philo. Similarly, Jacob Neusner has noted that, although there is no clear evidence that the authors of the Mishnah were aware of and interacting with Gnosticism, they come down firmly on matters which also interested the Gnostics, but with the opposite conclusions.⁷³ The designation 'two powers' may thus be a reference to a heresy (and that there were Jewish Gnostics seems very likely)⁷⁴ with which the rabbis had perhaps already begun to interact in the second century, without calling it by that specific name.

The third century provides a suitable context for the origin or intensification of the debate with Gnosticism, and perhaps also with Christianity. If 'two powers' only became an issue in the third century, then we must attempt to offer some explanation of why this should be the case. In the second century, we see Christian theologians beginning to formulate the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. This was done by drawing out the implications of the Judeo-Christian view of God in response to Gnosticism and contemporary philosophy, both of which held that there was an eternally existent material which God made use of when he created.⁷⁵ Judaism on the whole did not adopt or

⁷²Cf. R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem* (London: Mowbray, 1958) 261 and *passim*; Pearson, *Gnosticism*, 34-36, 171-182, for a balanced assessment of a number of the similarities and differences between Philo and the Gnostics.

⁷³Cf. Neusner, *Formative Judaism: Fifth Series*, 15-17.

⁷⁴Cf. especially Pearson, *Gnosticism*, *passim*; *idem*, "The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature" *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1986) 21-35. See also Segal, *Other Judaisms*, 32-34.

⁷⁵Cf. Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994). See also Origen, *De Prin.* 2.1.4; Tertullian, *Adv. Herm.* 2-3.

develop the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* until the middle ages.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the debates about how God relates to creation may have had an impact on Judaism as well as on Christianity, even if the effect was not the same. Christians, concerned to emphasize the goodness of creation against Gnosticism, denied that God used eternally existent matter in creating, and began to define God in such a way that a clear dividing line was drawn between God and creation. This line had not previously been drawn, and the space where the line would be drawn was previously occupied by the Logos, whom Philo describes as “neither uncreated...nor created.”⁷⁷ From the second century onwards, Christians began to see the need to distinguish clearly between God and creation, which ultimately necessitated that a line be drawn on one side or the other of the Logos. And so it was that Arius and other non-Nicenes drew the line between God and the Logos, whereas the Nicenes drew the line between the Logos and the creation.⁷⁸

The rabbis did not confront exactly the same issues as the Christians, and they seem to have reached different conclusions and to have nuanced their views differently. If God's uniqueness was safeguarded sufficiently, his use of pre-existent material need not be problematic. And thus it may be supposed that the rabbis also participated in this debate, drawing a different but equally clear line between God and creation, which might be bridged by metaphorical expressions of God's creative activity, such as *Memra*, but which nonetheless remained firm. At this point, in response to Gnosticism and to Christianity, the oneness of God was defined in terms of the denial of a ‘second power in

⁷⁶So May, *Creatio*, 25; Hayman, “Monotheism,” 3-4.

⁷⁷*Quis. Her.*, 206. See further Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 75-77.

⁷⁸See further Louth, *Origins*, 75-77; Young, “Christology”; Rowan Williams, *Arius. Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987).

heaven' who functions as, and could thus be confused with, God. In previous times, the distinguishing factor between the one God and other gods and angelic beings was worship, the cultic worship of the temple.⁷⁹ Perhaps it was the final disappearance of any real hope for the rebuilding of the temple--the place where the worship that distinguished Israel's God from all other beings and powers took place--that created the need to define the uniqueness of God in more abstract terms. This is of course speculation. But in view of the fact that an unambiguous dividing line between creator and creation appears not to have been drawn--or at least drawn clearly and explicitly--before the second century, whether by Jews or pagans, Christians or Gnostics, it makes sense to relate the Jewish opposition to belief in 'two powers' to this particular setting and controversy. The documentary evidence from rabbinic Judaism and the issues being debated by many other groups fit well together, and thus makes it reasonable to date the origins of the 'two powers' heresy to the end of the second century at the very earliest, and more likely to the first half of the third.

IV. What Exactly Was Heretical About 'Two Powers'?

Our study, and much other recent scholarship, suggest that, in first century Judaism at least, monotheism was felt to be compatible with the idea of a divine agent or viceroy who represented God and acted on his behalf.⁸⁰ This does not appear to have ceased to be the case even later on. The Babylonian Talmud recounts a discussion which is said to

⁷⁹On worship rather than cosmology as the distinguishing feature between the Jewish worldview and that of others see especially Hurtado, "What Do We Mean," 349,355-365. Cf. also Alexander, "Historical," 179. However, we would emphasize that it was sacrificial cultic worship, rather than worship in any broader sense, that was the make-or-break issue and dividing line.

have taken place between R. Idi (2nd-3rd cent. C.E.) and a heretic who engages in ‘two powers’ exegesis, pointing out that Genesis 19:24 appears to refer to two ‘Lords.’⁸¹ It is R. Idi who responds by asserting that this refers to Metatron, who bears God's name.⁸² His only point of conflict with the heretic is about whether this figure should be worshipped. The idea that there was such a principal agent of God does not appear to have been an issue in and of itself; rather, it was *some specific aspect of the content of that belief* that was in dispute. This suggests what may have led to the ‘two powers’ designation being applied to Christians. On the one hand, Christians regarded the Logos/Christ as essentially an ‘emanation’ from the Father, which may have seemed rather Gnostic to the rabbis. On the other hand, from the second century onwards, there was an increasing tendency to worship Christ as God.⁸³ Likewise, the developing Christian understanding of Christ as ‘fully God,’ which was officially affirmed at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E., led some to believe that monotheism was being denied.⁸⁴ It is interesting to note that, even in the post-Nicaea period, the Jewish-Christians who authored the Pseudo-Clementine literature did not feel that their belief in a second

⁸⁰E.g. Hurtado, *One God*, 75; P. S. Alexander, “Parting,” 19-20; John J. Collins, “Jewish Monotheism and Christian Theology”, in *Aspects of Monotheism* (ed. Hershel Shanks and Jack Meinhardt; Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1997) 81-105.

⁸¹*b. Sanh.* 38b.

⁸²Segal notes that it is not belief in Metatron *per se* that is the issue (*Two Powers*, 65). Gruenwald, *Apocalypticism*, 248 does insufficient justice to the apparent acceptability of belief in Metatron among the rabbis.

⁸³Cf. the letter of Pliny to Trajan (*Ep.* 10.96.7). On the evidence of worship offered to Christ in the NT see the different opinions in Hurtado, *One God*, 99-124; Richard Bauckham, “Jesus, Worship of” *ABD vol.3* (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 812-816; Hagner, “Paul’s Christology,” 26; Dunn, *Partings*, 204-206. See also 3 Enoch 14:5-16:5, where the apostasy of Aher is almost immediately preceded by the heavenly homage offered to Metatron. On development of the worship of Christ in the second century cf. Jonathan Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved One* (Sheffield Academic, 1996), 71-153.

⁸⁴Moore (*Judaism*, 365) notes the resemblance between the arguments used in debates between Rabbinic Judaism and Catholic Christianity and those found in the ‘Two Powers’ material. The tendency for Christians to distinguish their Trinitarian belief in God from Jewish monotheism can be traced back to the early third century: cf. e.g. Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 31.1-2.

heavenly being, who could even be called ‘god,’ was heretical, since this figure was clearly subordinate.⁸⁵ Subordinationist christology, whether in NT times or later, does not appear to have been controversial in and of itself.

We may thus suggest that a combination of development and retrospective condemnation were at work in the origins of the ‘two powers’ controversy. It seems likely that Gnosticism, while clearly not accepted by most Jews even in the first century, was condemned as heretical when the rabbis came to have the power to do so. Belief in a principal divine agent or angelic mediator was probably not condemned until groups with gnostic tendencies began to distinguish between the supreme God and the creator of the world, and/or until Christians began to regard the ‘second power’ as co-equal with God and equally worthy of worship. The need to polemicize against such beliefs--which developed out of earlier Jewish beliefs about mediators, but were not identical to the earlier beliefs--probably resulted in the condemnation of various streams of thought within Judaism that were felt to be too similar to the doctrines held by either Christians or Gnostics. Since they were condemned so late in the game, it may be that there was some ambiguity about which beliefs were acceptable and which were not. Perhaps many who would previously have considered themselves mainstream Jews found their beliefs being censured by the rabbinic authorities. To what extent such beliefs continued to be held in spite of official censure, and may have contributed directly to the beliefs found in later forms of Jewish mysticism, it is impossible to say.

⁸⁵The issue between the author of the Pseudo-Clementines and ‘the Jews’ was apparently whether Jesus is the Messiah, not the idea of being a pre-existent, subordinate heavenly viceroy. See further Segal, *Two Powers*, 256-258; James McGrath, “Johannine Christianity - Jewish Christianity?” *Koinonia* VIII.1 (1996) 6-7.

V. Conclusion

We have seen that Segal's work on 'two powers,' although widely accepted and obviously a very important contribution to this field, is not without shortcomings, and at points the evidence is open to interpretations other than those argued for by Segal. We have also observed that there is no passage in the Mishnah or Tosefta which explicitly mentions 'two powers' or which requires reference to that heresy in order to be understood. Alleged connections between 'two powers' and early tannaim are also suspect in view of the late date of the documents which first associate them with the 'two powers' heresy. A plausible setting can be given to the 'heresy' and to the controversies it caused in the late second and subsequent centuries, when the issue of the relationship between God and creation became an issue of debate for philosophers, Christians and Gnostics. Therefore, there is good reason to conclude that the conceptualities later condemned as 'two powers heresy' (i.e. those involving God and a second figure who functions as God's supreme divine agent) would *not* have been controversial in the first century. In short, our study suggests that it is anachronistic to interpret Jewish and Christian documents from this period as reflecting 'two powers' *heresy*.⁸⁶

⁸⁶The authors thank Dr. Robert Hayward for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. A shorter version of this paper was presented to the Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism Group at the Society for Biblical Literature 2001 conference in Denver, where the authors were delighted to receive feedback from, among others, Alan Segal himself.