

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD IN THE MIDRASHIC LITERATURE IN LIGHT OF CHRISTIAN TEXTS

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The various manifestations and theophanies of God are described in several midrashim. In a famous tannaitic passage it is said that although God had appeared to Israel as a warrior (while crossing the Red Sea) and as an old man (at Mount Sinai), these are merely two manifestations of one god, contrary to the heretical view according to which 'there are two powers in heaven'. The article discusses the composition of this passage in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishma'el* and possible religious background of some units of this passage (section I). A close parallel in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on ben Yohai*, as well as the other parallels in rabbinic literature are then discussed in detail (sections II and III). The rabbinic passages are compared to the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John* (section IV). The most striking parallel to the midrashic passage is found in a poem by Ephrem the Syrian. The wording of Ephrem may shed light on the midrashic statements and reveal the ancient form of the tradition in the *Mekhilta* passage (section V). It is demonstrated that other Christian Church Fathers made use of the same theme, and therefore the similarity between the Jewish midrash and Ephrem's poem is probably not due to an isolated and peculiar debt of Ephrem to Jewish traditions. It is instructive to note that in the same period (4th century CE) rabbinic Jews and Christians used the same wording to describe the different manifestations of the Deity, albeit in different religious contexts. Moreover, the rabbis used it as an anti-Christian polemic against Christian binitarian belief, while Christians of the same period used it to define their views concerning the Deity (section VI).

In the following sections (VII-X) the author compares additional poems by Ephrem that address God's manifestations with tannaitic and amoraic passages (especially of the *Midrash of the Ten Commandments*, an amoraic work embedded in *Pesiqta Rabbati*, and *Genesis Rabbah*) as well as later passages in the *Tanhuma* midrashim. Some of these passages are strikingly similar to Ephrem's poems; others reflect merely a thematic resemblance to the ideas expressed in them. All of them, however, shed light on the profound theological dimension of the brief and enigmatic statements in rabbinic literature. The article establishes the complex relationship – more complex than scholarly models and labels assume – between the religious worlds of Jews, Christians and Gnostics of the first centuries CE. It also illustrates the complex and dynamic relationships between the wording and the content of texts: Jewish traditions were accepted and transformed by other religious groups (notably Christians), while theological interests and religious phraseology that were common to them developed new dimensions in the atmosphere of heated polemics that prevailed in the first centuries CE.