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Reasonable Doubts of the "Other": Jewish Scepticism in Early Christian Sources

When early Christian sources describe polemical encounters with "unbelieving Jews," whether real or imaginary, and state that the Jews rejected Christian beliefs, they are referring to a variety of points of contention. In such instances, the question should be asked whether this picture faithfully represents a real external rival or whether it serves as an attempt to overcome an internal problem in the Christian outlook, conveniently disguised as a struggle with the Jewish religion: that eternal Other. In other words, how much of this polemic is actually directed against the Jewish Other and how much of it is implicitly aimed at intra-Christian disputes? Alternatively, in some illuminating cases of explicitly intra-Christian polemics, the Christian rivals are branded as Judaisers. One might wonder whether such accusations reflect views actually held by contemporaneous Jews or whether they are simply an exercise in expedient name-calling. There is a wide spectrum of attested points of contention with the "unbelieving Jews," some of which may be viewed as reflecting a supposed Jewish scepticism. What is of interest is which of Jesus's followers' beliefs are perceived as being under attack from scepticism and to what extent this attack is presented as the result of Jewish spiritual corruption, or, alternatively, as a reasonable, "sceptical" reaction in light of the absence of sufficiently convincing external signs of salvation. In the latter case, behind the scepticism of the Other may loom the internal doubts of the Christians themselves, projected onto their Jewish rivals.

By addressing some representative examples, I will correspondingly ask whether they really attest to existing Jewish "sceptical" views and positions or rather to Christian uncertainties. In most cases, the question remains open—it goes without saying that the true answer may be a combination of both—but merely positing it helps us to better appreciate the complex dynamics of multi-religious milieux in late antiquity.

1 The Nascent Christian Tradition

I will start from a few characteristic instances attested in the nascent Christian tradition. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, we find that the author has appended an exclusively Matthean pericope to the Synoptic description of Jesus's resurrection, culminating in Jesus's appearance to the astounded disciples (Matt 28:11–15):

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> While they [the disciples] were returning [from Jesus's grave], behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. [12]And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sum of money to the soldiers [13]and said, "Tell people, 'his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' [14]And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." [15]So they took the money and did as they were directed; and this story has been spread among the Jews (παρὰ Ἰουδαίος) to this day (μέχρι τῆς σὴμερον).

One may note the usage of *Ioudaioi*—unusual for Matthew, who, in contradistinction to John, habitually refers to particular groups within Jewish society and not to the Jews *en masse*. We are clearly dealing here with an editorial remark informed by an awareness of polemical Jewish versions of Jesus's post-mortem fate—something in the vein of what would reappear much later in the anti-Christian *Toledot Yeshu* circle of stories. It is worth noting, however, that the disbelief in resurrection in general—and by association, that of Jesus—was part and parcel of broader contemporaneous Jewish scepticism. Moreover, if we are inclined to accept the evidence provided by Flavius Josephus, this was a salient mark that distinguished all other "Jewish philosophies" from the strange beliefs of the Pharisees.[1] The same Gospel of Matthew, following the common Synoptic tradition, confirms Josephus's claim that belief in resurrection was a "sectarian fancy" of the Pharisees, rejected and mocked as unreasonable by Sadducees related to the members of the priestly elite (Matt 22:23–34):

> The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, [24]saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies, having no children, his brother must marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' [25]Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. [26]So too the second and third, down to the seventh. [27]After them all, the woman died. [28]In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her." [29]But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. [30]For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. [31]And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, [32]'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." [33]And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. [34]*But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together.*

The whole passage in Matt 22:15–46 is tailored to position core points of Jesus's religious stance within the variety of contemporaneous Jewish outlooks: Matt 22:15–21 against the Zealots among the Pharisees; Matt 22:22–33 with Pharisees against Sadducees; Matt 22:34–38 with the Pharisees; Matt 22:41–46 in contradistinction to the Pharisees. The Sadducees' mockery in the pericope is thus not presented as being directed against Jesus or his entourage, but against resurrection-centred Phar-

1 Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8; *A.J.* 18.

isaic fancy in general (v. 34), and the Sadducees' "realistic scepticism" is backed by their reference to Scripture. In other words, Scripture, in its literary, "virtual" reality, functions as the additional argument regarding what is reasonable and what is not. Fittingly, Jesus's counter-claim is also obliged to the same literary reality, offering its own interpretation of the Torah that supposedly backs the idea of resurrection.[2]

It is telling that Matthew names the "chief priests" as those who began propagating the derogatory explanation for the empty tomb—the Pharisees are involved neither in this event nor in Jesus's arrest and delivery to the Romans to be crucified. Moreover, Matthew shows a clear awareness of the fact that the issue of Jesus's resurrection even constituted a stumbling block for some members of Jesus's movement (28:17): "And when they saw him, they knelt before him; *but some doubted*." Likewise, Luke and John's attempts to emphasise the bodily (Pharisaic) nature of Jesus's resurrection bear important witness to this scepticism and to the need to overcome it. Here is the Lukan attempt to counter the doubt (Luke 24:36–42):

> As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. [37]But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. [38]And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? [39]See my hands and my feet, that it is I, myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." [...] [41]And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" [42]They gave him a piece of broiled fish.

John addresses the same conundrum—between the "reasonable," post-mortem existence of one's soul and the strange belief in bodily resurrection—in the famous "Doubting Thomas" episode (John 20:24–29):

> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. [25]So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Master." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." [26]Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." [27]Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." [28]Thomas answered him, "My Lord/Master and my God (ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου)!" [29]Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

The context—Thomas finally overcoming his doubt regarding Jesus's return from the dead—obliges us to interpret Thomas's exclamation of "My Lord and my God"

2 Compare *m. Sanh.* 10:1, where those denying that the belief in resurrection is grounded in the Torah are declared unfit for the world to come. On the possibly complicated editorial history of this ruling, see Israel J. Yuval, "All Israel Has a Portion in the World to Come," in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 114–38.

(ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου), or at least its second part, "my God" (ὁ θεός μου), not as addressing Jesus, but rather as expressing astonishment about God's great wonder, the bodily resurrection of his anointed one—something like "Oh my God!"[3] It seems, moreover, that the doubt about Jesus's resurrection is part of a broader doubt regarding his messianic calling—especially in light of the debacle of his death. Luke rejects this sceptical view, but he obviously sees it as being present among Jesus's disciples themselves and as being founded on a traditional interpretation of Scripture, and thus as "reasonable." Luke's solution is to argue for an alternative interpretation of Scripture (Luke 24:13–27; 44–47):

> That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem [...]. [15]While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. [...] [17]And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. [18]Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" [19]And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, [20]and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. [21]But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. [...] [25]And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! [26]Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" [27]And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. [...] [44]Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Torah of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." [45]Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, [46]and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, [47]and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

A different and more localised attempt to repel the scepticism backed by Scripture—or more precisely, by its seemingly well-established interpretation—is attested in Mark 9:11–13:[4]

> And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" [11]He replied, "Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; [12]but I tell you that Elijah has already

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3 This goes against a widespread understanding of the phrase as establishing Jesus's divinity. The appearance of ὁ θεός in this context may in principle be viewed as reflecting a broader process of Jesus's divinisation, attested, for example, in the letters of Ignatius (late first century) and thus detached from the Johannine strategies. However, if we strive to comprehend it in a specifically Johannine fashion, a problem arises: since it is the link to the logos that provides the Johannine Jesus with a divine status—like Moses, but greater—what is the inner logic in calling "God" the resurrected Jesus? In other words, how is Jesus's resurrection connected to him being the bearer of God's logos? Was it in line with Philo's suggestion that Moses, as one to whom God spoke face to face, did not die? Though it is a suggestive possibility, I would argue that in order to indicate such an interpretation, the Gospel ought to have provided some further elaboration.

4 Compare Matt 17:10–13.

> come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands." [13]Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

This passage presupposes a collation between the understanding of Mal 3:23–24 as presenting Elijah as an eschatological prophet and messianic expectations: a collation that results in the idea of Elijah as the Messiah's precursor. This scheme, which would become very popular in Christian thought, had, in fact, a much broader Jewish appeal,[5] and the Gospel passage, where it is characteristically ascribed to the "scribes," who clearly do not belong to Jesus's entourage, may bear witness to its circulation in the early first century CE. As such, it becomes the criterion of what is "reasonable" and thus is the promoter of scepticism.

In other early traditions, the scepticism focused on what appears to be a fiasco in Jesus's life mission and/or on his resurrection would be directed towards another essential part of a what appears to be a non-fulfilled promise—the promise of Jesus's return "in glory" to complete the task of messianic salvation. The Epistles of Paul contain many examples; it is characteristic, however, that epistles, in accordance with their genre, directly address their audience with entreaties and admonitions or rebukes. In this situation, the author does not have to present scepticism as a "Jewish thing," but rather explicitly ascribes it to the members of Jesus's movement. It is they who are called to overcome their own doubts—doubts which seem "reasonable" in light of the difficult times the movement is going through. Yet in his famous statement in 1Cor 1:23, Paul notes the broader currency of this "reasonable doubt": "We preach Messiah/Christ crucified, a stumbling block (σκάνδαλον) to Jews and folly (μωρίαν) to Gentiles."

The post-Pauline Epistle to the Hebrews not only epitomises the predicament, but also establishes the necessary link with the general Jewish lack of "redemption certitude"—this time not among Jewish contemporaries, but among those who experienced the Exodus (Heb 3:14–4:2):

> For we share in Messiah, if only we hold our first confidence [or faith] firm to the end, [15]while it is said, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." [16]Who were they that heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? [17]And with whom was he provoked forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? [18]And to whom did he swear that they should never enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? [19]So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.
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> Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest remains, let us fear lest any of you be judged to have failed to reach it. *[2]For good news came to us just as to them; but the message, which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers* [italics mine].

5 See, e.g., Chaim J. Milikowsky, "Trajectories of Return, Restoration and Redemption in Rabbinic Judaism: Elijah, the Messiah, the War of Gog and the World to Come," in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Perspectives*, ed. James M. Scott (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 265–80.

Faith here, as in Paul, indicates the ability to overcome reasonable scepticism with regard to the upcoming redemption in light of the troubled, "non-redeemed" present. One wonders if the recurrent rabbinic formula אין בן דוד בא ("the son of David will not come until …") in *b. Sanhedrin*, with its emphasis on the (indefinite?) postponement of the messianic salvation, represents a later echo of a broader sceptical sentiment. Thus, for example, "The Son of David will not come until two dynasties in Israel come to an end: the one of the head of the [Babylonian] exile and that of the *nasi* in the Land of Israel" (*b. Sanh.* 38a), or "The Son of David will not come until the whole empire embraces heresy" (*b. Sanh.* 97a).[6]

One notes that with all the scepticism concerning Jesus's messianic mission, there is a conspicuous lack of any description of a sceptical Jewish reaction to the miracles performed by Jesus as reported in the Gospel accounts. The polemical response is presented as focusing on the possible source of Jesus's miraculous powers, but no doubt is expressed with regard to the miracle itself (Matt 9:32–34):

> As they were going away, behold, a dumb demoniac was brought to him. [33]And when the demon had been cast out, the dumb man spoke; and the crowds marvelled, saying, "Never was anything like this been seen in Israel." [34]But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the prince of demons."[7]

This accusation, devoid of what we may call reasonable scepticism, might have been somehow linked to the dominant presence of demons in the miracle stories in the Gospels—not only those of exorcisms, but also of healings proper. Likewise, in rabbinic and later Jewish sources, Jesus is accused of being a magician (who, according to some traditions, received his magic powers through the theft of the divine Name).[8] Of course, one man's miracle is another's magic, but, characteristically, the event itself is not being denied even in the sources expressing the polemical stance of the Jewish Other.

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6 Compare *b. Yebam.* 63b: "The Son of David will not come until the number of all the souls [destined to dwell] in the body is filled." See also discussion in Ephraim E. Urbach, "On Redemption" in Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 2nd enlarged ed., (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), 1:649–90.

7 The appellation "prince of demons" for the commander in charge of the demonic forces also appears in *T. Sol.* 3:6 [12] (of uncertain provenance). William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Volume II: Commentary on Matthew VIII–XVIII* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991], 195–96) suggest that by the New Testament times, he was considered to have once been the highest heavenly angel (*T. Sol.* 6:1–2) and had become associated with Satan and Beelzebul. Other appellations were also in use, such as Asmodeus (see Tob 3:8, but compare *T. Sol.* 5 [21], where a distinction is upheld between Beelzebul and Asmodeus), Belial (Jub 1:20, compare "spirits/demons of Belial" in *Damascus Document* 11:3–2), and Mastema (Jub 10:8; 11:5).

8 See, for instance, *b. Sanh.* 43a.

2 Justin Martyr as a Polemical Witness

The writings of Justin Martyr from the mid-second century attest to a somewhat different arrangement of the foci of the alleged Jewish scepticism. As the Gospel narrative acquired its detailed form, it was now not Jesus's resurrection—already a firmly established belief among his followers—but additional details, such as the story of Mary's miraculous impregnation, that needed to be defended against sceptics. Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, a composition that would become a blueprint for much of the later Christian anti-Jewish polemic,[9] provides a telling example here. Since we cannot be sure if Trypho was the author's real-life interlocutor or merely a fictitious figurehead,[10] the question of what Trypho's views as spelt out in the composition actually stand for is even more appropriate. At the beginning of chapter 67 of the *Dialogue*, Trypho is presented as confronting the Christian tradition of Jesus's virgin birth, which was already gaining appeal:[11]

> Moreover, in the fables of those who are called Greeks, it is written that Perseus was begotten of Danae, who was a virgin; he who was called among them Zeus having descended on her in

9 On Justin Martyr's polemical agenda and strategies, see Ben-Zion Bokser, "Justin Martyr and the Jews," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 64, no. 2 (1973): 97–122; no. 3 (1974): 204–11; Harold Remus, "Justin Martyr's Arguments with Judaism," in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity, Volume 2: Separation and Polemic* (Waterloo, Ont.; Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), 59–80; Marc Hirshman, "Polemic Literary Units in the Classical Midrashim and Justin Martyr's 'Dialogue with Trypho,'" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 83, no. 3–4 (1993): 369–84; Michael Mach, "Justin Martyr's 'Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo' and the Development of Christian Anti-Judaism," in *Contra Iudaeos*: *Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, ed. Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996), 27–47; Graham N. Stanton, "Justin Martyr's 'Dialogue with Trypho': Group Boundaries, 'Proselytes' and 'God-Fearers," in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Graham N. Stanton and Guy G. Stroumsa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 263–78; Judith Lieu, "Accusations of Jewish Persecution in Early Christian Sources, with Particular Reference to Justin Martyr and the 'Martyrdom of Polycarp,'" in *Tolerance and Intolerance*, 279–95; William Horbury, "Jewish-Christian Relations in Barnabas and Justin Martyr," in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, repr. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 315–45; Daniel Boyarin, "Justin Martyr Invents Judaism," *Church History* 70, no. 3 (2001): 427–61; Philippe Bobichon, "Autorités religieuses juives et 'sectes' juives dans l'oeuvre de Justin Martyr," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 48, no. 1 (2002): 3–22; Philippe Bobichon, "Persécutions, calomnies, 'Birkat ha-Minim' et émissaires juifs de propagande antichrétienne dans les écrits de Justin Martyr," *Revue des études juives* 162, no. 3–4 (2003): 403–19; Antti Laato, "Justin Martyr Encounters Judaism," in *Encounters of the Children of Abraham from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Antti Laato and Pekka Lindqvist (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 97–123; Tessa Rajak, "Theological Polemic and Textual Revision in Justin Martyr's 'Dialogue with Trypho the Jew,'" in *Greek Scripture and the Rabbis*, ed. Timothy M. Law and Alison Salvesen (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 127–40; Terence L. Donaldson, "'We Gentiles': Ethnicity and Identity in Justin Martyr," *Early Christianity* 4, no. 2 (2013): 216–41.

10 See, for instance, Claudia Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics, 30–150 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 135, 215; Larry R. Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 493.

11 See also Rajak, "Theological Polemic and Textual Revision in Justin Martyr's 'Dialogue.'"

> the form of a golden shower. And you ought to feel ashamed when you make assertions similar to theirs, and rather [should] say that this Jesus was born man of men. And if you prove from the Scriptures that he is the Messiah (Christ), and that on account of having led a life conformed to the Torah (law), and perfect, he deserved the honor of being elected to be Messiah, [it is well]; but do not venture to tell monstrous phenomena, lest you be convicted of talking foolishly like the Greeks.[12]

Trypho is portrayed as one who is ready to accept Jesus's messiahship in principle, but who can do so only on what he views as a solid Jewish basis of the Messiah's faithfulness to the Torah—not that of mythological imagination. Justin might have been aware of contemporaneous Jewish attacks on the story of the virgin birth. At the very least, Celsus, that sceptical second-century Roman "conservative intellectual,"[13] was quoted by Origen in *Contra Celsum* (1.28) as claiming that he had heard from a Jew that Mary had actually been impregnated by a soldier named Panthera—a name that resurfaces in this context in a later Jewish source.[14] Certain scholars would suggest that Trypho's rejection of the story represented the views of some Jewish followers of Jesus.[15] It is moreover possible that the *Dialogue* here reflects disputations within Justin's community itself, especially in view of the fact that the texts of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which contain the virgin birth motif, had not yet become fully canonised: Justin himself seems to have used a harmony composed from excerpts from different Gospels.[16] It is telling that the need to con-

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12 For the English translation of the *Dialogue* used here and below, see, Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), revised and edited by Kevin Knight, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0128.htm.

13 See Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 94.

14 See *t. Ḥul.* 2:22, Zuckermandel edition, 503.

15 See, for example, Oskar Skarsaune, "Jewish Christian Sources Used by Justin Martyr and Some Other Greek and Latin Fathers," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 2007), 379–416.

16 What Justin makes Trypho say also seems to point to a written Gospel harmony rather than to separated Gospels of canonical status (*Dialogue* 10): "'This is what we are amazed at,' said Trypho, 'but those things about which the multitude speak are not worthy of belief; for they are most repugnant to human nature. Moreover, I am aware that your precepts in the so-called Gospel are so wonderful and so great, that I suspect no one can keep them; for I have carefully read them. But this is what we are most at a loss about: that you, professing to be pious, and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living from the nations, in that you observe no festivals or sabbaths, and do not have the rite of circumcision; and further, resting your hopes on a man that was crucified, you yet expect to obtain some good thing from God, while you do not obey His commandments.'" Moreover, this is how Justin himself refers to the Gospel account (*Dialogue* 105): "For I have already proved that he was the only-begotten of the Father of all things, being begotten in a peculiar manner *Word* and Power by Him, and having afterwards become man through the Virgin, as we have learned from the memoirs." The author of the *Dialogue* seems, therefore, to be aware of various "memoirs" (less than canon) and harmonistically combines them—or others have combined them for him—into a single

front the ridicule head-on only arises at this point: nothing of the kind is attested in the Gospels. Does Jewish scepticism then also represent the internal debates and the opposition of those who—like Trypho?—disliked the story of the virgin birth, the story conspicuously absent from Mark, John, Paul, and so on?

The crux of Jewish scepticism, however, is presented in the *Dialogue* as a continuation of the motif already discerned in the New Testament—namely, a sceptical response to the lack of redemption promised to and by Christians. Chapters 31 and 32 of the *Dialogue* are tailored to overcome this "reasonable objection." In chapter 32, Justin counters Trypho's protestation that Jesus does not fit the scripturally sanctioned and thus reasonable picture of final salvation, with the idea of two messianic advents—the first, already accomplished by Jesus (with reference to Zech 12:10: "They look on him whom they have pierced"), and the one to come (with reference to the glorified Son of Man from Dan 7:13):

> Trypho said, "These and such like Scriptures, sir, compel us to wait for him who, as Son of man, receives from the Ancient of days the everlasting kingdom. But this so-called Christ of yours was dishonorable and inglorious, so much so that the last curse contained in the Torah of God fell on him, for he was crucified."
> Then I replied to him, "If, sirs, it were not said by the Scriptures which I have already quoted, that his form was inglorious, and his generation not declared [...] and if I had not explained that there would be *two advents of his,—one in which he was pierced by you; a second, when you shall know him whom you have pierced.* [...] But now, by means of the contents of those Scriptures esteemed holy and prophetic amongst you, I attempt to prove all [that I have adduced] [...] [by] other words also spoken by the blessed David, from which you will perceive that the Lord is called the Christ by the Holy Spirit of prophecy; and that the Lord, the Father of all, has brought him again from the earth, setting him at His own right hand, until He makes his enemies his footstool.

Since there is no doubt that Justin's coreligionists were very much aware of the disappointing postponement of final redemption—which had not yet been safely reinterpreted in a spiritualised fashion—the question lingers: Are we dealing here mostly with Jewish scepticism, inner-Christian doubt, or both?

3 The Case of Theodore of Mopsuestia

I will now address a later case, that of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), where the Jewish rejection of basic tenets of the Christian outlook is not immediately derived from what may be viewed as scepticism. This case is therefore introduced

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narrative: "Word" comes from John, the virgin birth from Matthew. On the canonisation of the New Testament, see, for instance, Guy G. Stroumsa, "The Body of Truth and Its Measures: New Testament Canonization in Context," in Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 79–91.

here mainly as a backdrop in order to supply a broader perspective for discussion. Theodore was an important representative of the Antiochene tradition, a disciple of Diodore of Tarsus, and, at one point in his life, a friend of John Chrysostom.[17] Theodore's major theological treatise, *On the Incarnation*, having been lost,[18] we are left to reconstruct his outlook from the *Commentary on John*, which survives in its entirety only in Syriac translation.[19] The *Commentary* bears witness to a combination of low Christology and a modicum of understanding with regard to the supposed Jewish rejection of Christological ideas—especially illuminating, as the Fourth Gospel itself is usually perceived as both vehemently anti-Jewish and as propagating a very high Christology.[20]

The *Commentary*'s outstanding feature is the perception of a gradual development in unfolding Christological truths.[21] This concept of "progressive revelation" is not limited to Jesus's times, but functions as a guiding principle in Theodore's elaboration on the process of imparting divine knowledge throughout the history of salvation.[22] Thus, the Interpreter is of the opinion that it is only in the incarnation

17 He would be celebrated in East Syrian tradition as the Interpreter (ܦܫܩܢܐ).

18 For Theodore's Christology, see, e.g., Francis A. Sullivan, *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1956); Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition. Volume 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Mowbray; *Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press*, 1975), 421–42; Frederick G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 34–63. For the extant fragments of *On the Incarnation*, see Till Jansen, *Theodor von Mopsuestia: De incarnatione. Überlieferung und Christologie der griechischen und lateinischen Fragmente einschließlich Textausgabe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 234–91.

19 For the Syriac text, see Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentarius in Evangelium Iohannis Apostoli*, ed. and Latin trans. Jacques M. Vosté (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1940) (hereafter *Comm.*). For an English translation, see Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on John*, trans. Marco Conti, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010) (hereafter Eng.). See Felix Thome, *Studien zum Johanneskommentar des Theodore von Mopsuestia* (Bonn: Borengässer, 2008), and recently, inter alia, Aryeh Kofsky and Serge Ruzer, "Shaping Christology in a Hermeneutical Context: Theodore of Mopsuestia's Endeavor in Face of Contemporaneous Challenges," *Adamantius* 18 (2013): 256–75; Aryeh Kofsky and Serge Ruzer, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Development in Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on John in Syriac," *Parole de l'Orient* 40 (2015): 275–86.

20 See, for example, Reginald H. Fuller, "Lower and Higher Christology in the Fourth Gospel," in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990): 357–65; Jörg Frey, "Licht aus den Höhlen? Der 'johanneische Dualismus' und die Texte von Qumran," in *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditionsgeschichtlicher Perspektive*, ed. Jörg Frey and Udo Schnelle (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 117–203; Martin Hengel, "The Prologue of the Gospel of John as the Gateway to Christological Truth," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 265–94.

21 See discussion in Kofsky and Ruzer, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Development in Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on John in Syriac."

22 This principle is also consistent with the method of rational/literal/historical and contextual exegesis that Theodore inherited from his teacher Diodore of Tarsus, ingeniously elaborated and bequeathed to his disciples of the so-called Antiochene school. See Sullivan, *The Christology of*

that the logos was hypostatically revealed and *seen*, whereas earlier, God's words (ܡܠܬܐ, logos) were conveyed through intermediaries (angels or prophets).[23]

This "supersessionist" attitude, however, does not annul Theodore's positive appraisal of biblical Israel as being cognisant of divine truths.[24] The logos did convey its messages to ancient Israel, albeit only indirectly. The deficient character of the biblical Jews' theological cognition is therefore derived not from their unsatisfactory religious stance, but rather from the objectively veiled nature of the revelation to which they were exposed, which prevented Israel from a true recognition of its Lord.[25]

As may be expected, Theodore views the incarnation, outlined in John 1:14 ("And the Word [ὁ λόγος] became flesh and dwelt among us"), as a direct personal revelation of the logos and the *watershed* in the unfolding history of salvation. However, with regard to the period after the incarnation, Theodore also develops a model of the disciples' *gradual overcoming* of their lack of comprehension, the final phase of which comes only after Jesus's resurrection. Even then, moreover, it does not occur instantaneously, but is also distinguished by a gradual development.

This general framework of such a gradual development of cognition is finally epitomised in Theodore's bold and unusual concept of Jesus's own personal development—more precisely, concerning the changing mode of the union between the human and the divine in the incarnation. Here, Theodore discerns two consecutive potential and effective modes of the logos's operation on Christ's humanity. The first mode, which is only latent, is applied to the period between Mary's impregnation and Jesus's anointment with the Spirit at baptism. The second mode, which is actually effective, is initiated by the Holy Spirit at Jesus's baptism, when the additional grace is conferred, setting in motion Jesus's public ministry, miraculous powers, and moral perfection, *newly acquired* by his enhanced humanity. Theodore thus

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Theodore of Mopsuestia, 181–96; Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 352–60; Eduard Schweizer, "Diodor als Exeget," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 40 (1941): 33–75; Felix Thome, *Historia contra Mythos: Die Schriftauslegung Diodors von Tarsus und Theodors von Mopsuestia im Widerstreit zu Kaiser Julians und Salustius' allegorischem Mythenverständnis* (Bonn: Borengässer, 2004).

23 *Comm.*18–19; Eng. 9. Theodore characteristically claims that the notion of serial pre-incarnation appearances of the logos—which he sees as a heretical, mostly Arian deviation—was also common among John's Jewish contemporaries: "In fact, there was a firm belief (ܡܨܒ̈ܝܢ) among them (Jews) that he had indeed appeared to them many times in different guises (ܒܫܘܢܝ̈ ܕܡܬܚܙܐ ܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܢ)." What clearly underlies Theodore's polemical strategy here is his apprehension that such a position could potentially impair the singularity of the divine manifestation in the Messiah. This is, of course, a classic case of identifying heretical views with those of the Jews.

24 *Comm.* 18.20–21; Eng. 9. Theodore retains the basic pre-incarnation perception of the logos as omnipresent and as the voice proclaiming (ܡܟܪܙ ܘܡܡܠܠ) God's will—in fact, as God's intermediary in His dealings with the world and humanity.

25 ܡܢ ܕܠܐ ܡܬܦܠܓ ܗܘ, *Comm.* 32.14–15; Eng. 15.

presupposes that Christ needed an additional influx of God's grace in order to achieve moral perfection:

> Christ-in-the-flesh, when he was not yet in his nature—namely, conjoined with God the Word—necessarily needed the mediation of the giving of the Spirit (ܡܫܝܚܐ ܒܦܓܪܐ ܟܕ ܠܐ ܗܘܐ ܒܟܝܢܬܗ ܐܝܬ ܠܘܬ ܐܠܗܐ ܡܠܬܐ ܒܥܐ ܡܫܬܡܫ ܒܡܫܚܐ ܕܪܘܚܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ ܐܝܬ ܠܗ) [...]. After receiving every perfect grace (ܟܠ ܙܟܘܬܐ ܕܐܬܝܗܒ ܠܗ), which he received thanks to his anointing (ܒܡܫܝܚܘܬܗ), he lived a life of great integrity (ܒܬܪܥܝܬ ܟܒܝܪ ܒܚܫܐ) in a way that is not possible for human nature (ܒܟܝܢ ܕܠܐ ܡܫܟܚ ܠܒܪ ܐܢܫ ܒܛܒܝܥܬܐ).[26]

Theodore also seeks to conceptualise in Christological terms the events of the post-resurrection stage, when Jesus's enhanced human state is perceived as being derived from a new and stronger *mode of conjunction* with the logos:

> He (the assumed man) separated his person from other human beings [...] by indicating that he had received a *more excellent* grace (ܕܐܬܝܗܒ ܠܗ ܟܒܝܪ ܐܠܗܐ ܠܐ ܐܬܝܗܒ ܠܐ ܠܐ ܒܪ ܐܢܫ ܐܦ ܠܐ ܒܪ ܐܠܗܐ) through which he is [now] joined together with God the logos like a *real* son (ܒܗ ܐܬܚܒܪ ܥܡ ܐܠܗܐ ܡܠܬܐ ܐܝܟ ܒܪ ܐܡܬ).[27]

It is in the context of this gradual development that the Interpreter portrays the cognitive situation of Jesus's Jewish environment. For Theodore, first-century Jewry seems to stand for pre-incarnation stages of revelation delivered through the prophets,[28] and Jesus's disciples shared this general Jewish matrix—especially regarding messianic beliefs. Such recognition underlies Theodore's perception of the initial post-incarnation cognitive difficulties shared by the two groups.

Commenting on John 7:34, Theodore explicitly states that Jews *and* disciples during Jesus's lifetime belong to the same epistemological category:

> The Jews did not understand any of these words (ܐܝܠܝܢ ܠܐ ܝܕܥܝ ܡܢ ܗܠܝܢ ܡܠܝܐ ܕܐܡܪ). And this is not surprising, because even the *disciples* [...] could not understand the words that were said at that time (ܘܠܐ ܡܬܬܪܚܩ ܗܠܝܢ ܐܦ ܬܠܡܝܕܝ [...] ܕܐܬܝܕܥ ܐܝܟ ܐܡܪ). It was only at the end that they learned these things from the facts.[29]

In a fascinating replay of his treatment of the pre-incarnation biblical stages of revelation, he is ready to explain the lack of acceptance—on the part of Jesus's Jewish contemporaries in general, the disciples included—of the Christological truths regarding the Messiah's union with the logos. The rejection of those truths is again presented as being conditioned not by "Jewish weakness," but rather by a still limited mode of revelation, and thus as the expression of a "reasonable doubt." There-

26 *Comm.* 296.29–297.2; Eng. 137.

27 *Comm.* 350.19–22; Eng. 162.

28 See also Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Galatian*s 3:23, in *Commentary on the Minor Pauline Epistles*, ed. Rowan A. Greer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 82–83.

29 *Comm.* 161.1–5; Eng. 74.

fore, Theodore's interpretation—which the Interpreter explicitly presents as opposing the broad, and incorrect, understanding—of Thomas's initial scepticism in John 20:24–28, the Gospel passage I already addressed above, is particularly significant. Tellingly, Theodore views it not as a sign of weak faith, but rather as conduct that was most realistic and adequate at this stage, since *objectively*, Thomas was not yet *able* to discern the divine nature in Christ. Therefore, when Thomas, the "doubting disciple," exclaimed "My Lord and my God," he was merely praising God for the miracle of Jesus's bodily resurrection.[30]

To conclude, I have highlighted a variety of points from early Christian discourse towards which "Jewish scepticism" was supposedly expressed. We have observed a meaningful dynamic in its foci: from Jesus's resurrection through claims about his messianic mission and stories of his miraculous birth to the insistence—in spite of the obvious delay in the Parousia—on his future triumph, all the way to theological concepts. The extent to which those expressions of "Jewish scepticism" reflected actual contemporaneous Jewish patterns of thought remains an open question that warrants separate discussion on a case-by-case basis. What is clear, however, is that in most instances, they might in fact have also reflected internal Christian "reasonable doubts"; on some occasions, this is actually spelt out by our sources.

In this sense, the background case of Theodore of Mopsuestia remains an outstanding one, both because there is no indication that the Jews in Theodore's reasoning are his contemporaries and because he explicitly presents "Jewish doubts" regarding new Christological schemes that were being propagated in that time as reasonable and thus justified. He seems to be keenly aware of the highly complicated character of those schemes, and in his opinion, the "lack of comprehension" corresponds to the actual level of revelation to which Jesus's entourage had been exposed. Here especially, one may suppose that the Jewish "lack of comprehension" should, in fact, be viewed as reflecting internal Christian doubts vis-à-vis elaborations introduced into contemporary Christology. Unlike others, however, Theodore not only tries to help his audience to overcome its uncertainties by branding them as "Jewish doubts," but also identifies with those doubts, demonstrating sympathy with the predicament of the "unbelieving Jews" and thus that of his coreligionists themselves.

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30 *Comm.* 358.3–11; Eng. 166.

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