

Presence and Involvement: The Pre-incarnate Messiah in the History of Israel

By Edjan Westerman | August 15, 2022

For the interpretation and understanding of Scripture—both Tanakh and the New Covenant Scriptures—it is a hermeneutical prerequisite to be willing to think from *within* the Israel-centered revelation context and to think along *with* Israel, and its Messiah. Presuppositions tend to steer and limit our understandings, and results tend to strengthen our sets of presuppositions. To be conscious of this hermeneutical circle is necessary in order to become aware of the underlying paradigms that mold our interpretation of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit is opening eyes within the Body of Messiah to its centuries-long dependence on a supersessionist reading of the Bible. *Post*-supersessionist reading of Scripture means not only to get a right perspective on God's eternal election and calling of Israel, but also to redirect our thinking about (other) systematic theological themes. This predominantly biblical theological article tries to search and interpret Scripture in relationship to a theme that also has such systematic theological bearings. With respect to hermeneutics it will start from a fully post-supersessionist perspective, from within a new canonical narrative. To ensure that this will be no unsubstantiated course of operation, we will first sketch the outlines of this hermeneutical approach.

Hermeneutical Consequences of an Israel-centered Creation

It is no coincidence that the self-revelation of the Almighty Creator was granted in the midst of the people of Israel, and took place, for a big part, within the land of Israel. This Israel-centeredness within the revelation of God should *not* be interpreted as just being a logical and therefore “unavoidable” consequence of a divine election of Israel to become God's place of remedy after sin entered creation and the rebellion of the nations took place (Gen 11).

The origin of this feature lies further back. It is grounded in creation itself and in what went before. It has to do with the Creator's wish for *an Israel-centered creation of the earth and cosmos*. This Israel-centeredness has a revelatory aspect, as well as a physical and geographical aspect. In this chosen spiritual and physical center of creation God wished to reveal himself to his people, and from there the nations too have been reached with the message about him and his deeds.

It is therefore foundational to understand that the knowledge that we (including us non-Jewish Christians) have about God has been granted to us from Israel's midst and mediated by Israel's faithful service. Learning about him and knowing him as the God of creation is therefore indissolubly bound together with his voice reaching us from Israel's midst. It is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob revealing himself to us as

Creator. All knowledge about him comes to us as knowledge that the God of Israel imparts to us about himself.

It is *in the Temple* in Jerusalem that Yeshua reveals the depths of his divinity (John 8:58; 10:30). It is also in *the Messiah of Israel*—the Son—of whom it is written that he reveals God (John 1:18). This means that he reveals the God of Israel, who reveals himself to be the Creator (John 1:1). The simple use of the denotation “God,” in John’s prologue and elsewhere, must be understood from within the Israel-related context of revelation. For us too there is no legitimate possibility of pondering God’s greatness and divinity when we do not want to remain within the Israel-centered revelation or when we sever God’s divine greatness from the fact that he first of all wishes to be the God of Israel. Within a supersessionist reading of the canonical narrative—with the election and calling of Israel predominantly intended to remedy sin and its effects in general—thinking about God takes place in general categories, and not in Israel-related categories. This causes the designation “God of Israel” to become something that is an addition to, and not inherent to, the core of God’s self-revelation. In order to be in alignment with the ways that God chose for his revelation, we therefore should interpret Scripture from the God-chosen revelatory Israel-context, and also listen along with Israel (and its Messiah) in order to understand God’s revelation.

This implies that parts of Scripture that—from a superficial first look or from within a supersessionist scheme of interpretation—seem to speak about God in general categories should be interpreted from this Israel-related context. What this means for the interpretation of the very first very paragraphs of John, Ephesians, Colossians, and Hebrews, as for many other parts of Scripture, will become clear below. Suffice it to say here that these Scripture parts too have been written within and from the God-chosen Jewish center of learning, revelation, and understanding. It is there that God granted the revelation about himself and his Messiah. *This God-ordained context of revelation is therefore also the necessary context for interpretation.* But having stated this we will now turn to its argumentation.

Israel: God’s Intended Center of Creation and Priestly House of Learning

The traditional Christian narrative has been characterized by a movement from *creation*, via the entrance of sin, (and Israel’s election to bring forth the promised Redeemer as God’s remedy) toward the appearance, death, and resurrection of *Jesus the Christ*, ending with the expectation of the *future redemption* of creation. Within this theological scheme the particular election and role of Israel has been understood as instrumental toward the greater goal of the general redemption of people and creation. For centuries mainstream Christian understanding has also been that after bringing forth the Messiah the role of Israel had been played out. The perspective of this narrative scheme made Christian theologians and churches also think in general categories about God, the Christ, and the redemption of creation, in this manner further diminishing the importance of God’s self-revelation as the God of Israel.

R. Kendall Soulen’s diagnosis of the traditional narrative has stimulated me and others to think through how the structure of our Christian narrative determines our views of God, his Messiah, and his ways with Israel and creation.³ Soulen pleads for a creation-for-consummation perspective for the interpretation of God’s dealings with

Israel and the world. This implies that the particular election and covenant with Israel fits within a larger divine purpose with creation. Israel's election is then not functional only within a sin-redemption scheme, and the Messiah's appearance within Israel has a broader meaning than just being the start of a general redemption of creation.²

As stated above my purpose with this article is to demonstrate how the God-chosen Israel-context of his revelation should also mold our interpretation of Scripture. For this Israel-context is part and parcel of the ways that God wished to walk toward his consummation goal for creation.

Already from eternity God intended—a fully supralapsarian³ choice!—for Israel to be the center of creation and his priestly “House of Learning.”⁴ In this center he would reveal himself, and there creation could learn about his words and ways. From this center he would completely fulfill all his intentions for creation. This center of creation would be also the place of creation's consummation. But let's turn to Scripture now.

The very first words of Genesis (*Bereshit bara*) have traditionally been interpreted as the beginning of a chronological narrative (the perspective being from *within* the divine creation sequence) about creation and the inhabitation of the world. Israel seems then to be absent until Genesis 12. But another interpretation is also possible. In his comments on Genesis 1:1, Rashi distinguishes between the simple meaning of the text (“In the beginning God created”) and the old rabbinic interpretation⁵ of these words in which *bereshit* is understood as meaning “for the sake of *reshit*” God created the heaven and earth.⁶ *Reshit* (“beginning”) then is understood as speaking of both the Torah as the beginning of God's ways⁷ and Israel as the first fruit of his harvest.⁸ This leads to an understanding of these words as saying that the cosmos was created for the holy instruction (Torah) of God and for Israel's sake. In this supralapsarian interpretation (starting from the eternity perspective) Israel is the focal point right from the beginning, although creation is waiting for Israel to appear. The election of Israel is then not just functional as bringing forth a remedy after the entrance of sin, but connected with God's creation purposes.

Although Christian interpreters also pondered God's pre-creation intentions, the sin-redemption focus overshadowed their interpretations. It is, however, not only possible to interpret from a creation-consummation perspective, but such interpretation is also in line with interpretations we encounter in the New Testament as well with contemporaneous Jewish interpretations.⁹ Also reading closely along with Genesis in itself opens up new interpretative perspectives.

The creation account shows that creation is meant to enter its own history. A history of the earth being filled with vegetation, with animal life and human beings, created in God's image. Man has in God's mind a God-designed task even before he is created (Gen 1:26). This task is part of the history of the ever wider circles of the realization of God's purposes. The blessing of God is the force that drives this future-directed process (Gen 1:22, 28). But reading along with Genesis 1 and 2 raises questions: Who is this God? What is man's task to be? What is blessing? What does the sanctification of the seventh day mean? What is it “to be allowed to eat of the tree of life” (Gen 2:9)? In short: instruction is needed and teaching is necessary in order to reach and partake in the full consummation. This need for teaching and learning thus arises from creation. It is no consequence of the entrance of sin.

The hermeneutical consequence of the fact that not all answers are given in these first chapters is that creation should stay in the *learning* position, waiting for God-given answers. Reading with Israel these words of Scripture makes us realize that the nations too had to wait for the instruction of God, the Torah, to be given. The hermeneutical consequence of the history that unfolds in Genesis is that we discover that all creation is waiting for further instruction. And that everything gears toward the revelation of this Torah in the midst of “the camp of Israel” that God will create.¹⁰

The discovery of this waiting-for-instruction aspect means that we must think along two content lines within this instruction. First, creation awaits further instruction about its original divine purposes (that is, its consummation), and also at the same time we start to understand how sin made new content necessary (related to God’s efforts to counteract sin and its consequences). Both aspects are to be discerned within the Torah that will be given in the midst of Israel. Both aspects also are related to Israel’s election and calling. Israel has been chosen and called as a priestly nation to be God’s living House of Learning. Reading along with the unfolding of God’s history we see that creation is waiting for this House of Learning. Within the camp of this priestly nation, instruction will be available about the repair of the breach between the Creator and his creation, and God’s consummation purposes will also be revealed there. The priestly nation itself must learn, through the revelation that will be granted, and by its priests and prophets, this two-fold instruction. But the nations also will have the opportunity to learn there.

This physical House of Learning will have a geographical aspect. It will be located in the midst of creation. At “the navel” of the earth it will be (Ezek 38:12 NIV margin; cf. 5:5), and divine life will flow from there. This will happen because the self-revelation of the God of Israel—who is Creator—will take place there. It will be mediated by the priestly people that will represent the nations as well (Exod 19:5–6).

When we take into account this creation-for-consummation perspective, we perceive that Israel’s priestly role has to do with both God’s original intentions and with what became necessary in reaction to creation’s disobedience. The priestly tasks of blessing God,¹¹ sanctifying life,¹² and obeying and mediating his Instruction are inherent to creation as such, and belong therefore to the eternal calling of this people. The tasks related to the reparation of the breach between God and his creatures are expressions of God’s mercy, and will not be needed any longer when Israel, the nations, and creation will enter into the *tikkun olam*, “the perfecting of the world,” and “restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago” (Acts 3:21).

An Israel-Centered Creation is Also a Messiah-Centered Creation

When we conceive of Israel’s tasks to be inherent to God’s purposes for creation as such, as well as having a part in re-establishing communion with God, both for Israel itself and for the whole of creation, we begin to understand that Israel’s obedience is essential in both of these directions. Israel’s priestly (representative) role is dependent on its perfect *kedushah*.¹³ Life only flows through the navel of the earth when *kedushah* is found there. It is in this context that the Messiah-centeredness of creation also has to be mentioned.

Often when referring to the Messiah, we think of Yeshua “enfleshed” in Israel’s midst,¹⁴ and therefore from a post-incarnation and sin-redemption perspective (using infra-lapsarian categories). Within Jewish interpretation, however, we encounter the thought that the creation of the world happened for the sake of the Messiah.¹⁵ This concurs also with what we read in Colossians about the Son: “all things have been created through him and for him” (1:16).¹⁶ Speaking from an eternity perspective it can be stated there that the Messiah is the goal of creation. Also the very first verse of Genesis can be interpreted as referring to the Messiah too. He can be seen as the firstling (*reshit*) of God’s first fruit (*reshit*) Israel.¹⁷ In Jewish tradition he can be called “First One” (*rishon*).¹⁸ Creation-for-consummation (supra-lapsarian) and sin-redemption (infra-lapsarian) perspectives are perhaps mingled when the Messiah is said to be the head under whom all things are to be united as preparation for the fullness of time (Eph 1:10).

It is clear that the obedient, dedicated life, the *avodah* (worship/service) of the Messiah, his perfect kedushah, is essential in bringing about the fulfillment of Israel’s calling. Both his active obedience and his passive obedience are fundamental in the fulfillment of all righteousness (Matt 3:15).¹⁹ They fulfill and create the God-given possibility for Israel and the nations to be counted as righteous (2 Cor 5:21). It is also clear that his incarnation was necessary for the atonement of sins and in the overthrowing of darkness and death (Heb 2:14–18). But Messiah Yeshua’s kedushah and *avodah* were also a goal in itself, as perfect kedushah forms the goal of creation as such. His obedient life, his righteousness, forms the pinnacle showing what man is created for. His enfleshment in Israel’s midst—being welcomed by Israel as represented by Miriam/Mary²⁰—was functional not only within a sin-redemption scheme. This mystery of love should also be interpreted within the perspective of the purpose that creation was created for. He really is the First One who lived that purpose.

But this mystery can well be even deeper. When the narrative of Scripture at the deepest level speaks “about God who journeys with His creation toward the *tikkun olam*, then a different light is shed on the incarnation.”

Then God’s Indwelling in the flesh of Israel might express an eternal desire to “embrace” His people, and thereby the whole of creation, literally “pressing His people to His heart.” Then the incarnation is the deepest form of kedusha by which the people and the world are sanctified.²¹

Then the Messiah-centeredness of creation can be understood to imply also that in a grandiose manner the love of God for His people Israel, representing all of creation, is revealed. Then this incarnation reveals divine love that wished to be so near and share in every aspect of creation’s life. Then this possibility to look at and touch with our hands the Word of life that has been from the beginning (1 John 1:1), can also be understood as being God’s purpose all the way long.

Hermeneutical Consequences:

Looking Upward from the House of Learning

When Israel is meant to be God’s House of Learning and he wishes to reveal himself within Israel’s camp, this implies that both Israel and the nations encounter God’s revelation there first. We see this clearly demonstrated in Peter’s narrative structure

when he tells Cornelius what God had done within physical and geographical Israel (Acts 10:36–43). We are meant to look upward from this Israel-context in order to understand God's self-revelation and all revelation about his purposes and ways.

When we do not interpret from an Israel-context, but from a universalizing perspective that eclipses the particular Israel-context, this will lead to interpretative results that on a structural level are severed from Israel as God's House of Learning. The consequence is that systematic theological thought will be *de-Israelized*. For very long we have been used to this kind of interpretation, in which the Israel-context of the revelation (that is, God's revelation granted *within* Israel, *to* Israel, *for* Israel, and *only through* Israel's mediation *for* the nations) was eclipsed by a universalizing interpretation. This caused the Messiah as King of the Jews to be seen predominantly as King of kings and King of the world. Messiah's enfleshment within Israel, his incarnation in Jewish flesh, became celebrated as the Son taking (generic) human flesh. The love of God was understood in predominantly universal terms. Its arrival within Israel and its distribution through Israel became to be seen as accidental, instead as of structural importance. This "legitimized" the (believers from the) nations to be permanently independent of the distribution of God's redemption by his chosen intermediaries. But this attempted shortcut on the way of instruction from the House of Learning made us blind to what could have been learned by adhering to God's chosen way of learning.

This implies that our interpretation of parts of Scripture that speak about divine realities that surpass our physical world and perception should start from this Israel-context of revelation, and that we should use categories that are in alignment with it. We should be co-listeners with Israel when, for example, we are reading the prologue of John's gospel, or the first chapters of Ephesians, Colossians, and Hebrews. This means we should read them as mediated to us by Jewish writers, who themselves lived within the broader environment of Jewish interpretation of Scripture. Even when they wanted to convey the message about the crucified and risen Jewish Messiah Yeshua to a partly non-Jewish audience their message was in line with the Tanakh of which Yeshua had said that it could not be broken (John 10:35). When we read passages that speak about divine movements from heaven to earth, like Philippians 2:5–11, we should quite naturally understand them as speaking about what took place in Israel's midst. And reading about the exaltation of Jesus we should understand that it is about the King of the Jews receiving all honor from God. When these parts of Scripture make us look upward into the depths of eternity in relationship to God, the pre-existence of the Son and Messiah, and the pre-creation council of God, we are summoned to do this from the House of Learning that God has devised. This is post-supersessionist theology taking seriously the eternal calling of Israel as place of divine revelation.

In this manner our eyes can be opened for many new perspectives, and our theological understandings deepened. When we start to seriously take into account the Israel-relatedness of every part of God's (self-)revelation, we will realize that the whole of Christian theology essentially is, and therefore also should be, based on and molded by the self-revelation of the God of Israel granted in this House of Learning.

Christian thinking about God and his relationship to creation has in the past often been severed from the Israel-context of revelation. This affected our reflection about and understanding of the essence of his relationship to both Israel and the whole of

creation in history, in both (what some would call) the pre-Yeshua and the post-Yeshua period.²² Elsewhere I studied the ongoing relationship of God and Messiah Yeshua with the whole of the people of Israel during the post-ascension history of Israel.²³ This study of the faithfulness of God expressing itself in the continuing presence of the *Shekinah* within Israel's history and of the not-yet aspects of Yeshua's kingship over all Israel led to the conclusion that there is in fact no biblical reason to think in any way about Israel's history as a history of absence of God. The study also made me quite naturally think about what revelation of the presence and involvement of the pre-incarnate Messiah was given before the incarnation. Does the Tanakh already contain revelation about a pre-incarnation relationship of Israel with him who would be named Immanuel, and "whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Mic 5:2)?

The focus within the remainder of this article will therefore be on the pre-incarnate involvement of Messiah with Israel's history. This focus, however, makes it necessary to pay attention first to some fundamental hermeneutical questions arising from the paragraphs above.

Presence and Involvement of the Pre-Incarnate Messiah

Many texts (or text fragments) within the New Testament make us think about the pre-existence of the Son/Messiah and his pre-incarnation involvement with Israel. The question, however, must be asked whether these texts still fit in with the hermeneutical principle and starting point of Israel as the House of Learning. That is, can they still be characterized as Jewish writing, and are they still in line with the Tanakh, both in its original intention, and with second-temple Jewish interpretation of the Tanakh?²⁴ Or do they show a Christian interpretative superstructure imposed on the Tanakh, or even interpretations contrary to the meaning of its texts?

Texts that we will have to consider in this respect speak about the pre-existence of the Son/Messiah and his involvement in the creation and sustaining of the cosmos, and about all things being geared toward him (such as John 1:1–18, 8:58, 10:30; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 1:3–12; Phil 2:5–11; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1–2, 7:3, 16, 28). We also find texts that seem to mention a pre-incarnation involvement of the Messiah with (the history of) Israel (1 Cor 10:4; Heb 11:26). Also texts that show similarities to texts from the Tanakh (like Rev 1:12–16 in relation to Dan 10:4–6) will have to be taken into account, along with the designation of the Messiah as "the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev 13:8). We can observe that different aspects of the Son/Messiah are mentioned in close textual proximity to each other. Aspects of pre-incarnation realities and post-incarnation activities of Messiah are interspersed with each other.

It is also clear that it was the actual encounter with and revelation of Messiah Yeshua that opened hearts, eyes, and minds for further revelation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It was his physical nearness with all that this entailed (Yeshua's dedicated life, teaching, healing, miracles, death, and resurrection) that revealed "the Word of life" (1 John 1:1–3). Special revelatory instances, like the voice of God speaking (Matt 3:17; John 12:28), the transfiguration (Matt 17:1–8 and parallels) and visionary encounters (of Paul, Acts 9:3–6, 18:9–10; 2 Cor. 12:1–4; of John, Rev 1:9–20) meant that glorious and eternal aspects of Messiah Yeshua were gradually more disclosed. These encounters with him prompted Messiah's followers also to read Scripture anew,

to look upward for more revelation, and also to look “backward” in Israel’s history. All this exemplifies how this revelation was received within Israel as the House of Learning.

From the perspective of revelation granted within Israel as God’s House of Learning, therefore, we will try to read Scripture and also look backward (in relation to the Messiah’s incarnation) into Israel’s history. We are aware that over the centuries an abundance of literature and systematic theology has been produced that deals with the divine and eternal aspects of the Son of God. We can certainly draw on many of the riches that have been granted to the Body of Messiah in this respect. But at the same time we have to take into account that this study and interpretation of Scripture for the most part has been conducted from a perspective that lacked the Israel-context of revelation. Consequently the thinking about the pre-existence of Messiah and his pre-incarnation involvement with Israel’s history took place in general categories, and within a Christ-perspective that saw the history of Israel as only a preparation for a (universally perceived) salvation of the world.

We need, therefore, to look anew to the pre-existence of Messiah and his pre-incarnation involvement with Israel’s history, from the hermeneutical perspective of Israel as the House of Learning. Doing this we will also take to heart the principle that Messiah is not changing in any respect. He will always be the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Heb 13:8). We will therefore now focus—in a thematically arranged manner—on several of the aspects mentioned above, while we are conscious of the fact that both the sheer magnitude of literature available and the space limits of this article make for a very condensed treatment of the material.

The Pre-incarnate Messiah Creating and Accompanying Israel

Speaking of the Messiah when referring to the pre-incarnation period of Israel’s history is no anachronism. One can’t assume that this term would only fit the post-incarnation period. Paul speaks about the Messiah present in Israel’s desert journey (1 Cor 10:4) and the author of Hebrews mentions the Messiah when referring to Israel’s captivity in Egypt (Heb 11:26). In accord with the Messiah-centeredness of creation, described above, no sharp distinctions are made (or systematic theological definitions used) in Scripture passages that refer to the pre-existent realities of God’s council of creation and redemption, and that also speak of the special tasks of the Son of God, the Word, and Messiah Yeshua in relation to creation, redemption, and final restoration of all things. Therefore I will speak about the pre-incarnate Messiah, knowing that he is the Son, who took Jewish flesh, and that it is Messiah Yeshua, who revealed God, being “the one and only Son” (John 1:18).

As mentioned above, both Paul and the author of Hebrews know of the involvement of the pre-incarnate Messiah with Israel. Paul speaks about the Messiah accompanying the people in the desert (1 Cor 10:4). Although he interprets the rock that provided the people with water in a midrashic manner, the reality that he wished his readers to grasp was that Israel was not left unaccompanied in the desert.²⁵ Clearly Messiah Yeshua²⁶ had been active in sustaining the people of Israel. Hebrews speaks of Moses sharing in Messiah’s disgrace (Heb 11:26). Moses’ choice to share the plight of the people of Israel made him choose to share in the disgrace of the Anointed.²⁷ It is clear that Messiah Yeshua is meant. But how are we to understand the connection between Moses and the

Messiah? Is this (just) a typological connection, or is there again a reference to the presence of the pre-incarnate Messiah?²⁸ The interpretation is partly dependent on whether or not the idea of the pre-incarnate Messiah being active in Israel's history was present among the first generations of Jewish and non-Jewish Yeshua-believers.²⁹ F.F. Bruce speaks in another context about "the original reading" of Jude 5—in that version this verse mentions "Jesus" instead of "the Lord"—and is of the opinion that this verse has bearing on this issue. He states that it is "much more probable that Jude's language reflects an identification of Jesus (the pre-incarnate Son of God) with . . . the Rock . . . (so Paul in 1 Cor. 10:4b) . . . or with the Angel of the Divine Presence who guarded and guided [the people of Israel] to the promised land."³⁰

This identification, however, need not be based solely on the few verses discussed above. They form only a few elements within a complex of texts and text fragments that link Messiah Yeshua to divine appearances found within Tanakh, leading to identification with the presence and involvement of the pre-incarnate Messiah. This complex of texts found within the New Testament fits well in with contemporary patterns of Jewish interpretation.

John the Baptist stated: "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me" (John 1:15, 30). Yeshua himself said: "Very truly I tell you . . . before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58), thereby not only pointing to a pre-incarnate existence, but even associating himself with the divine Name, as he did at other places.³¹ It is clear that Yeshua's claims of being sent by the Father and coming from God and speaking his words (John 5:36, 6:29, 7:28, 8:42) must be interpreted in line with the prologue of John's gospel. He is the One who was "revealed in flesh" (1 Tim 3:16 NRSV). This "mystery" (1 Tim 3:16) is referred to in many places in the New Testament and is the background of, and surfaces in, many other places. Also Yeshua's self-designation as the Son of Man can be seen as referring to heavenly origins.³²

In a discussion about his message and behavior Yeshua concluded: "But wisdom is proved right by her deeds" (Matt 11:19). This reference to wisdom is not just a statement about his deeds expressing God's wisdom, or being in line with it. Yeshua is pointing again, although in a concealed manner, to his pre-existence. He is identifying himself here with the divine Wisdom, which was with God and assisted in creation (Prov 8:22–31). In contemporaneous Jewish interpretation of Tanakh this figure of Wisdom as a pre-existent reality, actively involved in creation, was a well-known feature.³³ It is closely connected to the identification of the pre-incarnate Messiah with the divine Word of God, as we find it in the prologue of John.

The role of the Word³⁴ of God, as a special heavenly entity mediating God's council and messages to both creation and Israel, receives extensive attention in contemporaneous Jewish thought.³⁵ The Targumim³⁶ show how in the interpretation of the Tanakh the Word of God is conceived of as a divine messenger, and is closely associated with other revelations of divine messages delivered and actions taken. The *Memra* is the agent of creation, God spoke his Word and his *Memra* let light originate.³⁷ The *Memra* executes God's decisions, initiates developments, encounters people, and is actively involved in Israel's history.³⁸ Within this line of interpretation the *Memra* is closely associated with the Angel—that is the *malakh*, messenger—of the Lord.³⁹

This Messenger of the Lord reveals the Presence of the Lord and appears to Hagar (Gen 16:13), Abraham (Gen 22:11, 15), Moses (Exod 3:2), Israel in the desert (Exod 23:20–23; 32:34; 33:2), Joshua (Josh 5:13–6:5), Balaam (Num 22:22–35), Israel at Bokim (Judg 2:1–5), Gideon (Judg 6:11–24) and to the parents of Samson (Judg 13:3–23). He is prophesied to come to his Temple (Mal 3:1–5). It is clear that sometimes this Angel/Messenger speaks as the Lord himself, and that an alternation can happen between “the Angel of the Lord” and “the Lord” (Gen 22; Exod 3). These intriguing specifics within Tanakh caused much serious Jewish reflection surfacing in writings from the first and second centuries onwards.

These reflections regarding the Angel of the Lord, together with interpretations of Scripture regarding the Memra acting as the personified Word of God, and the thinking about the pre-existent Wisdom, fit completely within the contemporaneous Jewish interpretative context. They also contributed—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—to the formation of the interpretative background against which the (self-)revelation of Yeshua took place and was understood. It is from this perspective that the prologue of John’s gospel must be interpreted. Paul understands the revelation about Yeshua within this same perspective, and should be interpreted accordingly. This implies that we should interpret everything that is written in his letters about the pre-existence of the Son in light of the Israel-context of revelation, and as speaking about the pre-incarnate Messiah of Israel.⁴⁰

The pre-incarnate Messiah is the One who reveals the invisible God, functioning like the Angel of God’s countenance.⁴¹ His existence is from before creation.⁴² In him everything is created and he also is the goal of creation (Col 1:16). He upholds everything and all aspects of creation (Col 1:17). Paul speaks of the pre-incarnate Messiah in the same manner as John in the prologue to his gospel (John 1:3) and as the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 1:2–3). Although Paul wishes to show his (for the most part non-Jewish) readers in Colossae that all powers are subordinated to Messiah Yeshua, these verses—understood from the perspective described above—have a direct relationship to what was said above about the Messiah-centeredness of creation. The pre-incarnate Messiah, who as the Word and Wisdom created all things, is characterized thereby as the explicit origin of Israel. “I am the first and I am the last”—this divine self-designation from Tanakh (Isa 48:12) is uttered by the glorious Messiah appearing to John at Patmos (Rev 1:17).

The Israel-centered creation is the pre-incarnate Messiah’s work. He is the beginning and end of Israel’s creation and history. In him also “all things” of Israel’s yesterday, today, and future “hold together” (Col 1:17). The creation is geared toward him as its head; as the King of Israel he will receive the supremacy over everything including death (Col 1:18; cf. Dan 7:14; 1 Cor 15:26). He is the goal of God’s redemptive purposes by bringing—as Israel’s perfect priestly representative—reconciliation through his blood (Col 1:20). But he will also perfectly realize God’s original creation goal, that is the kedushah—the sanctified dedication to God—of all creation as one unified whole (Eph 1:9–10, 20–22). It is true that this unity will come “after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24), finally subduing creation’s rebellion. But this kedushah of the Israel-centered creation has always been God’s purpose, right from the beginning, as all creation was meant to enter as (one) “man in God’s image” (Gen 1:27) into the kedushah that God decreed for the seventh day (Gen 2:3).⁴³ The creation by

Messiah Yeshua of the “one new man” (Eph 2:15 RSV) is therefore the eschatological redemptive realization of God’s original consummation purposes for his Israel- and Messiah-centered creation. In this perfect One of Israel the nations (which from the start were represented by this priestly people) are joined with Israel unto kedushah for their Creator, the God of Israel, redeemed and recreated to this priestly service of blessing God⁴⁴ by the death and resurrection of this one Son of Man.⁴⁵

Understood from this Israel-context of revelation, these findings—so much in line with what has been revealed in Tanakh, and also in line with contemporaneous Jewish interpretation—make us realize that the pre-incarnate Messiah in many ways has been involved with the history of Israel. As the Son, the Word/Memra, the Wisdom, the Angel/Messenger of the Lord, and in other qualities, he has been active in bringing Israel to its existence, and in guiding and guarding this people family of Abraham through all trials and tribulations that we read of in Tanakh.⁴⁶ He has taken care to strengthen and secure its hope of redemption and prepared it for his appearance in its midst. He created and prepared Israel for its highest calling, which is to be the beloved of God, his segulah-people. He also realized this two-sided love in his own person. He revealed by his incarnation the greatness of God’s descending love, as he also realized as the First One of Israel, in a perfect manner, its calling to cleave to the Lord (Deut 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20; Josh 22:5; 23:8; 2 Kings 18:6; Psa 63:9). That is creation reaching its highest goal in this Living Center of the center-people of God’s creation.

The Pre-incarnate Messiah: Suffering and Struggle

The intensive involvement of Messiah with Israel’s history also implies that he has been and still is involved in the struggle related to the perfect realization of Israel’s calling. “In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old” (Isa 63:9). In this verse the love and pain of God are combined with the activity of “the angel of his presence” in Israel’s redemption (from Egypt). Israel’s anguish is shared by the Lord and their afflictions are his afflictions. The author of Hebrews stated that Moses chose to share in the afflictions of Messiah. The struggle to free Israel from captivity in Egypt was not just affecting people and happening on earth. It affected the Lord and the pre-incarnate Messiah and it started with God sharing Israel’s pain. “I know their sufferings” (Exod 3:7, RSV), God tells Moses.

The struggle with Egypt, leading to redemption from captivity and preparing for the encounter at Sinai, must be diagnosed in line with the later revelation granted to Daniel. He encounters the divine “man dressed in linen” (Dan 10:5–6; cf. Rev 1:13–16) who reveals himself as the one who fights the decisive unseen battles for Israel’s existence. Unseen powers that relate to Persia and Greece have to be fought. These princes/principalities try to obstruct God’s plans. Daniel unwittingly shared in this struggle during his fast (Dan 10:12–13).

We may assume that these struggles have been going on also in relation to Egypt, Ashur, Babel, and Rome. We may infer from what has been revealed that these struggles and the ensuing pain have been a divine reality all the way; that divine wrestling with powers that wished to prevent this Israel-centered creation has been going on; that Messiah’s wrestling also with Israel for a whole-hearted obedience has been a constant

reality, and not just at Peniel (Gen 32:30–31). The pre-incarnate Messiah has wrestled with these unseen powers just as the incarnate Messiah Yeshua had to do. The New Testament shows in many places how the confrontation with unseen powers is closely connected with the appearance, preaching, and actions of Yeshua, and how this battle will be a continuous reality to reckon with (Eph 6:10–12). The statement that “in him all things hold together” (Col 1:17) implies therefore a wrestling involvement with the *whole* of Israel’s history. The mentioning of Messiah’s afflictions (Col 1:24) must therefore also be understood as much broader than just referring to his (post-incarnation) afflictions.

In Revelation we also hear of Israel’s Messiah—the Lion of the tribe of Judah—as the one who has merited the right to open the seals and to cause thereby the history of Israel and the nations to reach its consummation (Rev 5:5). When revealed to John however, he appears as “a Lamb, standing, as though it had been slain” (Rev 5:6 RSV). In the first instance one might quite naturally think that this designation is caused by the physical death and resurrection of Yeshua. But Revelation speaks of him elsewhere as “the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world” (13:8).⁴⁷ Of course one could interpret this designation as only becoming reality when Messiah Yeshua would die, and as just speaking about the incarnate Messiah. But perhaps we might consider that more is implied. Do we not learn here that the Lamb was in the beginning and will stay the Lamb forever, together with God the divine center of God’s city (Rev 21:22–23)? Could not the Messiah be spoken of here as the one who with suffering—both pre-incarnate and incarnate sufferings⁴⁸—wrestled for and with Israel (and Israel represents the whole of creation) to bring it to its perfection and completion? Is the Messiah-as-the-Lamb-slain revealed here as the First and the Last (Rev 1:17; 22:13), thereby encompassing and determining all of history? Just as the lambs of the tamid-offering⁴⁹ were the first and the last on the altar in God’s House and thereby created a spiritual, encompassing bond that also “held all things together”? Making every day and the whole of life, history and time, from the first to the last moment, to be geared toward the kedushah of all creation?

Those lambs in the morning and evening—together with oil, flour, and wine—formed the beginning and end of Israel’s daily and eternal priestly avodah. They taught Israel what holy worship the Lord had ordained and was befitting to him. But did they also exemplify the One who was the First and the Last? And did they—without words and not yet understood—reveal him who created and guarded the priestly people, and the altar in creation’s midst, in order to be its living Tamid at the appointed time? Did they invite Israel to share his afflictions in bringing about God’s consummation to dawn over Israel? Did they perhaps contain comfort for the people when suffering like lambs, like Jeremiah (Jer 11:19), and when they were “considered as sheep” (Psa 44:22; Rom 8:36), unwittingly sharing in the afflictions of Messiah?

Is the Lamb-as-slain the deepest mystery revealed about the whole of Israel’s history? Does his struggle and sacrifice—therein as God’s perfect image also revealing the Lord—precede Israel’s sufferings, instead of being predominantly a reaction to these? Is the righteous suffering of Israel therefore a sharing in the sufferings of this Righteous One who shall realize the ultimate purposes of the Lord, in the manner that Paul speaks about his own sufferings (Col 1:24)? Is Israel’s righteous suffering therefore

in a deep and mysterious manner connected to the pain of the Lord God, who wishes to bring his people to completion in order to bring all creation to its consummation?

These last paragraphs have direct bearing on the manner we look on the sufferings of Israel during the whole of its history. The suffering presence of the pre-incarnate Messiah, however, as well as the sharing of the incarnate Messiah Yeshua in the plight of the deepened exile of Israel following the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem,⁵⁰ stresses the fact that this never has been and never will be suffering-in-absence-of-Messiah. It is certain that what happened in the Shoah multiplies the questions that could be asked. The relationship of the sufferings of Israel to the sufferings of God and Messiah Yeshua asks for humble and prayerful study.⁵¹ The painful enigma of the Shoah is haunting and should disturb any misplaced feelings of rest. But one day it will become clear that Messiah Yeshua has been sharing all the pain of his brothers (Matt 25:31–45).⁵² His enfleshment in Israel did not take anything away from the “I know their sufferings” that Moses heard. On the contrary, Messiah Yeshua took on flesh in order to share all pain in his flesh. The incarnation made him “like his brethren in every respect” (Heb 2:17–18). God’s eternal desire in Messiah to press Israel—and in Israel all creation—to his heart, now also implied his sharing all degradation, suffering the pains and deaths of Abraham’s descendants as their merciful and faithful high priest (Heb 2:16–17).

The Glory of Israel’s Messiah Revealed

The descending love of Messiah that Paul writes about to his readers in Philippi (Phil 2:6–11) should never be interpreted as excising Israel’s history from the glorious path that Messiah took to become the servant of mankind. Far from that, we should interpret the words that phrase this love as coming to us from an appointed messenger of Israel’s Messiah, as words that describe how the pre-incarnate Messiah became a Jewish man and in that capacity served all humankind by his obedience “even to death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). By taking seriously the Israel-context of revelation, we understand that this glorious obedience has been revealed in the midst of the earth, and that the salvation of all nations is still “from the Jews” (John 4:22).

By adhering to the hermeneutical principle of interpreting from the Israel-context of revelation we discover the unity in the revelation of Messiah, both in Tanakh and in the New Testament, and the unity of a fully Jewish Messiah with a high Christology. We discover the unity that encompasses both Israel’s particular election and the universal blessing that Messiah also wishes to be, and the unity that binds together all creation around its center, the Messiah of Israel in its midst.

Conclusion

In this article we studied the hermeneutical consequences of God’s choice of an Israel-centered and Messiah-centered creation, with Israel as his House of Learning. We applied the hermeneutical rule that this God-ordained context of revelation is also the necessary context for interpreting the theme of the presence and involvement of the pre-incarnate Messiah in Israel’s history. Applying this hermeneutical rule in reading Scripture in this instance made us realize that our systematic theological thought regarding God and the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—should be more aligned

with this perspective of an Israel-centered, and a Messiah-centered, creation as the context for our interpretation and theological thought. Also other themes within biblical, systematic, and practical theology will appear in a new light, when more and more they become elements within a life of the Body of Messiah that is focused on blessing God, and that flows from the kedushah of Messiah Yeshua. May God be blessed by our learning, and by our dedication originating from his kedushah!

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- 1 R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).
 - 2 Jennifer M. Rosner writes (in listing some of the work that has to be done to recast Christian theology in light of Israel), “The sin-redemption paradigm . . . must be conceived in such a way as to fit within the larger overarching creation-consummation paradigm” (*Healing the Schism, Barth, Rosenzweig, and the New Jewish-Christian Encounter* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015], 295).
 - 3 As a decree from before (supra) the Fall (*lapsus*) instead of a decree after (*infra*, within the situation of) the Fall.
 - 4 For this see Edjan Westerman, *Learning Messiah, Israel and the Nations, Learning to Read God’s Ways Anew* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018). Chapters 1 and 2 present the argumentation of my views on this theme. This article follows the reasoning given there.
 - 5 Sometimes reference is made to rabbi Akiva, https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/8165/showrashi/true/jewish/Chapter-1.htm.
 - 6 The letter bet (*be-reshit*) being interpreted as short for *bishvil* (for, for the sake of). Genesis Rabbah 1:4–8 lists many divine reasons for creation, including the Torah, the creation of Israel, and the name of Messiah. Creation of the world for the reason of first fruits (of corn/bread and fruits) and tithes is also considered there. Cf. Leviticus Rabbah 36:4.
 - 7 This interpretation fits in with or is based on Proverbs 8:22–31, where Wisdom is the beginning of God’s ways.
 - 8 Jeremiah 2:3: “Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of His harvest” (JPS).
 - 9 For this, see below.
 - 10 This designation is meant to convey the fact that God’s revelation was granted within the physical people family of Israel, and most of it also within the God-willed geographical residence of the people, in the Land.
 - 11 Blessing God is the first and most important task for the whole people. The first tractate of Mishna and Talmud is therefore Berakhot (blessings).
 - 12 Sanctification (*kedushah*) is the goal of creation, as showed by the fact that all creation enters the God-ordained *kedushah* of the Shabbat (Gen 2:1–3).
 - 13 *Kedushah* meaning both holiness and sanctification.
 - 14 “Enfleshment” expressively conveys what incarnation means.
 - 15 So b.Sanhedrin 98b, <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.98b?lang=bi>.
 - 16 Bible quotations are taken from NIV, unless otherwise indicated.
 - 17 Cf. footnote 6.
 - 18 Herman L. Strack und Paul Billerbeck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus, Erläutert aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Oskar Beck: München, 1922), 65.

- 19 *Obedientia activa* and *passiva* are dogmatic terms that have been used to differentiate between the dedication of Yeshua to an active whole hearted obedient life and the dedication to (passively) bearing the consequences and punishment for the sins of (Israel and) mankind.
- 20 Msgr. Dr. Ron van den Hout, a Dutch Roman-Catholic Bishop, stimulated me to more articulate this Israel-representing welcoming function of Myriam/Mary.
- 21 *Learning Messiah*, paragraph 15.11, 175. When I wrote these lines I was not aware that the thinking of John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) followed this same supralapsarian pattern and that it is known as the “Franciscan Thesis.” An illustrative quote: “The absolute primacy, or ‘firstness,’ of Christ, means that the Incarnation, in relation to all other creatures, was first willed by the Creator as an end in itself. . . . The Incarnation was not willed for the sake of perfecting creation or for the sake of redeeming mankind as a kind of afterthought to them. The created universe and its Redemption were both willed for the sake of the Word Incarnate.” (Fr. Peter Damian M. Fehlner [<https://missiomagazine.com/franciscan-thesis-and-pope-benedict-part-1/>]). I evaluate this, however, to still lack the Israel- and Messiah-centeredness of creation.
- 22 This terminology is used to discern between what happened before the (incarnation and) appearance of Yeshua and what happened after his exaltation to heaven.
- 23 Edjan Westerman, “For Better and For Worse: The Faithfulness of God through the Exile and Return of the Shekhinah,” *Kesher* 38 (Winter/Spring 2021).
- 24 A positive answer to this question is given by Riemer Roukema, *Jesus, Gnosis & Dogma* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), and Daniel Boyarin, “Logos, A Jewish Word: John’s Prologue as Midrash,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* [JANT] eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 546–49. Roukema’s chapter 8 has the title “Does Jesus as Lord and Son of God Fit into Early Judaism?”
- 25 Interpreting only in a typological manner (referring to the availability of a spiritual well) does no justice to the reality of Messiah’s presence that Paul wishes to stress.
- 26 Paul uses the definitive article.
- 27 Cf. Psalm 89:51–52, where David and his royal offspring are designated as “the anointed.”
- 28 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971), 320, values this as a possible interpretation, although he himself chooses differently.
- 29 This certainly was the case in later centuries. Origen, Justin, and Jerome can be named here.
- 30 Bruce, 63, fn. 46. This identification can also be found with Justin, Origen, and Jerome in their interpretation of this text; Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude, An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1970), 163. This shows that such identification was not thought of as contrary to what was seen as Messiah’s involvement.
- 31 In the “I Am” sayings in the Gospel of John.
- 32 Dan 7:14 shows the Son of Man as coming from Heaven. See also footnote 47. Cf. Rebecca Lesses, *Divine Beings*, in JANT, 544–46.
- 33 Lesses, JANT, 544; also Boyarin, JANT, 548–49.
- 34 *Logos* in Greek, *memra* in Aramaic. Texts like Gen 1:3, Psa 33:6, 107:20, 147:15, and Isa 55:11 contributed to this personification of the Word of God.
- 35 See Boyarin, JANT, 546–47; Roukema, 149.
- 36 Aramaic interpretative translations (*targum* = translation) of the text of Tanakh. Wim Nieuwenhuis, a Dutch Targum researcher, recently started with others a research center for studying early Jewish messianic interpretations within the Targumim.
- 37 All creative acts in the creation story are conceived as acts of the personified Memra of the Lord (Boyarin, JANT, 547).
- 38 Boyarin, JANT, 547, gives as other examples Gen 3:8–9, 18:1, 19:24; Exod 17:21; Deut 32:39.
- 39 The Targumim identify at several places the Angel of the Lord with the Memra: Gen 16:13 (Hagar); Exod 3:4–12 (at the burning bush), 12:12–13, 23, 29 (the Exodus) (Roukema, 155).
- 40 The designation “Son of God” was already mentioned by Gabriel (Luke 1:35). After his baptism Yeshua is designated by God as “My Son” (Matt 3:17), as is the case in his transfiguration (Matt 17:5). This Sonship is tested (Matt 4:1–11) and it thus shows that there is an intricate relationship

- to the sonship of Israel (cf. Deut 8:5; Hosea 11:1), and both the sonship of Israel's kings and the more-than-human Sonship of the Anointed One that Psalm 2 speaks of.
- 41 Isaiah 63:9 mentions the Angel of God's countenance. John 1:14, 18; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3; 1 John 1:1–2 speak about this God-revealing capacity of the pre-incarnate Messiah.
- 42 John 1:1–2. Also the phrase “firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15 NRSV) does not mean that he is part of creation. He is before creation; he is the firstborn *over* all creation (NIV, emphasis added).
- 43 This “one new man” community is realized within the camp of Israel by Israel's Messiah, and the concept can therefore not be used to plead for a de-Israel-ized universal-eschatological community. Ezekiel 34:31 speaks about the people of Israel as *adam* (sg.) in a context of salvation. This might refer to the God-intended unity of the people that is also prophesied in 37:15–28. The designation “one new *man*” that Paul uses perhaps also refers to this prophecy. *Adam* without the definitive article is interpreted within the Talmud to designate only the Jewish people. See the discussion about “You are called man” (b. Yevamot 61a) that is found at https://www.sefaria.org/What_is_the_Talmud%2C_VIII_What_is_not_written_in_the_Talmud%3F_Jew_and_Gentile%2C_1_%22You_are_called_man%22.11?ven=Translated_from_German_by_Ruth_Morris,_Jerusalem,_2013&lang=bi.
- 44 Blessing God is the first and foremost calling of both Jewish and non-Jewish Yeshua-believers. This is also congruent with the fact that the first tractates of both Mishnah and Talmud bear the name, and treat the subject of *Berachot* (blessings). Blessing God is connected with gratefulness that focuses on God (in the NT *eulogeo* and *eucharisteo* can be used as synonyms, see Mk 8:6–7; cf. Matt 26:26 with Luke 26:17–19; Eph 5:20 shows the all-importance of blessing and thanksgiving).
- 45 The self-designation of Yeshua as Son of Man should not just be interpreted from the majestic perspective of Daniel 7:14 but also from the perspective of Psalm 80:18, which colors this title with the suffering of all Israel.
- 46 An example could also be Amos 7:7. We can also think of the similarities between the appearances that Daniel (Dan 10) and John (Rev 1) witnessed. John 1:14 shows that Yeshua is the living *Shekhinah* of God, as Hebrews 1:3 also states. Perhaps we may also infer a connection between the pre-incarnate Messiah and the appearances of the *Shekhinah* in Tanakh.
- 47 I link (with NIV, unlike RSV) “from the creation of the world” with “slain,” not with “written.” Leon Morris, *The Revelation, An Introduction and Commentary* (London: IVP, 1971) 169, sharing this opinion, refers also to 1 Peter 1:19–20.
- 48 An intriguing question is whether creation as such already implied divine suffering. Jan-Heiner Tück, *Gottes Augapfel, Bruchstücke zu einer Theologie nach Auschwitz*, 2nd Edition (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 137–40, discusses this question in relation to the Jewish concept of God's self-contraction at creation (*zimzum*), and refers to Gershom Sholem who wrote about this concept, and Jürgen Moltmann who gave it a place in his Christian theological thinking. Related is also the divine command to guard the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15), which raises the question: guarding against what or whom?
- 49 *Tamid* is an abbreviated form for *olat tamid*, the daily burnt-offering, that is commanded in Exodus 29:38–46.
- 50 For this cf. *Learning Messiah*, chapters 18–21. Also *For Better and For Worse*, Kesher 38 (Winter/Spring 2021).
- 51 The question how the suffering of Israel relates to the suffering of Messiah and God “must be more fully exposed and expounded.” It is one of the tasks for the “recasting of Christian theology in light of Israel” that is listed by Rosner, *Healing the Schism*, 294–95. Related is also – to name an example – the question whether to interpret the Songs of the Servant individually or collectively.
- 52 “Brothers” refers in the first place to brothers within the Body of Messiah, both the first circle of Israel and the second circle of the nations (cf. Matt 28:10 and 12:49), but in an inclusive manner also to the persecuted people of Israel, with whom Messiah Yeshua as King of the Jews stays connected (cf. Matt 5:22–24, 47 and 23:8).