

# Philippians Series

Lesson #045

June 29, 2023

Dean Bible Ministries

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# The Rabbis and the *Memra*

## Philippians 2:5–11



## **Two Fundamental Questions:**

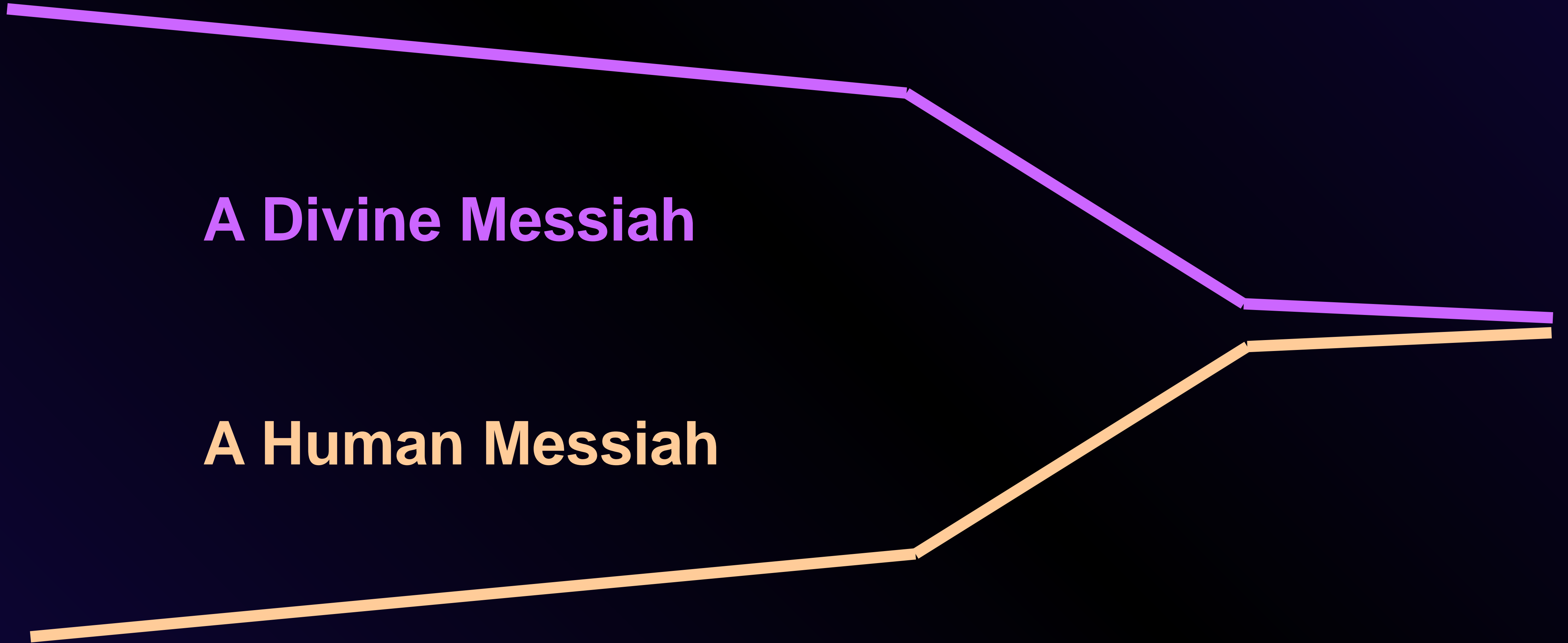
**Who was Jesus *Before* He Came?**

**What was Jesus *When* He Came?**

# Two Streams from the Old Testament Converge in Jesus of Nazareth

**A Divine Messiah**

**A Human Messiah**



## **New Testament Passages on Preexistence**

**John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**

**John 1:2, “He was in the beginning with God.**

**John 1:3, “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.**

**John 1:4, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”**

**1. The Angel of YHWH is the messenger, the spokesperson, of God the Father, the same as Christ in the New Testament.**

## **New Testament Passages**

**John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”**

**John 1:2, “He was in the beginning with God.”**

**John 1:3, “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.”**

**John 1:4, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”**

**John 1:5, “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”**

**John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.**

**John 1:15, “John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, ‘This was He of whom I said, “He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.” ’ ”**



**What is the *Memra* and why is it important?**

***Memra* is an Aramaic term that means “word,” and it is a translation of the Hebrew term *davar*, “word.” When the Apostle John wrote his Gospel in Greek, he needed a Greek word to express the concept of the *Memra*. The Greek term *Logos*, “word,” expressed what he needed. However, his mental framework was not Greek philosophy, but intertestamental rabbinical thought.**

**According to Edersheim, the term *Memra* occurs “176 times in the Targum Onkelos, 99 times in the Jerusalem Targum, and 321 times in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.”**

**~Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 931**

**“Santala confirms Edersheim’s analysis, saying that in the *Targumim*, the *Memra* seemed to have been identified with the name of God. To prove his point, he quotes Talmudic statements, such as ‘The LORD’s *Mimra* will be my God’ or ‘I will save them through their God, the LORD’s *Mimra*.’ He finds further proof for the personification of the *Memra* in the fact that it was the *Memra* who created the world, that Moses prayed to it, and that Israel was saved through it. He concludes: ‘If these ideas are joined to the Messianic expectation, a connection the Rabbis made, they will receive a new significance for Christians too.’”**

**~Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua***

**“Frequently this Mimra is also identified with God. In the Targums Jacob promises that the Mimra will be God for him if he is protected on his way; Abraham is justified through the Mimra; Moses prays to the Mimra, the seed of Israel is justified through the *Mimra*, *Mimra* is to deliver it, and as we saw, the world was also created through the *Mimra*’s instrumentality – it would appear that the whole Logos theology is related to this . . . Jewish interpretation. John does, then, exemplify Jewish rather than Hellenistic thought . . . ”**

**~Santala**

**“In the Targums, the divine Word is usually indicated by a form of the Aramaic word . . . (*Memra*), which, when so used, is not a translation of anything in the Hebrew text; rather, the phrase ‘the Word of the Lord,’ is often a circumlocution, or substitute, for the Tetragrammaton (the ‘four letters,’ . . . YHWH), the pre-eminent OT name for God. ‘The Word of the Lord’ is actually more than a circumlocution, since ‘Lord’ by itself was already in use as a substitute for the divine name, as is clear from a comparison of the mt and the LXX [Septuagint]. In recitation of the Targums, when the Hebrew ‘*Adonay*’ was used, rather than another Hebrew word meaning ‘Lord,’ the hearers would know that the Tetragrammaton was meant.”**

**~John Ronning, *The Jewish Targums and John’s Logos Theology*, 2**

**“ ‘Memra’ is the emphatic (definite) form of . . . (*memar*), from the root [*amar*]. Aramaic *memar* may be used simply as a translation of a Hebrew word for ‘word’ (usually the etymologically related [*amar*] or [*amrah*]). When the word is used as a circumlocution for the divine name, it is of particular interest with relation to the Logos title. When so used, in English translations of the Targums it is often transliterated consistently as *Memra*, even though the underlying Aramaic spelling changes depending on whether or not the word is emphatic or has pronominal suffixes. . . .”**

**~Ronning**

**“Although it is repeated 596 times in these Targums, it does not appear once in the Talmud. The word *Mimra* is an exact counterpart of the word Logos. When Christian Logos interpretation began to spread, the Rabbis avoided using the word *Mimra* and censored it from their own writings. The *Mimra* or creative word of God was before the creation. Deut. 33:27 says, for example, that, ‘The everlasting God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.’ *Targum Onqelos*, the only Targum officially recognised by the Synagogue, says of this that, ‘these “everlasting arms” are the *Mimra*, through whom the world was created’.”**

**~Risto Santala, *The Messiah in the New Testament in the Light of Rabbinical Writings***



# Genesis 15:6

MT	Tg. Onq.	Tg. Ps.-J.	Tg. Neof.
<b>He believed in the LORD.</b>	<b>He believed in the Word of the LORD.</b>	<b>He had faith in the Word of the LORD.</b>	<b>Abram believed in the name of the Word of the LORD.</b>

**Faith in Jesus . . . is a key issue in John's Gospel, analogous to faith in the divine Word, or the name of the divine Word, in the Targums. . . .**

**~Ronning**

**“Understanding the Logos title as based on the Targums is crucial to understanding not only John’s Prologue, but the body of the Gospel as well, for if we understand the Logos as a divine title, we can see that John’s statements about the Word (the Word was with God, the Word was God, and the Word became flesh) presage themes throughout the Gospel.”**

**~Ronning**

**The *Targum Neofiti* 1 on Genesis states:**

**The designation for God most characteristic of all the Targums is “the Memra of the Lord.” This is found 314 times in *Neofiti* and 636 times in *Neofiti* mg; in Frg. Tgs. about 99 times; in CTg text 97 times in texts published by Kahle; in Onqelos 178 times and 322 in Ps.-Jonathan.**

**“If you are willing and attend to my *Memra*, you shall eat of the good of the land; but if you refuse and do not attend to my *Memra*, by the adversary’s sword you shall be killed; for by the *Memra* of the LORD it has been so decreed.”**

***~Introduction to Targum***

**One example of many is found in footnotes in *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis*:**

**The Hebrew “and God was with” is here reworded out of deference to God with insertion of the *Memra* to obviate a direct relationship between man and God. The use of the phrase “the *Memra* of the Lord sustains” is an extremely common Targumic phrase employed in translation for situations in Hebrew where God is depicted as assisting, protecting, defending, or preserving man.**

**The Hebrew has: “by God,” which has anthropomorphic implication and here is avoided by the introduction of the *Memra*.**

**~Intro to *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis*.**

# 1. *Memra*: Both Distinct From God, But Also the Same as God.

John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” [NKJV]

**20. And Noah built an altar to the name of the Memra of the Lord; and he took some of all the clean animals and of all the clean birds and set holocausts in order on top of the altar. *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis 8:20.***

**Gen. 8:20, “Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.” [NKJV]**

**33. . . . And it came about that while eating and drinking they would seek to give him the price of what they had eaten and drunk and he would say to them: “You are eating from him who said and the world was.” And they would not move from there until he would convert them, and would teach them to give praise to the Lord of the world. And he worshiped and prayed in the name of the *Memra* of the Lord, God of the world. *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis 21:33.***

**Gen. 21:33, “Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God.” [NKJV]**



- 39. See now that I, I in my *Memra*, am he, and there is no other God beside me. I am he who causes the living to die in this world, and who brings the dead to life in the world to come. I am he who smites and I am he who heals, and there is no one who can rescue from my hands.**
- 40. For I have lifted up my hands to the heavens in an oath, and have said: “(As) I live and endure in my *Memra* for ever, . . .”**  
***Targum Neofiti 1: Deuteronomy 32:39–40, in *The Aramaic Bible – The Targums*, 22 vols***

**Deut. 32:39, “Now see that I, even I, am He, And there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand.**

**Deut. 32:40, “For I raise My hand to heaven, and say, ‘As I live forever,’ ” [NKJV]**

1. “And the Lord said to Jacob: ‘Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there and build an altar there to the name of the *Memra* of the Lord, who was revealed to you when you fled from before Esau your brother.’ . . .  
*Targum Neofiti* 1: Genesis 35:1; p. 165, Apparatus, Chapter 35, n. n.

Gen. 35:1, “Then God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.’ ” [NKJV]

**2. *Memra*: the agent of creation. God creates by His Word, by His *Memra*.**

**John 1:3, “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” [NKJV]**

**Col. 1:16, “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.” [NKJV]**

**Heb. 1:2, “has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds;” [NKJV]**

- 1. From the beginning with wisdom the *Memra* of the Lord created and perfected the heavens and the earth.**
- 2. And the earth was waste and unformed, desolate of man and beast, empty of plant cultivation and of trees, and darkness was spread over the face of the abyss; and a spirit of mercy from before the Lord was blowing over the surface of the waters.**
- 3. And the *Memra* of the Lord said: “Let there be light”; and there was light according to the decree of his *Memra*.**
- 4. And it was manifest before the Lord that the light was good; and the *Memra* of the Lord separated the light from the darkness.**
- 5. And the *Memra* of the Lord called the light daytime and the darkness he called night. And there was evening and there was morning: (in) the order of the work of creation, first day.**

***~Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis 1:1–1:6.***

**22. But Abraham said to the king of Sodom: “Behold, I have lifted up my hand in an oath before the Lord, the most High God, who by his *Memra* created the heavens and the earth;”**

**~*Targum Neofiti* 1: Genesis 14:22**

**Gen. 14:22, “But Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth,’ ” [NKJV]**

**12. Did you not create the world at the beginning, O Lord? You, O God, are the true judge over all your creatures, holy among those who do the truth; your Memra endures for ever. O Lord, you created it to administer judgment and, O strong One, you established it in order to take vengeance.**

**13. Your Memra is too pure to look upon those who do evil or to behold those practicing vain deceit. Is it not revealed before you? Why do I look upon oppressors when you grant extension of time to the wicked and they devour those who are better than themselves?**

**~Robert P. Gordon and Kevin J. Cathcart, trans., *The Targum of the Minor Prophets: Habakkuk 1:12–13*, in *The Aramaic Bible – The Targums*, 22 vols.**

**Hab. 1:12, “Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction.**

**Hab. 1:13, “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?”**

**[NKJV]**

### **3. *Memra*: the agent of salvation.**

**John 1:11, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.**

**John 1:12, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:”**

10. And now, come and I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall bring my people, the children of Israel, as redeemed ones out of Egypt.
11. And Moses said before the Lord: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring up the children of Israel redeemed from Egypt?”
12. And he said: “But I, [in] my Memra, will be with you, and this will be a sign that my Memra has sent you: when you have brought out the people from Egypt, you will worship before the Lord upon the mountain.”
13. And (Moses) said before the Lord: “Behold, I go to the children of Israel and say to them: ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ And they say: ‘What is his name?’ What will I say to them?”
14. And the Lord said to Moses: “I AM WHO I AM.”



**[Verse 14] Nfmng 1°: “the *Memra* of the Lord (said) to Moses: He who said to the world: ‘Be,’ and it came into being, and who will again say to it: ‘Be,’ and it (will be) (correcting text, which has imperative or past tense, as in VB). And he said: Thus shall you say to the children of Israel: (‘WHO I AM (‘hyh) has sent (me)’ = V; Nfmng 2°: “I have existed before the world was created and have existed after the world has been created. I am he who has been at your aid in the Egyptian exile, and I am he who will (again) be at your aid in every generation. And he said: Thus shall you say to the children of Israel. I AM (‘HYH) sent me to you;”**

**~ *Targum Neofiti* 1: Exodus 3:10–14; p. 19, Notes**

**30. “And on that day the *Memra* of the Lord redeemed and delivered Israel from the hands of the Egyptians; and the Israelites saw the Egyptians dead, cast upon the shore of the sea.”**

**~*Targum Neofiti* 1: Exodus 3:10–14**

**2. “Our strength and the magnitude of our praise is the one Feared of all ages, the Lord. He decreed in his *Memra* and became for us a Redeemer.” The children of Israel said: “He is our God and we will praise him, the God of our fathers and we will extol him. . . .”**

**~*Targum Neofiti* 1: Exodus 15:2.**

**Ex. 15:2, “The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; My father’s God, and I will exalt Him.” [NKJV]**

**25.8 They will forget death forever, and the LORD God will wipe away the tears from all faces and the reproaches of his people. He [sic] will take away from all the earth; for by the Memra of the LORD it is so decreed. 25.9 And he will say in that time, “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us; this is our LORD; we were waiting for his Memra; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”**

***~The Isaiah Targum 25:8–9***

**Isa. 25:8, “He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; The rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; For the Lord has spoken.” [NKJV]**

**7. But I will rejoice in the *Memra* of the Lord, I will exult in the God who accomplishes my salvation; my God will hear my prayer . . . 10. Then Rome my enemy shall see and shame shall cover her who said to me, “Where was it that you were delivered by the *Memra* of the Lord your God?” My eyes shall see her downfall; now she shall be for trampling like mud in the streets.**

***~The Targum of the Minor Prophets: Micah 7:7, 10, 14***

**Mic. 7:7, “Therefore I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; My God will hear me.” [NKJV]**

**4. *Memra* was the visible form, the visible expression of God, the means by which God became visible.**

**John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt [*skene* = *to tabernacle*] among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” [NKJV]**

**John 14:9, “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, “Show us the Father”?’ ”**

**Some rabbinic sources define the Shechinah this way:**

**SHECHINAH (literally, ‘abiding [of God]’ ‘Divine presence’); the spirit of the Omni-present as manifested on earth; “the Presence [of God]”; used as a circumlocution when Scripture speaks of God’s dwelling in a place or removing from one.**

**[Shechinah] refers etymologically to an act of dwelling (cf. the verb *škn*), but specifically its reference is to God’s presence in association with the cult. Accordingly, the Shechinah can be portrayed as in the Temple, as removed from the Temple (thereby destroying the efficacy of prayer), or as awaiting in heaven its restoration to the Temple.**

3. **And Moses said: “I will turn aside now and I will see this great vision: why the thorn bush is not burned.”**
4. **And it was manifest before the Lord that Moses had turned aside to see, and the *Memra* of the Lord called to him from the midst of the thorn bush and said to him: “Moses, Moses.” Moses answered in the language of the sanctuary and said: “HERE I AM.”**
5. **And he said: “Do not draw nigh hither. Put off your shoes from off your feet because the place upon which you stand is holy place.”**
6. **And he said: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look on the Glory of the Shekinah of the Lord.**

**~Targum Neofiti, Ex. 3:3–8**



**“The meaning rather is that the wicked caused the Shechinah to depart from the earth, but the righteous have caused the Shechinah to dwell (*hishkinu*) on the earth. When did the Shechinah rest on earth? On the day when the Tabernacle was erected; as it says, Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex. XL, 34).”**

**Ex. 40:34, “Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.”  
[NKJV]**

**Below is a comparison of John 1:14, MT, Tg. Zech., and Tos. Tg. Zech. 2:10:**

**MT, “ ‘Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell (LXX: [*kataskeinoo*]) in your midst,’ declares the LORD.”**

**Tg. Zech., “Rejoice and be glad, O congregation of Zion, for behold, I will reveal myself and I will make my Shekinah dwell in your midst, says the LORD.”**

**Tos. Tg. Zech., “Rejoice and be glad, assembly of Zion, for the Word {glory} of the LORD will be revealed, and he shall illumine the world from the brilliance of his glory, in that he said to make his Shekinah dwell in your midst.”**

**John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.”**

**~Ronning, 32–34**

20. Then He said, “You will not be able to see the face of My Presence; for no man may see Me and live.”
21. And the Lord said, “Here is a place prepared before Me; now you are to stand on the rock.
22. “So when My Glory passes by, I will place you in a cleft of the rock and will shield you with My *Memra* until I have passed by.”

*~Targum Onkelos to Ex. 33:20*

1. “Then Solomon said: ‘The Lord has chosen to cause his Shekinah to dwell in the city of Jerusalem, in the sanctuary house which I have built for the Name of his *Memra*, but a thick black cloud has concealed before him.’ ”

~ *The Targum of Chronicles*: 2 Chronicles 6:1.

**5. *Memra* was the means by which God signs His covenants.**

**God made 8 covenants:**

**Edenic, Adamic, Noahic: with mankind in general;**

**Abrahamic, Mosaic, Land, Davidic, New: made with Israel.**

3. Stay in this land and I, in my Memra, will be with you and I will bless you; because to you and to your sons I will give all these lands and I will fulfill the oath which I swore to Abraham your father.
4. And I will multiply you like the stars of the heavens and I will give to your sons all these lands; and in your merit will all the nations of the earth be blessed,
5. because of the fact that Abraham listened to the voice of my Memra and kept my charge, my precepts and my covenant, and the ordinances of my judgments.”

~ *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis 26:3–5*

Gen. 26:3, “Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father.

Gen. 26:4, “And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed;

Gen. 26:5, “because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.” [NKJV]

11. “I will establish my covenant with you, and never again will all flesh be blotted out by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”
12. And God said: “This is the sign of the covenant which I am establishing between my *Memra* and you, and every living thing that is with you, for eternal generations.
13. “I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant be’ween my *Memra* and the earth.
14. “When I spread clouds of Glory over the earth the bow shall be seen in the daytime, as long as the sun has not sunk in the cloud,
15. “and I will remember my covenant which is between my *Memra* and you and every living thing of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.
16. “The bow will be in the cloud, and I will see it and remember the eternal covenant between the *Memra* of God and every living thing of all flesh that is upon the earth.”
17. And God said to Noah: “This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between my *Memra* and the *Memra* of all flesh that is upon the earth.”

~Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis 9:11–17. See also The Targum Onqelos to Genesis 9:11–17.

- 24. And the people said to Joshua: “We will serve the Lord our God, and we will accept his *Memra*.”**
- 25. And Joshua cut a covenant for the people on that day, and he deposited for it the covenant and the statue in Shechem.**

***~Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets: Joshua 24:24–25***

**Josh. 24:24, “And the people said to Joshua, ‘The Lord our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!’**

**Josh. 24:25, “So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem.” [NKJV]**



## **6. *Memra* was the agent of revelation.**

**John 1:18, “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”**

**John 14:8, “Philip said to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.’**

**John 14:9, “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, “Show us the Father”?’ ” [NKJV]**

12. “And now go, and I, with my *Memra*, will be with the speech of your mouth, and I will teach you what to say.”
13. And he said: “I beseech, by the mercy before you, O Lord, send, I pray, by the hand of the one who is suited to be sent.” ...
15. “And you will speak with him and place the words in his mouth; and I, in my *Memra*, will be with the speech of your mouth and with the speech of his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do.
16. “And he shall speak beside you to the people, and he will be an interpreter for you, and you shall be for him as one seeking instruction from before the Lord.”
- ~ *Targum Neofiti* 1: Exodus 4:12–13, 15–16

**Ex. 4:12, “ ‘Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.’ ”**

**Ex. 4:13, “But he said, ‘O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send.’ ” [NKJV]**

**Ex. 4:15, “ ‘Now you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do.**

**Ex. 4:16, “ ‘So he shall be your spokesman to the people. And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God.’ ” [NKJV]**

**9.6 The prophet said to the house of David, For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and he will accept the law upon himself to keep it, and his name will be called before the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, existing forever, “The messiah in whose days peace will increase upon us.”**

**9.7 Great pride will belong to those who perform the law, and for those who keep peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom, to establish it and to build it with judgment and with virtue from this time forth and forever. By the Memra of the LORD of hosts this will be done.**

***~The Isaiah Targum 9:6–7.***

## **Conclusion:**

- 1. The *Memra* is fully divine but distinct from God.**
- 2. The *Memra* is the One through whom God created.**
- 3. The *Memra* reveals God to mankind.**
- 4. The *Memra* came to His own, but they rejected Him.**
- 5. Those who accepted the *Memra* have eternal life.**

## **Edersheim comments:**

**“Beyond this Rabbinic theology has not preserved to us the doctrine of Personal distinctions in the Godhead. And yet, if words have any meaning, the *Memra* is a *hypostasis*, though the distinction of permanent, personal Subsistence is not marked.”**