Hebrew Streams

The Trinity Paradigm

"We should always be disposed to believe that that which appears white is really black, if the hierarchy of the Church so decides."

— Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)
Founder of the Jesuits (Society of Jesus)

"The fact that we accept the Bible as the authority of the Church does not make the authority of the Church the higher of the two."

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)Professor of English Literature (Oxford and Cambridge)

Paul Sumner

When Paul of Tarsus, the Jewish Pharisee evangelist for Yeshua, entered the synagogue in the town of Berea in Macedonia (Greece), he was greeted eagerly by the Jewish leaders. They didn't immediately throw him out once he spoke about Yeshua. Nor did they uncritically accept him and his message. Just the opposite: they listened. They were

more noble-minded [than Jewish leaders in Thessalonica]...[and] received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

They listened and examined Paul's message in light of their Jewish Bible. As a result, "many of them put their faith [believed] in [Yeshua]" (v. 12).

Why did these synagogue Jews accept Paul's message? Because they believed it fit the message and prophecies of Israel's Scriptures: the Word of God.

Their openness, based on confidence in the Scriptures as the measure of revealed truth, is not as common today. Religious groups tend to have official doctrinal templates (paradigms) through which they view or hear all messages. Authority resides in these templates: the traditions of the elders, rabbis, theologians, preachers and denominations.

In contrast, the example shown by the Berean elders—Jewish elders—is a point of light for gaining our own navigation bearings.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the most controversial issue between Judaism and Christianity.

The Synagogue says those who believe in the Trinity are idolaters.

The doctrine is also at the core of Muslim rejection of what they believe are Christian distortions of the true "Injil" (gospel) about the prophet Isa (Yeshua, Jesus). The Mosque says about Christians who believe Christ is the Son of God: "May they be damned by Allah. How perverse are they!" (Qur'an 9:30). [Note 1 at end of article]

The fact that Rabbinic Judaism and Islam reject the Trinity doctrine is not, in itself, reason to reexamine it. There is also an array of non-Trinitarian Christian sects, such as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians, older Adventists, Unitarians, and Messianic groups such as Ebionites.

Serious Messianic believers should not allow any of these divergent "monotheistic" groups to influence what they accept as revealed truth. The only valid reason to look seriously at the doctrine is what we find in Scripture itself, and it always has been.

The "Trinity" is literally a non-scriptural doctrine.

[A PDF version of this document is available HERE.]

[Top]

By that I mean, the non-Semitic, post-New Testament Church formulated, evolved, and institutionalized it. It is a **speculative model** or **paradigm** of how theologians conceive the ontological, metaphysical relationships among the persons of the Godhead. It's a **paradigm** that theorists believe fits the data of Scripture and adheres to principles of deductive logic.

A modern summary of the Trinity Paradigm reads:

"There is one God and only one God; this one God exists eternally in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; these three persons are completely equal, each fully possessing the divine nature or essence."

The 5th century A.D. Creed of Athanasius early on gave more explicit detail:

"The Catholic Faith is this:

That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance [Essence].

"In this Trinity none is before or after another; none is greater or less than another.

"The whole three Persons are co-eternal and co-equal. So that in all things, as said before, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped." [selected portions]

Church historians refer to this creed as the "Quicunque Vult" or "Whosoever will be [saved]" creed, because it contains the sober warning: "Whosoever will be saved must thus think of the Trinity."

That is, "Christians" must **think** about God as a Triune Deity. If they don't, they are lost - unsaved.

[Top]

To Protest is Biblical

Anyone who abides within the thought-world of Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament is confronted with the alien mind of these abstract, even belligerent dictates. How can anyone conceive of these theoretical, hypothetical, imaginary abstractions that are not **revealed** in Scripture?

More importantly: we who abide in Scripture should reject human dicta that our salvation depends **not** on our repentance or reliance on the atoning blood of the Messiah and the forgiveness of God—but on our agreement to "**think**" about God as a "Unity in Trinity, Trinity in Unity."

Christian theologians have added to the Gospel and redefined biblical content. They have disobeyed the command "not to exceed what is written [in Scripture]" (1 Cor 4:6) and not to "add to the word" (Deut 4:2; Rev 22:18).

In the NT itself the phrase "one God" refers to the Father alone (1 Cor 8:6, Eph 4:6, 1 Tim 2:6).

Theologians, however, say it refers to a composite God of three divine persons. The Quicunque Vult tells us to worship the Triune God. In the NT, angels, martyrs and disciples only bow before the Father and Son. And Jesus himself worshiped only his Father, never the Spirit.

This is what I mean by saying the Trinity **doctrine** is not **biblical**. We're talking about philosophical assumptions and formulas created and imposed by the Church Fathers and required by most Christian divisions, which includes their avoidance and distortions of plain texts of Scripture.

[Top]

Among many Yeshua-believing ["Messianic"] Jews, believing in the Trinity simply means affirming that Yeshua is the Messiah and Son of God. To them, he's not merely a good Jew or hasidic rabbi from Galilee. Theirs is the foundational Gospel, without theological nuancing. John 3:16 is a key text accepted at face value (a view I share).

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only **Son** that whoever would put their trust in him would not perish but have eternal life.

But that simple, foundational belief about Yeshua and God is not technically the doctrine of the Trinity. In the eyes of historical Orthodoxy, John 3:16 is an inadequate summary of "Christian faith" and will **not** lead to eternal salvation.

The **Nicene Creed** of AD 325 describes Christ as "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God." This construct is what Christian orthodoxy demands people voice adherence to for their salvation, even if it makes no sense to them.

Theologians admit that the Doctrine and its formulas are unfathomable. But their oft-used slogan "the mystery of the Trinity" wasn't coined by slow-witted Galilean fishermen or earth-bound shepherds in the hills above Bethlehem or bemused shopkeepers in ancient Jerusalem.

The slogan was coined by theologians themselves who speculated about the Godhead and literally didn't understand what they and their colleagues had conceived. Yet they were very sure everyone had to **say** they believe in the unfathomable doctrine.

[Top]

Wait. If the professionals don't understand it, why do they demand that we

fishermen, herders and shop keepers **say** we believe it? Does the Almighty tell us anywhere that He wants this verbal confession from us?

An Australian evangelical Anglican priest writes:

"Let's face it, it is not easy even today, even for those who are familiar with the definitions of Nicea and the writings of Athanasius and others, to make sure you always state everything with correctness and precision. How much more for those Christians writing before Nicea!" (From: *How God Became Jesus* [2014], ed. Michael Bird, p. 188)

Note Bird's points here:

- 1. post-biblical theologians composed "correct" and "precise" definitions of the Godhead,
- 2. we should "always state" our beliefs according to their definitions.

His *unspoken* implication is that Jews living before the Nicean and Athanasian creeds were not in possession of these truths. Logically, that would include Yeshua's apostles, the NT writers, even Yeshua himself.

[Top]

The Theoretical Paradigm

In recent years, I've noted how many studies come out trying to (re)explain the Trinity Theory. Evidently, very few scholars—and especially pew-people—are getting it after 17 centuries.

To help pew-people, this American Eastern Orthodox author says:

It is important to note that when Trinitarians speak of one God they are referring to the nature or essence of God. Moreover, when they speak of persons they are referring to personal self-distinctions within the Godhead. Put another way, we believe in one What and three Who's.

[Hank Hanegraaff, The Complete Bible Answer Book (2008)]

A novice Bible reader might ask: Should I pray to the **Heavenly What** or to the **Heavenly Who's**? I don't get it. Jesus told his followers to simply pray to his "Heavenly Father" (Matt 6:9).

I prefer to approach the heavenly Throne with the same mindset that Isaiah had when he saw God: "Woe is me, for I am ruined! For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of armies" (Isa 6:5). Or when John saw the resurrected Yeshua in Heaven, he responded: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as a dead man" (Rev 1:17).

Budding theological arithmetic

A British theologian sees in Paul's letter to the Galatians evidence for "incipient trinitarianism." That is, references to "God" and "Christ" in the same sentence (Gal 1:1, etc.) reveal the budding appearance of a Trinity concept in Paul's teaching. That is, God+Christ=the Triune God (or, 1+1=3). [Angus Paddison, *Theological Hermeneutics* (2005), pp. 150-151]

[Top]			

Western, Northern-hemispheric Christian theologians have always been obsessed with understanding and explaining "God" from atop Mars Hill in Athens.

Norman Henry Snaith trenchantly wrote in his The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament:

"Thy sons, O Zion, against thy sons, O Greece" (Zechariah ix.13) arose as a rallying cry in days long ago when some Jews sought to re-interpret Judaism in order to make it more acceptable to Greek ways of thought and life. There have always been Jews who have sought to make terms with the Gentile world, and it has in time meant the death of Judaism for all such. There have been Christians from the beginning who have sought to do this.

Our position is that the re-interpretation of Biblical theology in terms of the ideas of the Greek philosophers has been both widespread throughout the centuries and everywhere destructive to the essence of the Christian faith. (p. 187, bold emphasis added)

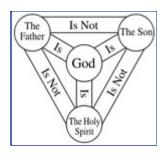
Snaith's historical perspective is pertinent to us who live in a post-Biblical era, when Christianity is less and less a biblical religion and Judaism is for many simply an evolving body of human ethics.

God Isn't a Theo-Geometrical Puzzle

I believe the lack of resonance with the Trinity Paradigm among many Western Christians is because they can't "find" it when they read the Bible. It isn't native to the concrete, image-rich, Jewish, Semitic, Hebrew Scriptures—or to the Hebraic bedrock of the New Testament. It breathes another mind, from outside.

Simply said: The Paradigm is the product of non-Jewish Diaspora Christianity.





[Top]

Ironically, some Protestant evangelical theologians in the West are among the most vocal defenders of catholic orthodoxy, which they prefer to call "historic Christian orthodoxy." (They dislike the word "catholic" so they use "historic" and "orthodox" to mean the same thing.)

Likewise, they say they affirm what the Church has "always believed everywhere," and say the creeds of the 4th and 5th centuries embody those universal Christian beliefs.

Yet this isn't true. People didn't believe in what had not yet been invented. Protestant thinkers don't validate Scripture, but the Paradigm.

The late Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) openly said:

The thoughtful person places the doctrine of the Trinity in the very

center of the full-orbed life of nature and mankind. [Herman Bavinck, *Doctrine of God* (1951), p. 329, emphasis added]

Here's another example of Protestant endorsement of post-biblical theological tradition by the previously cited evangelical Anglican **Michael Bird**:

Though obviously the term evangelical means different things to different people, I intend it as designating those faith communities who hold to the catholic and orthodox faith and who possess a singular religious affection for the Triune God. [Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (2013), p. 11]

For such theologians and spiritual leaders, the Bible **alone** is not the final arbiter of truth—the Church is. They accept the Roman view that only an elite, priestly class of theologically-trained insiders can interpret the Bible for the laity. And they want lay people to trust **them** about what God wants them to believe.

[Top]

Orthodox Judaism is "Catholic" Judaism

Modern Orthodox Judaism has no Reformation spirit—except perhaps in its fervor to return to Talmud-Torah Judaism. And like historical Catholicism, Jewish liberty to study and interpret the Hebrew Bible is restricted.

Jewish inquirers are told to consult rabbis (medieval or modern) for authoritative explanations of what the Tanakh means to Jews and how a Jew should think about it—not how any open-minded seeker of God's self-revelation should respond.

In contrast, in Ancient Israel, true faith and loyalty to God were marked by obedience to the **written** scriptures that existed at the time.

Psalm 119 extols God's written revelation. "Your Torah is my delight... Oh, how I love your Torah... Your Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path... Those who love your Torah have great shalom" (vv. 77, 97, 105, 165).

By Yeshua's time, Torah scholars ("scribes") were an emerging professional class. Many of them were infuriated that he rejected their authority over the Bible and criticized them for twisting and disobeying Scripture, in favor of promoting the rabbinic traditions of exegesis and application (Matt 7:29; Luke 20:1-2).

"You have invalidated the word of God for the sake of your Tradition." (Matt 15:6)

Imagine the response if he said this to Christian leaders in the Vatican or Canterbury, Dallas or Seoul.

[Top]

Taking the kosher purity test

If you are a Berean at heart (Acts 17:11-12) and decide that the rabbis, church fathers, and esteemed seminary professors have **no** ultimate authority over what you believe, you will not hear affirming applause. Some will accuse you of rejecting the Christian Church's faith and all it has taught and held dear. You'll be accused of being an apostate denier of Jesus.

Eventually, you will hear an intimidating—but faux—argument: "Dear brother, so you think 2,000 years of Christian history have been wrong? And you know better than

all the great spiritual leaders of the Church?"

Screening a person with this orthodox, kosher theology grid is the same tactic **Jewish anti-missionaries** use on **Messianic (Jesus-believing) Jews:**

"Nu, 4,000 years of Jewish history are wrong about God and the Messiah, and you're right? Our esteemed rabbis misled us? And the Six Million died with a lie on their lips [the monotheistic Shema]?"

These barbs from Christian and Jewish authorities can be persuasive. They're meant to be. Their purpose is to produce timidity, enforce unquestioning silence, and expel heretics.

But their rhetorical questions are historically anachronistic. The Trinity Paradigm is not 2,000 years old. And Unitarian, Rabbinic, anti-Yeshua, Judaism is not 4,000 years old.

[Top]

"Orthodox" Messianics

A number of Messianic scholars and teachers have been trained in Protestant seminaries. They seem to have accepted as axiomatic the traditional view that they must reconcile the Old Testament with post-biblical Christian theology.

So they tend to focus on finding the "Triunity of God" in the Hebrew Bible. They believe the Tanakh is the foundation document for Jews and for New Testament Messianism. (A view I also hold.)

But, like their Gentile Christian counterparts, what Messianic scholars present as proof texts turn out to be (as some admit) only "hints" of the doctrine. And when these hints are studied in context, they lose persuasive power, because **a hint is not proof**. And hints often become proofs when you find what you're looking for and already believe.

Usually these proof-texts include the **Genesis Plurals** [Note 2], the plural word **Elohim** (God) [Note 3], and the meaning of **echad** (one) in the Shema [Note 4].

Supported by these and other biblical texts, Messianic organizations have opted for orthodox Christian creedal statements. That is, their creeds or "statements of faith" contain terminology and conclusions widely accepted by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and mainline Protestants.

[Top]

Messianics pressured to assimilate

Messianic scholars face a profound dilemma. For even though they have labored to find the doctrine of the Triune God in the Hebrew Bible, **Christian Theological Tradition** (CTT, my term) dismisses the idea. It says the doctrine isn't in the Tanakh.

Two Roman Catholic sources note:

"The Old Testament writings about God neither express nor imply any idea of or belief in a plurality or trinity of persons within the one Godhead." (Edmund Fortman, *The Triune God*, p. 9)

"The mystery of the Trinity was not revealed to the Chosen People of the OT." (New Catholic Encyclopedia, 14:306)

Some conservative Protestants agree with these Roman Catholic authorities. Note the comment by the conservative OT scholar **Bruce K. Waltke**.

"God did not reveal to his covenant people before the coming of Jesus Christ that the Messiah is an incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity." (An Old Testament Theology [2007], p. 621)

Not every scholar or teacher may agree with these statements from Christian authorities. But the historical opinion of CTT that the Trinity Doctrine isn't in Hebrew Scripture cannot be deleted from history—and should not be ignored.

It should be a warning to Messianics.

The painful paradox is that Messianics are trying to prove something (a theological paradigm) that isn't there—in the scriptures of Israel, which Yeshua called the "word of God."

The late Messianic scholar **Jakob Jocz** once criticized the "slippery path of exegetical acrobatics" that Christian apologists have used to prove the Trinity from the Old Testament. What he said about these Christian efforts generally can be applied to Messianic apologists today:

"Some of this very dubious exegesis is still reproduced in pious tracts for the purpose of converting Jews."

(From *The Messiahship of Jesus: What Jews and Jewish Christians Say*, ed. Arthur W. Kac [Moody Press, 1980], p. 191)

[Top]

A reemerging tactic among some Messianics is to prove the Trinity using kabbalistic literature, such as the medieval book *Zohar* and the 18th century *Tanya (Likutei Amarim)*. The latter was composed by Rabbi Shneur Zalman (1745-1812), who founded the Chabad movement of hasidic Judaism in Lithuania.

Jews For Jesus published an article called "Kabbalah's Best Kept Secret?" (available here in the Hazak portal). In it, the unnamed author attempts to show how the kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefirot* and other mystical speculations about the Godhead foreshadow, even validate, Christianity's doctrine of the Compound Unity of the Triune God.

The article's author cites a passage in the Zohar about the Shema:

YHVH Eloheinu YHVH echad. These three are one.... The threefold Divine manifestations [are] three modes which yet form one unity." [Zohar, Shemoth, Raya Mehemna, 43b]

In contrast, the only place **in Scripture** where the Father, the Word, and the Spirit are described as "one" is found in **1 John 5:7**. This trinitarian text, however, was interpolated into the Greek NT by Catholic scribes. That the author of this Kabbalah article shows no awareness that 1 John 5:7 is counterfeit is surprising.

In the end, this Zohar passage merely validates Catholic dogma, not Biblical content.

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Not mystery, but misrepresentation

Of course there is "mystery" about God. Any honest, thoughtful person would agree. God is beyond our comprehension—except where he has revealed himself, primarily in the written Word and in his Living Word, the Messiah. That's what the Word does: it reveals.

Mystery is not the issue.

A major concern is how the **Christian Theological Tradition** (CTT, my term) view of "God" has distorted New Testament teaching. Here are three examples of how **CTT** clashes with Scripture:

(1) In the NT the phrase "one God" refers to the Father of Yeshua.

For us there is one God, the Father...and one Lord, Yeshua Messiah. (1 Cor 8:6)

There is...one Lord...one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:5, 6)

There is one God and one mediator also between God and men, the man Messiah Yeshua. (1 Tim 2:5)

But in CTT "one God" refers to a theoretical compound triune Godhead of Father, Son and Spirit. The biblical phrase has been completely **redefined**. And that implies that Scripture **means** something other than what it literally says.

And that implies that only approved and trained interpreters of "Christian" doctrine can tell us what Scripture actually means.

[Top]

(2) Paul of Tarsus—an orthodox Jew, Pharisee, and apostle of Yeshua—opens his letters with blessings from "God the Father and the Lord Yeshua Messiah." And he calls the Father "the God of Yeshua" (Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:17). His word choices are specific and striking.

They do not depart from the track of his initial preaching:

Following his vision of Yeshua, Paul began to proclaim him in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God...; ...confounding the Jews...proving that this [one] is the Messiah." (Acts 9:20,22)

Peter's evangelistic message parallels Paul's:

Let all the house know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah—this Yeshua.... (Acts 2:26)

[God] sent to the sons of Israel the gospel of peace through Yeshua Messiah (he is Lord of all).... (Acts 10:36)

[Top]

(3) In heaven, God's angels and the early martyrs for Yeshua aren't worshiping the CTT paradigm of the Godhead when John overhears them singing praise before the Throne, as described in the book of Revelation. Rather, they praise God and the Lamb.

To **Him** who sits on the throne *and* to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever. (Rev 5:13)

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God *and* of his Messiah; and He will reign forever and ever. (Rev 11:15)

Should we conclude that these divine beings and holy martyrs did **not** have a fully orthodox (CTT) grasp of divine reality? If they did not, those closest to the Throne can't be trusted to give true witness.

Then whom can we trust?

[Top]

A Shift to the Biblical Paradigm

Messianic Jews and non-Jews who accept the New Covenant scriptures as God's revelation about Yeshua haMashiach need to make a biblical **Paradigm Shift** away from the Diaspora religions: Rabbinic Judaism and Catholic Christianity.

Cease bondage to their authority, not all ties.

If Messianics (whether Jew or non-Jew) have been raised up by God for leading this **Paradigm Shift**, they are in a unique position to bring reconciliation between the Jewish people and Yeshua, between Muslims and Yeshua, and between Christians and the biblical Jesus.

This could bring peace to all three groups. And that would be a sign to the non-religious world that Yeshua is who he says he is.

And that would fulfill God's will that

"Every knee should bow...
and every tongue confess that Yeshua Mashiach *is Lord*,
to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:10-11)

• Paul Sumner

[A PDF version of this document is available HERE.]

[Top]

Pre-Notes

"Scientific revolutions occur when the established paradigms do not provide answers to the anomalies that continue to pester scientists. New theories arrive on the scene that displace older theories. The newer theories appear almost apocalyptically, breaking in and displacing older ways of conceiving the problem" (Mark Gignilliat, *Brief History of Old Testament Criticism*, 2012).

The coiner of the phrase "Paradigm Shift" in the field of science appears to be Thomas S. Kuhn in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1996, 4th ed. in 2012).

Notes

(1) Several passages in the Qur'an refer to unacceptable, heretical Christian

beliefs:

The Women [An-Nisa] 4:171

O people of the Book, do not be fanatical in your faith, and say nothing but the truth about God. The Messiah who is Jesus, son of Mary, was only an apostle of God, and a command of His which He sent to Mary, as a mercy from Him. So believe in God and His apostles, and do not call Him 'Trinity'. Abstain from this for your own good; for God is only one God, and far from His glory is it to beget a son.

The Feast [Al-Ma'idah] 5:73

Disbelievers are they surely who say: "God is the third of the trinity"; but there is no god other than God the one. And if they do not desist from saying what they say, then indeed those among them who persist in disbelief will suffer painful punishment.

Mary [Marium] 19:88-92 88

They say: "God has begotten a son." (89) You have uttered a monstrous falsehood (90) which would cleave the skies asunder, rend the earth, and split the mountains, (91) for they have attributed a son to Ar-Rahman [the Merciful One, God], (92) when it does not behove the Merciful to have a son.

[Return to footnote marker]

(2) The Genesis Plurals are discussed at length in the article in the Hebrew Bible portal. Briefly, it argues for the idea that when God uses the pronouns "us" and "our" he is speaking to members of his heavenly council. This conclusion is based on a broad spectrum of biblical ideology and interprets the passages in Genesis within the context of the whole Hebrew Bible.

[Return to footnote marker]

[Top]

(3) The plural form "Elohim" — the most commonly used word for "God" in Hebrew Scripture — represents a biblical phenomenon in which this word and the word "Lord" (Adon, not "YHVH") are amplified or intensified out of honor for the Creator. God is both Elohim and Adonim.

Making nouns plural is a Hebrew way of putting them in all capital letters or in bold font or in gold. The Elohim the Israelites believed in is the GOD above all elohim (the word is also used for pagan deities). He alone deserves the title "God." [For extensive details see Elohim in Context in the Monotheism portal.] [Return to footnote marker]

[Top]

(4) Echad in the Shema

The adjective **echad** has various uses in the Tanakh.

At times it means first or the numeral one or the same or singleness. It can also mean unique, one of a kind. In the context of the Shema (Deut 6:4)—which occurs in the broader context of Deuteronomy, which reflects the historical identity-battle between Yahveh and the gods of Canaan, Egypt, and Mesopotamia — echad means unique above all.

The Shema is a confession that Yahveh, who is "our Elohim," is unique among the elohim. He alone deserves the title God, and he is *our* God and deserves our single-hearted [lev echad] allegiance.

The Shema is not transmitting a Da Vinci-like Bible code across the ages that was

deciphered first by Roman Catholic theologians in the Middle Ages who had constructed the Trinitarian creeds and were looking for evidence of their conclusions in the Tanakh in order to convince Jews that Roman Christianity was biblical and thus truer than Judaism.

Yeshua himself quoted the Shema in Mark 12, but he did not point to any hidden meanings that would bolster his identity as God's Son, or assert his deity as God himself. Instead, he alluded to passages like Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:9-14 for scriptural validation.

[Return to footnote marker]

[See the full article "Echad" in the Shema in the Hebrew Bible portal.]

Directory | Articles | Monotheism

hebrew-streams.org

Hebrew Streams: The Trinity Paradigm