THE IDEA OF INTERMEDIATION IN JEWISH THEOLOGY

A NOTE ON MEMRA AND SHEKINAH

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The exact significance of the use of the terms Memra and Shekinah has once again become the subject of debate in recent years. The subject is of interest both to Jewish and Christian theologians. Thus, in Canon Streeter's authoritative book on the Four Gospels, (1924), some pages are devoted to the discussion of the use of the term Logos in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, and the writer refers to the possible affinities of the term, as used by John, either with the Logos of Philo, the philosophic Jew of Alexandria, or to its possible connection with the Memra of the Old Testament Targums:—

"His (the Evangelist's) choice of Logos (expressed thought, or word) instead of Nous (reason) or Sophia (wisdom) was no doubt mainly determined by the use of the phrase 'God said' in the description of the act of creation in Genesis, and by the way in which in poetical passages in the Old Testament the 'word of the Lord' is at times all but personified. The use of the term Memra in the Targums was developed out of these same texts in the Old Testament, and it is quite likely that Philo was familiar with it in the oral paraphrases which later on came to be written down in the Targums. If so, that would be an additional reason for his preferring the word Logos, which was a possible equivalent in Greek."

\[^{1}\text{op. cit. p. 374f.}\]
At the same time Dr. Streeter goes on to say that the usage in Philo and the Targums is absolutely different, Philo being concerned with working out a philosophical system "designed to effect a synthesis between two great monotheisms—the religious tradition of the Hebrews and Greek Neoplatonism." On the other hand "the Targums are popular renderings of the Old Testament lessons intended for congregations the majority of whom knew neither Hebrew nor Greek, but were sufficiently advanced to find difficulty in the more startlingly anthropomorphic expressions of the Old Testament like 'the Lord God walked in the garden.' Wherever anything of this kind occurs in the original, the Targum replaces it by some inoffensive substitute; the 'Dwelling of the Lord' (Shekinta = Heb. Shekinah) or the 'Word of the Lord' (Memra) are the most common."

Dr. Streeter goes on to quote an important article by the late Professor Moore, who regards these terms as merely reverential paraphrases:

"The expression the 'Word' or the 'Dwelling,' is not meant to be in any sense a metaphysical or theological conception, it is a purely philological subterfuge—a kind of verbal smoke-screen to conceal the difficulty presented by the anthropomorphic language of the original. To Philo, on the other hand, the Logos is the name of a divine principle conceived of, along the lines of Greek philosophical thinking, as a connecting link between transcendent Deity and the material universe."

Whether the Fourth Gospel uses the term with a full sense of its philosophical implications, or whether it is more nearly in line with the Palestinian use, is a matter which

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*See the *Harvard Theological Review*, January 1922, p. 41f. "Intermediaries in Jewish Theology."*
cannot be discussed here. The subject with which we are more particularly concerned is the use of these terms in the Targums, and their significance in a theological sense.

I

I desire to make it clear at the outset that I have never doubted the hostility of rabbinical Judaism to the whole idea of mediation between man and God by a celestial being or beings; but at the same time it seems clear that such ideas were implicit in some forms of popular Judaism, which are reflected in certain phenomena of the Targums, and which the Rabbis had every reason to regard as highly dangerous to the pure conception of God. In order to safeguard the orthodox religion it was found necessary to revise the Targums, which was accordingly done. The importance of this fact deserves to be emphasized. It is of considerable significance.

Jastrow in his well-known Dictionary defines Memra as follows: (1) word, command: (2) (hypostatized) the Word (with a capital W), i.e. the Lord (used in the Targum to obviate anthropomorphism). Levy both in his large (4 volumes) and small (1 volume) Wörterbuch is even more pronounced: he defines מֶמְרָה as (1) word, dictum: (2) the Word conceived as a person ὁ λόγος (das Wort als Person gedacht): (3) in a metaphorical sense the personality, the essential being of a man (‘die Persönlichkeit, das Wesen eines Menschen’). Such distinguished Jewish scholars as Kohler and Abelson also accept the distinction between the ordinary meaning ‘word’ or ‘utterance’ and the Word conceived, in a special sense, as the power of God. Kohler, for instance, in the chapter of his book Jewish Theology entitled “God and the Intermediary Powers” (p. 198), says:

“Just as the references to God’s appearing to man suggested luminous powers mediating the vision of
God, so the passages which represent God as speaking suggest powers mediating the voice. Hence arose the conception of the Divine Word (capital W), invested with divine powers both physical and spiritual. The first act of God in the Bible is that He spoke, and by this word the world came into being. The Word was thus conceived of as the first created being, an intermediary power between the Spirit of the world and the created world-order. The word of God, important in the cosmic order, is still more so in the moral and spiritual worlds. The Word is at times a synonym of divine revelation to the men of the early generations, or to Israel, the bearer of the Law. Hence the older Haggadah places beside the Shekinah the divine word (Hebrew, Maamar; Aramaic, Memra; Greek, Logos), as the intermediary force of revelation.

Strack-Billerbeck in their Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, Vol. II (1924), devote a long excursus to the Memra of Jahveh (Memra Jahves), pages 302 to 333, in which the subject is discussed in all its bearings. The conclusion they arrive at is summed up as follows:—The expression Memra is a paraphrastic designation of God, or a reverential substitute for the Divine Name Jahveh. On account of the commandment given in Exodus 20.7 ("Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain"), a tendency arose to avoid pronouncing the Divine Name, in fact, the pronunciation of the Divine Name came ultimately to be strictly forbidden. Hence the growth of substitutes, of which the Word of God is one.

Before we come to consider the evidence afforded by

3 Compare the opening verse of the well-known hymn
"Thou whose Almighty Word
Chaos and darkness heard, and took their flight."
intermediation in Jewish theology—box

the Targums in some detail, it is important that two preliminary observations should be made and emphasized. The first is the canon laid down by Luzzatto, and quoted with approval by Dr. Moore, that the Targum was not made for scholars but for the unlettered masses. Consequently its procedure is governed by practical considerations, and is not systematic or always consistent: and

Secondly, the Targum itself exists in various forms which represent or reflect various revisions. The Official Targum of the Pentateuch, the so-called Targum of Onkelos, is itself a Babylonian revision of the earlier Palestinian Targum. This revision, according to Bacher, was 'thorough and systematic,' embracing both subject-matter and text (diction), and one of its main objects was to make the Targum as literal as possible as a rendering of the Hebrew text, unnecessary or paraphrastic words being largely eliminated. "Despite the fact," says Bacher, "that the Targum was thus reduced to a fixed form in Babylonia, the Palestinian meturgemanim had full license to revise and amplify it, so that the final redaction as it now exists in the so-called 'Targum pseudo-Jonathan' (and this is true in even a greater degree of the 'Fragmenten-Targum'), though it was made as late as the seventh century, approximates the original Targum much more closely both in diction and in content, and includes many elements earlier than the Targum bearing the name of Onkelos." Now this is a very important point, which ought constantly to be borne in mind. The literal renderings, in Onkelos, are to be explained, probably, by this process of revision. The more paraphrastic renderings of the Palestinian Targum really approximate much more nearly to the ancient Targum.

Dr. Moore asserts in one passage of his article that where the creative activity of God is spoken of in the Scriptures,

the Targums do not represent this activity as mediated by his Memra.

Isaiah 45.12, (he goes on to remark), is an apparent exception of the kind which, in the proper sense of the doctrine, probat regulam. See also Deut. 33.27, in a midrashic interpretation of the difficult words translated in our Bibles “Underneath are the everlasting Arms,” where Onkelos has “By his Word (Memra) the world was created.” Can we safely rely on this construction of the evidence? I venture to think that it is much more likely that in these two passages we have a relic of the older interpretation which has escaped revision. Isaiah 45.12 is particularly interesting. It runs: “I by my Memra (Memra) have made the earth.” It is quite true that in Onkelos, as a rule, the creative activity of God is represented by a baldly literal translation of the Hebrew text. Thus Gen. 1.1 is rendered in Onkelos: “At first (ברק健康管理) the Lord created the heavens and the earth.” But in the Fragmenten-Targum a remarkable variant to the first word is preserved: “By Wisdom” (ברק健康管理) the Lord created. Personified Wisdom is very near to personified Word. An even more remarkable variant from the same source is preserved in Gen. 1.27, where Onkelos has simply “And the Lord created man in His image”; the Jerusalem Targum has “And the Memra of the Lord created Man to His likeness.” Now this manner of speech became intolerable to later rabbinic Judaism, and it is much more probable that the bald literalism of Onkelos in these passages is due to revision of an earlier Targumic usage than that such phrases grew up later. In fact, there is rabbinic authority for equating, for in the Yalkut, which opens with the well-known dictum (Abot V, 1) that the world was created by ten sayings (פרעות) nine occurrences of发挥作用 and the tenth is said to be implied in发挥作用.
since the verse “In the beginning of the heavens and the earth” is equivalent in meaning to the verse (Ps. 33.6) “By the word of the Lord were the heavens created.”

In T. B. Hag. 12a, Rab is reported to have said that the world was created by ten דברים. As Dr. Charles Taylor has pointed out, some of these ten דברים are found also among the ten Sephiroth of the Kabbalists. Another passage in Hag. (14a) may be cited in this connection. It runs:—*From each word (דיבור) that proceeds from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, there was created an Angel, for it is said (Ps. 33.6) ‘By the word of the Lord were the Heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth’.*” Dr. Moore calls attention, with some emphasis, to the fact that the Targum on the Psalms renders ‘word’ in this verse (Ps. 33.6) not by Memra but by the common Millah. Its avoidance of Memra here is no doubt deliberate, and may be explained (it is a late Targum) by the anxiety of the later Rabbis to avoid any suggestion of a mediatorial agency in creation. It is well known that the opening chapters of Genesis became the basis for a whole mystical literature and speculative system, which it was considered dangerous to unveil to the uninitiated. Kohler indeed suggests that the rabbinical schools gave up the personified Word because of Christian developments. The older term has, however, survived in certain liturgical formulas. One of the most interesting of these is the first Benediction preceding the evening Shema, known as the הילל אד, the nucleus of which is very old. It contains an interesting phrase in which Word and Wisdom are used in parallelism. “Thou art He, who at His word bringest on the
evening twilight, by Wisdom openest the (heavenly gates) and by understanding changest times and seasons."

That the Word was personified in Jewish religious thought in a sense, is asserted by such scholars as Kohler and Abelson. This does not mean that the Word was regarded by the rabbinical teachers who employed it as a person distinct from God, with a separate personal existence. This was no more the case with Word than with Wisdom, which is undoubtedly personified in Proverbs, Ch. 8. In the case of the personified Word, God's creative or directing Word or speech is thought of, "manifesting itself" as Kohler says, "in the world of matter or mind." The reality behind it is God—it is, as it were, God in action; but the divine power or qualities expressed by 'Word' or Memra are, as it were, abstracted and personified. This would inevitably be the result if such terms were regularly employed.

II

Kohler, in the present writer's opinion, is undoubtedly right in insisting that Memra and allied terms are not merely verbal counters, but have a positive theological significance. The term Memra was associated with the act of creation, and thus carried with it inevitably the idea of the creative Word or Wisdom of God. There is a tendency in some quarters to minimize this significance. But particular expressions, consistently or largely used, connote certain things, at any rate at certain stages of their history.

It is, of course, true that Memra sometimes bears the simple unextended sense of "word" or "command." In exactly the same way the Greek Logos has a simple meaning; but when it is strongly personified it bears implications of a

[6] Compare e.g. Gen. 3.17, Targ. Onkelos, and see further Strack-Billerbeck, II, 319f.
different kind. The fact remains that Memra in certain phrases is strongly personified. It is made the subject of verbs which imply personal action. Thus the Memra brings Israel nigh unto God, and sits on His Throne receiving the prayers of Israel (Targ. Yer. to Deut. 4.7) 'For what people is so great, to whom the Lord is so high in the Name of the Word of the Lord? But the custom of (other) nations is to carry their gods upon their shoulders, that they may seem to be nigh them; but they cannot hear with their ears, (be they nigh or) be they afar off; but the Word of the Lord sitteth upon His throne high and lifted up, and heareth our prayer what time we pray before Him and make our petitions.' Kohler⁷ thus summarily states the facts in this connection: "The Memra of the Lord shielded Noah from the flood, (Targ. Yer. to Gen. 7.16), and brought about the dispersion of the seventy nations (Gen. 18.8); it is the guardian of Jacob (Gen. 28.20–21; 35.3), and of Israel (Targ. Yer. to Ex. 12.23, 29); . . . it hardens the heart of Pharaoh (Ex. 13.15); "and when the Word of the Lord had hardened the heart of Pharaoh . . . he killed all the firstborn;” goes before Israel in the wilderness (Targ. Yer. to Ex. 13.18); “and the Word of the Lord conducted the people by the way of the desert,” etc., cp. v. 20 “and the glory of the Shekinah of the Lord went before them;” blesses Israel (Targ. Yer. to Numb. 23.8); battles for the people (Targ. Josh. 3.7; 10.14; 23.3 . . .). The Memra acts in the execution of justice. The Memra is prominent in connection with the divine oath. “It is the Memra who is always the subject of swearing or oathtaking,” says Abelson, “Either the Memra takes the oath, or God swears by His Memra. This is the way in which Targumic literature describes divine fidelity to divine promises; whether to reward or punish.” Gen. 6.6, is a good example, “And God

turned from His Memra, by which He had made man in the land, and He said by His Memra that He would (lit. to) break their strength according to His Will.”

Perhaps the strongest cases of personification are passages like Deut. 33.7. “Hear O Memra of the Lord the voice of Judah’s prayer,” and Numb. 10.35–36: “Arise now, O Memra of the Lord,” “Return now, O Memra of the Lord.” Is it conceivable that the people when they listened to such renderings in the synagogue service regarded Memra as a mere ‘buffer-word’ devoid of any special significance? Abelson says, with reference to the terms Shekinah and Memra, and says justly, that “the Rabbis personified these terms, speaking with the greatest freedom of them as the visible manifestations of Deity in the objective world”; he adds: “They yet (at the same time) left no stone unturned to prevent any belief in anything but the unique and incomparable unity of God.” There is nothing impossible in holding together these two views. That there was a danger lest the personification should be carried too far, is clear; that the Rabbis were alive to this danger is obvious from various indications.

The official Targum was revised, and in the most dangerous cases Memra was eliminated from the text (as in the creation passages in Gen. 1 ff), and literal renderings were substituted. But there is also direct evidence that the Rabbis were alive to the danger. A passage from the Midrash ha-gadol is quoted by Schechter as follows:—“R. Eliezer said: ‘He who translates a verse (from the Bible) literally is a liar. He who adds to it commits a blasphemy. For instance, if he translated (Ex. 24.10) And they saw the God of Israel, he spoke an untruth; for the Holy One . . . sees, but is not seen. But if he translated, And they saw the glory of the Shekinah of the God of Israel, he commits blasphemy; for he makes three (a Trinity) viz. Glory, Shekinah,
and God'. Now this rendering, which is here so roundly condemned, is actually found in the Fragmenten-Targum. Schechter adds: 'A good essay on the various heresies which the Rabbis had to face, and which would, as I believe, throw much light on the inconsistencies of the Targumim and of the Rabbis concerning the question of anthropomorphism, is still a desideratum.'

III

In this connection reference may be made to Ginsberger's masterly article on 'Die Anthropomorphismen in den Targumim' published in two parts in 1891. At the beginning of the article Ginsberger warns the student against attempting to explain and classify the use of locutions, to avoid or reduce anthropomorphism, on the basis of evidence derived from single Targums. All available data should be considered in these connections. There is a real danger that general statements may be made concerning the Targums on the sole basis of the official Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan on the Prophets. The Jerusalem Targum and the Fragmenten-Targum ought to be included; their evidence is often all-important.

It is true, as has often been pointed out, that Memra is an expression confined to the Targumic literature. It is not found in the Talmud or in the Aramaic passages of the Midrashim. The inference sometimes drawn from this fact is that Memra is simply a phenomenon of translation; i. e. presumably it has no special connotation. But in answer to this objection it may be pointed out (a) that Memra is a specifically Aramaic word, and as such was a popular term, intelligible to the people, (2) that the Rabbis preferred specifically Hebrew terms, like Dibbur and Shekinah, which they employ in a manner similar to the use of Memra in the Targums. In fact, they introduced these
terms in an Aramaized form into the Targumic literature (Shekinta and Dibbura). Now Dibbur is personified in the same way as Memra. Like the latter term it is sometimes employed in its simple natural sense of 'utterance,' sometimes in a strongly personified way. As an illustration of the latter use the following passage is given by Abelson. It appears both in the Sifre and in Shir-ha-shirim Rabba (on Cant. 1.13) and runs as follows:—

"The Word (Dibbura) emerged from the right hand of God and went to the left of Israel; thence returning it surrounded the camp of Israel, which was eighteen miles by eighteen miles; thence returning it went from the right of Israel to the left of God, who received it on His right, and afterwards engraved it on the Tablet; and its voice resounded from one end of the world to the other, fulfilling the statement of Scripture: 'The voice of the Lord divideth the flames of fire,' (Ps. 29.7). In another passage in the Midrash (6.3 on Canticles 5.16) ('His mouth is sweet') the Dibbur as the organ or intermediary of revelation is represented as interceding before God on behalf of the Israelites who had been reduced to a state of panic at the utterance of the divine voice at Mt. Sinai. When the divine voice uttered .... and the Israelites heard this word, says the Midrash, 'their souls fled.' As it is said, Deut. 5.25, 'If we hear the voice of God any more we shall die.' Thereupon the Dibbur (The Word) returned before the Holy One, and said, 'Lord of the Universe, Thou art living and eternal, and Thy Law is living and eternal, and (yet) Thou hast sent me to (the state of) the dead.'"

It is very instructive to see how the Targum of Onkelos treats the parallel passage in Deuteronomy and to compare it with the corresponding passage in the Palestinian Targum.
Onkelos runs as follows (Deut. 5.22ff): "These words (Pithgamayya) spake the Lord with all your congregation at the mount, from the midst of the fire the clouds and the darkness, with a great voice and hath not ceased; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone and gave them to me. But it came to pass, when you heard the voice from the midst of the fire and darkness, and the mount burning with fire; that ye drew nigh to me, even all the chiefs of your tribes and your elders; and you said, Behold the Lord our God hath shown us His glory and His greatness and we have heard the voice of His Word (Memra) and out of the midst of the fire this day we have seen that the Lord speaketh with a man and he liveth."

It will be noticed that Onkelos has largely (though not entirely) eliminated the Memra from this passage; and that pseudo-Jonathan has not only employed Memra more largely, but has הובירא (i.e. the Aramaized form of דרור) twice.

Further, the passage in both Targums shows that Memra and דרור were closely associated with the idea of revelation. It is interesting to add that Alshech in his commentary on the passage from Canticles Rabba (6.3 on Cant. 5.16) cited above, explains דרור as being identical with an angel on the basis of the remark in T. B. Hag. 14a, "From each utterance (דיבור) that proceeded from the mouth of the Holy One there was created an Angel," which the Yalkut on Canticles I. expands into "One Angel goes forth before every Dibbur, and asks every Israelite in turn, whether he accepts such and such a Dibbur and all that it implies."

It is worth while noting here that Dibburiel (Word of God) is one of the seventy mysterious names conferred upon Metatron according to 3 Enoch, Chap. 48D.⁸ "Seventy names has Metatron, which the Holy One, blessed

⁸ Compare Odeberg, 3 Enoch, p. 172f.
be He, took from His own name and put upon him, and these are they,” etc. Odeberg goes on to remark “These names which probably are understood as representing different aspects and functions of Metatron, are here conceived as combining all the different functions assigned to the special angels mentioned.”

IV

Another term that is important in this connection is Shekinah. This, however, is a specifically Hebrew term, and occurs with great frequency in the rabbinical literature generally. In the Aramaized form of Shekinta it also occurs in the Targums.

It would take too long to attempt to illustrate here the different usages of this term; nor is it necessary; it will suffice to point out one or two salient features in the usage, and then to pass on.

Shekinah, like Memar, Memra, is used sometimes in a simple literal sense, and sometimes with a more extended significance. Literally it means “dwelling”, and is occasionally employed in this meaning; but far more frequently it denotes the Divine Presence, God manifesting Himself, especially in light and glory, though sometimes an invisible Shekinah is spoken of. It is in this technical sense, denoting the localized presence of the Deity, that Shekinah is most significant. As such it is sometimes personified. For instance, in the tractate known as Abot de R. Nathan, I, the phrase in Ezek. 43.2, “and the whole earth shone with His glory” is interpreted as “This is the face of the Shekinah.” In Deut. Rabba 11.3, Moses is said to have spoken “with the Shekinah face to face.” The Midrash Tanhuma on נ doen alluding to the passage Exod. 34 29. asks, “Whence did Moses get his horns of glory?” and comments, “There
are some who say that at the time when the Holy One taught Moses Torah, Moses gained his horns of glory from the sparks which shot out from the mouth of the Shekinah."

In one passage in the Yalkut the Shekinah is apparently equated with an angel. Commenting on the verse (Numb. 10.35), "Rise up and let thine enemies be scattered," the Midrash says that Moses sought to assure the Israelites that the Shekinah was with them by quoting the divine promise (Ex. 23.20) "Behold I send an angel before thee."

The close connection between Shekinah and the Holy Spirit is generally admitted. Dr. Moore has remarked 'revelation or inspiration, the chief function of Holy Spirit in Judaism, is, so far as I know, never attributed to the Presence (Shekinah)." He apparently has forgotten a passage in Koh. Rab., I, 2, where Amos is said to have become a prophet because God caused His Shekinah to rest upon him.

Another Midrashic passage of similar import is quoted by Abelson (p. 378). "Jonah . . . was one of the pilgrims who went up to Jerusalem for the Feasts . . . and the Holy Spirit rested upon him, teaching that the Shekinah only rests upon one who is joyful of heart."9

It has been pointed out by more than one scholar that the Memra is not consistently employed as a circumlocution for "God said" or "God spoke." The official Targum constantly translates the phrase literally, but this is not the case with the non-official Targums. The phrase "The Memra of J. said," or "called" or "spoke" is frequent in the Palestinian Targum, and especially in the Fragmentary Targum. The right inference to draw from this phenomenon is that this feature represents an earlier usage of the Palestinian Targum, which the revised official Targums had

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9 Cf. Yalkut on Jonah, 1, 1.
scruples about using, and therefore revised away. The same remark applies to the phrase "and the Memra of J. created" or "formed."

On the basis of the evidence adduced above, I would venture to say that the Memra has a certain significance and theological value. It is to be regarded, I think, as what Ginsberger calls a "Mittelsbegriff," and connotes a certain view of God's manifestation, a theology of immanence which has been admirably and convincingly worked out by Dr. Abelson. Words are not mere counters, even in rabbinic. They carry with them certain implications. It is true that the Rabbis were not philosophers, but certain concepts, which are implied in their phraseology, are capable of a philosophic presentment. They were not always consistent; but a theology which is immanental in character can be traced all through the rabbinic literature. The Memra was not a being endowed with a separate personality, but the view of Moses ben Nachman, that it expresses God Himself in certain modes of self-manifestation, cannot lightly be dismissed. A view which summarily rejects the theory of Maimonides and Nachmanides is purely arbitrary. I am content to accept the reasoned conclusion of Ginsberger, who after a full review of all the relevant evidence, explains the idea of Memra, as it appears in the oldest form of the Targum, which is the only proper basis of comparison in dealing with the historical development of the idea of the personified "word," as follows:—

"Memra ist weder der griechischer Logos noch auch die Person oder die Seele Gottes . . . Sondern es ist das von Gott gesprochene Wort das die Welt geschaffen und sie leitet und regiert. Es ist der unsichtbare Repräsentant der Persönlichkeit Gottes den Menschen gegenüber."
The same idea was implicit in the rabbinic periphrasis—one of the many such that occur—“He who spake and the world was” (וי שם והיו העולם) or as it might be rendered: “He who said (the Word) and the world was.” This circumlocution is very old and can be traced back to the early part of the second century C.E.\textsuperscript{10}