

A MYSTICAL THREAD:
THE SHEKINAH TRADITION IN THE TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

ADAM T. ARN

THEO 8516 - THE TRINITY

DR. RALPH DEL COLLE

DECEMBER 06, 2011

Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, in his book entitled *Night*, a work based on his experiences as a prisoner in the Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald concentration camps, relates the following poignant and now almost legendary incident:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. ‘Where is God? Where is he?’ someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, ‘Where is God now?’ And I heard a voice in myself answer: ‘Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.’¹

Wiesel’s experience, in addition to inspiring a generation to cultivate a more compassionate and just humanity, has also engaged the imaginations of countless theologians, Jewish and Christian alike. For as this incident so clearly illustrates, post-Holocaust theology has had to revisit the enduring question of theodicy in the face of such massive and intentional human suffering. Furthermore, intrinsic to this question is the larger doctrine of God. If God exists, what can we say about God’s nature? What can we say about God’s being? God’s relationship to history, humanity, and our ostensibly precarious future?

One theologian who has commented on Wiesel’s experience possibly more than any other is the German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann. An initial source for Moltmann’s theology is his own experience as a prisoner of war in 1945-8. It was during this period that Moltmann experienced God both “as the power of hope and ... [a] presence in suffering: the two themes which were to form the two complementary sides of his theology in the 1960s and early 1970s.”² The second of those two themes, the presence of God in the midst of suffering, finds its theological articulation in one of Moltmann’s most celebrated works, *The Crucified God*. In this work, Moltmann suggests that Wiesel’s experience is a “shattering expression”³ of his *theologia*

¹ As quoted by Jürgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974), 273-4.

² Richard Bauchham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 1.

³ Jürgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God*, 273.

crucis and is representative of the “rabbinic theology of God’s humiliation of himself.”⁴ This rabbinic theology is what has come to be known as the mystical doctrine of the Shekinah, or as I will be referring to it simply as the Shekinah tradition. This tradition is one of the primary theological frameworks that Moltmann uses to interpret his own, as well as the world’s, experience of suffering. It plays a major role in his theological works dealing with questions of theodicy and in his many “contributions to theology.”⁵ In fact, I maintain that one cannot fully understand Moltmann’s theology if one does not understand the important place this tradition plays within it. The Shekinah tradition exists as a kind of mystical thread that weaves itself in and out of Moltmann’s theology.⁶ It helps to hold together his various “contributions” from his doctrine of creation to his christology, from his doctrine of God to ultimately his eschatology. In what follows, I wish to trace this mystical thread by 1) exploring the roots of the Shekinah tradition, 2) explicating the specific role the Shekinah tradition plays in Moltmann’s contribution to the trinitarian doctrine of God,⁷ 3) evaluate whether or not Moltmann’s reading and use of the tradition is legitimate, 4) intimate two broad possibilities his use of the tradition holds for Christian theology in general and trinitarian theology in particular, and 5) conclude by offering my own proposal that aims to prepare a way for future theological discussion.

I. The Roots of the Shekinah Tradition

The primordial roots of the Shekinah tradition are found in the Hebrew Bible. The Scriptures suggest that in the memory of Israel’s earliest days there existed profound experiences

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Moltmann uses the expression “contributions to theology” in order to indicate not only his “content and style” but also “to avoid the seductions of the theological system and the coercion of the dogmatic thesis.” His aim in each contribution is to “prepare the way for a theological discussion in the future which will be both broader and more intensive.” cf. the original preface to his first contribution in *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), xii.

⁶ After doing an electronic search of his five major contributions to systematic theology I estimated roughly 172 occurrences of the Shekinah.

⁷ While this paper will primarily take a trinitarian direction it will be helpful to explore Moltmann’s trinitarian theology at the nexus of a number of his other contributions. For it is almost impossible to grasp what Moltmann is doing in his theology without noticing the various interconnections between his doctrine of God and the other mysteries of the Christian faith.

of God's presence in their midst. In the Exodus of Egypt and the wilderness wanderings God manifested God's own presence in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (cf. Num. 14:14; Neh. 9:12). The covenant that was made with the nation at Sinai exhibited remarkable occurrences of God's presence (cf. Ex. 19:16-22). These occurrences – God's descent and God's dwelling in the midst of Israel – become an abiding feature as God's presence took up residence both within and upon the transportable ark of the covenant (cf. Ex. 25:22). Ultimately, David brought this transportable ark to Jerusalem, and his son, Solomon, built a temple for it. Here God's presence was to abide permanently in the *qodesh ha-qodashim* (The Holy of Holies).

In later rabbinic theology, this abiding presence in the midst of God's people, in the midst of the temple, became known as the Shekinah⁸ – God's indwelling presence. This noun derives from the Hebrew/Aramaic verbal root *shākhan* which in classical usage means to settle, inhabit, or dwell.⁹ For instance, a quintessential example is found in Exodus 40:35 where it states that “Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled [*shākhan*] upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.” While the term Shekinah itself is not found in the Hebrew Bible, it is extremely common in rabbinic literature and Aramaic targums. In fact, it seems to be used as a reverential appellation for God employed in contexts that imply God's immanence.¹⁰ For example, in Exodus 25:8 God tells Moses to “make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among” the people. In Targum Onkelos this verse is translated as “make before Me a sanctuary and I shall cause My Shekhina to dwell among”¹¹ the people. Occurrences such as these abound, especially in connection with literature associated with the temple, sanctuary, and/or tent of meeting. This demonstrates that the Shekinah tradition draws its initial nourishment from temple theology.

⁸ While there are a number of ways to transliterate שכינה, the most accurate being “Shēkhînāh,” throughout this paper I am using the transliteration that Moltmann himself uses except where quoted by another author.

⁹ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 369-70.

¹⁰ Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Blaisdell, 1965), 225.

¹¹ Quoted in Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 41.

However, as Moltmann asks in his many brief surveys of the Shekinah tradition: “what happened to the Shekinah when the Babylonians destroyed the city and the temple in 587 B.C.E.?”¹² The destruction of the temple and subsequent exile was an experience of profound crisis for the people of God. Much of exilic religion is a development in response to this crisis. Analogous to post-Holocaust theology, theology done during and after the exile caused Israel to revisit questions of theodicy and fundamentally their doctrine of God. Their primordial experiences of God’s Shekinah – God’s indwelling presence – in their midst gets taken up and developed into two divergent traditions. The first tradition says that God withdrew the Shekinah and therefore no longer dwelt in the midst of the people. God is wholly transcendent in this conception. Moltmann suggests that the Deuteronomist writings belong to this tradition. We no longer read about God’s own self dwelling in the temple, but rather God’s own name which is then somehow associated with the temple. The second tradition says that God’s Shekinah went into exile with the people. Moltmann asserts that this is understandable because of the fact that God dwelt in the midst of his people *before* his indwelling in Solomon’s temple. Following this assertion, the subsequent conclusion is then supposedly inevitable: “The people are carried into captivity, and the Shekinah goes with them. The people suffer exile and persecution, and the Shekinah suffers with them. The Shekinah suffers exile and ignominy, and the people suffer with the Shekinah.”¹³

Later rabbinic literature took up the second *sympathetic* tradition. In their ongoing reflection upon the accompanying presence and co-suffering of God, the rabbis cite, as testimony to this tradition, such biblical texts as Isaiah 63:9, “In all their affliction He was afflicted,” and Psalm 91:15, “I am with him in trouble.” God is conceived of as “Israel’s twin brother. The two are so much one heart and one soul that every hurt Israel suffers becomes God’s hurt too.”¹⁴

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!: God’s Future for Humanity and the Earth*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 103.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, “Shekinah: The Home of the Homeless God,” in *Longing for Home*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1996), 175.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Other reflections suggest that the co-suffering of God is not solely in relationship to Israel but to humanity as a whole. In the Mishnah, immediately following the description of capital punishment, we read the following commentary: “When a human being suffers what does the *Shechinah* say? My head is too heavy for Me; My arm is too heavy for Me. And if God is so grieved over the blood of the wicked that is shed, how much more so over the blood of the righteous” (*Mishnah Sanhedrin*, VI, 5).¹⁵ It is conceptions like these that make up the background to the Wiesel’s intuitive answer to the perplexing question: Where is God now? According to the Shekinah tradition God is right there in the midst of human suffering. God is indeed this youth’s twin brother, for God’s own self is hanging there on the gallows. And yet how is this possible? In what way is God’s own self present in suffering? Because of questions such as these, some traditions within rabbinic theology and later Jewish mysticism begin to speak of a self-distinction of God, particularly in God’s co-suffering.

For instance, in the dialogue that Moltmann had with the Orthodox Jewish theologian, Pinchas Lapide, concerning Jewish monotheism and the doctrine of the Trinity,¹⁶ Lapide makes a number of references to these traditions. He finds in Hasidism a concept that is reminiscent of Karl Barth’s famous trinitarian analogy that refers to God as “the Revealer, the Revelation, and the Being-Revealed.” Rabbi Zalman Shneur of Ladi, the founder of the Lubavitcher dynasty and one of the pillars of Hasidism, wrote that God “is the Knowing One, the One Known, and the Knowledge. All these three form in God an indivisible unity.”¹⁷ This differentiation in the unity of God is even more pronounced in the Kabbalist doctrine of the *Sephiroth* tree. Lapide states that Kabbalists perceive God “as a dynamic process between ten different levels of the

¹⁵ Quoted in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 21-22.

¹⁶ This dialogue took place on May 22, 1978 in the village of Niefern bei Pforzheim, West Germany and has been published as *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine: A Dialogue by Pinchas Lapide & Jürgen Moltmann*, trans. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

¹⁷ Pinchas Lapide and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine: A Dialogue by Pinchas Lapide & Jürgen Moltmann*, trans. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 37.

Godhead”¹⁸ and human beings are only able to experience God in “phenomenological multiplicity.”¹⁹ As Gershom Scholem writes in his landmark lectures on Jewish mysticism, “These are the ten spheres of divine manifestation in which God emerges from His hidden abode ... they are also called the inner, intrinsic or mystical Face of God ... through which God descends from the inmost recesses down to His revelation in the Shekhinah.”²⁰

In his theology of Israel’s prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel developed a bipolar concept of God wherein God is at once wholly free in God’s self and at the same time committed to the people of God in covenant and affected by their history. Picking up on this concept Moltmann asserts that,

Heschel has shown that the Jewish experience of God cannot be a simple monotheism, because on the basis of the experience of the divine pathos it must come to an awareness of this self-distinction of God. Every self-communication presumes a self-distinction. Whoever speaks of the communicability of God presumes a relationship in which God can step over against God.²¹

Elsewhere Moltmann writes of Heschel’s bipolar concept: “In history, God exists in a twofold presence: in heaven and in his exiled people, unlimited and limited, infinite and finite, free from suffering and death, while at the same time suffering and dying with his people.”²²

Finally, we arrive at Franz Rosenzweig’s mystical reflections on the Shekinah tradition in his major philosophical work *The Star of Redemption*. He writes:

The Shekhina, God’s descent upon man and his sojourn among men, is pictured as a dichotomy taking place in God himself. God himself separates himself from himself, he gives himself away to his people, he shares in their sufferings, sets forth with them into

¹⁸ Ibid, 38.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941), 213-4.

²¹ Lapide and Moltmann, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine*, 49.

²² Jurgen Moltmann, “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 143.

the agony of exile, joins their wanderings ... Nothing would be more natural for the “God of our Fathers” than that he should “sell” himself for Israel and share its suffering fate. But by doing so, God himself puts himself in need of redemption.²³

This is a remarkable reflection on the Jewish experience of God’s self-distinction, God’s condescension, and God’s co-suffering solidarity with Israel. Moreover, Rosenzweig even takes up the biblical metaphor of redemption whereby God is understood as “selling” God’s own self for the sake of the other in a way that is strangely reminiscent of the paschal mystery. However, what remains troubling in Rosenzweig’s conception is just how this redemption of God’s self – God’s Shekinah – is suppose to come about. As Moltmann writes, “Who delivers the ‘exiled God’?”²⁴

According to Rosenzweig, this deliverance is ostensibly in the “hands of human beings.”²⁵ The Jew fulfills the endless customs and precepts “for the sake of uniting the holy God and his Shekhina.”²⁶ For instance, every time a Jew confesses the Shema Yisrael they “confess God’s unity – the Jew calls it: to unify God. For this unity is as it becomes, it is Becoming Unity”²⁷ which is “nothing less than the process of redemption.”²⁸ God’s self-distinction, condescension, and self-humiliation in exile finds its redemption and deliverance through Israel’s unifying acknowledgment of God and in their obediential, eschatologically participatory acts of *tikkun olam* (mending the world). Thus, analogous to the ancient metaphysical model of *exitus* and *reditus*, God goes out of God’s self and God returns to God’s self again. God’s “descent into the Innermost has disclosed itself as an ascent to the Highest.”²⁹

²³ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 409-10.

²⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!*, 107.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 410.

²⁷ Ibid, 410-11.

²⁸ Ibid, 411.

²⁹ Ibid.

In bringing this brief survey on the roots of the Shekinah tradition to a close, let me offer a recapitulation of this tradition in the form of three movements within the God-world relationship that each in their own unique way are taken up by Moltmann in his various contributions to theology. These three movements can be summed up as follows: 1) God's self-distinction, condescension, and immanent indwelling which came to be known as God's Shekinah; 2) the Shekinah's commitment to Israel resulting in God's self-humiliation and co-suffering in exile, sometimes referred to as God's estrangement; and 3) the mutual redemption of the Shekinah and God's people resulting in eschatological restoration and union for the Godhead as well as all of creation. Let us now turn to Moltmann's trinitarian theology proper in order to see what role the Shekinah tradition plays within his doctrine of God.

II. The Shekinah Tradition in the Trinitarian Theology of Jürgen Moltmann

Can one discern in the movements of the Shekinah tradition some kind of coherence to Moltmann's trinitarian theology? Within Moltmann's various themes and contributions to systematic theology can one trace the contours of this mystical thread revealing a certain indebtedness to the Shekinah tradition? Furthermore, I wonder whether the Shekinah tradition – which for Moltmann opens up to the trinitarian mystery itself – grounds all of his themes and contributions in the triune God, making each thoroughly trinitarian? In order to see whether or not this is the case I will proceed to trace Moltmann's trinitarian theology along the path of the three movements within the God-world relationship that characterize the Shekinah tradition.

The First Movement: God's self-distinction, condescension, and immanent indwelling

Moltmann asserts that the Christian ideas of the incarnation of the divine *Logos* and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit developed in the same "spiritual neighborhood"³⁰ as the Jewish ideas of exilic and rabbinic Shekinah theology. Because of this parallel development we should

³⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, "Shekinah: The Home of the Homeless God," 178.

not be surprised if we find significant similarities in both traditions. For instance, in the opening prologue to John's gospel, analogous to the Shekinah that descends and indwells the desert tabernacle, we read about the divine *Logos* that descends and indwells (*lit.* tabernacles) among God's people as Jesus of Nazareth, the Word become flesh. Moltmann writes that in Christian terms this descent of God "is explained as the self-distinction of God, an idea which led on to the later doctrine of the Trinity."³¹ Moltmann goes on to connect this self-distinction even more explicitly to the Shekinah tradition:

When the doctrine of the Trinity talks about three divine Persons in one divine substance (Tertullian's formulation), this formulation is of course using the terminology of Greek philosophy. But as the New Testament shows, in actual fact it goes back to the Israelite theology of the Shekinah. The God who lives in heaven and among the wretched of his people reveals a double presence – what Abraham Heschel in his interpretation of the prophets calls a "bipolarity."³²

However, whereas the Shekinah tradition perceived a kind of "double presence" the Christian experience perceived a kind of "triple presence." According to the Lukan Pentecost narrative, the Spirit, like the divine *Logos*, also descends and immanently indwells among God's people. Only this condescension, unlike the Incarnation, is an indwelling in "our hearts" (Rom. 5:5). As Paul writes to the church in Corinth: "do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (1 Cor. 6:19). Moltmann adds, "What once happened in Solomon's temple, when God's Shekinah entered it, resting and dwelling there, now happens in the bodies of believers. The living, physical community becomes the temple of the divine, lifegiving Spirit."³³

This notion of immanent indwelling becomes paradigmatic for the whole of Moltmann's trinitarian theology. According to Moltmann, the Christian tradition expanded on the Shekinah

³¹ Jürgen Moltmann, "Shekinah: The Home of the Homeless God," 179.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

tradition³⁴ and began to perceive a series of mutual indwellings which the church fathers would later describe in terms of *perichoresis*. This can be observed on three levels.

First, perichoresis describes the trinitarian unity of the Father and the Incarnate Word which is analogous to the unity of the transcendent God and the immanent Shekinah. The quintessential text for this perichoretic unity is found in John's gospel: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn 14:10). By way of extension, one can add that, not only do the Father and the Son exist in each other, but they both exist in the Spirit and the Spirit exists in them as well. Through this tripartite and mutual indwelling, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit form an inwardly differentiated unity. As Moltmann writes, "They give one another mutually the living space for the mutual indwelling. So God's unity is not infringed. Nowhere is there any talk of three gods."³⁵ What's more, however, is that this living space, by virtue of the divine missions, opens itself up to receive into itself both redeemed humanity and renewed creation which we will see in greater detail when we get to the third movement within the Shekinah tradition.

Second, perichoresis describes the christological unity of the of the Triune God and redeemed humanity in the Christ. This mutual indwelling can be observed by looking at two New Testament reflections. The writer of Colossians, in explicating the mystery that has been revealed to the saints, describes this mystery as "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). The inverse of this is seen in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. Here Paul speaks of an inaugurated eschatology of new creation for those who are "in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17). Moltmann writes that this christological unity is "undoubtedly God's greatest mystery: his closeness, which embraces us, his presence in our world, far from God as it is, and his accompaniment on our odysseys in this world. Emanuel, 'God with us' – with us, the godless and God-forsaken. That is the name for the wonder which Christians experience in the fellowship of Christ."³⁶

³⁴ Whereas the Shekinah tradition perceived the transcendent God and the immanent Shekinah as different and yet one, because one indwells the other, Moltmann suggests that the Christian tradition perceived a series of indwellings "out of which a unity-in-difference and a difference-in-unity proceeds" (2010, 112).

³⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!*, 113.

³⁶ Ibid.

Third, perichoresis describes the pneumatological indwelling of the Holy Spirit in redeemed humanity and the ecclesial community as a whole. As I mentioned above, the New Testament asserts that “we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’” (2 Cor. 6:16). Moltmann argues that by quoting Israel’s covenant formula, Paul is picking up Israel’s idea about the Shekinah and “with it interprets the experience of the indwelling divine Spirit among Christians.”³⁷

In light of the various ways Moltmann takes up the first movement within the Shekinah tradition, what can we say about the role this movement plays within his doctrine of God? Contra the formula of the early church, “one substance – three persons” and the Hegelian formula, “one subject – three modes of being,” Moltmann’s doctrine of God does not begin with the divine unity (either the one substance nor the one subject) but rather with the divine plurality evidenced in the divine missions. His is a social doctrine of the Trinity. Moltmann writes in the introductory chapter to his doctrine of God *The Trinity and the Kingdom*: “Here we shall presuppose the unity of God neither as homogenous substance nor as identical subject. Here we shall enquire about that unity in the light of this trinitarian history.”³⁸ I aver that the Shekinah tradition plays a significant role in this enquiry and is used to not only help Moltmann parse this trinitarian history, and in particular the divine missions, but it also helps Moltmann eventually arrive at the divine unity with the theological concept of mutual indwelling or perichoresis.

The Second Movement: God’s self-humiliation, co-suffering, and estrangement

When Moltmann began to work on his theology of the cross he writes that he “turned the traditional question upside down.”³⁹ The question traditionally asked was the soteriological one: What does the cross mean for human beings? Instead, Moltmann asked a theological one: What

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 19.

³⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 2000), 304.

does the cross mean for God's own self? Asking this question provided the theological point of entry whereby the Shekinah tradition first makes its debut in Moltmann's writings. In *The Crucified God*, just after relating Wiesel's Holocaust experience, Moltmann asks the question: "Does the Shekinah, which wanders with Israel through the dust of the streets and hangs on the gallows in Auschwitz, suffer in the God who holds the ends of the earth in his hand?"⁴⁰ He goes on to suggest that this suffering would not only be something that God experiences externally but would also be a kind of suffering history in the midst of God's own self. Moltmann writes, "We are not concerned here to set up paradoxes, but to ask whether the experiences of the passion and the suffering of God lead into the inner mystery of God himself."⁴¹ It seems quite clear that by the time Moltmann wrote *The Trinity and the Kingdom* he had securely affirmed that this is indeed the case. For after he sets up his methodological starting point in the first chapter, "Trinitarian Theology Today," he moves immediately to a discussion on "The Passion of God" in which the Shekinah tradition plays a prominent role. As Moltmann writes, "the experience of the divine pathos inevitably leads to the perception of the self-differentiation of the one God,"⁴² and these insights are "deepened if we take up the early rabbinic theology and the kabbalistic doctrine of the Shekinah."⁴³ By taking up the second movement of the Shekinah tradition, in what way is Moltmann's trinitarian theology deepened?

If we start with the self-humiliation of God then, according to Moltmann, we must necessarily begin with the doctrine of creation. For Moltmann, the self-humiliation – the divine kenosis – begins with the creation of the world and is completed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. How is this so? Moltmann reminds us that Christian theology has consistently seen creation as act of the triune God directed outwards. However, he asks the following insightful

⁴⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 274.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 27.

⁴³ Ibid.

question: “can the omnipotent and omnipresent God have an ‘outward’ aspect at all?”⁴⁴ In order to answer this question, Moltmann turns to the Jewish mystic Issac Luria’s doctrine of *tsimtsum*, which is part of his contemporary interpretation of the Shekinah tradition. Gershom Scholem calls Luria’s doctrine of *tsimtsum* “one of the most amazing and far-reaching conceptions ever put forward in the whole history of Kabbalism.”⁴⁵ *Tsimtsum* means “concentration” or “contraction” and, in Kabbalist parlance, signifies a withdrawal into the self. Luria, taking up a midrashic teaching originating in the third century that refers to God “concentrating” his Shekinah in the *qodesh ha-qodeshim*, transformed this teaching into God’s concentrated inversion for the purpose of creating the world. As Moltmann understands it, “God has released a certain sector of his being, from which he has withdrawn – ‘a kind of primal, mystical space’; and into this, accordingly, he can issue from himself in his creation and his revelation.”⁴⁶ This means that the *exitus* of creation begins with a self-humiliation on God’s part when he determines to be self-limited. It is through this withdrawal – this “exile” – into God’s own self that allows for the *nihilo* in which God then actively creates. Transposing this into a trinitarian key, Moltmann writes that the “relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is so wide that the whole creation can find space, time and freedom in it.”⁴⁷

As might be expected, according to Moltmann, God’s self-humiliation is ultimately realized and is nowhere greater than on the cross, which is why his theology is often referred to as a *theologia crucis*. The incarnation outward, resulting in the trinitarian event of the cross, presupposes a self-humiliation inward that is the culmination of a history of divine self-humiliations, the goal of which is the very redemption of creation and the reconciliation – the *reditus* – of all things to God. This trinitarian event, as Moltmann understands it, is deepened by the Shekinah tradition in three ways corresponding to each of the three persons of the Trinity.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 108.

⁴⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 260.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 110.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 109.

First, the Son of the triune God, like the Shekinah, participates in humankind's destiny, making the sufferings of his people his own. The Shekinah accompanies Israel into the humiliation of exile and there co-suffers in solidarity awaiting redemption and return. Christ experiences the humiliation of the cross – the “exile” of death – and there co-suffers in solidarity awaiting resurrection and return. These parallel traditions come together in a poignant reflection in Moltmann's christological contribution, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, when he writes that “it is not merely possible to see Golgotha and Auschwitz in a single perspective; it is actually necessary ... if Jesus had lived in the Third Reich, he would have been branded like other Jews, and would have died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.⁴⁸ Or course, Golgotha is not just an event that takes place in the life of the Son, it is a “passion which takes place between the Father and the Son.”⁴⁹ This is where the theme of estrangement surfaces and it takes us to the heart of the theological question of what the cross means for God's own self.

Recall Rosenzweig's description of the Shekinah as a “dichotomy” or “divorce” which takes place in God's own self. God cuts God's self off from God's self as God gives God's self away. In a somewhat analogous fashion, Moltmann argues that on the cross the Father and the Son are so deeply separated that their relationship is cut off. Using a rhetorical aporia, Moltmann daringly proclaims that “Jesus died ‘without God’ – godlessly.”⁵⁰ He asserts that there is a “breakdown of the relationship that constitutes the very life of the Trinity: if the Father forsakes the Son, the Son does not merely lose his sonship. The Father loses his fatherhood as well.”⁵¹ While the Son suffers death, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The love of the Father results in infinite pain over the sacrifice of the Son . The love of the Son results in infinite suffering over the rejection of the Father. And yet, Moltmann maintains, in this event of co-suffering love, the Father and the Son are at the same time absolutely united via a single

⁴⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 168.

⁴⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 76.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 82.

⁵¹ Ibid, 80.

surrendering movement. They are united – they are one – precisely because this surrendering movement takes place “through the eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14) who is the link in their separation. So while this passion takes place between the Father and the Son, the Spirit is present as well. We might then ask: In what way does the Spirit experience Jesus’ dying? Moltmann once again turns to the Shekinah tradition to help him answer this question.

In a striking move that occurs in his pneumatological contribution, *The Spirit of Life*, Moltmann suggests that the descent of the Spirit on Jesus, and its “resting” on him, indicate that the Spirit might also be interpreted as God’s Shekinah.⁵² Moreover, the Spirit, much like the Shekinah, which both led and accompanied Israel, both leads and accompanies Jesus, the embodiment of Israel. For Moltmann, it then follows that just as the Shekinah did not abandon Israel in exile but rather suffered with her, so the Spirit does not abandon Jesus in his sufferings – his “exile” – but rather the Spirit “is drawn into his sufferings, and becomes his *companion* in suffering. The path the Son takes in his passion is then at the same time the path taken by the Spirit ... Through the Shekinah, the Spirit binds itself to Jesus’ fate.”⁵³ Thus, through the help of what I am calling the second movement of the Shekinah tradition, Moltmann is able to conclude that the cross is a thoroughly trinitarian event that affects the entire Godhead. He becomes convinced that, contra Cyril’s famous datum, not only does “one of the Trinity” suffer, but the others suffer as well. From a methodological standpoint, Moltmann determined: “The Trinity is the theological background for the happening on the cross; the crucified Christ is the revelation of the trinitarian mystery of God.”⁵⁴

The Third Movement: God’s redemption, restoration, and eschatological union

As mentioned previously, according to the Shekinah tradition, à la Rosenzweig, redemption and eschatological union is entrusted to Israel. The eventual *reditus* is effected by

⁵² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1992), 61.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 62.

⁵⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 306.

Israel's unifying acknowledgement of God and in their acts of *tikkun olam*. In his contribution to ecclesiology, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Moltmann asks whether or not that which is entrusted to Israel is in an analogous way entrusted to the Holy Spirit, "who through believers 'unites' God by glorifying him?"⁵⁵ Moltmann understands this glorification as a thoroughly trinitarian event. This glorification is conceived in this way: "God the Father glorifies Christ the Son through his resurrection, while the Son glorifies the Father through his obedience and his self-surrender. The event of their mutual glorification is the work of the Holy Spirit."⁵⁶ Moltmann then concludes that if this mutual glorification is the work of the Spirit, then the unification of God proceeds from the Spirit as well. This unification of God – the Son with the Father and the Father with the Son – is also a unification of redeemed humanity (John 17:21) and the whole creation with God and in God. As Moltmann writes, "God does not desire to be united with himself without the uniting of all things with him."⁵⁷

While Moltmann departs from the Shekinah tradition by understanding this eschatological union to be entrusted to the powerful work of the Spirit, he nevertheless makes room for the church's own participatory acts of *tikkun olam*. In the uniting of human beings with one another, in the uniting of "society with nature and in the uniting of creation with God. Wherever unions like this take place, however fragmentary and fragile they may be, there is the church."⁵⁸ The church participates in this trinitarian event of glorification and divine union in and through the workings of the Spirit for the creation's deliverance, reconciliation, and eschatological union with and in God. Thus, through the help of what I am calling the third movement of the Shekinah tradition, Moltmann is able to conceive of an ecclesiology that genuinely participates in the trinitarian history of God. Furthermore, we can sum up the basic

⁵⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London, SCM Press: 1977), 61.

⁵⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 124.

⁵⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 63.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 65.

contours of Moltmann's indebtedness to the Shekinah tradition in the following three ways corresponding to each movement respectively: 1) The Shekinah tradition helps Moltmann arrive at the divine unity with the theological concept of mutual indwelling or perichoresis. 2) The Shekinah tradition helps Moltmann to affirm that the cross is a thoroughly trinitarian event that affects the entire Godhead in co-suffering love. 3) The Shekinah tradition helps Moltmann to conceive of a practical/ecclesiological theology of eschatological ethics and liberative social justice rooted in the trinitarian history of God's glorifying unification. Now that we have traced Moltmann's trinitarian theology along the path of the three movements within the God-world relationship that characterize the Shekinah tradition, what conclusions can be drawn from such a brief survey?

III. A Critique, Two Possibilities, and a Proposal

In this concluding evaluation I wish to briefly consider three matters. First, is Moltmann's reading and subsequent use of the Shekinah tradition legitimate? Second, what possibilities does Moltmann's use of the Shekinah tradition open up for Christian theology in general, and trinitarian theology in particular? Finally, I wish to offer my own proposal that aims to prepare a way for future theological discussion.

I have only found one instance where Moltmann expresses the slightest of reservations in the way in which he takes up the tradition. He admits that the tradition "does not permit the full and real presence of God in his Shekinah and his Spirit to be thought."⁵⁹ In addition, buried in an endnote is the caveat that Rosenzweig's notion of "self-distinction," taken over from Hegel, in no way implies assent to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.⁶⁰ I am pleased to see that Moltmann makes these admissions, but one would have hoped that these reservations had urged him to reevaluate his use of the tradition in light of *all* the evidence. For instance, in my quite

⁵⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 319.

abbreviated research into the Shekinah tradition I came across some evidence to make one, at the very least, cautious about Moltmann's reading. Max Kadushin, in his classic work *The Rabbinic Mind*, warns that any notion of the Shekinah which expresses the idea of immanence, in so far as God is conceived within a particular place or mode of being is "foreign to rabbinic thought," and it is only when statements are "taken out of context, or not checked against other passages, do they at all imply this conception."⁶¹ Furthermore, in his exhaustive study, *The Sages*, Urbach notes that a "survey of all the passages referring to the Shekhina leaves no doubt that the Shekhina is no 'hypostasis' and has no separate existence alongside the Deity. This fact is [even] stressed by Gershom Scholem."⁶² Likewise, in Lapid's dialogue with Moltmann, after acknowledging Jewish "possibilities" within the mystical tradition, he follows this with an important qualification:

One thing is clear: the whole rainbow of Jewish experiences of God is and remains ... nothing other than a gallery of verbal images which neither are now nor ever have become stone-hard concepts on which one could build a putative pseudoknowledge of God ... all these images without exception are a helpless stammering ... toward the unutterable.⁶³

Taking into consideration the above warnings, one wonders how easily this mystical thread could unravel and what kind of regrettable consequences this would have for Moltmann's theology given his indebtedness to the tradition as he regards it. At the very least, it might be prudent to begin prefacing discussion of Moltmann's use of the Shekinah tradition by acknowledging that there is a lack of scholarly consensus concerning some key aspects of the tradition. That being said, whether or not we permit Moltmann's reading of the Shekinah tradition to stand – to hold some ground of legitimacy – we can also acknowledge that his use of

⁶¹ Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind*, 255.

⁶² Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages*, 63 (emphasis mine).

⁶³ Pinchas Lapid and Jurgen Moltmann, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine*, 38.

the tradition evidences certain broad possibilities that open up for Christian theology in general, and trinitarian theology in particular. Let me suggest two such possibilities.

First, regarding theology in general, Moltmann's willingness to enter into theological dialogue with the various Jewish scholars discussed above stands as an exemplary model of the many possibilities authentic interreligious dialogue can produce. Leonard Swidler writes in the forward to the publication of the Lapide-Moltmann dialogue that this particular conversation alone yielded "exciting new insights into the meaning of reality that neither alone had more than an inkling of. As a result ... each is more profoundly a Jew and a Christian, respectively, but at the same time each is profoundly closer to each other."⁶⁴ Moltmann's indebtedness to the Shekinah tradition is a particular example of the promise of comparative theology in an increasingly multireligious world.

Second, regarding trinitarian theology in particular, Moltmann's use of the Shekinah tradition envisages a way of doing trinitarian theology anew in a postmodern ethos that is, on the one hand, suspicious of classical substance metaphysics, and on the other, sees the "absolute subject" of the modern era as irrelevant in a world that is growing increasingly aware of our interdependency. As Moltmann states in *The Trinity and the Kingdom*: "In distinction to the trinity of substance and to the trinity of subject we shall be attempting to develop a social doctrine of the Trinity."⁶⁵ This is a trinitarian theology that thinks "in terms of relationships and communities ... men and women to God, to other people and to mankind as a whole, as well as on their fellowship with the whole of creation."⁶⁶ In other words, Moltmann is concerned with thinking "*ecologically* about God, man and the world in their relationships and indwellings."⁶⁷ As I understand it, the Shekinah tradition contributes to this concern in three ways, again corresponding to the three movements outlined above: 1) perichorisis or indwelling, 2)

⁶⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 19.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

accompanying solidarity and co-suffering love, and 3) liberative social justice. All three of these categories and themes are at the core of Moltmann's social doctrine of the Trinity as well as the Shekinah tradition. Therefore, I maintain that this tradition can be thought of as both fitting and useful in so far as it helps to deepen our understanding of these categories and themes.

Furthermore, Moltmann's use of the Shekinah tradition stands as a particular example of the promise of continually exploring new categories and themes, as well as new ways of articulating existing categories and themes, in our quest to articulate and understand God in his triunity within new contexts. Both of these possibilities, the promise of comparative theology and the promise of new categories and themes, leads me to a final proposal that aims to prepare a way for future theological discussion.

In an essay entitled "Functional Specialties for a World Theology," Fr. Robert Doran asks what would happen if theologians affirmed "that we Christians share a religious community with all human beings, including the people of the world's religions, precisely because the divine person whom we call the Holy Spirit has been sent to all."⁶⁸ The result, Doran argues, would be "a vast collaboration constructing what we may call a world theology."⁶⁹ I propose that if theologians follow the two possibilities intimated above, modeled by Moltmann's use of the Jewish mystical doctrine of the Shekinah, we will not only become participants in this vast collaboration Doran is calling a "world theology," but we will also gain a broader and deeper appreciation of the trinitarian missions in a multireligious context. Though this side of the beatific vision, the Trinity will continue to remain, to a great extent, shrouded in mystery, perhaps such an ecumenical project will uncover mystical threads that were heretofore unrecognized, culminating in a kind of trinitarian tapestry that brings glory to the triune God and unity to more of creation.

⁶⁸ Robert Doran, "Essay 36: Functional Specialties for a World Theology" in *Essays in Systematic Theology: An E-book*, 2010, 13-4, <http://lonerganresource.com/book.php?1>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 14.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bauchham, Richard. *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995.
- Doran, Robert. "Essay 36: Functional Specialties for a World Theology" in *Essays in Systematic Theology: An E-book* 13-4, 2010. <http://www.lonerganresource.com/book.php?1>.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983.
- Holladay, William L. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.
- Kadushin, Max. *The Rabbinic Mind*. New York: Blaisdell, 1965.
- Lapide, Pinchas and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine: A Dialogue by Pinchas Lapide & Jürgen Moltmann*. Translated by Leonard Swidler. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Translated by R.A. Wilson and J. Bowden. London: SCM Press, 1974.
- _____. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. London: SCM Press, 1977.
- _____. *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.
- _____. *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. London: SCM Press, 1992.
- _____. *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- _____. "Shekinah: The Home of the Homeless God," in *Longing for Home*, ed. Leroy S. Rouser. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1996.
- _____. *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. London: SCM Press, 2000, 304.

_____. “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*. Edited by John Polkinghorne. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

_____. *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!: God’s Future for Humanity and the Earth*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*. Translated by William W. Hallo. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971.

Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941.

Urbach, Ephraim E. *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*. Translated by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975.