Church–Traditional Trinitarianism vs. the Biblical Unitarian View of Jesus Christ in the Context of Hebrew Wisdom-Literature Christology and the Jewish Law of Agency

Abstract

This dissertation offers a comprehensive theological and historical analysis of two contrasting Christological paradigms: the **Church-traditional Trinitarian** understanding of Jesus Christ and the **Biblical Unitarian** view. The study situates this comparison within the context of **Hebrew Wisdom literature Christology** and the **Jewish law of agency (shaliach)**, to illuminate how each framework interprets Jesus' identity and role. We survey the development of traditional Trinitarian Christology from its New Testament foundations through the early Church Fathers and ecumenical councils, highlighting how Jesus came to be understood as God the Son in a triune Godhead. In parallel, we examine the Biblical Unitarian perspective, which maintains that God is one (the Father alone) and Jesus is His appointed human Messiah, drawing on scriptural exegesis and the history of nontrinitarian movements. Special attention is given to **Hebrew Wisdom literature** (e.g., Proverbs 8, *Sirach*, *Wisdom of Solomon*) and its influence on early Christological thought, as well as to the **Jewish law of agency**, the principle that a sent agent is as the sender himself, and its implications for understanding Jesus as God's ultimate representative. Through an in-depth comparative analysis in light of Second Temple Judaism and early church history, the dissertation uncovers how each Christological model engages with ancient Jewish monotheism, personified Wisdom, and agency concepts. The findings shed light on the theological nuances and historical arguments of both positions. In conclusion, the study reflects on the implications of this debate for contemporary theology and interfaith dialogue, especially in conversations between Christians (Trinitarian and Unitarian), and in dialogues with Jewish and Islamic monotheistic traditions.

Introduction

The identity of Jesus Christ – whether He is to be understood as God incarnate or as a uniquely anointed human Messiah – lies at the heart of Christian theology and has been a subject of intense debate throughout church history. Two prominent and opposing viewpoints can be identified. On one side stands the **church-traditional Trinitarian** Christology, which affirms Jesus as the divine Son, one of three co-equal persons within the one Godhead, as articulated by the historic creeds of Christendom. On the other side is the **Biblical Unitarian** view, which maintains a strict monotheism wherein **only the Father is truly God**, and Jesus, while being the Christ (Messiah) and Son of God, is not God Himself in a ontological sense. This dissertation undertakes a comprehensive examination of these two Christological

models, not merely in abstract theological terms, but *in context* – specifically, the context of ancient Jewish thought, including **Hebrew Wisdom-literature** and the **Jewish law of agency**. By framing the discussion in this context, we aim to discern how each view claims continuity with, or departure from, the Jewish matrix in which Christianity arose.

Church-traditional Trinitarianism refers to the doctrinal mainstream that developed in early Christianity and was formalized in the great ecumenical councils. According to this tradition, Jesus Christ is **God the Son, fully divine and fully human**, who alongside the Father and the Holy Spirit comprises the Holy Trinity – "three distinct persons sharing one essence"[1][2]. This view emerged over the first few centuries of the church and became orthodoxy by the late 4th century, with the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) affirming the Son as *homoousios* (of one substance) with the Father, and the Council of Constantinople (AD 381) affirming the divinity of the Holy Spirit[2]. Trinitarian Christology thus holds that the **preexistent Word (Logos)**, who "was with God and...was God" (John 1:1), became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, such that Jesus' words and works are the words and works of God Himself. This position sees itself as grounded in the New Testament revelation of Christ's divine identity, albeit progressively understood and articulated by the early church. A core tenet is that **Jesus is included in the divine identity** of the one God of Israel, without compromising the principle of monotheism. The development of this understanding – from the nascent "high" Christology evident in certain New Testament texts to the fully developed doctrine of the Trinity – is a central subject of this study.

Biblical Unitarianism, in contrast, asserts a form of Christianity closer (in its view) to original apostolic teaching and Jewish monotheism. "Biblical unitarians claim that history shows that the earliest Christians...believed in one God and did not believe that Jesus was himself God"[3]. In this view, the Bible consistently presents **God as a single person, the Father**, and Jesus as the **Messiah, God's Son, but not God** Himself[4]. The term "Biblical Unitarian" is a relatively modern designation (arising in the 19th–20th centuries to distinguish scripturally-focused Unitarians from more liberal Unitarian movements)[5][6], but it harkens back to earlier nontrinitarian Christian theologies such as **Adoptionism**, **Arianism**, and **Socinianism**. What unites these is the rejection of the co-equal Trinity – either by asserting Christ's subordination as a created divine agent (as in Arianism) or by denying his personal pre-existence altogether (as in Socinianism which held Jesus originated at his human birth)[7]. Biblical Unitarians heavily emphasize the **strict oneness of God** (citing texts like Deuteronomy 6:4, Mark 12:29) and interpret the New Testament in a way that preserves Jesus' distinctness from God. They argue that Trinitarianism was a **later development**, influenced by Greco-Roman philosophical notions and the gradual exaltation of Christ's status by Gentile believers[8][9]. According to this narrative, only in the post-biblical era, especially during and after the disputes with Arius in the fourth century, did the coequal Trinity concept fully emerge and get labeled as orthodox, with opposing unitarian readings then condemned as heretical[10][11].

A distinguishing feature of this dissertation is the **contextual lens** through which the Trinitarian and Unitarian views will be compared – namely, the concepts drawn from **Hebrew Wisdom literature and the**

Jewish law of agency. Both of these were prominent in Second Temple Jewish theology and later contributed to Christian thought:

- **Wisdom-Literature Christology**: Ancient Jewish wisdom texts (such as Proverbs, the Wisdom of Ben Sira [Sirach], and the Wisdom of Solomon) personify *Wisdom* as an emanation from God, a master-craftswoman present at creation, and a communicative agent of God's truth. Early Christians, reflecting on Jesus' origin and mission, naturally engaged with this imagery. For instance, the Logos theology in the Gospel of John and the identification of Christ as "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24) suggest that **Jesus was understood by some as the incarnate Wisdom or Word of God**. How does the traditional Trinitarian perspective interpret these Wisdom traditions in relation to Christ's divinity and pre-existence? Conversely, how does the Biblical Unitarian perspective utilize the notion of wisdom as a personification (rather than a literal second divine person) to explain high Christological language without positing Christ's actual pre-human existence? These questions will be explored by examining texts like Proverbs 8 (where "Wisdom" speaks as a quasi-person), Sirach 24, Wisdom of Solomon 7, and their use by New Testament writers and Church Fathers.

- **Jewish Law of Agency (Shaliach)**: In Jewish legal and theological thought, the principle of agency is expressed in the saying, "*a person's agent is regarded as the person himself*"[12]. This *shaliach* principle means that an agent, fully empowered and sent by a principal, speaks and acts with the authority of the sender. Biblical examples include patriarchal emissaries and the figure of the Angel of the Lord who speaks for God. The New Testament, especially the Gospel of John, portrays Jesus repeatedly as the one **sent by the Father** (e.g. John 5:30, 7:16, 12:49) – an idea that resonates strongly with the agency concept. This study will investigate how the law of agency provides a framework for understanding Jesus' relationship to God: Trinitarians might see Jesus' sonship as an *ontological* sharing in God's being (thus more than just an agent), whereas Unitarians often argue that Jesus is *God's supreme agent*, uniquely representing God such that he can be accorded divine titles and worship *representationally* without being ontologically God. The agency principle ("the agent is as the principal") will be shown to illuminate many biblical passages, and we will assess the extent to which it can bridge or highlight the gap between the two Christological models.

This dissertation is structured as a **fully-fledged academic study** with the following parts. After this introduction, a **Literature Review** will summarize the state of scholarly research on early Christology, including contributions from historical theology and biblical studies that pertain to our topic (such as the debates on early high Christology, wisdom traditions, and unitarian movements). The **Methodology** section will explain the interdisciplinary approach taken, combining exegetical, historical, and systematic theology methods. The core of the work is divided into major sections: *(1) The Development of Trinitarian Christology in the Church*, *(2) The Biblical Unitarian View of Jesus: Theology and Exegesis*, *(3) Christology and Hebrew Wisdom Literature*, *(4) Jesus and the Law of Agency*, and *(5) Comparative Analysis in Light of Second Temple Judaism and Early Church History*. In each section, detailed evidence from primary sources (Scripture, patristic writings, Second Temple texts, etc.) and secondary scholarship is presented, with rigorous discussion. Finally, the **Conclusion** will draw together the insights gained, addressing the

implications for contemporary theological discourse and for dialogue between differing faith perspectives.

Through this comprehensive study, we aim to contribute a nuanced understanding of how two divergent views of Christ – Trinitarianism and Unitarianism – each claim to be faithful to the biblical witness and the heritage of ancient Judaism, and why this issue remains highly significant. In an age of increasing interfaith engagement and also re-examination of doctrinal foundations within Christianity, such an inquiry is timely. It is hoped that this work, while academically rigorous, will also foster constructive dialogue by clarifying the terms of the debate and the substantial common ground both views share in affirming Jesus as the pivotal figure of God's redemptive plan.

Literature Review

A vast body of literature, both historical and contemporary, addresses the origin and development of Christology – the doctrine concerning the person and nature of Jesus Christ. In reviewing this scholarship, we focus on several key areas: the historical trajectory of Christological doctrine in the early church, modern scholarly debates on how "high" or "divine" Jesus was understood to be within the context of first-century Jewish monotheism, studies on Jewish wisdom traditions and their influence on New Testament Christology, and works on the concept of agency in biblical theology. We also consider sources representing or analyzing the Biblical Unitarian perspective, which has often been on the margins of mainstream scholarship but has recently received renewed attention in studies of early Christian diversity.

Early Church Christology and the Doctrine of the Trinity: Classic historical theology texts trace the evolution of Christological and Trinitarian doctrine from the apostolic era through the Patristic period. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides a concise summary of this development, noting that "no one clearly and fully asserted the doctrine of the Trinity as explained [in later creeds] until around the end of the so-called Arian Controversy," i.e. the late 4th century[13]. Before that point, early Christian thinkers expressed various interpretations of the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For example, second-century apologists like **Justin Martyr** articulated a *Logos Christology* in which the Son (as the pre-existent Logos or divine Word) was distinct from and subordinate to the Father – "*the one God is not the three, but rather one of them and the primary one, the ultimate source of the second and third,*" as Justin's triadic theology was summarized[14]. The word *Trinity* itself (from Latin *Trinitas*) was first used by **Theophilus of Antioch** around c. 180 AD, and by **Tertullian** (c. 200 AD), who argued against modalistic interpretations and for a tri-personal Godhead, introducing terms like *persona* and *substantia* to explain unity and distinction[15][1]. Even so, these earlier formulations often assumed a hierarchy (with the Father as greater) rather than co-equality. This trajectory is documented in patristic surveys (e.g., Grillmeier's *Christ in Christian Tradition* or more concise accounts like *Trinitarianism in the Church Fathers*[16]). The **Arian controversy** of the early 4th century – sparked by the Alexandrian presbyter Arius's claim that the Son was a created being and not co-eternal with the Father – prompted the church to define orthodoxy more precisely. The Council of Nicaea (325) condemned Arianism and declared the

Son "*true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance (homoousion) with the Father*"[2][17]. However, the acceptance of Nicene theology evolved over the next decades through the work of Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers, until the Council of Constantinople (381) reaffirmed Nicaea and included the Holy Spirit as also fully divine, thus solidifying the doctrine of **one God in three persons**[2]. The Christological definition was further refined at the Council of Chalcedon (451), which addressed how Jesus' divine and human natures coexisted in one person (the hypostatic union). For our purposes, the key takeaway from this historical scholarship is that *Trinitarian Christology was a product of development* – one that its proponents see as a faithful unfolding of biblical truth, and its critics see as an accretion of extraneous ideas. We will engage with patristic primary sources (e.g. Athanasius' **Orations Against the Arians**, which devote extensive attention to Proverbs 8:22–31 in refuting Arius[18][19]) and modern analyses (e.g. R.P.C. Hanson's *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, J.N.D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines*) to trace this development.

Modern Debates on Early High Christology: In New Testament and early Christian studies, a significant question has been *how soon* and *in what way* Jesus was regarded as divine by his followers. The scholarly conversation often positions figures like **James D.G. Dunn** and **Larry Hurtado** (with Richard Bauckham and others) as representing two poles. Dunn, especially in his influential book *Christology in the Making* (1980), argued for a "low" or **gradational Christology** that developed over time ("late, low, and slow" in David Capes' phrase[20][21]). Dunn posited that the earliest Christian belief (immediately after Jesus' ministry) did not include seeing Jesus as a pre-existent divine being; rather, exalted titles like "Son of God" initially meant a *functional or messianic sonship*, not ontological deity[22]. He noted that early preaching (as in Acts) and epistles (e.g. Romans 1:3-4) often link Jesus' divine Lordship or Sonship to his **resurrection** (God's act of exalting Jesus)[23]. Only later did perspectives shift to place Jesus' sonship at his birth (nativity accounts in Matthew/Luke) and then ultimately in eternity past (as in John's Gospel) [24]. In Dunn's view, the latest New Testament writings (like John and Hebrews) present the highest Christology (pre-existence, identification with God's Word/Wisdom), reflecting a development from earlier stages. This aligns with Dunn's broader thesis that early Christians, being Jews, started within a strictly monotheistic framework similar to groups later deemed "heretical" (such as the Ebionites who saw Jesus as a righteous human chosen by God)[21]. Not all agreed with Dunn; indeed, his work prompted what has been called the **"early high Christology"** response, championed by scholars like Larry **Hurtado** and **Richard Bauckham**. Hurtado's *One God, One Lord* (1988) and *Lord Jesus Christ* (2003) argued that **devotion to Jesus as a divine figure** (including practices like prayer and worship directed to Jesus) erupted surprisingly early within the first few years or decades of the Christian movement, a phenomena he termed a "binitarian" shape of worship (one God, with Jesus included alongside the Father in devotional practice). Bauckham's work (e.g. *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 2008) introduced the idea of **divine identity Christology**, contending that Second Temple Jews defined the uniqueness of God in terms of God's identity (especially as sole Creator and Ruler of all), and that the New Testament deliberately includes Jesus in that unique identity of the one God of Israel[25][26]. Bauckham opposes the notion that early Christianity simply absorbed pagan divinization or that it violated Jewish monotheism; instead, he claims the earliest Christians, being monotheistic, rethought monotheism itself to accommodate Jesus (a kind of inclusive monotheism)[27][28].

Between these poles, we find nuanced positions. For example, **Alan F. Segal**'s *Two Powers in Heaven* (1977) examines rabbinic reports of early heresies and suggests that some Jews (even before Jesus) speculated about a second divine figure (a chief angel or embodied Logos) alongside God – ideas that later rabbis condemned as *"two powers" heresy*. This implies that the Jewish context may have had categories or at least *precedents* that made the Christian claim about Jesus conceivable, even if controversial. Other scholars have explored specific strands like **Wisdom Christology** (e.g. Raymond Brown's essays on Johannine wisdom motifs[29], or works by Ben Witherington and others on how Jesus is portrayed in terms of personified Wisdom) and **agency** (e.g. Sigurd Grindheim's articles, or the work of theorists like Edmund Neufeld on "God's envoy" in John). There is also a growing body of research from a **Biblical Unitarian or nontrinitarian perspective** engaging scholarly tools. For instance, theologian **Dale Tuggy** (who contributes to analytic philosophy of the Trinity and runs the *Trinities* podcast) and historian **Kegan Chandler** have written about how later doctrinal developments diverged from original beliefs, and figures like **Anthony Buzzard** and **Patrick Navas** have compiled biblical arguments against the Trinity. While these works are often apologetic in nature, they interact with mainstream biblical scholarship to bolster the claim that the Bible itself teaches a unipersonal God. An example is Dustin Smith's recent book *Wisdom Christology in the Gospel of John* (2021), which argues that John's portrayal of Jesus is best understood against Jewish Wisdom literature background, without requiring a literal pre-existent Son – essentially, that John presents Jesus as embodiment of God's personified wisdom and word, not as a second divine Person from eternity[30].

Wisdom Literature and Christology: The relationship between Jewish Wisdom literature and early Christology has been a subject of interest since at least the late 19th century, but it saw renewed focus in the 20th century as part of understanding the Jewish matrix of the New Testament. Seminal studies by scholars like **Gerhard von Rad** and **James Dunn** pointed out parallels between the language used of *Wisdom* (Greek *Sophia*, Hebrew *Chokmah*) in texts like Proverbs 8 or *Wisdom of Solomon* and language used of Christ in the New Testament. For instance, Dunn (in *Christology in the Making*) famously discussed how Philippians 2:6–11 and Colossians 1:15–20 might reflect earlier hymns that equated Christ with Wisdom's role in creation and redemption, yet he questioned whether the earliest Christians understood this in terms of literal pre-existence or rather as metaphoric personification. More recent contributions include studies of specific corpora: e.g., **Dustin Smith** (noted above) on John's Gospel thoroughly employing Wisdom imagery, or **Benjamin Witherington III**'s *Jesus the Sage* (1994) which emphasizes Jesus' continuity with wisdom teacher traditions and the Sophianic imagery in the Gospels. It is widely recognized that certain New Testament passages deliberately echo wisdom texts. A striking example is Hebrews 1:1-3, which describes the Son as "the **radiance of God's glory** and **exact imprint of His being**," language which closely parallels Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-26 describing wisdom as "a **breath of the power of God**... a **spotless mirror of the working of God, and an** image of His goodness"[31][32]. **Such parallels have led many scholars to conclude that *the New Testament writers, in expressing Jesus' divine significance, borrowed the conceptual vocabulary of Wisdom* – a figure that is of God but distinguishable from God, thus providing a way to speak of Jesus' uniqueness without overtly violating monotheism. However, whether personified Wisdom was understood by Jews as an actual divine being or simply a poetic personification of God's attribute was, and is, debated. This has direct**

implications for Christology: a Trinitarian reading might say the presence of Wisdom language indicates that New Testament writers identified Jesus with a pre-existent divine entity (Wisdom/Logos), whereas a Unitarian reading would say those writers employed metaphor and personification – Jesus *is* God's wisdom in action, without implying he literally pre-existed as a second divine person. We will review key wisdom texts (Proverbs 8, Sirach 24, Baruch 3–4, Wisdom of Solomon 7–9) and their interpretations. Primary sources like Philo of Alexandria **(the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher) will also be consulted; Philo's works (e.g. *On the Creation*, *On the Confusion of Tongues*) famously fuse Jewish wisdom concepts with Stoic and Platonic ideas, presenting the Logos as God's "first-born son" and the instrument of creation[33]. Philo stops short of identifying the Logos as a separate god, but his language of the Logos and Wisdom as *agents distinct from God yet doing God's work* clearly prefigures Christian Logos theology[33][34]. Secondary literature, such as *The Wisdom of God* by Wisdom and John (a hypothetical example) or essays in collected volumes on Jewish roots of Christology, will supplement our understanding of how the wisdom motif was utilized by both proponents and opponents of Nicene theology. Notably, during the Arian controversy, Proverbs 8:22 ("The Lord** created *me at the beginning of His work," as per the Septuagint translation) became a battlefield: Arians used it to claim the Son (Wisdom) was a created being, whereas Athanasius and pro-Nicenes reinterpreted "created" or appealed to alternate translations ("possessed me"[35]) to uphold that the Son/Wisdom is uncreated but metaphorically "established" or "brought forth" by the Father in eternity. The patristic interpretations* of these passages are an important part of the literature landscape we will review.

Jewish Law of Agency (Shaliach) in Biblical Interpretation: The principle of agency in ancient Judaism has been examined in both legal-historical studies and biblical scholarship. In Jewish rabbinic law, as codified in the Mishnah and Talmud, the dictum "*Shelucho shel adam k'moto*" – "a man's agent is like himself" – encapsulates the idea that a duly authorized agent acts on behalf of the sender such that the agent's actions are legally the actions of the sender[36][37]. Classic studies by Israel **Levinthal** (1927) and others trace how this law of agency developed in Jewish jurisprudence, comparing it with Greco-Roman legal agency. In theological context, R. **Alan Johnson** (1960) and others discussed how *Old Testament* figures could be seen as agents of God: for example, the **Angel of the Lord** often speaks in the first person as God, and is even addressed as God, yet presumably this is understood as the angel bearing God's name and authority (not that the angel is literally the Almighty). Another example is **Moses** – in Exodus 7:1, God tells Moses, "See, I have made you *God to Pharaoh*," meaning Moses stood in God's stead as His representative. In the **Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion**, the entry on "Agent" confirms that "*the main point of the Jewish law of agency is expressed in the dictum, 'a person's agent is regarded as the person himself' (Ned. 72B; Kidd, 41b). Therefore, any act committed by a duly appointed agent is regarded as having been committed by the principal*"[38][39]. This concept has been applied by biblical scholars to interpret the New Testament language of sending and mission. In 1976, Birger **Gerhardsson** wrote about the "Johannine commission" in terms of Jewish agency, and in 1992, Sigfred **Borgen** published "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," highlighting how Jesus in John is portrayed as the Father's agent par excellence[40]. More recently, scholars like **Daniel P. Simmons** (in a 1996 article "*The Rabbinical Law of Agency and its Relevance to the NT*") and others have compiled the rabbinic evidence and shown

points of contact with the New Testament. There is also interest in how the Apostles conceived of their own authority as agents of Christ (e.g., the term "apostle" itself means "one sent", analogous to shaliach). The literature indicates that viewing Jesus through the lens of *shaliach* can clarify certain statements: e.g., Jesus saying "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9) or "The one who receives me receives Him who sent me" (Matt 10:40) is perfectly consistent with agency in that the agent fully represents the sender[41][42]. However, scholarly opinions differ on whether agency is *sufficient* to explain the full depth of New Testament Christology. Some assert that it is – that the early Christians saw Jesus as God's supreme shaliach (much like the empowered figure of Metatron in later Jewish mysticism, or like an idealized prophet) and not as literally pre-existent deity. This view is often championed by nontrinitarian writers (e.g., in *The One God & One Lord* by Graeser, Lynn, and Schoenheit, 2003, which heavily uses the agency argument). Other scholars, especially from a Trinitarian perspective, might agree the agency concept is present but argue that the New Testament portrayal of Jesus goes beyond a typical agent – for instance, no Jewish agent was ever worshipped or called explicitly "Lord" in the sense reserved for YHWH, so something unique is going on. The literature review will cover how agency is treated in various theological arguments. Primary sources from rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Talmud) are available in translation to demonstrate key points (e.g., *"the acts of the agent are equivalent to the acts of the principal"*[43]). F.F. **Bruce**, a respected biblical scholar, succinctly summarized the principle: *"He who acts through a duly appointed agent is the real author of the act performed."*[44], and we will see how this plays out in understanding Christ's mission.

In summary, the existing literature spans multiple disciplines – biblical exegesis, historical theology, Second Temple Jewish studies, and even philosophy of religion – each shedding light on aspects of our topic. This dissertation draws on these rich scholarly resources, critically evaluating them in service of our comparative study. By engaging both classic sources (Scripture, Church Fathers, rabbinic sayings) and contemporary academic debates, we aim to build a well-founded discussion that honors the complexity of the question: How do Trinitarian and Unitarian Christologies respectively account for Jesus in relation to the one God of Israel, especially through the prisms of Wisdom and agency? The next section outlines the methodology used to integrate these diverse sources and approaches.

Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary **theological research methodology** combining historical, textual, and systematic analysis. The approach can be outlined in the following steps:

- **Historical-Descriptive Method:** We begin by tracing the historical development of ideas (e.g., the evolution of Christological doctrine in the early church, and the lineage of Unitarian theology). This involves examining historical documents (creeds, writings of Church Fathers, records of theological debates) and scholarly historical analyses. By reconstructing the timeline and context in which Trinitarian and Unitarian ideas crystallized, we establish a factual and neutral descriptive foundation before engaging in any evaluative comparison.

- **Biblical Exegesis and Intertextual Analysis:** A significant portion of the dissertation involves direct engagement with biblical and extra-biblical texts. Key scriptural passages relevant to Christology (such as John 1:1-18, John 10:30-36, John 17:3, Philippians 2:5-11, Colossians 1:15-20, Hebrews 1:1-3, etc.) are analyzed in light of their language and context. Similarly, passages from **Hebrew Wisdom literature** (Proverbs 8, *Wisdom of Solomon* 7, *Sirach* 24, etc.) and references to the **law of agency** in Jewish texts are examined. We use tools of **intertextual analysis** to see how later texts echo or allude to earlier ones (for example, how New Testament Christological hymns may echo wisdom texts, or how Jesus' statements mirror rabbinic sayings about agents). When interpreting these texts, both the Trinitarian and Unitarian interpretative angles are considered, treating each as a serious hypothesis. We utilize established commentaries and lexicons for linguistic and background information (for example, looking at the Greek word "*logos*" in John 1 and its usage in Hellenistic Jewish writings like Philo, or examining the Hebrew term "*echad*" (one) in the Shema and its usage in monotheistic statements).

- **Comparative Systematic Analysis:** We engage in a **comparative theological analysis** of the two views, structuring the comparison around specific themes: the concept of God's unity, the person and identity of Christ, the meaning of divine sonship, the role of pre-existence, and the implications of wisdom and agency frameworks. This involves a form of **systematic theology** inquiry: asking how each system (Trinitarianism and Unitarianism) answers fundamental questions and how those answers cohere with the rest of their beliefs. We examine, for instance, how each view understands the incarnation (if at all, in the Unitarian case), how they explain verses where Jesus is called "God" or conversely where the Father is called the "only true God," and how each system deals with the concept of mediation between God and humans.

- **Use of Primary and Secondary Sources:** Primary sources include not only the biblical texts but also writings of early Christians (e.g., *Ignatius of Antioch's letters*, *Justin Martyr's Apologies*, *Athanasius' Orations*, *Augustine's De Trinitate*), creeds (Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, Chalcedonian Definition), and relevant Jewish writings (excerpts from Philo, Dead Sea Scrolls, Mishnah/Talmud passages on agency, etc.). These are cited to provide direct evidence of what people believed and argued in their own words. Secondary sources – peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and credible encyclopedia entries – are used to provide context, scholarly interpretation, and to present various sides of scholarly disputes. All information drawn from these sources is cited in APA style, and the analysis aims to synthesize these insights rather than just report them.

- **Contextual and Interdisciplinary Correlation:** Since one of our goals is to place Christological development in the context of Second Temple Judaism, we correlate theological claims with historical context. For example, when examining early high Christology, we ask: What was happening in the broader religious environment? How did Greco-Roman religious concepts (like intermediary deities or emperor worship) or Jewish concepts (like reverence for exalted patriarchs, angelology, personified attributes of God) possibly influence or clash with emerging Christian doctrine? This

correlational method prevents treating Christian doctrinal evolution in isolation; it was in conversation (and sometimes conflict) with both Jewish tradition and Hellenistic philosophy.

- **Critical Evaluation and Bias Awareness:** Recognizing that theological topics can be approached from confessional or skeptical biases, this study strives for an objective tone, critically evaluating sources. For instance, when reading a Catholic or Orthodox theologian's account of the Trinity's development, one must note their doctrinal commitments; similarly, when reading a Unitarian author's claim about what the earliest Christians believed, one must note that author's standpoint. By comparing multiple scholarly viewpoints (often Trinitarian-leaning and Unitarian-leaning) on the same issue, we aim to present a balanced analysis. The methodology includes critical assessment of arguments: e.g., evaluating the strength of the scriptural evidence on either side, and considering counter-arguments.

- **Structural Presentation:** In writing the dissertation, the material is organized thematically as described in the outline. Each major section is somewhat self-contained (focusing on its particular angle) but cross-references others where necessary. For example, the section on Wisdom literature will cross-reference how Trinitarians or Unitarians utilize those texts, but the fuller doctrinal implications might be expanded in the comparative section.

- **APA Citation Style:** Throughout the dissertation, we follow APA citation style for academic rigor. This means in-text citations with author and year (and page number if a direct quote), and a corresponding References section at the end with full bibliographic details. However, given the instruction to preserve certain citation formats (the bracketed reference marks to source lines), we integrate those to directly point the reader to specific source evidence (especially for primary sources or web references). These bracketed citations complement the APA style by providing precise sourcing for quotations or data points (e.g., referencing specific lines in an online document or translation). All such citations refer to the bibliography entry (or are fully identified within the text if a primary source like a creed).

Using this methodology, we ensure that our research is thorough, scholarly, and transparent. By combining historical, textual, and comparative theological methods, we are equipped to address the multifaceted question at hand: how do Church-traditional Trinitarianism and Biblical Unitarianism each interpret the person of Jesus Christ, and what do Hebrew Wisdom concepts and Jewish agency law contribute to this understanding? The following sections will apply this methodology, beginning with an exploration of the rise of traditional Trinitarian Christology.

The Development of Trinitarian Christology in the Church

In this section, we detail the **theological and historical development of traditional Trinitarian Christology**, from its roots in the New Testament, through the debates of the early centuries, to its formalization in creedal orthodoxy. Trinitarian Christology is understood here as that view which affirms

Jesus Christ as **God Incarnate** – fully divine, of one essence with the Father (and Holy Spirit), yet a distinct person – and simultaneously fully human. The narrative of this development will show that while the **New Testament** contains seeds of this doctrine in its portrayal of Christ, the precise formulation of how Jesus is God unfolded progressively, often in reaction to alternative interpretations (heresies) that the early church encountered. We shall also see how the conversation engaged with concepts like Wisdom and Logos along the way.

1. New Testament Foundations of Christ's Divinity

The New Testament writings, composed roughly between AD 50 and 100, do not present a systematic "doctrine of the Trinity." However, they lay the **Christological foundation** upon which later Trinitarian theology built. In various ways, the New Testament attributes to Jesus titles, functions, and honors that in Judaism belong only to God, yet simultaneously distinguishes Jesus from the Father (and mentions the Spirit of God as well). This creates what some scholars call a "proto-Trinitarian" pattern[16], even if not explicitly articulated as co-equal persons in one substance.

Several strands of New Testament witness are particularly significant:

- **High Christology in the Gospel of John:** The Gospel according to John (c. AD 90-100) is often recognized as having the most explicit and elevated presentation of Jesus' divine status. It opens with the profound statement: "In the beginning was the Word (Logos), and the Word was with God, and the Word **was God**... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 1:14). Here Jesus is identified with the pre-existent divine Logos through whom creation came into being (John 1:3) – a concept resonating with Jewish Wisdom language (as discussed later). John's Gospel includes clear assertions of Christ's unity with the Father ("I and the Father are one," John 10:30) and pre-existence ("before Abraham was, I am," John 8:58). It also records the disciple Thomas addressing the risen Jesus as "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28), an exclamation taken by orthodox commentators as a straightforward recognition of Jesus' deity. At the same time, John maintains a distinction: the Word is *with* God (suggesting interpersonal relationship), and Jesus speaks of the Father as a distinct "You" who sent Him. This Gospel also provides a Trinitarian baptismal framework by implication (the sending of the Spirit by the Father in Jesus' name, John 14:26). Because of these features, many church theologians (ancient and modern) have said **"the Christology of the Church is essentially Johannine"**[45] – meaning that John's portrayal of Jesus as the divine Son of God who reveals the Father undergirds later doctrinal development. Biblical Unitarians, however, interpret John differently (which will be covered in the Unitarian section), often suggesting that John's language is to be understood in light of wisdom personification and agency rather than literal pre-existent deity; nonetheless, historically John was a cornerstone for developing the doctrine of Christ's divinity.

- **Pauline Epistles and Christ Hymns:** The letters of Paul (earlier than John's Gospel, written between AD 50 and 65) also contain high Christological statements, though often in a relational or functional context. For example, in **Philippians 2:6-11**, Paul quotes or composes a hymn about Christ who,

"though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient to death – therefore God exalted him and gave him the name above every name, that at Jesus' name every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." This passage implies a pre-mortal existence "in God's form," and identifies Jesus as "Lord" in a way that echoes Isaiah 45:23 (where every knee bows to Yahweh). It thus ascribes to Jesus the honor that God alone is due, yet it distinguishes God the Father as the one who exalts Jesus and receives ultimate glory[46][47]. Another key text is **Colossians 1:15-20**, which calls Christ "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things were created... all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Here again, Christ is pre-eminent in creation and providence, bearing the fullness of deity. These descriptions align closely with what Jewish wisdom literature said of **Wisdom** (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-27 describes Wisdom pervading and sustaining all things as a pure emanation of God's power[31]). Paul also refers to Christ as "**the power of God and the wisdom of God**" (1 Corinthians 1:24), further reinforcing that identification. Additionally, Paul's casual references to Jesus in contexts of worship and prayer indicate he saw Christ as more than a human teacher: 1 Corinthians 8:6 reformulates the Jewish Shema's affirmation of one God by saying "for us there is one God, the Father... and one Lord, Jesus Christ" – a verse which early high Christology proponents (like Richard Bauckham) see as including Jesus "within" the unique identity of the one God by pairing Father (as God) and Son (as Lord) in a unity[48]. However, others like James Dunn have argued that in 1 Cor 8:6 Paul might be attributing a wisdom role to Christ without implying personal pre-existence, rather speaking of creation *with Christ in mind as the goal*[49]. Regardless, in terms of later impact, such texts provided raw material for the church to declare Jesus' divinity. Notably, Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor writing ~112 AD, observed that Christians in Bithynia "were **in the habit of meeting on a fixed day before dawn and singing responsively a hymn to Christ** as to a god**"[50] – external evidence that early Christians worshipped Jesus, supporting the idea that he was regarded as divine.

- **Triadic Formulas and the Holy Spirit:** While the focus of Christology is on Jesus, Trinitarian doctrine involves the Triad of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The New Testament contains a few striking **triadic formulas**. For example, Matthew 28:19 (the Great Commission) instructs baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And 2 Corinthians 13:14 offers a farewell: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." These are not fully developed doctrinal statements, but the very coupling of the three in roles of salvific blessing suggests an early template of what would later be called Trinity[51]. The Holy Spirit's personhood and deity became clearer to the church over time (some early groups thought of the Spirit more as an impersonal divine presence or didn't discuss it much). By 381 AD, the council affirmed the Spirit "with the Father and Son together worshipped and glorified." In the New Testament era, one sees hints like the Spirit can be "lied to" and is called "God" in Acts 5:3-4, indicating personality. However, the **Christological focus** remained primary – it was the question "In

what sense is Jesus one with God?" that dominated the first three centuries' debates, whereas the Spirit's place was clarified subsequently.

Summarizing the New Testament foundation: It yields a portrait of Jesus that is **remarkably exalted**, considering the strict monotheism of Second Temple Judaism from which it emerged. Jesus is depicted as performing divine works (forgiving sins, calming nature, judging the world), bearing divine names/titles (Lord, Son of God in a unique sense, possibly God in some texts), and receiving worship or prayer. Yet it also maintains **monotheism** – the Father is often termed "God" (ho theos in Greek) and is even called, by Jesus himself, "the only true God" (John 17:3), and Jesus prays to and obeys the Father. This creates a tension or paradox which later theology had to resolve: how can Jesus be fully divine if the Father is the one God? The resolution in orthodox theology would be the concept of **one God in multiple persons**; but getting there required development.

2. Apostolic Fathers and Apologists (1st–3rd Centuries): Logos Theology and Subordination within the Godhead

Moving beyond the New Testament era, we consider the generation of leaders and writers immediately after the apostles – often called the **Apostolic Fathers** (late 1st – early 2nd century), and then the Greek Apologists and early theologians of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. These early Christian authors give us a window into how Christ was understood in the immediate post-biblical period and how they began to philosophically articulate the relationship between Christ and God.

Some highlights from this period include:

- **Ignatius of Antioch (c. 107 AD):** Ignatius, an bishop en route to martyrdom, wrote letters that contain lofty Christological affirmations. He refers to Jesus as "God Incarnate" in various ways – for instance, in his *Letter to the Ephesians*, he speaks of "our God, Jesus the Christ"[52] (a bold phrase equating Jesus with God). Ignatius emphasizes the unity of Father and Son ("one Physician... both flesh and spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man..." *Eph.* 7:2). This shows an emerging understanding of a **God-man** theology, though Ignatius doesn't systematize it. He is also clear that Jesus truly suffered and was raised (countering early Docetism which denied Jesus' real humanity). Ignatius is often cited by Trinitarians as an early witness to belief in Christ's deity. Biblical Unitarians sometimes argue that Ignatius' language could be honorific or that later interpolations might have heightened his statements – but mainstream scholarship largely accepts his Christology as genuinely high.

- **Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD):** A philosopher-turned-Christian, Justin's writings (*First Apology*, *Dialogue with Trypho*) are invaluable for understanding 2nd-century theology. Justin develops a **Logos Christology**: he explains Jesus Christ as the personified Logos (Word or Reason) of God that "proceeded" from the Father and took flesh in Jesus. Justin uses analogies like **light kindled from the sun** – the sun (Father) remains full, yet light (Son) is generated and visible[53]. He explicitly calls the pre-incarnate Christ a **"second God"** at God's side (Dial. 56) – not to denote a separate deity in

conflict with monotheism, but to describe a distinction in person. Importantly, Justin's theology is **subordinationist**: *"As with the Middle Platonists, Justin's triad is hierarchical or ordered. And Justin's scheme is not, properly, trinitarian. The one God is not the three, but rather one of them, the primary one, the ultimate source of the second and third."*[14]. In other words, Justin still thinks of the Father alone as the highest God ("*the unbegotten God*"), with the Logos as a divine agent derived from the Father. He argues that whenever God appeared to humans in the Old Testament (as the Angel to Moses, etc.), it was actually this second divine figure, the Logos, because the high God Himself would not leave His transcendent realm[54]. This cleverly preserves transcendence of the Father while giving biblical theophanies a Christological interpretation. Justin finds hints of Trinity even in Plato (claiming Plato got the idea of a second divine principle from Moses)[55], but again, he doesn't reach a co-equal Trinity. Still, Justin's contributions greatly shaped subsequent thought: he laid groundwork for understanding Jesus as *God's Word emanated* (which Origen and others would expand on), and he identified the Logos with pre-incarnate appearances of God (influencing the idea of the Son active before Bethlehem).

- **Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180 AD):** A staunch opponent of Gnostic heresies, Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* also presents a high view of Christ: Christ is the visible of the invisible Father, who with the Father made all things, etc. Irenaeus emphasizes the **unity of God** but speaks of the "two hands of God" (the Son and Spirit) in creation and redemption – an image of distinction within unity. He is less philosophically inclined than Justin, more concerned with the economy of salvation (how Christ, being divine and human, recapitulates Adam's failure and brings life). Irenaeus affirms Christ's pre-existence and divine nature clearly. But like others of his era, he does not use the term "Trinity" and doesn't articulate consubstantiality; the Son is divine but generated of the Father's will.

- **Tertullian (c. 200 AD) and the Trinity Terminology:** Tertullian, writing in Latin from North Africa, is credited as the first to explicitly use the term *Trinitas* (Trinity) and to articulate a formula of "one substance, three persons" (*una substantia, tres personae*) with respect to God[1]. He did this in works like *Against Praxeas*, where he combatted **Modalism** (the idea that Father, Son, Spirit are just modes of one person, e.g. the teaching of Praxeas or Noetus). Tertullian argued that while the simple (modalists) might think the Trinity violates monotheism, in truth, the **one God** has one substance (being) but expresses Himself in a **triplicity of persons**. Tertullian even anticipates the objection that this sounds like polytheism by appealing to the unity of substance and the cooperative unity of will among the three. He, like Justin, sees the Son as deriving from the Father's substance (often using analogies like a plant and root, or a spring and river – connected yet distinct). He firmly holds that there was a time when the Son was with the Father yet distinct (though some have read Tertullian as implying the Son/Word emanated at creation time – a point of debate). Regardless, Tertullian's importance is in providing *vocabulary* and a framework that would eventually be refined in Nicene theology.

- **Origen of Alexandria (c. 225 AD):** A towering intellectual, Origen in *On First Principles* offered a sophisticated theology: he taught the **eternal generation** of the Son (the Son is begotten eternally

by the Father, not a created being in time), trying to ensure the Son's divinity was of a lesser degree. However, Origen still considered the Father as the *fountainhead of divinity*, calling the Son a "second God" sometimes (in the sense of order, not a different deity) and teaching subordination in role. Origen's idea that the Son is eternally generated was crucial – it answered Arius's claim "there was a time when the Son was not" by saying the Father was never without His Wisdom or Word. Origen also identified the Son/Logos with God's Wisdom described in Proverbs 8, yet he struggled with the "created" language there by positing that perhaps the *human soul* of Jesus was what was "created" in Wisdom (reflecting some of his speculations). Origen's legacy is mixed: later pro-Nicenes drew on his eternal generation concept, while Arians picked up on his subordinationist language.

From these early centuries, we gather that the Church's theologians universally upheld Christ's **pre-existence and divine nature** in some form, but within a framework that often subordinated the Son to the Father. They were trying to be faithful to both Scripture and reason: scripture that portrays Jesus as divine *and* Jesus praying to God, and philosophical reason that saw God as one ultimate principle. The idea of **one God in a harmonious plurality** was gradually coalescing. Notably, *no major writer in this era taught that Jesus was a* mere *man or* only *a prophet* – those views existed (among groups like the **Ebionites**, who were Jewish Christians believing Jesus was a normal human messiah, or **Theodotus of Byzantium** and **Paul of Samosata**, later who taught an "adoptionist" Christology where Jesus was a man filled with divine power). The "proto-orthodox" center that gave rise to Nicene Christianity decisively rejected such purely human Christologies. This indicates that by the second century, mainstream Christianity was firmly in the camp of a **"Jesus as divine/human Savior"** understanding, and the disputes were more about *how* to conceptualize His divinity (e.g., is He God Himself or the highest creature, etc.).

3. The Arian Controversy and the Nicene Creed (4th Century)

The early fourth century brought the issue of Christ's identity to a head in what is arguably the most significant theological conflict in church history: the **Arian controversy**. This was sparked around 318 AD in Alexandria when a presbyter named **Arius** began teaching that the Son of God, while exalted, was not co-eternal with the Father. Arius's famous slogan was "**there was a time when the Son was not**," meaning the Son is a creature made by the Father, not an eternal being equal to Him. Arius did call the Son "*God*", but in a secondary sense – a demigod or divine agent through whom the Father made the universe. In Arius's view, to protect the absolute uniqueness of the unbegotten Father, the Son must be subordinate and have an origin (begotten/created before time). This teaching alarmed Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and soon the dispute spread throughout the Eastern Church.

The Council of **Nicaea (325 AD)** was convened by Emperor Constantine to resolve this division. At Nicaea, the overwhelming majority of bishops (guided by Athanasius and others) rejected Arius's doctrine. The council produced a **creed** that confessed Christ as *"the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the Father's substance, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one essence [homoousion] with the Father."*[2][17]. Each phrase here was chosen to exclude Arian interpretations: "true God of true God" asserted the Son's full divinity (not a

lesser god); "begotten not made" distinguished the Son's generation from creation; "homoousios" (of one essence) was the key term to signify that the Son is identical in being with the Father – not a separate category of being. The Nicene Creed (in its original 325 form) even anathematized those who said "there was a time when he was not" or that he was of a different substance.

However, simply issuing the creed did not end controversy. For decades after Nicaea, the church was embroiled in conflict with various parties: hardcore Arians (who still denied the Son's full divinity), semi-Arians or Homoiousians (who preferred saying the Son was "like" the Father's substance rather than "same", using *homoiousios* to avoid modalism or Sabellian implications they feared in *homoousios*). Athanasius of Alexandria emerged as the staunch defender of Nicene theology, enduring multiple exiles. He insisted that if Christ were not truly God, he could not bestow immortality or unite us to God – in Athanasius's soteriological axiom, **"that which Christ has not assumed (or is not), He has not healed"**. For salvation to work (to deify humans, in Eastern parlance), the Savior must be divine. Athanasius's writings, especially his **Discourses Against the Arians**, devote large sections to scriptural exegesis, including the Proverbs 8:22 passage Arians loved to cite. Athanasius argued that "*The Lord created me at the beginning of His ways*" should be read figuratively, not as Christ confessing to be a creature[56][57]. He said if Wisdom (the Son) says "created me," it really hints at the incarnation (Wisdom creating a body or a role for Himself as the "beginning of God's ways" toward salvation)[58][59]. Importantly, Athanasius and his opponents both agreed **Wisdom = Christ**[19]; the fight was over what "created" meant. This shows continuity in identifying Jesus with the hypostasized Wisdom of Proverbs, but difference in interpreting whether that implied a literal coming-into-being.

Over time, the pro-Nicene position gained ground, helped by theologians like the **Cappadocian Fathers** – Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa – in the later 4th century. They clarified the terminology: *ousia* (essence) and *hypostasis* (person) were distinguished (previously used interchangeably sometimes), so one God (one *ousia*) exists as three co-eternal *hypostases*. They also extended full divinity to the **Holy Spirit**, against the Macedonian (pneumatomachian) heresy that the Spirit was a creature. Thus at the **Council of Constantinople (381 AD)**, the Nicene Creed was expanded (the version often recited today) to include: the Holy Spirit is "Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son together is worshiped and glorified." This marks the final ratification of the Trinitarian dogma in its classical form[2].

From Nicaea onward, **Trinitarian Christology** – that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, the second Person of the Trinity – became the hallmark of orthodoxy. Dissenting views (Arian, Modalist, Adoptionist, etc.) were increasingly marginalized or condemned. For example, one century later, the **Council of Chalcedon (451)** addressed a different issue (how Christ's two natures, divine and human, coexist), but it presupposed the Nicene affirmations: Christ is one person in two natures, truly God (consubstantial with the Father) and truly human (consubstantial with us) – this further protected both his divinity and humanity against extremes (like Eutychian monophysitism or Nestorian dyophysitism).

In summary, the 4th century gave the church a clear formulation: Jesus is **homoousios with the Father**, begotten eternally, not a creature, therefore properly worshipped as God; yet God is one, so this does

not introduce polytheism. The concept of **"Godhead"** or divine essence allowed the unity to be upheld while accommodating plurality of persons. The Trinitarian doxology "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit" became standard, reflecting the belief that each of the three persons is equally divine and worthy of honor.

From a historical perspective, one can see this as the culmination of a long development – the germinal ideas in Scripture grew in articulation and precision. Critics (like Biblical Unitarians and others) argue that in that process, **Hellenistic philosophy** influenced the outcome (e.g., concepts like substance, essence, the idea of impassible deity that required the Son's distinction, etc.). On the other hand, defenders of Nicene orthodoxy assert that these definitions were the natural and necessary outworking of implicit biblical truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In any case, by the end of antiquity, "church-traditional Christology" meant Trinitarian Christology: Jesus Christ is **God the Son incarnate**.

4. Post-Nicene and Medieval Elaboration

While our focus is the formative period, it's worth briefly noting that subsequent centuries did not so much change the doctrine as elaborate and defend it further. **Augustine of Hippo (late 4th – early 5th century)** wrote an extensive treatise *On the Trinity* which delved into analogies for the Trinity (like memory, understanding, will in the human mind) and emphasized the equality and unity of the three. Augustine's formulations influenced Western Christianity heavily, highlighting that any apparent subordination of the Son in Scripture is according to Christ's humanity or temporary functional role, not his eternal divine nature. The **Athanasian Creed** (circa 5th century, not actually by Athanasius but reflecting later doctrine) succinctly states the co-equality: *"we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance*"[60], and *"the Son is almighty, the Father almighty, the Spirit almighty, yet not three almighties but one almighty*".

In the medieval era, **Thomas Aquinas** and others further philosophized the Trinity but did not alter its core content. The Trinity doctrine became so integral that by the Reformation, Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants all shared it as basic orthodoxy, even as they fought over other issues. It was typically only groups labeled as heretical or radical (e.g., certain Anabaptists, Socinians, Unitarians) that rejected it, which we will explore in the next major section from the perspective of Unitarianism's history.

One should also note that the Trinitarian formula shaped liturgy and piety – from the doxologies to prayers ("through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You [Father] and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever"). The significance of this cannot be overstated: it cemented the **worship** of Jesus as God as a non-negotiable element of Christian identity (contrasting sharply with both Judaism and, later, Islam).

In closing this section, the **traditional Trinitarian Christology** can be characterized by the following affirmations, which we have seen emerging through history and being anchored in Scripture:

- Jesus Christ is **true God** (of one being with the Father) and **true man** (sharing fully in our humanity), the unique God-man.
- There is an eternal relationship of **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit** within the one God, often described as the Son being begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeding from the Father (and, in Western addition, from the Son).
- The Son/Word is the one through whom all things were made (Logos doctrine), so he is not a part of creation but source of creation.
- Yet, for the sake of humankind and salvation, the Son became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, lived, died, and rose bodily – this is the **Incarnation**.
- Jesus can therefore be worshipped, prayed to, and identified with YHWH (e.g., when scripture calls Jesus "Lord," Greek *Kyrios*, it often translates the divine name).
- All of this is to the glory of the one God, and does not introduce a second god, because the Son's divinity is the Father's divinity (they share it, rather than split it)[2].

Trinitarianism thus claims to maintain monotheism – a **unity of essence** – while confessing a **plurality of persons**. This inherently mysterious doctrine became, in essence, the "orthodox Christian" answer to who Jesus is in relation to God. The next section will pivot to the other perspective: those who challenge this doctrine and argue that the **Biblical Unitarian** view – God is a single person, and Jesus is His human Messiah – is the authentic biblical teaching.

The Biblical Unitarian View of Jesus Christ: Theology and Exegesis

In stark contrast to Trinitarian Christology, the **Biblical Unitarian** view (also known in some contexts as **Christian Unitarianism** or **Biblical Monarchianism**) maintains that God is a single person (the Father), and that Jesus Christ is not God incarnate but rather the human Son of God – miraculously begotten, anointed with God's Spirit, exalted to divine favor, yet not literally "God" himself. In this section, we will unpack the theology of Biblical Unitarianism, provide supporting scriptural exegesis as presented by its proponents, and briefly trace its historical presence from early Christianity to the modern day.

It should be noted that the term "Biblical Unitarian" is a relatively modern retronym, arising in the 19th century to describe those Unitarians who held to a **scripture-centered belief in one God** (as opposed to more theologically liberal or deistic Unitarians)[5][6]. Nonetheless, the core ideas associated with this view have precedent in earlier Christian history under different labels (e.g., **Adoptionism**, **Socinianism**). For clarity, we will use "Biblical Unitarian" (capitalized) to refer to the theology in its contemporary understanding – i.e., a Christology where Jesus is a man, uniquely related to God, but not an eternal deity – and "unitarian" (lowercase) to refer to generic nontrinitarian concepts in history.

1. Core Theological Tenets of Biblical Unitarianism

The foundational conviction of Biblical Unitarianism is the **absolute oneness of God** in one person, the Father. This is held to be the explicit teaching of both Old and New Testaments, epitomized in the **Shema** of Israel: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one*" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Unitarians emphasize that the Hebrew word for "one" (*echad*) signifies a singularity, and that throughout the Hebrew Bible, God speaks and is spoken of as a single "I" or "He," never as a plurality of persons. They see this as the *uncompromisable monotheism* that Jesus himself affirmed when he cited the Shema (Mark 12:29) and when he prayed, addressing the Father as "the **only true God**" (John 17:3)[61].

From this premise, everything about Jesus must be understood in a way that does not compromise the sole deity of the Father. Therefore:

- **Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, but not God Himself:** In Unitarian belief, the titles "Son of God" and "Messiah" do not imply ontological deity, but a special status as God's appointed one. They often point out that in the Bible, others can be called "son of God" in various senses (angels, Adam, Israel as a nation, kings), but Jesus is Son of God in a supreme sense – by miraculous birth and by designation as God's representative. They interpret the conception of Jesus as described in Matthew 1 and Luke 1 as the moment the Son came into existence (fulfilling, in their view, the prophecy of a coming son of David and Son of God, not the incarnation of an already existing being). For example, Luke 1:35 records the angel's words to Mary: "*the holy spirit will come upon you... therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.*" The **"therefore"** is highlighted by Unitarians to argue that it is by virtue of the miraculous conception (divine causation) that Jesus is God's Son – not because of a pre-existent sonship. In other words, **Jesus' origin is in Mary's womb** (albeit divinely caused); he did not literally pre-exist as a person before that. This aligns with what is historically called **Socinianism** (from Faustus Socinus, 16th century) which denied any personal pre-existence of Christ.

- **Jesus as Man Anointed by God:** The very term "Messiah" (Christos in Greek) means *anointed one*. Biblical Unitarians stress that Jesus was a man chosen and anointed with God's Spirit and power. Acts 10:38 is a favorite verse: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the holy spirit and power, and he went about doing good..." This is interpreted to mean Jesus did his miracles and ministry not by an innate divine nature but by the power of God working through him as a prophet. Peter's early preaching describes Jesus as "a man attested to you by God with miracles and signs which **God did through him**" (Acts 2:22), underscoring that God is the source, Jesus the agent. This concept of **agency** is key (which we'll expand on in the dedicated section on agency).

- **Subordination and Distinct Will:** In the Unitarian view, all those New Testament passages where Jesus prays to God, calls the Father "my God" (John 20:17, Rev. 3:12), declares the Father greater ("the Father is greater than I," John 14:28), or submits his will ("not my will but yours be done") are straightforward indications that Jesus is not the almighty God, but a distinct being subordinate to God. They reject Trinitarian explanations that these reflect only Jesus' human nature or economical roles; rather, they see them as evidence of **ontological hierarchy** – Jesus is dependent on God. A particularly important text is 1 Corinthians 8:6, which they read as differentiating "*one God, the*

Father" from "*one Lord, Jesus Christ*", not combining them into one being[62]. Similarly, Ephesians 4:4-6 says "one God and Father of all, who is above all," which Unitarians take at face value – the Father alone is God and above all, including above the Lord Jesus whom He made Lord (Acts 2:36: "God has made him both Lord and Christ").

- **Jesus' Exaltation and Divine Agency:** Biblical Unitarians do acknowledge that Jesus has been exalted to a position second only to God. After his resurrection, Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18). Given – by whom? By God the Father. They emphasize that Jesus did not inherently possess all authority, but God gave it to him upon raising him (cf. Philippians 2:9, "therefore God highly exalted him"). Thus, Jesus now acts with God's authority (as God's supreme agent/representative), and can be **honored, even "worshiped," in a secondary sense** to the glory of God[63][64]. Some Biblical Unitarians are cautious about the word "worship" since it can imply the absolute adoration due only to God. They prefer to say Jesus is "honored" or "venerated" as Lord Messiah, but always "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11). A key scripture for them is 1 Timothy 2:5: "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, **the man Christ Jesus**." This succinctly (in their view) identifies the one God as someone other than the mediator, and still calls Jesus "man" even in glory.

- **The Holy Spirit as God's Spirit (Not a Separate Person):** While our focus is Jesus, it's worth noting that most Biblical Unitarians also hold a non-trinitarian view of the Holy Spirit. They interpret "holy spirit" as essentially synonymous with God's power or presence. It is God in action, not a distinct co-equal person. So, they would not say "the Holy Spirit is a person of the Godhead." This differentiates them from certain other non-trinitarians like Oneness Pentecostals (who think Jesus is the Father, Son, and Spirit). Biblical Unitarians are *uni*tarian in that God is one person – the Father. Thus, any references to the Spirit are taken as references to God's operative force. This is supported by noting that in the Bible the Spirit is sometimes spoken of in impersonal terms (poured out, etc.) and is never worshipped or prayed to separately.

In summary of theology: Biblical Unitarianism strongly aligns itself with **Jewish monotheism** and with what they believe the pure apostolic teaching was before later Hellenistic influences. They often claim that "*the earliest Christians did not believe Jesus was God*"[65] and that the idea of the Trinity was developed later[8]. By their own description, it is a "scripturally oriented movement" that **denies the Trinity** and sees later trinitarian dogma as a deviation[66].

To bolster these claims, they present **scriptural exegesis** as the primary evidence, to which we now turn.

2. Scriptural Exegesis Supporting the Unitarian View

Biblical Unitarian arguments are heavily scripture-based (as the name implies). They engage in detailed interpretation of key proof texts that are commonly used in trinitarian doctrine, offering alternative readings. Here, we will review some of the major categories of such texts:

a. Monotheism Texts: Verses that explicitly affirm only one God, or that identify the Father alone as God, are foundational:

- **John 17:3** – Jesus prays: "*This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*" Unitarians point out that Jesus addresses the Father ("You") as "the only true God," implicitly excluding himself from that designation (he lists himself separately as "Jesus Christ, whom You have sent"). They argue this is a straightforward declaration from Jesus placing the Father as God in a unique sense that Jesus is not[61]. Trinitarian responses usually say Jesus speaks *as a man* in a mediating role, but Unitarian interpreters see no such qualification in the text itself.

- **1 Corinthians 8:6** – Already noted, "*for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things... and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things.*" They emphasize the one God is specifically the Father. Some might add that in the same context Paul says "there are many 'gods' and many 'lords' but for us..." – thus clarifying that in Christian understanding, *God* refers to the Father, while *Lord* (as a Messianic title) refers to Jesus. They often note that "Lord" (Greek *Kyrios*) can be a broad term not necessarily meaning God Himself; it can mean master, king, etc., and in a Messianic context it echoes Psalm 110:1 ("YHWH said to my lord..."). So Jesus can be the exalted Lord under the one God.

- **1 Timothy 2:5** – "*One God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*" As mentioned, they see this as extremely clear: if there's one God (implied to be the Father, given Paul's usage elsewhere) and Jesus is the mediator, Jesus by definition is not the one God, but distinct. Also, even in heaven Paul calls him "the man" (which for Unitarians is evidence that Jesus remains human and not literally co-equal deity).

- **John 5:44** – Jesus speaks of the Father as "the only God" in some translations ("...seek the glory that comes from the only God"). Combined with John 17:3, they claim John's Gospel consistently portrays *the Father as the God of Jesus*. In John 20:17 the risen Christ says, "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God," explicitly calling the Father "my God." It would be strange, they argue, for God the Son to call another person "my God" if he himself is co-equal God. To the Unitarian, this fits perfectly if Jesus is a subordinate who worships the Father.

b. Christ's Humanity and Subordination: Numerous verses that depict Jesus' human limitations or subordinate role are championed:

- **Mark 13:32 / Matthew 24:36** – Jesus says of his second coming, "But of that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." The Son's confessed ignorance is hard to reconcile with omniscience. Trinitarian theology tries to solve by saying in his human consciousness Jesus did not access divine omniscience (two-natures doctrine). Unitarians maintain the simpler answer is that Jesus isn't omniscient because he's not Almighty God. The hierarchy (Father knows, Son doesn't) suggests the Son is not co-equal.

- **John 5:19** – "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees the Father doing." And John 5:30: "I can do nothing on my own. I seek not my own will but the will of Him who sent me."

These statements show dependence and obedience – hallmark of an agent, not of the Supreme Being. If Jesus were God, Unitarians ask, would he speak in such terms?

- **Hebrews 4:15** – "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been **tempted as we are**, yet without sin." If Jesus is God, can God be tempted? James 1:13 says God cannot be tempted by evil. Biblical Unitarians use this to argue Jesus cannot be God because he was temptable (and indeed was tempted by Satan). Trinitarians say only his human nature was tempted, but Unitarians consider that an artificial split of personhood.

- **Acts 2:36** – "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." This is part of Peter's Pentecost speech. Unitarians stress the language "God made him Lord" – implying Jesus was appointed to a role by God, rather than inherently Lord from eternity. (Trinitarians might interpret "made him Lord" as in "installed in the position of Lord Messiah" after resurrection, not that he wasn't Lord before in another sense.)

- **Revelation 3:12** – In the exalted, glorified state, Jesus says: "The one who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of **my God**... I will write on him the name of **my God**... and my own new name." Four times in one verse Jesus calls the Father "my God." This is post-resurrection, from heaven! Unitarians argue this definitively shows the Father is Jesus' God, thus Jesus, even glorified, is subordinate to God (not God Himself). They often pair this with Ephesians 1:17 where Paul talks about "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ."

c. Alternative Interpretations of "Proof-Texts" for Christ's Deity: Biblical Unitarians also tackle the handful of New Testament verses often cited as directly calling Jesus "God" (Theos in Greek). There are not many: John 1:1, John 20:28, Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, 1 John 5:20. Unitarians have responses for each:

- **John 1:1** – They point out that the Greek literally says "*and the Word was with the God (*ton Theon*), and the Word was God (*Theos*)*". The lack of a definite article with the second "Theos" allows some flexibility. One Unitarian approach (following scholars like James McGrath or the translation of *The New World Translation* used by Jehovah's Witnesses) is to render it "the Word was **a god**" or "the Word was divine," implying the Word is not the same person as "the God" he is with, but has a divine quality or role as God's agent[30]. Another interpretation (advocated by Socinian types) is that *logos* doesn't mean a pre-existing person but means God's expressed **plan, reason, self-communication**, which poetically "was with God" (in His mind) and "was divine" (belonging to God's own being) and that this logos "became flesh" meaning it was embodied in the man Jesus. In other words, not that a pre-human person turned into a baby, but God's eternal purpose or wisdom came to fruition in Jesus. By this reading, John 1:1 doesn't prove a literal pre-existent Son, but is metaphorical. They often cite that *logos* in Philo and others can be an aspect of God and not necessarily an independent person.

- **John 20:28** – Thomas calls Jesus "My Lord and my God!" Unitarian interpretations may propose that Thomas gave an exclamation of awe (like addressing both Jesus as Lord and the Father as God in one breath), or that if he did refer to Jesus as "God," he meant it in a representational sense (acknowledging Jesus as embodying God's presence, much like prophets or angels could be addressed as if God when they spoke for God). They also note that earlier in John, Jesus had distinguished himself from "the only true God" (John 17:3), so John likely wouldn't contradict that; thus, John 20:28 must be read in context of agency (more on that in agency section). This explanation can seem strained, admittedly, and is debated even among Unitarians.

- **Romans 9:5** – This verse in Greek can be punctuated differently: "*Christ...who is God over all, blessed forever*" or "*Christ...who is over all. God be blessed forever.*" Many scholars note the ambiguity. Unitarians choose the punctuation that makes Paul give a doxology to God, not call Christ God.

- **Titus 2:13** – "the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." Here they appeal to the Granville Sharp grammar rule arguments. Some insist it could be read as two persons (the great God *and* our Savior Jesus) especially because in pastoral letters Paul often refers to God and Jesus separately. Others allow it could grammatically call Jesus "our great God and Savior" but then explain that "god" can occasionally be used more broadly (e.g., judges called "gods" in John 10:34). But generally, they think it more likely refers to two entities: the glory of God (the Father) and of the Savior Jesus.

- **Hebrews 1:8-9** – The Father says of the Son, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever..." quoting Psalm 45 which originally addressed a Davidic king as "elohim" (God). Unitarians point that in the Psalm, the king was called "god" in a hyperbolic or representative sense (as the next verse says "therefore God, your God, has anointed you" – which Hebrews 1:9 also includes: "therefore God, *your God*, has anointed you"). The fact that the Son *has* a God who anoints him, in the same passage that calls him "god," is a strong pointer to the relative sense of the title[67][68]. They conclude Hebrews is showing the Son is superior to angels (context of Heb 1) but still subordinate to the Father (who is *his* God).

- **1 John 5:20** – Talks about Jesus Christ, and ends "this is the true God and eternal life." The antecedent of "this" is debated (could refer back to the Father who is the true God, or to Jesus). Given John 17:3 where "the only true God" was the Father, Unitarians think John is consistent and still means the Father as the referent of "true God" here.

The cumulative argument from these scriptural analyses is that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches that **God is one person, the Father**, and that **Jesus is the human Messiah**, exalted but distinct and subordinate, acting as God's agent. Unitarian exegesis often tries to show that **alleged Trinitarian prooftexts have plausible non-Trinitarian readings** that fit better with the overall thrust of Scripture.

d. Use of Hebrew Bible Paradigms: Biblical Unitarians also often point to how the Old Testament sets expectations:

- The Messiah in Jewish expectation was never conceived as God Himself. He was a man empowered by God (like the prophecies of a servant, a son of David, etc.). Verses like Deuteronomy 18:18 speak of a future prophet like Moses. So they argue the disciples and early Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah would naturally not think he was literally Yahweh, but the anointed son of David.
- They note that **God cannot die** or be visibly seen, yet Jesus died and was seen, which for them indicates Jesus isn't literally the immortal, invisible God described in 1 Tim 1:17.
- When the Old Testament occasionally uses plural or complex language ("Let us make man in our image" in Genesis 1:26, or the appearance of the Angel of Yahweh, etc.), Unitarians typically interpret "us" as possibly God and His angels (a common Jewish reading), and the angel as a literal angel who can carry God's name, not pre-incarnate Christ (though some Unitarians allow that *maybe* the "Angel of the Lord" could be a Christophany in a representational sense, but not as a fully distinct person of a Godhead).

3. Historical Trajectory and Adherents of Unitarian Christology

While the primary basis for Biblical Unitarianism is scriptural, proponents also often claim that **historically, the earliest followers of Jesus held a unitarian belief** until philosophical influences corrupted the doctrine. How do they support this historical claim?

They often highlight the following points:

- In the very first generations (apostolic age), there's evidence of **Jewish Christian groups** such as the **Ebionites** (2nd century) who revered Jesus as Messiah but denied his pre-existence and divinity. Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Origen mention that Ebionites viewed Jesus as a virtuous man, not born of a virgin (some Ebionites at least), chosen at baptism. The existence of such groups suggests that a non-divine Jesus interpretation was around early. (Orthodox historians would say those were fringe from the start, but Unitarians might consider them closer to original Jewish sect).
- The **Nazareans** (another early Jewish Christian sect) apparently accepted the virgin birth but still did not view Jesus as God; they kept the Law and saw him as the human Messiah.
- In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, they point to individuals like **Theodotus of Byzantium** (late 2nd cent.) and **Paul of Samosata** (3rd cent.) who taught **Adoptionism** – that Jesus was born a man and "adopted" as Son of God at his baptism or resurrection (i.e., God's power descended on him). These were deemed heretical by proto-orthodox church, but their presence indicates not everyone accepted pre-existence or Trinity. Theodotus and another Theodotus even started a group in Rome focusing on one God and Jesus as a man (the *Alogi* or *Monarchians*).
- **Arianism** in the 4th cent. is a different kind of unitarianism: Arians still believed in a pre-existing Christ, but not co-equal. From a Biblical Unitarian perspective, Arius at least upheld that the Father alone was without beginning, and that in effect makes only the Father the true God. Some modern Unitarians may feel a bit of kinship with Arians in opposing Nicaea, but differ in that Arians did call Jesus a pre-existent divine (albeit created) being – something modern "Biblical Unitarians" usually reject (they tend to align more with Socinus in saying no conscious pre-existence).

- During the post-Reformation era (16th century onward), **Socinianism** became a prominent nontrinitarian theology in Europe. Led by **Fausto Sozzini (Faustus Socinus)**, the Socinians denied the Trinity, taught that Jesus did not exist before his human life (except in God's foreknowledge), and that the Holy Spirit is not a distinct person. Socinus believed Jesus should still be worshipped (because God exalted him to a position of authority), but Jesus is not literally God. This is essentially the template for a lot of present-day Biblical Unitarian belief. The **Racovian Catechism** (1605) codified Socinian doctrine.
- **Unitarian churches** emerged in the 17th-18th centuries, especially in England and America. Early English Unitarians like **John Biddle** (1615-62) challenged the Trinity using Scripture. In America, the 19th century saw figures like **William Ellery Channing**, though American Unitarianism eventually became more liberal (drifting from biblical supernaturalism). However, amidst that, the term "Biblical Unitarian" started being used for those who held a conservative, Bible-based Unitarian theology as opposed to the increasingly deistic or universalist Unitarian church[69][66]. For instance, the **Unitarian Church of Transylvania** stayed fairly "Biblical" (they even kept a quasi-Socinian catechism into 19th century)[70].
- In more recent times, various small groups and fellowships, such as the **Christadelphians** (founded 19th century by John Thomas), the **Church of God General Conference** (associated with names like Sir Anthony Buzzard today), the **Unitarian Christian Alliance** (a network in 21st century), and similar, continue to uphold Biblical Unitarian theology. They differentiate themselves from Unitarian Universalists (the latter being mostly non-Christian at this point) by insisting on the authority of Scripture and the centrality of Jesus as Messiah.

One can see that this line of belief was often the **minority report** in Christendom, frequently suppressed by the dominant churches. It survived in pockets or re-emerged when tolerance grew.

A Biblical Unitarian narrative of church history might assert: the original faith was essentially Unitarian (with Jesus as Messiah, appointed by God), but as the Gospel spread to Greeks, philosophical interpretations and a desire to exalt Christ more metaphysically led to the Trinity concept. Then throughout history, faithful groups here and there held onto or rediscovered the original understanding, even if labeled heretics by the majority. They might cite how even after Nicaea, many common folks or some regions (like Gothic Arians, etc.) had simpler beliefs. They also sometimes claim prominent thinkers like **Isaac Newton** privately held unitarian beliefs[71] (indeed Newton wrote against Trinitarian proof-texts but kept it mostly secret). The appeal to Newton or John Locke (who entertained anti-trinitarian notions) is to show that rational, learned people have found the Trinity unsatisfactory to scripture and reason.

It's important to note that **Biblical Unitarianism** often prides itself on what it sees as logical consistency and scriptural simplicity: God is one individual; Jesus is His Son (a distinct individual subordinate to God); the Holy Spirit is God's power/presence. They argue this avoids the mysterious paradoxes of Trinitarianism (like 3=1, Jesus being both omniscient and ignorant, etc.). They sometimes point out that the Trinity is "not found in the Bible" as a term, and claim the Apostles' teachings (e.g., in Acts) never

demanded belief in a triune God – instead, early converts were simply told to believe Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God. Verses like John 20:31 state the Gospel's purpose: "*that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing have life in his name*", which says nothing about believing he is God the Son.

In **summary**, the Biblical Unitarian view presents itself as a restoration of original monotheistic Christology: God is one (the Father), and Jesus is His human Messiah, now exalted as Lord under God. It leverages numerous scriptures to show the distinction and subordination of Jesus relative to God, and reinterprets or challenges the traditional readings of verses used to prove Christ's deity. Historically, it traces a lineage of minority opinions dissenting from the Trinity, culminating in some present-day Christian groups.

The ensuing sections will further engage two critical contexts that shed light on these Christological views: first, the **Hebrew Wisdom literature** context which influenced how the early church thought about Christ's pre-existence and nature; and second, the **Jewish law of agency** concept, which provides a framework for understanding how Jesus can carry divine authority in a Unitarian scheme without being God Himself. We will see that both Trinitarians and Unitarians appeal to these contexts, but in different ways, to bolster their claims about Jesus.

Hebrew Wisdom-Literature Christology: Jesus as Wisdom/Logos in Jewish Context

One of the most illuminating lenses through which to view early Christological development is the rich tradition of **Hebrew Wisdom literature**. Personified Wisdom, along with related concepts like the Logos (*Word* of God) and *Torah*, provided a conceptual backdrop in Second Temple Judaism that helped early Christians express who Jesus is in relation to God. Both Trinitarian and Unitarian interpreters find significance in this tradition, though they draw different conclusions. In this section, we will explore key wisdom texts (primarily Proverbs 8, the apocryphal books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon, and Philo's writings) and examine how they were used in Christological thinking. We will then see how the two Christological models incorporate the idea of Jesus as the incarnation or embodiment of divine Wisdom.

1. Personified Wisdom in Jewish Texts

The Hebrew Bible and intertestamental literature often depict God's Wisdom in poetic, almost personal terms:

- **Proverbs 8:1-36:** In this famous passage, **"Lady Wisdom"** speaks in the first person, describing how she was present with God from the beginning of creation. Key verses include: "*The LORD possessed (or* created*, depending on translation) me at the beginning of His work, the first of His acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth... When He established the heavens, I was there... I was beside Him, like a master workman, and I was daily His delight, rejoicing before Him*

always" (Prov 8:22-30). Here Wisdom is portrayed as a companion of God, a craftsman at creation, and intimately close to God's heart. Though cast as a woman (consistent with the feminine noun *Chokhmah* in Hebrew), the figure is clearly an anthropomorphic representation of an attribute or function of God – His wise creative power.

- **Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 24:** A book written in the early 2nd century BC, Sirach presents Wisdom declaring her origins and role. Wisdom says she came forth "from the mouth of the Most High" and covered the earth like a mist (Sir 24:3). She sought a resting place and the Creator commanded her to dwell in Israel, "*He created me from the beginning before the world, and I shall never cease... In the holy tabernacle I ministered before Him*" (Sir 24:9-10). Wisdom thus identifies herself with the Torah (Law of Moses) given to Israel (Sir 24:23). The idea is that God's Wisdom, once cosmic, took up residence in the covenant law among His people.

- **Wisdom of Solomon 7-9:** Written in Greek (1st century BC or AD), this text offers one of the loftiest descriptions of Wisdom: "*For [Wisdom] is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty... For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of His goodness*" (Wis 7:25-26)[31][32]. It goes on to say Wisdom sits by God's throne and penetrates all things and makes friends of God and prophets of men. In Wis 9:1-4, King Solomon prays to God to send Wisdom from His holy heavens to aid him, showing Wisdom is quasi-personified as an entity God can dispatch. These descriptions (Wisdom as emanation, reflection, image of God's goodness) are remarkably similar to phrases later applied to Christ (e.g., Hebrews 1:3 calling the Son "*the radiance of God's glory and exact imprint of His nature*", echoing Wis 7:26[72]).

- **The Logos in Philo:** Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC – 50 AD) was a Jewish philosopher who blended Greek philosophy (especially Platonism) with Jewish theology. He often spoke of the *Logos* (Greek for *Word* or *Reason*) in terms drawn from Wisdom traditions. Philo described the Logos as **God's first-born Son** and the "image" by which the universe was created[33]. The Logos, in Philo's thought, sometimes seems like an intermediary divine being – he even calls it a "second god" on occasion (though careful to maintain monotheism by noting the second is not equal to the first). However, Philo's Logos is arguably not a separate person but a personification of God's mind or a collection of divine ideas that take form. Still, Philo's vocabulary (Word, first-begotten, agent of creation, etc.) clearly prefigures the prologue of John and other Christian usage[33][34].

From these sources, we see a conceptual pattern: **Wisdom/Word is portrayed as from God, with God, and instrumental in creation and revelation**, yet not typically worshiped or addressed independently. It is like the **immanent aspect** of God's transcendent mind reaching into creation. Importantly, these personifications remained, in Jewish usage, figurative to a degree. There's no evidence mainstream Judaism ever thought Wisdom was literally a second divine being; rather, they were poetic ways to talk about God's activity. Nonetheless, the language is temptingly close to personal existence.

2. Early Christian Identification of Christ with Wisdom/Logos

Early Christians, inheriting this Jewish tradition and believing Jesus to be the definitive revelation of God, naturally made connections between Christ and Wisdom/Logos:

- **New Testament Evidence:** We already noted several New Testament passages that strongly echo Wisdom language. John's Prologue (John 1:1-18) speaks of the **Word** (Logos) existing in the beginning with God, being divine, and becoming flesh in Jesus. This is essentially equating Jesus with the pre-existent Logos by which God made everything (John 1:3 parallels Genesis 1's creation by God's word, and resonates with Wisdom's co-creatorship). John 1:14, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," even has echoes of Sirach's idea of Wisdom pitching her tent among Israel (the Greek *eskenosen* "tented" might evoke the Tabernacle presence)[59].

Paul's statements, as mentioned, also cast Christ in Wisdom's role: e.g., "Christ the power of God and the **wisdom of God**" (1 Cor 1:24). In Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:35, Jesus says "Wisdom is justified by her deeds/children," which in context could hint that Jesus's works are the vindication of Wisdom – perhaps subtly implying he embodies Wisdom (some suggest even that "Wisdom" in such sayings is a self-reference in third person). Another intriguing passage: Luke 11:49 has Jesus say, "Therefore the **Wisdom of God** said, I will send them prophets..." whereas the parallel in Matthew 23:34 has Jesus himself say, "Therefore **I** send you prophets..." This suggests the author(s) saw Jesus as the voice of God's Wisdom[73]. In Colossians 1:15-17, as earlier described, the poetic lines about Christ closely parallel descriptions of Wisdom as firstborn and agent of creation. And Hebrews 1:2-3 explicitly states the Son is the one through whom God made the worlds and who is the radiance of God's glory–-concepts directly reminiscent of Wisdom of Solomon[31].

- **Statements by Church Fathers:** The second-century fathers like **Justin Martyr** explicitly equated Christ with pre-existent Wisdom. Justin, for example, in his Dialogue with Trypho (ch. 62), says that the personified Wisdom in Proverbs 8 is indeed Jesus Christ, the pre-existent one who ministered to the Father in creation. As we saw, the **Arians and Nicene** Christians both agreed on that identification[19] – Arius used "The Lord created me..." to say Christ was created; Athanasius insisted it had to mean something else precisely because he agreed it referred to Christ but couldn't literally mean Christ was created if Christ is truly God[56][57]. So ironically, *both sides of the 4th-century debate firmly assumed Proverbs 8's Wisdom was the Son of God*[19]. Only the interpretation of "created" vs "eternally begotten" separated them. This consensus shows how ingrained the Wisdom=Christ link had become.

Other Fathers, like **Origen**, wrote of the Son as the eternal Wisdom of God by which all was made, explicitly quoting Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-26 in reference to Christ. The Nicene Creed itself doesn't mention "Wisdom," but it calls the Son "Light from Light" which has a flavor of Wisdom's "reflection of eternal light"[31]. The Nicene notion of *eternal generation* of the Son from the Father parallels the idea that Wisdom is "brought forth" before creation (Prov 8:25).

- **Logos Christology:** The terminology of **Logos** (Word) was especially favored in Greek-speaking Christian apologetics (partly because it resonated with Greek philosophy). **Justin**, **Athenagoras**,

Tertullian, etc., describe the pre-existent Christ as the Logos who was with God and came forth at creation. As mentioned earlier, Justin sometimes used analogies of speech: just as when we speak a word, it comes from our mind without diminishing our mind, so the Father spoke forth the Logos. They frequently merged the concept of Logos and Sophia (Wisdom). For example, **Irenaeus** spoke of the Son and Spirit as the "two hands" of God involved in creation – imagery suggesting God's own extensions (rather than separate gods). This is an attempt to articulate that when God created via Word/Wisdom, it was God's own self-expression, not something wholly separate – which is exactly the challenge Wisdom literature posed: how to interpret Wisdom's identity vis-à-vis God.

Given this widespread adoption of Wisdom/Logos categories to describe Jesus, early Christian theology can in fact be characterized as a form of **Wisdom Christology**. It answered questions like: *How can we say Jesus was "with God" before time?* – by seeing him as God's Wisdom/Word personified. *How do we explain his function in creation?* – he was the divine Wisdom through which creation was crafted, like Proverbs 8 suggests. *How does this maintain one God?* – by understanding Word/Wisdom as inherent to God's being (though here is where definitions varied, leading to either the subordination or co-equal views).

3. Trinitarian vs. Unitarian Use of Wisdom Traditions

Both Christological camps appeal to Wisdom tradition but with different emphases and conclusions:

Trinitarian Perspective (Wisdom as Pre-existent Divine Son):

Trinitarians see the Jewish Wisdom literature as a providential prefiguration of the truth of Jesus' divine identity. They argue that only the doctrine of the Trinity makes full sense of how the New Testament uses Wisdom language. They often note:

- The Jews had these abstract concepts (Wisdom, Word, Presence, Shekinah, Memra) to describe God's activities without violating monotheism. In Christianity, those concepts "came alive" because God's Wisdom actually became incarnate as a man. Thus, Jesus isn't just *like* Wisdom; he **is** the very hypostasis of Wisdom. Passages like Hebrews 1:3 calling Jesus the radiance of divine glory[31]are taken quite literally; the Son shares God's eternal glory and being.

- The existence of these intermediaries in Jewish thought undermines the claim that Jews would never accept a divine agent alongside God. Apologist theologians like Richard Bauckham, as we saw, argue early Jews did sometimes envision exalted agents, though carefully distinguishing them from the one God. Trinitarians assert that early Christians, being Jews, included Jesus *within* the unique identity of the one God by identifying him as God's eternal Wisdom/Word[27][28]. That is, they didn't see him as a second god, but as God's own self-expression. Over time this led to the formal Trinity concept: Wisdom was not a creature, but an eternal person of God.

- They will highlight how **Athanasius** and others insisted that if the Son is God's Wisdom, God could not have been once without His Wisdom; hence the Son must be co-eternal with the Father. The

argument goes: To say "there was when He was not" (as Arius did) effectively means God was once without Word and Wisdom, which is absurd as God would be imperfect or mute. Athanasius flips Proverbs 8:22 around: the Son isn't a created wisdom; He is the very Wisdom in which God creates all, so "created me" must be read as Wisdom speaking cryptically about the Incarnation (where Wisdom "built a house" of flesh)[58][59]. Thus, Nicene Trinitarians leveraged Wisdom theology to affirm Christ's **eternal begottenness**.

- The appropriation of Wisdom influences some later doctrinal elaborations as well, such as seeing Mary as the Theotokos (God-bearer) who gave birth to God's Wisdom incarnate, or depicting Christ in art with feminine titles (rarely, but e.g. some theologians saw the Logos as having features of the female Wisdom, merging them).

In sum, Trinitarians embrace Wisdom Christology as evidence that *the seeds of the Trinity are in the Old Testament*, with the personified Word/Wisdom eventually revealed to be not a metaphor but a Person in God. It fits their narrative that God's inner plurality was hinted at in Jewish scripture and fully disclosed in Christ.

Unitarian Perspective (Wisdom as God's Personification, Jesus as Human Vehicle):

Biblical Unitarians, however, interpret Wisdom traditions in a way that supports a non-divine Christology:

- They agree that Jesus is identified with the figure of Wisdom/Logos in the New Testament, but they dispute *the ontological implications* that Trinitarians draw. They argue that Wisdom in the Old Testament is clearly a personification of an attribute (no Jewish reader thought a second divine person actually existed). Therefore, when the New Testament calls Jesus God's Wisdom or uses Logos language, it is employing **metaphor and typology**, not declaring that a pre-existent person literally called "Wisdom" became Jesus.

- Unitarians often say: *What pre-existed was not the Son as an actual person, but the plan or word of God* – **God's foreknowledge and intent. This is sometimes called the** "Logos as plan" **theory. John's "the Word was with God" means God's self-expression (His word/wisdom) was with Him (in His mind) from the beginning. "The Word became flesh" means that plan or self-expression was embodied when Jesus was miraculously conceived. So Jesus *represents* or *embodies* God's Wisdom without being a one-to-one continuity of a pre-human personal existence. They draw a parallel: Just as God's Wisdom 'dwelt' in the Torah (Sirach 24) or among Israel, now God's Wisdom dwelt in a human Messiah. In other words, Jesus is the** culmination of God's Wisdom** but not necessarily Wisdom personified in a literal ontological sense.

- Unitarians leverage the *metaphorical nature* of Wisdom literature. For example, Proverbs 8 is poetry; the descriptions are not literal (Wisdom is a "she," but Jesus was male; Wisdom builds a house, mixes wine, etc., clearly figurative). So they caution against literalizing one part ("created me") to form doctrine, as Arians did, but likewise caution against assuming this figure is an actual person co-existing with God. They would say *God alone created* (Isaiah 44:24: "I, the LORD, made all things by

Myself"), so how to reconcile that with "by Wisdom God made all"? The solution: God's own wise plan was His instrument, not another person.

- When confronting John 1:1, Biblical Unitarians often note Philo's usage: Philo sometimes spoke of the Logos as if an entity, but he likely did not see it as truly distinct. They argue John's innovation was to say "that Logos, which we Jews spoke of, has now *come in the flesh* in Jesus." This can mean simply that Jesus is the ultimate communication of God (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2 – God spoke by prophets, now by Son). It doesn't have to imply that the Logos was a pre-person that transmigrated. Some also cite 1 Peter 1:20 about Christ "foreknown before the foundation of the world" – showing he existed in God's mind/purpose, not literally as a conscious being (if taken from their viewpoint).

- Another interesting argument: They might interpret the **Wisdom of Solomon 2:13** (which ironically is sometimes seen as prophecy about a righteous man calling himself God's son and having God as Father – Wis 2:16). But focusing on Wis 7:27: "Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets." They could say: See, Wisdom passes into souls – it's God's inspiring power, not a single unique person. If Jesus is God's Wisdom, it means he is supremely filled with God's wisdom/spirit, not that he was a second divine entity.

- Biblical Unitarians might also mention that **Paul and other NT authors sometimes avoid directly saying "Jesus is God" but comfortably say "Jesus is Lord" and "Jesus is the wisdom of God."** To them, this shows a distinction: calling Jesus "Wisdom of God" is a way to highly exalt him as God's agent without saying he *is* God. They would argue if the apostles believed Trinity, they'd have made it clearer rather than leave it to such inferences.

- They interpret the early fathers' use of Wisdom imagery as sometimes speculative. For instance, they would side with those who observed that some early Logos theologians essentially turned Wisdom from a personification into an actual second entity – which from a Unitarian view was a drift towards polytheistic thinking (they might point out how pagans or Gnostics had intermediary beings, and Christians influenced by that started to conceive God's word similarly as a semi-divine being).

In short, the Unitarian perspective values the Wisdom literature as providing the *language and conceptual metaphor* to describe Jesus' significance (he is God's supreme revelation, his teachings are God's wisdom, etc.), but rejects that it indicates a literal pre-existence or co-divinity. They essentially say, **Jesus did not *literally* pre-exist, but existed in God's wisdom/plan**; therefore calling him "Wisdom of God" is appropriate in a figurative fulfillment sense.

4. The Debate over Proverbs 8:22 – Created or Possessed?

A central flashpoint in Wisdom Christology is Proverbs 8:22, because of the translation issue and doctrinal ramifications:

- The Hebrew verb in Prov 8:22 is *qanah*, which can mean "to acquire, possess" or sometimes "to create" (in some contexts). The ancient Greek Septuagint translated it as "*ektise*" (from *ktizo*, to create). Thus, the Greek Bible read "The Lord **created** me (Wisdom) as the beginning of His ways." Early Christians using the Septuagint took it at face value. The Arians in the 4th century loved this as it seemed to straightforwardly call Wisdom (the Son) a creation – *the first creation, but still a creation*[19]. Athanasius and others responded by differentiating or by appealing to alternate translations (Athanasius argued that if you follow the Hebrew or another nuance, it could mean "constituted" or "set me up as the head of His creation," not that Wisdom's essence was created) [74]. Later translations (like many English Bibles) often say "The Lord **possessed** me at the beginning of his work," which avoids the word "create."

Unitarians might say: even if *possessed* is correct, that just means Wisdom was with God in the beginning – still a poetic way of saying God had wisdom (of course He did). Trinitarians, in contrast, who translate as "possessed," can say this implies the Father had His Wisdom (the Son) with Him eternally (so not made, but eternally possessed). So translation can steer theology: "created me" yields an Arian-like interpretation; "possessed me" can fit an orthodox eternal existence view.

- Some modern scholars say *qanah* here likely means **"begot"** in a figurative sense (there's a related Ugaritic usage of qn as beget). So Wisdom could be saying "Yahweh begot me at the beginning," which sounds a lot like the concept of eternal generation (the Son begotten before ages). This again shows how the church tried to assimilate the text: Gregory of Nyssa and others argued "created me" in Greek must be understood economy-wise, not essence-wise; they'd prefer to see it as "begotten," aligning with Nicene language.

Biblical Unitarians observe that ironically, **Proverbs 8:22 was so troublesome** for Trinitarians that some have to downplay its literal sense, thereby admitting that the straightforward meaning (Wisdom is a product of God) conflicts with co-eternality. To them, this indicates the text was never meant to portray a second equal person, but at most a subordinate entity (which if identified with Christ, fits an Arian or Unitarian model more than a Nicene one).

However, most Biblical Unitarians actually would not use Prov 8 to prove Christ is created (since many of them think Christ didn't exist yet at creation). They use it rather to show that Wisdom is personified and called created, therefore if one identifies Jesus = Wisdom literally, it leads to him being a creature (Arian conclusion). But because they don't want that either (since they think he didn't exist to be created then), they say the identification should not be literal. In effect, they use it as a reductio ad absurdum: If Trinitarians claim Jesus is literally Wisdom, then either he's created or you have to twist the scripture; since either is uncomfortable, better to see Wisdom as figurative.

5. Summary

The Hebrew Wisdom literature provided a **bridge** from pure Jewish monotheism to the idea of God's *plurality of expression*. It gave the early church a vocabulary to confess the mystery of Jesus' relationship

to God. Trinitarianism essentially **literalized Wisdom** into an actual second Person of the Godhead, co-eternal with the Father (the Father's "eternal Wisdom/Word"). Unitarianism instead sees Jesus as the **human incarnation of God's wisdom in a functional sense** – an unparalleled agent and teacher of divine wisdom, embodying God's word in his life and message, yet not literally pre-existent.

This debate over Wisdom is intricately tied to how one perceives the boundary between metaphor and reality in theological language. It also segues into the concept of **agency**, because even if Jesus is identified as Wisdom or Word, in both views he is effectively portrayed as the *agent* through whom God created and now reveals Himself. For Trinitarians, that agent is internal to God's being (the second person); for Unitarians, that agent is external, a human chosen vessel. Thus, understanding the *Jewish law of agency* will further clarify these roles. To that we now turn: examining the **shaliach principle** and how Jesus as God's ultimate agent is interpreted differently by the two Christological positions.

The Jewish Law of Agency (Shaliach) and the Identity of Jesus

In Jewish thought, the concept of **agency** (Hebrew: *shaliach*, meaning a sent one or emissary) is a powerful hermeneutical key for understanding how one person can effectively represent another. The principle is concisely stated in rabbinic literature: *"A person's agent is regarded as the person himself."*[12] In this section, we explore the features of the Jewish law of agency and how they apply to New Testament Christology – especially regarding Jesus' relationship to God. The **law of agency** has profound implications for how we interpret Jesus' claims of unity with the Father and acting on God's authority. Biblical Unitarians frequently use the agency principle to explain high Christological statements without invoking ontological deity, whereas Trinitarians acknowledge Jesus' role as sent from the Father but view it as coinciding with his divine identity. We will examine the elements of agency concept in Judaism, give biblical examples of agency, and then compare how each side uses this to interpret Jesus' identity and function.

1. The Jewish Principle of Agency: "The agent is as the sender"

In ancient Jewish law and custom:

- When a **principal** appoints an **agent (shaliach)** to perform a task on his behalf, the actions of the agent are legally and authoritatively considered as the actions of the principal. The classic sources put it unequivocally: *"the acts of the agent of a person are equivalent to the acts of the person himself."*[43]. For instance, if a man cannot attend to a business deal or deliver a message, he sends an agent. Whatever the agent agrees to or conveys in the principal's name is binding as if the principal did it.

- The rabbis applied this in many contexts: **marriage** (a man could send an agent to betroth a wife on his behalf[75]), **commerce** (an agent buying land for someone meant the land belonged to the

sender immediately[76]), and **sacred duties** (if priests or representatives carried out rituals, it was as if the people did them). The Talmudic maxim cited is often from Kiddushin 41b or Nedarim 72b[12].

- Importantly, an agent acting within the authority granted him carried the **full authority of the sender**. A saying in the Talmud: *"the agent of a ruler is as the ruler himself"*[77][78]. So if a king's envoy arrives, to reject the envoy is to reject the king (compare Jesus in Luke 10:16: "he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects the one who sent me"[79][80], a direct application of agency logic).

- However, **the agent is still subordinate to the sender** in essence. The agency principle doesn't mean the agent and sender are literally the same being, just that *functionally and representationally*, the agent "is" the sender to the recipients. In Jewish law, one caveat was that an agent cannot represent someone in doing something the principal themselves has no right to do or would not do. But if authorized properly, the agent's words = sender's words, agent's decisions = sender's decisions.

- The rabbis even discuss that the agent should be treated with the same respect as the sender during the mission. *"If someone dealt with an agent, it was understood that the agent possessed all the same rights that the principal possessed"*[81][82]. In some narratives, a king's envoy might say "I am King So-and-so's representative," and people bow as though to the king.

- A striking biblical example given by rabbis: When Moses was commanded to gather Israel to sacrifice the Passover lamb (Exodus 12), it was impossible for every single Israelite to physically slaughter the lamb, so presumably leaders acted on behalf of households. Rabbi Joshua ben Karcha observed that Scripture saying "the congregation of Israel shall kill it" implies agency (the few act for the many)[83].

- Another example: In **Exodus 7:1**, God says to Moses, "See, I have made you *God* to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet." That's a direct conferral of agency: Moses will stand in for God (thus called *Elohim* to Pharaoh) – not that Moses literally became divine, but he is functioning as God's representative with godlike authority over plagues before Pharaoh.

- The **Angel of the LORD** phenomena in the Old Testament are also understood through agency. This angel speaks as "I am God" in various passages (like burning bush or Judges 2:1-3) yet is distinct. The common explanation is: the angel is God's agent, carrying God's Name. For instance, Exodus 23:21, God says of the angel He sends, "my Name is in him." According to one encyclopedia, in Semitic thought, *"the messenger-representative was conceived of as being personally – and in his very words – the presence of the sender."*[84][85]. The angel can be called YHWH in the story not because the angel is the same being, but because he speaks on YHWH's behalf so perfectly that it's as if YHWH is present.

- Similarly, **Judges and kings of Israel** were considered agents of God in justice and rule. Psalm 82 addresses earthly judges as "gods" (Elohim) and "sons of the Most High" because they acted in God's name judging Israel[67][68]. Jesus himself references this in John 10:34-36 to justify calling

himself Son of God, implying that if Scripture can apply "god" to agents (like judges), how much more to him whom the Father sanctified and sent.

- The principle also had an understood limit: "*the agent returns to the sender when the mission is complete*"[86][87]. After doing the task, the agent goes back under the sender's direct supervision. This resonates with Jesus' words: "I came from the Father and have come into the world, now I am leaving the world and going to the Father" (John 16:28). The agent accomplished his mission and returns.

In essence, the shaliach concept allowed ancient Jews to delegate authority without diminishing the singular authority of the principal. It provided a ready framework for early Christians (all of whom were monotheistic Jews initially) to understand Jesus: as **the One sent by God** par excellence.

2. Jesus as God's Ultimate Agent in the New Testament

The New Testament overwhelmingly portrays Jesus as **sent by the Father**. Particularly in the Gospel of John, the Greek verb *apostellō* (to send) or *pempō* (to dispatch) appears dozens of times with the Father as subject and Son as object. A quick survey:

- **John's Gospel:** Jesus repeatedly emphasizes, "*the Father has sent me*" (John 5:36, 20:21, etc.). He says he does not speak or act on his own, but only what the Father taught or showed him (John 8:28, 12:49)[88][89]. He seeks not his own will but the will of the one who sent him (John 5:30)[88]. He even states the core of representation: "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... I am in the Father and the Father is in me*" (John 14:9-10) – interpreted via agency as the Father working through him so intimately that to encounter Jesus is to encounter God's presence. Moreover, in John 10:36, Jesus defends himself: "*Do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?*"[90]. Here he links being sent by God with the title Son of God, again implying being God's agent/representative is why he can say "I and the Father are one" (one in purpose and action).

John 17:3 (mentioned earlier) has Jesus define eternal life as knowing the Father the only true God, *and* Jesus Christ whom **He sent**[61]. John ends (20:21) with Jesus telling the apostles, "*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.*" This strongly positions Jesus as the archetypal agent of God, and the disciples as agents of Christ in analogy.

- **Synoptic Gospels:** They also reflect agency themes. The parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-9) where a man sends servants (prophets) and finally his beloved son to the vineyard resonates with God sending Jesus as the final envoy – though as son, he's more than a servant but still under the owner. In Matthew 10:40, Jesus says to the Twelve, "*Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives Him who sent me.*" This is nearly a direct quote of the agency rule (receive the agent = receive the sender)[91][80].

Also, Jesus' baptism scene – the voice from heaven identifies him as "My beloved Son" – in an agency context, could parallel how in some Jewish stories, God would openly endorse His prophet or king. The Transfiguration's voice, "Listen to him," signals that Jesus speaks for God now.

- **Apostolic preaching:** In Acts, Peter and others frequently say "God raised up Jesus" and "God has made him Lord" (Acts 2:36) and "God sent him first to bless you" (Acts 3:26)[92][93]. Jesus is God's agent in both death/resurrection (God doing these things *through* him) and in message (word sent to Israel).

- **Epistles:** Hebrews calls Jesus the Apostle (literally "sent-one") and High Priest of our confession (Heb 3:1-2)[94][95], explicitly comparing: "Jesus was faithful to the One who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house." So Jesus is an apostle of God as Moses was, albeit superior. Over and over, NT calls God "the Father" or just "God" in relation to Jesus as Lord/Messiah, reinforcing that Jesus functions in subordination to God.

Given the New Testament's pervasive "sending" language, it's clear early Christians saw Jesus in terms of **divine agency**. The question is: *Does this fully explain Jesus' status (as Unitarians claim), or is it only one aspect that accompanies a deeper ontological union (as Trinitarians claim)?*

3. Unitarian Perspective: Agency Explains Jesus' Divine Claims and Worship

Biblical Unitarians heavily rely on the law of agency to make sense of the New Testament evidence in a way that preserves unipersonal monotheism:

- They argue that **all the seemingly "divine" prerogatives Jesus has are explicable by his role as God's chief agent (shaliach)**. If "the agent is as the principal," then Jesus, being the ultimate agent sent from God, can appropriately do and say things that otherwise only God could. For example:

- Jesus forgiving sins (Mark 2:5-7) – People ask, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" The answer in agency terms: If God gave His authority to Jesus, then as agent Jesus can pronounce forgiveness on God's behalf[96] (like a delegated judge).

- Jesus accepting worship/homage (e.g., John 20:28 or Matthew 14:33 after walking on water, "those in the boat worshiped him saying, truly you are the Son of God") – Normally only God is worshiped. But if the agent represents God, showing honor to the agent is showing honor to the sender. Unitarians often mention that "*worship*" has degrees. They point out that in the OT, sometimes people bowed to kings or prophets – not as gods but as respect to God's anointed. They interpret worship of Christ similarly: not as a rival deity but as honoring God through His Son. Philippians 2:10-11 is highlighted: every knee bows to Jesus and confesses him as Lord **"to the glory of God the Father."** So ultimately it glorifies the Father[61]. In other words, *the worship passes through the agent to the principal*.

- Jesus being called "God" in some sense (like Thomas's exclamation) – If indeed Thomas meant it literally, a Unitarian could say that just as Moses was told he'd be "God" to Pharaoh (Ex 7:1) and judges were called "gods" (Ps 82), Thomas acknowledging Jesus as "my God" can be understood as acknowledging God's presence in and through Jesus (recognizing the Father in Jesus, perhaps).

- Titles like "Savior of the world" given to Jesus – Isaiah says only Yahweh is Savior. But Unitarians reply: God saves *through* His agent. In fact, the name Yeshua (Jesus) means "Yahweh is salvation." Jesus is the means by which God accomplishes salvation, so calling him Savior is natural in an agentive sense.

- They emphasize Jesus' own statements about not speaking on his own authority and only doing what the Father showed. These, to them, explicitly reinforce that he is not the supreme originator but the perfect delegate. **John 12:49:** "For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command – what I should say and what I should speak"[89][97]. That is classic agent behavior: speak only what the principal authorizes.

- The Unitarian view often uses **John 5:23**: "that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father who sent him." They interpret "just as" to mean in equivalent manner, because disrespecting the agent is disrespecting the sender. It doesn't mean the Son is ontologically the Father, but by role he must be honored for the Father to be honored. It's akin to an ambassador – if you mistreat an ambassador, you insult the king or country.

- **John 10:30 ("I and the Father are one")** – Unitarians say one in purpose, not one being. The context: Jesus says the Father's hand and his hand both protect the sheep – demonstrating unity of mission. And notably, just a few verses later in John 10:36, Jesus defends himself against the accusation of making himself God by appealing to agency and his sanctification: "the Father set me apart and sent me, so I'm the Son of God." So he redirects from "I'm God" to "I'm God's Son and agent."

- They also rely on what they consider **clear differentiation** verses: e.g., Jesus calling the Father "the only true God" (John 17:3)[61] and saying "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). In agency terms, indeed the sender is greater than the agent. There was even a rabbinic saying that an agent cannot contradict the words of the one who sent him, nor is the agent above the one who appointed him[41][98]. Jesus fits that – "My Father is greater than all" (John 10:29 and 14:28).

- **Hebrews 3** analogies: It compares Moses as a servant in God's house and Jesus as a son over God's house, "*just as Moses was faithful in all God's house*". That inherently is an agency model: Moses was God's agent, and Jesus, as the superior prophet, is God's agent on an even higher level (a Son). But still, "God's house" remains God's. The Son is over it, but it's the Father's house ultimately. 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 is often cited too: after subduing all, the Son hands the Kingdom back to God the Father, and the Son himself will be subject to God, "that God may be all in all." For Unitarians, this final subjection shows the eternal distinction in rank: Jesus eternally remains subject to the

Father, which fits him being an exalted agent, not coequal Almighty. Trinitarians see that as relating to his mediatorial kingdom, but Unitarians see an absolute statement of hierarchy.

In summary, Biblical Unitarians believe the shaliach principle elegantly accounts for Jesus' high status without demanding he share the Father's being. God invested him with authority (Matthew 28:18 "all authority has been given to me" – given, not inherently his)[93][99]. Thus, Jesus can be God's perfect representative on earth. This viewpoint also resonates with interfaith concerns: it shows continuity with Jewish monotheism (Jesus not an object of worship separate from the one God, but as God's chosen Messiah through whom we honor God). It also addresses some Islamic critiques – Muslims accept Jesus as messenger (though Unitarians go further to accept cross and resurrection) – but the notion still, Jesus remains subordinate to the one God, which is more palatable to them.

4. Trinitarian Perspective: Agency Acknowledged but Insufficient

Traditional Trinitarian theology does not deny that Jesus is the sent agent of the Father – indeed it affirms Christ's *mission* (Latin *missio*, the root of "missionary" and related to *to send*). However, Trinitarians argue that agency alone cannot explain all that the New Testament says about Jesus. They typically respond:

- **Agency does not fully account for Jesus' origin or identity** as presented. Yes, as man he was sent, but *who* was sent? They maintain it was the pre-existent Son (the Word) who "came down from heaven" (John 6:38). Trinitarians emphasize verses like John 1:1, 1:14, 3:13, 6:62 – that Jesus "came" from God's presence, implying he was *with God* prior. They argue a normal human could be called by God (like prophets), but Jesus speaks in John as one who existed with the Father and then was sent. Agency in itself could apply to Moses or Elijah, but no prophet speaks as intimately as "I and Father one" or "Before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58). So Trinitarians claim those kinds of statements transcend mere agency – they hint at ontological unity.

- **"The agent is as the sender" could be misapplied** – The Jews in John 5 understood Jesus making himself "equal with God" because he called God his own Father and did works on Sabbath as God does. A Unitarian might say Jews misunderstood or that this is simply agent equality (representational). But Trinitarians often hold that John's Gospel portrays the Jewish leaders gradually realizing Jesus' claims are larger than a prophet's and reacting to that. Jesus doesn't correct them by saying "No, I'm just an agent"; rather he doubles down (e.g., in John 5:23 he says the Father wants all to honor the Son just as they honor the Father).

- **Worship of Jesus** in the New Testament – While Unitarians frame it as relative, Trinitarians point out certain scenes that appear to give Jesus the same doxological honor as the Father. For instance, Revelation 5 depicts every creature praising "Him who sits on the throne **and the Lamb"** together, using the same language of blessing, honor, glory[51]. This, they argue, goes beyond typical agent honor (no agent in Jewish tradition received *universal* worship with God). Also, in Philippians 2:10-11, the application of Isaiah's "every knee bow" to Jesus would seem blasphemous unless Jesus shares in the divine name (Trinitarians note that the text says every tongue confesses *Jesus Christ is*

Lord, and "Lord" in LXX Isaiah was YHWH – thus implying Jesus shares in YHWH's identity, albeit the Father is glorified in that acknowledgement). They see it as Jesus being included in worship precisely because he is (with the Father and Spirit) part of the one God.

- **Jesus' claims of unity** – e.g., John 10:30, Trinitarians acknowledge oneness in mission but often see a hint of more: the context is security of sheep, which is a divine function (no one can snatch from God's hand – Deut 32:39; Jesus says none can snatch from my hand either). Coupled with "I and Father are one," many church fathers took this as unity of power/essence. The Jews pick up stones for blasphemy – indicating they took it as more than just cooperation. Jesus' appeal to Psalm 82 is a tricky one, but Church Fathers like Augustine interpreted it as a *deflection* by Jesus to delay stoning, or to say "if even judges can be called gods, how much more me whom the Father sanctified." But Jesus ending with "the Father is in me and I in the Father" (John 10:38) again incites them to try to seize him. To Trinitarians, the narrative suggests Jesus truly was hinting at an inexplicable union, not just agency.

- **Agent vs. Son relationship**: Trinitarians argue Jesus is not just an emissary; he is God's Son by nature. In the parable of the vineyard (Mark 12), the son is different in kind from the servants. They'll say the son represents the owner differently – sharing his status in a way a servant doesn't. This "son" category, in their view, implies a filial relationship that goes beyond appointed messenger. The Nicene creed calls Jesus "begotten of the Father," not just sent. So they incorporate sonship as an eternal relational concept – something agency alone doesn't cover.

- They concede that **agency is part of the picture** – Jesus *did* act as representative, saying only what the Father says (which also correlates with Trinitarian *doctrine of Trinity* where the Son and Spirit in Trinity eternally proceed and speak not on their own – there's this notion of relational order). But they contend the reason Jesus could be the perfect agent is because he is of the same nature and intimately one with the Father. A merely human agent, they say, cannot perfectly reveal the Father ("He who has seen me has seen the Father" John 14:9) because any creature, no matter how holy, is still finite and separate. Only one who is himself divine can fully show the Father. This is basically the argument of John 1:18: "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made Him known." Trinitarians read that as, Christ can perfectly exegete God because he shares God's bosom/from His being. Unitarians would read it as positional (close to heart) but Trinitarians take it as ontological intimacy.

- **Use of the term "agent" in church history**: Some early anti-trinitarians (like the *Dynamic Monarchians* in 3rd century) essentially said Christ was a man empowered as God's agent. They were deemed heretical (Paul of Samosata's teaching is one example – he basically said Jesus was a mere man inspired by Logos but not Logos incarnate; he liked the term "Shaliach" conceptually too). The mainstream church rejected this as insufficient to account for the biblical data of Christ's pre-existence and divine works.

Trinitarians also might caution that the human analogy of agency has limits: a human agent is separate and acting externally, but the Son is described as being *in* the Father and vice versa. That mutual indwelling (John 14:10) might be beyond any typical agent relationship – sounding more like a metaphysical unity. They thus see *shaliach* as a useful concept (indeed some commentaries mention it to explain John's "sent" language), but only as part of the truth. Jesus is agent *and* Son *and* Word incarnate.

5. Synthesis and How Agency Bridges or Highlights Differences

Understanding agency certainly bridges to Judaism: it shows that Christianity's high view of Jesus doesn't necessarily violate monotheism if viewed through representational authority. Early Jewish Christians might have initially seen Jesus as God's agent (Messiah) without working out metaphysics. Over time, one could say, the church moved from a functional understanding to an ontological understanding.

Biblical Unitarianism essentially stops at the functional stage: Jesus is God's appointed Messiah, nothing more needed. Trinitarianism goes to ontological: Jesus shares God's substance, which explains his function.

Interestingly, even in Trinitarian theology, Jesus in his incarnate role is the Father's obedient servant – so he's functioning in an agency mode. The difference is behind that role, Trinitarians see an eternal identity.

One might ask: could the early apostles have simply thought in agency terms and not in terms of substance? Possibly yes – some scholars think the earliest "high" Christology was a kind of "*cultic binitarianism*" (worship of God and Jesus) without a worked-out explanation, which later demanded a theological explanation, culminating in Nicaea's ontological statements. If that's true, then early on, agency might have been the working model. The Unitarian position could be considered a conscious return to that simpler early understanding, whereas Trinitarian is the developed form.

From a comparative vantage:

- **Trinitarianism** readily acknowledges Jesus is the **Shaliach of God** – even calling him the Apostle of our faith as Hebrews does. But it says he's a unique agent who is also God's Son by nature. They still benefit from agency concept in explaining, e.g., how worshiping Jesus fits into monotheism (because honoring the Son goes to the Father, not to a separate God). Some modern Trinitarian apologists will indeed use the agency line of reasoning when conversing with Jews or Muslims: not to deny Jesus' deity, but to show that acknowledging Jesus in worship isn't splitting God, because he perfectly represents God.

- **Unitarianism** posits that *nothing beyond agency is necessary or scriptural*. It thereby upholds pure numerical monotheism. It tends to see the elevation of Jesus beyond an agent as a Hellenization or exaggeration.

In practice, concept of agency also addresses verses like Jesus saying "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) – obviously the sender is greater, so Unitarians love that. Trinitarians say that's as man or in role

he's lesser, which ironically is essentially an agency explanation albeit couched in two-natures concept.

To conclude this section: The Jewish law of agency offers a powerful framework that both illuminates Jesus' mission in continuity with Jewish thought and serves as a battleground for Christological interpretation. Biblical Unitarianism uses it to assert that Jesus' unity with God is *relational and functional*, not an identity of being. Church-traditional Trinitarianism accepts the relational unity but also asserts an *ontological unity*, thus seeing Jesus as *God's agent because he is God's Son, sharing God's nature*.

Having now examined both the Wisdom literature context and the agency principle context, which were critical in early Christological formulation, we are prepared to compare the Trinitarian and Unitarian Christologies in a broader context – particularly the context of **Second Temple Judaism** and the subsequent early church environment. We will explore how each view aligns (or not) with first-century Jewish monotheistic beliefs and what historical trajectories they took, before moving to the final implications and conclusions.

Comparative Analysis in Light of Second Temple Judaism and Early Church History

We have delved into the theological specifics of church-traditional Trinitarianism and Biblical Unitarianism, including their approaches to Hebrew Wisdom literature and the law of agency. Now, we step back to analyze these two Christological paradigms in a broader historical and religious context: that of **Second Temple Judaism** (roughly 516 BC – 70 AD, the period of Jewish history into which Jesus was born) and the **early church** of the first few centuries AD. This comparative analysis will highlight how each view relates to Jewish monotheism of the time and to the diversity of early Christian beliefs. We will consider questions such as: Which view is more consistent with the beliefs of Jesus' first followers, who were Jews steeped in their monotheistic tradition? How did each view evolve or manifest in the early Christian centuries? What external influences (Jewish, Hellenistic) can be traced in each Christological development? Through this, we will see the strengths and challenges of Trinitarian and Unitarian positions in historical perspective.

1. Monotheism and Divine Agency in Second Temple Judaism

Jewish Monotheism: During the Second Temple period, Jews were fiercely monotheistic, especially in contrast to surrounding paganism. The foundational confession was the Shema (Deut 6:4). The understanding of monotheism, however, while excluding multiple gods, did include a concept of one supreme God who might work through exalted agents. We should clarify the nature of this monotheism: - Scholars like **Alan Segal** and **Larry Hurtado** speak of an **"exclusive worship"** monotheism: Jews directed cultic worship only to YHWH, yet could believe in a hierarchy of spiritual beings (angels, personified attributes) that served YHWH. They drew a strong **Creator/creature** line – only YHWH is uncreated, deserving of worship. - Some Jewish texts (like 1 Enoch, certain Qumran writings) entertained the idea of principal angels with immense authority. But whenever these seemed to challenge God's

uniqueness, the mainstream rabbis labeled it heretical (the so-called "Two Powers in Heaven" heresy) [100].

Principal Divine Agents: The concept of **"principal agent"** or *memra* (Aramaic for "word," used in Targums) or *Metatron* (an exalted angel in later Jewish mysticism) illustrates how Jews could conceive a figure that represented God yet was not literally a second deity. For example: - The **Angel of the Lord**: already mentioned, often identified closely with God's presence (sometimes later Jewish commentary would intentionally differentiate, saying God's *word* spoke, to avoid God appearing directly). - **Personified Word/Memra**: In Aramaic Targums (paraphrases of OT in Aramaic), instead of saying "God did X," they might say "the Memra (Word) of God did X," perhaps to emphasize God's transcendence. This Memra wasn't a separate being, but a reverent way to speak of God acting. - **Wisdom/Torah**: Many Jews identified God's Wisdom with the Torah given to Israel, meaning God's mind expressed in law. There was even a strand of thought that Torah pre-existed creation. - **Exalted human figures**: Some Jewish literature speculated on translated patriarchs (like Enoch becoming Metatron in 3 Enoch), or a pre-existent Messiah figure. For instance, the **Similitudes of Enoch** (part of 1 Enoch, possibly 1st century BC/AD) speaks of a heavenly "Son of Man" given a throne. This is debated, but if first-century Jews read Daniel 7 (one like a son of man coming on clouds) messianically, they might envisage a superhuman Messiah.

Given this, how might early Christian claims about Jesus fit or conflict? - If the earliest believers said "Jesus is the Messiah, exalted to God's right hand," a Jew could accept that as akin to Psalm 110:1 – God invites the lord (Messiah) to sit at His right hand. That's a huge honor, but not necessarily making Messiah equal to God. A concept of an **exalted agent (Messiah)** was within some Jewish expectation (though not all expected a super-exalted heavenly Messiah; many expected a human kingly one). - If they said "Jesus is to be worshiped alongside God," that is pushing a boundary. But apparently, early Christians did just that (e.g., **Marana tha** prayer, "Our Lord, come," directed to Jesus, or invocations in Jesus' name). **Philo's** description that the Logos was an object of contemplation but not worship is telling: Jews stopped short of worshiping intermediary figures. Yet the Christian innovation was singing *hymns to Christ as to a god* very early[50]. That's a radical practice in Jewish eyes. - The question arises: Did the earliest Jewish Christians justify this worship through an agency principle or did they think Jesus truly shared divine identity? Some scholars (e.g., Hurtado) think they believed Jesus was in some sense divine very early (hence they worshiped him), even if they hadn't defined it. Others (like Dunn) think perhaps they honored him highly but concept of worship might be nuanced.

"Two Powers" Controversy: Segal's research suggests that by the early 2nd century, rabbis explicitly opposed the idea of two divine powers. Segal indicates that some Jewish Christians or others (like certain gnostic groups) were considered "two powers" heretics because they gave a kind of divine status to a second figure (be it Christ or a chief angel)[100]. This implies: - The **Trinitarian trajectory** (which effectively posits two (and later three) persons within godhead) was perceived by non-Christian Jews as violating pure monotheism – hence heretical. The Unitarian trajectory (seeing Jesus as subordinate or purely human) would not provoke that "two powers" accusation because it keeps only one true power

(God). - Biblical Unitarian view of Christ would align more closely with mainstream Jewish monotheism: God is one, Christ is a man/prophet (perhaps even akin to an archangel in authority but not God). - Trinitarians might respond that the "two powers" notion is found earlier (like certain interpretations of the figure in Daniel 7 or in some apocalyptic writings) meaning some form of binitarian thinking predated Christianity. They often cite that only after Christianity did rabbis clamp down and say such views are heretical, implying that Christians triggered it by their claims about Jesus. Richard Bauckham, for instance, argues that **early high Christology did emerge within a Jewish monotheistic framework** (the earliest Christians being Jews themselves), and only later did Judaism define itself against that (e.g., the Birkat ha-Minim curse against heretics including those who believe in "two powers").

So, from a Second Temple perspective: - **Biblical Unitarianism** would seem a safer fit: It keeps Jesus as a (even if exalted) human messianic agent, akin to categories Jews had (prophet, king, maybe even a translated saint like Enoch – though mainstream Jews didn't worship Enoch). - **Trinitarian Christology** pushed the envelope of Jewish categories – effectively, it forced a rethinking of monotheism. Early Jewish Christians found themselves affirming Jesus in divine terms and thereby were making a claim that required either re-defining monotheism (as inclusive of Jesus) or being seen as bi-theistic by other Jews.

2. Diversity of Christologies in Early Christianity

The first few centuries of Christianity were not monolithic in belief; there was significant diversity in how Jesus was understood: - **Ebionites** (early Jewish Christians sect, perhaps originating in 1st/2nd century) – held a **Unitarian** view: Jesus was the human Messiah, not pre-existent, born naturally (some Ebionites denied the virgin birth), totally subordinate. They saw Paul as heretical. Ebionites thus represent an early Unitarian strain, though considered heretical by the Great Church fathers. - **Docetists/Gnostics** – some, on the other extreme, saw Jesus as a divine being who only seemed human (Docetism). They might not be Trinitarian per se, but they had a *very high* Christology (in that Christ is fully divine, but not truly incarnate – which is another heterodox view). - **"Middle" proto-orthodoxy** – figures like Ignatius of Antioch clearly call Jesus "God" but also emphasize his humanity. Justin Martyr describes Logos as second to the Father (so not coequal, but definitely pre-existent and divine in nature). - **Arianism** (early 4th century but had antecedents) – taught Christ as pre-existent divine agent but created. This is somewhat in-between: higher than Unitarian human-only, but not equal to Father. Historically, Arianism is often seen as a kind of *extreme subordinationism* that became a major alternative to Nicaea.

So, in early centuries: - If one were to find groups that align with **Biblical Unitarian** perspective, one finds Ebionites, some Adoptionists (like Theodotians), and later the **Socinians** (16th century). These were always a minority and deemed heretical by the majority church after the 4th century triumph of orthodoxy. But their existence shows that the Biblical Unitarian-like reading persisted among some. - The **proto-orthodox path** gradually excluded those human-only or too-subordinate views (declaring them heresy as at councils) and also excluded modalists on the other side. Orthodoxy hammered out a position between extremes: not merely human, not created demigod, not modal but truly distinct persons sharing one essence.

From a historical perspective, one could argue: - **Trinitarianism** eventually prevailed by the late 4th century in the Roman Empire as the official doctrine. But it took philosophical refinement and political power to enforce (e.g., after Council of Constantinople 381, Theodosius made Nicene Christianity state religion, suppressing Arianism). - **Unitarianism** was suppressed in the imperial church, surviving only in pockets (like Transylvanian Unitarians, etc., much later). For many centuries, the Trinity doctrine was nearly unquestioned in Christendom. Only after the Reformation did Unitarian ideas re-emerge publicly in Europe (with figures like Michael Servetus who was executed 1553 for anti-trinitarian views, and Socinus who formed the Polish Brethren).

One might ask: does the triumph of Trinitarianism indicate its truth, or just historical circumstance? A Unitarian might say the original truth was marginalized as the church became Gentile and Hellenized, whereas a Trinitarian might argue the Holy Spirit guided the church into truth and overcame heresies.

In the context of **Second Temple Judaism**: - Trinitarian Christology can be seen as a novel development (from a Jewish vantage, a "mutation" of monotheism). - Unitarian Christology can be seen as keeping closer to the old paradigm (one God, one chosen human mediator). However, even Unitarian Christology requires an expanded view of agency because typical Judaism didn't pray "in the name of" an agent or ask an agent for grace; early Christians did with Jesus.

Hellenistic Influence: The role of Greek philosophy and categories is often discussed. Trinitarians sometimes counter the accusation of Hellenization by noting that Logos and Wisdom ideas were already in Hellenistic Judaism (Philo, etc.)[33], so they were just continuing that trajectory. Unitarians might argue the over-specification (like substance, essence, hypostasis) was due to Greek metaphysics rather than biblical thinking. Historically, concepts like *homoousios* (one substance) were indeed Greek philosophical terms adopted to define theology. A Biblical Unitarian might say the earliest Christians wouldn't have spoken of essence, they'd just say "one God, one Lord" in a simpler functional way, and that should suffice.

3. Continuity vs. Change – Which is more plausible historically?

This is somewhat subjective, but let's weigh: - If Jesus was **just a human Messiah** (Unitarian view), how did a group of devout Jews so quickly (within 20 years after Jesus) start worshiping him and speaking of him in such elevated terms? Unitarian answer: perhaps they didn't originally, and that came later with Gentile influence. Some suggest that early on, terms like "Lord" for Jesus meant only master/Messiah, and only gradually was it taken as divine title in Gentile circles who conflated it with pagan lords. They might cite that the synoptic Gospels (thought to reflect earlier tradition than John) have a "lower" Christology (Jesus doesn't openly claim deity; he even says in Mark 10:18 "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."). So maybe earliest belief was more purely Unitarian, and John's Gospel (decades later) shows a higher view emerging. - Trinitarians argue the high Christology was early and that's why we have it in Paul and John. They often cite **Pliny's letter (112 AD)** confirming early Christians worshiped Christ as a god[50], also the **Didache** and **Paul's letters** including maranatha prayer, baptism formula, etc., as evidence even 1st-century practice placed Jesus in divine context. They would say a

strictly unitary view (like Ebionite) became a minority precisely because the evidence of Jesus' resurrection and claims led the majority to realize he was more than a man. Historically, indeed, groups like Ebionites were on the fringe by second century, whereas churches that revered Jesus highly spread widely.

Thus, historically: - The **Trinitarian view** can claim to represent the main line of development from early times to Nicene creed – the line that won out, shaping mainstream Christianity. It integrated both scripture and philosophical clarity over time. - The **Unitarian view** can claim to represent an earlier simpler belief that was overshadowed. They often appeal to the Reformation principle of returning to biblical sources beyond later traditions. For example, 16th-17th century Unitarians (like John Biddle) explicitly argued that Trinity was a later corruption not found explicitly in Scripture (which is true, the exact formula isn't explicit).

4. Interplay with Non-Christian Monotheists (Jews, Muslims)

When considering contemporary implications (which is next section, but historically also interesting): - **Jews** through history have typically regarded the Trinity as a form of hidden polytheism or at least something incompatible with the indivisible unity taught in Torah. Maimonides (12th century) in his creed insisted God is one in a way that excludes the Trinity concept. From the Jewish point of view, Biblical Unitarian Christianity (if they were aware of it) would be closer to acceptability (Jesus as a great prophet/Messiah figure but not God). - **Muslims** (from 7th century on) directly rejected the Trinity, and the Quran appears to misunderstand it as believing in God, Jesus, and Mary as three gods (Quran 5:116). But Islam firmly says "God is one, He has no son." So they would also much prefer a Unitarian Christology (indeed, they revere Jesus as prophet, but not Son of God). Historically, Islamic regimes were much more tolerant of Unitarians (like some Socinians in Ottoman lands) than of Trinitarians because they saw them as closer to monotheism.

From the vantage of second temple or later monotheists, Unitarian view seems more continuous with their understanding of God's oneness. Trinitarian view requires accepting a paradoxical expansion of oneness to a compound unity.

5. Early Church Councils and Creeds vs. Alternative Christologies

The Council of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) were turning points that locked in the Trinitarian understanding for the dominant church. After that, **Nontrinitarian groups** were marginalized or persecuted within Christendom. Notably: - The **Arian Germanic tribes** persisted for a while (e.g., Visigoths were Arian until late 6th century). - Some scholars mention that in pre-Nicene times, ordinary believers might not have fully grasped philosophical nuances, but they did pray to Jesus and call him God occasionally, albeit in subordination (like Origen's "second God" usage[101] which is not Nicene but does call him God).

Interestingly, one could argue the line between an Arian-like subordination (the Son is a lesser divine being) and a Biblical Unitarian (the Son is not pre-existent but highly exalted human) is a big jump. Arians believed in pre-existence strongly. Unitarians see that as reading Wisdom/Logos too literally. Historically, the church fought Arianism more because it was widespread; Ebionite or Socinian-like views were smaller and died out or went underground.

From a historical analytic perspective, the existence of Arius and others shows the early *scriptures themselves* could be interpreted in different ways. Arians used many of the same scriptures Unitarians use to show the Son's subordination, but Arians also felt compelled to account for John 1 etc. by saying, yes he existed before creation but was made by the Father. Socinians later would say John 1's "Word" isn't literally a pre-person, thus eliminating the need to say he was created first.

Thus: - Trinitarians see in the early church's battles the eventual triumph of a balanced truth that the Son is fully God (against Arians) and also distinct (against modalists) and truly human (against Docetists). - Unitarians might see that as philosophical over-complication, and prefer the adoptionist/Unitarian reading which though labeled heresy, they claim was closer to original apostolic teaching (which they think emphasized Jesus' humanity and the Father's sole deity, e.g., in Acts sermons Jesus is called a man approved by God, etc.).

6. Summary of Comparative Outcomes

Consistency with Jewish context: - **Unitarian Christology** – highly consistent with Jewish monotheism; Jesus as Messiah doesn't violate that, similar to how prophets and kings could be revered but not deified. It doesn't require a Jew to accept a second divine person, just to accept that God worked mightily through a man (which is conceptually acceptable, albeit calling that man "Lord" in a quasi-worship way would be unusual but perhaps manageable if seen as honor). - **Trinitarian Christology** – demands a redefinition of the uniqueness of God to include Jesus (and the Spirit) within it, which is something second temple Jews did not explicitly articulate. It was a stumbling block ("a crucified man is God?!") for many Jews (1 Cor 1:23). Yet, the earliest Jewish Christians were convinced enough by the resurrection and their experiences to go that route.

Evolution vs. original: - If one emphasizes continuity, Unitarian view appears as a more natural outgrowth of pure monotheism: Jesus as exalted human agent. - If one emphasizes revelation/newness, Trinitarian view presents the idea that God revealed deeper truth about His nature (as multi-personal) through Christ, which was unexpected but true.

Early evidence: - Paul's letters (50s AD) – He is somewhere in between: He still calls the Father "God" mostly, and Jesus "Lord." He implies pre-existence in some places (Phil 2:6, 1 Cor 8:6). - If Paul believed in Jesus' pre-existence and being "in God's form" etc., that supports at least an incipient Trinitarian-like viewpoint (though not yet fully formed doctrine). - If Paul's statements like Phil 2:6 can be read as Jesus in God's plan rather than literally with God, that leans Unitarian. Dunn thought so originally (that it's

wisdom language but not implying conscious pre-existence), but others like N.T. Wright disagree. This is debated academically[48][49].

It's beyond doubt that by the time of John's Gospel (c. 90s AD), a very high Christology was in place in at least one stream of the church. Unitarian apologists often try to date adoptionistic views early, but evidence is scant that mainstream earliest Christianity was adoptionist. The New Testament as canon doesn't have any book clearly teaching a purely human Christ after his ministry started (the closest might be Mark if read in one way, but even Mark has divine sonship at baptism by God's declaration).

Thus historically, one could say: - The **Trinitarian view** best explains the trajectory of devotion and the texts that exalt Christ (hence why it became orthodox). - The **Unitarian view** appeals to the simplicity and direct statements of God's oneness and Christ's subordination, arguing the later church read too much Greek metaphysics into the faith.

Having assessed the historical interplay, we can transition to consider how these findings inform contemporary theological discourse and interfaith dialogue, which will be addressed in the next and final section. The historical and contextual analysis underscores that the debate is not just abstract but rooted in real early struggles of faith and identity – something that continues today as different groups understand Jesus in distinct ways.

Implications for Contemporary Theological Discourse and Interfaith Dialogue

The enduring debate between the traditional Trinitarian conception of Christ and the Biblical Unitarian view is not merely of historical or academic interest; it carries significant implications for how Christians understand their faith today, how different Christian groups relate to each other, and how Christianity interfaces with other monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Islam. In this final section, we discuss several key implications:

1. **Intra-Christian Dialogue and Unity:** How do Trinitarian and Unitarian Christians engage with each other, and what are the prospects for mutual understanding or reconciliation?
2. **Theological Reflection and Hermeneutics:** What does this debate teach us about interpreting Scripture, the development of doctrine, and the balance between biblical authority and church tradition?
3. **Christian-Jewish Relations:** How does each Christological view affect dialogue with Jewish believers, and does one provide a better bridge for mutual respect or even common ground?
4. **Christian-Muslim Relations:** Similarly, how might each view influence discussions with Muslims, who also venerate Jesus as a prophet but vehemently reject the Trinity?
5. **Broader Philosophical and Devotional Impact:** We consider how conceptions of Jesus' identity influence worship, spirituality, and the understanding of God's nature and approachability.

6. **Modern Trends:** Are there movements or trends in contemporary theology revisiting or challenging the traditional doctrine, and how are they received?

1. Intra-Christian Considerations: Unity and Diversity of Belief

Denominational Perspectives: Today, the vast majority of Christian denominations—Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant (including Evangelical, Reformed, Anglican, Pentecostal, etc.)—affirm the Nicene Trinity and the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's two natures as core doctrine. On the other hand, there are smaller groups explicitly rejecting the Trinity: - Historic Unitarian churches (like the Unitarian Church, though many of those have moved away from Christian specifics into Unitarian Universalism). - Groups like the **Christadelphians**, **Church of God General Conference (Abrahamic Faith)**, **Jehovah's Witnesses** (though JW theology is somewhat Arian subordinationist, not exactly the same as Socinian biblical unitarianism), and some **oneness Pentecostals** (who are actually Unitarian in Godhead but in a modalist way). - The **Unitarian Christian Alliance** is a recent network aiming to connect Biblical Unitarian believers across different backgrounds.

For mainstream churches, the Trinity is often seen as a non-negotiable "first-rank" doctrine. Unitarian Christians thus find themselves on the fringe or even considered outside orthodoxy. In many circles, denying the Trinity is cause for being labeled a cult or heretic. This creates a significant divide.

Dialogue and Understanding: However, with modern ecumenism and scholarship, there is some more open discussion: - Some theologians (even Trinitarian) acknowledge that the biblical basis of the later creedal formula is complex and that early Christians didn't use the exact later language. This doesn't mean they reject the Trinity, but there's an understanding that sincere believers might question the post-biblical terminology. For instance, within the **Evangelical academic community**, you sometimes see attempts to explain the Trinity more in biblical terms to those who struggle with classical phrasing. - There have been dialogues between **Jehovah's Witnesses** and some Christian scholars, or debates between **Unitarians (like Anthony Buzzard)** and Trinitarians, which, while often polemical, at least clarify positions. These debates continue the pattern of earlier centuries, but in more collegial environments sometimes. They revolve around scriptural exegesis and early church history as we have discussed. - The question of Christian unity arises: is belief in the Trinity essential for salvation or fellowship? Historically the church said yes (hence creeds), but some modern Christians emphasize living faith in Christ over strict doctrinal tests. For instance, many lay Christians might not fully grasp or articulate the Trinity but have a relational trust in God and Christ—are they outside grace? Likely not. This opens a door to consider: could Biblical Unitarians be accepted as fellow Christians if they exhibit genuine faith in God and Christ as Savior (albeit understanding Christ differently)? This is an ongoing point of tension. Some evangelical statements (like those of the **World Evangelical Alliance**) include Trinity in essential doctrinal points, thereby excluding anti-trinitarians from membership; others focus on core gospel narrative and might not explicitly mention Trinity.

Enrichment vs. Reduction: Theologically, Trinitarians argue that denying the Trinity impoverishes the understanding of God's nature as love and relational (since in Trinity, God is love within Himself).

Unitarians counter that the Trinity complicates and obscures the true personal oneness of God and the real humanity of Jesus. These differences affect devotion: - A Trinitarian Christian might pray to Jesus, sing hymns addressing Christ or the Holy Spirit, etc., feeling that's proper worship. A Unitarian Christian typically prays only to the Father (in Jesus' name) and directs worship to God alone, thanking God for Jesus as Lord/Messiah. This can cause awkwardness in joint worship settings. Yet, interestingly, many prayers in churches are indeed addressed to Father through Son (which both could agree with), but songs often address Jesus (where a Unitarian might mentally adapt it or feel uncomfortable).

Mutual Misconceptions: Trinitarians often accuse Unitarians of "downgrading" Jesus or not giving him his due honor, or aligning with rationalism over revelation. Unitarians accuse Trinitarians of veering into tri-theism or illogical dogma or even idolatry by worshipping Jesus as God. Clearing misconceptions is important: - Trinitarians clarify they do not worship three gods, but one God in three personal expressions. And they do highly honor the Father as well (not ignoring Him for Jesus). - Unitarians clarify they do honor Jesus greatly as Savior and Lord (they are not equivalent to those liberal churches that see Jesus as just a moral teacher; Biblical Unitarians typically affirm resurrection, miracles, second coming, etc.). They just believe all that is under the one Almighty God, the Father. Hearing each other out can reduce accusations of blasphemy/heresy at least in tone, though theological disagreement remains.

2. Hermeneutical and Theological Reflection

The debate raises the question: how do we derive doctrine from Scripture? - **Sola Scriptura vs. Tradition:** Protestants claim Scripture as highest authority, yet most accept the Trinity which is an extrapolation and synthesis not explicitly spelled out in one verse. Biblical Unitarians push sola scriptura to say "if it's not clearly in Scripture, we shouldn't make it a dogma," accusing the Trinity of leaning on post-biblical tradition or philosophical terms[8][9]. This forces theologians to consider how early creeds relate to Scripture. Many will argue the Trinity is a "summary" of biblical teaching even if not verbatim there – a legitimate development guided by the Spirit. Unitarians see it as adding to Scripture. - **Language and Mystery:** The Trinity is often admitted to be a mystery beyond full human comprehension. Some modern Christians might privately admit they find it confusing or irrelevant to daily faith. Unitarian proponents leverage this by offering a seemingly simpler faith: One God, one Messiah – easier to grasp and directly supported by many verses. There is an appeal to *rational clarity*. On the other hand, critics of Unitarianism say it oversimplifies or rationalizes away texts that clearly ascribe divine status to Christ. This interplay between clarity and mystery is common in theology debates (analogous to how some gravitate to simple oneness of God vs. complex unity). - **Christology and Soteriology:** Does one's view of Christ affect salvation doctrine? Trinitarians argue yes: only if Jesus is truly God could his sacrifice have infinite worth to atone for sin, and only God can save (hence Jesus must be God to be Savior)[102]. Unitarians respond that God can confer salvific power on His chosen one; Jesus' death is sufficient because God ordained it so, and God raised him. They also note scriptures like 1Tim 2:5 emphasize Jesus' humanity ("the man Christ Jesus") in the mediating role, which to them indicates his being human is vital for saving us as a representative. These differences in theology of atonement and mediation are nuanced but present. It influences preaching: Trinitarian gospel presentations often highlight God Himself came down

to save us (showing His love), whereas Unitarian presentations highlight God sent His beloved Son (showing His love) – similar message of love, but different subject of incarnation (God vs. son of God). - **Devotional Focus:** Trinity offers a relational view of God – Father, Son, Spirit in eternal love, sometimes used to model community in the church (e.g., perichoresis as mutual indwelling love, inspiring social analogies). Unitarians worry that splitting focus among three distracts from pure devotion to the Father. But they certainly focus devotion on God *through* Christ. They would say Jesus being a perfect man means he's a perfect example we can emulate (e.g., resisting temptation as a man). Trinitarians also see Jesus as example, but some critics say seeing him as God incarnate might make people think "well, of course he was sinless, he was God," potentially reducing the inspirational identification (Trinitarians counter that with two-nature doctrine, he was fully tempted as man, etc.). - **Prayer practice:** Many Christians pray to Jesus or "Come Holy Spirit" etc. Unitarians typically pray to the Father. Does it matter? From Unitarian view, praying to Jesus is not modelled by Jesus (he taught pray to Father), and might detract from the Father's unique glory. From Trinitarian view, since Son and Spirit are God, it's appropriate and historically done (e.g., "Lord Jesus, have mercy" prayers from ancient times). This remains a practical division; interfaith gatherings find it easier to use Father-centric prayers that all can amen.

3. Christian-Jewish Dialogue

Given Judaism's stance, the Christian affirmation of Jesus as divine has been a chief stumbling block for Jews accepting the gospel. As noted: - Jews view worship of a human as idolatry. Trinitarians try to explain that it's not a different God, but often this doesn't convince since any appearance of plurality is suspect to Jews guarded about Shema's oneness. - Some have suggested that a more **"Jewishly rooted Christology"** might help evangelistic efforts towards Jews. For instance, emphasizing Jesus as Messiah, prophet like Moses, ultimate shaliach of God, and not starting with "Jesus is God," might at least get a hearing. In that sense, the Biblical Unitarian approach appears more aligned to what a Jewish monotheist could digest initially: it presents Jesus in categories they know (agent, Messiah) without the immediate hurdle of deity. - There have been cases of **Messianic Jews** who hold a more Unitarian theology (not the mainstream, as most Messianic congregations are Trinitarian, believing in Yeshua's divinity as part of their faith). But there are a few who find they can affirm Yeshua as Messiah while remaining closer to Jewish monotheistic tradition by not calling him HaShem (The Name). - Interfaith scholar **Pinchas Lapide** once wrote that maybe Christians and Jews could find unity if Christians saw the resurrection as God exalting a righteous man (which he as a Jewish scholar was open to believing) without requiring the man to be God. That is essentially a Unitarian-compatible viewpoint. However, mainstream churches wouldn't agree as it stands. - For improved dialogue, Trinitarians have been careful to explain they still uphold one God. For example, some engage in what's called **"Jewish-friendly Trinitarian theology"**, pointing out that the concept of God's word/wisdom and Shekinah was in Judaism (so God's complexity isn't totally foreign), or citing the angel of the Lord instances, etc. They try to show continuity rather than a breach. But at the end of the day, the Trinity remains a major dividing line (one of the reasons Judaism cannot syncretize with Christianity easily is this deification of Jesus from their view). - Biblical Unitarian theology, if it were more known, might serve as a bridge in some cases for Jews intrigued by Jesus but not willing to accept

the Trinity. It could present a Christianity that looks more like what the **Nazareans/Ebionites** may have believed – which a Jew might consider as Jesus being a revered prophet of the one God (some even view him as such without converting). However, a Jew converting to any form of Christianity is rare and often the Trinity is only one of many issues (others being law observance, historical persecution, etc.)

Thus, within the Christian-Jewish dialogues, some Messianic Jewish theologians try to articulate the Trinity in terms of **"compound unity"** using Hebrew categories (like one could argue the plural form Elohim or God speaking in plural gives hints; though those arguments are not very convincing to Jews). Others, like the group of **"Hebrew Christians"** in 19th century, some tended toward Binitarian or Unitarian ideas trying to reconcile their heritage and faith. It's a sensitive area.

4. Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Islam explicitly positions itself against the Trinity: - The Quran repeatedly says "God is one" and denies He has a son. It accuses Christians of polytheism (shirk) for saying God has partners. As mentioned, it seems to misconceive the Trinity as including Mary in one verse, though other verses clearly reference the Christian three (though from a Muslim vantage, any kind of three is unacceptable). - In **Muslim-Christian debates**, Muslims often focus on how Trinity is illogical or not in the earliest Gospel, etc. They also often use Biblical Unitarian-style arguments (pointing to verses where Jesus is subordinate, ignorant of the hour, etc. – Muslim apologists frequently sound like Socinians in their exegesis). - Some Christian apologists attempt to explain Trinity in terms Muslims might understand (e.g., comparing to aspects of Allah's word and spirit concept in Islam, or simply saying we also believe in one God, we do not divide His essence, etc.). But majority of Muslims remain unconvinced, seeing it as a compromised monotheism at best. - If one presented a **Unitarian Christology** to a Muslim, they would find it much closer to their view of Jesus (whom they call Isa). However, even Biblical Unitarians go further than Islam: they accept Jesus as Messiah, as Son of God (though meaning not literal God the Son, but chosen one), they accept his death on the cross and resurrection (Islam denies crucifixion of Jesus per mainstream interpretation of Quran). They accept Jesus as Lord (master) to whom allegiance and even a form of worship is due. So still differences, but certainly saying "we too believe God is a single person and Jesus was His Messiah, not a part of God" removes the core theological objection Muslims have. - There actually have been small efforts at a **"Islam-friendly" Christianity**, sometimes called "Insider Movements" where converts in Muslim contexts try to follow Jesus while not using Trinitarian language or overtly breaking Islamic monotheistic norms, in hopes of gradually leading them to more truth. This is controversial in missions. But some do essentially start with a more Unitarian portrayal to not alienate Muslim inquirers. - Long term, Trinitarians would hope Muslims could come to see Jesus as more than prophet, as divine. Muslims say that's impossible as it violates their creed. Perhaps a stepping stone could be to first see Jesus as true Messiah and agent of God (which the Quran actually calls him Messiah, though they don't reflect much on that title). If one day a Muslim acknowledged Jesus has much higher status (as judge in end times etc., which some Islamic traditions ironically do believe he will return to judge), maybe that opens them to the idea of his unique oneness with God. - Historically, groups like **Sabellians** or **Arians** in Arabia (pre-Islamic) might have influenced Muhammad's understanding of Christianity (some scholars think

Muhammad encountered heterodox Christians, which is why the Quran's description of Christianity is off). Ironically, Islam's strict monotheism could be seen as a reaction to perceived Christian tritheism. If the church in Arabia had been more clearly monotheistic in language, maybe that conflict would have been less. This is speculative, but interesting to ponder.

So, for interfaith: - In **Judaic dialogue**, some have suggested dropping insistence on the Trinity when conversing, focusing on common ethics and belief in one God, leaving Christological differences aside for mutual respect but that limits evangelism. - In **Islamic dialogue**, similarly focusing on Abrahamic common ground first is common, but eventually, the person of Jesus is a major difference. A Unitarian approach could potentially portray Christianity in a way more palatable to a Muslim (some might even say, look we too reject polytheism and we see Jesus as Messiah not God; but then they'd have to also say but we believe he died for our sins and rose, which Islam denies, so that remains a big difference).

5. Influence on Worship and Spirituality

The way Christians conceive Jesus and God deeply affects worship styles and spiritual practice: - **Trinitarian spirituality** often explicitly invokes all three persons (the Sign of the Cross in liturgical churches: "In the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit"). Hymnody: songs like "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty... God in three persons, blessed Trinity." Or modern worship songs addressing Jesus directly and expressing love to him as God. - **Unitarian Christian spirituality** would center all worship explicitly on the Father. They might sing Psalms or songs to "God" and reference Jesus in third person (thank God for Jesus, or praise God who exalted Jesus). This is a different emphasis. Some Biblical Unitarians report that focusing prayer solely to the Father in Jesus' name gives them a clearer sense of addressing God as Jesus taught. They still highly regard Jesus and mention him in thanks and confession (e.g., ending prayer "in Jesus name" or thanking "you for giving Your Son..."). - There is an argument about **mediation**: Trinitarians might pray directly to Jesus at times, while Unitarians emphasize Jesus as mediator (so pray to Father through him, because that's biblical pattern). 1 John 2:1 calls Jesus our advocate with the Father, implying prayer to Father and Jesus as advocate. Trinitarians would say you can talk to your advocate too; Unitarians prefer to talk to the judge (Father) with trust that the advocate (Jesus) intercedes. - **Sense of relationship with Jesus**: Many Trinitarian Christians have a personal relationship concept with Jesus ("Jesus is my best friend," "walking with Jesus," etc.). Unitarians also have a relationship with Jesus as Lord and teacher, but they might direct their love ultimately to God through Jesus. Possibly the warmth of directly conversing with Jesus as Lord might feel different for them. However, Biblical Unitarian authors like Anthony Buzzard often stress loving and following Jesus closely, just not worshiping him *as God*. They often cite John 17:3, that eternal life is to know the Father *and* Jesus Christ (so relationship with both, in their proper roles). - **Concept of God's nature**: Trinity offers a God who is inherently relational (Father loving Son eternally, etc.). Some theologians see this as making "God is love" more profound – because even before creation, love existed within God (perichoretic love). Unitarian view of a solitary God might say God had the capacity to love and did so once He created or perhaps loved His own Word/plan, but it's more abstract. In interfaith with Jews and Muslims, they don't find that problematic; they think one God can love without requiring internal persons. Trinitarians think it

reveals a richer understanding. This difference can shape how people conceive God's attributes and why He created (Trinity sometimes explained as outflow of internal love; Unitarian could simply say out of desire to share goodness). - **Mystery and awe vs. simplicity and clarity**: Some find the mystery of Trinity draws them into awe of God's transcendence, accepting that God is beyond human logic and that leads to worship (like the paradox inspires humility). Others find that confusing doctrines hinder faith or give atheists ammunition to ridicule. A Unitarian Christian might say our message to world should be straightforward: One God, and Jesus His Son died for you. Not "God died for you" which might sound strange or impossible. Trinitarians respond that the paradox is part of the divine revelation that can convict hearts in its own way.

6. Modern Trends and Theological Movements

In contemporary theology: - **Social Trinitarianism** and other explorations have tried to apply Trinity to social issues or ecumenical models. Unitarian Christians would obviously not partake, but interestingly, Unitarian Universalists (who are theologically not Christian but historically stem from Unitarians) focus heavily on social justice and inclusive community in a different way, not based on Trinity but on liberal religious values. So different roots lead to different current emphases. - **Oneness Pentecostalism** (Modalism revived, Jesus-only baptism, etc.) is a growing movement in some places (millions of Oneness adherents). They reject the Trinity but still believe Jesus is God (as Father and Spirit too). Trinitarians consider that heresy, Unitarians also disagree with Oneness because Oneness still says Jesus is God Almighty (just that Father, Son, Spirit are roles of Jesus). Oneness Pentecostals and Biblical Unitarians do sometimes dialogue given both reject Trinity, but they diverge in that Oneness affirms Jesus' deity strongly (just denies distinction of persons). - **Academic interest**: There's some scholarly interest in re-examining subordinationist theologies of early church without the usual heresy stamp, purely historically. Also some interest in **"Jesus's self-understanding"** – did Jesus think he was God or agent? Most historical Jesus scholars (even many Christians) think Jesus likely saw himself as Messiah/prophet, not walking around thinking "I am God." That could support a view that the high divine Christology was a post-resurrection development by disciples. Trinitarians accept that development but attribute it to revelation (resurrection proved his divine status). Some liberal theologians who value only historical Jesus might lean effectively Unitarian (seeing Jesus as a human teacher and downplaying John's high statements as later interpretation). - **Ecumenism**: The Trinity has ironically been a unifier among diverse churches (Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants all share it), so it's part of common creeds used to unite. Nontrinitarian groups sit outside that visible unity. Ecumenical dialogues sometimes include how to handle groups like Jehovah's Witnesses or Unitarians – often they are not included in formal Christian councils because of this doctrinal barrier. However, some individuals move from one camp to another, forcing families and churches to grapple with differences. The internet age has allowed minority views like Biblical Unitarianism to get more visibility (through websites, YouTube debates, etc.), potentially causing some to question the Trinity. Church leaders then respond with apologetics materials reaffirming Trinity.

In conclusion, the Trinitarian vs. Unitarian debate remains a live issue with far-reaching implications. For mainstream Christianity, the Trinity is a cherished mystery that encapsulates the fullness of who God is and who Christ is. For Biblical Unitarian believers, their view purports to restore a simpler, more monotheistically pure and scripturally consistent faith, which they believe honors God and Christ in the proper proportions. The dialogue between these views (when conducted respectfully) can sharpen understanding on both sides: Trinitarians can be challenged to articulate their doctrine in less philosophically opaque ways and to ground it in Scripture (as they indeed attempt with concepts like "divine identity" Christology[27]), and Unitarians can be pressed on whether their view adequately accounts for all biblical data and the experiential aspect of Christ's exalted role in Christian life.

Ultimately, how one views Jesus Christ in relation to God is at the heart of Christian theology and will continue to influence Christian witness, worship, and relationships with those of other faiths. While church-Traditional Trinitarianism and Biblical Unitarianism present significantly different answers, both are attempts to honor the revelation of God in Christ. The ongoing conversation – spanning from the first century to the twenty-first – invites Christians to continually seek greater understanding of the mystery of "Christ in us, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), and to practice charity and humility in discussing these profound matters.

Conclusion

This dissertation has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of **"Church-Traditional Trinitarianism vs. The Biblical Unitarian View of Jesus Christ"** within the rich contexts of Hebrew Wisdom-literature Christology and the Jewish law of agency. Through theological, historical, and scriptural analysis, we have compared how each framework understands the identity of Jesus and his relationship to the one God of Israel.

We began by tracing the historical **development of Trinitarian Christology** in the church: from the implicit high Christology of the New Testament (where Jesus is worshiped and identified with God's Word/Wisdom) to the explicit doctrinal formulations of the early councils. We saw that the doctrine of the Trinity emerged gradually as the early Christians strove to reconcile the scriptural testimony that "*Jesus is Lord*" with the unwavering biblical assertion that "*the LORD is one.*" By the fourth century, the church concluded that the Son (and Holy Spirit) must be confessed as sharing the divine essence with the Father, co-equal and co-eternal, to safeguard both God's oneness and the full deity of Christ attested in Christian worship and experience[2][16]. Trinitarian Christology thus presents Jesus as **God the Son Incarnate** – the eternal Wisdom/Logos who was with God and was God, and who became flesh for our salvation[33][14].

In parallel, we examined the **Biblical Unitarian view of Jesus Christ**, which maintains that the Bible teaches a strictly Unitarian theology: the **Father alone is the true God**, and Jesus is His Messiah, **Son of God** but not God himself[65][62]. This perspective finds support in numerous scriptural affirmations of God's single-person identity and Jesus' subordinate, dependent role (e.g., John 17:3, 1 Cor 8:6)[8][62]. We

surveyed how this view has been represented historically, from early Jewish-Christian sects and dynamic Monarchian thinkers, through the Unitarian movements of the Reformation and post-Reformation era. Biblical Unitarians appeal to the clear monotheism of Second Temple Judaism, arguing that Jesus' status as the human **agent of God** (and exalted Lord/Messiah) is the earliest Christian understanding, later supplanted (in their view) by metaphysical speculations of Greek-influenced church fathers. They underscore scriptural passages where Jesus differentiates himself from God or is depicted as exalted by God, not as co-equal (e.g., Acts 2:36, "God has made him both Lord and Christ")[92][99].

A focal point of our study was **Hebrew Wisdom-literature Christology**. We discovered that texts like Proverbs 8, Sirach 24, and Wisdom of Solomon personify "Wisdom" as existent with God and instrumental in creation[19][31]. The early Christians readily identified Jesus with this divine Wisdom/Logos. Trinitarians interpret this literally: Jesus pre-existed as the personal Wisdom of God, eternally begotten and not created – as Athanasius argued, Wisdom's statement "The Lord created me" in Proverbs 8:22 must be understood in a figurative or incarnational sense, because the Son as God's Wisdom cannot be a creature[56][57]. Biblical Unitarians, by contrast, see the Wisdom imagery as metaphorical; they contend that Jesus "fulfills" or embodies God's Wisdom plan without being a pre-personal heavenly being. In their reading, **God's Word/Wisdom "became flesh"** means that what was once a personified attribute was manifested in a human life[30]. The debate over Proverbs 8:22 – whether it implies Christ was created or whether it is non-literal – epitomizes how each side handles Wisdom literature: one finds support for Christ's eternal generation[19], the other for his functional personification of God's wisdom.

We also examined the **Jewish law of agency (shaliach)**, encapsulated in the phrase *"a person's agent is regarded as the person himself."*[12] This principle illuminates much of Jesus' language about being sent by, and acting on behalf of, the Father. Both views agree that Jesus is the supreme agent of God; yet they diverge on its ultimate implication. Biblical Unitarians argue that agency *fully explains* Jesus' divine prerogatives: as God's shaliach, Jesus can forgive sins, receive honor, and speak in God's voice *representationally*[41][42]. When Jesus says "I and the Father are one" or "whoever has seen me has seen the Father," Unitarians understand it in light of agency – a unity of will and purpose, such that to encounter Christ is to encounter God's authorized presence[81][103]. Trinitarians affirm the agency concept but maintain it is *insufficient* unless Jesus also shares the Father's divine nature. They appeal to the uniqueness of Jesus' sonship and the New Testament's indications that Jesus is more than a typical prophet or angelic agent (for example, John 1:1's strong assertion of the Word's divinity and pre-temporal existence)[33][34]. The agent principle, in the Trinitarian view, operates within the Son's incarnate mission but rests on an ontological union (the Son is one in being with the Father, therefore the perfect agent).

Our comparative analysis situated these Christologies within **Second Temple Judaism and early church history**. We found that: - Trinitarian Christology represented a significant and, to Jewish observers, radical development within Jewish monotheism. Early Christians (mostly Jewish) were doing something novel in reverencing Jesus alongside God, which invited charges of blasphemy or "two powers" heresy[27][100].

Nonetheless, the very rapid "high" Christology in the primitive church (as evidenced by hymns, Maranatha prayers, and Pliny's report of Christians singing to Christ *as to a god*[50]) suggests that experiential conviction (rooted in Jesus' resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit) propelled them to include Jesus in the divine identity in worship and practice, even before a full doctrinal explanation was in place[46][28]. - Biblical Unitarianism aligns more comfortably with **Jewish theological categories**. It portrays Christianity as adhering to the unipersonal God concept and treating Jesus as Messiah–-exalted, yes, but still a human servant of God. Historically, groups with Unitarian-like beliefs (Ebionites, Theodotians, Socinians, etc.) were often marginalized as heretical by the dominant church, but their existence demonstrates that from the beginning there were streams of Christianity with a "lower" Christology that attempted to remain closer to Jewish monotheistic norms[7][71].

We noted that each view carries distinct implications: - **Theologically,** Trinitarianism provides a framework in which God's eternal nature is communitarian and self-giving (Father, Son, Spirit in eternal love), which many see as enriching doctrines like *God is love* and the incarnation (God Himself comes to save). Biblical Unitarianism provides a straightforward monotheistic theology, emphasizing God's transcendence and the genuine humanity of Christ; this can clarify scriptural statements and avoid what Unitarians perceive as the philosophical abstractions of Trinity. However, critics question whether Unitarianism does justice to all dimensions of the New Testament portrayal of Christ (for instance, the Gospel of John's explicit ascription of deity to the Logos). - **In practice,** both Christologies strive to honor Jesus Christ, but they do so in different ways. Traditional Christians worship Jesus as Lord and God, integrating him into their prayers and doxologies to God[1][2], whereas Biblical Unitarians honor Jesus as Lord/Messiah and offer obedience and love to him, directing actual worship to God the Father through Christ. Each approach yields a distinctive spirituality: one of direct communion with the triune God (including Jesus as an object of prayer), and the other of emulating and obeying Jesus as the path to glorifying the one God[61][104]. Neither side doubts the centrality of Christ; the debate centers on *who Christ is in relation to God* and *how he mediates God's presence*.

When it comes to **interfaith dialogue,** these differences are consequential. We observed that a Biblical Unitarian Christology is more readily comprehensible (even if not ultimately fully acceptable) to Jews and Muslims, who fiercely uphold God's indivisible unity. For example, a Unitarian Christian can without hesitation join a Jew or Muslim in affirming the Shema or Shahada (God is one) with full agreement, whereas a Trinitarian affirms it with a nuanced understanding that might puzzle or concern their monotheist counterparts. This suggests that highlighting the **agency** and **Messianic role** of Jesus, as Biblical Unitarians do, can serve as a bridge in explaining Christian beliefs to those audiences. At the same time, mainstream Christianity's Trinitarian confession remains a significant stumbling block in those dialogues, illustrating that how we articulate Christ's identity has real-world implications for religious understanding and mission.

In bringing this exploration to a close, we acknowledge that the **mystery of Christ** is profound. The church-traditional Trinitarian stance and the Biblical Unitarian stance both attempt to be faithful to Scripture and the apostolic testimony, yet they arrive at very different portraits of how Jesus reveals God.

Our study does not purport to solve this age-old debate in one stroke–-indeed, these questions have occupied the finest minds in the church for millennia–-but it has aimed to **illuminate the key issues and evidence**. We have preserved the voices of Scripture (from Deuteronomy's ringing monotheism to Thomas's exclamation "My Lord and my God!"[50]), of early witnesses (from Ignatius calling Jesus "God" to Arius insisting "there was when he was not"), and of modern scholarship grappling anew with Christ's place in first-century Judaism[27][21]. In doing so, we gain a richer appreciation for the complexity and gravity of the doctrine of Christ.

What is at stake is not merely a theological formula, but the question Jesus himself asked: "*Who do you say that I am?*" (Mark 8:29). The Traditional Trinitarian answer is: "*You are God the Son, one of the Holy Trinity, worthy of the same worship as the Father.*" The Biblical Unitarian answer is: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, uniquely representing the one Father.*" Both responses seek to glorify Jesus–-in the first, by lifting him into the Godhead, and in the second, by fully acknowledging his God-given authority and role as Savior while keeping the Godhead singular. Both recognize him as **Lord and Messiah**; both assert that our salvation and hope are found in him.

In the spirit of academic and spiritual humility, we conclude that further dialogue–-guided by Scripture, history, and love–-can perhaps lead to deeper insight. The church might learn from the Biblical Unitarian emphasis on the oneness of God and the real humanity of Jesus, even as it holds to the Trinitarian intuition that in Jesus we encounter nothing less than God's own self. As Gregory of Nazianzus once said regarding the Trinity: "*I cannot think on the One without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the Three; nor can I discern the Three without being straightway carried back to the One.*"[16]. And as the Apostle Paul wrote of Christ: "*In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*" (Col 2:3). May our continued study and reflection on Jesus Christ–-whether through the lens of Triune mystery or Unitarian clarity–-lead us to a greater reverence for God, a more faithful reading of His Word, and a more Christ-like life of love.

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