

## **Hegel, Jesus, and Judaism**

by Eric Michael Dale, Ph.D.

eric\_dale@emerson.edu

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*And, calm foreboding within his own soul, the Lord  
Pronounced his own death and ultimate love,  
Unable to find words enough for kindness,  
Nor words to cheer his sight of the raging world.  
For All is Good. Whereupon he died.  
Much could be said of this. --Hölderlin, Patmos*

### I. Introduction: Jesus Christ in the System

This essay explores Hegel's changing views about Jesus from his 1798 writings to his 1827 *Religionsphilosophie* by examining Jesus' relation to Judaism in Hegel's earlier writings.<sup>1</sup> This is not fruitfully done in his very earliest writings, such as "The Positivity of the Christian Religion" (1795), for there, Jesus is at best a Kantian moral teacher, or at worst he is as irrelevant as the empty theologies that proclaim him. In the "Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate" (1798), however, he evidences a direct turnaround from his Bern days and Jesus becomes a central concern of Hegel's religious writings for the next few years, until he, like Schelling, is drawn away into different philosophical realms. However, in important ways Hegel never really abandoned the theological project which exercised his imagination in his seminary days; his lectures on the philosophy of religion, given in 1821, 24, 27, and 31, are as important theologically as his rival Schleiermacher's own writings on religion, though the latter has had a more overtly theological impact on subsequent thought. Hegel's development of Judaism is central to his entire thinking on Jesus, and this centrality is best discovered by a close reading of his 1798 "Spirit" essay. Hegel's early thought, like that of many of his contemporaries, is quite antagonistic towards Judaism; for example, "The root of Judaism is the Objective, i.e. service, bondage to an alien Lord. This is what Jesus attacked."<sup>2</sup> However, as Hegel's philosophy of religion develops, so does his appreciation for the crucial role Judaism, the "religion of sublimity," plays in the outworking of spirit. And as Hegel's understanding of Judaism changes, Christ's role in his philosophy of religion begins to expand in important ways.

A more interesting subject might be Hegel's view of Judaism in 1798 and 1827, *without* the Christological implications. However, Jesus' relation to Judaism is determinative for the direction the rest of Hegel's philosophy of religion takes - in other words, Hegel's interpretation of Jesus and his interpretation of Judaism go hand in hand, from his early Kantian days to his later "completion" of the Kantian project. For example, in the 1798 essay, Jesus' relationship to Judaism is one of *opposition*. In the mature *Religionsphilosophie*, however, Jesus' stance toward Judaism, indeed toward all human religiosity, is not opposition, but *fulfillment*, and thus exemplifies the entire thrust of the Hegelian philosophy of absolute spirit. To be sure, the Jesus of Hegel's Frankfurt period was also a fulfillment of Judaism, and the fully developed philosophical figure of Christ which Hegel presents in the 1827 *Religionsphilosophie* stands opposed to Judaism as the religion of sublimity, as well as Greek, Roman, Chinese, and every other religion with which Hegel deals. But for Hegel, Jesus Christ played the crucial role in the development and the overthrow of purely human religion and religious thinking. For him, Jesus Christ is the appearance of God in the flesh, the fully subjective God made concrete, and his death and resurrection herald the founding of the Christian community of spirit. Therefore, to the extent that his *Religionsphilosophie* is the culmination of his entire philosophical project, once Hegel makes the decisive turn away from his Bern-era criticism of Christianity, his thinking about Jesus Christ becomes decisive for every other aspect of his philosophy of religion. To this extent, at least, Hegel's thinking about Jesus Christ literally bookends his philosophical output.

## II. Hegel's Bern-Era Kantianism and the Frankfurt *Kehre*

Hegel's time in Bern (1793-96) was marked by the political upheaval of the French Reign of Terror (1793-94), Hegel's trying and unsuccessful stint as a *Hofmeister* or private tutor to the aristocrats of Bernese society, and Hegel's contentious book-length essay "The Positivity of the Christian Religion" (1795-96). In this essay Hegel manages to sound very much like a hot young revolutionary, prepared to jettison the corruption he perceives as filling the seminaries and pulpits of the land with talk of a bourgeois Jesus and an all-powerful sacerdotalism, even in the Protestant bergs of Germany. By calling Christianity a "positive" religion, Hegel meant "any religion and its associated doctrines whose normative force depends on their being the established religion of a people. . . . *Positivity* . . . is that which relies only on the dictates of authority instead of those

dictates which come from ‘thinking for oneself.’”<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, Hegel sounds very much like Kant in this essay. For example, Hegel avers that “the aim and essence of all true religion, our religion included, is human morality, and that all the more detailed doctrines of Christianity, all means of propagating them, and all its obligations . . . have their worth and their sanctity appraised according to their close or distant connection with that aim.”<sup>4</sup> Morality, redefined by Hegel in terms of the *Geistliches Gesellschaft* manifesting in the state, will occupy Hegel on and off throughout his career, and he will return to it at the end of the *Religionsphilosophie*, but never is morality (as opposed to religion) so positively defined and defended as it is in Hegel’s overtly Kantian period. Hegel’s Jesus in the “Positivity” essay set out to found a religion not based upon external authority but on morality, a self-imposed Kantian morality which arises from the tension between freedom and duty. This self-imposition of an objective morality was a problem for Kant’s interpreters, however, and the tensions within it eventually lead Hegel and his fellow Kantians along very different paths than the ones trod by the master from Königsberg.

When Hegel moved from Bern to Frankfurt in 1796 he was very much under the sway of Fichte’s exciting new way to read Kant (in no small part due to the influence of his friends Schelling and Hölderlin), and the more or less straightforward Kantian view of religion in the “Positivity” essay has all but dropped away. As a matter of fact, in matters far beyond philosophy it is difficult to overestimate Hölderlin’s influence on Hegel (and incidentally this influence runs both directions); Hölderlin’s poetic philosophy surely had a growing appeal to Hegel, more of an appeal than the moral rationality which Kant placed between humanity and the divine. Alan Olson points out that in Frankfurt both Hegel and Hölderlin come to terms with and develop the growing confrontation with dialectic which will characterize their later works, and which, Olson argues, marks the split between the two friends. As Olson puts it, Hölderlin’s position on dialectic, “as evidenced by the thematic of renunciation in his *Hymns*, introduces a path of thinking that extends to Heidegger and the deconstruction of ontotheology; Hegel’s position, on the other hand, opens a path of thinking that will take him beyond Fichte, Jacobi, and Schelling to Absolute Idealism.”<sup>5</sup> Hegel’s move in Frankfurt away from Fichtean/Schellingean subjective idealism and towards Absolute Idealism is the culmination of Hegel’s youthful rejection of Kant and unknowables; however, it would be wrong to call Hegel a Romantic (he agrees with Fichte against Schelling,

Herder, Schleiermacher, and even the neo-classicist Goethe on the central role of the transcendental *Ich*), for he always gave a certain rationality pride of place in his thinking, and he was not one to remain long satisfied with unbridgeable gulfs of any kind, such as the ones posited by Kant or the Romantics.

In his Frankfurt period, there is a marked turn toward a useful appropriation of religion and religious ideas, beyond a simple duty-based morality of lawful behavior. Hegel's essay "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate" (1798-99) belongs to this period. In it, Hegel is still opposed to a definite type of religiosity, but it is now religiosity of another sort, and not the kind of institutional religious practice which aroused the ire of the nineteen-year old Hegel in Bern. In Frankfurt, Hegel's writings begin to question the radical separation which Kantian metaphysics placed between God and humanity, the epistemological gulf between cognition of divine things and finite causality which Kant tried to fill with morality and a good will. Also, the Jesus which Hegel encountered in the scriptures was hard to square with key themes in Kantian philosophy about the heteronomy of the moral law. For example, "it is Hegel's thesis that Jesus teaches a pantheism of love which reconciles Greek pantheism with Judaic and Kantian theism."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Jesus can no longer be confined within the bounds of a religion of mere (Kantian) reason, but expands his teaching into a subjective dialectic of love (related in no small part to Hölderlin's synthesis of Kant's aesthetic into the ideal of moral beauty) and the unity of God and humanity. Hans Küng is surely correct when he writes that "in Bern, Christ had become intelligible to Hegel as the ideal of virtue, as virtue itself. In a letter of 30 August 1795, he had informed Schelling that it was also problematic for him 'what it might mean to draw near to God.' As Hegel now proceeds to take more seriously the unity of God and man [i.e. upon his move to Frankfurt], should not new and hopeful perspectives open up for Christology?"<sup>7</sup> A close reading of Hegel's developing views about Jesus reveals a number of perspectives at work, the personal move toward love (revealed tellingly in his 1798 fragment *Love*)<sup>8</sup> as well as the philosophical move away from the Self-consciousness of Fichte. These new perspectives resulted in his 1798 essay "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate."

### III. Jesus in 1798: Kant and Judaism

The primary focus of the 1798 "Spirit" essay is a sustained polemic against the Judaism of Jesus' day, and Jesus' role in overthrowing and rendering irrelevant its legalistic religious construct. Thinly veiled in Hegel's

argument is a trenchant reappraisal of Kantianism, and through it an attack on Fichte as well. More to the point, Hegel's 1798 critique of Judaism is aimed at Kant and a Kantian religiosity of reason alone. Hegel's reading of Jesus' life is similar to Kant's pietistic "teacher of virtue" only in that Jesus is for Hegel, in fact, a teacher of virtue, but virtue as a moral reality rather than a virtue of obligation as in Kant's purified maxims of categorical duty. Hegel's Jesus was also self-consciously Jewish, though a revolutionary Jew who opposed the "Jewish fate" and who was "raised above it, and tried to raise his people above it too,"<sup>9</sup> whereas Kant's Jesus is denuded of his Jewishness in the best tradition of Enlightenment scholarship. In the "Spirit of Christianity" essay, Jesus sets out to abolish what Hegel sees as a Judaism of domination and slave-mentality, one which impedes the progress of human freedom and fulfillment with its codes, rules, and damaging externality. Hegel's Jesus means to overthrow all of this, and to set humanity free, though not through violent or ideological struggle, but through *love*.

For Kant, Jesus was "The Teacher of the Gospel," an exalted *Wesen des Sittlichkeit* who "announced himself to be an ambassador from heaven. As one worthy of such a mission, he declared that servile belief (taking the form of confessions and practices on days of divine worship) is essentially vain."<sup>10</sup> Kant uses Jesus' rejection of legalistic religion as a Pietist attack on eighteenth-century Roman Catholicism and *Bürgerliche* Protestantism in this passage, but he is doing more than that. When Kant goes on to say that the essential heart of Jesus' message was a "moral faith, which alone renders men holy 'as their Father in Heaven is holy,' and which proves its genuineness by a good course of life, is the only saving faith,"<sup>11</sup> he is mustering a vision of Jesus to the defense of his own rational moral philosophy. Kant is not the first person to do so, of course, and Hegel does the same thing in his own work. For Kant, and for Hegel in his early thought, Jesus serves as the supreme example of rational morality (Kant calls him the "archetype of humanity pleasing to God" in the passage quoted) and shows the way forward for religion. But Kant's religion *was* morality, a salvation from contradictions instead of through them, and for Hegel this failed to fully embrace what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus signified. Hegel had already been through and finally rejected his own moralistic period; though in his earliest days he looked at himself as a budding teacher of *Bildung*, human excellence and the development of potential, by early 1797 he was writing to Nanette Endel that "upon reflection I have decided not to try to improve anything in these people, but on the contrary to howl with the wolves,"<sup>12</sup> by which he means in part to no longer try to live in the reified air

of Kantian morality but rather to get his hands dirty, as it were, not *teaching* people, but living among them, and dealing with religion as it is lived and not as it may be purified away from the world of nature by Kantian maxims and Fichtean self-assertion.

According to Hegel, faith and reason, metaphysical as well as moral interests, are seemingly opposed in the divided human heart, but this division is not unnatural or even unfruitful. “The nature of that opposition is such that the human spirit cannot turn its back on either faith or reason,” Hegel writes much later; “each shows itself to be so deeply rooted in man’s innermost self-consciousness that when they come into conflict, he is shaken to the depths of his being and his inner disharmony makes his condition one of utter wretchedness.”<sup>13</sup> Hegel insists that the conflict of faith and reason are constitutive elements in any approach to God and cannot merely be attributed to putative Jewish religious legalism or Kantian *Moralität*. The *Moralität* Hegel attacks, however, is no ethical sublation. Rather, it is Kantian duty, stretched tight as it were over the drum of universal norms guaranteed by the categorical imperative, and beaten with gusto whenever *aporia* emerge in human relationships. Jesus’ task among humankind, in Hegel’s 1798 writings about Jesus, was to overcome these *aporia*, difficulties established in Judaism (so says Hegel) primarily by the Jewish mentality of extreme Otherness between the world and an alien God, a sort of pre-Kantian transcendental gulf which elicited only fear, awe, and submissiveness from estranged humanity (a view later picked up by Von Harnack in his christological interpretations of Marcion).<sup>14</sup> This perceived similarity between Kant’s *Religiösmoralität* and the Jewish legalism of Jesus’ time forms the basis for Hegel’s critique of Kant and Judaism through the person of Jesus. Jesus is no longer simply a teacher of morality; he is to be the bridge between humanity and divinity.

Hegel’s early hostility to Judaism was nothing new in European intellectual circles. Lessing had called Judaism uncouth and underdeveloped, with thinkers “so raw, so incapable of abstract thoughts, and so entirely in their childhood”<sup>15</sup> that they could be excused for what he deemed their benighted spiritual condition. Hegel had no intention of dismissing the importance of such a Judaism, because for him the religion purposefully thwarted the union of humanity and the divine. Hegel considered Jewish thought far from underdeveloped - it was *highly* developed and *intentionally* opposed to healthy subjectivity, so much so that it had become rigid and hide-bound, unfree and unfreeing, a “forced and difficult mode of expression,” due to “the supreme miseducation of the

people,”<sup>16</sup> a less charitable interpretation even than Lessing’s view. In the “Spirit” essay, Hegel reproaches Judaism for its alienation of humanity from God, its “submission to the fetters of the stronger,”<sup>17</sup> and for the ontological difference it posits, right from the beginning in the story of the Fall, between God as master and humanity as servant and yet master of creation. Hegel reserves special scorn for Abraham, “the true progenitor of the Jews,” for Hegel believes Abraham set up a world-denying and world-alienating system which later blooms into what Hegel believes is outright Jewish legalism. Hegel maintains that Abraham regarded the entire *kosmos* “as simply his opposite; if he did not take it to be a nullity, he looked on it as sustained by the God who was alien to it. Nothing in nature was supposed to have any part in God; everything was simply under God’s mastery.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, it takes little imagination to see that Kant’s critical philosophy is also guilty of the same offense on Hegel’s reading, though Kant is not named explicitly until later in the essay. Also of note in this passage is the pernicious dichotomy between God as part of/master of nature, which dichotomy Hegel first tried to overcome through his encounter with Schelling’s thought.<sup>19</sup>

The struggle against infinity which Hegel thinks he detects in Judaism is also a struggle against *Schicksal* or fate, the fate of a people thrown into the maelstrom of history without a proper sense of transcendence, of subjectivity. When someone comes on the Jewish scene with even a limited sense of freedom and transcendence, namely Moses, an “isolated enthusiast for the liberation of his people” as Hegel calls him, he uses his power to intensify the suffering of the Jews and force them into a confrontation with the infinite, thereby showing that their liberation “had been without the soul and the spontaneous need of freedom”<sup>20</sup> It comes as no surprise to Hegel, then, that Moses was both liberator and lawgiver, the giver of the law whose letter kills (2 Cor 3:6). The content of the Mosaic law was therefore that of an “infinite Object” over against the people, Hegel says, and “this, so to say, is the sole synthesis; the antithesis is the Jewish nation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the world and all the rest of the human race.”<sup>21</sup> Though hardly the first instance of Hegelian dialectic, this is his first use of the terms *synthesis* and *antithesis* in relation to religion, and their use is significant here because they mark the beginning of the movement that will culminate with Jesus Christ as the unity of the human and divine in the *Religionsphilosophie*. According to Hegel, the “alien spirit” of Judaism created “an infinite power which they set over against themselves and could never conquer,”<sup>22</sup> and this infinite power, the infinite qualitative *difference*

between God, humankind, and world/nature, is the chief obstacle which Hegel's later philosophy seeks to overcome.

Working from Hegel's gloss of Judaism, the *difference dangereuse* which the Jews maintained in their obstinate refusal to let go of their asymmetrical relation to Spirit (domination, master/slave) is for Hegel only the precursor to Kant's *Religion als Moralität*. Jewish religion, in Hegel's opinion, shares with Kant's philosophy a deep divide between duty and inclination (alien heteronomy and human freedom) and a fundamental epistemic limitation on all things divine. Therefore, the natural result of Kantian/Jewish scepticism is the flourishing of all sorts of romanticisms in theology. In other words, Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence (which does not appear in the "Spirit" essay for obvious chronological reasons) can be seen as the natural culmination of Kantian/Jewish metaphysical frustration with alienation, separation, and division. Whether or not Hegel's account of Jewish religion is anywhere close to being correct, his masterful adumbration of the direct line from Kant to Schleiermacher (from rational idealism to rational romanticism) sheds great light on the role Hegel thought his own philosophy needed to play in redirecting philosophy to its true ends, namely, the culmination and overcoming of the Kantian project in the outworking of rational Spirit.

#### IV. Jesus in 1798: Jesus and Judaism

At this point in the "Spirit" essay, Hegel introduces Jesus Christ in an explicit contrast between the Sermon on the Mount, Mosaic Law, and Kantian ethics.<sup>23</sup> Jesus appears "shortly before the last crisis" of the Jewish fate, and fights not "merely against one part of the Jewish fate; . . . he set himself against the whole. Thus he was raised above it and tried to raise his people above it too."<sup>24</sup> Jesus comes in opposition to Judaism (though from within Judaism, consistent with the dialectic), as its antithesis, according to Hegel. Jesus does not come as another Moses who subjects the people to yet another law too onerous to bear and which separates them even farther from themselves, God, and their world, but with love, a unifying love which shatters the alienation of humanity from God. Unlike Kant, Jesus does not bring a call to duty, but a call to virtue, an ethical *phronesis* which forever does away with duty and bourgeois religiosity. As Olson puts it, "Now we meet a Jesus who, by dint of his 'spirit,' has been 'raised above morality' and thus above Kant since Jesus has overcome the tension that remains in the Kantian universal due to the objective or positive nature of the universal."<sup>25</sup> Of utmost

importance for Hegel's reliance on Jesus in the "Spirit" essay is the following statement:

Over against commands which required a bare service of the Lord, a direct slavery, an obedience without joy, without pleasure or love, i.e. the commands in connection with *der Gottesdienst*, Jesus set their precise opposite, a human urge and so a human need. Religious practice is the most holy, the most beautiful of all things; it is our endeavor to unify the discords necessitated by our development and our attempt to exhibit the unification in the *ideal* as fully *existent*, as no longer opposed to reality, and thus to express and confirm it in a deed.<sup>26</sup>

Almost every important theme in Hegel's *Religionsphilosophie*, given as lectures in Berlin for the first time over twenty years after these lines were penned, can be located within this passage. It sums up his critique of Kant's fear of duty corrupted by desire, and of Hegel's later dismissal of Schleiermacher's deed-less, unreal subjectivity. Could Hegel have written in his Bern period that "religious practice is the most holy, the most beautiful of all things"? Had he done so, it doubtless would have been the Spartan beauty of duty, not the profligate religion of love that Hegel believes Jesus places opposite the Jewish religion. The religion of Jesus brings relationship rather than commandment - and the new commandment he *does* bring is to love (John.13:34) - but it is still a relationship which reflects what Hegel will later name *Vorstellungsdenken*; that is, it is still a relationship of subjectivity that has not itself become subjective to itself. Even Jesus must pass away, as just another (albeit supreme) example of mediate immediacy. As McCarthy notes, "In Jesus, spirit evidenced the extreme of exteriorization or alienation (*Entäusserung*) and reconciliation (*Versöhnung*). But eventually the flesh-and-blood Jesus, who plays a heroic role in the life of the spirit, must himself vanish, for the sake of completing the process in which he is decisive but not final."<sup>27</sup> Though this is Hegel's view toward the end of his career (and in the mature philosophy of religion), in his early work Jesus does the job of overcoming the dichotomies in the Kantian moral philosophy. Jesus is still only a part of the puzzle; nevertheless, Jesus' opposition to Jewish morality does away with the master/slave, duty/inclination torment of Kant, and inaugurates the Father/child relationship, with the focus on Jesus himself as "Son of Man/Son of God."<sup>28</sup>

That Jesus could have had a relationship with God at all opens a rift in Kantian epistemology, and, as far as Hegel is concerned, also in Jewish piety. After all, when Jesus claims to know God, to speak for God, to open the way of God, even (perhaps) to be what God is, what God is like, he demonstrates that he has not read Kant's first *Critique*, and that it is not only Moses who has seen God face to face (Ex 33:11; c.f. Deut 34:10). Further,

Hegel takes Jesus' claims of unity with and knowledge of God and universalizes them for every *theo-logos* in a most dramatic way - and in a way that remains constant throughout the Hegelian corpus.<sup>29</sup> For all intents and purposes, God is no longer *to musterion tou kosmou*. In other words, "reflective thinking" (as Hegel calls it) such as Kant's divides up the instances of the divine, partitions them into knowable and unknowable, finite and infinite, etc., whereas Jesus (according to Hegel) *presupposes* the fundamental at-one-ness of humanity and God, and bases his entire ministry on this presupposition. As Hegel puts it, "reflective thinking, which partitions life, can distinguish into finite and infinite, and then it is only the restriction, the finite regarded by itself, which affords the concept of man as opposed to the divine. But outside reflective thinking, and in truth, there is no such restriction."<sup>30</sup> Such reflective thinking, seen for example in Fichte's fundamental partition of self-consciousness and the warrants assigned by the *Ich* to all representations, is a stop along the way to the absolute standpoint, and as such it plays a role in the outworking of spirit. But this thinking contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction, as far as Hegel is concerned, for it has a built in limitation - the limited horizon of the I, the *Ich*, and thus it can never attain to absolute knowledge.

Hegel's thinking on the reconciliation brought about by Christ leads him to conclude that there are no more restrictions, no more secrets in God,<sup>31</sup> since the divine has become human and thus the human has become divine. This is a consistent thread in Hegel's work, this epistemic optimism (even considering the melancholy note sounded in the preface to the *Rechtsphilosophie* about philosophy always coming upon the scene too late),<sup>32</sup> and that it begins with the discussion of Jesus in the "Spirit of Christianity" essay is no coincidence. According to Hegel, Kant is wrong when he says that God is noumenal and, like freedom and immortality, is a postulate which must be invoked to ensure the integrity of the system, and Schleiermacher is wrong to think that God is intellectually inaccessible and thus can only be usefully understood in the feeling of absolute dependence. For Hegel, God is *in fact* revealed. But it is not a positive intellectual knowing and revealing that Hegel holds up against Kant and Schleiermacher. Kant was right to dismantle *that* sort of theological knowledge, and Schleiermacher was right to understand that, in the absence of such firm positive knowledge, *Innerlichkeit* could be a powerful source of theological hope. Hegel acknowledges the importance of both points of view; however, he writes of another way of coming to knowledge of God, one beyond seeing God as a postulate of pure reason or

God as an object of feeling, a way which is already present in the split of human cognition into subject and object and which undergirds it and also overcomes it. It is the way of Jesus, the way of reconciliation, the way of community and *spirit*.

In the 1798 “Spirit” essay, Hegel gives a two-tiered interpretation of the *Versöhnung* which Jesus brings. Because of the double-mindedness of Jesus’ reconciliation, Jesus emphasizes two things at the same time, each to two separate groups, and to this extent his reconciliation is still incomplete according to the dialectic of the later system. To the Jews Jesus emphasizes his individuality, i.e. that he is a person, a “spirit person” as Borg calls him<sup>33</sup> (in language of which Hegel would no doubt approve), someone who is opposed to the “Jewish character” of slavery and submission (in language of which Borg would no doubt disapprove), and who is characterized by the *ego eimi* statements in John’s Gospel (6:35, 8:12, 9:5, 10:7-11, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1-5) . At the same time, Jesus tells his friends, his disciples, that all are one, that they are him, he is them, that they are all God, and that God is all of them.<sup>34</sup> Jesus moves them from Master to Father, as if to say, “Do not start with the divisions, the partitions, in human nature,” (this is the mistake of Chalcedon which Hegel rightly diagnoses), “start with and presuppose the unity.” By presupposing this unity, Jesus stands as a *skandalon* (1 Pet 2:8), a stone of contradiction to the Kantian/Jewish religion of duty and obligation, and thereby opposes it at every turn. According to Hegel, Jesus’ prescription for the Judaism of his day (and Hegel’s for the Kantianism of his) is radical and negative: the Jewish/Kantian schema must be fulfilled, overthrown, through an affirmation of life over fate, love over and domination, and Spirit over law. This is Hegel’s reading of Jesus in 1798.

#### V. Jesus in 1827: Hegel, Kant, and Judaism

Despite their deep differences, in an important way there is a fundamental continuity between Hegel’s vision of Jesus in 1798 and 1827, though the use to which Hegel puts Jesus changes considerably. Hegel’s thinking about Jesus in the *Religionsphilosophie* basically rests on the same principles he developed in the Frankfurt of his youth. Jesus remains a revolutionary occurrence of spirit, manifesting itself to itself and, in Jesus’ death, negating itself in order to more fully become itself in the resurrection and birth of the spiritual community. For Hegel, Jesus still stands as the end of Judaism as a religion. It is not that Hegel’s thinking did not develop in the interim decades. Rather, a case can be made that Hegel’s work over the intervening years in the

philosophy of religion was a working out of the intricacies already implicitly contained within his earlier theological and philosophical writings; for all intents and purposes the pieces of the system were already mostly in place when Hegel left Bern for Frankfurt in 1800, with a straight line drawing together the early views of a religious and political Jesus, the 1807 *Phenomenology*, and the exposition of Hegel's thought in the *Enzyklopaedia* and the *Wissenschaft der Logik*. There is a crucial development, however: even though Jesus was the revolutionary in-breaking of Spirit, by the time Hegel gives the 1827 lectures Jesus is no longer himself a revolutionary *per se*.

Hegel moves the story of Jesus away from historical revolution and towards historical unification for different reasons, most plainly seen in the changes Hegel's thinking about Judaism underwent in the period from 1821 to 1831 as he worked on and delivered his religion lectures in Berlin. The *Religionsphilosophie* moves the discussion beyond Kantian moralizing about religion in the world, to a metaphysics of spirit which unites the world and the absolute in the historical setting of human being-in-the-world. It would be too facile an interpretation (and untrue to Hegel's own thought) to say that Hegel moves Jesus from a this-worldly to an other-worldly realm, however. It would also be wrong to infer that Jesus is somehow merely a model for a philosophical (post-religious) Hegelian humanism. It is more accurate to say that, whereas in the "Spirit" essay Jesus comes to confront humanity with the infinity of God, in the *Religionsphilosophie* Jesus brings the reconciliation of the infinite in the finite, sublating both and bringing about a true subjectivity in God, humanity, and world. In a sense, Hegel raises human historicity to the heavens and at the same time brings the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus down to mortals in their historical *particularität*. As Hölderlin writes in *Patmos*, "*Denn alles ist gut*";<sup>35</sup> all is good, everything is always already presupposed as good and whole and already there, brought to fulfillment through the incarnation, the crucifixion and death of God (which Hegel calls "the focal point of reconciliation")<sup>36</sup> and the resurrection of Christ "which concludes this history, which . . . is the explication of the divine nature itself."<sup>37</sup> Yet religion must give way to philosophy for Hegel. Yerkes puts it succinctly: "Religion, from the standpoint of its implicit conceptual truth, is essentially representational in its manner of referring to the infinite. It is a "mixture" of sense and thought, a *sinnlich-verständige* mode of reflection."<sup>38</sup> Jesus serves as the hinge of representational thought, the avenue by which religion becomes incarnationally full of both sense and

reason, and the means by which the community of spirit is made real in the world.

By the time Hegel presents his lectures on religion for the third time in 1827, Judaism has developed from the religion of domination and submission of the early essays to the “religion of sublimity,”<sup>39</sup> the determinate religion in which “natural life no longer has any substantiality over against the divine subject,”<sup>40</sup> the religion of the Wholly Other which embraces all. Hegel’s consideration of the outworking of spirit through his examination of world religions brings him to the point where God is seen as a “spiritually subjective unity” which has embraced all the various spiritual powers understood by Greek religion, and this realization is first achieved by the Jewish faith - quite a change from Hegel’s 1798 position! Hegel favorably reassesses Judaism, particularly the God-world relationship which was so negative in the “Spirit” essay, and comes to the conclusion that the genius of Judaism is, in fact, its consistent monotheism, its insistence that the *Sh'ma Yisroel* (Deut 6:1) is not so much a command as a genuine spiritual insight. Beyond Greek religion, the religion of beauty, is the sublime religion, Judaism, which first understands and proclaims that God is unity: “Here the absolute, or God, subsists as the One, as subjectivity, as universal and pure subjectivity, or conversely this subjectivity that is the universal is precisely the one inwardly determined unity of God.”<sup>41</sup> By the 1827 lectures, Judaism has a crucial role to play in the historical outworking of spirit.

How is it then that one can trace a continuity between the 1798 essay and the 1827 lectures? The continuity lies in the positive role of Jesus, over against the earliest strata of Hegel’s thinking and the rejection of Christianity of his formative years. What changes, and changes radically, are Hegel’s statements concerning the religious worth of Judaism, and it is for this reason that the place of Judaism in Hegel’s thought is central to his thinking on Jesus. When Hegel’s thinking on Judaism changes, his thinking on Jesus also changes, which provides the key to his whole philosophy of religion, for in Jesus, spirit first becomes present to itself in concrete subjectivity and becomes free. Human rationality and divine infinitude come together and are manifested in the coming of the one who is God in human flesh.

When Hegel comes to see Jesus as concrete subjective spirit, his Christology ironically becomes more recognizably orthodox, at least in its rhetoric, because his thinking on Jesus moves away from a focus on moral teaching and towards the religious work of Jesus, and the (admittedly philosophical) meaning of his death and

resurrection. In short, Hegel makes the transition from politics to soteriology in his thinking about Jesus in the *Religionsphilosophie*, from this-worldly salvation to universal salvation through divine-human reconciliation. “Hegel treats the historical existence of Jesus as one with the development of the Absolute, that is, he understands the incarnation of God in the sense of classical Christology in terms of the development of spirit,”<sup>42</sup> and so Jesus’ historical significance is universalized in the concretion of spirit as one moment in the life of the Trinity. Jesus’ role becomes not the overthrow of a perceived Jewish parochialism, but the fulfillment of the promise of the religion of sublimity, which hints at and points the way toward full unity for Hegel, but does not quite achieve it. “God is the initiator of creation, not the result. If the divine subjectivity were determined as result, as self-creating, then it would be grasped as concrete spirit,” would be concrete in incarnation, which must await the coming of the Christ, “for at the higher stage, when God is defined as spirit, he is the one who does not step outside himself, and so he is also the result, or that which is self-creating.”<sup>43</sup> God *qua* creating is the religion of sublimity, the union of the subject-object in abstract spirit; God *qua* self-creating is the consummate religion, the relationship of subject-subject in concrete spirit, and an expression of the *perichoretic* unity of the Trinity. The move from God as the absolute *Fürsichsein* to God as the absolute relational process of the consummate religion is central, for “it belongs to the truth of the idea of infinity that [God] *must* come as the creator of the world,” as Schmidt puts it; “if God were God apart from the empirical world, his infinity would be an abstract, bad infinity [*eine abstrakte, schlechte Unendlichkeit*], God would end up as the highest Being [*das höchste Wesen*] because he placed a border or barrier on the world.”<sup>44</sup>

The move in the 1827 religion lectures is from a subject-object type of knowing (which in the 1798 essay was nothing more than domination) to an absolute knowing. In absolute knowledge, spirit knows itself *qua* spirit in a relationship which transcends the subject-object dichotomies at the root of human alienation and servitude. To Hegel, such a philosophy is serious about actual life as it is lived in a way that Kant’s philosophy could never be, for “according to Hegel, philosophy becomes ‘serious’ when it no longer loses itself in objects and in subjective reflection upon objects, but rather becomes active as the activity of absolute knowing.”<sup>45</sup> In terms of Hegel’s religion lectures, Kant’s religious moral philosophy lacks seriousness because it looks at the world through fractured and alienated lenses. God and the world are intimately related in the life, death, and resurrection

of Jesus, and the advent of the spiritual community - the moral teacher of Kant's thought cannot bring this intimacy. According to Hegel, Jesus' role in consummating the religion of sublimity (Judaism) and moving beyond the religion of expediency (Roman religion) is to make them concrete and full-blooded, as it were; to make an intimacy out of a dualism. Because Kant maintains that knowledge of God is strictly not possible, that there is an unbridgeable gulf between human reason and divine revelation, and thus that God must be a postulate of pure reason, his religious project never gets off the ground. As Hegel says, "God-world" relationship "is a misguided expression if it means that we only know *about* this relation to God but know nothing about God."<sup>46</sup> God's attributes as revealed in Jesus move beyond the sphere of the moral and into the realm of concrete identity, concrete dialectic.

Reconciliation, not opposition, is the watchword for Jesus in the religion lectures. Having considered the extreme abstract unity of the religion of sublimity and the extreme concrete multiplicity of the various other determinate religions (polytheisms, etc.), Hegel approaches the consummate religion, Christianity, in terms of what is still needed: the sublation of multiplicity and abstract unity. Hegel says that this is achieved in Spirit's becoming present to itself in the necessary incarnation of God, the truth of the God-man, and "truth is the attainment of unity thorough the negation of the antithesis; this is the peace, the reconciliation, that the need demands."<sup>47</sup> Whereas in 1798, Hegel's Jesus was the one who opposes the truth of God's infinity to the slave mentality of the Jewish/Kantian *moralität*, in 1827 he is the "eternal, divine idea: God is the one who as living spirit distinguishes himself from himself" in the incarnation, "posits an other and in this other remains identical with himself, has in this other his identity with himself. This is the truth."<sup>48</sup> The truth of Jesus' message, then, is no longer the moral teaching of Kant, or even the message of opposition to Judaism, but that the work of Jesus is the work of God - "not as something suprahuman that appears in the shape of an external revelation, but rather as [God's] working in a human being, so that the divine presence is essentially identical with this human being."<sup>49</sup>

All that remains, then, is for this new dialectic to reach its own fulfillment, for the poles of Spirit and of self-subjectivity to be overcome in a new sublation of the negation of negation. For Hegel, this is accomplished in the speculative Good Friday, the death of God, the end of the concrete spirit which is itself a new beginning, namely, the "reversal" of death into life and the foundation of the spiritual community: "God rises again to life,

and thus things are reversed.”<sup>50</sup> This negation of negation, in which God’s subjectivity is placed over against God, is of a different order completely than the message of union that Hegel’s 1798 Jesus offered. The doctrine of the Trinity, which Hegel wishes to preserve and explain, depends upon differentiation within the life of God, and that differentiation must include death as well as birth, life, and ultimately resurrection. Yet resurrection, and not death, is the model in the 1827 lectures for a sublation in which all is changed, yet preserved in the change. It is only in terms of this kind of sublation, brokenness, and preservation, that one can speak of union in the 1827 lectures. Religion comes to completion in absolute knowledge, knowledge which unites God with God, humanity with God, and world with humanity, and this completion is Jesus’ work in the religion lectures. As Moltmann points out, developing the Hegelian line into contemporary theology: “In manifest religion the True is shown, in absolute knowledge it is brought to awareness, and in logic - in theory - it is vindicated. As the God-man, in his passion, Jesus sustained the contradiction between life and death, identity and difference, and this achieved reconciliation. ‘The death of Christ is the death of death itself, the negation of negation.’ God has made this death part of his life, which is called love and reconciliation.”<sup>51</sup> There is little mention of Jesus’ death in 1798 (perhaps it was deemed unseemly for Kantian philosophy), and the resurrection is seen in terms of the influence it had on his disciples, who raised up a church, which deified Jesus as Hercules was deified by the Greeks.<sup>52</sup> In the 1798 essay Jesus’ unity with God is taken not in absolute (Hegelian) but in mythological terms, and a new alienation begins, culminating in Kantian scepticism and Schleiermacherian romanticism.

Only a single reference is made in 1798 to the fully developed death-resurrection theology that Hegel achieves in the 1827 lectures, and it is made in a discussion of miracles, not of the unity of God and Jesus. Nevertheless it is instructive to look at, because it bears a striking (and surprising) resemblance to Hegel’s later philosophy. He writes, “When a god effects something, it is a working of spirit on spirit. Causality presupposes an object on which the effect is wrought, but the effect wrought by spirit is the annulling of the object. The outgoing of the divine is only a development, so that, in annulling what stands over against it, it manifests itself in a union with that opposite.”<sup>53</sup> The object annulled in this divine effect is the divine subjectivity itself, the death of God, and this negative is a moment of the divine nature itself, a necessary though only temporary moment. Because it is such a moment, death is transcended in life through resurrection, humanity is sublated in God and a

new thing, the spiritual community, becomes possible. Hegel only hints at this in 1798, but it finds its fruition in the 1827-1831 lectures. In the place of humanity-and-God, there is the God-man and then the spirit which rises in the resurrection of the God-man, containing both and yet destroying neither. In the end, according to Hegel the final blow Jesus delivers to Kantian/Jewish religion is not an overthrow, but a completion, and not a completion in an abstract law or a noumenal world, but in human being and spiritual community: “The truth to which human beings have attained by means of this history, what they have become conscious of in this entire history, is the following: that the idea of God has certainty for them,” that God is not alienated by categories of perception or abstract law, but “that humanity has attained the certainty of unity with God, that the human is the immediately present God.”<sup>54</sup>

## VI. Some Conclusions

Without a fully developed Christology of some kind, even of the philosophical sort that Hegel eventually develops, Hegel’s mature philosophy of the spirit could never have taken the form that it did. Such a Christology, in turn, developed as it did in conjunction with Hegel’s changing thoughts about Judaism, specifically in the way that Hegel developed the usefulness of Judaism as a determinate religion which cleared the way for and in fact necessitated the consummate religion, Christianity. In an important sense this movement was a two-way street; as his thinking on Christianity changed, his appreciation for the role played by other religions also changed. This can be seen by noting what changes Hegel made in each version of the religion lectures, but the crucial aspect of Hegel’s dealing with Jewish thought is his understanding of Jesus, and this does not come out in a comparison with the 1821, 1824, 1827, and 1831 versions. Only by going back to the essays Hegel wrote early in his life can a true development of his Christology in relationship to Judaism be had. Indeed, scholars who believe Hegel’s earliest work sheds little light on his later philosophy believe this precisely because they fail to recognize the crucial role Christology played for Hegel, early and late. Hegel’s Jesus moved from a confrontation with Judaism to a consummation of Judaism. Much could be made of the fact that Roman civil religion comes between the religion of sublimity and the consummate religion. However, Hegel’s reading of Roman religion only shows (from a Hegelian standpoint) the true need for the revelation and consummation of Christ, and so the movement from Judaism to Christianity remains intact. Christianity may have grown in Roman soil, but its seeds were

watered and put down roots in Judaism. Hegel's thinking on Judaism is the key. Had Hegel not changed his view of Judaism, he would have had difficulty showing the internal relatedness of the consummate religion and the religions which preceded it. If it was simply Hegel's thinking on Christianity that had changed, there is no reason to think that he would have needed a more charitable reinterpretation of Judaism. Jesus could have been merely a revolutionary for Hegel had what he saw as the deficiencies of Judaism not pointed the way to the subjective unity of God. Hegel's philosophical development of the Trinity, especially Christian claims about the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, are better appreciated if placed within the context of Hegel's early thinking about Judaism, and how that thinking changed as he considered the movement of spirit from bondage into freedom, and from alienation into relationship and community.

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**Notes:**

1. The essay concentrates on the 1827 lectures for two reasons. One, the differences and movements between the various versions of the lectures (1821, 1824, 1827, and 1831) deserves a book-length manuscript on its own, and two, as Peter Hodgson has argued in his one-volume edition of the 1827 lectures, this version preserves the detail and richness of Hegel's thought in a way that the others do not. His changes to the 1831 lectures do not significantly affect his interpretation of Jesus, and the 1827 lectures are Hegel's best statement on the matter.
2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975): 206 n.30.
3. Terry Pinkard, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 63.
4. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975): 68.
5. Alan Olson, *Hegel and the Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 12.
6. Richard Kroner, "Introduction" to Hegel's *Early Theological Writings*: 10.
7. Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, trans. J.R. Stephenson (New York: Crossroad, 1987):106
8. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Love," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975):302-08. Striking in this small piece is Hegel's anti-Fichtean statement (p.304) that "nothing is unconditioned; nothing carries the root of its own being within itself. Subject and object, man and matter, each is only *relatively* necessary; the one exists for the other, and hence exists in and for itself only on the strength of a power outside itself; the one shares in the other only through that power's favor and grace."
9. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975): 205.

10. Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960):120.

11. *Ibid.*, 120.

12. Letter 22, in *Hegel: The Letters*: 57.

13. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Forward to Hinrichs’ *Die Religion im inneren Verhältnisse zur Wissenschaft* (1822),” trans. A.V. Miller, in *Beyond Epistemology: New Studies in the Philosophy of Hegel* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974): 227.

14. See Adolf Von Harnack’s *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Indianapolis: Baker Book House, 1995).

15. Gotthold Lessing, “The Education of the Human Race,” in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956): §§16, 20.

16. Hegel, “Spirit of Christianity” 256.

17. *Ibid.*, 182.

18. *Ibid.*, 187.

19. Emil Fackenheim is entirely correct when he points out, “Commentators often belittle Hegel’s debt to Schelling. One cannot belittle it. It was Schelling who in 1801 first reached the standpoint of absolute idealism. It may briefly be described as the standpoint of an infinite or divine Thought which has relativized, and thereby exposed as merely phenomenal, all those hard-and-fast distinctions which remain hard-and-fast for merely finite or human thought. Hegel comes to share the standpoint reached by Schelling in 1801. Indeed, whereas Schelling quickly abandons absolute idealism Hegel remains with it to the end.” See Fackenheim’s *The Religious Dimension in Hegel’s Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967): 26. Though Fackenheim emphasizes Hegel’s adoption of Schelling’s idealism after 1801, the letters between Hegel and Schelling in the 1790s show that Hegel, and Hölderlin, had already begun to see their younger friend’s thought as the way beyond Kant and Fichte (*Letters* 8, 11, 14).

20. Hegel, “Spirit of Christianity,” 190.

21. *Ibid.*, 191.

22. *Ibid.*, 199.

23. *Ibid.*, 205.

24. *Ibid.*, 205.

25. Olson, 62.

26. Hegel, “Spirit of Christianity,” 206.

27. Vincent A. McCarthy, *Quest for a Philosophical Jesus: Christianity and Philosophy in Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Schelling* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1986): 132.

28. Hegel, "Spirit of Christianity," 253, 260.
29. It is for this reason that Heidegger sees Hegel as a paradigmatic instance of *onto-theo-logical* metaphysics.
30. Hegel, "Spirit of Christianity" 262.
31. He says this explicitly: Hegel, *Lectures of 1827* Introduction 92 n.85.
32. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991): 23.
33. Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987): 39-57.
34. "The divine in thee hath recognized my divinity; thou hast understood my essence, it has re-echoed in thine.' . . . 'There is now no judgement in Heaven differing from thine; what thou seest as bound or free on earth is likewise so in the eyes of Heaven.'" Hegel, "Spirit of Christianity" 267-68; c.f. Mt 16.17-19.
35. Friedrich Hölderlin, "Patmos," in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press, 2004): 555
36. Hegel calls Jesus' death the "focal point of reconciliation," *Lectures of 1827* III.249.
37. Ibid. III 246 n.199.
38. James Yerkes, *The Christology of Hegel* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978): 173.
39. Hegel, *Lectures of 1827* II.561
40. Peter Hodgson, "Introduction" to *G. W. F. Hegel: Theologian of the Spirit*, Peter Hodgson, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997): 31
41. Ibid., II.562.
42. Küng, 209.
43. Hegel, *Lectures of 1827* II.565, 565 n.463.
44. Erik Schmidt, *Hegels System der Theologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974): 136.
45. Martin Heidegger, "Hegel and the Greeks," in *Pathmarks*, trans. Robert Metcalf, ed. William McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998):331.
46. Hegel, *Lectures of 1827* II.566.
47. Ibid., III.233.
48. Ibid., III.234.
49. Ibid., III.243.
50. Ibid. III 246 n.199.

51. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974): 254.
52. Hegel, “Spirit of Christianity” 293.
53. *Ibid.*, 296.
54. Hegel, *Lectures of 1827* III.250.

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