

# INTRODUCTION

## *Incarnation and Incarnational Thinking*

Christianization is divinization, and divinization is humanization.

Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*

God was made man, that man might be made God.

Saint Augustine, *Sermon XIII de Tempore*

If words stand at the heart of our enterprise, then it is with the question of words and their comparisons that we must begin.

Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*

## I

One salient dimension of contemporary scholarship on Jewish mysticism is its departure from the apologetic tendencies of traditionalism—that is, its defense of the self-referential claims in the texts themselves—to engage with concepts common in the textual traditions of other great religions and cultures.<sup>1</sup> Important attempts are being made to integrate Jewish mysticism more fully into the humanities and to promote it as a significant contribution to the history of human literary and spiritual creativity. I am not speaking here of comparative analysis in a formal sense.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the richness of a textual tradition can become visible when refracted through a prism of ideas from a competing tradition without apparent historical influence or confluence.<sup>3</sup> Scrutinizing inherited distinctions, for example those between Judaism and Christianity, is a fruitful way of revisiting Jewish mystical texts that have characteristics challenging to traditional received interpretations.<sup>4</sup> In this book I argue that the best way to examine difference is through sameness, and sameness is best articulated through shared nomenclature.<sup>5</sup> I call my approach to Hasidism reading through “incarnational” lenses. I begin with four basic theses.

*First:* Throughout the history of Hebraic monotheism, the lines separating the divine from the human—or more generally the divine from the world—were tenuous and fragile. Ancient Israelite literature often tested and sometimes crossed these boundaries, until Christianity emerged as a strong reading of these Israelite tendencies, erasing those boundaries as the very apex of

Christology.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps partially in response to what they viewed as the deviant nature of Christianity's theological innovation, the rabbinic sages of late antiquity, those who constructed what we now call Judaism, shut the doors to incarnational thinking. Or did they?<sup>7</sup> It is true that the Israelite texts that hinted at incarnational motifs were largely excluded from the Hebrew canon. Incarnation became a focal point of medieval Jewish polemics *against* Christianity.<sup>8</sup> But the lines separating the human from the divine remained thin, perhaps because the divine/human dichotomy was embedded in the very fabric of Hebraic monotheism. It was not until Moses Maimonides' use of rationalism and the doctrine of radical transcendence, founded on his version of negative theology, and his suggestion that the categorical distinction between the human and the divine is the very cornerstone of Hebraic monotheism, that the ambiguity between the divine/human distinction became inoperative.<sup>9</sup> There are two caveats, however. First, as much as Maimonides had attained canonical status by the time Kabbalah emerged in medieval Spain, his theological and hermeneutical presuppositions were not accepted by many kabbalists, even though he was co-opted (via creative reading) as a supporter of kabbalistic ideas.<sup>10</sup> Second, while today Maimonidean rationalism is held up as the necessary antidote for the return of "mythical" Judaism, it is really a Maimonideanism passed through modern filters—for example, the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen—and less a depiction of twelfth-century rationalism. Perhaps if Maimonidean rationalism is taken in its medieval context, some medieval kabbalistic readings of him are more coherent than might be expected.

*Second:* After the emergence of Christianity, Jewish notions of incarnational thinking (sometimes depicted as divine embodiment) took on a particular form some scholars have called *logos theology*. Divine embodiment was now limited to the Book, the word of God, not the human body.<sup>11</sup> It is a matter of scholarly debate whether, in fact, *logos theology* predated Christology, providing a rationale for incarnation, or was a response against Christology, enabling the rabbis to posit post-prophetic divine immanence without acceding to incarnation.<sup>12</sup> In any case, this theological discussion provides one way to understand early Christianity and classical Judaism and the continuing tension between the divine and the human.<sup>13</sup>

The link between Jewish and Christian notions of traversing the divine/human divide (embodiment/incarnation) is Torah. Judaism has long accepted the notion that God is embodied in the Torah, though questions remain as to what that actually means.<sup>14</sup> Daniel Boyarin treats this *logos theology* as dis-

tinct from incarnational theology.<sup>15</sup> He claims Judaism can accept the former but not the latter without risking distinctiveness. Michael Fishbane expresses a similar sentiment when he notes that the mystical esotericists (perhaps pre-kabbalistic) “descend even further [than the rabbis] into the hidden mysteries of Scripture to the point where the essence of the Bible and *deus relevatus* were One. Hereby the sacrality of the biblical text actually merged with the sacrality of the Godhead.”<sup>16</sup>

*Third:* By the Middle Ages the specter of divine incarnation in the human body again came into play. (Actually, it may have been in play throughout, but normative rabbinic doctrine largely effaced its public influence.) Perhaps after Judaism and Christianity parted ways, when Judaism was no longer being destabilized by internal critique, the divine/human tension once again became a factor in Jewish theology.<sup>17</sup> Medieval Kabbalah proved that the dyke of logos theology constructed by the rabbis against incarnational theology did not hold.<sup>18</sup>

By the Middle Ages, Christology was a stable theological doctrine, and no one who desired to remain a Jew would openly profess allegiance to it. There was a distinction, however, between the fundamental principle, probably rooted in ancient Israelite religion, and the Christian articulation upon which it rested. The boundaries between the divine and the human, God and the world, were permeable holdovers from paganism. They created the conditions for the evolution of Christology and at the same time enabled Israelites/Jews to develop monotheistic ideas that did not totally exclude God from their corporeal existence. (The kabbalistic concept of the *shekhina* is one example of this.)<sup>19</sup> So while medieval kabbalists polemicized against Christianity as much as against their philosophical counterparts, their arguments were different. For many of them Christology was simply untenable philosophically, not only in its articulation but also on theological grounds. The kabbalists rejected Christology but fought against it, often covertly, as an error of articulation rather than principle. In fact, as the work of Elliot Wolfson, Yehuda Liebes, and their students has shown, kabbalists often polemicized against incarnational theology by adapting some of the very conditions that gave birth to their subject of critique.<sup>20</sup> Whether it advocates *unio mystica* (mystical union) or not, Kabbalah was founded against a metaphysical template whereby the veil separating the divine from the human is translucent if not sometimes transparent.

*Fourth:* Much of medieval Kabbalah was presented in metaphysical, cosmological, or mythical language that did not directly relate to corporeal existence. There were important exceptions, such as Abraham Abulafia, the person and

the work, but the ways in which the boundaries between the human and the divine were traversed in medieval Kabbalah were not directly threatening to ironclad distinctions between Judaism and Christianity. With Hasidism this began to change. The steps from Christian ideas of the Incarnation to rabbinic logos theology, to post-rabbinic Jewish incarnationalism, to medieval kabbalistic metaphysics could be distinguished in Hasidism when the *zaddik*, or righteous master, as *axis mundi*, supplanted the fetishization of the Book, which had become the centerpiece of classical Rabbinic Judaism. If Martin Buber was correct that one of Hasidism's innovations was the recentralization of the person in place of the word, a notion apparent also in early Christianity, the reformulation of incarnational thinking in Hasidism was not far-fetched. While the nexus between incarnationalism and medieval Kabbalah was more complicated than we think, I argue in this book that it was in Hasidism that the transition from logos theology to incarnational theology reached its most radical, materialist articulation. Moshe Idel agreed that in Hasidism a new apex of these ideas was reached, even as he argued against using the term "incarnation," part of his commitment to avoid the terminological quandary that is central to the scholarly enterprise.<sup>21</sup>

## II

Hasidism, like its medieval kabbalistic predecessors, arose in a world where Christianity and all it represented was forbidden. Most Hasidic masters knew little about Christianity other than what they had absorbed from Jewish polemical literature, for example, *Toldot Yeshu* and philosophical treatises such as Joseph Albo's *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* and the work of Isaac Abravanel, or ideas they absorbed from living among Christians.<sup>22</sup> Most were probably not aware of the extent to which canonical texts such as the Zohar were polemicizing against Christianity, an idea that comes to light only in modern scholarship. (Most traditionalists date the Zohar to a period before the formal advent of Christianity.) In contrast, the Hasidic masters were by and large not engaged in polemics against Christianity; that is, although they lived in a Christian world, they were largely not working under a Christian gaze. At the same time, Jews influenced by the Enlightenment who were forging what would become various forms of liberal Judaism constructed their new theologies very much under the Christian gaze.<sup>23</sup> As a result, and because many of these Jewish ideas resembled Protestantism (many Jewish reformers were very well-versed in Christian Scripture and tradition), Judaism in this period was constituted in ways that would dif-

ferentiate it from its Christian neighbors (this also may have been done to dissuade potential converts to Christianity). Concepts such as incarnation were deemed antithetical to Judaism. To a degree, Judaism became what Christianity was not. By the same token, some Jewish thinkers argued that what the truly rational Christian theologians viewed as embodied in liberal Protestantism was in fact better represented by the new liberal Judaism.

Precisely because Hasidism developed in modernity while drawing from medieval kabbalistic texts that adapted Christian motifs in order to polemicize against Christianity (likely unbeknown to Hasidic writers), Hasidism grew largely outside the Christian gaze and had no need to draw the distinctions common in modern Western European Jewish thinking. It was the freedom to think outside the Christian gaze, using earlier kabbalistic sources minus their earlier polemical agenda, that produced a Jewish theology colored by incarnational thinking.<sup>24</sup>

Hasidism's affinity with Christianity did not go unnoticed, either by Jews or Christians. Joseph Wolff's missionary journal, written in 1823–1824, contains the following:

It would be very advisable for the missionary students at Stansted Park to read the Hebrew manuscript (No. 3) containing the principles of Israel Baal Shem Tov, the Jewish sectarian. There is, in that sectarian's principles, much tendency to Christianity. Rabbi Mendel was struck with amazement, when he found me acquainted with the principles of Israel Baal Shem, for this sect is very numerous in Poland, who receive so readily the New Testament, must be of the sect called Hasidism.<sup>25</sup>

While this one journal entry is not ample proof of a widespread recognition of Hasidism's affinities with Christianity, it does offer a window into the ways in which Christians viewed Hasidic spirituality from a distance.



One of the more difficult aspects of our study of Hasidic ideas is the use of nomenclature—"incarnation," "incarnational thinking," and so on—what Moshe Idel calls "terminological quandaries."<sup>26</sup> Although I began work on incarnational tropes in Hasidism before the publication in 2007 of Idel's *Ben: Sonship in Jewish Mysticism*, Idel's book presents many new challenges, particularly dealing with Idel's argument against using such incarnational terminology to describe ideas in the Hasidic texts.<sup>27</sup> While he acknowledges structural,

perhaps even phenomenological, symmetry between what he calls “sonship” in Jewish mysticism and incarnation in Christianity and is open to the possibility of influence or confluence,<sup>28</sup> he opposes the importation of terminology from one tradition to describe another. On the affinities between mystical Judaism and Christianity, he writes,

It seems, therefore, that similar views describing an emanation that does not sever the ontic affinity between emanator and emanated, and that posits a possible return of the latter within the former, were found in some ancient Jewish sources. Such a concept seems also to underlie the somewhat later theosophical-theurgical understandings of the theological sin in cutting the branches, *kizuz bi-netiyot* attributed in rabbinic literature either to Elisha ben Abbaya or to Adam.<sup>29</sup>

Idel avoids the term “incarnation,” obviously laden with considerable theological weight, when trying to describe the many-faceted articulations of sonship in Jewish mysticism. For him, “Incarnation, in the way Christian theologians use the term, is a matter related to a small span of time, when the divine pre-existing Son assumed flesh, in order to suffer as part of his kenosis, after which he then returns to his exalted status, leaving the flesh behind him.”<sup>30</sup> He then adds the important eschatological component that this figure is “the redeemer *par excellence*.”

Acknowledging mystical Judaism’s sometimes surprising affinity with Christological motifs, Idel adds that it is evident that kabbalists “avoided, premeditatedly in my opinion, resorting to explicit incarnational terminology, not only because they were afraid to use it from a political-religious point of view, but also because their reasonably loose positions did not require such expressions, and they resorted to non-carnal terms which expressed their ideas about embodiment and dwelling of the divine.”<sup>31</sup> Adding that there is no adequate Hebrew cognate for “incarnation” Idel concludes,

I prefer to resort to the term “embodiment” as the result of the divine dwelling within human beings, rather than to the more specific and theologically loaded term “incarnation,” with the exception of one instance related to Sabbatai Zevi. Since the term is not only terminologically problematic in the Jewish contexts to be discussed below, in which the term “flesh” is premeditatedly avoided. . . . I consider its use in the following discussions as irrelevant, especially because in the instances to be discussed below, neither the precise conceptual nor the terminological aspects covered in the sense that incarnation I used are present.<sup>32</sup>

While “embodiment” is a term often used as a substitute for “incarnation” to distinguish Jewish from Christian texts, it may also obscure the similarities between them, conditions for negotiating difference. Idel chooses to invent neologisms to describe mystical phenomena whereby he can avoid using a term from one tradition to describe a similar phenomenon in another. This solves one problem while creating another. His invented terminology may distinguish kabbalistic from Christian phenomena, but it does so by blurring generic similitude, thereby reducing the possibility of recognizing specific differences. Idel is explicit that part of academic discourse involves paying attention “not only to similarities, but even more so to differences between religious phenomena, which is characteristic of a scholarly interest in specificity.”

It is worth asking if the neologism is an adequate means of negotiating similitude and difference? Things are often best compared (yielding both similarity *and* difference, or similarity *in* difference) within a genus as opposed to things that are categorically other. By describing Jewish articulations of incarnational thinking as something other than “incarnation,” by using a different term, the specificity of comparison may be weakened. What Idel misses is a point argued by Jonathan Z. Smith: “It is axiomatic that comparison is never a matter of identity. Comparison requires the acceptance of difference, and a methodological manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end.”<sup>33</sup> This approach is developed at length by Elliot Wolfson in numerous studies on Kabbalah. For example, in *Language, Eros, Being* he argues that a nuanced understanding of Kabbalah’s use of embodiment and incarnation requires looking beyond history and into the phenomenological structures of the kabbalists when they speak of embodiment and offer interpretations of biblical anthropomorphism.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, following Wolfson and Smith, if we use the term “incarnational” with full knowledge that we mean something different from the Christian formalization of that term, specific comparisons and expressions of difference may be better served. As Smith puts it, “A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being ‘like’ in some stipulated fashion.”<sup>35</sup> One must question why scholars dedicated to the specificity of both phenomena and terminology cede “incarnation” to Christianity simply because it plays a more central role in Christian theology. The term represents a phenomenon, Idel’s “ontic affinity”—whatever the term may have been in Hebrew or Greek to describe it—that

clearly had precedent in Israelite religion even as Christianity offered its own particular take on it. Of course, incarnation does not mean just one thing in Christianity but rather embodies many meanings and interpretations, sectarian differences, and significant nuances that were hotly debated even before the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. It is easier to arbitrate difference when one begins with similitude. Idel's new terminology undermines the latter in order to negotiate the former, but in the end it may subvert the very enterprise he wants to foster. Wolfson has contributed an influential thought on this question:

I am well aware that the incarnational tropes to be extracted from Jewish texts are distinct and in opposition to the Christian formulations; indeed in my estimation, it is the disparity that justifies the use of the same nomenclature. This is not to deny the adverse portrayal of Christians by Jews and Jews by Christians. However, the rejection of the "other" does not mean the other has no impact on the formation of one's own sense of self; on the contrary, condemnation of the other bespeaks contiguity with the other, and this is so even when the other has preached intolerance or perpetrated violence in the sociopolitical arena. By utilizing the term "incarnation" in explicating kabbalistic texts I do not mean to paint a monolithic picture. Precisely by deploying one term to ponder disparate phenomena I call attention to the rift that both unifies and splits the two.<sup>36</sup>

Use of "incarnation" thus does not narrow our inquiry but widens it; it enables us to think inside an "ontic affinity" while acknowledging clear differences and the threshold where similitude ends and difference begins, or when differences are expressed within the ontic affinity shared by the two textual traditions. In his 1990 book *Drudgery Divine* Smith writes that "comparison provides the means by which we re-vision phenomena in *our* text in order to solve *our* theoretical problems."<sup>37</sup>

Scholarly inquiry into difference is something that was largely uninteresting for the Hasidic masters. Their main concerns were devotional, and they used creative readings of the tradition to cultivate devotional behavior.<sup>38</sup> Medieval polemicists had a much more politically charged agenda; they were invested in categorical difference between Judaism and Christianity for sociopolitical ends, though they likely believed fervently in the veracity of those categorical theological distinctions.

Texts such as the Zohar are more complicated in these matters. On the one hand the Zohar often contested Christological ideas in a veiled manner but did so inside the ontic affinity that its authors shared with those very ideas.<sup>39</sup>



And one can see how those Christological resonances emerged through Sabbatean readings of the zoharic corpus. By the time Hasidism emerged, the ontic affinity presented in the Zohar was part of Jewish intellectual canon, at least in communities untouched by the Enlightenment. So Hasidism, a movement that did not take a polemical stance against Christianity and developed largely outside the Christian gaze, proved an interesting place to revisit these affinities and differences as they took another form, in Jewish literature. Because of Hasidism's utilization of the zoharic corpus one can find such polemics embedded in Hasidic discourse, but the Hasidic writers were likely not aware of the Zohar's polemical stance. Thus, like Wolfson, we use the terms "incarnation" and "incarnational" (to be distinguished from "Incarnation," the centerpiece of Christianity) with full knowledge that the Hasidic texts would reject the Christological implications even as their ideas often come quite close to Christological ideas. Wolfson's comment in *Venturing Beyond* is pertinent: "Suffice it here to note that the task of responsible scholarship is to acknowledge the reverberations of these ideas in contemporary compositions, which undoubtedly have an influence on the current socio-political scene, even though we want to avoid ethical condemnation of a tradition shaped in a different time. In short we need to navigate between the extremes of pious apologetic and moral dogmatism."<sup>40</sup>

The ontic affinity—again to borrow Idel's locution—that many Hasidic texts share with Christian incarnational texts enables a fruitful discussion of both similarity and difference when they are juxtaposed rather than placed in opposition to one another.

This enterprise is reminiscent of what some theorists have called "cultural translation." When scholars describe a phenomenon in one language by importing a word from another, the stock in trade of scholars who work with texts not written in scholarly language, they produce a cultural product as much as make a linguistic choice.<sup>41</sup> Translations are simultaneously the products of cultures coming into contact with one another and a force that produces that contact. Using the terms "incarnation" and "incarnational" to describe Hasidic texts is an acknowledgement both of similitude ("ontic affinity") and an invitation to a deeper exploration into that similitude which, of course, includes the delineation of difference. Light is not only shed on the Hasidic text but the term used to describe it is altered.

Judith Butler's exploration of cultural translation in her *Parting Ways: Judaism and the Critique of Zionism* may be helpful in this context.<sup>42</sup> She notes that

translation and what she calls “transposability” is necessary for a “crossing of worlds.” By this she does not mean ecumenism in the sense of interreligious dialogue, but rather an attempt to find a common language in order better to understand and utilize the terms as they are embedded in their respective contexts.<sup>43</sup> Her interest in *Parting Ways* is in the interface between traditional and secular notions of justice as a critique of Zionism, but her approach could just as easily be used in analyzing two religious traditions.

Inventing neologisms to describe texts, ostensibly protecting them from the weight of foreign terminology, is one approach, but Butler’s is preferable: “The assumption is that religion is a form of particularism, tribalism, or communitarianism that must ‘translate’ into a common or rational language in order to have a legitimate and restricted place in public life.”<sup>44</sup> This kind of translation does not collapse one religious phenomenon into another or, in Hans Gadamer’s term, “fuse” them. Rather, it suggests that translation can open a chasm not only between the two systems but also within the tradition one is trying to understand and breathe new life into the possible ways it can be understood. This requires not only a close reading of the texts but also understanding the terms of the interpreter, who must adhere to scholarly protocol as well as use hermeneutical ingenuity to read the texts, as Gershom Scholem suggests, “against their own intentions” (probably a take on Walter Benjamin’s “reading against the grain”).

What stands between my method and Idel’s may not merely be a disagreement on the terminological quandary of whether “incarnation” can be used to describe Hasidic phenomena but on the role of the scholar more generally. Should we read the texts only on their own terms or should we open a chasm in the text itself such that we can view it otherwise by forcing it into dialogue with a related textual tradition? This is done all the time when methodological paradigms (e.g. Marxist, psychoanalytic, or deconstructionist) are used as templates for the reading of classical texts. Literary scholarship in any tradition is an act of translation. Description, definition, extrapolation, interpolation, and explication—all are acts of translation.

Translation and transposability, using terms from one tradition to explain another, is another way to open the chasm. My use of “incarnation” and “incarnationalism” is close to the act of cultural translation as described by Butler, a way of destabilizing both the term and the texts we seek to interpret. I do not propose collapsing one into the other; quite the opposite. I am interested in exploring difference via similitude, in deepening our understanding of tradi-

tions that share an ontic affinity that surfaces when Judaism no longer needs to define itself against Christianity and no longer needs to see in Christianity an unequivocal “not-me.”

The social precariousness of such an enterprise should not be underestimated, but I do not want to be hamstrung by it either. Jews today are not being compelled to convert to Christianity as they were in prewar Western Europe, not to mention medieval Spain, Italy, and Germany. Today most Diaspora Jews are tolerated and accepted minorities in Christian societies. Yet the distinctions between the two communities remain an important part of Jewish identity, even as Jewish-Christian similitude is not as threatening to Judaism as it once was. Contemporary scholars are called upon to examine the past while realizing that scholars of the past were doing the same. Their world is not ours, thus their “Christianity” need not be ours. There is no imperative for us to defend as canonical their readings of Judaism and Christianity. They were expressions of their times, and we should be inspired to advance our own views. The hazards of our project are readily apparent, yet it is both important and our responsibility as scholars, whatever our investment in a particular tradition may be, to revisit old ways in the light of a new age.

While this study is not historical in the formal sense, it does make a number of historical claims. Focusing on theological issues in Hasidism and Christianity through close readings of Hasidic texts, I argue that it is possible to detect the articulation of incarnational tropes that, while not totally absent in earlier kabbalistic literature, are more overt in Hasidism. The question is, why? In part it may be due to the historical context in which Hasidism arose, specifically a Jewish mysticism born in modernity but not directly subject to the Christian gaze. This is surely a historical claim, yet it is one founded on a textual analysis of literature that has never explicitly addressed the proposition.

The affinities between Hasidism and Christianity highlighted in this book were noticed in nineteenth-century Europe long before they surfaced in post-World War II America. Many of the Europeans came from traditional or Hasidic backgrounds and ended up as *Maskilim* (proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment). The neo-Hasidic movement in late-nineteenth-century Europe and later the Palestine Mandate, made up of literary and artistic figures such as I. L. Peretz, Martin Buber, Micah Joseph Berdichevsky, Samuel Abba Horodetsky, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Marc Chagall among many others, used Jewish affinities with Christianity, many drawn from Hasidic life and literature, in their construction of modern Jewish literature and art.<sup>45</sup>

Hasidism's popularity in contemporary Jewish spirituality, perhaps a second-wave neo-Hasidic movement, especially in America, was partly a product of a certain refraction of American Christianity and not limited to the postwar period. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz observe, "Although historians generally agree that Hasidism had no direct impact on the shaping of Jewish modernity, it has been argued [by Gershom Scholem, Jacob Katz, and others] that Hasidism challenged, often quite effectively, traditional rabbinic institutions of authority and models of religious virtuosity. Hence, it is said that Hasidism indirectly—dialectically—prepared the way to the secularization of East European Jewish life, if by secularization is meant the weakening and eclipse of religious authority and traditions."<sup>46</sup> Hasidism's influence on westernized and "enlightened" Jews in both Eastern and Western Europe can be traced at least to the mid-nineteenth century. It became more prominent in the latter decades of that century and the beginning of the next in what was called the neo-Hasidic movement.<sup>47</sup> Its postwar instantiation merged with the postwar American religious innovation.

Having emerged from its traditionalist version in early twentieth-century Europe, Hasidism proved happily compatible with the American spiritual renaissance and a religious landscape pervaded by countercultural values and a longing for spiritual values.<sup>48</sup> The plethora of publications on Jewish meditation, astrology, the JuBu (Judaism-Buddhism) movement, and so forth attests to this claim. Notions such as human experience as the center of religiosity, the accessibility of God to human experience, the use of nature and "worldliness" as tools of religious devotion, and the creation of a Jewish "social gospel" in *tikkun olam*, bring Judaism and Christianity closer together. The influence of New Age religion on American Jewish spirituality is a subject for scholarly debate.<sup>49</sup> In the present book I posit a circuitous line of influence.<sup>50</sup> I am not arguing that "Christianizing" tropes in Hasidism are bringing about a "Christianization" of contemporary Judaism. I am simply suggesting that the popularity of Hasidism in contemporary Judaism should attract scholars to make a closer analysis of the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual affinities among Hasidism, Judaism, contemporary Kabbalism, New Age religion, and so forth. This book is a prolegomenon to the broader historical and cultural project, drawing attention to affinities between Hasidism and Christianity through close textual analysis.<sup>51</sup>

My more speculative suggestions about the influence of Hasidism may be open to accusations of generalization, often considered the cardinal sin of

historical research. Reflecting on French philosopher Michel Foucault's comment that "history is for cutting," medieval historian David Nirenberg notes, "That conviction is strong among historians of ideas, some of whom go so far as to suggest that to guard against false continuities, we should treat texts and ideas—especially the most classical and seemingly enduring—as 'speech-acts,' their meaning to be interpreted only within the immediate context of their utterance." And yet, he continues, "No amount of cutting can eliminate the historian's need to generalize, that is, to create connections and continuities between nonidentical things."<sup>52</sup>

Or, as a philosopher once said, "Generalizing is the occupational hazard of the philosopher." This is to say that while one must work with caution and care, the philosopher, historian, or theologian can never sever their work from the world in which they live or from the image of the future they wish to create. As Walter Benjamin wrote, "Criticism and prophecy must be the two categories that meet in the salvation of the past."<sup>53</sup> *Hasidism Incarnate* dwells in the details of Hasidic textuality. I make a conscious attempt, however, to historicize that textual tradition and offer suggestions—some may call them generalizations—as to why Hasidic metaphysics developed the way it did, how it became a template for contemporary Jewish spirituality, and what its potential impact is for future interaction with Christianity, especially in America.<sup>54</sup>

### III

Most scholarly studies of Hasidism begin by placing it in its historical and theological contexts. An introduction to the history of Hasidism, what Scholem called the "latest phase of" Jewish mysticism, would include a more thorough historical and social contextualization for the literature under examination.<sup>55</sup> In *Hasidism Incarnate* I take a different tack. I examine a series of Hasidic texts spanning the entire history of Hasidism and develop a theory of "incarnational thinking," showing how the texts navigate the divine/human divide and the ways in which they push and sometimes even break those boundaries in order to posit an immanent God who can be both worshipped and felt, within an orthodox Jewish framework. I then examine various themes that are addressed in innovative ways in Hasidic literature, such as charisma, kenosis, ethics, and the personhood of Jesus.

Since my interest is not only a textual reading of Hasidic literature but also its impact on modern Judaism, the final chapter examines attitudes of Jewish theologians and scholars on Christianity in the twentieth century. I focus on

four Jewish thinkers in order to map the changes in attitudes across history and geography. Germans Hans-Joachim Schoeps and Leo Baeck were active both before and after World War II, while Americans Michael Wyschogrod and Elliot Wolfson wrote in the latter decades of the twentieth century.



I conclude with a series of reflections on the ways in which Hasidism has had an impact on modern Judaism, how its return to “mythos” has opened contemporary Judaism to new influences at least as interesting as the role that reason played in the post-Enlightenment period. Differences between Judaism and Christianity remain, but I hope this book will convince readers that those differences are more nuanced, subtle, and interesting than the old Hasidic masters—or any of us—might have imagined.