Reclaiming the Battlefield of Tanakh in Jewish-Christian Debate

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For nearly two thousand years, Christian theology has presented itself as the fulfillment
of the Hebrew Bible. Incarnation, divine sonship, vicarious atonement, and Trinitarian theology
are all claimed to be latent within Tanakh—awaiting recognition.

Jewish responses have typically taken one of two paths.

Some attempt to refute Christianity by engaging it on its own turf: analyzing the New
Testament, dissecting Greek terminology, critiquing Church history, or debating early Christian
councils. Others retreat from engagement altogether, assuming that faith alone is sufficient
insulation.

Both approaches are flawed.

The first is strategically misguided. The second is intellectually insufficient.
This article proposes a third approach: return the debate to Tanakh—and only to Tanakh.

If Christianity cannot establish its doctrines from the Hebrew Bible, then its claim to be
the fulfillment of Judaism collapses at the foundation. A Jew does not need to master the New
Testament in order to defend Judaism. But Christianity, by definition, must root itself in the “Old
Testament.” That asymmetry is decisive.

We do not need their texts.
They need ours.
And that is where the conversation must remain.

The Method: Let Tanakh Stand on Its Own
The method is simple:
1. Argue from Tanakh alone.
2. Prioritize peshat (plain meaning).
3. Avoid dependence on rabbinic commentary 1 or later mystical speculation.
4. Do not engage in New Testament critique.
5. Demand textual clarity, not theological inference.
If doctrines like incarnation or Trinity are genuinely rooted in Tanakh, they should be
unequivocally demonstrable from the text itself—in context, linguistically, and covenantally.
They should not require
● Hidden codes
● Retrospective reinterpretation
● Ambiguous pronoun counting

● Mystical letter symbolism
● Post-biblical theological overlays
Tanakh is not cryptic about its core doctrines.
When it introduces covenant.
When it introduces kingship.
When it introduces sacrifice.
When it introduces prophecy.
It speaks clearly.
If incarnation were foundational, it would not appear as a grammatical anomaly in a poetic verse.

Example 1: “Let Us Make Man”—The Trinity Claim
Bereishit 1:26 is frequently cited:
“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”
The argument: the plural “us” indicates plurality within God.
But Tanakh itself supplies the interpretive framework. Isaiah 6 describes God as surrounded by the heavenly court. I Kings, 22 depicts God consulting celestial beings. 2 Isaiah
8:8 3 does the same. Ancient Near Eastern royal language frequently includes deliberative plural
speech.
The text never hints at ontological plurality.
If this verse were teaching a triune metaphysics, it would be the most opaque doctrinal
introduction in all of Tanakh.
Instead, the next verse reverts immediately to singular form:
“And God created man in His image.”
No explanation. No doctrinal development. No clarification.
To build Nicene theology through pronoun counting is not textual reading. It is theological projection.
Example 2: Isaiah 53—The Suffering Servant
Isaiah 53 is often treated as the decisive Christian prooftext.
But by chapter 53 Isaiah has already identified the servant explicitly and repeatedly:
“But you, Israel, My servant…” (41:8)
“Hear, O Jacob My servant…” (44:1)
“You are My servant, Israel…” (49:3)
By the time we reach chapter 53, the servant’s identity has already been fixed within the
book’s own narrative structure.
To switch identities in midstream without textual signal is not exegesis; it is retrofitting.
Even within Isaiah 53 itself, you find:
“He will see offspring and prolong his days.”

Christian interpretation must spiritualize this, because Jesus had no biological offspring.
Judaism, however, reads it plainly.
That is not polemic.
That is textual fidelity.
Example 3: Messianic Criteria

Tanakh describes the Messiah's role clearly:

- Global peace (Isaiah 2, 11)
- Universal knowledge of G-d (Jeremiah 31)
- Restoration of Torah observance (Ezekiel 37)
- Rebuilding the Temple (Ezekiel 37)
- Gathering exiles (Isaiah 11)
- Davidic patrilineal descent (II Samuel 7)

These are measurable outcomes.

Tanakh does not say: He will come, fail, die, and return millennia later.

If the Messiah must fulfill criteria, and those criteria were not fulfilled, Tanakh's definition governs.

A "second coming" is not a Tanakh-based category.

Is Christianity Shituf (syncretism), Avodah Zarah (idolatry), Henotheism, or Monotheism?

The Critical Error In Mischaracterizing Christianity

Before engaging Christian claims from Tanakh, we must first clarify how Christianity is categorized in halakhic and theological terms. Sloppy labels undermine serious argument. If we call it paganism when it does not define itself that way, we lose credibility. If we collapse complex halakhic distinctions into slogans, we forfeit strategic clarity.

This section therefore addresses four critical questions:

1. What is shituf in halakha, and how does it function in polemics?
2. How do later authorities treat Christianity within the framework of "religion-bound nations"?
3. Is Christianity accurately described as henotheism?
4. Does the Rambam's polemical description actually match Christianity's self-definition?

These distinctions are not semantic. They determine whether we argue carefully from Tanakh—or begin the debate already on the defensive.

1) Shituf in Halakha: What It Is, And Why It Matters in Christian Polemics

In halakhic literature, shituf refers to attaching something else to God in worship—invoking a "partner," mediator, or composite divine framework – such that worship is no longer directed to God alone. 4 The category is not merely philosophical; it

functions
halakhically as a boundary-marker for what a Jew may affirm, invoke, or validate.
Rambam: Christianity as Avodah Zarah For Jews
Rambam treats Christian theology as avodah zarah (idolatry) from a Jewish standpoint, i.e., a
Jew is forbidden to frame God in Trinitarian terms, and certainly forbidden to worship through
that framework. (This is part of his broader project of protecting absolute, uncompromised
unity.)
See Rambam Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim, 5 where he sets out the Torah's prohibition
against worshipping through any "foreign" framework, and the halakhic posture that flows from
it.
At the same time, Rambam famously recognizes that Christianity has played a role in
spreading knowledge of the Creator across the world 6 —though that sociological point does not
reduce the halakhic prohibition for Jews.
Tosafot & Rema: Shituf and Non-Jews
A major axis in the halakhic discussion is whether shituf is prohibited for non-Jews.
Tosafot in their commentary on shituf, 7 do not define shituf philosophically.
They describe it functionally: Invoking God together with something else.
They even add:
"They do not consider them gods."
That line is critical. Tosafot acknowledge that gentiles do not think they are worshipping
multiple gods. Yet halakhically, it is still called shituf.
That nuance is extremely important when engaging with Christians, so as to not mischaracterize their religion as non-monotheistic.
The Rema then codifies this principle in a practical halakhic context, that a non-Jew's
oath can be accepted even though "they mention the Name of Heaven and another thing,"
because their intent is toward the Creator, adding that shituf is not prohibited to them. 8
The Bottom Line

From a halakhic perspective, the operative question is not “do Christians claim monotheism?”—they do. The operative question is: Does their formulation violate the Torah’s
demand for the unity of God as understood by halakha, and if so, does that prohibition apply
equally to non-Jews?

2) Later Approaches That Treat Christianity as “Religion-Bound Nations” Rather Than
Classic Idolaters

Once you move beyond the Rambam’s strict philosophical-halakhic posture, you find an
additional track in the posekim and ba’alei machshavah: not redefining Christian doctrine as
“kosher,” but reclassifying Christians sociologically/halakhically as part of the “religion-bound”
world rather than pagan idolaters.

Meiri: “Nations Bound by the Ways of Religion”

The Meiri is often cited for distinguishing between pagans and what he describes as
civilizations governed by religion and morality, where belief in one transcendent Creator is
central. 9 The Meiri’s exact wording for such people is: “But any nation that is bound by the ways
of religion and acknowledges divinity – there is no doubt that even if one does not know him
personally, it is permitted and proper [to act toward him differently].” 10

In this approach, Christianity is treated very differently than the idolaters discussed in many
talmudic passages—less as “classic avodah zarah culture” and more as a mistaken theology
within a monotheistic religious civilization.

An Important Nuance

Notice in the key passage mentioned above:

● They acknowledge divinity.
● Meiri does not say they have perfect theology.
● Meiri does not say they affirm God’s unity properly.

Rather, he is making a halakhic-sociological distinction. He is saying that these nations are
religiously structured and morally bound. Therefore, they are not treated like

ancient pagan
idolaters.
This Meiri-frame essentially states that belief in a single transcendent God is what moves
Christianity outside the simple category of avodah zarah.
The Bottom Line
Even within Orthodox sources, one can find models that speak of Christianity as:
● theologically incorrect, yet
● religiously oriented toward the Creator, and
● certainly not equivalent to paganism.
3) Is Christianity Henotheism?
No—at least not in the standard definition. 11

Henotheism is worship of the one God without denying other gods.
Nicene Christianity 12 does not present itself as worshipping the one God among many; it presents
itself as one God with an internal tri-personal structure.
So if the goal is persuasive accuracy, one shouldn't call it henotheism. The critique is different:
it's about whether their "complex unity" preserves Torah's framing of God's unity or violates it.
4) Rambam's Description Doesn't Match Christianity as Christians Define It
Here is the key move you want for apologetics strategy:
Rambam's Polemical Description of Christianity in Iggeret Teiman
In his Iggeret Teiman, 13 the Rambam describes Jesus as someone who:
1. persuaded people that he was a prophet sent by God, and
2. presented himself as the Messiah, and
3. interpreted Torah in a way that led to "the total annulment…the abolition of all its
commandments."
This is an explicit summary of what the Rambam thought Christian doctrine entails.
The Apologetic Point: Rambam's Description Is Not Christianity's Self-definition
But this is precisely where a careful Christian polemicist can counter:
● Nicene Christianity does not define Jesus as merely a "prophet sent by God." It defines
him as fully divine ("true God from true God"), and grounds this in the doctrine of Trinity and incarnation. 14
● The Nicene Creed opens with "We/I believe in one God," and then immediately defines

Jesus in divine terms, i.e., their claim is not “two gods,” but one God in a tri-personal framework. 15

● Likewise, Christianity typically does not say “Torah is simply abolished.” It argues a fulfillment/reframing model (often the Torah’s “moral law remains; ritual law is fulfilled/transformed”), 16 which, while completely unfounded in the Torah, is not identical to the Rambam’s phrasing that Jesus sought “total annulment” of mitzvot.

Why This Matters

The previous point serves not to diminish Rambam. It is simply methodological: When Jews cite “shituf” or “avodah zarah” claims sloppily, Christians will answer: “We unequivocally affirm one God.”

And here the evidence is straightforward: their own creed explicitly frames their belief as monotheistic, even while defining God in a way Judaism rejects.

The apologetics takeaway: don’t mischaracterize—categorize:

● Don’t argue “they’re not monotheists.” They will instantly quote their creed and the conversation shifts to your credibility.

● Do argue: “Even granting your claim of one God, Tanakh defines God’s oneness in a way that excludes incarnation/divine man/divine mediation and forbids directing worship through/alongside any other referent.”

That keeps you firmly on Tanakh-based ground (the entire debate method of this essay), and it prevents the debate from turning into a meta-fight about whether you’ve even read Christian sources.

A Final Thought: Bringing the Debate Onto Jewish Turf

This is the core strategic insight:

When Jews debate Christianity from Christian texts, they play defense.

When Jews demand proof from Tanakh, they control the field.

Christian theology cannot detach itself from the Hebrew Bible. It requires it.

Judaism can defend itself entirely within Tanakh.

That asymmetry must be preserved.

One faithful to Torah does not need to master Greek Christology to defend emunah. He needs to

know his own inheritance.
If incarnation is real, show it in Tanakh.
If the Trinity is real, show it in Tanakh.
If a dying messiah who suspends Torah is real, show it in Tanakh.
Not in church councils.
Not in mystical overlays.
Not in typological readings centuries later.
In Tanakh.
…and if it is not there, it is not there.

1 This methodological choice is strategic, not theological. Christian polemicists often claim that the Rabbis “suppressed,” “buried,” or “reinterpreted away” messianic prophecies that originally pointed to Jesus or to Trinitarian theology. Although this claim is unfounded, once the debate shifts to whether Hazal distorted the text, the discussion becomes a historical argument about rabbinic authority rather than a textual examination of Tanakh itself. Therefore, for the purposes of interfaith debate, the method here must be deliberately simple: read the Tanakh on its own terms. If incarnation, Trinity, or a dying-and-returning messiah are genuinely embedded in the Hebrew Bible, they should be demonstrable from the plain text—without appealing to a single rabbinic commentary. If these claims cannot unequivocally be shown there, the burden has not been met.
2 “I saw God sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him…”
3 “Who will go for us?”

4 Tosafot, Sanhedrin 63b.
5 Rambam, Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 2:1–3.
6 Rambam Hilkhot Melakhim 11:4.
7 Tosafot, Sanhedrin 63b.
8 Rema Orah Hayyim 156:1.
9 Meiri, on Avodah Zarah 20a.
10 Ibid.
11 See Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “Henotheism”.
12 Nicene Creed.

13 Rambam, Iggeret Teiman, Iggerot HaRambam.
14 Nicene Creed.
15 Ibid.
16 Matthew 5:17.