

Understanding the Trinity

Rather than following most systematic theology books which work through God's attributes, one of which is that He is triune, I have decided to begin with the Trinity, as I believe this emphatically reminds us that God is first and foremost not a collection of various attributes ("holy", "gracious", "just"), but that He is first and foremost personal and relational.¹

- Put another way, we are starting with *who* God is before looking at *what* God is.

And the unfolding picture that the Scriptures give us is that the only true and living God – Yahweh – is triune. That is, God is one, and yet God is three. He is one in essence or substance, but has three persons.

At the end of the day, we must trust the Scriptures, even above our reasoning abilities (which is why we began our ST studies with the doctrine of the Word of God).

- The Scriptures don't *explain* the Trinity so much as they *declare* it.²

Of course, as anyone who has ever talked to a JW or Muslim knows, the Bible does not explicitly use the word 'trinity.'

- However, as we are going to see, the Word of God is replete and overflowing with sufficient support of this glorious doctrine.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is Progressively Revealed in Scripture

Cf. The "acorn to oak" understanding of 'Biblical Theology'.

- Perhaps the best illustration of this is given by B.B. Warfield:

¹ This is how Gerald Bray begins his Systematic Theology work "God is Love."

² This is where studying Church History can be both helpful and hurtful. We ought to praise God for the countless councils that took place to hammer out such doctrines as the Trinity (e.g. The Council of Chalcedon in 451), but at the end of the day, reading through the differences between how the Greek word for *hypostasis* captures more of the essence that the Latin *persona* will not convince one of the Trinity. One must believe that the Scriptures clearly, authoritatively, and unapologetically teach that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, and yet there is only one God (Deut. 6:4).

1. Partial revelation in the OT

The triune nature of God, though more explicitly explicated in the NT, is not relegated only to the NT. As Grudem says, “If God has eternally existed as three persons, it would be surprising to find no indications of that in the OT.”³

Not surprisingly, we see Trinitarian shadows in the very first verse of the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible:

- “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Gen. 1:1)⁴

This is not so clear in the English.

- The English singular “God” is from the plural Hebrew *Elohim*.

Contrary to what liberal linguists would have us to believe, this is not a strawman verse.

- Some state that this is merely a “plural of intensity”, a common feature used in the Hebrew OT.
 - Though there is definitely some merit to this (i.e. *Elohim* is the ‘greatest, most powerful ‘god’), the usage of the same noun in 1:26 seems to reinforce some kind of plurality in “God.”⁵

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 226.

⁴ As we will see in our studies from the NT, all three persons of the Trinity are intimately involved in creation: the Father speaks the Word (cf. John 1:1) through the Spirit (who here is mysteriously hovering over the waters (Gen. 1:2). This is course sets up a beautiful typology for how salvation (i.e. the new creation) works as well.

⁵ Cf. Victor Hamilton, *Genesis, chapters 1-17* in “New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 134. On p. 133, Hamilton reminds us “the theological battle of Moses’ day was not trinitarianism versus unitarianism. The battle centered around the belief in one God who is himself uncreated, merciful, and sovereign versus the belief in multiple gods and demons who were capricious, unpredictable, and often immoral.” This reminds us that we need to remember Augustine’s simple hermeneutic: “In the old [testament] concealed, in the new [testament] revealed.”

Gen. 1:26 – “Then God [*Elohim*] said, ‘Let us [plural] make man in our [plural] image, after our [plural] likeness.’”

- Some assert that this is a “plural of majesty.”
 - However, as many scholars note, in OT Hebrew there are no other examples of a monarch using plural verbs or plural pronouns of himself in such a “plural of majesty,” so this suggestion has no evidence to support it.⁶
- Others have suggested that God is here speaking to angels.
 - But nowhere in the Bible does it say that angels participated in the creation of man (*Elohim* alone is Creator), nor does the Bible teach man was created in the image and likeness of angels.
 - Cf. Eph. 4:24
 - Note the categorical differences between humans and angels in Psalm 8 (and how the author Hebrews interprets it Christologically in chapters 1-2).

The best explanation of these verses in Genesis 1 is that there is a plurality of persons in God Himself.⁷ Though we are not told explicitly how many persons there are, there is more than one.⁸

- Cf. Gen. 3:22 – “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”⁹

⁶ *Ibid.* Grudem further cites *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, Section 124g, n.2 regarding this idea of a plural of majesty: “The plural used by God in Genesis 1:26, 11:7, Isaiah 6:8 has been incorrectly explained in this way.” Cf. Also Hamilton, *Genesis* (NICOT), 133-34.

⁷ This follows the philosophical principle of “Ockham’s Razor”, which simply states that the simplest, most straight-forward proposition, is likely the right one (it has the least amount of assumptions needed to work).

⁸ Hamilton notes, “It is one thing to say that the author of Gen. 1 was not schooled in the intricacies of Christian dogma. It is another thing to say he was theologically too primitive or naïve to handle such ideas as plurality within unity. What we often so blithely dismiss as ‘foreign to the thought of the OT’ may be nothing of the sort. True, the concept may not be etched on every page of Scripture, but hints and clues are dropped enticingly here and there, and such hints await their full understanding ‘at the correct time’ (Gal. 4:4).” From *Genesis* (NICOT), 134.

⁹ Again, in light of the Bible, God’s angels are never given this ability to “know” (i.e. decide) what is good or evil. They simply carry out their orders.

- Cf. Gen. 11:7 – “Come, let us go down.”
- Cf. Isa. 6:8 – “Whom shall I (singular) send, and who will go for us (plural)?”

Other passages in the OT clearly call separate persons *Elohim* or *YHWH*:

- Psa. 45:6-7
 - Here, two separate persons are called “God”.
 - ➔ In the fullness of the NT, this passage is ultimately attributed to Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:8), who, as the eternal Son, is as fully God as His Father is (cf. 1:1; John 1:1).
- Psa. 110:1 – “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies Your footstool.’”
 - King David is clearly referring to two separate persons, one whom he calls “the LORD” (*Yahweh*), and the other “Lord” (*Adonai*).
 - ➔ Again, the NT clearly interprets this Christologically, attributing once again full divinity to Jesus, the Son of God (Matt. 22:41-46).
 - Even without the NT teaching on the Trinity, it seems clear that David was aware of a plurality of persons in one God.
- Cf. Hosea 1:7; Malachi 3:1-2

The OT also depicts that the Holy Spirit is a separate divine person from the Father and the Son:

- Isa. 63:9-10 – “In all [Israel’s] affliction [Yahweh] was afflicted, and the angle of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.”

- As we will soon see, this angel of God’s presence, is fully divine, yet distinct from the God who sends Him.¹⁰ Amazingly, the Spirit of this divine angel is sent, and even takes up residency in the midst of Israel (vv.11, 14).¹¹
- Isa. 48:16 – The speaker, whom the previous context clearly shows is the LORD (most likely the Servant of the LORD), nevertheless says, “And now the Lord GOD (*Adonai Yahweh*) has sent Me, and His Spirit.”
 - Here, the Spirit of the LORD, like the Servant of the LORD, has been “sent” by “the Lord GOD” (most EVV = “the Sovereign LORD”) on mission.
 - ➔ Once again, the NT clearly interprets this as Trinitarian: Jesus the Messiah is Yahweh’s “Servant”, and the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father (John 15:26), is likewise sent on an errand of redemption.

The Angel of the LORD

As Grudem notes, if this angel of the LORD is a “messenger” (*mal’ak*) of the LORD, then He is distinct from the LORD Himself.

And yet, as the OT clearly and repeatedly shows, this angel of the LORD is called “God” (*Elohim*) or “the LORD” (*Yahweh*).

A few examples:

- Gen. 16:13 – Here, Hagar calls the “angel of the LORD [who] found her by a spring of water in the wilderness” and delivered her “the God who sees”, “for, she said, ‘truly I have seen Him who looks after me.’”
 - According to this verse, to see the angel of the LORD is to see God Himself.

¹⁰ This is what theologians call a “Theophany” (“an appearance of God”), or, more precisely, a “Christophany” (that is, a pre-incarnate appearance of the eternal Son of God in the form of ‘flesh’).

¹¹ It is almost impossible to miss the glorious typology in this text which prepares us for Jesus “sending” the Holy Spirit upon the “new Israel”, His church, in the NT.

- Cf. the narrative in Judges 13, where Manoah sees the angel of the LORD and offers worship and sacrifice to Him (things which would be considered idolatry according to Exodus 20 if this angel were merely a created being [cf. Rev. 19:10]). In v.22, Manoah is terrified for his life, as he exclaims to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God (*Elohim*).”¹²
- Judges 2:1-2 – “Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And He said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you.’”
 - Staggeringly, this angel actually says *He* brought Israel out of Egypt, and *He* made a covenant with them.
 - Any Jew knew from the Pentateuch that it was the LORD who redeemed and delivered Israel out of Egypt, and who made a covenant with them at Sinai. And yet the OT author seemingly assumes it is ‘OK’ for the angel to say this without being rebuked by Israel, God, or the author.
 - This is because in Exodus 3:2-6 and 23:20-22, the LORD had already declared He would rescue Israel by means of His angel. And yet, here, we see the angel is none other than the LORD Himself!

2. A more complete revelation in Jesus and the NT

¹² Not surprisingly, mention of the Spirit of the LORD is immediately mentioned in v.25.