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Old Testament Background

The Bible and the Doctrine of the Trinity

We must distinguish between the doctrine of the Trinity and the Trinity itself. God always is, and he always is Trinity. From eternity he is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one indivisible being, three irreducible persons.

On the other hand, *the doctrine of the Trinity* is the developed formulation of what the church understands God to have revealed in the history of revelation and redemption, as recorded in Scripture. Here, the church responded to erroneous ideas that imperiled the gospel. It used refined concepts, language stretched to express the reality that God disclosed.

The Trinity is revealed in the OT in latent form, in the NT implicitly but pervasively. Yet the fully fledged *doctrine* awaited prolonged reflection on the biblical record. As Wainwright states, "In so far as a doctrine is an answer, however fragmentary, to a problem, there is a doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament. In so far as it is a formal statement of a position, there is no doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament."[1]

God in Genesis 1

"*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*" It takes the rest of the Bible to disclose the meaning concealed in this

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1. Arthur Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1963), 4.

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cryptic sentence.[2] Even so, the first chapter of Genesis reveals much. It portrays the creation and formation of the world, and the ordered shaping of a place for human beings to live. It presents man as head of creation, in relation to and in communion with God his Creator. The act of *creation* itself is direct and immediate (Gen. 1:1–2), distinct from the work of formation that follows.[3] The result is a cosmos formless, empty, dark, and wet—unfit for human life. The rest of the chapter describes the world's *formation* (or *distinction*) and *adornment*, God's introducing order, light, and dryness, making it fit for life to flourish. First, God creates light, and sets boundaries to the darkness (vv. 2–5). Second, he molds the earth into shape so that it is no longer formless (vv. 6–8, 9–10). Third, God separates the waters and forms dry land, so that it is no longer entirely wet (vv. 9–10). Following this, he populates the earth, ending its emptiness (vv. 20–30), first with fish and birds, then with land animals, and finally, as the apex of the whole, by humans made in his image. This God is not only almighty, but also a master planner, artist, and architect supreme.

This order is clear from the parallels between two groups of days, the first three and the second three.[4] On day 1 God creates light, while on day 4 he makes the moon and the stars. On day 2 he separates the waters, the clouds and the seas, and forms the sky, while

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2. Fred Sanders, in his excellent book *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 191–237 and passim, argues that since the Trinity is preeminently revealed in the missions of the Son and the Spirit in the incarnation and Pentecost, this exegetical procedure is best undertaken by focusing on the NT and afterward reading the OT in the light of the NT. This order has much to commend it; it makes the fully Christian doctrine of God primary. Yet it is impossible to understand the NT apart from the OT background. God first revealed himself as one and then, over time, as triune. This undergirds the legitimacy of beginning with the OT.

3. Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 100ff. See also the discussion in Aquinas, *ST*, 1a.66.1–4, and questions 66–74 in general.

4. This pattern was discerned at least as long ago as the thirteenth century. See *Robert Grosseteste: On the Six Days of Creation: A Translation of the Hexaëmeron by C. F. J. Martin*, Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1996), 160–61 (5.1.3–5.2.1); Aquinas, *ST*, 1.74.1. See my article "'In the Space of Six Days': The Days of Creation from Origen to the Westminster Assembly," *WTJ* 61, 2 (1999): 149–74.

on day 5 he creates birds and fish to live there. On day 3 he forms the dry ground, and on day 6 he creates animals and humans, whose native element this will be. He shows his sovereign freedom in naming and blessing his creation, and sees that it is thoroughly good. At the end of it all comes the unfinished seventh day, when God enters his rest that he made to share with man, his partner, whom he created in his own image. Entailed is an implicit invitation for us to follow.[5]

It is needless to elaborate on this, so generally recognized is it. Especially striking is God's sovereign and variegated ordering of his creation. In particular, *he forms the earth in a threefold manner*. First, he issues direct fiats. He says, "Let there be light," and there is light (Gen. 1:3). With seemingly effortless command, he brings into being the expanse (v. 6), the dry ground (v. 9), the stars (vv. 14–15), and the birds and fish (vv. 20–21). It is enough for him to speak; his edict is fulfilled at once. Second, he works. He separates light from darkness (v. 4), he makes the expanse and separates the waters (v. 7), he makes the two great lights, the sun and the moon (v. 16), setting them in the expanse to give light on the earth (v. 17), he creates the great creatures of the seas and various kinds of birds (v. 21), he makes the beasts of the earth and reptiles (v. 25), and finally he creates man—male and female—in his own image (vv. 26–27). The thought is of focused, purposive action by God, of divine labor accomplishing his ends. But there is also a third way of formation, in which God uses the activity of the creatures themselves. God commands the earth to produce vegetation, plants, and trees (vv. 11–12). He requests the lights to govern the day and night (vv. 14–16). He commands the earth to bring forth land animals (v. 24). Here the creatures follow God's instructions and contribute to the eventual outcome. This God who created the universe does not work in a monolithic way. His order is varied—it is threefold but one. His work shows diversity in its unity and unity in its diversity. This God loves order and variety together.

This reflects the chapter's record of God himself. The triadic manner of the earth's formation reflects who God its Creator is. He is a relational being. This is implicit from the very start. Notice the

5. Cf. Heb. 3:7–4:11.

distinction between God who created the heavens and earth (Gen. 1:1), the Spirit of God who hovers over the face of the waters (v. 2), and the speech or word of God issuing the fiat "Let there be light" (v. 3)—and his speech recurs frequently throughout the chapter. Of course, it is most unlikely that the author and original readers would have understood the Spirit of God in a personalized way, because of the heavy and insistent stress in the OT on the uniqueness of the one God. The word *ruach* can mean "spirit," "wind," or "breath." Many commentators understand it to refer to the energy of God—the divine force, the power that creates and sustains life (Driver), an awesome wind (Speiser), a mighty wind (Westermann), God's outgoing energy (Kidner), or the wind of God (Wenham). Wenham is sound when he suggests that this is a vivid image of the Spirit of God.[6] Driver recognizes that this passage prepares for the personal use of the term *Word* in John's Gospel and, by the same token, that the later NT personalizing of the Spirit of God is a congruent development from this statement also.

With the creation of man is the unique deliberation "Let us make man in our image," expressing a plurality in God (Gen. 1:26–27). Von Rad comments that this signifies the high point and goal to which all of God's creative activity is directed. But what does it mean? A variety of interpretations have been advanced to explain it. Some suggest that God is addressing the angels and placing himself in the heavenly court, so that man is made like the angels.[7] Yet the agents addressed are invited to share in the creation of man, and this is never attributed to the angels elsewhere in the Bible. Second, Driver is one of those who suggest a plural of majesty, a figure of speech underlining God's dignity and greatness.[8] But this is no longer as favored

6. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1926), 4; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 5; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1967), 45; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 15–17; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

7. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 57–59.

8. Driver, *Genesis*, 14.

as it once was. Among other things, plurals of majesty are rarely if ever used with verbs. Third, Westermann and many recent interpreters favor a plural of self-deliberation or self-encouragement. Yet few parallels support it. Wenham puts forward a variant on the theme of the heavenly court, only in his case he argues for God's inviting the angels to witness the creation of man rather than to participate in it. He points to Job 38:4–7, where at creation the morning stars are said to sing together and all the sons of God (angels?) shout for joy.[9]

Scripture, however, has a fullness that goes beyond the horizons of the original authors. Many of the fathers saw this statement as a reference to the Trinity. While this was concealed from the original readers and from the OT saints as a whole, the fathers were not at variance with the trajectory of the text. Rabbinical commentators were often perplexed by this passage and other similar ones referring to a plurality in God (Gen. 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8). Philo thought they referred to subordinate powers assisting God in the creation of man. Puzzling over these passages, Jewish interpreters tried to see them as expressing the unity of God.[10] Perhaps it is significant that the NT never refers to Genesis 1:26 with regard to God, but that does not mean it is unwarranted to see here a propleptic reference to the Trinity. The NT does not refer to *everything*, but it does give us the principle that the OT contains in seed form what is more fully made known in the NT, and on that basis we may look back to the earlier writings much as at the end of a detective mystery we reread the plot, seeing clues that we missed the first time but are now given fresh meaning by our knowledge of the whole. In other words, in terms of the *sensus plenior* (the fuller sense or meaning) of Scripture, God's words here attest a plurality in God, a plurality later expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. The original readers would not have grasped this, but we, with the full plot disclosed, can revisit the passage and see there the clues.

I have written elsewhere, commenting on Genesis 1:26–27, that "man exists as a duality, the one in relation to the other. . . . As for

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9. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 28.
10. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 23–26.

God himself, . . . the context points to his own intrinsic relationality. The plural occurs on three occasions in v. 26, yet God is also singular in v. 27. God is placed in parallel with man, made in his image as male and female, who is described both in the singular and plural. Behind it all is the distinction God/Spirit of God/speech of God in vv. 1–3. . . . This relationality will in the development of biblical revelation eventually be disclosed as taking the form of a triunity."[11] I refer there to kindred comments by Karl Barth.[12]

In short, this God who made the universe—establishing an order with a vast range of variety, with human beings as the crown of his creation, representing him as his image-bearers—is relational. Communion and communication are inherent to his very being. In creating the world, he has made us for himself, to enter into communion with him in a universe of ravishing beauty and ordered variety. By his creation of the seventh day, he ceased from his works in contemplation of their ordered beauty and goodness, and invites us to join him. The first chapter of Genesis says to all who read it that Yahweh the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses, is also the Creator of all things. He who made his covenant with his people Israel is not some merely territorial divinity but is the one to whom all nations are accountable, for he is their Maker. There is a clear unity between creation and redemption. The mandate in Genesis 1:26–29 to multiply and subdue the earth embraces the whole creation, and it is also the basic building block for the unfolding structure of salvation after the fall. Reflecting on this implicitly Trinitarian structure of Genesis 1, Athanasius will write of creation as being *in Christ*.[13] Because Genesis (no less than any other part of the Bible) is to be read in the context of the whole of Scripture, we can see references in the NT to the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in creation as reinforcing this (John 1:1ff.; Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:3; 11:3).

This vital point is underlined by other—unmistakably poetic—

11. Robert Letham, "The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment," *WTJ* 52, 1 (1990): 71.

12. Barth, *CD*, III/1:196.

13. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1, 3, 12, 14.

accounts of creation in the OT. In Psalm 33:6, creation is said to be "by the word of the Lord . . . and by the breath of his mouth." In Proverbs 8:22ff., a passage much used and abused in the early-church debates, Wisdom is personified and eulogized as sharing with the Lord in the creation of the heavens and the earth. Job acknowledges that the Spirit of God made him (Job 33:4; cf. 26:13), and the psalmist also talks of God's Spirit as Creator (Ps. 104:30). It is impossible to think of creation (*this* creation, *this* multifaceted and coherent creation, the only one we know and the only one there is[14]) as occurring apart from its Maker's being relational, and so in accordance with his full revelation as triune, as Bavinck so cogently argues.[15] Bavinck goes even further, arguing that "without generation [of the Son by the Father] creation would not be possible. If in an absolute sense God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible."[16] This is borne out by hints in the OT of distinction within the unity of the one God.

The Angel of the Lord

The Pentateuch contains a good number of passages where the angel of the Lord appears and is identified with God himself. In this there are hints of plurality in God. In Genesis 16:7–13, an angel speaks as God, saying to Hagar, "I will surely multiply your offspring," informing her of the impending birth of Ishmael and of the name he is to have. Hagar replies to the angel, calling the Lord who spoke to her "a God of seeing." Then in Genesis 21:17–18, the angel again speaks to Hagar about her son, again with the voice of God: "I will make him into a great nation." To Abraham in Genesis 22:11–18, immediately after he offered Isaac on the altar, the angel of the Lord calls from heaven, making promises in line with the covenant that God had already established. The angel's words here are the

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14. *Pace* theorists of parallel universes, for which there exists no evidence.
15. Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, 39–45.
16. Ibid., 39.

equivalent of the Lord's in Genesis 12:1–3: "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring." Again, in Genesis 31:10–13, speaking to Jacob, the angel of the Lord identifies himself with the God of Bethel. In Exodus 3:2–6ff., the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in a flame of fire out of the bush, while from the bush itself the Lord sees (v. 4), speaks (v. 4ff.), and identifies himself as God (v. 6).

Later, after the conquest of Canaan, in Judges 2:1–5 the angel of the Lord who goes from Gilgal to Bochum speaks in the name of Yahweh, saying, "I brought you up from Egypt . . . . I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you . . . .' But you have not obeyed my voice." Appearing to Gideon, the angel of the Lord (Judg. 6:12, 20–22) *is* the Lord (vv. 14ff., 23–24). Then, when he appears to Samson's parents, Manoah and his wife, in Judges 13:3–23, an angel of the Lord is equated by Manoah's wife at his first showing with a man of God (vv. 3–8), while the second time he is the angel of God, the Lord, and also a man (vv. 9–20). After this, in fearful awe the couple recognize that in seeing the angel of the Lord, they have in fact seen God. In each instance, the angel appears as a man but is simultaneously equated with God. Augustine will debate these questions at length in his great work *On the Trinity*. Here is a figure identified with God, yet distinct from him. As yet, there is no explanation of how this can be, and the whole series of events is seen in the light of there being only one God.[17]

Theophanies

Closely related to the appearances of the angel of the Lord are those few occasions when God appears in bodily form. Most notable is the visit by the three men or angels to Abraham, recorded in Genesis 18 and 19. There the Lord appeared to Abraham (18:1). Yet in the same breath, Abraham finds three men standing in front of him (v. 2). He offers them the usual Semitic hospitality (vv. 3–8), including a meal. Then the Lord speaks, in words that only God

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17. See also Zechariah 3:1–10, where the angel of the Lord is not explicitly identified with Yahweh but speaks the word of Yahweh.

could utter: "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son" (v. 10). Again, the narrative records that the Lord speaks to Abraham (v. 13).

Following this, the men set out, while the Lord speaks (Gen. 18:16–21). The men turn to leave for Sodom, while the Lord speaks to Abraham (vv. 22ff.). Then the Lord leaves, and Abraham returns home (v. 33), while the two (no longer three) angels arrive at Sodom (19:1). These two angels announce to Lot that the Lord has sent them to destroy the place (v. 13), while after Lot's precarious escape it is the Lord who destroys it (vv. 24–25). Here is a bewildering and continued juxtaposition of men, angels, and the Lord. It is as though boundaries had disappeared. This passage will puzzle Augustine, who wonders whether this is an appearance of the preincarnate Christ, all three persons of the Trinity, or an angelic visitation. The point is that the one God presents himself in a way that poses questions. As Wainwright comments, this "mysterious oscillation" aroused a great deal of discussion among the rabbis, although not until Justin Martyr in the second century did Christians begin to consider the incident.[18] Not until then does the problem of the Trinity begin to emerge, and there are good reasons—the rigorous Jewish monotheism and widespread pagan polytheism—why it could not have been tackled any earlier.

Joshua's meeting with the commander of the army of the Lord in Joshua 5:13–15 deserves more attention than it has often received. This mysterious figure appears as a man, but is presumably an angel. Joshua worships him, however, and is not reproved for it. This is strikingly different from the apostle John's experiences when he worships an angel (Rev. 19:10; 22:8–9), for both times he is sharply rebuked. Moreover, the commander of the Lord's army—and remember that Joshua was precisely that himself—speaks to him in the same language that the Lord had used in addressing Moses at the burning bush. Both here and in Genesis, God appears as man; a personal agent speaks as God and yet is distinguished from him. These appearances have frequently been seen as Christophanies, preincarnate appearances of the Son. While I am cautiously noncommittal

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18. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 26–29.

on this matter, Sanders rejects the idea, on the grounds that it would undermine the uniqueness of the historical incarnation.[19] But if it is granted that these were appearances of God, and that it was necessary that the Son, rather than the Father or the Spirit, become incarnate (see chapter 17), I see no reason why this should undermine the uniqueness of the incarnation.

Rigorous Monotheism

Behind all these episodes is a pervasive monotheism. Israel was time and again taught that there is one God only—Yahweh, who had taken his people into covenant with himself. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 was central to Israel's faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." These words, and the whole law of which they are a part, trenchantly repudiate the polytheism of the pagan world. In the immediate context, Canaanite religions were the challenge to Israel, but this impressive declaration includes in its scope all pagan objects of worship mentioned in the historical and prophetic literature.

Israel's history was in many ways a conflict with idols, leading up to the exile. This lesson is rammed home again and again but is finally learned only through the painful tragedy of banishment to a far country.[20] Isaiah is full of assertions of the uniqueness and sole deity of Yahweh:

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel
    and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
"I am the first and I am the last;
    besides me there is no god.
Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.
    Let him declare and set it before me,

19. Sanders, *Triune God*, 224–26.
20. "All idolatrous worship had been abolished by that time." Jules Lebreton, *History of the Dogma of the Trinity: From Its Origins to the Council of Nicaea*, trans. Algar Thorold, 8th ed. (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1939), 74.

since I appointed an ancient people.
>   Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.
Fear not, nor be afraid;
>   have I not told you from of old and declared it?
>   And you are my witnesses!
Is there a God besides me?
>   There is no Rock; I know not any." (Isa   44:6–8; see also
>>   40:9–31; 42:8; Zech. 14:9)

The creation account of Genesis was itself a powerful counter to the axiomatic assumption of the ancient Near East that the gods of the nations were territorial deities, presiding over the area in which their devotees lived but without jurisdiction beyond those boundaries. In this light, the conflict between the great king, Sennacherib the Assyrian, and the prophet Isaiah is crucial. Recorded three times in the OT, it is evidently considered an important example of the universal domain of Yahweh. In the vivid account of the confrontation between Assyria and Judah in 2 Kings 18–19, the central point is the duel between the word of the great king, backed up by all the political and economic muscle and all the military might of the greatest power on earth, and on the other hand the word of Yahweh, his human agents utterly powerless, completely at the great king's mercy. There is simply no contest. The word of Yahweh triumphs with ease!

It is in the light of this monotheistic faith, rammed home time and again, that we should view the passages concerning the angel of the Lord and the various hints of distinction within God's being that come to light from time to time in the OT. These incidents were never remotely intended as examples of the surrounding paganism's supposition of a plurality of gods. They fitted a monotheistic framework.

Distinction in God

In a number of passages, Yahweh addresses Yahweh, not in self-deliberation but apparently as distinct agents. Psalm 110:1 records: "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Here Yahweh addresses a figure

whom David calls his "lord" (*Adonay*). In this enthronement psalm, David the king pays homage to this figure, who appears as "more than royal."[21] This Lord receives authority and power greater than David. He and Yahweh are fully at one. Yahweh's oracle is followed by an oath (v. 4) plus a pledge that he will never change his mind in his decree that the Lord be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. This Melchizedek has appeared in Genesis 14, without any reference to his ancestry, birth, or death—all vital and essential features of the priests in Israel. As an everlasting priest, Melchizedek mediates an everlasting salvation. The psalm points forward to the person and power of Christ, and will be frequently cited in the NT both by Jesus of himself (Mark 12:36 and parallels) and by Peter of Jesus (Acts 2:33–35). The psalm stops short of explicitly identifying David's Lord with Yahweh, but the connection is as close as could be.

In this psalm we have an example of what Matthew Bates terms "prosopological exegesis," person-based interpretation of the OT by the NT and early Christian exegetes. This was instrumental in preparing the way for the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Bates makes a convincing case that it was a far more widespread interpretive strategy than typology and was probably used by Jesus himself as well as the apostles. It considered that certain discourses in the OT were dialogues between the persons of the Trinity. Hence, in Psalm 110:1, David reports a setting in which God addresses "my Lord," the Christ. Mark and other synoptic writers relate how Jesus deduced "via scriptural exegesis that God (*the Father*) via a script authored by the *Holy Spirit* had spoken directly to him after the dawn of time about his origin before time began."[22] In this way, the prophets were on occasion swept up to hear intra-Trinitarian discourse referring to events that were to occur at a later date. In turn, the incarnate Son would enact these events performatively in the course of his life and ministry.

This interpretive method went beyond typology even as it differed

21. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: A Commentary on Books III–V of the Psalms* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 392.

22. Matthew Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford:

from it. Whereas typology required a correspondence between the OT and NT entities, prosopological meaning demands that the discourse cannot refer to the OT prophet or anyone else. Often the identity of the referent in the passage is a puzzle if it were taken to be a human. It can refer only to one who is divine; indeed, it does not *refer* to them, nor is it simply *about* them, for the divine persons are themselves the actors in the drama. For the reader to appreciate this requires a recognition of the widest context of Scripture, including the sovereignty of God, his transcendence over time, and his purposes in revelation and redemption, so that the Son is in conversation with the Father about later events in human history in his incarnate life that are yet to happen from the prophet's perspective. In the NT, he or the apostles recount these discourses as referring to himself.

The NT writers and early Christian exegetes regarded passages such as this (Psalm 2:7–9 is another, but there are many more, which could not possibly refer to David or the relevant prophet) as involving a revelation of a Trinitarian conversation. In such contexts, the discussion focuses on events that were to occur in the future in relation to the human author. In Psalm 110, the Father is discussing with the Son his future office as Priest-King, the whole being disclosed to David by the Holy Spirit.[23]

These proposals have been called "stunningly important," "a compelling game changer" (Joel Green), "an important contribution" (Larry Hurtado), "a stream of early Trinitarian thinking that has all too often been forgotten" (Lewis Ayres), and "bold and erudite" (Matthew Levering).[24] Bates is aware of the dangers of using such a method ourselves and provides some clear guidelines as controls to keep it within bounds. It was used when the natural meaning could not apply to the human author. He contends that it is a valid mode of interpretation, casting light on the Trinitarian relations that go beyond generation and procession, a method that he deems to have been well-nigh essential to the emergence of the doctrine of the

Oxford University Press, 2016), 44–62, here 62. Note also the discussion in Sanders, *Triune God*, 226–37.

23. Bates, *Birth of the Trinity*, 62.

24. Ibid., back cover.

Trinity, greatly facilitating the church's recognition of the personal nature of God. Moreover, it sheds light on the meaning of the literal sense of Scripture, for it attests that the widest theological context should be taken into consideration. Sanders stresses that the method flows from recognition of the missions of the Son and the Spirit and so depends on the fullness of canonical revelation and our own knowledge of the Son and the Spirit, from which we can then reread the OT canonically.[25]

Then there is Psalm 45:7–8 (6–7 English), which reads, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." Here, referring to a royal wedding, "royal compliments suddenly blossom into divine honours," and while some scholars attempt to evade the obvious fact that the royal figure addressed as God in verse 6 is anointed by God in verse 7, "the Hebrew resists any softening here."[26] Such language makes final sense only in the light of the incarnation of the Son of God.

In a subtle series of ascriptions in Isaiah 63:8–14, Israel's checkered past is in view. Yahweh became their Deliverer (v. 8), the angel of his presence rescued them (v. 9), he loved, pitied, and carried them (v. 9), but they grieved his Holy Spirit and so he fought against them (v. 10). Then he remembered that he had put his Holy Spirit in their midst (v. 11), and so the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest (v. 14). This series of oscillations brings the Spirit of God into rather clear relief, and so, as R. N. Whybray comments, "God's holy spirit . . . is here personified more clearly than anywhere else in the Old Testament, and is on its way to its later full development as a distinct hypostasis in late Jewish and in Christian thought."[27]

We also note Isaiah 6:3, where the prophet, in his vision of the exalted Yahweh, hears the trisagion "Holy, holy, holy" in the mouths

25. Sanders, *Triune God*, 226–37.

26. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: A Commentary on Books I–II of the Psalms* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 170–71.

27. R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 258.

of the seraphim. This is another example of what, on the face of it, was originally understood as a threefold ascription of praise to God but that on later reflection, in the light of fuller NT revelation, bears the impress of the three-personed God.

God as Father

While the distinctive covenant name of God, *YHWH*, occurs nearly seven thousand times in the OT, God calls himself *Father* only just over twenty times. Both the stress on monotheism and also the commandment against images for worship underline God's transcendence over all creaturely comparisons. This helps explain why the name is so scarce and also the real absence of feminine images and metaphors for God.[28] Indeed, *Father* usually refers to the covenantal relationship of Yahweh to Israel (Ex. 4:22–23; Hos. 11:1) and points to God's free choice, not to sexual activity and physical generation.[29] The various gods and goddesses of the ancient world were usually connected with procreation. Israel was hereby taught to avoid thinking of God in physical terms, especially anything drawn from human begetting and fertility. Instead, as Father Yahweh had freely chosen them in the history of salvation, his unconditional promise put him in an entirely different context,[30] that of a father's love and of the "intimate closeness" expressed in, for example, Hosea 11:3–4:[31]

> Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
>> I took them up by their arms,
>> but they did not know that I healed them.
> I led them with cords of kindness,
>> with the bands of love,
> and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
>> and I bent down to them and fed them.

28. Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 12.
29. Ibid., 14, 23; Wainwright, *Trinity*, 43.
30. O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 15–18.
31. Ibid., 17, 22.

The Spirit of God

The Spirit of God is mentioned nearly four hundred times in the OT. In general, the Spirit is seen as the power of God at work, on occasion as an extension of the divine personality, but for the most part as little more than a divine attribute. Sometimes Hebrew poetic parallelism implies that the Spirit of God is identical to Yahweh (Ps. 139:7), but this simply begs the question, for there is not the slightest hint even here that the Spirit is to be understood as a distinct person. Rather, it is God's divine power or breath,[32] "God's manifest and powerful activity in the world."[33]

Frequently, anthropomorphic language is used. The Spirit has personal characteristics—guiding, instructing, being grieved. The Spirit, or breath, of God gives life (Gen. 1:2; Pss. 33:6; 104:29–30), coming upon the inert bones in Ezekiel's vision to reanimate them (Ezek. 37:8–10). The Spirit of God empowers for various forms of service in God's kingdom (Ex. 31:3; 35:31–34; Num. 27:18; Judg. 3:10; 1 Sam. 16:13), and is the protector of God's people (1 Sam. 19:20, 23; Isa. 63:11–12; Hag. 2:5), indwelling them (Num. 27:18 re Joshua; Deut. 34:9; Ezek. 2:2; 3:24; Dan. 4:8–9, 18; 5:11; Mic. 3:8), resting upon and empowering the Messiah (Isa. 11:2–3; 42:1; 61:1). The most remarkable actions of the patriarchs and prophets are all due to the Spirit of God, whether they be those of Gideon, Samson, Saul, or Joseph, who is able to interpret dreams because he was full of the Spirit of God (Gen. 41:38). All these events were to protect Israel or to develop its relationship to Yahweh. There is no evidence, however, that the Spirit was seen as a distinct person. In fact, everything points the other way. In view is not the Spirit's nature but the Spirit's action.[34] Yahweh acts through the Spirit, as Wainwright comments.[35] To suggest the contrary would have challenged the insistence of Deuteronomy that there is only one God, for no tools existed at that time to distinguish such a putative claim from

32. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 30.
33. O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 32.
34. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 88.
35. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 31.

the pagan polytheism that Israel was bound to reject. The Spirit is the power of God at work, a distinctive attribute, no more.

Yet a development in the course of the OT helps pave the way for the Christian teaching. Generally, the Spirit comes only intermittently on the prophets and on select persons such as Samson and Saul, and his presence with his people in general is also intermittent (Ps. 51:11). Later on, however, the Spirit is seen as a permanent possession, with an increased focus on his ethical effect in terms of righteousness and justice (Isa. 11:2; Zech. 12:10).[36] The Spirit is also linked with the Messiah in three passages (Isa. 11:1–2; 42:1; 61:1), and is expected to come as a future gift to all of God's people (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; 37:12–14; Joel 2:28ff.; Zech. 12:10). Thus, "the developing idea of the Spirit provided a climate in which plurality within the Godhead was conceivable."[37]

At this point, B. B. Warfield's magisterial article "The Spirit of God in the Old Testament" is important.[38] He considers the work of the Spirit in connection with the cosmos, the kingdom of God, and the individual, concluding that he was at work in all the ways he works in the NT. But there is a difference. New in the NT are the miraculous endowments of the apostles and the worldwide mission of the Spirit, promised in the OT but only now realized. In addition and principally, the OT was a preparation for the NT, the Spirit simply preserving the people of God, whereas now he produces "the fruitage and gathering of the harvest."[39] Still, Warfield agrees, there is no evidence that he was considered as a distinct person.

The Word and Wisdom of God

After the exile, God is seen to work through a variety of heavenly figures, with divine attributes and powers—Wisdom and Word,

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36. Ibid., 32.
37. Ibid., 32–33.
38. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "The Spirit of God in the Old Testament," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 127–56.
39. Ibid., 155–56.

exalted patriarchs, or principal angels such as Michael (Dan. 10:1–
12:13). In particular, Wisdom and Word provide the closest back-
ground for the eventual emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Wisdom is mentioned in Job 15:7–8 and 28:12, implying preex-
istence but hardly any personal distinction. In Proverbs 8 and 9 are
two poems in which Wisdom is the chief figure. In Proverbs 8:1ff.,
Wisdom addresses human beings, promising the same things that
God gives.[40] In Proverbs 9:1ff., Wisdom presents herself apparently
as a person but more accurately as "a personified abstraction," in
antithetical parallel with folly (vv. 13ff.). Since folly is merely per-
sonalized, the same might apply to Wisdom. In the famous section
from 8:22, however, more than metaphor is present, for Wisdom cries
aloud, hates, and loves and is portrayed as God's master workman,
"an effluence of God's glory" (Wainwright). Wisdom also advises
and instructs and, moreover, is identified with God, yet also distin-
guished.[41] These themes are repeated in the intertestamental literature.
Wisdom has a certain role in creation, is frequently identified with the
law, and is also clearly distinguished from God.[42] While not directly
connected with the Messiah, the idea of Wisdom is used by Paul and
the early Christians to explain who Christ is.[43]

The psalmist presents the Word of God as active in creation, in
parallel with God's Spirit (Ps. 33:6–9). When God communicated
to man, he spoke (cf. Ex. 3:4ff.; Ps. 33:6–9). But this Word is never
personified in the OT in the way that Wisdom is. It was Philo, with
the aid of Hellenistic influence present in Alexandria, who thought
of the Logos in a personalized way.[44] Lebreton suggests that "if these

40. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 91–92; O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 24. Where I refer to
wisdom, I keep the first letter lowercase, unless it is the first word in a sentence. In
quotations, of course, I retain the source's casing. Where the word is personalized,
as in parts of the OT or in Russian theology, I capitalize the *W*. On occasion, the
category in which to place it is a matter of judgment.

41. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 92–94; Wainwright, *Trinity*, 33–34.

42. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 94–98.

43. See James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry
into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press,
1980), 163–212.

44. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 35–36; Lebreton, *Trinity*, 99–100.

various obscure and elementary conceptions are not sufficient of themselves to constitute a doctrine of the Trinity, they at least prepare the soul for the Christian revelation."[45]

The Expectation of the Messiah's Coming

The prophets from time to time hold out the prospect of a future Deliverer. In fact, Yahweh himself was to come and save his people and bring them to an age of peace and prosperity. The sign that Isaiah gave to King Ahaz was the birth of a son to be called *Imanu-el* (Isa. 7:14), which means "God with us." There is no clear contender for this accolade in Judah's immediate or later history, and since Hebrew children were regularly given names denoting some aspect of the character or action of Yahweh, no extraordinary significance may have been attached to this oracle at the time. But Isaiah also speaks of a child, a son who would rule, whose dominion was to be of unending peace, security, and justice. This son is evidently portentous. He was to sit on the throne of David and be called, *inter alia*, "mighty God" (Isa. 9:6). Again, Micah foretells a ruler over Judah, born in Bethlehem, of superhuman origins "whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days" (Mic. 5:2–5a). This ruler is associated with God but is not identical to him. In Daniel, the majestic figure of the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13–14) is given universal, everlasting, and impregnable dominion. Jesus was to call himself the *Son of Man* as his most usual self-description. But the exact identity of this figure, presented in Daniel without recourse to any other source, is unclear. Neither the prophet's contemporaries nor later generations grasped the full meaning of these oracles, and only with the presence of Jesus, and the reality of who he was and what he did, is their full meaning disclosed, for then the NT writers apply to Jesus the prophetic statements referring to Yahweh.[46]

45. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 81.
46. Ibid., 101.

Summary

While the OT does not make explicit what is revealed with the coming of Christ and the completion of the NT, it provides the essential foundation without which the full Christian doctrine of God could not exist. As O'Collins puts it, "The OT contains, in anticipation, categories used to express and elaborate the Trinity. To put this point negatively, a theology of the Trinity that ignores or plays down the OT can only be radically deficient."[47] From the positive angle, "the NT and post-NT Christian language for the tripersonal God flowed from the Jewish Scriptures," for though deeply modified in the light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, naming God as Father, Son, and Spirit "found its roots in the OT."[48] This is not to say that by the first century there had emerged in Israel a clear and coherent picture of plurality within the one being of God. This was clearly not the case. These ideas in the OT were scattered and had not formed into anything like a coherent picture.[49] Even so, the OT provided the means both to distinguish and to hold together the role of Son/Wisdom/Word and Spirit, since these were vivid personifications, not abstract principles. The ultimate acknowledgment by the church of the triunity of God was "providentially prepared" by these foreshadowings.[50] The OT personalizations helped lay the groundwork for the eventual leap to persons, for "the post-exilic Jews had an idea of plurality within the Godhead," and so "the idea of plurality within unity was already implicit in Jewish theology."[51]

On the other hand, there is no evidence in the OT that the question the church had to answer had been raised. That problem was that Christ was not a mere emanation from God and that he was more than a personalized concept. He was a man with whom the apostles conversed and with whom they worked. He had a real

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47. O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 11.
48. Ibid., 32.
49. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 102–3.
50. O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 33–34.
51. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 37.

interaction with God, far more real than theirs. Indeed, they had eavesdropped on "an interaction within the divine personality," "a dialogue within the Godhead" of which there is little if any trace in the OT. As Wainwright continues, "The idea of extension of divine personality is Hebraic. The idea of the interaction within the extended personality is neither Hebraic nor Hellenistic but Christian."[52] This is the great leap forward that the NT contains and that the church was to develop.

As so often, Gregory of Nazianzus gives us a superbly appropriate summary, ingeniously pointing to the historical outworking of revelation, to explain its cautious, gradual, and progressive unfolding of who God is. "The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of himself. For it was not safe, when the Godhead of the Father was not yet acknowledged, plainly to proclaim the Son; nor when that of the Son was not yet received to burden us further . . . with the Holy Spirit . . . . It was necessary that, increasing little by little, and, as David says, by ascensions from glory to glory, the full splendour of the Trinity should gradually shine forth."[53]

> We adore the Father, as also his Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity in one Essence, crying with the Seraphim: Holy, holy, holy art thou, O Lord. Now, and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.[54]

Key Terms

anthropomorphic
monotheism
typology

52. Ibid., 38–40.
53. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31*, 26.
54. Matins, *Service Book*, 29.

Question for Reflection

How far is it appropriate to talk of the revelation of the Trinity in the OT?

For Further Reading

Matthew Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).