

TRINITARIAN CONTROVERSY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: TOWARD A SOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

One of the most controversial issues in the biblical studies is the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament because the word, “Trinity” never occurs in the Bible. It is also misrepresented as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit though not much in use in the Old Testament, Trinity is often used. The usage of the term Holy Spirit is lucidly used in the New Testament.¹ The point of clear-cut difference is that Trinity comprises the three personality of God in one. Jesus came in bodily form but still in full person of God, while Holy Spirit is the proxy of Jesus after ascension.

Furthermore, the belief that God is one substance, yet three persons, is one of the central doctrines of mainstream Christianity. The concept of the Trinity is believed by most professing Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant. Yet for all this belief in the Trinity, it is a doctrine that is not clearly understood by most Christian laymen. In fact, most have neither the desire nor the incentive to understand what their churches teach. Few laymen are aware of any problems with the doctrine of the Trinity. They simply take it for granted, leaving the mysterious doctrinal aspects to theologians. And if the layman were to investigate further, he would be confronted with discouraging statements similar to the following: “The mind of man cannot fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. He who would try to understand the mystery fully will lose his mind. But he who would deny the Trinity will lose his soul.”² Such a statement means that the concept of the Trinity should be accepted by faith or else. This is because; we do not understand it and what one does not understands, one may not be able to elucidate. Stuart Allen opines that:

There is no doubt whatsoever that knowledge of what the Holy Scriptures teaches concerning the Trinity is of supreme importance. The need to get a Bible-based view of the Trinity becomes more and more evident as various charismatic movements appear on the scene. The study is indeed profound as any consideration of the great eternal God must be.³

¹ Paul N. Benware, "The Work of the Holy Spirit Today" in *The Fundamentals for the Twenty-First Century: Examining the Crucial Issues of the Christian Faith* edited by Mal Couch, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 312.

² Harold Lindsell and Charles J. Woodbridge, *A Handbook of Christian Truth* (London: University Press, 1978), 51-52.

³ Stuart Allen, *The Doctrine of Trinity* (England: Berean Publishing Trust, 1995), 3.

Consequently, the researchers endeavor to give a succinct concept of Trinity in the context of the Old Testament via the use of plural names of God in the Old Testament, there is going to be a brief discussion on Trinity, evidence for Trinity in the Old Testament, the deity of Christ attesting to the trinity, and distinguishing between the three person using biblical basis in the Old Testament. It should, however, be noted that the concept compasses the three personality of God which is inseparable.

TRINITY AS A CONCEPT

In a concise sense, it is good to establish that the Trinitarian concept emphasize both the Trinity of God and His Oneness. Some uses Triune God instead of Trinity.⁴Grudem opines that “God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and each is fully God and there is one God.”⁵ This symbolizes Trinity. The main idea is that God is one and exists in three distinct persons. Surely the Bible would be filled with teachings about such an important subject as the Trinity. Unfortunately, the word “Trinity” never appears in the Bible. “The term ‘Trinity’ is not a Biblical term, and we are not using Biblical language when we define what is expressed by it as the doctrine.”⁶

Not only is the word “Trinity” never found in the Bible, but there is no substantive proof that such a doctrine is even indicated. Karl Rahner recognizes that theologians in the past have been embarrassed by the simple fact that in reality the Scriptures do not explicitly present a doctrine of the ‘imminent’ Trinity (even in the Apostle John’s prologue there is no such doctrine).⁷ Other theologians also recognize the fact that the first chapter of John’s Gospel the prologue—clearly shows the pre-existence and divinity of Christ, but does not teach the doctrine of the Trinity. After discussing John’s prologue, William Newton Clarke writes: “There is no Trinity in this; but there is a distinction in the Godhead, a duality in God. The distinction or duality is used as basis for the idea of an only-begotten Son, and as key to the possibility of an incarnation.”⁸

The first chapter of John’s Gospel clearly shows the pre-existence of Christ. It also illustrates the duality of God and as Clarke explains, the key to the possibility of the incarnation—the fact that God could become man. The Apostle John makes plain the unmistakable fact that Jesus Christ is God (John 1:1-14). Yet we find no Trinity

⁴ Desmond Alexander, *The Origin of Man* (England: Intervarsity Press, 200), 80.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 226-227.

⁶*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, article “Trinity,” 3012.

⁷ Karl Rahner *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 22.

⁸ William Clarke Newton, *Outline of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), 167.

discussed in the chapter. We do not find even a mention of the Holy Spirit in John's inspired revelation—only a duality of God the Father and the Son, who was God before the incarnation.

EVIDENCE FOR AN OLD TESTAMENT TRINITY

The sola scriptura hermeneutic is Scripture interpreting Scripture, and in our case, allowing the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament texts on God. This hermeneutic is vital to biblical understanding and is crucial in evaluating dispensational claims regarding the continuing relevance of Old Testament prophecies for contemporary Israel.⁹

Creation: In the creation of male and female in the image of God (Gen 1:26, 27), the Persons of the Godhead are imaged in the oneness of man and woman in marriage. The sola scriptura hermeneutic specifies the reality of that image as the Spirit (Gen 1:2; Psa 104:30; cf. Job 33:4; 26:13) and the Father creating everything through the Son (Col 1:15, 16; Heb 1:2b), and hence the reality of the image is a oneness in three, or the Trinity.

Christ's Mission and Inauguration. In Luke 4:18, 19, Christ read from Isaiah 61:1, 2, recognizing the verses as a statement of His mission, and in so doing indicated that Isa 61:1, 2 speaks of the Trinity as follows: "The Spirit [Holy Spirit] of the Sovereign Lord [the Father] is on me [Christ]" (Isa 61:1a). This is Christ's commentary on this Old Testament passage. The inauguration of Christ in heaven is another example of more than one Person in the one God. "Your throne, O God [Heb. Elohîm], will last forever and ever . . . You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God [literally "God, God of you"] has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy" (Psa 45:6, 7).¹⁰

Here God is addressing God; two Persons share the name of God (Heb. (Elohîm). Who are they? This passage is quoted in Hebrews 1:8, 9. "But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever... You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions.'" Here God speaks to Christ after His victorious life on earth when He "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb 1:3b).

⁹ Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2003), 717, 749.

¹⁰ F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the OT in Ten Volumes*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 455.

The Trinity in Isaiah

It is well known that the Trinity is explicit in the New Testament and only implicit in the Old Testament. However, internal evidence provided below indicates that the Trinity can rise to the level of being explicit in the Old Testament. There are several examples in the Book of Isaiah.

(1) The Trinity is explicit in Isa 42:1: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.” God the Father is speaking about His Son, to whom He will give the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The New Testament comments that this passage from Isaiah was fulfilled in the healing ministry of Jesus (Matt 12:15–21), who was sent by the Father (John 3:16, 17) and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:16, 17; Luke 4:18). The heart relationship of the Father for the Son is seen in this passage, for the Father says Christ is “the one I love, in whom I delight” (Matt 12:18a). Here is specific insight into the loving relationship among the three in the Godhead. They love each other, and as such are by nature “love” (1 John 4:8). Here is a glimpse into the relational Trinity.

(2) The Trinity is explicit in Isa 48:16: “Come near me and listen to this [cf. “Listen to me, O Jacob . . . I am the first and the last” v. 12] . . . And now the Sovereign Lord [Father] has sent me [Christ], with his Spirit” [Holy Spirit].¹²

THE PLURAL NAMES OF GOD

God refers to Himself in the plural

In the Old Testament we do not see a full revelation of the triune God but we do see significant indications. God refers to Himself in the plural, refers to another God who is distinct from Him and two of His most preferred names are used of Him in the plural. God refers to Himself in the plural. “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. . . God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” Genesis 1:26-27. God refers to Himself as plural, which is unusual and doesn’t seem to make sense. Matthews concludes of this passage, “Here the unity and plurality in the Godhead are in view. The plural indicates an intra-divine

¹¹ John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah: The New International Commentary on the OT: Isaiah 40–66*, ed. by R. K. Harrison, Robert L. Hubbard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 606.

¹² Geoffrey W. Grogan, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. By Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1986), 342.

conversation, a plurality in the Godhead”.¹³ There are three other instances in the Old Testament where God refers to Himself in the plural Genesis 3:22, 11:7 and Isaiah 6:8.

This concept of God as plurality would seem to be a direct contradiction of one of the most well-known verses among the Jewish people Deuteronomy 6:4 which says, “Hear O Israel, The LORD is one...” The word ‘One’ in the Hebrew is the word ‘ehad which means one, to be united, (an indication of the Godhead or trinity) and is often used of a composite oneness. This same word ‘ehad was used to describe the oneness of Adam and Eve’s union, “they shall become one flesh” Genesis 2:24. This clearly establishes that ‘ehad can refer to a oneness which comprises multiple persons.

There is another term for one used in the Bible that the authors could have used. Yahid is another Hebrew term for one which means “only one, solitary.” This is used 12 times in the Old Testament but never of God. The point is the Hebrew language has a word that could more forcefully exclude plurality within God, but the Old Testament writers never employed it of God’s oneness.

Merrill concludes regarding Deut. 6:4, ”This is not in opposition to the later Christian doctrine of the Trinity but rather functions here as a witness to the self-consistency of the Lord”¹⁴ God is consistent and indeed leaves the door open to reveal Himself more fully in the future.

The Plural Names of God

The names of God and God’s reference to Himself suggest multiple persons in the Godhead. Two of the three most utilized names of God are plural in their usage. Adonai is the name of God used hundreds of times in the OT and it is translated “my (singular) Lords”. This is bad grammar unless the author is leaving the door open for multiple persons in the Godhead. The word Elohim as earlier stated above means “powerful ones” used in Gen 1:1, 1:2-2:3. Elohim is not used exclusively of God but is a more generic name, thus, God in three persons. These names of God do not prove the trinity but they do show that the authors of the OT left plenty of room for the concept of God as trinity.

¹³ Kenneth, Matthew, *The New American Standard Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 163.

¹⁴ Eugene, H. Merrill, “Deuteronomy” *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 163.

THE DEITY OF CHRIST ATTESTS TO THE TRINITY

Jesus explicitly claims deity for Himself and He possesses the attributes, works and the titles of God. Besides these direct claims, Jesus is also worshipped as God. Though Jesus claimed deity, He referred to the Father as God and distinct from Himself. The following passages are some of the stronger claims to deity that Christ made for Himself.

In Matthew 28:19 commanded that all His disciples should be baptized, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Name is singular and yet refers to three. Keener comments on this baptismal formula that Jesus commands, “Disciples baptize not only in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit, whom biblical and Jewish tradition regarded as divine, but also in the name of the Son. Placing Jesus on the same level as the Father and Spirit makes even more implicit that Jesus is divine.”¹⁵ Consequently, the affirmation that God is a separate entity should however, be vituperatively refuted. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are inseparable. They are a coin with two sides.

During Jesus’ trial He is asked if He is the blessed one and in Mark 14:61 He replies, "I am; and you shall see the ‘Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’” Jesus is quoting from Daniel 7 the passage we looked at earlier where the Son of Man is given glory among all peoples in the presence of the Ancient of Days. Edwards says that Christ’s confession was, ”an affirmation that sets him unambiguously in God’s place.”¹⁶ That Jesus is claiming to be the God who is distinct from the Ancient of days is clear from the response of His accusers. “Tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? "You have heard the blasphemy” Mark 14:62. They understood that Jesus was claiming deity.

DISTINGUISHING THE THREE PERSONS OF THE GODHEAD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

God the Father

God is shown to be the person of the Father in Psalm 2:7 when the verse says, "I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'" This revelation of God the Father is also shown in ancient writings such as the Apostles’ Creed.

¹⁵ Craig, Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 716.

¹⁶ James, R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 447.

The Apostles' Creed recognized God the Father in Genesis when it said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."¹⁷ Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God, in this verse, is God in the person of the Father. However, some liberal scholars still hold tenaciously to the claim that God in Genesis 1:1 still refer to the doctrine of the Godhead. From all indication the verse tends to speak of the Trinitarian doctrine.

God the Son

God is shown to be the person of the Son in Psalm 2:7. The Psalms are a compilation of poems. Poetry is a succinct, highly structured means of expression.¹⁸ The succinct and highly structured account of Psalm 2:7 referring to the Son of the (LORD) express two of the three persons in the Trinity located in this particular verse. As was mentioned previously, there are Christophanies located throughout the scriptures of the Old Testament. The Son spoken of in Psalm 2:7 is described as the Son is also described in John 3:16. Both verses contain a form of the word, "begat."¹⁹ God the Son is clearly expressed in this verse. It may be simpler to view the God of the Old Testament as the Father, but the presence of the Son in this verse proves the line of thought to be incorrect. The son had to manifest in the human form solely to reconcile man with God the Father.

God the Holy Spirit

Brent Strawn adapted the view of the presence of God the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament when he said, "The witness of the Old Testament that can be identified with other members of the Trinity need not be solely about the first member."²⁰ Strawn's belief in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament may be based on two particular verses in the Old Testament which distinguish God the Holy Spirit specifically from other Persons of God: Genesis 1:2 and Genesis 6:3.

The latter portion of Genesis 1:2 says, "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." This verse shows priority of God distinguishing the Holy Spirit from the other Persons of God. Historically, there have been people who denied either the

¹⁷ Moltmann, Jurgen, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1981), 162.

¹⁸ W. H. Bellinger, *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Incorporated, 1990), 34.

¹⁹ W. H. Bellinger, *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises*, 34.

²⁰ Brent A. Strawn, "And These Three Are One: A Trinitarian Critique of Christological Approaches of the Old Testament," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 2, no. 31 (Summer 2004): 205.

existence of the Holy Spirit, or simply the divinity of the Holy Spirit.²¹ God's Spirit hovering over the face of the waters at the beginning of the creation of the heavens and the earth seems to disprove this.

Genesis 6:3 says, "Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit shall not abide in man forever.'" This verse allows readers of the Bible to better comprehend one of the reasons for the presence of the Trinity; that reason is to visualize the process of breathing in our bodily life as a continuous, internal, life-giving act that arises from the depths within the body.²² Verses such as Genesis 1:2 and Genesis 6:3 are extant in the overall process of unveiling the blatant or explicit presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. The three persons of God are present within the Old Testament. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit each contribute to the Old Testament as a whole. Not only do the presence of the three Persons of God represent the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, not only do the plural forms of the name of God contribute to the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, and not only does the process of worshipping God prove the existence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, but Isaiah 48:16 assists readers of the Bible comprehend this as well.

CONCLUSION

The building of a house can be likened to the function of the Trinity. You have the plans for a house, which is God the Father, who many never be seen by anyone directly associated with the house. You have the workmen who show up, are seen, and actually do the work that is God the Son (Jesus). And then you have the power for the power tools also unseen and that is God the Holy Spirit. It should, however, be noted that Trinity does not divide God into three separate entities. They are intertwined.

The study of the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament is essential to everyday living. However, a lack of presence of the Trinity in the majority of the Bible would show a lack of consistency in our faith which would in turn show a lack of consistency in living out our inconsistent faith. The researchers opine that the concept of trinity in this era is only taken by FAITH. However, the presence of the three Persons of God allows Christians to better grasp the reality of who God is to us. One of the best ways to grow closer to someone or something is to know who or what they are. There is no better way to know who God is than to study Him in the portion of the Scriptures which contains the

²¹ Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 141.

²² George Marcil, *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* (St. Bonaventure, NY, The Franciscan Institute, 1979), 61.

majority of the writings. However, it is one thing to study the word; it is another thing to believe or have faith in what one has studied and to crown it up; the best way to get to know God via the scripture is to make do of what one has studied James 1:22. Someone once said, “Observation plus Interpretation minus Application is equal to Abortion (O+I-A=A). Thus, there is a painstaking need to apply what we have studied or what we are studying about the doctrine of the Godhead.

The researcher opines that, after having studied the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, Christians have a greater propensity for glorifying God, and allowing His love to glean from His follower’s lives. God is one through all ages; however, He exists as three distinct persons. Trinity is a mystery beyond mortal (human) comprehension. The researcher agrees with an African Scholar (Aremu) who avers that, “we are not called to understand but to believe the doctrine of trinity.”²³ To deny it is to dishonor the Son (Jesus). It is to be absolutely lost. (Jn. 3:18; 1 Jn. 2:22; 4:15). Through God, we are chosen, through Jesus our redemption came and through the Holy Spirit we are kept.

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²³ Tunde Aremu, *Theology 1 Note* (ETSI, 2014), 30.

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