

The Trinity in the Bible

The Holy Trinity: the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; is a defining concept of Christianity. Three persons in one God is a mystery that separates the Christian from a Muslim. Based on the 1 John 4:1-3 warning to "test the spirits," it is a justifiable dividing line between "true" Christianity and some sects that claim to be Christian. But in a religion steeped in mysticism, this is perhaps the greatest mystery of all. Indeed, I had a priest say that when he was in seminary school, one of the professors offered anyone who could give a homily on the Trinity without committing heresy an automatic "A" for the course. This same priest then told me that it was enjoyable watching the efforts the other seminarians made. But while it is impossible to fully understand, and equally impossible to properly describe, I do think we need to make an effort to at least try to make this belief personal. Even as we humbly acknowledge that all efforts will fall short of truth.

Part of the problem of understanding the concept of the Trinity is that the Bible does not explicitly mention it. But there are large clues to its existence. Perhaps the single greatest clue, one that does everything but identify itself as the Divine Trinity, is when Jesus commanded his disciples to "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit.*" (Matthew 28:19, italics mine) It has never been explained to me with any degree of credibility how this is meaningful outside the concept of the triune God, at least within the context of the monotheistic Jews from which this concept came. For pagans, this could be interpreted as being baptized in the name of three distinct gods, but the Hebrews were the one and only culture in the world where such an interpretation is absurd. One could also suggest that this was merely three different monikers for the same god, an effort to give full glory to this god. But we have lots of problems with that as well.

Perhaps the most outstanding problem is the earlier baptism of Jesus. All four gospels tell us of the Baptism of Jesus. All four claim the Holy Spirit descended like a dove over Jesus. The three synoptic gospels tell us a voice from the heavens claimed Jesus was His son, while the gospel of John tells us that God spoke to John the Baptist beforehand and told him to look for the dove. So we have two members of the trinity in corporeal form at the baptism, and neither of them said the words that boomed overhead. We have a similar situation in the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36), although there is no clear indication of the Holy Spirit this time. Therefore, we have unequivocal evidence that these three are distinct persons, and that this evidence came from a culture who professed a single God. But there is so much more to this story.

We have Jesus saying "The Father and I are one." in John 10:30, and we know that this was taken by his immediate audience as meaning He was suggesting His own divinity. We see "The Jews again picked up rocks to stone him. Jesus answered them, 'I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of these are you trying to stone me?' The Jews answered him, 'We are not stoning you for a good work but for blasphemy. *You, a man, are making yourself God.*'" (John 10:31-33, italics mine) And this, I think, is the real rub. Was Jesus truly God, a pagan like demi-god, or human? Unfortunately, Jesus does more to add to this controversy than anyone else. His response to the pharisees is cryptic; "Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your law, 'I said, 'You are gods' "? If it calls them gods to whom the word of God came, and scripture cannot be set aside, can you say that the one whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world blasphemes because I said, " 'I am the Son of God' "?' " (John 10:34-36) In this response, Jesus refers to several references in the Old Testament that indicated the angels God sent to govern the non-Hebrew nations were entitled "gods" (the specific quote Jesus used came from Psalms 82:6). Deuteronomy 1:17 also equated the human judge with God when he gives judgment (meant as a warning to be fair and just when hearing a case).

And things get even more interesting. We can go back to Exodus 3:14-15 when, after Moses asked the name of the God that was calling the Hebrews, "God replied to Moses: I am who I am. Then he added: This is what you will tell the Israelites: *I AM has sent me to you.* God spoke further to Moses: This is what you will say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. *This is my name forever; this is my title for all generations.*" (italics mine) Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus describes Himself as "I AM" seven times! This is one of several things Jesus said that led the pharisees to call Him a blasphemer, as only God was allowed to call Himself that. This phrase was specifically reserved to let the Israelites know that it was really their God talking to them. But even here, Jesus never came out and said "Yes, I am the I AM." Why the pharisees wanted to hear this specific phrase despite the overwhelming evidence in front of them (much like many modern critics do today), I can only speculate. Today's critics, in their defense, simply fail to appreciate the weight of those two words. But we see that the pharisees clearly *did* appreciate the choice of words. Perhaps the fact they thought Jesus was a Galilean (what we might call a "country hick" today) led them to believe Jesus was just being crude and vulgar. If almost anyone else had said this, then the pharisees would have had the person stoned and been done with it. But because Jesus was so popular, they needed proof this was what Jesus meant in much the same way certain skeptics demand today.

And this continued until His execution. One would think that if Jesus was a fraud, then He would have clarified His position as to whether He was a prophet or the Son of God. Especially considering the type of death awaiting him. So why did He persist even on the cross? I think we might have a clue in the passage from Matthew 16:13-20, where Peter claimed Jesus was God. If one reads this whole passage, one will see perhaps the closest Jesus came to explicitly announcing his divinity. Peter explicitly calls Jesus the Son of God, and in the literal sense. If Jesus was a mere prophet and failed to rebuke Peter, then Jesus would have been encouraging blasphemy. But Jesus does not. Instead, He blesses Peter, and says that Peter could only say this because the Father gave him special insight. Jesus then makes Peter the leader of *His* church. One would only have a church built for oneself if one considered oneself divine. So we have to conclude that Jesus was either a great deceiver, a lunatic, or truly the Son of God and of Man as He so often mentions. Yet there are those who refuse this line of thought, simply because Jesus did not say, "Very good Simon; you are correct."

Jesus was not here to prove He was God, He was here to bring together those who would believe He was God. This may seem counterintuitive at first, but remember that God was indeed claiming He was God for at least 1,400 years before the time of Jesus, as detailed in the Old Testament. Such efforts failed. The plan of salvation had made a critical turning point with Jesus: God was no longer trying to impress or scare people into following Him through "shock and awe." He was giving people the chance to believe in Him through reason. He was challenging people to figure things out for themselves. Miracles may capture the imagination, but they generally do not have long-lasting effect on people. Consider Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:29, where the miracles Jesus was doing were being attributed to the devil (Beelzebul in particular). It is not really a question of whether or not Jesus claimed to be God; it is a question of if one chooses to believe He is.

In Genesis 1-2, we see that most of creation was spoken into existence, yet that man had life breathed into him (the connection between breath and spirit is a nearly universal belief in religions throughout the world). Finally, we see on several occasions that God saw that the progress was "good," which suggests an appraisal of what was completed. The very first story of the Bible suggests that there was the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the authority of God. And since God does speak of Himself in the plural in this scripture, we have to at least consider the concept that "we" might not have

included the angels after all.

If we accept the possibility of a triune God, even if not yet convinced it is true, then we can actually see a wealth of further evidence to support this idea from the Old Testament. Most notably, God often talks in the plural (i.e., uses the word "we"). It is easy to dismiss most of them as God referring to Himself and the angelic host in Heaven in most of these cases, but not all. In the book of Job, it is difficult to assume "we" means God and the angels when it is clear that God is speaking to the angels. Yet it happens several times.

But I realize this alone may not convince the skeptic. In later Old Testament times, we see that the Holy Spirit is specifically mentioned several times, often as "Spirit of God." Consider Psalm 51:13: "Do not drive me from your presence, nor take from me your Holy Spirit"). This plea is interesting, as it asks to be united with both God and with God's spirit, as if they were two distinct things while at the same time unified. If this plea were made to another human, then we would simply state one's "presence" is the physical closeness, while the spirit is a transcendent attachment that can be given or taken by mere will. But God is not a physical being, so both pleas are for the transcendental. The only way this verse can be meaningful is if God's presence and spirit are aspects of one God that are still somehow independent enough that one could have one but not the other. We also see the image of a Father (Exodus 4:22, "So you shall say to Pharaoh; thus says the Lord: Israel is my son, my first-born"). But the Word (or Son) is largely (but not entirely) missing since the creation. Or is He?

The word "lord" is used interchangeably between Earthly rulers and God. In Psalm 110:1, we actually see both meanings used in the same sentence: "The Lord says to my lord..." (quoted by Jesus in Matthew 22:43-44). No doubt, all the times Jesus was called "lord" by His followers made the pharisees cringe, although it was not as blasphemous as Jesus calling Himself "I AM." We actually have an Old Testament account in which God the Lord manifested Himself as a man. In Genesis 18:1-3, we find "The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent, while the day was growing hot. Looking up, *he saw three men* standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them; and bowing to the ground, he said: "*Sir*, if it please you, do not go on past your servant." (Italics mine)

This is the first time God revealed Himself to man in corporeal form since the Garden of Eden. And God made this revelation in the context of three persons (two of which, we learn later, are angels). If the man Abraham saw that day was Melchizedek (which might be why he was so easily identifiable), the priest of the most high God, then we find another interesting event. Both Melchizedek and Jesus are the high priests of the most high God, suggesting a connection between them.

But the clearest connection between Jesus and the Old Testament is made in the Gospel of John (1:1-3, 14). In these passages, John clearly and unequivocally states that the Word of God, which made all creation, became human. Furthermore, verse 1:14 specifically calls this man as God's only Son.

If one accepts this evidence that Jesus is indeed God (and there is more), that the Spirit of God is somehow separate, and that there is a God with ultimate authority, then we have three divine persons from a monotheistic faith. In other words, three persons yet one being (i.e., God). But how is this possible? It seems absurd, how can three people be one being? But while the full mystery is beyond us, it is not hard to look at everyday examples of similar things.

To begin with, the computer I am typing this on exists, therefore it has being. But there is no personhood assigned to it. I am a man, so I exist and have being. I have Imagination, I can think, I can

reason, and I can make moral choices. Therefore, I am a person. I have friends who are married. Marriage is a state of being, and it exists in a transcendental manner. Many of these marriages have children involved. The computer is one being with no persons. I am one being with one person. Marriage is one being with two persons, and a family is one being with multiple persons.

"Not so fast," one might say. "Transcendental beings don't count!" All I can ask is, why? God is not material either, He is Transcendental. Indeed, the reason why so many efforts to demonstrate the triune nature of God are ultimately heretical is because they reduce God to a physical state, and therefore God is being limited by the material world. While such examples can be useful, we must also be aware of their limitations.

Another counter-argument might be "How about all the times Jesus referred to God as superior to Him (such as John 5:19), or when Jesus claims He is returning to the Father?" (John 20:17) To this, I will go back to my family analogy. God can be called the ideal family, an example of how a family should exist. Jesus constantly refers to God as "the Father." As the Father, this person is the ultimate authority in the family we call God. And as to how Jesus can claim to return to God while being God Himself is likewise found in the dynamics of a family. At the end of s work day, one may very well say one is going home to his family. By no means does this suggest that one is not a member of the family he claims to be going to. Jesus can be God and return to God just as a man can be part of a family and return to the family.

But this is just a demonstration that three persons in one being is possible; it does not provide evidence that it is correct. But I think there is one last bit of evidence we can call on here. It is found in two places in the first letter of John: "God is love." (4:8 and again in 4:16) I know most people will look at that and only see the raw beauty inherent in those words, but there is a deeper meaning that points to the Triune God.

Note that both God and love are referred to in the singular. But love cannot exist in the singular, it requires three aspects. There first needs to be the lover, the one who brings love into existence. Next, there needs to be the beloved, as a lover cannot be a lover without the existence of a beloved. And, of course, there is the bond that exists between lover and beloved. For love to exist, all three aspects need to exist at all times, yet there paradoxically needs to be an initiation of it. As God exists outside space and time, fully grasping this will be impossible for us, yet there is no other way for it to be. And this example likewise helps us understand the relationship of God the Father (the lover, whose authority comes from initiating the love), God the Son (the beloved) and God the Holy Spirit (the unity of the love).

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