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The Trinity in the Bible

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Is the doctrine of Trinity in the Bible? By the canons that the modern West has enforced, clearly it is not. Modernity has demanded Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas" in all fields. With respect to a doctrine, this is a demand for properly formulated and univocal propositions. For the formulated doctrine to which we usually refer as the doctrine of the Trinity to be in the Bible, it must therefore appear there in the conciliar and traditional propositions as formulated, or in propositions logically equivalent to these. But of course nowhere in the Bible do we find the propositions that there are in God one divine nature and three persons, or that the Father eternally begets the Son, or that the Spirit is equally to be worshipped and glorified, or indeed any of the chief propositions of the doctrine formulated by the councils; nor do we find plausibly equivalent propositions.[1]

It is important to recognize that this canon of modernity controls theological movements that are otherwise very different, some of which may not be aware how much they belong to modernity. For present purposes, I will distinguish what I will call historicism and the equally

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[1]We do indeed find *judgments* equivalent to many judgments made by propositions of Nicene doctrine; see the justly celebrated article by David Yeago, "The New Testament and Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994):152-164. Not all propositions state judgments, and judgments can be otherwise made than by propositions.

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modern movement I will call modern biblicism.[2] Both, to repeat, suppose that if we are to find the conciliar doctrine of Trinity in Scripture it must be there in so many words. But from this point, historicism and modern biblicism move differently.

Historicism is the belief that understanding something's history and understanding the thing itself are the same. But the conciliar doctrine of Trinity reached its formulation at the end of a history that continued past the writing of the last books of the Bible. Thus, since whatever approaches to a doctrine of Trinity appear in the Bible are one stretch of history; and the conciliar doctrine appears at the end of a longer and so different stretch of history, the two cannot in the judgment of historicists be the same doctrine.

So far the general position of historicism. Within that general position, there are again two possibilities. Some historicists take the supposed post-biblical status of the doctrine of Trinity as liberation from what they anyway regard as an absurd doctrine. Others will say things like I used to, that while the doctrine of Trinity is indeed not in Scripture, it is a proper development from things that are in Scripture—and indeed I might still say this in certain contexts, but have come to see that it is but a small part of the truth.

Modern biblicism also comes in two varieties. Some, determined to argue that the doctrine of Trinity is after all in Scripture, scrabble around in the Bible for bits and pieces of language to cobble together into a sort of Trinity-doctrine— usually with intellectually lamentable and indeed sometimes heretical results. Others, like many American Evangelicals, take the same tack as some historicists, and say if the doctrine of Trinity is not in Scripture we need not worry overmuch about it—we never understood it anyway.

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[2]There is of course the quite different biblicism of the great tradition, which I by no means wish to question.

You will gather that I think all of these paths misguided, and indeed misguided in fundamentally the same fashion. I hope to persuade you that the doctrine of the Trinity is indeed in the Bible.

And now let me ask the same question again, fishing this time for a different kind of wrong answer. Is the doctrine of Trinity a biblical doctrine? Many will answer that it is, but that it is found in only part of the Bible. That is, it will be assumed that the doctrine of Trinity is a New Testament doctrine but not an Old Testament doctrine, that it is what separates Christians from old Israel, that it is the new revelation that they lacked and that Judaism still lacks. Indeed the doctrine of Trinity is often taken—whether with rejoicing or regret—as the supremely supersessionist doctrine, the truth whose revelation relegates Judaism to the past.

Against all these errors, allow me to propose the following. The doctrine of the Trinity is indeed in Scripture, *if* one abandons modernity's notion that statement in so many words as formulated is the only way that a doctrine can appear there. Moreover, the doctrine appears in the New Testament *and* in the Old, severally and jointly. The present essay will be mostly about Scripture, concentrating precisely on the Old Testament, and then at the end about the conciliar doctrine of Trinity.

The church has her own way of reading Scripture. There are others, and it will bring the church's way into sharper profile, if we contrast it with at least one other. The most important other way of reading is of course that of rabbinic Judaism. The earliest church and rabbinic Judaism are alike in that both, more or less at the same time and for analogous reasons, added a second volume to old Israel's Scripture. The church added the collection of Gospels and Epistles we call the New Testament; rabbinic Judaism added the collection of rabbinic dicta we call the Mishnah.

Judaism's second volume is a compilation of the oral Torah, of handed-down divine guidance for life. Rabbinic Judaism then reads the old Scripture from the viewpoint of this new volume. Thus rabbinic Judaism reads the Old Testament fundamentally as Torah; the narrative provides the context. This is obviously a perfectly possible way to read the Old Testament, but it is not the church's.

The church's second volume, the New Testament, is fundamentally narrative and comment on the narrative. The church then reads the Old Testament from the viewpoint of *this* new volume; and accordingly reads the Old Testament fundamentally as narrative, with Torah and wisdom and prophecy providing the moral and spiritual context. There are, of course, still other ways of reading Scripture, but I do not need to go into them for my purpose, which is simply to point up that the church has her own way, and that this way is to read the whole Bible as one long narrative.

This narrative is of God's history with his people, from creation to fulfillment. Since we are in this essay concerned with the doctrine of Trinity, it is the narrative's display of God that now most directly interests us. And it is an obvious question but one too often not asked: How *would* a *narrative* display the reality of God?

How, for example, would it show that God is merciful? Not primarily by pronouncing the proposition, "God is merciful," though in appropriate contexts it can do that too, but by telling and pondering his merciful behavior. Or by recording prayers uttered by his people on the way, prayers for mercy which are answered. Or by telling of people of faith whose trust in God's mercy was justified. Along the way, the Bible also, of course, puts the words "God" and "merciful" together in various ways, sometimes even in the explicit proposition, but this is secondary to its primary narrative way of showing that God is merciful.

So how would a narrative tell us that God is three persons? Not by the proposition "God is three persons,"

which indeed never appears in Scripture, but by telling a history of God with us that displays three enactors of that history, each of which is indeed other than the other two and yet is at the same time the same God as the other two. In my writing on these matters, I have used a phrase developed from Tertullian's language: in God, I like to put it, there are three *dramatis personae Dei*, three persons of the divine drama, and I will use that expression in the following. What Scripture does, also in the Old Testament, indeed especially in the Old Testament, is to tell the drama of God with his people, showing three *personae* of the drama, each of which is other than the other two and is the same God as the other two.

The Father takes less looking. In the name "Father, Son and Spirit" the "Father" is the God of Israel in a particular connection: he is the God of Israel insofar as Jesus addresses him as "Father," thereby making himself out to be a unique Son. That the Father, that is to say, the God of Israel in a certain relation, appears as agent in the Old Testament is not problematic; the whole of Israel's Scripture is about the doings of the God of Israel, whom Jesus called Father. It is the Spirit and the Son that may be thought problematic.

The Spirit first. Hebrew *ruach*, like Greek *pneuma*, is the wind of life; it is living persons who have spirit. Spirit is at once the life of the one whose spirit it is, and the liveliness that blows out of him to agitate others. In Scripture, as the Lord indeed himself lives, and as he blows on creatures to stir them into life, he has indeed his Spirit. And this Spirit is everywhere in the Old Testament: stirring up country boys to take command of Israel's forces and liberate her from oppression; falling upon unexpecting victims to make them prophets, that is, spokesmen of that word of God which will accomplish what it intends in the world; and generally blowing things about as *Spiritus Creator*, as the wind which keeps the creation moving toward its fulfillment.

Clearly, the Spirit is very much a *persona* of the story that Scripture—and again precisely the Old Testament—tells of

God. Is he then God? To be, as the creed says, worshipped and glorified equally with the Father and the Son?

He is the life *of* God and the enlivening power blowing *from* God; thus the Father and he are in the Old Testament narratives clearly two *personae* of the narrative. That he is just the same God as the Father, I will develop using the analogy between his Spirit and our spirits, for in the case of this one of the Trinity, the analogy with phenomena of human existence is in fact close.

Although my spirit, as it goes out from me, as my life impacts the lives of others, is in one way an other than me, if you ask someone whom my life has moved and changed who did that to him, he will simply reply that Jenson did it. He will not mean that I used my spirit as an instrument; he will simply mean that I did it. If my spirit has changed him for the worse, if — to adapt some Old Testament language — it is "an evil spirit from" Jenson that has blown upon him, he will not allow me to say that it was not me who harmed him but only my spirit. And if my liveliness has enlivened him in good ways, I will not want him to say, "Oh well, you did not help me. It was your spirit." So in close but of course still imperfect analogy, those whom the Spirit of the Lord blows about in the Old Testament narratives know themselves impacted not by some instrument of the Lord or even by some aspect of the Lord but simply by the Lord himself.

The Son's presentation in the Old Testament is even more clearly a matter of a *plot*-structure displayed both by the Old Testament's total narrative, and by many of its individual incidents. We must consider first some of those incidents.

We begin with the story of Moses and the burning bush. Moses is at Horeb. The narrative begins, "There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush...." This figure, "the angel of the Lord," is recurrent in Genesis and Exodus. In the burning-bush narrative, he is *introduced*

as clearly an other than the Lord, as related to the Lord prepositionally, as the messenger *"of"* the Lord. But when Moses responds to the angel, it turns out to be God who speaks to him "out of the bush." Is the angel God or another than God? Plainly, in the narrative he is both.

Or again, Hagar and Ishmael are sent away into the desert. She and the child weep, God hears their distress, and "the angel of God" speaks to her "from heaven." The angel first refers to God in the third person, "God has heard the voice of the boy." But then without any break in his speech or formula of citation, the angel says *"I* will make a great nation of him." So who is the angel? He is one who simultaneously refers to God in the third and first persons.

In the very next chapter there is perhaps the most remarkable of the angel-of-the-Lord histories, the *Akedah,* the near-sacrifice of Isaac. There is a previously published article of mine in which analysis of this narrative is the centerpiece. But I cannot here do entirely without it. Abraham is about to offer Isaac when the "angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven." Abraham answered. Then the angel said, "Now *I* (the pronouns make it clear that this is still the angel) know that you fear God (still third person reference to God), since you have not withheld your son ... from *me* (and suddenly the reference to God is in the first person). Here the first and third persons occur in the same sentence. To all these stories compare John 1: the word is *with* God and just so *is* God. The angel like John's *Logos* is both another than God and by virtue of the character of his otherness is God.

The initial situation in the angel-stories is that there is God in heaven and humans on earth. The division is transcended in that the angel of God intervenes from heaven—or the supernatural bush—and establishes himself as a *persona* of the story occurring on earth. But once the angel's presence in the created story is established, the angel speaks and acts as God in the first person.

Nor is the angel of the Lord a unique phenomenon in the Old Testament. There is "the name of" the Lord, which the Lord puts on earthly locations, at which locations Israel is to find the Lord himself. There is the "glory of" the Lord, which inhabits the Temple without displacing God from his heavens, yet to which the prayers and sacrifices of Israel are directed as to God.

Initially for that Presence in the Temple, the rabbis developed the concept of the *shekinah*, the "settlement" of God within the life of his people. The desert pillars of fire by night and smoke by day, which accompanied the people on their journey were — the rabbis taught — the *shekinah*, as was the awful presence for which the Tabernacle was a sort of sedan chair, as was the space in the empty throne in the Holy of Holies. The *shekinah* was the presence *of* God *within* the life of Israel, of precisely that God who remained the author and judge of Israel's life. There is indeed a famous and often cited rabbinic *aggadah*, that when God would bring back Israel from exile, and with them bring the *shekinah* back to his Temple, he would rescue *himself*.

We are, I think, both historically and systematically justified in taking all these patterns of Old Testament narrative together, as displaying the same fact about God, that he is as the same God an agent within the life of Israel and the one who determines that life from without it. There is a metaphor I often use to evoke this fact, which I hope you will allow me: the *shekinah* and the angel and the Name and whatever other similar narrative patterns we may find in the Old Testament display God as a *persona* in Israel's story — of which he is simultaneously the author. Indeed, that the Lord is at once the author of Israel's drama and a character within it is something more than a metaphor; since creator and author are such closely related notions. In a sense close to the literal meaning of the terms, in the Old Testament — and in Scripture as a whole — God is at once the author of his people's history and one of the enactors within the history that he authors. Which is precisely what the

doctrine of Trinity initially means by saying he is Father and Son.

And now there is a whole other aspect of the Son's reality in old Israel. God said through the prophet Jeremiah (31), "... for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn." And in the same chapter he says that the love which is thus enacted is "eternal" (עולם). Here it is Israel as a whole who appears as a sort of *shekinah* in and for the world. Nor is this by any means the only Old Testament instance of such a pattern of language. One may of course say that "Father/Son" language in this connection is metaphorical, and that עולם does not quite mean what other languages mean by "eternal"; that it is not quite a doctrine of the Son's eternal generation that appears in Jeremiah and elsewhere. But one may still consider what the relationship between the Lord and Israel must be for such metaphor to be appropriate.

I have been concerned to show the presence of the doctrine of Trinity in the Old Testament. What then happens in the New Testament? I suggest: two things.

First, the *shekinah* appears as an individual Israelite. On the one hand, the pattern we discerned in the appearances within Israel of the Angel of the Lord or of the Name or the Glory sheds its anonymity and lives in Israel as one with a name and an ancestry and an earthly calling, with a mother and an executioner. On the other hand, the calling of Israel as a nation to be Son and *Logos* for the nations, is taken up and fulfilled by this same individual Israelite, who in respect of this calling *is* all Israel. Although the Word who speaks through the prophets is, as the fathers all insisted, Jesus Christ, he does not through the prophets introduce himself in that way. The New Testament tells of his self-introduction.

The Son's shedding of anonymity pertains also to the Spirit. The notion of spirit has in itself a fatal openness to hijacking. We need not scour the religiosity of Israel's

environs for example; we can simply observe the flood of "spirituality" with which America is inundated and the regular invocation also of biblical language by the swimmers. For indeed there are spirits of all sorts on the loose, and they cannot always be sorted out by the phenomena they release. Why is one outbreak of glossalalia a gift of the Spirit, and another demonic possession? Perhaps they look very much alike. The spirits need to be judged, and Paul's criterion of judgment is unequivocal: it is whether or not a spirit confesses that same one individual male Israelite prophet and rabbi and healer as the one and only Lord.

And then second, with the appearance on the stage of the *shekinah* in his own human identity, the New Testament can provide the drama of God with—to continue the metaphor—its playbill. It can *list* the *dramatis personae dei*: they are the "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" of the baptismal mandate, and of the less compressed formulas that appear on every page of the Epistles. Indeed, it can then use this listing as the proper name of the one God, the next and last biblical phenomenon to which I wish to draw your attention.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that each of the three nouns, "Father, Son and Spirit" has its proper biblical meaning only in its relations to the other two; they are, after all, the *personae* of the one God's dramatic existence. "Father" therefore gets none of its import by projection of earthly fatherhood. The "Father" of the triune name is so called strictly as the Father of the next-named Son, who in turn is so named strictly as the Son of the just-named Father; and both namings are possible and mandated strictly because Jesus notoriously addressed the God of Israel as his "Father," merely thereby making himself out to be the unique Son of the God of Israel—and thereby in turn getting himself crucified. And the "Spirit" of the triune name is so called strictly as the Spirit who lives in the relation between this Father and this Son.

Thus and by the by, such coinages as "Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier," are not equivalent to "Father, Son, and Spirit" and indeed have no semantic relation at all to the triune name. The triune God indeed creates, redeems and sanctifies — but every putative God putatively does the same. Moreover, the triune God is Creator not as the Father but as the Father with the Son in the Spirit, and is Redeemer not as the Son but as the Son before the Father in the Spirit, and is Sanctifier not as the Spirit but as the Spirit uniting the Father and the Son.

I have spent most of this essay on the Bible. Now I must much more briefly turn to the formulated conciliar doctrine. What does it do that the Bible does not? Two things.

First, it formulates the plot of the biblical God-story in the most compressed possible form. The so-called trinitarian relations of begetting and being begotten and breathing and being breathed are slogans for the action of the divine *personae* in Scripture's narrative. The Father begets the Son, and the Son goes forth from the Father. Just so, the Father has no origin, but is the origin of all else. The Spirit is the breath of the Father, who rests upon the Son. Just so, the Spirit gives himself to the Father and the Son, to be the love that unites them. What is all this? It is the Bible in a nutshell — or as I will say in a moment, almost the Bible in a nutshell.

Second, over against certain dogmas of our culture, the formulated doctrine of Trinity insists that the God-story whose plot it renders is the story of God *himself* and not merely the story of God's adaptations to us. If the three are roles, *dramatis personae*, the life enacted through these roles are all there is to God; there is no deeper reality of God lurking in the background. If on the cross it is decided that the Father forgives even those who crucify the Son, then that decision stands eternally as the very actuality of God.

Classically, this last point was formulated by the doctrine of the economic and immanent Trinities. The

economic Trinity is God as the story told in Scripture; the immanent Trinity is God in himself. But then the very point of the doctrine is to provide language with which to say that the immanent Trinity lives no other plot than that displayed in the economic Trinity, that when you are taken into the story told in Scripture, you are taken into God himself.

Finally, it would not be a systematic theologian writing this essay if he did not have at least one proposal to make that goes beyond what is established in the tradition. It will be noted that the classically stipulated innertrinitarian relations, "begetting" "being begotten," "breathing," and "proceeding," are all, as the tradition explicitly says, "relations of origin." The Father is the unoriginate Origin, and the Son and Spirit are distinct hypostases in and by their different originatings from him. I am not the only contemporary theologian to have complained that this plot-summary does not adequately mirror the actual plot of the biblical drama of God. For in Scripture God is not merely or even predominantly the Origin of all things; he is at least equally the Eschatos, the upsetting Goal of all things, the Coming One who will create anew and overturn the orderings of this world. The Bible's drama of God is an eschatological drama; but this is not apparent in the traditional doctrine of trinitarian relations, which proposes an exclusively protological and not at all eschatological plot for the biblical story.

We need to think of relations of futurity as also constitutive of God's triune being. Both testaments provide many of them, which may perhaps be summed up by saying that the Spirit, as he is in the work of the economic Trinity the Spirit of Freedom, so in the immanent Trinity he liberates the Father and the Son to love each other.

So, also from this last point of view, is the doctrine of Trinity in the Bible? Yes indeed, and there is more of the Trinity in the Bible than has yet been recognized in the formulated doctrine.