
The Christian Trinity: Biblical Antecedents

No Trinity in the Bible?

For the Christian who inquires into the meaning and sources of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is most natural to “begin from the scriptures and their testimony to the tripersonal God.”¹ Where else would one turn to? All Christian traditions agree in principle that the Bible is the highest and most authoritative source of doctrine and faith. That said, it sounds curious at best and perhaps semi-heretical at worst that one of the few commonly shared convictions among both biblical and doctrinal theologians concerning the Trinity is that the doctrine itself cannot be found in the Bible. This statement seems to apply first and foremost to (what Christians name as) the Old Testament (OT). What does this mean? What are the implications for our topic? To point out this scholarly consensus is not to deny the obvious fact that in some real sense, even the OT “contains, in anticipation, categories used to express and elaborate the doctrine

of the Trinity.”² And even more, that therefore “a theology of the Trinity that ignores or plays down the OT can only be radically deficient.”³ It is just to state the obvious, namely that although the doctrine may be able to claim biblical support in light of its *later* creedal and theological development, the Trinity is unknown in the first part of the Scripture; and even in the second part, Father, Son, and Spirit appear somewhat abruptly, and despite their ubiquitous presence everywhere on the NT pages, their interrelations, origin, and roles remain undeveloped.

For precritical Christian exegesis and theology, this state of affairs did not appear to be a problem. Even when early theologians acknowledged the underdeveloped nature of OT faith before the coming of the Messiah, they discerned traces, patterns, and even teachings regarding the Trinity throughout the pages of the OT. Typical “prooftexts” included Genesis 1:26 (“Let us make”), which current exegesis regards as an example of plurality of majesty (not unlike the royal pronouncements in the form of “We declare . . .”); the Isaianic threefold “Holy, holy, holy” exclamation (6:1); and the theophanies (divine manifestations) of the “Angel of Yahweh” in Genesis 18 and elsewhere, traditionally interpreted as preincarnation appearances of the second person of the Trinity. Among the church fathers whose way of doing trinitarian theology was deeply and widely founded in Scripture⁴ (in contrast to common later prejudice, according to which early creeds were primarily worked out on the basis of “secular” philosophical resources), various other kinds of OT teachings and materials played an important role and often appeared in sophisticated theological debates. Especially important was the Wisdom theme found in the book of Proverbs (particularly in chapter 8) and other writings belonging to the same genre; this will be looked at in some detail in the following section. Many other OT passages played a crucial role in patristic debates and controversies. Just think of Isaiah 53, a passage universally interpreted as messianic and thus related to Jesus the Christ. Similarly, from the book of Psalms a number of christological and trinitarian lessons were

drawn, most often from the so-called Royal Psalms; they were not seen to be only about David but also of the heavenly David's son. Also noteworthy is that what at times appears to be a miniscule detail in the inspired text seemed to settle this controversial issue.⁵

Not surprisingly, contemporary scholarship does not agree with these and related approaches. At their best, so it is argued, these kinds of prooftexts may give an indication of the *idea* of plurality in God, but they are hardly sufficient to establish any kind of doctrine of the triune God. Not only that, but questions such as these emerge: Why not a binitarian or quadrilateral view of God? It is also to be noted that the NT does not consider the OT view of God as "underdeveloped," for the simple reason that the God of the NT is also that of the OT. In other words, the "God of Jesus is none other than the God of Jewish faith. . . . He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt 12:26–27), the God whom Israel confesses in the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 (Mark 12:29)."⁶ In that light, we need to acknowledge not only that the roots of the NT doctrine of God are to be looked for in the OT, but also that the NT presupposes the teaching about God as explicated in the OT.⁷

For these and related reasons, contemporary theology has taken a different approach to considering the relation of the OT to Trinity. This has meant revisiting and revising some canons of theological scholarship:

It used to be the conventional wisdom of New Testament scholars that predication of a divine nature to Jesus came about as a result of the impact of Hellenistic culture outside Israel and the ideas that culture had about the Divine. The assumption was that early Jews in tune with their monotheistic language would not use such language of anyone but Yahweh. The oneness of God ruled out speaking of multiple persons in the Godhead.⁸

At the same time, contemporary theology attempts to do full justice to the teachings of the OT on their own Jewish terms, before "baptizing" them into a NT understanding. That said, for a *Christian* reading of the OT—which, after all, constitutes

more than half of the canon—there is no need to concede the right to interpret it also in light of the coming of Christ as long as this is done as a second step.

So, what, if any, is the contribution of the OT to the Christian doctrine of God? How does that doctrine fare when placed side by side with the foundational beliefs of the OT? A careful look at this must precede our engagement with the NT.

Old Testament Monotheism

Every inquiry into biblical Christian doctrine of the Trinity should keep in mind at all times the uncompromising monotheism of the faith of Israel, which is the basis of the Christian confession of God as well. Both Christians and Jews join in the famous *Shema*, Israel's "confession of faith": "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4). Known under various names, among which the most important is *Yahweh*, going back to the significant self-revelation of God in Exodus 3:14, Israel's God demands unreserved loyalty vis-à-vis the constant tendency of God's people to succumb to the worship of other deities. Any allegiance to other gods was considered nothing less than a blasphemy. In the context of that kind of uncompromising monotheism, any reference to threeness might easily elicit the suspicion of polytheism. No wonder early Christians from the beginning had to defend their faith in Father, Son, and Spirit against charges of tri-theism (belief in three deities).

But what, exactly, is "monotheism" and what is meant by the demand for believing in one God alone? At its core, Israel's monotheism is much less about the "number" of deities and more about absolute devotion and loyalty to one God; "texts such as the *Shema* (Deut 6:4–9) reflect a repeated call to the difficult task of exclusive loyalty to God alone, and God's uniqueness is more soteriological than metaphysical,"⁹ that is, it is less about ontological speculations and more about salvation and true faith.

This opens the door to the possibility for some kind of plurality within the one God. Let's ask ourselves: What is there, if anything, in the OT understanding of monotheism that allowed early Christian theology to conceive of God in plural, especially triune terms? How did it come to be that from the very beginning the incipient Christian church came to speak of the one God of the OT, the Yahweh of Israel, in terms of Father, Son, and Spirit? If the sudden appearance of the threefold naming of one God were not so familiar a phenomenon to the Christian reader, we might be in a better place to appreciate its radical nature!

So, what do we mean when speaking of a plurality with regard to the God of the OT? It is an incipient plurality within the one God, expressed in terms of "Wisdom," "Word," and "Spirit." These three seem to serve as (semi-)personified agents of divine activity. And very importantly, the existence of such personified agents was not seen necessarily as a threat to monotheism.

A Plural Possibility: Wisdom–Word–Spirit

In addition to the three mentioned in the heading, namely Wisdom, Word, and Spirit,¹⁰ there are several other semi-personified agents of Yahweh in the OT, such as the "name" of Yahweh, especially in the Deuteronomistic theology, which dwells in the temple (Deut 12:5, 11). Another example is the "glory" of God that acts as an agent separately from, yet sent by, Yahweh; the book of Ezekiel is the prime example here.¹¹ And so forth.

Among these, a highly significant role is played by *hokmah*, Wisdom, which occurs more than three hundred times in the OT (not only in the Wisdom literature). Consider these two formative passages, one from Proverbs and the other one from the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, written close to the beginning of the NT times:

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very
beginning, when the world came to be . . . I was there when he set

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the heavens in place . . . Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence. (Prov 8:22–23, 27, 30, NIV) For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Though she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the man who lives with wisdom. (Wis 7:24–28, RSV)¹²

Wisdom’s significance lies in that the “[p]ersonified Wisdom or Sophia [in Greek] becomes increasingly related to the divine work of creation, providence, and salvation and grows in dignity and power along with OT sapiential [wisdom] thinking. Within a monotheistic faith, Wisdom takes on functions and attributes of YHWH. . . .”¹³

Wisdom plays a central role particularly in Proverbs (1:20–33; 3:13–24; 4:5–9; and chs. 8 and 9). In the beginning of the book, Wisdom, in the form of a sophisticated Lady, invites people to the source of true wisdom. As mentioned above, this passage was of major importance to patristic exegesis. Not only wisdom and insight come from Wisdom, but also salvation. And according to the famous passage of 8:22–31, Wisdom was “begotten” or “created” “long ago” as God’s “first-born.”

Echoing the Wisdom of Solomon’s profound statements cited above about the unique relation between God and Wisdom—“breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty . . . a reflection of eternal light”—Sirach,¹⁴ another apocryphal writing, speaks of Sophia (the Greek term for Wisdom) in this way:

In the assembly of the Most High she will open her mouth, and in the presence of his host she will glory: “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in high places, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I

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have made the circuit of the vault of heaven and have walked in the depths of the abyss. In the waves of the sea, in the whole earth, and in every people and nation I have gotten a possession. Among all these I sought a resting place; I sought in whose territory I might lodge. . . . From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and for eternity I shall not cease to exist.” (24:2-7, 9)

With a little imagination one can see the affinity of these themes with Christ, the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). Or, think of the invitation in the Wisdom of Solomon: “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my produce. . . . Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more” (Wis 24:19, 21). It is fully justified to see here a connection with Jesus’s invitations in the Gospels (Matt 11:28-30; John 6:35).¹⁵ The same can be said of the following passage, perhaps the most profound and in many regards astounding passage in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-24, a litany of the excellent capacities and virtues of Wisdom. Quite naturally, early Christian theologians saw them embodied in Christ, the preexistent Power and Wisdom and Word (*Logos*) of God (see Col 1:15-17, 19-20; 2:9-10; Heb 1:2-3, among others):

For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.

Word (*dabar*), another agent of God, appears already in the first creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4a). The psalmist explains that it was through the Word and *ruach* (Spirit) that creation was accomplished (Ps 33:6). Everywhere the Word is able to accomplish its God-given purposes (Isa 55:10-11). Spirit (with about four hundred occurrences in the OT), at times coupled with not only Word but also Wisdom (Deut 34:9; Job 32:8-9; Isa 11:2), appears as the “breath of life” (Gen 1:2), sustaining all life (Ps 104:29-30).

Clearly, these agencies could be taken as an indication of an incipient plurality without a direct threat to belief in one God. Furthermore, very importantly for the purposes of Christian trinitarian thought, we note that they imply not only plurality but also relationality. Take Genesis 1 as an example. The work of the Creator *Elohim* employing the agencies of the Spirit (*ruach*) and Word (divine creative speaking) was rightly taken by Christian interpreters to point to both plurality and relationality in one God.¹⁶ This summary statement by the Catholic Jesuit theologian Gerald O'Collins is accurate:

The vivid personifications of Wisdom/Word and Spirit, inasmuch as they were *both* identified with God and the divine activity *and* distinguished from God, opened up the way toward recognizing God to be tripersonal. The leap from mere personifications to distinct persons is always, to be sure, a giant one. Nevertheless, without these OT personifications (and the Father/Son language applied to God), the acknowledgment of the Trinity would not have been so well and providentially prepared—by foreshadowings and by an already existing terminology.¹⁷

These insights get strong support from some leading biblical scholars. Richard Bauckham has argued that, in some real sense, the early Jewish definition of God could include the person of the Son without violating monotheism.¹⁸ What distinguished the Yahwistic faith from polytheistic faiths was the desire not to place Yahweh “at the summit of a hierarchy of divinity” but, rather, to place him in an “absolutely unique category, beyond comparison with anything else.”¹⁹ In other words, even the highest angels or heavenly powers so highly appreciated especially in apocalyptic literature, while participating in God’s rule over the earth, did not share in God’s essence. However, distinctions within one Godhead, such as between God’s Spirit and God’s Word, were not necessarily understood as compromising the divine unity. Consequently, Bauckham concludes—and this is highly significant for a NT trinitarian outlook—“the Second Temple Jewish understanding

of the divine uniqueness . . . does not make distinctions within the divine identity inconceivable.”²⁰

So, when the NT writers’ encounter with the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit forced them to develop a theology that could account for the plurality in unity, they could build on these incipient foundations in the Israelite faith. Wolfhart Pannenberg makes a brilliant comment here: “Christian statements about the Son and Spirit take up questions which had already occupied Jewish thought concerning the essential transcendent reality of the one God and the modes of his manifestation.”²¹ Yes, they went beyond the OT faith, no doubt, but not against it, and they could hold on to the *Shema* of Israel while talking about Father, Son, and Spirit as one God.²²

While the NT builds on the foundations laid by the OT, it also is true that it focuses clearly on Jesus, the Son. “In the older testament things are seen from the Father’s point of view, whereas the Father is largely viewed from the Son’s point of view in the NT.”²³ This is the decisive clue to the rise of the trinitarian faith in the OT.

The Trinitarian God of the New Testament

Son of the Father

To the Christian reader it may come as a surprise to read in a typical textbook that “[t]here is no mention of the word ‘Trinity’ in the New Testament.”²⁴ Really? What are the implications of this? The concerns might be eased if the same reader also gets the following message: “What we do discover from the NT writers, though, is a consistent argument for the filial uniqueness of Jesus Christ in relationship to the Father of the old covenant.”²⁵ So, what we have is this: on the one hand, the *doctrine* of the Trinity cannot be found even in the NT; on the other hand, Jesus’s unique relation to the Father calls for an explanation that really takes us beyond the boundaries of the OT. This statement by Stanley J. Grenz focuses the issue:

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The initial impetus in the direction of what became the church's teaching about God as triune was spawned by the theological puzzle posed by the early church's confession of the lordship of Jesus and the experience of the indwelling Holy Spirit, both of which developments emerged within the context of the non-negotiable commitment to the one God of the OT that the early believers inherited from Israel.²⁶

That development, however, took centuries and was a matter of much debate. In hindsight one may ask: If the NT does not contain a doctrine of the Trinity, how can we then justify the later Christian doctrine?²⁷ The answer to this question is that, rather than looking for prooftexts or a *doctrine* of the Trinity in the NT, we need to look at the ways the first Christians came to understand salvation history, namely, what the God of Israel was doing through God's Son in the power of the Spirit.

There is no doubt that what became a full-fledged *trinitarian* confession of faith in later creedal tradition began in the NT and earliest Christian tradition as a more-or-less binitarian understanding of God. It was focused on the relationship between the Father and Son. As Stephen Holmes summarizes it succinctly: "The gospels present the relationship between Jesus and the One he calls 'Father' as unique and central" and that "there is a complex relationship of intimacy, union, shared knowledge and action, and subordination."²⁸ Theologically put: the self-distinction of Jesus from his Father, on the one hand, and their unity, on the other hand, is the foundation of the NT orientations to the Trinity.²⁹ Or, as O'Collins puts it, there is a "trinitarian face" to the history of Jesus.³⁰ Just consider the beginnings of the NT Gospels. In the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we are told that the conception of Jesus was an act of God in the power of the Spirit (Luke 1:35). Matthew's way of connecting the coming of Jesus to a trinitarian understanding is to name Jesus as Immanuel, the presence of God, with his people (1:23). The Gospel of John goes back to the OT idea of the Word as God's agent, and names the Word (*Logos*) God (John 1:1). These and similar biblical statements are indications of the fact that the coming of Jesus from the "begin-

ning” was understood by the Gospel writers as linked to God and his Spirit, yet distinct from them.

In John’s Gospel, the Son–Father relationship plays an important role.³¹ During his life, Jesus claimed to have been sent by God (5:37) and having been granted the authority to give life (5:21). To the Son has also been given the authority to execute judgment, similar in this to the Father (5:22). So close is the mutual relationship that whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father (5:23). Or, no one can see the Father without the mediatory role of the Son (1:18; 14:6–9).

All of what has been said so far on the basis of the Gospel testimonies has its basis in the critical event that brought the Christian church into existence and made possible the proclamation of the gospel of the one God who now was seen as Father, Son, and Spirit. That is the experience of the earliest followers of the *resurrection* of the crucified Messiah. The significance of that event calls for closer attention.

Resurrection and the Divine Son

According to Pauline theology, before his cross and resurrection, Jesus claimed to have the authority and approval of his Father. And when, as Romans 1:3–4 maintains, Jesus was raised from the dead by his Father, the early Christians interpreted that as divine confirmation. “There was a dramatic change when the crucified Jesus, who had died the death of a criminal cursed by God (cf. Deut 21.23), was experienced by the witnesses to the Easter appearances as the one who had been raised and confirmed by God: this experience became the starting-point for a deepened christological reflection which persistently also shaped the image of God among the early Christians.”³² Without doubt, the resurrection is crucial for the emergence of the conviction of the deity of Jesus, a claim that was of course hotly contested during Jesus’s lifetime by his Jewish opponents. No wonder it elicited the Jewish accusation of blasphemy (John 5:18).³³

Indeed, the resurrection is the defining moment in the rise of the doctrine of the Trinity. A first necessary conclusion on the way to that conclusion was the establishment of the deity of Christ. According to O'Collins,

First-century Christians proposed a trinitarian interpretation of the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. In those events, along with the outpouring of the Spirit, they experienced the unique high point of God's revelatory activity for our salvation. This saving revelation was experienced as threefold. . . . [W]e find at the origin of Christianity a certain sense that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were revealed as acting in our human history, above all in the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday and their aftermath.³⁴

This is not, of course, to claim—and O'Collins hastens to note it—that any kind of full-fledged trinitarian, or even a christological, doctrine emerged suddenly. It is just to underline the cataclysmic effects of the resurrection event. Even more, resurrection from the dead was interpreted by early Christians to mean that “the Son of God was also at the side of God from all eternity,” even though the “church's later view of the full deity of the Son did not have to be related to the idea of preexistence.”³⁵ In other words, what soon came to be known as Christ's preexistence is integrally linked with the raising from the dead. Of course, for a while the concept of the Son's preexistence was fluid, moving between the preexistence of an idea (in the mind of God) and a “real” preexistence.³⁶

A decisive impulse for the affirmation of the full deity of the Son, the critical stage in the emerging trinitarian faith, was the applying of the title *Kyrios* to the risen and exalted Son. This is the title “Lord” reserved only for God in the OT (in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of our OT). Indeed, it is astonishing that, as far as we know, “amidst all the variety of primitive Christianity, the worship of Jesus as divine was simply ubiquitous.”³⁷ Just think of these familiar practices and patterns: beginning from the earliest NT witnesses (some letters of Paul), “prayer is offered to the Father ‘through Jesus Christ’ (Rom

1:8), and to the Father and Jesus together (1 Thess 3:11–13); benedictions can be uttered in either name (Rom 16:20), or in the name of Jesus with no mention of the Father (1 Cor 16:23).”³⁸ So common is the worship of Jesus as divine that the biblical scholar Larry Hurtado may summarize it thus: “Amidst the diversity of earliest Christianity, belief in Jesus’ divine status was amazingly common. The ‘heresies’ of earliest Christianity largely presuppose the view that Jesus is divine. That is not the issue. The problematic issue, in fact, was whether a genuinely *human* Jesus could be accommodated.”³⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg concludes:

The title *Kyrios* implies the full deity of the Son. In the confession of Thomas in John 20:28 the titles God and Lord are expressly set alongside one another. Yet the Son is not *Kyrios* in competition with the Father but in honor of the Father (Phil 2:11). The confession of Jesus Christ as the one and only *Kyrios* in no way weakens the confession of the one God. The former confession is so related to the latter that all things proceed from the one God, the Father, but all are mediated through the one *Kyrios* (1 Cor 8:6).⁴⁰

To sum up: the foundation for the emerging NT trinitarian faith was laid by the two ideas we have explicated above: the identity between the Yahweh of the OT and the God of Jesus Christ of the NT as well as the distinction, yet unbroken unity, between Jesus and his Father.⁴¹ In order to clarify and deepen the latter statement, let us look further into the distinctively NT view of the fatherhood of God.

The Father of Jesus Christ

Although the idea of the fatherhood of God is not unknown to the OT, it does not occupy the kind of central role it does in the NT.⁴² One of the most delightful pictures of fatherhood occurs in Hosea 11 as Yahweh is teaching Israel, his son, to walk (even if the Hebrew word *‘ab*, “father,” does not appear therein). Only very rarely is the actual term “father” used (Ps 103:13; Prov

3:12; Deut 32:6).⁴³ Generally speaking, fatherhood in the OT testifies to God's "deep involvement in the story of Israel."⁴⁴

In Jesus's way of addressing his God, the fatherhood theme becomes programmatic and central.⁴⁵ Matthew contains thirty references to this theme. The Gospel of John, however, written a few decades later, contains no less than 120!⁴⁶ At the heart of Jesus's message was the announcement of the nearness of the kingdom of God; this God was none else than the Heavenly Father whose reign was near:⁴⁷

God shows himself to be Father by caring for his creatures (Matt 6:26; cf. Luke 12:30). He causes his sun to shine and his rain to fall on the bad as well as the good (Matt 5:45). He is a model of the love for enemies which Jesus taught (5:44–45). He is ready to forgive those who turn to him (Luke 15:7, 10, 11ff.), ask for his forgiveness (11:4), and forgive others (Matt 11:25; cf. 6:14–15; 18:23–35). He lets himself be invoked as Father, and like earthly fathers, and even more than they, he grants good things to his children when they ask (Matt 7:11). Thus the prayer to the Father which Jesus taught his disciples combines the prayer for daily bread, the sum of all earthly needs, with the prayer for forgiveness, which is connected with a readiness to forgive (Luke 11:3–4). This prayer also shows that Jesus' proclamation of God's fatherly goodness is related to his eschatological message of the nearness of the divine rule. For the prayer begins with three petitions that are oriented to the coming of the lordship of the Father God.⁴⁸

While Jesus's view of God was not completely new, his mode of address to God was novel because his relationship with God was unique and intimate. Importantly for us, Jesus not only addressed God as his Father, *abba*, but also taught his disciples to address God as "our Father."⁴⁹

From Biunity to Trinity

The Bible speaks of the divine Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, in terms of symbols, images, metaphors, testimonies, and stories.⁵⁰ The basic biblical terms, the OT *ruach* and the NT

pneuma, carry similar ambiguity: “breath,” “air,” and “wind.” Other metaphors used of the Spirit include fire, dove, and *Paraclete*.

The background of the NT teaching on the Spirit of God is, of course, the OT. As mentioned, the OT⁵¹ contains over four hundred references to *ruach* (and about one hundred references to the “Spirit of God”), Gen 1:2; Isa 11:2, among others. From the beginning of the biblical narrative, the Spirit’s role in creation, as the principle of life, comes to the fore. The same Spirit of God that participated in creation over the chaotic primal waters (Gen 1:2) is the principle of human life as well (Gen 2:7). This very same divine energy also sustains all life in the cosmos: “When you [Yahweh] send your Spirit [*ruach*], they are created, and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps 104:30). Similarly, when Yahweh “take[s] away their breath [*ruach*], they die and return to the dust” (v. 29). Importantly, the prophetic books make an integral connection between the Spirit of God and the promised Messiah. Indeed, the Messiah is the receiver of the Spirit and the Spirit’s power (Isa 11:1–11; 42:1–4; 49:1–6).

Fulfilling the prophetic promise of Joel 2:28–32, on the day of Pentecost a powerful outpouring of the Spirit signaled the birth of the church (Acts 2). The communities of the book of Acts experienced the Spirit’s presence and power with visible signs (Acts 4:31; 8:15–19; 10:44–47; and so forth)—so much so that, as a rule, the signs were taken as the evidence of the work of God (Acts 8:12–25, among others).

When it comes to the Gospels’ testimonies to the Spirit, it is characterized everywhere by an intimate relationship between the Spirit and Son—and, of course, also between the Spirit and Father. This integral, mutually conditioned relationality between Spirit and Son has given rise to the nomenclature “Spirit Christology.” Jesus’s birth (Matt 1:18–25; Luke 1:35); his baptism (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:33); his testing in the wilderness (Matt 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1); his anointing (Luke 4:18–21); his ministry with healings, exorcisms, and other miracles (Matt 12:28; Luke 4:18; 11:20); the eschatological

ministry of Jesus as the Baptizer in the Spirit (Matt 3:11)—these are all attributed to the Spirit.⁵²

According to the NT testimonies, Jesus was also raised to new life by the power of the Spirit (Rom 1:4), so much so that he “became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). Here we come to the critical stage in moving from a binitarian to a trinitarian understanding of God. It had to do with the growing insistence on the Spirit as the “medium of the communion of Jesus with the Father and the mediator of the participation of believers in Christ.”⁵³ By extension, the same God who raised the Son from the dead by the power of the Spirit is looked upon as the one who will raise believers from the dead (8:11). Indeed, the filial “*abba*” cry of the Spirit in the hearts of believers, echoing the prayer of Jesus in relation to his Father, already testifies to the presence of the life-giving Spirit (8:15–16).

In keeping with this, in the Pauline corpus, a distinctive Spirit Christology comes to the fore, similar to the Gospels.⁵⁴ Jesus was raised to new life by the Spirit (Rom 1:4). The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9; Gal 4:6; Phil 1:19). Therefore, it is only through the Spirit that the believer is able to confess that “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:1–3). Indeed, to be “in Christ” and “in the Spirit” are virtually synonymous. Therefore, the Spirit cannot be experienced apart from Christ (1 Cor 12:3). Paul also knows the presence and power of the Spirit in the lives of the Christians and communities, including empowering inspiration (1 Thess 1:5; 1 Cor 2:10–12; 2 Cor 3:15–18) and charismatic endowment and gifting (1 Corinthians 12 and 14). Through the Spirit, the new eschatological age has arrived and the Spirit serves as *arrabon*, a down payment of the coming glory (Eph 1:13–14) and participation in the kingdom of God (Gal 4:6–7).

Not only is there a close relationship between the Son and Spirit, the same applies also to Father and Spirit, though differently. “In the working of the Spirit[,] God himself is present.”⁵⁵ This means that the inclusion of believers in the filial relationship between Father and Son is also mediated by the Spirit, similar to the mediation of God’s presence by the Spirit in all

creation. “The Spirit is thus given to believers, and by receiving the Spirit they have a share in the divine sonship of Jesus.”⁵⁶

Clearly, there is a definite shift from binitarianism (Father and Son) to trinitarianism in the NT data. Perhaps we should speak of “explicit binitarianism and implicit trinitarianism.”⁵⁷ As our survey has clearly evinced so far, binitarian passages about Father and Son abound.⁵⁸ Alongside this there emerges a more frequent linking together of all three, Father, Son, and Spirit. Consider, for example, the well-known endings of two NT books:⁵⁹

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Matt 28:19)

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)

The triadic pattern comes to the fore in various forms, such as in the thematically trinitarian structure of Ephesians 1:3–14 based on the salvation history of Father, Son, and Spirit.⁶⁰ Furthermore, already in binitarian passages there is a basic trinitarian consciousness even when the Spirit is not explicitly mentioned.⁶¹ That said, nowhere in the NT are the relations among Father, Son, and Spirit clarified in any systematic manner. Pannenberg summarizes it well:

The involvement of the Spirit in God’s presence in the work of Jesus and in the fellowship of the Son with the Father is the basis of the fact that the Christian understanding of God found its developed and definitive form in the doctrine of the Trinity and not in a biunity of the Father and the Son. . . . The NT statements do not clarify the interrelations of the three but they clearly emphasize the fact that they are interrelated.⁶²

So, it is here that the NT leaves us and it is left to postbiblical theology to take up the task of clarifying several open questions and look for a more solid understanding of the interrelations among the three “persons” of the one God. To the investigation of that development we will turn next.

Notes

1. Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999), 4.
2. *Ibid.*, 11.
3. *Ibid.* Oddly enough, in light of this statement, a 1999 compilation of essays on the biblical, historical, and contemporary systematic perspectives on the Trinity by leading international scholars does not have any discussion of the role of the OT. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, eds., *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
4. For useful comments concerning the OT's use among the church fathers and its relation to contemporary biblical scholarship, see Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 34–39.
5. A highly useful survey and discussion of these and other similar OT passages can be found in Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 39–44.
6. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 260.
7. Still useful is the classic study by Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962).
8. Ben Witherington III and Laura M. Ice, *The Shadow of the Almighty: Father, Son, and Spirit in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 67–68.
9. Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 45–49, at 45. A highly useful scholarly monograph is Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of 'Monotheism'* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001). An accessible and succinct discussion regarding Yahweh, the one God, and other deities or spiritual beings is John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2: *Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 43–46 particularly.
10. For a detailed discussion of these three, see O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 23–34; my exposition here is directly indebted to his. I have also benefited from Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 24–31.

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11. See, e.g., Ezekiel 43 with the theme of the return of the glory of God; for useful comments, see Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:276–77 particularly.
12. All citations from the apocryphal writings in this chapter come from the RSV.
13. O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 24.
14. Or: Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach.
15. For finding this passage and the following in the Wisdom of Solomon, I am indebted to O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 26.
16. For the further significance of relationality, see Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 19–22.
17. O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 34 (italics in the original).
18. Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): ch. 1 places the discussion of plurality in the Godhead in the context of “early Jewish monotheism,” and ch. 2 investigates the emerging “Christological Monotheism in the New Testament”; see also Witherington and Ice, *Shadow of the Almighty*, ch. 3 (which also engages widely Bauckham’s main theses). Highly important and similar kind of work has also been done for years by another biblical scholar, Larry Hurtado, who argues that, on that basis, the seemingly seamless move in the early church from the beginning to show devotion to Jesus the Christ as “Lord” (*kyrios*, the name reserved for Yahweh in the Septuagint, the Greek rendering of the Hebrew Torah) was made possible. See especially his massive monograph, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
19. Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 12.
20. *Ibid.*, 22.
21. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:276–77. So also O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 89.
22. See Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity*, Guides to Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 9–10; Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:277.
23. Ben Witherington, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 156, with reference to Christopher R. Seitz, *Word without End: The Old*

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- Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 258.
24. Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 6.
 25. Ibid.
 26. Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 7.
 27. Cf. the comment of A. W. Argyle, an exegete of the previous generation: “Broadly speaking, we may say that the God of the New Testament is the God of the Old Testament reinterpreted and more fully revealed in the light of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.” Argyle, *God in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965), 10.
 28. Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 52; for a wider survey, see 51–54.
 29. For a careful analysis, see Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:263–64. The self-distinction of Jesus from the Father is also a key to the NT’s emerging Christology.
 30. O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 35, in a chapter titled “The History of Jesus and Its Trinitarian Face.”
 31. The term “son” appears in the NT in various ways, the most important of which is Jesus’s self-designation of himself as the “Son of Man,” going back to the OT usage (particularly Dan 7:14–15). A helpful discussion in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity can be found in Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Self-Designation ‘The Son of Man’ and the Recognition of His Divinity,” in Davis, Kendall, and O’Collins, eds., *The Trinity*, 29–47. For other important titles, see Witherington and Ice, *Shadow of the Almighty*, 71–97.
 32. Franz Dünzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*, trans. John Bowden (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 3.
 33. See further, Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 8. See also Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:264–65.
 34. O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 4–5.
 35. See further Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:264–65.
 36. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:265. See further Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 48–49; and more widely, Larry W. Hurtado, “Pre-Existence,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 743–46.

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37. Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 54.
38. Ibid.
39. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 650, cited in Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 55.
40. See further Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:266.
41. Ibid., 263–64.
42. Witherington and Ice, *Shadow of the Almighty*, 1; for possible reasons behind this scarcity of father imagery in the OT, see further, 4–6. An issue not known among the ancients had to do with the gender debate, so vital and important to our current intuitions. Since that topic can only be briefly treated at the end of this book, suffice it to say this much at this juncture: “In the OT scriptures, God exercises no sexuality and is utterly transcendent. Even if male and sometimes female images are applied to the deity, the sense that God is literally neither male nor female and transcends creaturely representations comes through the official OT prohibition of divine images.” O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 12.
43. For details, see Witherington and Ice, *Shadow of the Almighty*, 1–16.
44. O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 23; see also 12–22.
45. For a brief review of scholarly debates about the “newness” (or lack thereof) in Jesus’s introduction of God, see Marianne Meyé Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 13–15; for the various meanings of the term “father” in the NT, see 39.
46. Witherington and Ice, *Shadow of the Almighty*, 19. For a detailed study of Gospel passages, see 19–51; and for the rest of the NT, 51–64 (including summative points of the whole NT data). See also chs. 3 and 4 in Meyé Thompson, *Promise of the Father*, for a detailed study of Jesus’s use of “father” in the Synoptics, ch. 6 in John, and ch. 5 for the rest of the NT epistles.
47. For the integral linking between the kingdom of God and Father in Jesus’s ministry and life, especially when it comes to the awaited eschatological coming of God’s rule, see George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 [1974]), 82–85.
48. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:259.
49. A classic study is Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden and Christoph Burchard (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

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While older scholarship—as well as popular teaching even today—maintains that the address *abba* has daddy-like implications based on the language of small children, biblical scholarship reminds us that the term was also used in an intimate relationship between an adult son and father; Witherington and Ice, *Shadow of the Almighty*, 22. For a sympathetic and critical assessment of Jeremias's view of *abba*, see ch. 1 in Meye Thompson, *Promise of the Father*.

50. The main source in this section is George T. Montague, *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); for shorter, less technical discussions, see George Montague, "The Fire in the Word: The Holy Spirit in Scripture," in *Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and D. Lyle Dabney (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 35–65.
51. A very helpful outline of OT perspectives is offered by E. Kamlah, "Spirit," in *New Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:690–93.
52. For details, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 35–38; and more widely in my *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), ch. 8.
53. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:266.
54. A massive study on Pauline pneumatological traditions is Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).
55. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:267.
56. *Ibid.* Thus, it is understandable that the baptismal formula, even though binitarian forms were also in use earlier on, became trinitarian.
57. Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 52 (section-heading title).
58. Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1–3; and so forth.
59. Other passages include Rom 15:30 and 1 Cor 12:4–6, among others.
60. See further O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 65–68; Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 63–69.
61. See Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Perspective of the Trinity* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1996), 117.

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62. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:268–69.