

THE HOLY TRINITY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT



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“Above all guard for me this great deposit of faith for which I live and fight, which I want to take with me as a companion, and which makes me bear all evils and despise all pleasures: I mean the profession of faith in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I entrust it to you today.” - Saint Gregory the Theologian (Nanzianzus)

“Scripture brought me to the Gate of Paradise, and the mind stood in wonder as it entered.” - Saint Ephrem the Syrian

Preface

There is only one God: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph, the God of the Παναγία Θεοτόκος, Peter, and Andrew. Jesus Christ the Eternal Word of the Father made flesh, reveals the nature and very being of God as Holy Trinity. In the power of the Holy Spirit sent by the Father, we are able to profess that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In that same power we profess that the Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.

One Holy God, a Trinity of Persons in perfect ontological communion; One Holy Church, a multitude of persons in perfect ontological unity. As the nature and being of God cannot be altered or changed so also the nature and being of the Church cannot be altered or changed. Even if the visible unity of the Church appears to be fractured, this is true only to the extent that human weakness and sin can cast doubt and confusion upon individuals, for in its essence the Body of Christ cannot be divided.

The renowned Orthodox liturgical scholar Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983) remarked that : “The Church is not a library of doctrines that have been neatly catalogued into individual classifications, neither is it in the strict sense of the word a teacher of religious truths, rather it is an ‘epiphany’ of God’s final and total revelation to humanity” (*The Eucharist - Sacrament of the Kingdom*). When we ask how can the Church be that beacon which draws all men and women into the light of Christ, to

discover in faith the great epiphany of God's final and total revelation; our answer must first involve overcoming the great scandal of visible separation. How can we recapture for our time, the unity in diversity that existed in the first millennium of Christianity; and like the Fathers of the Church be able to express the essential truths of the faith in different languages and cultures, while retaining the bond of visible communion. This is our calling, our mission, and our hope - One Holy God, One Holy Church.

Introduction

A study of the Holy Trinity and the Old Testament involves much more than reciting passages of the Sacred Scripture where there seems to be a recognition of the triune nature of God, or the activity of one or more of the Persons of the Trinity in the particular passage. First, we must be careful in reading into the Old Testament our Christian understanding of God, if we are looking to uncover what was in the mind and intention of the inspired Jewish writer and the people for whom they wrote. Second, we would diminish the importance of the Incarnation of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, if we were to posit that the fullness of Trinitarian Faith was present and available to the Chosen People of the Old Testament. Third, within the context of Sacred Scripture when dealing with the Old Testament we are confronted with many centuries of human history, many centuries of oral traditions that become eventually written down, and many centuries of redacting of those writings, often in the light of their present situation and dominant religious perspective. By comparison the New Testament gives us a much more manageable timeframe and a more focused environment to place under our Biblical-Theological microscope.

This takes us to the heart of our endeavor, which is not a matter of searching for explicit references to God as Holy Trinity in the Old Testament. For while some may answer that there are, most contemporary exegetes of Sacred Scripture would say there are not. Rather, we must keep in mind that there is only One God, and for us who profess Christian Trinitarian Faith we understand that while the fullness of this nature may have been as yet veiled to the Chosen People of Israel, it is the Holy Trinity who moved and inspired Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the people of the Old Testament Church, to use the theological perspective of the holy Evangelist Luke.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers the following insight:

237 The Trinity is a mystery of faith in the strict sense, one of the "mysteries that are hidden in God, which can never be known unless they are revealed by God". To be sure, God has left traces of his Trinitarian being in his work of creation and in his Revelation throughout the Old Testament. But his inmost Being as Holy Trinity is a mystery that is inaccessible to reason alone or even to Israel's faith before the Incarnation of God's Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit. (***The Catechism of the Catholic Church***)

The Septuagint

Often called the *Alexandrian Version*, the *Septuagint* is the only Greek translation from as possibly seven or more translations to survive completely. Written most likely in the third century before Christ in Alexandria Egypt by order of the Greek ruler of Egypt, King Ptolemy II. The official title in the Koine (Common) Greek of the time is *The Translation of the Seventy*, the title *Septuagint* coming from the Latin title given to the work *Septuaginta*, because it was thought to have been translated from the Hebrew by seventy Jewish scholars.

The *Septuagint* is considered by the Eastern Orthodox Church to be the official and inspired version of the Jewish Scriptures or Old Testament. It has significantly

been used throughout history in translations of the Old Testament and in many instances employed texts from the most ancient Hebrew biblical sources. This has been substantiated by the findings at Qumran known as the Dead Sea Scrolls; that the manuscript sources of the *Septuagint* pre-date those used by the *Masoretic Text*, which is considered today as more or less the official Hebrew Scripture by many in modern Judaism.

The New Testament Church received the Old Testament or Jewish Scriptures primarily in the Greek of the *Septuagint* and until Saint Jerome was called upon by the Pope of Rome to create a new and improved translation of the Scriptures into Latin, the famous *Vulgate* (Common Latin) translation, both western and eastern Christianity accepted the *Septuagint* as the standard Old Testament text. From the perspective of ecumenical dialogue there is a need to take into consideration how the *Septuagint* has influenced Orthodox belief and life. In the Catholic tradition the *Latin Vulgate* held sway over Catholic Old Testament devotion and scholarship, until the encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of 1943, which called for new translations into the vernacular languages based upon the most available ancient sources. While positive in its outlook and forethought, this often meant overlooking the Greek *Septuagint* for the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament.

The Icon of the Hospitality of Abraham

There is an old English adage that, "a picture is worth a thousand words." While no picture can produce more meaning than the words of Sacred Scripture, one of the greatest visible images reflecting the words of Scripture is that of ***The Holy Trinity*** by the Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev. This masterpiece of art and spirituality is also

known as *The Hospitality of Abraham* and was completed in either 1411 or between 1425 and 1427. The Scriptural reference is Genesis 18:1-8:

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. Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest under the tree. Now that you have come to your servant, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves; and afterward you may go on your way." "Very well," they replied, "do as you have said."

Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick, three measures of bran flour! Knead it and make bread." He ran to the herd, picked out a tender, choice calf, and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it. Then he got some curds and milk, as well as the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them, waiting on them under the tree while they ate. - **Genesis 18:1-8**

Philip Kosloski writing in aleteia.org offers a very succinct introduction to the theology of this icon:

"It is most absurd and improper to depict in icons God the Father with a grey beard and the Only-Begotten Son in His bosom with a dove between them, because no-one has seen the Father according to His Divinity, and the Father has no flesh [...] and the Holy Spirit is not in essence a dove, but in essence God." (Great Synod of Moscow, 1667)

For the Russian Orthodox Church, depicting the Holy Trinity in art has been an issue of controversy for the past thousand years. Even though the Council of Nicaea in 787 permitted the artistic representation of God, the Russian Orthodox Church was unhappy with the popular images of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. They felt the gray-bearded man and the dove could not do justice to the unfathomable mystery of the triune God. In place of these widespread images of God, they chose to use Andrei Rublev's Trinity icon as the proper way to depict the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Russian icon is hard to grasp for those outside the Orthodox tradition and at first glance it doesn't appear to represent the Holy Trinity. The central scene of the icon comes from the book of Genesis, when Abraham welcomes three strangers into his tent...

Rublev's icon depicts this scene with three angels, similar in appearance, sitting around a table. In the background is the house of Abraham as well as an oak tree that stands behind the three guests. While the icon depicts this scene in the Old Testament, Rublev used the biblical episode to make a visual representation of the Trinity that fit within the strict guidelines of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The symbolism of the image is complex and is meant to summarize the Church's theological beliefs in the Holy Trinity. First of all, the three angels are identical in appearance corresponding to the belief of the oneness of God in three Persons. However, each angel is wearing a different garment, bringing to mind how each Person of the Trinity is distinct. The fact that Rublev depicts the Trinity using angels is also a reminder of the nature of God, who is pure spirit.

The angels are shown from left to right in the order that we profess our faith in the Creed: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The first angel wears a blue undergarment, symbolizing the divine nature of God and a purple outer garment, pointing to the Father's kingship.

The second angel is the most familiar as he is wearing the clothes typically worn by Jesus in traditional iconography. The crimson color symbolizes Christ's humanity, while the blue is indicative of his divinity. The oak tree behind the angel reminds us of the tree of life in the Garden of Eden as well as the cross upon which Christ saved the world from the sin of Adam.

The third angel is wearing a blue garment (divinity), as well as a green vestment over the top. The color green points to the earth and the Holy Spirit's mission of renewal. Green is also the liturgical color worn on Pentecost in the Orthodox and Byzantine tradition. The two angels on the right of the icon have a slightly bowed head toward the other, illustrating the fact that the Son and Spirit come from the Father. In the center of the icon is a table that resembles an altar. Placed on the table is a golden bowl or chalice that contains the calf Abraham prepared for his guests and the central angel appears to be blessing the meal. All of that combined reminds us of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

While not the most direct representation of the Holy Trinity, it is one of the most profound visualizations ever produced. It remains in the Orthodox and Byzantine traditions the primary way to depict the Triune God. The icon is even held in high esteem in the Roman Catholic Church and is frequently used by catechists to teach others about the mystery of the Trinity.

The Trinity is a mystery and will always be so while we are on earth. However, sometimes we are given glimpses into God's divine life, and Rublev's icon allows us a brief second to peek behind the veil. (*Peter Kosloski, aleteia.org*)

It is significant to note that Rublev chose to make his mystical theological point about the trinitarian nature of God, using the first book of the Old Testament, and the father of faith Abraham. In doing so he teaches us that the Triune God is present in the faith of Abraham, if in a veiled manner and therefore at the very beginning of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It also conveys the message of truth, that the presence of the One God, is always the presence of the Holy Trinity; wrapped in glory,

comprehended as mystical truth, with the Father eternally revealing himself in the Son and Spirit, thus the hypostatic nature of God, is Love.

The Old Testament Understanding of God

There is a great cultural leap between the people of ancient Israel and the Fathers of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople that formed the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith. What they hold in common is the faith experience of a personal-relational God. While ancient Israel drew upon the languages and cultures that comprised the ancient Near East. The Fathers of the Church drew upon the philosophical language of Greco-Roman philosophy, although to some degree the Syriac Fathers shared in the poetic cultural expressions of the Jewish people, and therefore give expression to Trinitarian Faith in none Greco-Roman philosophical language.

John L. McKenzie writes:

Israelite thought in the biblical era lacked the discursive reasoning developed by Greek philosophy and was incapable of general and abstract speculation. In Hebrew "to know God" is to encounter a personal reality; and a person is not known unless his name is known.

In Hebrew speech there is a peculiar association of the person and the name foreign to our idiom. "Name" is used in contexts where modern language uses "person" or "self." To have no name is to have no existence in reality; when one's name is blotted out, one ceases to exist. To give a name is to confer identity and not merely to distinguish from other individuals or species; when God creates (Gen. 1), he gives a name to each object of his creation. ...Hence, the knowledge of God is disclosed in his name. (***Aspects of Old Testament Thought, in the New Jerome Biblical Commentary***)

As the Israelites moved from henotheism (the worship of one deity without the explicit denial of the existence of other deities) to strict monotheism, we encounter in the text of Scripture many names and titles for God.

Elohim (often translated as Kyrios, in Greek) is actually a plural word, but was usually regarded as being singular when referring to the God of Israel, although used by the Israelites in its plural meaning when referring to the gods of other peoples or even angels. The exact meaning of the word is not certain, although “power” seems to be the most likely meaning, especially if understood as the power of being “holy,” which Rudolph Otto explained as meaning “wholly other” in comparison to all other beings.

God reveals his name to Moses, his name being Yahweh (YHWH); a name for the deity or divine not found anywhere else in the ancient Near East. This name was so holy for the Israelites that it was not used in a manner by which it could be trivialized or erased, so it was often replaced by another descriptive word for God, and not written where it might be erased.

The idea of the nature of God as being trinitarian would have been almost impossible throughout most of the history of the Israelite/Jewish people during the Old Testament period. What they did have faith in was the God who was active in their lives, the God who had chosen them for a unique purpose among all the peoples of the world. They understood that God was personal, relational, ruler and creator of the universe, and that he would redeem them, and save them.

The Old Testament speaks of both the spirit of YHWH and the word of YHWH. Both are seen as impersonal powers of God, that go forth from God and do his will, especially seen in the mission of the prophets of Israel and Judah.

Some Old Testament Passages Seen As References To The Holy Trinity

Genesis 1:1 – “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.”

Genesis 1:26 – “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”

Genesis 11:6-7 – “And the Lord said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.’”

1 Samuel 16:13 – “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up, and went to Ramah.”

Daniel 7:13-14 – “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

Conclusion: Ecumenical Convergence

John S. Romanides in the *Empirical Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church*

offers a brief explanation of how the Orthodox Church has viewed the unity Sacred

Scripture:

The word testament denotes someone’s will, which is recorded and confirmed by his signature. In both Testaments the Second Person of the Holy Trinity appeared to the Prophets and Apostles. The revelation was granted to them. An agreement was made and it was sealed with the blood of sacrifice in the Old Testament, and the blood of Christ in the New Testament. We therefore study the Old and New Testaments using interpretative keys given by the Prophets, Apostles, and Fathers, as preserved within the Church. ...

The Holy Fathers of the Church did not see the Old Testament and New Testament divided into Law and Grace, but from the perspective of the stages of perfection. Another serious issue is that Western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) theologians supported the view, as we see in Barlaam, that Divine manifestations in the Old Testament are transitory. They are different from the theophanies of the New Testament. The Holy Fathers of the Church did not hold such views. It is characteristic

that Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, whose teaching is the same as the Eastern Fathers, guided blessed Augustine to prepare himself prior to baptism by reading the Old Testament...(*Empirical Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church*)

Romanides points to the historical-theological difference of how the relationship between the Old and New Testaments have been viewed in Eastern and Western Christianity. He also shows using the conversion of St. Augustine and the instructions of St. Ambrose, how the West in the Patristic Period shared the same sense of the unity of the Testaments as the East also held. Unfortunately, under the influence of Medieval Scholasticism a type of disjoining of the Old and New Testaments emerged in Western Christian thought.

In Roman Catholic theology today there has been a return to a theological sense of the unity of Sacred Scripture. The Second Vatican Council in *Dei Verbum* taught:

“God, the inspirer and author of both testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. For, though Christ established the New Covenant in His blood, still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light on it and explain it.” (*Dei Verbum, no. 16; The Second Vatican Council*)

Also, we find in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

112 “Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God’s plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover” (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

Jesus Christ is the unity of Sacred Scripture, for it is revealed by him and is about him. In like manner Jesus Christ is the unity of the Church, it is his visible Body in the world. By the power of the Holy Spirit may we continue in our ministry of repairing the visible unity of Christ’s Holy Church.

Rev. David A. Fisher