
ON THE TRINITY

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In 325 AD, as the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, he convened a session of clerics to address a seemingly simple question: *What is the relationship of God the Father to God the Son to the God the Holy Spirit?*

And beneath was an underlying question: Is Christianity monotheistic or polytheistic?

The Council of Nicaea has served for nearly 1,700 years to buttress Catholic and Protestant doctrines of the Trinity – the concept of the Godhead as *three in one*. With the Son and Spirit consubstantial with the Father.

For more than 1-1/2 millennia, Christian faith and doctrine have been shaped by what we know as the Nicene Creed. As modified through history and stated today, this confessional statement of faith is organized around the concept of a triune God – a Trinity:

I believe in one *God the Father* Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And I believe in one *Lord, Jesus Christ*, the only-begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; *begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father*, by whom all things were made, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven. And He became flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man. He was also crucified for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was buried. And on the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. And of His kingdom there will be no end.

And I believe in the *Holy Spirit*, the Lord and Giver of life, *who proceeds from the Father and the Son*, who together with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, and who spoke through the prophets, and one holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And I await the resurrection of the dead. And the life of the world to come. Amen.¹

The equality and interdependence of this *three-in-one* Godhead is carefully expressed by the credal formulation. Jesus Christ is the “only-begotten Son” of God, of “the same essence” or substance with God the Father. The Holy Spirit is defined as one “who proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

The trinitarian formulation is widely viewed throughout Christendom as authoritative, but is it scriptural? At the Council of Nicaea, theological battle was waged over the relationship between Father and Son. Was Jesus of the same substance, of similar substance, or different substance than the Father?

For Judaism, the Nicene formulation is viewed as idolatry – because it appears to contradict the Shema formulation that the “the Lord our God is one.”² A similar conclusion is reached by Muhammed in the Qur’an: “Praise be to Allah, Who begets no son, and has no partner in (His) dominion; nor (needs) He any to protect Him from humiliation: yes, magnify him for His greatness and glory.”³

For some, Nicaea could even be interpreted as violating the first of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”⁴ Small wonder that this tenet of Christianity has served to drive a wedge between Christians and their Muslim as well as Jewish counterparts.

The year after the Council of Nicaea, Emperor Constantine precipitated a household tragedy of his own making. He first murdered his eldest son Crispus and then boiled his wife Fausta in her bath (over an alleged affair between wife and stepson).

But in death, Fausta got what she had wanted. She assured the line of succession would be to her three natural sons – but with tragic results. The oldest would die in war with the youngest son. The youngest would then be displaced by a German officer who was then overthrown by the middle son Constantius II. One bright light – Constantius was devoutly Arian – but to no avail within a generation.

The Nicene Formulation

The creed as we know it today was not easily settled – even though the at least the initial outcome was essentially pre-determined. The 325 AD Council of Nicaea was convened and presided over by the Roman Emperor Constantine. The first formulation proposed by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, was based on a Palestinian confession and represented an attempt by Eusebius to evade the central issue.

Eusebius essentially proposed a middle-of-the-road solution to the question of the nature of the God-head, specifically the relationship of God the Father to the Son. The solution proposed by Eusebius attempted to side-step the subject but was consistent with the semi-Arian view that Jesus of is “like essence” or substance with the Father. Not quite the same, but not different either.

The Roman Emperor himself then intervened, stating that the proposal of Eusebius matched his own sentiments, albeit with a minor modification. He urged adoption but with “the insertion of the single word *Consubstantial*” (meaning of the same rather than similar substance with the Father).

Despite protests from a certain Arius from Alexandria (Egypt) and others that the term “of the same essence” was not to be found in any of the New Testament writings, the Emperor’s viewpoint (not surprisingly) prevailed. The Council ended by condemning Arius, authorizing his excommunication and degradation from the presbyteriate of Alexandria. Emperor Constantine ordered Arius and three others of his supporters “to be arrested and banished to the most distant region possible.”

The emperor acted not on the basis of a deeply held theological conviction but primarily for political reasons. The concept of a united God was most consistent with the imperial mandate of a united empire – coming just after Constantine had spent nearly two decades fighting off other claimants to take sole possession of the Roman throne.

In time, the emperor would have second thoughts, largely because the chief advocate of the consubstantial position, Athanasius of Alexandria, proved to be even more troublesome than Arius. Athanasius (who also gave us the books of the New Testament as now received) threatened to withhold shipment of grain from Alexandria. – breadbasket of the empire. Athanasius then experienced the pain of imperial exile (the first of five times).

The see-saw between the Arians and Nicenes would continue beyond Constantine to the conflicted reigns of his three younger sons. Following the

The Council of Nicaea has served over nearly 1,700 years to buttress Catholic and then Protestant notions of the Trinity. There have been two problems with the Nicene theological trinitarian construct – both of which have to do with lack of scriptural authority. The *first problem* is that the term “Trinity” is never once mentioned in the Bible. Simply stated, “Trinity” is not a scriptural term; it’s an after-the-fact theological construct.

The *second problem* is that scripture has never even used even the looser term for Trinity such as the concept of “three in one.” This has been an unresolved problem down through the centuries for the orthodox church.

return of a pagan emperor – Julian – control of the empire fell into the hands of Theodosius, a confirmed Nicene. The final victory of Nicaea was fully confirmed in 381 with the Council of Constantinople.

So, back to the question of the evidence for or against the concept of a trinitarian God-head as *three-in-one*. Go back before Nicaea, back to the Old and New Testaments as we know them. Back to other early pre-3rd century non-canonical writings. What is the evidence for or against the concept of Trinity as we conceive it today?

A warning before we get started. The scriptural evidence is murky – not nearly as clear-cut as advocates either for or against the Trinity would like. However, due to the penetration of trinitarian roots to a linked network of credal beliefs, this rabbit trail is worth pursuing.

Hebrew Scriptures

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God first defines *who he is* in discussion with Moses, the man being groomed to lead his people out of slavery to freedom in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Moses asks God this question: “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

God’s answer is succinct: “I Am Who I Am.”

Then the Almighty explains: “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’ ”

“Thus you shall 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, and this my title for all generations.”

Years later, wandering in the wilderness, Moses delivers 10 Commandments on behalf of the God of his people. He follows up with that great statement of what is known as the Shema (translated by the New King James as follows):

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Another perhaps more accurate translation might be:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord alone. . . .

(Note: the term ‘alone’ is used in biblical translations as diverse as the Living, New Revised Standard, and New American Standard).

What is the difference? The first version of the “Lord is one” has been too easily conflated with the trinitarian doctrine of three in one – a sort of Old Testament source-proof for a concept first introduced in the emerging Christian church of the first 3-4 centuries AD.

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In contrast, the second version makes it clear that the God of the Hebrews should stand apart as the superior god but not the only god. This God alone trumps those Old Testaments gods of human and/or demonic invention – as with Baal, Astarte, Molech, and so on. Could it be that this God also stands part and above even other members of a heavenly Godhead?

The concept of God alone – this is the basis of the Hebrew (and later the Muslim) faiths as stoutly monotheistic.

Gospel Accounts

All four gospels have something to say on the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit – some more, some less.

Starting with Matthew’s gospel, the identity of Spirit and God the Father is in evidence as Jesus tells his disciples that “...it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”⁵

Jesus later quotes the prophet Isaiah, who speaking for the Father says: “Here is *my servant*, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put *my Spirit* upon him...”⁶ Using this prophecy, there is a clear sense of divine infusion and identity of the Father both with God’s servant (i.e. Son) and spirit.

Lest there be any doubt as to Matthew’s intent, consider his version of the Great Commission. In his last earthly statement, Jesus commissions his disciples, saying:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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*, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.⁷

Clearly, for Matthew, there is a divine relationship involving three entities – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, Matthew is not as explicit in stating the precise nature of the Godhead relationship as is, say, the Nicene Creed. Are these entities of the same substance? Are they co-equal? Matthew’s gospel provides no clear illumination.

When other gospel writers are added to the mix, things get more confusing. For example, Mark notes that “Jesus perceived *in his spirit* that they were discussing these questions among themselves”⁸ Is Jesus referring to the Holy

Spirit? Or to his own spirit within him – as flesh and (possibly) God? In fact, there are numerous occasions in this gospel where Jesus perceives an “unclean spirit” in others.

Nowhere does Mark provide a trinitarian formulation as cohesive as that of Matthew. In fact, in his version of the Great Commission (before the ascension), Mark does not even mention the roles of Father, Son and Spirit.⁹

Luke appears to fall somewhere in the middle between Matthew and Mark. There is a stronger linkage at least between Godhead and the Holy Spirit.

As an example, look to the time while Mary has yet to give birth to Jesus: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...¹⁰”

This statement seems to clearly equate the Holy Spirit with the power of the Most High. However, the text does not directly say whether the Holy Spirit is in fact of the same substance as the Most High, or whether the Spirit is an expression (or emissary) of the power of God. However, later Jesus is described (after his temptation) as “filled with the power of the Spirit.”¹¹ This statement would appear to distinguish Jesus’ own spirit from the Spirit of the Most High.

Similarly, Jesus goes to a synagogue in his hometown Nazareth, declaring that he has been “filled with the power of the Spirit.”¹²

Luke’s gospel perhaps comes closest to an early trinitarian formulation – albeit in a backhanded sort of a way:

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced *in the Holy Spirit* and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”¹³

All three entities are here in one prayer, but again the precise nature of this linkage in terms of unity and equality is not directly stated.

And at the point of his death, Luke attributes these final words to the Son: “Father, into your hands I commend *my spirit*.”¹⁴ In his final moments of agony, Jesus calls on God as his father. He then releases his (Jesus’ own) spirit to God, though not necessarily the Holy Spirit.

Like Matthew, Luke’s gospel ends with a truncated form of a Great Commission – but without the same trinitarian elements as contained in Matthew’s gospel. Rather, Luke’s formulation is left to the opening scene of

Acts (assuming Luke wrote this account of the early church as well as his gospel of Jesus' time here on earth).

The verbiage of Acts is somewhat different than that of Matthew. However, the elements of Father, Spirit and Son are all there, as Jesus declares:

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the *Father* has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the *Holy Spirit* has come upon you; and you will be *my* witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.¹⁵

In this opening scene of Acts, Luke places all three entities into one statement, uttered as Jesus' last reported words just prior to the climactic moment of his ascension to the clouds. In effect, Luke has offered tantalizing clues, but without sealing the identity of the Godhead.

The Gospel of John leads in a similar direction. This gospel begins with the well-known introduction: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was God*. He was in the beginning with God."¹⁶

A few sentences later, John writes: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son." And moments later, he concludes the soliloquy, noting: No one has ever seen God. It is *God the only Son*, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."¹⁷

At first glance, the logic appears clear, Jesus (the son) = God (the father). But, wait a moment. Between the statement about the Word being God and God being the Son, we have something else.

Indeed, John seems to contradict his own logic, indicating that there is not necessarily any uniqueness to being a child of God. We all can become "children of God," expressed by the additional passage in John 1 that "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become *children of God*, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."¹⁸

In this passage, humankind does not appear to be merely adopted, but of the direct spiritual lineage of God. How different is this from the role of Jesus, the "only begotten" son of God? John's gospel never quite says.

For those who wonder about God and Spirit, it is John's Jesus who says: "God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."¹⁹ In this instance, God does not authorize a separate entity known as Spirit; rather, God is Spirit.

"But the Helper, the *Holy Spirit*, whom the Father will send in My name"²⁰ In this later instance, John's Jesus seems to communicate an opposing thought.

The lack of any scriptural reference to "three in one" has been an unresolved problem down through the centuries for the orthodox church.

The problem was temporarily remedied in 1552 when I John 5-7-8 was amended to read as follows include verbiage regarding Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – that "these three are one."

This clumsy fix does not appear in any Greek manuscript of the Bible before the 16th century. There is general agreement that this phrase was added by the Catholic theologian Erasmus in his 1552 version of a Greek New Testament. This terminology has since been removed in most modern translations of the New Testament.

The Spirit is not part of the Father, but is subject to the Father as one whom the Father can dispatch. Later, John's Jesus speaks of "the *Spirit of truth who proceeds* from the Father..."²¹ This language of the Spirit *proceeding* from the Father would centuries later be incorporated within the Nicene Creed.

Back to the first century, Jesus is speaking of himself, saying: "All things that the Father has are Mine."²² And more directly, John's Jesus states simply: "The Father and I are one."²³

So, while John provides clues that could be construed as a possible trinitarian relationship, the entire formulation once again is not spelled out.²⁴ The strands are there:

- God = Spirit
- Father = Son

So, is the conclusion to be: God = Father = Son = Spirit? One could draw out this logic, yet John never explicitly so states. If this is the logic, could the full relationship be: God = Father = (Son = Other Human Children) = Spirit? Extension of this logic clearly can lead to some messy results, quickly.

John's Trinitarian Blunder?

Perhaps the strongest trinitarian formulation of the New Testament is not to be found in the gospels, but in the epistle of I John (ostensibly written by John the apostle). The King James version states that "**there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.**"²⁵ However, the oldest Greek manuscripts do not contain this trinitarian addition. Newer translations such as the New Revised Standard Version simply drop the trinitarian reference of three as one entirely.

At the end of four gospels, we are left with a conundrum. Matthew gets us closest (but not all the way) to the trinitarian formulation of the Nicene Creed, Mark gets us not very far at all, and Luke and John get us perhaps half-way. John makes perhaps the most explicit statements of Jesus' oneness with the Father, but complicates the issue by saying we are all children of God. None of this is very satisfying to bolster an explicit, definitive creedal statement clearly ready to be at the center of Christian belief and doctrine.

Paul & James

In the post-resurrection church, do either the apostle Paul or Jesus' brother James get us any nearer the nexus of Father, Son and Spirit? Well, yes and no.

Paul provides a number of discourses which offering clues as to the possible nature of this triune relationship – exemplified by this passage from Romans (worth recounting in its entirety):

For *God* has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his *own Son* in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the *Spirit*. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the *Spirit* set their minds on the things of the *Spirit*. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the *Spirit* is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the *Spirit of God* dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the *Spirit of Christ* does not belong to him. But if *Christ* is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the *Spirit of him who raised Jesus* from the dead dwells in you, he who raised *Christ* from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his *Spirit* that dwells in you.

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the *Spirit* you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the *Spirit of God* are children of *God*. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “*Abba! Father!*” it is that very *Spirit* bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of *God*, and if children, then heirs, heirs of *God* and joint heirs with *Christ*—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.²⁶

Clearly, for Paul the relationship is tightknit – but certainly also a bit confusing. Consider all the terms given for possible members of the God-head:

- God
- (God's) own Son
- Spirit
- Spirit of God
- Spirit of Christ
- Christ
- Spirit of him who raised Jesus
- Abba, Father

Going a step further, one could even note the reference that Jesus gives to the

rest of us as “children of God”. Does that provide any similar claim for humankind to divinity?

In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul writes that: “...you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the *Lord Jesus Christ* and in *the Spirit of our God*.”²⁷ And in the second epistle, Paul puts it this way, stating that: “...it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us *his Spirit* in our hearts as a first installment.”²⁸

Yet, Paul can also provide distinctions, for example saying that it is God “who has given us the Spirit...”²⁹ His closing comments represent a clear albeit as yet primitive trinitarian formulation: ¹³ “The *grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*, the *love of God*, and the *communion of the Holy Spirit* be with all of you.”³⁰ While trinitarian, it is by no means certain as to whether Paul is referring to these as three distinct beings or as three in one.

To the Galatians, Paul articulates a theme that would later be picked up by the Nicene Creed:

And because you are children, *God* has sent the *Spirit of his Son* into our hearts, crying, “*Abba! Father!*”⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through *God*.³¹

As with his letter to the Romans, Paul employs a formulation involving God, Spirit and Son. The wording related to God’s sending the Spirit is reminiscent of that of John’s gospel.

However, once again, the boundaries are blurred. The Spirit is not simply the Holy Spirit, but the “Spirit of his Son.” Once again, the purpose of this draw to the divine is for us to call “Abba Father.” But who is this Abba? God the Father only, or the full God-head?

And once again, we as humans are part of the equation, no longer as slaves to the God-head, but as joint heirs.

Finally, to the Thessalonians, Paul writes this bit of practical advice:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of *God in Christ Jesus* for you. Do not quench the *Spirit*.³²

In this instance all three entities of the God-head are clearly important but also distinct. The interrelationships are inextricably intertwined:

- God in Christ
- The Spirit in *or* of Christ

Yet, for Paul there is also a clear sense of divine hierarchy. God the Father is preeminent. From God comes the authority of the Son and the Spirit. Are they of the same or similar substance? Well, this is a question Paul never really answers.

In sharp contrast with Paul, the short epistle of *James* offers little discussion and provides virtually no insight into the concept of a divine Trinity. The “Lord Jesus Christ” is mentioned twice. The term “spirit” is mentioned twice, both times in the *lower case*, referring to the human rather than a divine spirit.³³

God (the Father) receives consistent mention throughout James’ epistle, only once in conjunction with another of the Godhead. At the beginning of his epistle, James opens with the line: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁴

In short, all three personages appear in James but they are never clearly linked to each other. In fact, James appears to head in a definitely different direction, referring to the Old Testament Shema with the observation that “God is one.”³⁵ Consistent with his anchor in Judaism, James identifies with Father, Son, and Spirit – but never equates them as *three in one*.

Non-Canonical Gospels

The non-canonical Gospel of Thomas consistently refers to the “Father’s imperial domain” throughout his sayings. This so-called gospel bearing the name of Thomas is replete with a wide range of sayings from Jesus (114 of them). He refers to “children of the living Father.”³⁶

In an interesting counterpoint to the Great Commission of three canonical gospels, Thomas quotes the disciples as asking who is to be their leader after Jesus leaves. Rather than point to the coming ministry of the Holy Spirit, Thomas takes a more pragmatic approach quoting Jesus as saying: “No matter where you are, you are going to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.”³⁷

However, Thomas also quotes Jesus as saying something to the effect that: “Where there are *three deities, they are divine*. Where there are two or one, I am with that one.”³⁸

At one point, Thomas does appear to veer toward some form of a trinitarian formulation. In a passage that parallels the three synoptic gospels, Jesus says: “Whoever blasphemes against the Father will be forgiven, and whoever blasphemes against the son will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the holy spirit will not be forgiven, either on earth or in heaven.”³⁹

As another non-canonical writing, the Secret Book of James provides an intriguing twist on the possible hierarchy of the God-head. Speaking

Three centuries after Constantine, Muhammad came out of the Arabian desert preaching a gospel surrender to God – of Islam. Muhammad had close affinity with Christians – he and his first wife were married by the Christian bishop of Mecca.

But Muhammad had one major problem with Christianity. He had abandoned Arabian polytheism for the monotheism of Allah. Muhammad could accept the idea that Jesus was a divine prophet but not God. As reflected by writings in the Qur'an: "Praise be to Allah, Who begets no son, and has no partner in (His) dominion; nor needs He any to protect Him from humiliation: yes, magnify him for His greatness and glory."

ostensibly to his brother James, the Lord (Jesus) says:

I swear to you, none will be saved who are afraid of death; for (God's) domain belongs to those who are dead. Become better than I; be like the *son of the holy spirit*.⁴⁰

This reference could be read to suggest that Jesus is not only son of the Father, but of the Holy Spirit. The confusion (or mystery) only deepens.

Also noted with extra-biblical literature is The Gospel of the Hebrews, a collection of references to what appears to be a single Jewish-Christian gospel from various early Christian authors. This gospel is intriguing because of its multiple comments regarding the Holy Spirit – indicated with attribution to the author who ostensibly quoted from this work.

In the 4th-5th century, Jerome stated that:

In the Hebrew gospel that the Nazarenes read it says: "The whole fountain of the *holy spirit* comes down on him. For the Lord is the spirit and where the spirit is, there is freedom."

Later on, in the same gospel, we find the following: "And it happened that when the *Lord* came up out of the water, the *whole fountain of the holy spirit* came down on him and rested on him. It said to him. 'My son, I was waiting for you in all the prophets, waiting for you to come so I could rest in you. For you are my rest; you are my *first-begotten Son* who rules forever.'"

A century or so earlier, the great theologian Origen provided another even more intriguing snippet in his Commentary on II John:

Those who give credence to the Gospel of the Hebrews, in which the Savior says, "Just now *my mother, the holy spirit*, took me by one of my hairs and brought me to Tabor, the great mountain," have to face the problem of explaining how it is possible for the 'mother' of Christ to be the holy spirit which came into existence through the Logos. But those things are not difficult to explain. For if 'whoever does the will of the heavenly father is his brother and sister and mother,' and if the name 'brother of Christ' applies not only to humans, but also to beings of a more divine rank, there is nothing absurd in the holy spirit being his mother, when anyone who does the will of the heavenly father is called the 'mother of Christ.'

Both quotations by Jerome and Origen indicate that Jesus is a Son of the Holy Spirit. Origen's quotation also suggests that the Spirit is a woman, the mother of the Son. Origen then seeks to explain this passage from the Gospel of the

Hebrews away, suggesting that the meaning is figurative rather than literal.

In Genesis 1, the singular (and apparently monotheistic) God creates the heavens and the earth. Then the Godhead turns to the business of making people with this oft-quoted statement: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ..."

The question is: **Who is us?** Is this a veiled Old Testament trinitarian reference to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three in one? Or is this God appealing to his entire heavenly retinue (as with angels) to help shape humanity?

The Hebrew Scriptures never offer an explicit determination. We humans – the created – are left to make our best guess.

Like Origen, Jerome comments elsewhere in his writings on this unusual passage regarding "my mother, the holy spirit." In a commentary on Micah, Jerome says that this phrase should lead one "to say that the word of God proceeds from the spirit, and that the soul, which is the bride of the word, has the holy spirit (which in Hebrew is feminine in gender, RUA) as a mother-in-law."

And in a commentary on Isaiah, Jerome again comments on this passage from the Gospel of the Hebrews, suggesting that "...no one should be offended by this (reference to spirit as mother), because "spirit" in Hebrew is feminine, while in our language (Latin) it is masculine and in Greek it is neuter." In divinity, there is no gender. In other words, for Jerome (like Origen), the gender of the Spirit is a matter of semantics which lead nowhere – effectively neutered.

But even Jerome has a softer moment. In yet another commentary (this time on Ezekiel), Jerome writes:

In the Book of Judges we read 'Deborah' which means 'bee.' Her prophecies are the sweetest honey and refer to the holy spirit, who is called in the Hebrew by a feminine noun. In the Gospel of the Hebrews that the Nazarenes read, the Savior indicates this by saying, "Just now my mother, the holy spirit, whisked me away."⁴¹

Spirit as Sophia

There is another tradition generally outside of the OT/NT canon that bears on this discussion – the tradition of the Sophia (or Wisdom).

The writer of the Proverbs declares that:

Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares *she* raises her voice.
At the busiest corner *she* cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates *she* speaks⁴²

and

Wisdom has built *her* house,
she has hewn *her* seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals, *she* has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
has sent out her servant-girls, *she* calls
from the highest places in the town,
"You that are simple, turn in here!"
To those without sense *she* says,

“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight⁴³

In the New Testament, the *female personality of wisdom* is invoked by none other than Jesus as a response to charges that he was living a dissolute lifestyle:

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by *her* deeds.’⁴⁴

The Sophia (or wisdom) of Jesus Christ also is part of the Nag Hammadi Library. This gnostic text describes the “Great Sophia” as the consort of the “Self-constructed Father.”

In this gnostic text, the disciple Bartholomew asks:

“How (is it that) (he) was designated in the Gospel ‘Man’ and ‘Son of Man’? To which of them, then is this son Related?” To this the Holy One answers:

I want you to know that First Man is called Begetter, Self-perfected Mind. He reflected with *Great Sophia*, his consort, and revealed his first-begotten, androgynous son. His male name is designated ‘First Begetter Son of God’; his female name, ‘First Begetress Sophia, Mother of the Universe.’ Some call her ‘Love.’ Now First-begotten is called ‘Christ.’ Since he has authority from his father, he created a multitude of angels without number for retinue from Spirit and Light.⁴⁵

Trinity in Summary

All enough to make your end spin! At the end of this survey, we are left with a conundrum.

Of the four gospels, Matthew gets us closest to the trinitarian formulation of the Nicene Creed, Mark gets us not very far at all, and Luke and John get us perhaps half-way. Like John, the apostle Paul provides for all sorts of linkages between Father, Son and Holy Spirit – with God in Spirit and Son, the Spirit in the Son and even the Son in the Spirit. Yet there is some sense of hierarchy – with the Father preeminent, from whom both Son and Spirit emanate.

The epistle of James reverts to the traditional Jewish Shema of “God is one.” Of the non-canonical gospels, Thomas recognizes three deities; Secret James refers to the Son of the Holy Spirit. Both the early church theologians Origen

and Jerome cite the now missing document known as the Gospel of the Hebrews as calling the Savior's mother the Holy Spirit.

In one sense, this long-glossed over debate could be viewed as again to answering the question: how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? But in another sense, the answer is more consequential. If Christians are adopting a theology bereft of direct Biblical support, is that not akin to idolatry? How can Christian expect others to confidently place their faith in a spiritual system built on quicksand? And do we not owe our Jewish, Muslim an apology for two millennia of needless division and conflict over the very nature of the divine that we all profess to worship?

What are we to make of all this? Clearly, the part of the Nicene Creed best supported by these ancients is the statement that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from" Father and possibly the Son. Even this is not without what is known as the filioque controversy – with Catholics believing that the Spirit proceeds from Father and Son while Orthodox believe that the Spirit is from the Father alone.

In any event, with the possible exception of John's recorded statement that "the Father and I are one," there is little direct support for the Nicene assertion that Father and Son are of "one substance."

Finally, we are left with the rather intriguing thought that the Holy Spirit (or a close relation) may be of the feminine gender – a thought essentially expunged from the canonical writings. But then gender confusion engenders role confusion. Is the Christ the son of Father and Spirit? Or does the Spirit really proceed from Son as well as Father?

And so, the confusion remains – three in one, one in three, a distinct three, or all of the above? Or more radical, is there a fourth (Sophia) to add to the mix? And who is the full retinue associated with the declaration in Genesis to: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ..."

At this juncture, there are **three initial conclusions** that can be drawn from this review of early and medieval church history:

- The Nicene trinitarian formulation of three-in-one, consubstantial with the Father may have served as good politics and as orthodox theology, but **can not be explicitly scripturally grounded**.
- Nicaea may also have been perceived as a **marketable** means by which Christianity could peddle itself as consistent with a monotheistic faith, but that subterfuge has been easily understood by Jew and Muslim alike.
- To retrieve an authentic Christianity, we need to go back to the boneyard of Nicaea – and start all over again. Confess the Nicene error, and move forward in the reality of Father, Son and Spirit as beings of **similar but separate** essence.

We as "Christians" need to re-think the theological foundations of our faith and creed. Not the biblical foundations (which remain unaltered though often overly interpreted).

Rather, the imperative is to rethink the theological foundations arising after the time of Jesus' sojourn on earth and the subsequent generation of the apostolic era – in a way that makes our theology clearly subordinate to what

The semi-Arian formulation of Trinity as of similar but not the same and not totally dissimilar essence comes out as the *least risk option*. It is most in accord with scripture and allows for a bit of heavenly surprise (in either direction) when we cross to the other side.

scripture unequivocally states.

Christians should find more common ground with their Jewish and Muslim cousins. Religious beliefs should not be expected to prove fully coterminous, but there will be much greater overlap – more common ground.

The end result can be a more friendly interaction involving both marketplace competition and collaboration between the three great faiths of monotheism. No more crusader mentality of winner take all, everyone else be damned. We have much to learn from each other.

Finally, Christians can press toward reconciliation not only across faiths but even within the multi-stranded cacophony of those followers of the Way. Across denominations including those too often dismissed as cults. There is yet so much we all have yet to learn of the ineffable mysteries of the G-d, Allah (blessed be his name), our Father.

End Notes

¹ This is not the original Nicene Creed adopted in 325 AD, but the common version accepted today after added iterations.

² Deuteronomy 6:4, KJV.

³ The Qur'an, 17.111.

⁴ Exodus 20:3, KJV.

⁵ Matthew 10:20.

⁶ Matthew 12:18.

⁷ Matthew 28:18-20.

⁸ Mark 2:8.

⁹ See Mark 15:16-18. Note that these verses (from 9-16) are not included with the earliest extant manuscripts of Mark.

¹⁰ Luke 1:35.

¹¹ Luke 4:14.

¹² Luke 4:18.

¹³ Luke 10:21-22.

¹⁴ Luke 23:46.

¹⁵ Acts 1:3.

¹⁶ John 1:1-2.

¹⁷ John 1:14-18.

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- ¹⁸ John 1:12-13.
- ¹⁹ John 4:24.
- ²⁰ John 14:26.
- ²¹ John 15:26
- ²² John 16:15.
- ²³ John 10:24.
- ²⁴ Unlike Matthew, John’s Jesus does not invoke a Great Commission and so no ending reference to an holy Trinity.
- ²⁵ I John 5:7, KJV.
- ²⁶ Romans 8:3-17.
- ²⁷ I Corinthians 6:11.
- ²⁸ II Corinthians 1:21-22.
- ²⁹ II Corinthians 5:5.
- ³⁰ II Corinthians 13:13.
- ³¹ Galatians 4:6-7.
- ³² I Thessalonians 5:16-19.
- ³³ See James 2:26 and 4:5.
- ³⁴ James 1:1.
- ³⁵ The full text of James 2:19 is “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.” James draws this pivotal OT text to drive home to his Jewish readers the supremacy of works over faith.
- ³⁶ Gospel of Thomas 2:4
- ³⁷ Thomas 12:2.
- ³⁸ Thomas 30:1-2. Unfortunately, the Coptic and Greek versions of this text differ, leaving this saying all the more obscure.
- ³⁹ Thomas 44:1-3.
- ⁴⁰ Secret Book of James 5:5-6.
- ⁴¹ These excerpts are from the Gospel of the Hebrews 3-4, as provided in *The Complete Gospels*, Robert J. Miller, editor, Pleridge Press (San Francisco), 1992.
- ⁴² Proverbs 1:20-21.
- ⁴³ Proverbs 9:1-6.
- ⁴⁴ Matthew 11:18-19.
- ⁴⁵ “The Sophia (Wisdom) of Jesus Christ,” from *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Revised Edition, James M. Robinson, General Editor, New York (Harper Collins), 1978.