

Trinity in Jewish Terms?

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Hear O Israel: The LORD your God, the LORD is one. – Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29

Few Christian teachings are so debated as the Trinity. It is perhaps the most speculative teaching we commonly hold as dogma, finding indirect support rather than direct proclamation in the Scriptures. The question then arises whether all the inferences have been made correctly.

This question about the legitimacy of Trinitarian thought does not arise only out of opposition to Christianity, but also from within it. Those who first wrote of Jesus Christ considered him the fulfillment of their expectations as Jews and as a new, epoch-making revelation within the framework of the same faith in God held by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The early Jewish Christians saw Jesus and their own writings about him in continuity with this faith in which they had lived their lives, a faith which was unapologetically monotheistic and had not heard of a Trinity. So then questions about the Trinity do not arise only from external critique, but also from internal reflection. Can we rightly conceive of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as One God, in fact as the same One God known to the patriarchs and to ancient Israel? Is such a thing native to God's revelation and to classical Jewish thought based on God's revelation? If we were to re-evaluate Christ – and what he means for the knowledge of God – from a natively Jewish framework, what would we see?

Analysis, Objectivity and Good Judgment

“Rejoicing before Him at all times, Rejoicing in His inhabited world, Finding delight with mankind.” (the voice of Wisdom from Proverbs 8:30-31 NJPS)

If our goal is to consider things from a more natively Jewish perspective, then the first shift I hope to incorporate is in the nature of scholarship itself. The Wisdom literature of the Scriptures does not consider wisdom to be emotionless or detached. If we are to do justice to God of whom we think, we must reconsider whether detachment is appropriate. In much of contemporary scholarship, objectivity’s detachment is considered to be not only the accepted method and approach, but also the only acceptable tone for any conclusion. This required detachment does not govern whether someone holds a particular view, but limits the allowable attitudes towards the views we hold and towards the material we are discussing. Anything too far from analytical detachment is considered bad practice, evidence of clouded judgment.

Two things are often confused when talking about objectivity. On the one hand, objectivity has meant a clear-headed, sober, unprejudiced view of the facts; on the other hand, objectivity has meant personal detachment at any and all stages of consideration. But what if there are facts that, when viewed with a clear-headed, sober, unprejudiced view, lead to the conclusion that detachment is inadequate and indifference is unacceptable? What if the facts involve us so that detachment becomes a denial of either our humanity or of the meaning of what we are considering? What if there are times when a clear-headed, sober, unprejudiced view of the facts might lead us to celebrate? If no clear-headed view could ever lead to that type of joy, then all our joy in life is without a clear-headed basis. When we apply detachment to the starting point and the method, we avoid prejudice. But when we pre-determine that we will also apply detachment to the conclusion, that is begging the question whether detachment is an acceptable stance in light of the material being considered.

A prior intellectual commitment to detachment precludes the finding that there is something worth celebrating, someone worth praising, that there is such a thing as good news in the sense meant by our faith. This prior commitment to a certain outcome is a form of prejudice – in this case, a prejudice against meaning, passion, and attachment (not to say devotion). The scholarly process as currently conceived establishes in advance only one thing: that we must not claim that our findings matter beyond a certain threshold. The remnants are reduced to intellectual curiosities and denied life-changing force regardless of their content. If we decide in advance that anything even remotely visceral is out of bounds for scholars, then what remains is by definition eviscerated.

There is additional ground I wish to reclaim within the legitimate domain of Christian scholarship. The Christian's study of God is inseparably bound to meditation, so that a detached analysis of God is not the highest pinnacle of thought about God, but is actually misguided and misleading. Likewise the Christian's pronouncement of the knowledge of God is inseparably bound to praise, to blessing, and to proclamation of good news. We need to re-envision scholarship to reclaim respectability for this: that good judgment might lead someone to be devoted and passionate without any loss of good judgment.

It becomes the place of the scholar who wants to know God to ponder deeply on the things of God, to see how far clear thought of God leads, and to follow with honesty wherever those thoughts lead. This may lead to breaking scholarly taboos against lament, repentance, praise, or adoration. It should also improve the quality of material generally considered "devotional" as rigorous scholarship enters conversation with popular devotion. I believe it is important that we make this shift to expand the territory allowed to scholars, and that we make it with no apologies. Knowledge of God and proclamation of God are intrinsically blessings; considering

them as either academic curiosities or as outside the realm of serious scholarship does them an injustice.

God in Himself?

The question of God as he is in himself has long been considered. But the fact is that we are creatures in this world; and even with the least knowledge of God, only that which can be surmised from nature without any revelation, we know God already as creator of this world, not in himself. Of a time or a state when God is alone without us, we have no knowledge at all. All we know for certain is that God did not desire to be “in himself” but instead desired to be creator. This makes it doubly questionable why we should seek to know God in himself – that is to say, God apart from creation and salvation. When we study God in himself, we study God as not involved with us or the world; we study what we do not know and cannot imagine.

Philosophy does not seem to be completely at home with this physical world. In the act of creation, there is a sense in which God was the first materialist; there is a sense in which God moved beyond being a philosopher content with thought alone and moved into relationship with a real world, this world. In doing this, he made it impossible for us to find him in the world of thought alone. If we cannot find the mind of God in the world of thought alone, then we must seek him where he may be found. That brings us out of the hypothetical world inhabited by God in himself and into this world, where do not find God in himself but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Still, as for God in himself, the current task leads me to ask one question: is God in Himself apart from creation a Trinity? To clarify: since Wisdom is essential to who God is, the Wisdom of God must be as eternal as God himself. And obviously since “no one knows the mind of man except

the spirit within him”, likewise the Spirit of God must be as eternal as the mind of God. But are God’s Wisdom and God’s Spirit meaningfully distinct from God before creation when God is all that exists? If the Spirit of God and the Word of God had never been seen outside of “God in Himself” and interacting with the Father, could we still rightly speak of Trinity? So I do not mean to answer the question but I do mean to raise it: Is it proper to speak of Trinity before the creation of the world, or do the Word of God and the Spirit of God only gain their distinctness from the Father in their interactions with creation?

The early church’s Trinitarian thought drew heavily on Biblical imagery. Consider Tertullian (Adv. Prax.), with his efforts to explain the Trinity in analogies that drew from Biblical imagery: the root and the tree, the source and the stream, the sun and the ray. But even here there was some tendency to consider God in himself. The Scriptures do not stop with the root and the tree, but that we are the branches. The Scriptures do not stop with the source and the stream, but with wells of living water inside us. The Scriptures do not stop with the sun and the ray, but with the people of God as the light of the world.

Consider another established Jewish concept: the “Son of God.” If we trace the history of what Scripture refers to as “Son of God”, at first it appears to show a mismatched collection of people and things. But if we trace the causal relationship as to why things are called “Son of God”, that the people of God are “sons of God” because the Word of God came to them – then we see that the phrase “Son of God” is not used randomly, but that it plots a trajectory from the heart of God through his Word bearing the Spirit to his people in this world. The “persons of the Trinity” draw us into the life of God and pour out that life of God upon us.

(More on the “sons of God” and the Son of God in Scripture here:
<http://weekendfisher.blogspot.com/2008/02/son-of-god-and-sons-of-god.html>)

The Word of God

It strikes us as odd to see language such as “Word of God” and “Wisdom of God” applied to Christ: he is so obviously a person. Some of the ancient Jewish writings portray the Word of God as an intermediary between God and man. Perhaps the ultimate Scriptural example of this kind of thinking is Psalm 119. A Jewish commentary on this psalm states: “What is most remarkable is that a close relationship to Torah replaces a close relationship with God, and that in general, ‘torah’ as a manifestation of the deity supplants God,” and again “ ‘Torah’ is thus equated with Temple, monarchy, and the land of Israel” (*The Jewish Study Bible*, Jewish Publication Society, Oxford 1985: commentary on Psalm 119).

In that psalm the Word of God is described in ways elsewhere used for God: a light, the source of deliverance, one whose face we seek, who receives prayer made with uplifted hands, the source of justice, the object of our hoping and longing, and the object of love. Even the priestly blessing (“The Lord bless you and keep you”) is partially recast so that it is the Torah that shines its face upon the people (v 135). Yet the commentator is overly harsh in stating, “in this psalm, *love* of ‘torah’ replaces love of God.” Rather, no clear distinction is made between the two. The idea of God and God’s Word are blended together so that what God does, God’s word also does; and the devotion fitting for God is fitting for his Word through whom he rules and through whom he is known. Language or “Word” is, at its core, an intermediary; it is a go-between. It is through God’s Word that our minds can grasp in some small measure the mind of God and take it into ourselves.

The concept of the Word of God as intermediary between God and man is also developed in the rabbinic literature; the “memra” or Word of God again takes on a near-independent devotion and an active, nearly living role.

The Wisdom of God

He made the earth by His might,
Established the world by His wisdom,
And by His understanding stretched out the skies (Jeremiah 10:12 NJPS; see also very similar passages at Jeremiah 51:15, Proverbs 3:19)

Jewish wisdom literature contains passages attesting to Wisdom’s role in creation. Wisdom is said to be born of God before the foundation of the world was laid (Proverbs 8). In the Gospels, Matthew and Luke record a saying of Jesus in which he seems to understand himself as the Wisdom of God.

“The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.” (Matthew 12:42).

Here is not only a claim to be “great David’s greater son,” greater than Solomon through whom the Temple was built and through whom the Messianic promises were to be fulfilled. Christ specifically mentions Solomon’s wisdom in his claim to surpass him. Solomon was unique in being granted a special measure of wisdom from God himself, so that Solomon’s wisdom was greater than any other except the wisdom of God Himself. “One greater than Solomon is here.”

Matthew focuses several passages on Jesus' wisdom (besides Matthew 12:42, see also Matthew 11:19 and 13:54).

Paul, then, takes up the themes already present in the early traditions of Christ and Wisdom when he calls Christ "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24) and speaks of "Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3-4). Again Paul speaks in words typical of Jewish wisdom literature and applies these words to Christ, saying "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn overall creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities: all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Types

Shechinah

The presence of God was sometimes seen visibly in the history of Israel, and that came to be called the Shechinah. The Shechinah was visible at Sinai when the Torah was given. It was visible in the tabernacle and again after the Temple was built. The Shechinah accompanied the ark of the covenant where the Word of God was kept. This Shechinah was the subject of scholarly discussion among the scholars. In the Talmud and other early Rabbinic literature, it is said that the Shechinah is present in many times and circumstances, especially around the Torah. When Jesus promises his presence whenever two or three are gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20), he uses language reminiscent of what the scholars said of the Shechinah – the presence of God on earth – to refer to himself. The Shechinah was (and is) God presence on earth, God with us: "Immanuel".

For more on the concepts of Shechinah to which Christ was alluding, see here:

<http://weekendfisher.blogspot.com/2008/02/shechinah-presence-of-god-and-messiah.html>

Temple

The Temple is a central idea in Jewish thought and was the central physical place in Jewish life. It was the place where the ark of the covenant was kept, the place of sacrifice where atonement was made, the place towards which prayers were directed, the place where the Shechinah dwelled so that to appear before the Temple was to appear before God.

Jesus refers the idea of the Temple to himself when he says, “Destroy this Temple and I will raise it again in three days” and as the author of the Gospel notes, Jesus was referring to himself. Jesus here applies the ideas belonging to the Temple to himself. In him is the covenant, in him is atonement made, towards him our prayers are directed, in him the Shechinah dwells. When we appear before him, we appear before God.

The Messiah

In the Scriptures, the people who are anointed have an office from God. In that office, they hold a portion of power from God in his stead: prophets speak the Word of God, priests pronounce the blessing on behalf of God and intercede with God; the king rules by the authority of God. They are intermediaries between God and man. The ultimate Anointed One, the Jesus, combines all of the traditional roles of the anointed eternally. He speaks the word of God as a prophet, blesses and sacrifices as a priest, and rules as a king. As God is shepherd so is he the shepherd; as God is

the judge so is he the judge. All the human, personal intermediaries between God and man are recapitulated in Christ.

The Word and the Spirit

Scripture records a long and complex interplay between the Word of God and the Spirit of God. On the one hand, the Word of God is the Wisdom of God; on the other hand, the Spirit of God is the Spirit of Wisdom and Understanding. While the Spirit of God knows the mind of God within him; the mind of God is wisdom. The Word that Christ speaks to us is spirit and life. Those who receive the Word of God receive the Spirit of God, and those who have the Spirit of God speak the word of God. At Jesus' conception, the Spirit of God overshadows Mary to conceive the Word of God, and after Jesus' ascension the Word of God, Christ, sends out the Holy Spirit. While the Word of God and the Spirit of God are not identical, they are inseparable

One God in Three Persons?

Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit: Three we name you

While in essence only One undivided God we claim you.

(traditional German hymn, "Holy God we praise your name")

This hymn, familiar to many Christians, makes a wise move: it names the Father, Son, and Spirit, and tallies what we name them: three. But it avoids applying "three" to a noun; instead it applies "three" to our action of naming. The traditional formula for many centuries now has been "God in three persons"; but the word "person" has always seemed a slight mismatch to what we want to say. And regardless of the original language, if we are now to critically examine what we mean

and what we can rightly say, we find ourselves always again looking at the legacy language of “person”.

“Three persons” inevitably gives rise to questions. In what way is the Holy Spirit a person? When the Holy Spirit enters us, is the Holy Spirit within us a separate person from us? Or is “spirit” in a slightly different category than “person”, something that cannot be considered independent of the one whose spirit it is? If the spirit cannot be considered as independent of the one whose spirit it is, then whose spirit is the Holy Spirit within us: ours or God’s? And if we can truly answer “both” then the two spirits have become one, and we have been united with God in a spiritual parallel of marriage. Is it possible that the spirit is not person but spirit, and that this fact is one of the key facets of our redemption? And again, the Holy Spirit in Scripture is not said to compete with our own redeemed spirit, but to transform it: we are filled with wisdom and understanding; we are gifted with creativity or other gifts; we experience faith, hope, and love; we are characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and so forth. To consider these things is part of what it means to consider the spirit. The Athanasian Creed knows little more of the Spirit than that it “proceeds” rather than being “begotten” – but in applying the word “person” to the Spirit, it does not consider the Holy Spirit *as Spirit* at all.

Would we have considered the Word of God to be a person if not for his incarnation, his living among us as Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God? Even the life of Christ might not entirely satisfy us on that point. Consider the Gospel of John’s insistence that Christ does only what the Father does, says only what the Father says, and cannot do anything apart from the Father. These sayings could lead us to question whether Christ was fully human if they were not offset by the blessedly, wrenchingly human prayer in the garden and the cry from the cross. We uphold Christ as a person, though a very unique person as the Word of God, the one “in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in bodily form.” But when we consider his divinity in itself as an eternal

person standing alongside the Father, that threatens to remove the essential character of the Word of God as an intermediary, When we forget that he is an intermediary from the beginning and in his very constitution, we struggle to understand why the son in particular of the Trinity should be incarnate. We forget that it was from eternity his role as Word and as Wisdom to be the intermediary between God and man: to be the door, not to bar the way but to open the way, to be the way in which we could know the Father and see him.