

THE TRINITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The thought of the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament is not wholeheartedly accepted in theological studies. It has been argued that it is very doubtful Old Testament texts “should be understood as teaching, by the intention of their authors, the Three-in-Oneness of God.”¹ While this may be the belief of Garrett, the belief of Grudem is that, “Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly found in the Old Testament, several passages suggest or even imply that God exists as more than one person.”² This paper will seek to argue the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament through the use of plural forms of the names of God in the Old Testament, the process of worshipping God in the Old Testament, the distinguishing of the three persons of God in the Old Testament, and an exegetical study of Isaiah 48:16.

Plural Forms of the Names of God in the Old Testament

The name for God, $\sim\text{yhi}\hat{\text{e}}\text{l}\{\text{a}/$ (*Elohim*), is plural and may imply plurality.³ While $\sim\text{yhi}\hat{\text{e}}\text{l}\{\text{a}/$ may be plural for the sake of intensity, the argument believing such things allows itself to analyze every plural noun in the Hebrew language as either plural

¹ Garrett, James Leo Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (North Richland Hills, TX: Bibal Press, 2000), 308.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 226-227.

³ This word study of *Elohim* may be perceived as emphasizing intensity rather than plurality, but this is subject to individual interpretation as is noted in Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 90.

in actuality, or merely a form of intensity. This interpretation may allow the interpreter to misrepresent the grammatical fact or facts of the original text. Andrew Jukes

commented on the word $\sim\text{yhi}\hat{\text{e}}\text{l}\{\text{a}/$ when he said,

He is One, but in Him also, as His name declares, there is plurality; and in this plurality He has certain relationships, both in and with Himself, which, because He is God, can never be dissolved or broken. Thus, as Parkhurst says, the name contains the mystery of the Trinity. For the perfect revelation of this great mystery man had indeed to wait until it was declared by the Only-begotten of the Father, and even then only after His resurrection from the dead, to those whom He had called to be His disciples.⁴

While the interpretation of the plurality of $\sim\text{yhi}\hat{\text{e}}\text{l}\{\text{a}/$ may be interpreted in different ways, there are more definite forms of plural forms in the Old Testament to explicate the existence of the Trinity in the Old Testament in the book of Genesis. Genesis 1:26 (in the English Standard Version) says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Two chapters later, in Genesis 3:22, God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil." Eight chapters after this occurrence, Genesis 11:7 states, "let us go down" in reference to God's judgment at Babel. These are all examples of God referring to Himself as plural. This reference of plurality may very conceivably be interpreted to be referring to the three persons of God.

Further along into the Old Testament, Isaiah 54:5 says, "For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name." The word for maker comes from the word

⁴ Andrew Jukes, *The Names of God in Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1967), 19.

עֲשֶׂה; עָשָׂה, meaning, “to make or manufacture.”⁵ The Maker is a plural usage as well. “These plural names of God suggest what is known as ‘plural unity.’”⁶

Process of Worshipping God in the Old Testament

The process of worshipping God in the Old Testament presents a differentiation between a generic reference to God and the recognition of God as three persons. An example of this is seen in Isaiah 6:3 when Isaiah had a vision and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.” Isaiah’s use of the word *קֹדֶשׁ*, meaning “sacred” or “holy” three consecutive times is a sign of exalting the three persons of God on a theophanic throne.⁷ This verse assists with the long process of development, correction, and clarification of views and conceptions of God.⁸

In Genesis 48:15-16 Jacob blessed Joseph, his son, by referring to God with three separate distinctions by saying,

"The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, ¹⁶ The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; And may my name live on in them, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth."

⁵ Koehler, Ludwig and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 890.

⁶ Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth and Thomson Learning, 2002), 147.

⁷ The definition of *קֹדֶשׁ* is used in reference to the theophanic throne as cited in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Incorporated, 2004), 872.

⁸ Heron, Alasdair, *The Forgotten Trinity*, ed. Alasdair Heron, *The Biblical Basis for the Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Inter-Church House, 1991), 42.

The first two references to God are clearly in reference to God as the word $\text{~yhi} \hat{\text{e}} \text{l} \{ \text{a} /$ is used. The third reference to God is rendered by the English Standard Version saying, “The angel.” While this may be an acceptable translation, a more accurate translation of $\% \text{a} ' \text{l} . \text{M} ; \text{h} ;$ is, “the messenger.”⁹ This verse is an example of a reference to a Christophony. Jacob, like Isaiah, recognized God in three separate ways.

A third Biblical process of worshipping God in three persons in the Old Testament is in Numbers 6:24-26 in the benediction to Aaron saying, “²⁴ The LORD bless you, and keep you; ²⁵ The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; ²⁶ The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.” The Aaronic benediction is similar to the vision in Isaiah 6 where one name of God is used three times to communicate a form of worship to God.

While these Biblical examples of the processes of worshipping God in the Old Testament are not solely conclusive, they contribute to the recognition of the process of the recognition of the Trinity in the Old Testament.

The Distinguishing of the Three Persons of God in the Old Testament

After having studied the worshipping of God in three persons and the recognition of the plurality of God, it is also important to separately distinguish the three persons of God in the Old Testament. In an attempt to do such a thing, there must be specific examples of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament.

⁹ Ishwaran Mudliar, interview by author, November 17, 2006, Fleming Hall, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX.

God the Father

God is shown to be the person of the Father in Psalm 2:7 when the verse says, "I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'" The reference of the LORD having a Son also means He must be a Father. Further along in this paper this verse will be expanded upon to study the presence of the Son in this verse. This revelation of God the Father is also shown in ancient writings such as the Apostles' Creed.

The Apostles' Creed recognized God the Father in Genesis when it said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."¹⁰ Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God, in this verse, is God in the person of the Father.

God the Son

God is shown to be the person of the Son in Psalm 2:7. The Psalms are a compilation of poems. Poetry is a succinct, highly structured means of expression.¹¹ The succinct and highly structured account of Psalm 2:7 referring to the Son of the LORD (*LORD*) expresses two of the three persons in the Trinity located in this particular verse. As was mentioned previously, there are Christophanies located throughout the scriptures of the Old Testament.

¹⁰ Moltmann, Jurgen, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1981), 162.

¹¹ W. H. Bellinger, *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Incorporated, 1990), 34.

The Son spoken of in Psalm 2:7 is described as the Son is also described in John 3:16. Both verses contain a form of the word, “begat.”¹² God the Son is clearly expressed in this verse. It may be simpler to view the God of the Old Testament as the Father, but the presence of the Son in this verse proves the line of thought to be incorrect.

God the Holy Spirit

Brent Strawn adapted the view of the presence of God the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament when he said,

The witness of the Old Testament that can be identified with other members of the Trinity need not be solely about the first member. I am thinking here of the oft-noted fact of the Old Testament that the Old Testament also knows and speaks of God’s Spirit.¹³

Strawn’s belief in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament may be based on two particular verses in the Old Testament which distinguish God the Holy Spirit specifically from other Persons of God: Genesis 1:2 and Genesis 6:3.

The latter portion of Genesis 1:2 says, “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” This verse shows priority of God distinguishing the Holy Spirit from the other Persons of God. Historically, there have been people who denied either the existence of the Holy Spirit, or simply the divinity of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ God’s Spirit hovering over the face of the waters at the beginning of the creation of the heavens and

¹² Although both verses contain a form of the word, “begat,” the LXX in Psalm 2:7 uses *gege, nnhka*, to speak of the Son being begotten. John 3:16 uses *monogenh/* to speak of “only begotten.” The difference between the two is that John 3:16 considers the Son to be “the only,” and Psalm 2:7 does not distinguish it.

¹³ Brent A. Strawn, “And These Three Are One: A Trinitarian Critique of Christological Approaches of the Old Testament,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 2, no. 31 (Summer 2004): 205.

¹⁴ Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 1993), 141.

the earth seems to disprove this.

Genesis 6:3 says, "Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit shall not abide in man forever.'" This verse allows readers of the Bible to better comprehend one of the reasons for the presence of the Trinity; that reason is to visualize the process of breathing in our bodily life as a continuous, internal, life-giving act that arises from the depths within the body.¹⁵

Verses such as Genesis 1:2 and Genesis 6:3 are extant in the overall process of unveiling the blatant presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. The three persons of God are present within the Old Testament. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit each contribute to the Old Testament as a whole. Not only do the presence of the three Persons of God represent the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, not only do the plural forms of the name of God contribute to the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, and not only does the process of worshipping God prove the existence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, but Isaiah 48:16 assists readers of the Bible comprehend this as well.

An Exegetical Analysis of Isaiah 48:16

Isaiah 48:16 says,

Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there." And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit.

This portion of the study will concentrate on the latter portion of Isaiah 48:16 where

¹⁵ George Marcil, *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* (St. Bonaventure, NY, The Franciscan Institute, 1979), 61.

it says, “‘from the time it came to be I have been there.’ And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit.”

The reference to the Spirit in this verse is clear as it specifically states this Person’s name as “his Spirit.” Grammatically “the Spirit” could either be an entirely second subject or a second object. It is most certainly the latter.¹⁶ The importance of “the Spirit” being a second object in this verse is that it becomes separated from the Father and the Son as it is its own object.

Watts points out that, “someone, ostensibly a leader, claims that *Yahweh has sent him and his spirit*.¹⁷ The identity of the speaker in this verse and his relationship with “the Spirit” is one which requires interpretation.¹⁸ The speaker identifies himself as “one whom God has sent.” Although scholars have differing opinions as to who is speaking, it may be interpreted that God the Son is the one speaking in this verse.¹⁹ Verse 17 even more clearly demonstrates the Son to be present in this context. Not only does verse 17 contribute to the belief of Isaiah 48:16 being spoken by the Son, but the belief “That Christ is the speaker, and not the prophet, is to be gathered from a comparison with 61:1.”²⁰ Isaiah 61:1 says,

¹⁶ Frank E. Gaebelin, *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary with the New International Version, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 281.

¹⁷ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 178.

¹⁸ Scholarly opinion is divided as to whether this refers to Cyrus, to the servant, to the prophet, or to Christ. The prophet is most certainly the correct one as the Old Testament almost always has messengers or prophets to be those who were sent by God as is cited in Clifton J. Allen, *Proverbs-Isaiah*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 327.

¹⁹ Towns, 148.

²⁰ W. E. Vine, *Isaiah: Prophecies-Promises-Warnings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 139.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

Isaiah 61:1 allows an interpreter the right to determine the one speaking in Isaiah 48:16 as being the Son. Isaiah 61:1 parallels with Luke 7:22 when it says, “the poor have good news preached to them.” The one who brought good news to the poor was the Son as was shown in both the Old and New Testament.

God the Father is present in this verse as He is referred to as $\text{hwI} \pm \text{hy} > \text{yn} \text{ } \hat{\text{o}} \text{d} \text{o} \text{a} \text{]}$, meaning, “LORD, God.” The first Person of the Trinity is the one being referred to as “LORD, God.”

Isaiah 48:16 captures all three Persons of God while never making any insinuation toward the idea of polytheism. This verse allows readers to interpret God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as three separate persons which contribute to being one Holy God.

Conclusion

The study of the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament is essential to everyday living. While there are 15,188 more Old Testament verses than New Testament verses, a lack of presence of the Trinity in the majority of the Bible would show a lack of consistency in our faith which would in turn show a lack of consistency in living out our inconsistent faith.

Instead, the presence of the three Persons of God allows Christians to better grasp the reality of who God is to us. One of the best ways to grow closer to someone or something is to know who or what they are. There is no better way to know who God is

than to study Him in the portion of the Scriptures which contains the majority of the writings.

After having studied the presence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, Christians have a greater propensity for glorifying God, and allowing His love to glean from His follower's lives.

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