

Trinity disruption



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This article does not have in mind to persuade its readers in a specific direction. What it has in mind is to make the reader think, and in this way, to rethink the ontology of the Trinity, as a Christian in a post-Christian, fourth revolution era. To significantly reason about the Trinity is a challenge, having the potential to easily be labelled as a heretic or part of a sect. However, to just accept all the 'facts' about the Trinity in the Bible, which are, in fact, interpretations by the Ecumenical Councils and Church Fathers of the early church era, is not in line with the 21st-century environment. In this article, we discuss the Trinity in light of the Bible, as well as the Councils and early Church Fathers, and (once again) conclude that the Trinity can best be explained in light of God's omnipresence.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article covers different disciplines like theology, philosophy and history, as well as different disciplines within theology, namely church history, systematic theology and practical theology. This is a follow-up of an article written in 2019 and focuses on the Trinity from another angle. We hope that this will be the beginning of a discussion group on the different ways in which the Trinity can be interpreted.

Keywords: Trinity; Ecumenical Creeds; Ecumenical Councils; Church Fathers; God's omnipresence.

Introduction

אָקד: יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁמַּע

(Israel, you must understand: Yahweh, our God, is ONE Yahweh – Dt 6:4)

Soon after the ascension of Jesus Christ – during the 1st century CE – the books and letters of the New Testament (NT) were written. It did not take long before an exhaustive struggle with terms and different points of view broke out inside the church, *inter alia* concerning Jesus' person and his position with reference to God the Father. Much later, specifically at the ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE), the church had put these struggles 'to rest' by announcing at Nicaea that there is 'one God, the Father Almighty', that Jesus is 'one substance with the Father' and that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father and the Son' (Nicene Creed 325). At Constantinople, they claimed that 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have a single Godhead and power and substance', and with reference to Jesus 'that he was before the ages fully God the Word',¹ In this way, they denounced all those who held different views as heretics, referring to 'Sabellius's diseased theory [and] the blasphemy of Eunomians and Arians and Pneumatomachi' (Creed of Constantinople 381). Much later, most probably during the 6th century, the Athanasian Creed confirmed that there is 'one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal...and co-equal' (Athanasian Creed n.d.).² The church of God has held the views of these Councils as true, re-affirming it in the days of the Reformation with the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and keeping it till this very day.

One of the challenges to this point of view held by the Creeds above and by Christianity in general is that when the Creeds refer to the property of the divinity (the Godhead), they claim that it is shared by three Gods. However, they do not indicate 'significantly on what they take this shared nature to be, and on the status of the ones who share it' (Tuggy 2020:4). In this article, we will

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1. In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Murray & Rea 2015), Michael Murray and Michael Rea concur with this, arguing: 'From the beginning, Christians have affirmed the claim that there is one God, and three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – each of whom is God'. Although this sounds so good to a Christian today, it is so untrue. Firstly, one only 'recognises' God in the OT as a Trinity from a NT perspective, and secondly, there were no Christians 'in the beginning'. The term 'Christian' was only coined in the 2nd century CE.

2. This was in line with Tertullian's dictum in *Adversus Praxeam* 12, *Unam substantiam in tribus cohaerentibus (one only substance in three coherent and inseparable Persons)* (Migne 1844:168; ed. Schaff 1885c:1358).

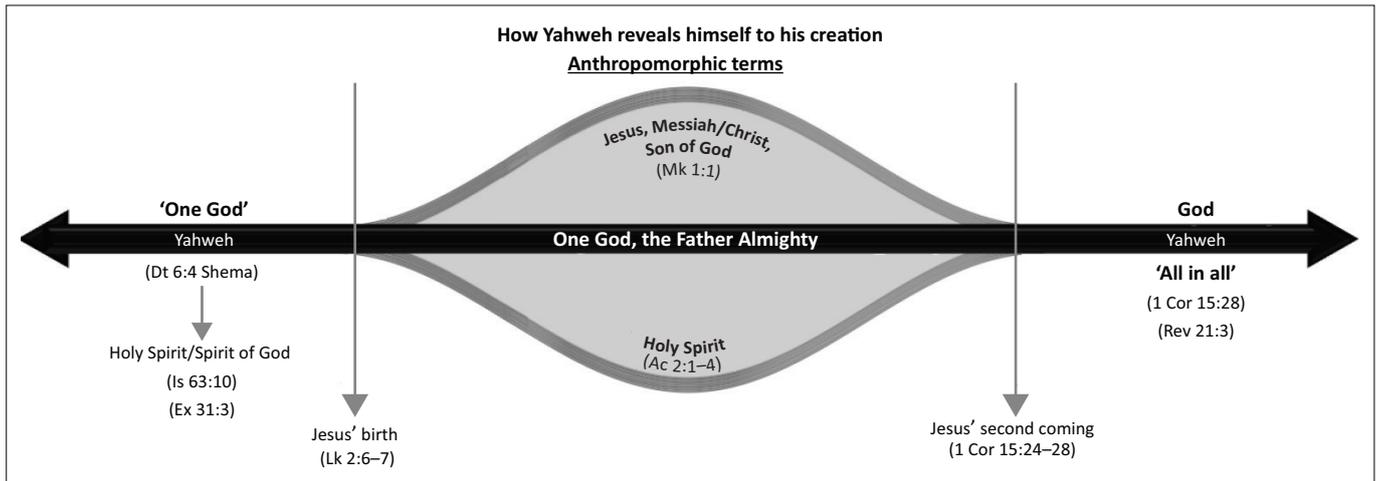


FIGURE 1: Yahweh's revelation to his creation (Personal archive).

discuss this *sharing* with the words of Horrell (2020:4) in mind: 'God is free. He is what he is...both by nature and by choice'. God is therefore not what *we* make of him, as he will never fit into the boxes that we create for him. He will always be bigger and more...

This article is a follow-up of an article being written in 2019, with the title, *God as One* (Oliver & Oliver 2019). In that article, we argued that God is one being, one person – not one being (*ousia*) and three persons (*hypostaseis*) as depicted, *inter alia*, by the Athanasian Creed (n.d.) and the Belgic Confession, Article 8 (Belgic Confession 1561).³ We argued that God's Trinity is entrenched in his omnipresence.⁴ While God's omnipresence is mostly defined and regarded by the church as him being *anywhere at any time* (cf. Anselm *Monologium* 20 – Anselm 1926:59; Cambridge Dictionary 2021), we have also linked it (naturally) to his ontological self, his person – that he:

[C]an be *anyone of the three Persons at any time* – simultaneously. To simplify it: God can be in two different places at the same time. What makes his omnipresence complete, is that he can be two different Persons in these two places at the same time, and for that matter he can be as many Persons as he chooses to be, in as many places as he chooses to be, on the very same moment. (Oliver & Oliver 2019:10; original emphasis)

Mind-boggling – but can it be true? With this article, we want to take this notion further by arguing that God (Yahweh) was there from the beginning of times, and that he will be there till infinity 'and beyond'.⁵ The way in which we depict the existence of Yahweh (if we may) and the way in which he reveals himself to his creation are captured in Figure 1 and discussed further in the article.

3.While we absolutely concur with Article 1 of the Confession, we do not agree with Article 8. Article 1: Article 1: The Only God: We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God – eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just and good, and the overflowing source of all good.

4.Already in the OT, God referred to his omnipresence in Jeremiah 23:23–24: 'Am I only a God nearby', declares the Lord, and not a God far away? 'Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?' declares the Lord. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the Lord.

5.With acknowledgement to Buzz Lightyear in the movie *Toy Story*.

As we read the history of God's people in the Old Testament (OT) – actually starting at Genesis 12 – we see that Yahweh called Abram without explicitly mentioning who he was, seemingly with the assumption (to the original hearer or reader) that the first part of Genesis has already introduced Yahweh (also Elohim) to them. In the first part of Genesis (Gn 1–11), we do not read anything about Yahweh being more than one Person (although some scholars, having the NT as background, 'identify' the Holy Spirit in Gn 1:1⁶ and the Trinity in Gn 1:26).⁷ More importantly, we do not read that his people understood God to be more than one person.

This was therefore the way in which God appeared to Abram (Gn 12:7) – as Yahweh, also referring to himself as El-Shaddai (God Almighty) when he made his covenant with Abram (Gn 17), and the way in which Abram served him by building altars to him (Gn 12:7, 8; cf. 13:4). The OT text also refers to Yahweh by the title of 'Elohim' (cf., e.g. Gn 1:1; 17:3, 9) and 'angel of the Lord' (Gn 22:11), among many other Names or titles. In Figure 2, a few Names or titles are portrayed, with Yahweh, God's covenant Name, in the centre and Elohim on top of it, as Elohim is the title of Yahweh, introducing him to his original hearer or reader in Genesis 1:1.

In Genesis 18, we read that Yahweh himself said about Abraham:

[F]or I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him. (v. 19)

Many years later, just after the wording of the *Shema*, Moses commanded Israel to keep the law of Yahweh and to

6.Most translations translate ruah Elohim with 'Spirit of God' (where most people interpret it as a reference to the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit), while translations like the CEB, [EXB], NABRE, NRSV, NRSVA, NRSVACE and NRSVCE translate it with a *strong wind*. The question may rightfully be asked, that if the original hearers/readers of the OT would understand this to be a reference to the Holy Spirit. The term 'Holy Spirit' or 'Spirit of God' anyhow occurs in the OT quite a few times. Reference to 'Holy Spirit' in the OT will be discussed below.

7.The question may be asked here, 'How would these scholars interpret these verses in Genesis 1 if there were no New Testament?' For a discussion of Genesis 1:26, see Oliver and Oliver (2019:2).

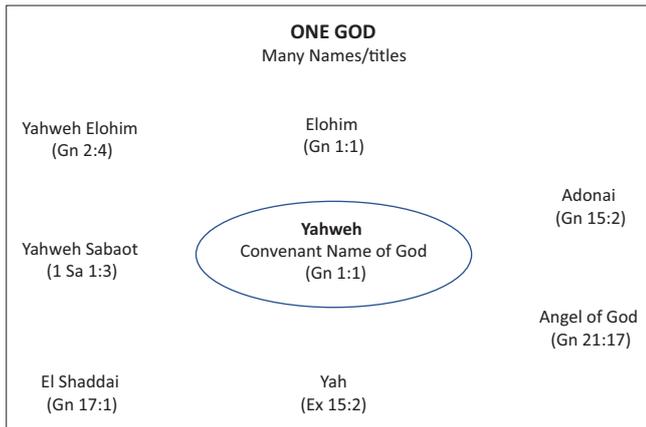


FIGURE 2: Some Names or titles of Yahweh in the Old Testament (Personal archive).

impress it on their children (Dt 6:4–9). This is echoed in Proverbs 22:6, where the author advises his hearer or reader: *Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.* The parents were taught by the priests and Levites about Yahweh (cf. Lv 10:11). During the time of the prophets, they declared the will of Yahweh to a sinful people who have turned their backs on their Lord. The prophets had prophet schools where many of them studied the Torah, like the one in Ramah (cf. 1 Sa 19:18). In this way, the people of the OT learned that there was only one God.

The parents mentioned above were therefore taught about one God, and this was what they taught their children. All of the prophets spoke about one God, one Yahweh and never referred to him being more than one, or even insinuated that. Yahweh was one, although they gave him many Names or titles. Thus, in the OT times (before the birth of Jesus), Yahweh was known to his people as one God, while his Spirit was already mentioned (known), but not as another or separate God – just as an ‘extension’ or part of Yahweh. No mention was made of the son.⁸

However, one could ask, ‘But what about the Messiah?’ Was he not equalled to or one with Yahweh or Elohim?

The Messiah⁹

The origin of the Messianic expectation of the Jews can be traced back to the intertestamental period (between ca. 400 BCE and the birth of Jesus) (Evans 2012).¹⁰ During this devastating era of Israel’s history, they re-interpreted OT passages such as Isaiah 11:1–5, Genesis 49:10 and Numbers 24:17 to point in the direction of a coming Messiah (Evans 2012). This term appears twice in Daniel 9:25–26,¹¹ seemingly

8. Notice is taken that some scholars regarded the Angel of God/the Lord as being Jesus – God’s Son (cf. Graham 2020; Stewart n.d.). However, this is performed from an NT perspective.

9. See Jewish Virtual Library (2008) for a concise but precise exposition of the Messiah during the second temple period, in Rabbinic thought, in the Middle Ages and in modern Jewish thought.

10. From a NT perspective, one can ‘discover’ Messianic expectations as early as 2 Samuel 7 (Evans 2012).

11. The book Daniel was written in the 2nd century BCE, therefore, in the intertestament time (Pratt 2016).

with reference to a coming Messiah.¹² The ‘coming Messiah’ was expected to be an earthly king who would slay all his (and therefore Israel’s) enemies (Evans 2012). He was therefore not a god or God, but a human. However, in the gospels, and for that matter, the NT, Jesus is depicted as God.

In the NT, especially the gospels, the term or title Χριστός is used (as a Greek translation) with reference to the Messiah, although this term cannot always be translated with ‘Messiah’, specifically outside the gospels. From an NT perspective, the OT is filled with many alleged references to the Messiah, especially referred to by the gospels according to Matthew and John, also Luke. These references are pointing in many instances to a re-interpretation of the OT passages, like Isaiah 7:14 (cf. Mt 1:23) and many others. Mark starts off by equalling Jesus as the Christ (the Messiah) to the son of God (Mk 1:1). Matthew 1 is also very explicit by calling Jesus the Messiah (cf. Mt 1:1, 16, 17, 18), with reference to the newborn Jesus, having a human ancestry. In Matthew 1:18, this ‘Son of (hu)man(kind)’ is said to be born from the Holy Spirit, thus a ‘Son of divinity’.¹³ John 1:1 does not call Jesus ‘Messiah’, but identifies him as the word of God who was there from eternity (*the beginning*), being actively involved in the creation process. We will refer to this below.

According to the gospels, Jesus himself had a ‘messianic self-consciousness’ (cf. Coutsoumpos 2020:55; Cullmann 1963:117). In Matthew 16:20, after the declaration of Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus *ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah*, thereby admitting that he *is* the Messiah. Also, in Matthew 26:63–64, Jesus admitted to being the Messiah, but immediately afterwards referred to himself as the ‘Son of (hu)man(kind)’ – the title that he loved to apply to himself. In Matthew 26:68, the soldiers mockingly addressed Jesus as ‘Messiah’, while Pilate also referred to him as ‘Messiah’ (Mt 27:17, 22).

Although Jesus’ suffering was in line with Isaiah 52:13–53:12, he had no intent to overthrow the Romans – this could be the reason why the Jewish authorities rejected him as Messiah (cf. Evans 2012). Added to this, although he was equalled to God in certain passages of the NT (see above), he was always regarded as a separate person or person to God.

The time between Jesus’ first and second coming

The NT starts with and describes the birth of Jesus, being incarnated by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is said to be (equal to) God (Jn 1:1) and the ‘Son of God’ (Mk 1:1), but the Holy Spirit is not indicated in the NT as being God – only as the ‘Spirit of God’ (Mt 3:16) or the ‘Spirit who is from God’ (1 Cor 2:12).

12. However, David Flusser claims that the ‘title “Messiah” (Heb. מָשִׁיחַ) as a designation of the eschatological personality does not exist in the Old Testament,’ while Harold Ginsberg argues that this is a ‘strictly postbiblical concept’ (Jewish Virtual Library 2008).

13. ‘Holy Spirit’ is not defined here or in Matthew 1:20, implying that the first hearers or readers were familiar with the term. In Matthew 3:11, we read about the Holy Spirit again, this time as an active agent in the baptism of Jesus. Interestingly, each of the four gospels refers to the Holy Spirit already in their first chapter.

The closest that the NT comes to equalling the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son is most probably in Matthew 28:19 where Jesus, just before his ascension, commanded his disciples to baptise his followers in the Name of the 'Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', thereby equalling the Holy Spirit to the father and the son.

Here, we see the use of anthropomorphic terms (cf. Horrell 2020:2) – revealing the 'one God, the Father Almighty' (Nicene Creed 325) to his people – something which was very familiar to the Jews, with titles like 'Father' and 'Son', while the Holy Spirit (Spirit of God) was already mentioned in the OT and was therefore just added. Right through the NT, the three 'parts' of God are proffered as three separate entities, up to the Book of Revelation. These are the three ways in which God the Father has revealed himself and is still revealing himself to his people or followers. It is our point of view that this scenario will continue until the second coming of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 15:24–28).

In the time between Jesus' first and second coming, God therefore proffers or reveals himself as three persons, which is easy for him to do because of his omnipotence and more specifically his omnipresence. That does not make him three separate entities *per se*, or for that matter, a Trinity. He is still one God – the original God being introduced to us in the OT – but for the sake of his people, he reveals himself as being three.

During the OT times, the people lived very close to God, so close that God spoke directly to many of them. After Jesus' ascension, God seemingly withdrew this privilege, as from then on, he did or does not speak directly to his people as in the OT times. However, how did or do God's followers then experience God's nearness after Jesus' ascension? God expresses his nearness to us by 'living' in our 'heart' as the Holy Spirit who guides us on how to act as Jesus' followers, and specifically how to pray – thus 'God close to us' or better, 'God inside us' (Jn 14:17). This is also the reason why God reveals himself as Jesus, the mediator between God the Father and us to intercede for us at the Father – thus 'God standing in the gap for us' (1 Tm 2:5). Both these 'Persons' are revelations of God to his people and are always referring us back to 'God, the Father Almighty'. This is, to some degree, in line with what Tertullian said in his *Adversus Praxeam* 8 (Migne 1844:163; ed. Schaff 1885c:1349): *Protulit enim Deus Sermonem, quemadmodum etiam Paracletus docet, sicut radix fruticem, et fons fluvium, et sol radium. Nam et istae species probolae sunt earum substantiarum, ex quibus prodeunt...Omne quod prodit ex aliquo, secundum sit ejus necesse est de quo prodit, non ideo tamen est separatum (For God sent forth the Word, as the Paraclete also declares, just as the root puts forth the tree, and the fountain the river, and the sun the ray. For these are probolai, or emanations, of the substances from which they proceed...Everything which proceeds from something else must needs be second to that from which it proceeds, without being on that account separated).*¹⁴

It is very important to take notice of this point about *referencing*. Especially in the gospels where the direct words

14. This point of view held by Tertullian 'distanced Tertullian from the eventual Nicene consensus' (Litfin 2019:81).

of Jesus are narrated, we learn that Jesus always refers back to his father. His father is the one who sent him (Jn 3:16; Ga 4:4), and he is doing what his father commands him to do – he obeys his father (Jn 6:38; cf. He 10:5–7). These anthropomorphic terms fitted in well with the authority structure between a father and his son in the household environment (well known to the Jews of that time): The father commands (sends) his son to do a specific job and the son obeys. This is also true of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the father (Jn 15:26) and who is sent by the son (who was the first *παράκλητος* – 1 Jn 2:1). Jesus has promised his followers that he would send them the second (in fact 'another') Paraclete – *ἄλλος παράκλητος* – the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16; 15:26; 16:7) after his ascension. In John 16:15, Jesus claims that 'the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you'. John 14:26 adds to this: God sends the Holy Spirit in Jesus' Name.

We read that Jesus has referred to himself as the source and also the object of his followers' faith (Jn 3:16), as the mediator (Jn 14:6), as the (one and only) Son of God (Jn 3:18) and that he and the father are one (though not one person) (Jn 17:11, 22). Throughout the NT, we read that Jesus and his father are two separate persons, but very close to each other, using anthropomorphic terms to depict God to his followers. However, it does not seem as if the Bible tries to profess any Trinity formula. No occurrence of or reference to God in the Bible 'refer[s] to a triune deity composed of three co-equal, essence-sharing "Persons"' – therefore to a Trinity (Tuggy 2020:2).

After Jesus' second coming, we will not need the Holy Spirit in our heart or as a guide anymore; we will also not need Jesus as our mediator anymore because God the Father will be 'all in all' for his people who will share heaven with him. God, the Father, will therefore not reveal himself to his people as Son or Holy Spirit anymore, signifying the end of the 'anthropomorphic era'. This will happen when Jesus hands back his entire kingdom to God the Father; he will even make himself subject to God the Father, so that God (Yahweh) can (once again) become 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:24–28).

The early church – The origin of the Holy Trinity

We do not read anything about the Trinity (three persons and one *ousia*) in the NT, except for the three persons of the Godhead who acted as separate persons. But when did the idea of the Trinity then come into being? According to Dale Tuggy (2020:1 of 26), the early church and the Church Fathers before the Athanasian Creed regarded God as being divided into three separate persons, and not as a 'three-in-one' entity (*ousia*).

Tuggy (2020:3 of 26) traces the metaphysics of the Trinity back to Plato who lived in the 5th and 4th century BCE.¹⁵ His

15. Church Fathers took heed of what Plato said. Justin Martyr, for example, became a follower of Plato and referred ample times to him in his *First Apology* (e.g., 7, 8, 59, 60 – Migne 1857; ed. Schaff 1885b) and his *Dialogue with Trypho* (6, 12, 13 – Migne 1857; ed. Schaff 1885b).

dialogue, *Timaeus*, consists of a myth depicting the creation of the universe. In this dialogue, the demiurge (eternal god, the maker and father of the whole universe – *Tim* 28C – Cornford 1937:22) made the visible world in the likeness of the ‘Living Creature’ to contain ‘all living things whose nature is of the same order’ (*Tim* 30C-D – Cornford 1937:40). He then commanded the gods (whom he has created) to create all the other mortal creatures (*Tim* 41A-D – Cornford 1937:140). The demiurge therefore needed some kind of mediation between him and his cosmos (Tuggy 2020:4 of 26). Along this line, the Church Fathers developed a Trinity of three separate persons (τριάς or ἁγία τριάδα) during the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, depicting a primary source, and two others who stand between him and the cosmos (Tuggy 2020:4 of 26). An example is the letter by Theophilus, the bishop of Antioch (ca. 185 CE) who indicated a familiarity with the term ‘Trias’, using it once in his *Ad Autolyicum* 2.15: αἱ τρεῖς ἡμέραι... γεγονυῖα τύποι εἰσὶν τῆς Τριάδος, τοῦ Θεοῦ, καὶ τοῦ Λόγου αὐτοῦ, καὶ τῆς Σοφίας αὐτοῦ (*the three days...are types of the Trinity, of God, and His Word, and His Wisdom*) (Migne 1857:1077; ed. Schaff 1885a:212).

In light of the mediation referred to by Plato, references to God engaging directly with his creation in the OT were regarded as impossible, thereby arguing that all the terms referring to ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ in the OT, are, in fact, referring to the pre-human Jesus, the *Logos* (cf., e.g. Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* 56¹⁶ – ed. Schaff 1885b:596). Based on John 1 (cf. Col. 1:16; He 1:2, 10), Jesus as eternal *Logos* became the intermediary who was ‘spoken out’ by God during the creation and through whom God made the universe – his direct agent of creation (Tuggy 2020:5).¹⁷

Based on the Platonic theory, the Christian God had to be one ultimate God, not participating in something else like a universal divinity. God being *the* divinity implies that other persons would have to “participate in” or “imitate” God’ (Tuggy 2020:5 of 26). The implication therefore was that Jesus as son of God, and the Holy Spirit, would have to receive their degrees of divinity directly from the Father (God). Tertullian’s statements in his *Adversus Praxeam* are in line with this. Tertullian (2nd–3rd centuries) was the first Church Father to use the term ‘Trinity’ (*trinitas*) with reference to God, ‘denoting a triad or an entity with a threefold structure’ (Litfin 2019:81). However, his understanding of the Trinity (‘three-in-one’ – cf. *Adversus Praxeam* [2–]3 – Migne 1844:156–159; ed. Schaff 1885c:1339, cf. 1337–1340) was not fully in line with the later decision by Nicaea (cf. Dünzl 2007:30; Olson 1999:95).¹⁸ Look at *Adversus Praxeam* 9: ...qua

16. We read in this chapter: *I replied again, ‘If I could not have proved to you from the Scriptures that one of those three [who appeared to Abram] is God, and is called Angel, because, as I already said, He brings messages to those to whom God the Maker of all things wishes [messages to be brought], then in regard to Him who appeared to Abraham on earth in human form in like manner as the two angels who came with Him, and who was God even before the creation of the world...’*

17. Notice is taken of the twofold-stage (two-stage) theory of the *Logos*, where the *Logos* ‘was embedded from all eternity in the Father, and became a second *hypostasis* when the Father brought it forth, “before the ages,” as his instrument of creation’ (Edwards 2000:159); also of the one-stage theory, following the twofold stage after Origen, depicting God who had somehow caused the being of his second divine agent (cf. Tuggy 2020:6 of 26).

18. The wording used by Tertullian ‘became the foundation for the church’s definition of the Trinity’ (Allison 2011:30; cf. Holmes 2012:69–70; McGrath 1998:62).

inseparatos ab alterutro Patrem et Filium et Spiritus testor, tene ubique...Ecce enim dico alium esse Patrem, et alium Filium, et alium Spiritum...Pater enim tota substantia est: Filius vero derivation totius et portio, sicut ipse profitetur, Quia Pater major me est (Joan. XIV, 28) (*the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other...the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and that They are distinct from Each Other...For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, as He Himself acknowledges: ‘My Father is greater than I’ [Jn 14:28]*) (Migne 1844:164; ed. Schaff 1885c:1350). Therefore, the way in which he understood the Trinity was that God has seemingly produced two inferior copies of himself – inseparable from him – each with some degree of divinity in themselves.

In 325 CE, the Nicene council that decided against Arius seemingly did not have the intention to reach a definition of the three-in-one God, but rather to show the ‘similarity of Jesus to God’ (Tuggy 2020:6), indicating a single *ousia* which implied that Jesus was ‘true God from true God’ (or ‘very God of very God’) – NOT implying that Jesus and the Father Almighty was the same God. Although they were of the same substance (Nicene Creed 325), they were distinctive.¹⁹ In 381 CE, the first council of Constantinople reaffirmed Nicaea and added the Holy Spirit to also be *homoousios* to the Father (Creed of Constantinople 381).

According to Tuggy, the fact that the Son and Holy Spirit were regarded as of the same *ousia* as the Father led the people to assume that ‘this equality of status made the three the same [G]od’ (Tuggy 2020:7). In this way (from the late 370s or early 380s), the new Trinitarian theology became a convenient medium between the Jewish monotheism and the polytheistic view that was initially held (Tuggy 2020:7). The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2020) agrees with this statement, declaring that the ‘formulation and imperial enforcement [of the Trinity only occurred] towards the end of the fourth century’.

If we now look back at the claim of Murray and Rea (2015, cited above; emphasis added), arguing that ‘[f]rom the beginning, Christians have affirmed the claim that there is one God, and three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – each of whom is God’, it is obvious that this only applies to close to the end of the 4th century CE.

Overview

We want to link to Horrell (2007) who asked:

whether one can even speak of an immanent Trinity. Is God really three persons in eternal relationship? Or is God triune only in relation to creation? Is the concept of God as Trinity inextricably bound up in cosmic or human history and, therefore, not intrinsic to God himself? (p. 62)

If we look at Figure 1, these questions are spot on, as the latter two can be answered affirmatively. God is only a ‘Trinity’ in

19. This is how we read and ‘understand’ it today. The existential question is: Was it how they intended it to be?

relation to his creation, which only spans between the first and second comings of Jesus, therefore even excluding the OT era. It is our conviction that this Trinity should be understood as three modes of revelation of the Father and not as three separate persons of the Godhead.

In line with the previous paragraph, one may ask, 'Why would Yahweh reveal himself in the OT as one, and then "suddenly" in the NT, he becomes three separate Persons (a so-called three-in-one)?' 'Suddenly', in the NT era, Yahweh (Hebrew) became Kurios and Theos (Greek), sharing his divinity with a Son and a Holy Spirit. As there is a continuity between the OT and the NT, how do we find a continuity between the God of the OT and the proposed 'new' God of the NT? In the OT, we do not read about God's son, although we read about God's Holy Spirit (or the Spirit of God) in passages like Isaiah 63:10 and 11. However, never is it mentioned that the Holy Spirit of God is also God or equal to God. At the most, one could argue that the Holy Spirit is presented as part of Yahweh, as a special revelation of Yahweh – then it makes sense.

Maybe the above question should be answered as follows: God or Yahweh stayed the same as he was (he remains immutable), but he started to reveal himself to his creation in another way after Jesus' birth. In order to come to earth in the form of a human, he had to reveal himself as 'more than one'. As the household was one of the top priorities of the people (cf. Oliver & Van Aarde 1991), could it be that Yahweh then decided to make use of anthropomorphic terms so that his people could understand the mission of Jesus, being God-in-a-human-body? To the authors of this article, it looks natural that Yahweh revealed himself to his people with anthropomorphic terms within a household thought pattern being very familiar and popular for them during that time. Revealing himself as Son, as Jesus, as a human, does not take anything away from him – because of his omnipotence and omnipresence – but also does not make him numerically more than one. Yahweh (Kurios, Theos), revealing himself as Son and Holy Spirit in the NT, did therefore not suddenly become three persons, but became three revelations of the ONE: He revealed or reveals himself to his people as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but he IS NOT Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the sense of three separate persons. He stays one person or one entity.

In the OT, there are references to the Spirit of God, also called God's Spirit. How did the people of those times experience the Spirit of God? Was this another God or was it part of God? It rather looks as if they experienced the Spirit as part of God and not something or some person separated from God. With reference to the son, the NT depicts Jesus definitely as someone separately from God the Father. Jesus referred to his father, he prayed to his father, and he indicated that his father has sent him. Just before his ascension, Jesus told his disciples to baptise people in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – three separate persons. Paul also made a clear distinction between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as if they were three separate persons.

A last word, but not on the Trinity

We are living in the 21st century. In this era of fluidity (cf. Brown 2013:20; Thompson 2017), many scholars have decided to become 'realistic thinkers' again.²⁰ Scholars like Tuggy call themselves analytic theologians and philosophers of religion, continuously looking for *facts*, as they call it (Tuggy n.d.). The 21st century is made for realism, for disruption. In light of this, Dr Ben du Toit, a retired pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church regards himself nowadays as 'post-theistic', someone with rational thoughts (Du Toit 2020). In many instances, these thinking patterns exhibit characteristics of the post-Christian era, also called PostChristianity.²¹

Looking at the above tendency, theological academia in the 21st century cannot afford anymore to sideline something in our faith or religion as a *mystery* when our answers are insufficient or when we do not have answers. This specifically applies to the Trinity. The Belgic Confession (1562) uses the term 'mystery' without clearly stating as to what it refers – most probably to the Trinity. Ligonier Ministries (2021) states it explicitly: 'We can distinguish the three persons, but we cannot separate them, for they are the one God. This is beyond our finite minds' ability to fully comprehend'.

Let us look at the following example to make this point. Firstly a question: Did Yahweh, who was there from eternity, in the beginning decide that he does not want to be alone and then created two other 'Persons' to share his mission? If so, then he would be the creator, and the other two the created – immediately an authoritative structure. If not, another solution is that when God 'came into existence', he was already three – a three-in-one. However, we read in the Creeds that Jesus was 'begotten'. Does this not imply that there was a time when Jesus was NOT – and what about the Holy Spirit? In his *Adversus Praxeas* 5 (Migne 1844:159–161; ed. Schaff 1885c:1342–1343), Tertullian's argument goes like this: 'Solus autem, quia nihil aliud extrinsecus praeter ilium' (*In the beginning, God was alone, with nothing external to Him but Himself*). He then, however, goes on to state that God's Reason was in himself. This Reason was his own Thought (Consciousness), called λόγος by the Greeks. God did not have the Word from the beginning, but as the Word itself consists of Reason, and God had Reason from before creation, he actually also had the Word, but he did not yet send out his Word, silently planning and arranging with himself (the Word) everything that he was going to utter through his Word. This Word became the second person but was still inside God. In *Adversus Praxeas* 6 (Migne 1844:161; ed. Schaff 1885c:1344), Tertullian then goes further to argue that this Divine Intelligence of God is also called Σοφία (Wisdom), and then, he jumps to Proverbs 8:22–28 where Σοφία has the word,

20. According to Anjaria (2017), 'the first decade-and-a-half of the 21st century has witnessed, across a wide range of literature and cultural production, what might be seen as a return to realism'.

21. Veith (2020:18; emphasis added) argues that 'post-Christian' is the blending of modernism and postmodernism, resulting in a *new anti-Christian posture*. He elaborates: 'Modernism with its scientific materialism and trust in evolutionary progress is post-Christian. So is postmodernism with its relativistic mindset'. De Chirico (2020) adds: "'Post-Christian' is an aggregate of all forms of present-day alternative worldviews to the Christian one'.

claiming that she was there with God before the beginning and at his side through the whole of creation. However, then Tertullian narrates that the moment when God started to create, he 'ipsum primum protulit sermone' (*first put forth the Word Himself*). This argument calls for some deep thinking. Trying to keep the concept of Trinity in place, sometimes brings unrealistic features to the fore. Trying to 'marry' the idea of one God with three persons brings us to a point where we cannot explain ourselves anymore, and then we just answer that it is a *mystery*, 'beyond our finite minds' ability to fully comprehend'. However, concepts that are more comprehensible are God's omnipotence, his omniscience and his omnipresence. We argue that the people or historians through history could have made much more of these concepts, specifically with reference to the Trinity.

Butner (2019a, cf. Butner 2019b) points out a fallacy that we must always avoid, and that is to do eisegesis when reading the Bible. He puts it this way:

If we read the Bible and uncover an interpretation with no historical precedent, we should be quite wary, as we wonder why God would choose to help us see a new meaning in a text that his Spirit-led (yet fallible) church has read for millennia. (n.p.)

This is very important regarding the Trinity. Starting with Abram, God revealed himself to his people as one, but then, having the NT at hand, scholars 'interpret' the OT in a new way, applying the Trinity to the OT and discovering the Son of God in many texts. According to the OT, God's followers understood and recognised him as one. Then how is it possible that the people of God misunderstood him right through the OT times? The same applies to the NT. Nowhere in the NT do we read about a Trinity, although we are taught by the Creeds about a Trinity. Although there is a development of God in the NT, especially with the birth of Jesus, using anthropomorphic terms, which does not make God a Trinity.

Why tampering with God, with Yahweh? Why arguing that he is one essence (ontological), but simultaneously three persons (economical)? Nowhere in the Bible is God depicted as a unity of three persons. In the OT, he is one, according to the *Shema*, an immutable God. Then why do we have to change this immutable God of the OT in light of the NT and afterwards state that they were so from eternity? To a great extent, this sounds like eisegesis.

In conclusion, Tuggy (2020:3) cites John Henry Newman who, in the 19th century, referred to the 4th-century Arians, and, in fact, to all non-trinitarians, in the following way: '[N]on-trinitarians are proud, unspiritual "rationalists," who arrogantly refuse to believe what they cannot understand, foolishly assuming that God can be understood, or fully understood, by puny human minds'. This is a very true word for everyone of us who thinks that we have said or read the last word about the Trinity (and we label everything else as heresy), and not so much for non-trinitarians. In the meantime, the debate will go on, more

specifically based on the texts of the Bible. Interestingly, it was the same Newman who claimed in his *Sermon 16* (n.d.:n.p.; original emphasis) on Christian mysteries: 'And it is important to observe, that this doctrine of the Trinity is not proposed in Scripture as a mystery'. If only he had elaborated on this true statement...

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Authors' contributions

W.H.O. was responsible for the methodology used in the article, wrote the original draft, administered the project, employed the software, curated the data, procured resources and reviewed and edited the manuscript. E.O. conceived of the presented idea, carried out the formal analysis, validated the results, curated the data, reviewed and edited the manuscript, supervised the work and acquired funding.

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