



Θεός, Father and the 'Holy Trinity' in the New Testament

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The term 'Holy Trinity', not known to the writers of the Bible, is still an elusive term to use nowadays, especially when one first reads the New Testament in light of the Old Testament and not immediately in light of the Creeds and Statements of Faith. This article discusses the roles of Θεός (God) and 'Father' in the New Testament with reference to the Holy Trinity. The conclusion is that the New Testament does not depict a Holy Trinity, but rather portrays Θεός as a coordinator, bringing a harmony between his anthropomorphic assignments 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit', as well as all the followers of Θεός on Earth.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: On the first level, this article covers the disciplines of Old Testament, New Testament (NT) and Practical Theology. On the second level, it makes use of philosophy and logics to help determine the 'truths' in the Bible. Who is Θεός? We propose that the NT depicts him as coordinator of his three revelations, 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit'. Using anthropomorphic terms, Θεός reveals himself to his followers on Earth. The Bible is used as the main source, with references to the three Creeds and four Statements of Faith.

Keywords: God; Yahweh; Father; Holy Trinity; Jesus; Holy Spirit; Bible.

The human being naturally seeks wisdom. A sign of this is that all human cultures inevitably seek to derive ultimate explanations of reality. These typically function as final principles of explanation, and as references for motivation and moral justification in practical action. (White 2022:1)

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – The 'Holy Trinity'

In this article the authors investigate the way in which the Bible portrays the usages of the terms Θεός (God) and 'Father'. This article acts as a continuation of three articles on the topic of the Trinity, which are already published by the authors.¹ The relevant Creeds and Statements of Faith are also shortly reviewed. This article discusses the usage of the terms Θεός and 'Father', focussing on the New Testament (NT) – with reference to the 'Holy Trinity'.

Preliminary notes on the Holy Trinity

When we as Christians or theologians discuss or are inquired about our faith, the first source we rightly resort to is the Bible, as the Bible forms the basis for our belief in God. Together with the Bible, the *Reformed* Christians adhere to three Creeds, namely the Apostles' Creed (CRC 2023c),² the Nicene Creed (CRC 2023d),³ and the Athanasian Creed (CRC 2023e).⁴ Many Reformed Christians also observe four Statements of Faith, namely the Heidelberg Catechism (CRC 2023f),⁵

1.Three articles (Oliver & Oliver 2019, 2021, 2023), written by the authors, precede this one. It is suggested to read these articles before engaging with this one.

2.The Apostles' Creed is an interpretation of the apostles' teachings, produced in the 4th century CE and acts (and is used) as an ecumenical symbol of faith (CRC 2023c).

3.The Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed (the other name for this creed) reflects the orthodox faith held by the early Christians, mostly based on the Councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE). Whereas the Eastern and Western church agreed on its contents, they held one difference, calling it the 'filioque' clause. In the Western Church they included the clause 'and the Son' with reference to the procession of the Holy Spirit, while the Eastern Orthodox Church erased it. Whereas the Council of Chalcedon accepted the Creed in 451 CE without the clause, Pope Leo 3 (East) agreed to keeping out of the creed, while Pope Benedict 8 (West) officially added the clause (cf. Butler 2021).

4.The Athanasian Creed got its name from Athanasius, who championed the attacks against Arius concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. Interestingly, Athanasius was not the author of this Creed, but it was commonly ascribed to him up to the 17th century. The Creed has a Latin (Western) origin and was not accepted by the Eastern church because of the *filioque* clause (cf. Branson 2022:14).

5.This Catechism was compiled in 1563 as a teaching document, but later on also became a guide for preaching (CRC 2023f).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

the Belgic Confession (1561),⁶ the Canons of Dort (CRC 2023b)⁷ and the Confession of Belhar (1986).⁸ These Creeds and Statements, most Christians believe, are in *perfect synchronisation* with the Bible. Thus, if the Bible is not explicit (enough) about a theological issue, these documents are there to give or add the necessary information.

When we are therefore questioned about a theological topic like the Holy Trinity, we first take the Bible as reference point. As the Bible does not use the term or has a doctrine on the Holy Trinity (cf. Snyman 2022:1 of 7), we then interpret the contents of the Bible in terms of the Creeds and Statements to verify our thoughts about the Trinity 'containing three "Persons" in or sharing "one essence" (or "being" or "nature")' (Tuggy 2020:27).⁹ Interestingly, of the mentioned Creeds, only the Athanasian Creed (more recent than the other two) uses the term 'Trinity' – six times – and of the Statements, only the Belgic Confession refers to the Trinity – five times.¹⁰ In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism also refers to the Trinity twice, without using the term. Let us take a cursory look at these applications.

Connected to the term 'Trinity', the Athanasian Creed¹¹ very adamantly states that only those who hold the catholic faith *will be saved* (CRC 2023c [emphasis added]):

That we worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity... Nothing in this Trinity is before or after, nothing is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three Persons are coeternal and coequal¹² with each other. So in everything, as was said earlier, we must worship their Trinity in their unity and their unity in their Trinity. Anyone then who desires *to be saved* should think thus about the Trinity. (p.1)

The Creed unequivocally argues that if someone wants 'to be saved', that person has to think in the same line as the Creed. When one takes a look at the Bible, this primary source of our

6.The Confessio Belgica was composed in 1561 by the Reformers in order to take a clear stance against the Spanish inquisition. The primary author was Reformed pastor Guido de Brès (a former student of Calvin), and with the assistance of the theologian, Francis Junius, and he addressed it to King Philip 2 of Spain to prevent him from killing all the Protestants under his jurisdiction. This Confessio points out that the Reformed belief system was just a continuation of the ancient Christian creeds (CRC 2023a). It was accepted by the Synod of Dort 1618–1619.

7.This polemic document against the Arminianism (under the leadership of Jacobus Arminius [the Latin form for the Dutch Jakob Hermanszoon] – who died in 1609 and was a theological Professor at Leiden) originated at an international Reformed synod, held in Dordrecht from 1618 to 1619. These canons articulated the Calvinistic beliefs, encapsulated in a really professional document (CRC 2023b).

8.Cf. an elaborated history of this Confession in CRC (2023g). Although the Confession of Belhar is indicated here as the fourth Statement of Faith, not *all* Reformed Christian institutions in South Africa regard it as such. We have included the Confession of Belhar, as *some Reformed churches in South Africa* have accepted this Confession, e.g. the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, already in 1991 (Fortein 2021:1 of 17).

9.Van De Beek (2022:1 of 9) correctly adds: 'Most trinitarian theologians call on texts of the patristic period for developing their argument'.

10.It seems as if the term 'Trinity' or references to a single triune God were not common among the theologians of the first three centuries (Hurtado 1998:2; Prestige 1952:93; Tuggy 2020:28). These include the authors of the Bible. Branson therefore correctly concludes: 'No form of Trinitarianism is consistent with the New Testament'.

11.As we have already indicated in footnote 4, this Creed was not accepted by the Eastern Church and can therefore 'hardly be appealed to as any sort of *sine qua non* of Trinitarianism in general' (Branson 2022:14; original emphasis).

12.Branson (2022:24) refers to this kind of view as the 'egalitarian' or 'symmetrical model' of the Trinity, thus branding it as 'Egalitarian Trinitarianism'.

belief (system) supplies us with the following picture about salvation, specifically where the clause 'will be saved' is used:

- Joel 2:32 (Jo 3:5 in the Hebrew Bible) states: 'And everyone who calls on the Name of Yahweh will be saved'.
- In Romans 11:26 we read how Israel will be saved: '...in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob"'.
- Matthew 10:22 (cf. 24:13; Mk 13:13, 16) states that everyone who stands firm (ὁπομένω[in their faith?]) to the end, will be saved.
- In John 10:9 Jesus narrates that everyone who chooses him as the 'gate' will be saved.
- Acts 2:21 claims that 'everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord [κύριος (*Jesus?*)] will be saved.'
- Acts 11:14 relates how the message of Peter saved a man (and his family?).
- In line with John 3:16, Acts 16:31 claims, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved' (cf. also Rm 19:13).
- Romans 10:9 clarifies it more elaboratively: 'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord", and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved'.

These verses from the Bible paint some other picture than the references by the Creed, that did not once refer to a Holy Trinity or the three Persons of the Trinity to be saved. The above statement by the Athanasian Creed should therefore be regarded as positivistic and not fully in line with the Bible. Branson (2022:9) correctly premises that '[i]f a later catholic teaching contradicts a central New Testament teaching, Christians should reject the former and accept the latter'. It is therefore better to rely on the biblical truth.

The Belgic Confession refers to the Trinity in Articles 8, 9 and 11. Let us first look at Article 8:

Article 8: The Trinity

In keeping with this truth and Word of God, we believe in one God, who is one single essence, in whom there are three Persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties – namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is the cause, origin, and source of all things, visible as well as invisible. The Son is the Word, the Wisdom, and the image of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, this distinction does not divide God into three, since Scripture teaches us that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each has a distinct subsistence distinguished by characteristics – yet in such a way that these three Persons are only one God. It is evident then that the Father is not the Son and that the Son is not the Father, and that likewise the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Nevertheless, these Persons, thus distinct, are neither divided nor fused or mixed together. For the Father did not take on flesh, nor did the Spirit, but only the Son. The Father was never without the Son, nor without the Holy Spirit, since all these are equal from eternity, in one and the same essence. There is neither a first nor a last, for all three are one in truth and power, in goodness and mercy. (Belgic Confession 1561:31–32)

The same argument given at the Athanasian Creed also applies here. In line with the Athanasian Creed, the Belgic Confession adds that 'the Father was never without the Son, nor without the Holy Spirit' (Belgic Confession 1561:32). The implication here is that the three Persons are together from eternity. However, just a few lines above this statement, the Confession clearly refers to the Holy Spirit as 'proceeding from the Father and the Son'. Is this not an indication that the Father (and the Son) *preceded* the Spirit (cf. Jn 15:26)?¹³ Added to these, do the given Names not in itself depict a hierarchy and not an equality – especially the terms 'Father' and 'Son' (cf. Branson 2022:21)? Furthermore, why is the Holy Spirit as a Person so 'silent' in the NT – not speaking much if ever (directly) – although many actions are ascribed to him?¹⁴ Also, is it not strange to refer to a Person as a 'spirit'? When asking questions like these, the proponents of the Trinity simple answer in line with the Creed, 'It's a mystery' (cf. Krill & McCullough 2022; Tuggy 2020:28; Van De Beek 2022:4 of 9; White 2022:2, 4, 21). The disruptive reaction to this statement could be: 'Was it the intention of Yahweh or Θεός to shroud himself (themselves?) in a mystery through all the centuries, or are the Christians throughout history the culprits doing it?'

Article 9 of the Belgic Confession refers to 'The Scriptural witness on the Trinity' (Belgic Confession 1561:32). Verses used as proof that the Old Testament (OT) depicts a plurality of Yahweh within himself, are Genesis 1:26–27 and 3:22. However, as argued by Westermann (1984:145; cf. also Oliver & Oliver 2019:2), these verses designate 'a plural of deliberation, in fact referring only to one Person'. The verses from the NT that are used as witness to the Holy Trinity are Matthew 3:17, 28:19, Luke 1:35 and 2 Corinthians 13:14: All these verses are clear references as to how Yahweh (called Θεός in the NT) revealed himself in anthropomorphic terms to his people as three (separate) Persons, working in very close proximity with each other – after the birth of Jesus. It therefore seems that the three Persons as such are not coeternal, specifically not in Yahweh's revelation to his people. To our mind, therefore, these verses do not depict a three-in-one Holy Trinity. Having stated these, Tuggy (2020:28) is seemingly correct when he argues: '[T]here is no idea of a triune God in the Bible'.

Interestingly, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563:76) refers to the Holy Trinity in questions 25 and 53, without using the term. Question 25 asks: 'Since there is only one divine being, why do you speak of three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?' Then follows the almost correct answer: 'Because that is how God has revealed himself in his Word: These three distinct persons are one, true, eternal God'. What is correct is the fact that this is how God has *revealed himself* – but only in the NT and not the entire Bible. Then, it is true that these three Persons are One true God, but it is seemingly not true to refer to the three Persons as 'eternal', as Yahweh did not *reveal*

13. This will be discussed in the follow-up article.

14. These include Mary being impregnated by the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35) and his outpouring at Pentecost in Acts 2.

himself in the OT in the same way as in the NT. This also goes for Question 53 (using the term 'eternal').

These decisions taken at the formation of the above Creeds and Statements on the Trinity have become the Christians' 'Bible' with reference to the Trinity. On account of these decisions, Christians have construed an entire epistemology and ontology about and for the Trinity, without really taking into consideration what the Bible states in this concern.¹⁵ Additionally, even to this very day the church confirms that the points of view being labelled as heresies by the Ecumenical Councils (e.g. Council of Constantinople 381; Council of Nicaea 325) during these times (e.g. against Arianism, Modalism [Monarchianism] and Sabellianism) are currently still in contrast with 'God's word', without taking the Bible as the main source to verify these allegations.

This way of reasoning has caused scholars – in line with these Creeds and Statements, read together with decisions taken by specifically the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (Council of Constantinople 381) – to allow themselves the freedom to bring about their own 'metaphors' about the Holy Trinity, implying that these are in line with the Bible (cf. Marmion & Van Nieuwenhove 2011:16–17, 244). A prime example of this is the metaphor given by Bentley (2023):

So how do we bring this (transcendence, immanence and experienced reality) together in a metaphor that is true to the doctrine of God as Trinity and our belief that we are beings who are in the image of God? Let me suggest the following metaphor...In this metaphor, I would like to suggest that the first person of the Trinity is represented by the reflection on the pane of glass [inside the projector]. It also represents transcendence, that which is beyond the scope of our reason, experience or understanding. The second person of the Trinity is represented in the image on the screen. Being the exact image of the first person, the second person of the Trinity makes the infinitely inaccessible accessible in human form. This is the Word that has become flesh. The second person does not take anything away from the first person, nor adds to it [*sic.*], but is, because the first person is. The light which binds the image on the pane of glass and the image on the screen, represents the third person of the Trinity. As Augustine described, the Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. None of the three persons of the Trinity can be without the others. The persons cannot operate independently and are isolated from each other. The persons are the three-in-one. (pp. 6–7)

This is such a striking metaphor, encapsulating the Christians' view of the Holy Trinity and in line with the decisions taken by the Christian Creeds and Statements. However, the question that we should bluntly ask, is: Is this metaphor based on the Bible or just in line with the Creeds, Statements and Councils? It really looks as if the Bible is more on the realistic side with reference to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as portrayed in the NT, while the

15. Tuggy (2020:28) puts it this way: '[The] arguments from the Bible to the claim that there is a triune God...[are] slippery and contentious, not obvious and compelling'.

Creeds, Statements and Councils started to move over to the *mysterious side* with a *concoction* called ‘the Trinity’. Let us take a look at Figure 1, reworked from the one published by Oliver and Oliver (2021:2 of 8):

With reference to Figure 1, we are currently living in the era between Jesus’ birth and his Second Coming, after his Ascension. Before this era, Yahweh revealed himself as One to his people, as it is portrayed in the OT. During the current time, Yahweh (now called Θεός) is presenting and revealing himself in anthropomorphic terms to his people, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three separate Persons working in a close relation and proximity – according to the Bible and in line with the mentioned Councils. However, in line with the Bible, this article argues that the NT does not depict Θεός as a Trinity in which the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are *mysteriously* enshrined, captured or captivated in one entity, but that these three Persons are the way in which Θεός revealed and is revealing himself to humankind, using anthropomorphic terms to do so. According to 1 Corinthians 15:14–28, this way in which Θεός is revealing himself to humankind, will most probably end after Jesus’ Second Coming.

The idea of a Trinity (‘three Person and one Being’) being drafted and implemented by the mentioned Creeds and Statements was obviously unknown to the biblical authors. The NT therefore rather propagates the idea of Θεός, the main Deity, revealing himself through three Persons, the Father (of Jesus Christ), Jesus (his Son) and the Holy Spirit. In many verses in the NT, we read about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, each with his own characteristics. Concomitant to Figure 1, it makes sense within this period between Jesus’ birth and his Second Coming. The term יהוה is applicable to the time *before* Jesus’ birth and most probably *after* his Second Coming, indicating that (1) Yahweh was never shrouded in a mystery of a Trinitarian unity: *He is who he is*

(cf. Ex 3:14), and (2) after Jesus’ Second Coming, Yahweh (Θεός) will then (most probably) cease to reveal himself in an anthropomorphic way and once again only present himself as One to his people (in Heaven) (cf. 1 Cor 15:28 within the context of 1 Cor 15:[12]20–28).

To summarise our view about Θεός, we contrast the definition of Branson’ Unitarian Theology to Trinitarian Theology (cf. Branson 2022:17–18), but then we add our part to it, distinguishing us from both:

Trinitarian Theology:

- There are three eternal divine Persons.
- There is only one God.

Unitarian Theology:

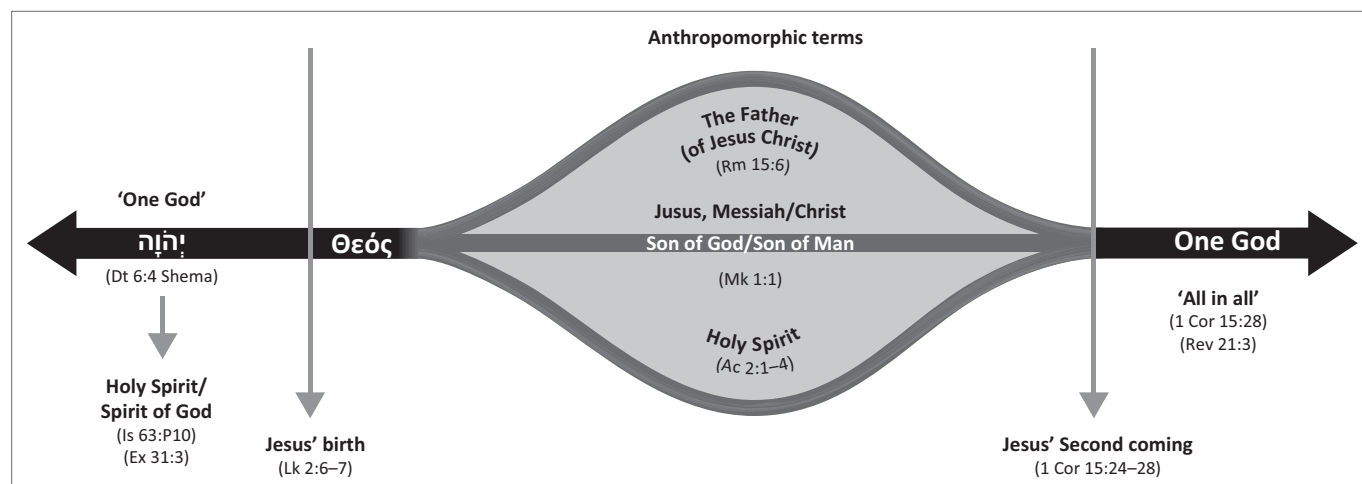
- There is exactly one divine Person or individual – the Father.
- There is exactly one God.

Our God-as-One view:

- There is only one eternal God and/or divine Person, called יהוה (Θεός).
- Between Jesus’ birth and Second Coming he reveals himself in anthropomorphic terms to his people as Father, Jesus Christ (Son) and Holy Spirit.

Introductory notes on Θεός

The term Θεός in all its declensions appears more than 1300 times in the NT. The general translation for the term is *God*. However, to whom does this term refer? Most scholars argue that, in line with the common faith held by Christians all over the world, the term refers to or includes the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit – the Holy Trinity (cf. Bentley 2023:2 of 7; Branson 2022:22; Zizioulas 1983:40–41, 88–89). This assumption needs verification from NT texts that should confirm it. Research should clearly indicate where the term Θεός in the NT is a clear reference to three



Source: Oliver, W.H. & Oliver, E., 2021, ‘Trinity disruption’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(1), a2337. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2337>

FIGURE 1: How Yahweh reveals himself to his creation.

Persons.¹⁶ A good case could be made that the term is just used as a continuation of the term הוה used in the OT, equalling $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ to הוה (cf. below). This implies that the term $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ does not refer to a tripersonal deity (cf. Branson 2022:10, 12), but to a unipersonal (*not* tri-personal) deity – one God (Ga 3:20; 1 Cor 8:4, 6 [Father]; Jas 2:19) – who after the birth of Jesus, has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (anthropomorphic terms) – according to the Bible.

Although there are a few texts referring to Jesus as $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ (e.g. Jn 1:1; Tt 2:13, and 2 Pt 1:1) – creating the allusion that Jesus could be equated with $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ (which should not be ignored) – the Holy Spirit is not directly referred to as $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$. Even in NT texts referring to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in combination, like Matthew 28:19 and 2 Cor 13:14, they are not referred to as a triune entity, but as three separate Persons acting in close proximity.

Many scholars argue that $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ *only* refers to ‘the Father’ (cf. Szymik 2020; Tuggy 2020) – called a Unitarian view (Branson 2022:8; Tuggy 2020:28)¹⁷ – with reference to quite a few texts in the Bible where the authors refer to the ‘God and Father (of Jesus Christ)’ (cf. Rm 15:6), therefore equating $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ with ‘Father’.¹⁸ These scholars could have a point, as there are at least 40 texts in the NT referring to $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ as Father.¹⁹ However, the big difference between being unitarian (equating them to each other) and referring to $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ as Father, is that in the latter instance, the Father is complemented by his Son and the Holy Spirit. Additionally, there is a myriad of texts in the NT referring to ‘the Father’, implying that the authors may have $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ in mind (cf. footnote 14). Then there are texts that clearly refer to $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ (the Father) and Jesus as separate Persons, and to different relations between $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ and Jesus (cf. Section 4.2.1), especially to Jesus being his Son. $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ is even sometimes called the ‘ $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ (and Father) of Jesus Christ’ (cf. Rm 15:6). There are, however, also many texts referring to $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ as such, without attaching any other term to it. These texts will be discussed in more detail below and must act as indicators of how we should reason about $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ – the God whom we worship.

16.Branson (2022:9) distances himself from this assumption.

17.According to Marmion and Van Nieuwenhove (2011:Introduction), Western Christianity has a ‘supposedly more Unitarian approach’. Branson (2022:7) adds to it, stating that ‘all the fourth century church fathers’ accepted the doctrine of the Monarchy of the Father, therefore depicting the Father as the head of the Godhead.

18.Tuggy (2020:27), however, in line with Branson (2018a, 2018b, 2018c), grounds his argument on the fact that ‘in about the first three Christian centuries the teaching was that the one God just is the Father’ (Tuggy 2020:27). With a very small difference, and based on the more than 40 verses in the Bible, the Apostles’ Creed (cf. Heidelberg Catechism 1563:69) that Christians recite every Sunday during public worship all over the world, also (only) refers to the Father as $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$, thereby equating them to each other: ‘I believe in God, the Father almighty’, but fortunately with the one difference that it does not *only* refer to the Father as the only one that Christians believe in. Even in the explanation of this article by the Heidelberg Catechism (1563:77), $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ is depicted as the ‘eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’, ‘is my God and Father’ and ‘God is...a faithful Father’, which is therefore close to the *unitarian* idea although distinct from it.

19.Cf. Romans 1:7, 15:6; 1 Corinthians 1:3, 8:6, 15:24; 2 Corinthians 1:2, 3, 11:31; Galatians 1:1, 3, 4; Ephesians 1:2, 3, 17, 4:6, 5:20, 6:23; Philippians 1:2, 2:11, 4:20; Colossians 1:2, 3, 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 3, 3:11, 13; 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 2, 2:17; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 1:3; 1 Peter 1:2, 3; 2 Peter 1:17; 1 John 3:1; 2 John 1:3; Jude 1:1; Revelation 1:6. Added to these are the Creeds and Statements of Faith that also equates $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ to ‘Father’ on more than one occasion (cf. e.g. the Belgic Confession articles 12, 13, 15, 17 and 20 – Belgic Confession 1561:36, 37, 40, 41, 44).

This article aims to indicate that $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ himself in the NT times (and up to today) is an autonomous (in fact solitary) Person, called ‘God’, revealing himself as Father, working *together* with his Son, whom he has sent to Earth (cf. e.g. Lk 1:26–35; Jn 5:37, 6:44, 57, 8:16, 18, 42, 12:49, 14:24, 20:21; 1 Jn 4:14), and the Holy Spirit, whom he has sent after his Son (cf. e.g. Jn 14:16, 26, 13:3; 15:26; 16:27, 30; Ga 4:6), all three as separate and autonomous Persons – anthropomorphically speaking. As will be discussed below, in this sense, $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ therefore acts as some kind of a coordinator in the NT, revealing himself as the Father, Jesus, his Son and the Holy Spirit, working in close proximity.

A very applicable question is, Is $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ of the NT the same God as Yahweh of the OT? A counter-question could be, Is there any difference between them, like the God of the OT being a *God of wrath* (Carson 1999) compared to the God of the NT being a *God of grace* (Piper 2013)? This article suggests that he has remained the same God – Yahweh – whom we discover in both Testaments (cf. Section 4.1). Nowhere in the NT is it indicated that we now have a ‘new God’ working with his people, and that he has therefore replaced the ‘old God’. We in fact discover a continuation from the OT to the NT – the texts will be discussed below. Nowhere in the NT the question is even asked whether this God that Jesus proclaimed was a new God. Not even the Jews who opposed Jesus, thought so. They rather accused Jesus of stating that he would ‘destroy the temple of God (in fact Yahweh’s temple) and rebuild it in three days’ (Mt 26:61), or that he was the Son of God (here they also had Yahweh in mind) (Mt 19:7).

The three main differences (for this article) between the two Testaments are (1) the language in which they are presented, (2) the presenters themselves – the authors and (3) the time in which they were written. Furthermore, from a Christian perspective, the NT is a continuation of the OT. In fact, the two Testaments form one entire Testament, which is God-breathed (2 Tm 3:16), being written over a couple of centuries by different authors, living in different places (communities) with different ways of thinking.

Just like the OT depicted Yahweh as One, $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ is also depicted in the NT as One; however, in anthropomorphic terms, revealing himself as a ‘company of three Persons’, namely the Father, the Son, called Jesus (Christ) and the (Holy) Spirit – where the latter two are both being sent from $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ to his people (as indicated above). Nowhere in the NT one gets the indication (or feeling) that the term $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ is referring to the Father and the Son simultaneously or for that matter to all three Persons simultaneously. Here we will focus on the NT where the term $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ is used in different ways or combinations with other terms:

1. $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ as reference to and continuation of Yahweh (the God who made Heaven and Earth).
2. $\Theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ as the Father (of Jesus) in the NT.

In line with the previous research (being referred to in footnote 1), this article supplies only marginal notes to all the scholarly articles already being written on this subject. The contribution that these articles want to make, is to add an alternative to the general, traditional, reformative view that interprets the NT (more than oft including the OT) as a narration about a Trinity. We would rather like to resort to an analytic theology (not a Trinitarian theology *per se*), performing an analysis of the terms in which the terms referring to God are expressed specifically in the NT.

This research links with Nils Dahl, who, in the previous century, has argued that God is the 'neglected factor' in NT theology (Dahl 1991:153–163). He claims that there are three reasons for a lack of literature on the theme of God (Dahl 1991:154–156):

- Scholars tend to study and discuss the NT from a Christological perspective.
- A lack of thematic formulations about God in the NT.
- Mostly, references to God in the NT are made within contexts referring to some other theme.

Even today, although many scholars (like Chen 2005; eds. Downs & Skinner 2013:back cover; Thompson 2001) may claim that these words are not true anymore, this premise of Dahl still rings true to some extent: We should do more research on how Θεός revealed himself in the NT times to his people (cf. Branson 2022:7), specifically what we read about him in the NT, instead of resorting to metaphors about the Trinity (cf. Van De Beek 2022:8 of 9).

The use of the term Θεός in the New Testament

Θεός as continuation of יהוה

In the Greek NT, the term θεός is used as translation for the Hebrew יהוה. Interestingly, Θεός is in fact the Greek translation for the Hebrew אלהים, while κύριος is the Greek translation for יהוה. However, most of the time, the term θεός is used in the NT when referring to יהוה, while κύριος is used ample times with reference to Jesus (cf. e.g. Mt 17:4; 18:21; 20:30). In the NT, there are many verses referring to the OT, indicating that Θεός of the NT is in fact equated to and a continuation of יהוה in the OT (mostly given below in chronological sequence). In these verses Θεός as Person is in many cases not a direct reference to the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit, but an autonomous entity, just like יהוה. The following verses are references as to where the term Θεός in fact refers to יהוה:

- Θεός was there from eternity (Jn 1:1–2).
- Θεός created the world – the Heavens and the Earth, the universe – everything (Mk 13:19; Ac 14:15; Ac 17:24; 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 3:9; He 11:3; 2 Pt 3:5; Re 4:11).
- (Invisible) qualities of Θεός (Rm 1:20).
- The sin of the angels (2 Pt 2:4).
- Θεός made the first humans (Mk 10:6, 9).
- Θεός and Abel (He 11:4); Enoch (He 11:5); Noah (1 Pt 3:20).

- The followers of Θεός²⁰ are serving the same God as their ancestors (2 Tm 1:3).
- Θεός gave his people the 10 Commandments (Mt 15:4; Rm 7:22).
- Θεός was/is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Mt 22:31; Mk 12:26; Lk 20:37; Ac 3:13; 5:30; 7:32; 13:17; Ac 22:14; Ac 24:14).
- Θεός and Abraham (Ac 7:2–7; Rm 4:2, 3, 20, 21; Ga 3:6; He 6:13, 17; 11:10, 17, 18, 19; Jas 2:23); Melchizedek (He 7:1, 3); the twins (Esau and Jacob) (Rm 9:11); Joseph (Ac 7:9).
- Θεός and Moses (Jn 9:29; Ac 7:25, 35, 37, 44; He 3:2; He 3:5; 11:25; Re 15:3); Aaron (He 5:4); Joshua (He 4:8).
- The covenant of Θεός with his people (2 Cor 6:12, 18; He 8:10; 9:20; 13:20).
- The Law of Θεός (Ga 3:17).
- Θεός drove the nations out of Canaan (Ac 7:45).
- Θεός gave his people judges in Canaan (Ac 13:20).
- Θεός and David (Ac 13:22; 13:36; Rm 4:6); Elijah (Rm 11:4); the prophets (2 Pt 1:21).
- Θεός spoke to the ancestors of Israel through the prophets (He 1:1).
- Θεός was the teacher of his people (Mt 22:31; Jn 6:45).
- Θεός overlooked their ignorance (Ac 17:30).
- Θεός once turned away from his people (Ac 7:42).
- Θεός gave his people promises, also about Jesus (Ac 13:32; Ac 26:6; Ga 3:18; Tt 1:2).
- Θεός entrusted his people with his words (Rm 3:2).
- Old Testament Scriptures used in the NT referring to Θεός (Rm 2:24; 4:17; Rm 9:26; 11:2, 8; 14:11; Rm 16:26; 1 Cor 2:9; 2 Cor 6:2; Ga 3:8; He 1:8; 3:4; 4:4, 7; 13:5; Jas 2:23; 4:6).
- Prophecies/messages ascribed to יהוה (Ac 2:17, 30; 3:18; 10:36; Rm 1:1–2; 3:21).

These verses are a clear indication that the God of the NT is just a continuation of the OT God, only in a different language and with a 'new' Name.

Θεός as the 'Father' in the New Testament

According to Szymik (2020:498), Jesus can be regarded as 'the source and starting point of the New Testament theology of God the Father'. John 20:17 implies that the Father is God. The term Θεός, referring to Father in the NT, is used in at least four categories, namely as the Father of his Son, Jesus,²¹ as the Lord of Heaven and Earth,²² as the Father of his people (according to Ac 17:29, God's people is his *offspring*),²³ and

20. In this article, the 'children of God' will be called 'the followers of Θεός', who were in fact called 'people of the Way' (Ac 24:14) in the NT.

21. Father–Son (relationship): Matthew 11:25, 26, 27; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17, 27; 18:10, 19, 35; 20:23; 25:34; 26:29, 39, 42, 53; Mark 8:38; 13:32; 14:36; Luke 2:49; 9:26; 10:21, 22; 22:29, 42; 23:34, 46, 49; John 1:14, 18; 2:16; 3:35; 5:17, 18, 19, 20; 6:32, 40; 8:10, 19, 27, 49, 54; 10:17, 25, 29, 37; 11:41; 12:26, 27, 28; 14:2, 7, 20, 21, 23, 31; 15:1, 8, 10, 15, 23, 24, 16:23, 25, 32; John 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 25; 20:17; Acts 1:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3; 11:31; Ephesians 1:3; He 1:5; 5:5; 1 Peter 1:3; 2 Peter 1:17; 1 John 1:3; 2 John 1:3; Revelation 2:27; 3:5, 21; 14:1.

22. Father as Lord (of Heaven and Earth): Matthew 11:25.

23. Father (in Heaven) of his people: (Mt 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 15, 18, 26, 32; 7:11, 21; 10:20, 29, 32; 13:43; 18:14; 24:36; Mk 11:25; Lk 6:36; 11:2, 13; 12:30, 32; Jn 4:21, 23; 20:17; Rm 1:7; 8:15; 15:6; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 6:18; Ga 1:3, 4; 4:6; Eph 1:2; 3:14; 5:20; Php 1:2; 4:20; Col 1:2; 1 Th 1:3; 3:11, 13; 2 Th 1:1; 2 Th 2:16; Phm 1:3; Jas 1:27; 3:9 [Lord and Father]; 1 Pt 1:17; 1 Jn 1:3; Re 1:6). The Jews 'who had believed Jesus' (Jn 8:31) added to this: 'The only Father we have is God himself' (Jn 8:41).

in a general way, being just referred to as ‘the Father’.²⁴ All these verses indicate that the Early Church was familiar with the Name ‘Father’ when referring to Θεός. The Early Church derived it from OT citations that have constituted the origin for calling Θεός the Father during Jesus’ stay on Earth (Szymik 2020:489). However, individual Jews did not have the privilege to call God this way (Szymik 2020:486). The term ‘Father’ (אב) referring to Yahweh, only occurs in the OT on a few occasions (cf. e.g. Dt 32:6; Is 9:6, 63:16 [2x], 64:8; Jr 3:4, 19; Mal 2:10), while there are other texts referring to the Fatherhood of Yahweh and the sonship of his people, Israel (cf. Ex 4:22; Hos 11:1; Is 63:16; Jr 31:9), linked to the words of God’s covenant with his people, being established for the first time between him and Abram in Genesis 15 (short version in Gn 17:7 [...to be your (Abram’s) God and the God of your descendants after you;] cf. Ex 6:7) and Leviticus 26:12 (the more elaborated version: I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people) (cf. Ringgren 1977:3–5, 16–17; Schrenk & Quell 1966:959–974).

Θεός as the Father (of Jesus) in the New Testament

We will only elaborate on this point of how Θεός revealed himself in the NT, and not on the other three categories indicated in the section above. The Gospel according to John can be regarded as the ‘culmination of the development of the NT idea concerning God as Father’ (Szymik 2020:496). Szymik (2020:486) regards Jesus as the ‘first source’, referring here to the NT, who used this term.²⁵ It resulted in the Son-of-God Christology, with specific reference to Matthew 11:27 and Luke 10:22. It is important to mention here that the use of the term Αββα did not depict a sweet loving nickname, but rather a very deep relationship between the earthly Jesus and his (heavenly) Father (cf. Barr 1988; Jeremias 1988:73).

In the section above, all the verses resorting under the first category are referring to Θεός as the Father of Jesus. In the NT, Jesus constantly made use of anthropomorphic terms to indicate his relationship with God to his people, referring to God as (my) ‘Father’, sometimes ‘Abba’²⁶ (Aramaic) or on a rare occasion, the combination, ‘Abba Father’ (Mk 14:36).²⁷

We also read in the NT that God refers to Jesus as his Son (Mk 1:11; 9:7), implying therefore that he is the Father of Jesus Christ (cf. Col 1:3). Even before Jesus’ birth, the angel Gabriel already called him ‘Son of God’ (Lk 1:35), his people referred to him as the Son of God (Mt 14:33; 16:16; Jn 11:27; Ac 9:20), a Pharisee called him the Son of God (Jn 1:49), others admitted that he was the Son of God (Mt 27:54), and ultimately he

24. Father (in a more general sense) (Jn 5:21, 22, 23, 26, 36, 37, 43, 45; 6:27 [God the Father]; 6:37, 44, 45, 46, 57, 65; 8:16, 18; 8:28, 38; 10:15, 32, 36, 38; 12:49, 50; 13:1, 3; 14:6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 24, 28, 31; 15:9, 16, 26; 16:3, 10, 15, 17, 26, 27, 28; 18:11; 20:17, 21; Ac 1:7; 2:33; Rm 6:4; 1 Cor 8:6; 15:24; Ga 1:1; Eph 1:17; 2:18; 6:23; Php 2:11; Col 1:3, 12, 17; 1 Th 1:1; 1 Th 1:2; 1 Tm 1:2; 2 Tm 1:2; Tit 1:4; He 12:9 [Father of spirits and life]; Jas 1:17; 1 Pt 1:2; 2 Pt 1:17; 1 Jn 1:2; 2:1, 14, 15, 22, 24; 3:1; 4:14; 2 Jn 1:3, 4, 9; Ju 1:1).

25. However, Jesus was not the origin of this term (cf. Szymik 2020:486). This is in line with Jeremias (1966) and contra scholars like D’Angelo (1992:616).

26. Αββα (from the Aramaic term אבא) was used here as a *status determinatus* or *emphaticus* (Szymik 2020:487).

27. The other two places in the NT where ‘Abba Father’ are used, are linked to the Holy Spirit (Rm 8:15; Ga 4:6) and addressed to God.

himself has claimed to be the Son of God (cf. Mt 27:43; Lk 22:70; Jn 5:25). Interestingly, even the demons referred to Jesus as the Son of God (Mt 8:29). In 1 Corinthians 11:3, we read that God is the head of Christ. Ephesians 1:17 and Revelation 1:6 even state that he is the God of Christ. John 14:28 elaborates on this, stating that the Father is greater than Christ (in contrast to the Athanasian Creed).

The term ‘Father’ was already used – though not widely – for Yahweh in the OT, in verses like Psalm 89:26, Isaiah 63:16, 64:8, Malachi 2:10 and Jeremiah 3:4, 31:9. In Exodus 4:22, Hosea 11:11 and Jeremiah 31:9, 20, one finds that Israel is referred to as the ‘son of Yahweh’. These OT instances are regarded as the primary contexts or bases for the NT referrals to God as Father, although it was not used as a dominant theme, specifically in the OT (Szymik 2020:491). In the NT, we find the close relationship between Jesus and his Father depicted in texts like Mark 8:38 and 13:32 (cf. also Jn 8:54) and between the disciples and the Father in Mark 11:25 (cf. Mt 6:14).

However, to commonly equate the term Θεός in the NT with ‘Father’ is incorrect (against Tuggy [cf. e.g. Tuggy 2020] and Branson [cf. e.g. Branson 2018a, 2018b, 2018c]), except where he is pertinently called ‘God the Father’ or where the context indicates it. This intitulation has its origin in the Egyptian diaspora during the 2nd century BCE (Szymik 2020:489). Jesus fondly referred and spoke to his ‘Father in Heaven’ (cf. e.g. Mt 7:21; 10:32; 26:29–42). In the Sermon on the Mount, he even referred to ‘your Father [in Heaven]’ (cf. Mt 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 6, etc.) when he spoke to the crowd of followers.

Jesus’ statements in the Gospels reveal the ‘unique relationship of closeness between the Father and the Son’ (Szymik 2020:494), indicating that he had full knowledge of his Father, complemented by full access to him (cf. Jn 10:15, 30). When he taught his disciples to pray, he even indicated to them to start with ‘(our) Father’ (cf. Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2). However, nowhere do we get the indication that Jesus equated himself to his Father. The closest that he got to that is where he has stated that he and his Father are one (Jn 10:30, 17:11, [21–]22). We also do not read that Jesus depicted himself as part of a *mysterious connection* with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion to this section

From what we have read in this section, we conclude that the term Θεός was used as a continuation for the term יהוה of the OT, indicating that the God of the OT continued to be the God of the NT. The use of the term ‘Father’ in the NT is much stronger than in the OT, and in anthropomorphic terms applied to Θεός as the Father of his Son, Jesus Christ. This does not mean that Θεός was in fact just another Name for Father, as there are too many usages of the term in the NT where ‘Father’ is not implied. However, it is clear from the information that ‘Father’ is equated to Θεός and not by any means subservient to Θεός. This could be the reason why scholars like Tuggy and Branson postulate that ‘Father’ = Θεός.

With what can we compare the actions of Θεός in the NT? Contrasting to the Trinity theory, we can identify Θεός in the NT as some kind of a coordinator.

Θεός as ‘coordinator’

The NT mostly refers to God with the term Θεός. The term ‘(Θεός the) Father’ is also used often, thereby indicating that he was well known to his people as Father. Only on a few occasions Jesus is referred to as Θεός, while the Holy Spirit does not have that intitulation in the NT. When looking at all the activities and functions ascribed to Θεός in the NT, it creates the impression that he acts as some kind of a coordinator between his three revelations, Father, Son (Jesus Christ) and Holy Spirit. The following verses could be used to witness to that:

General (read together with what is said above of Θεός)

- Θεός is the saviour of his people (believers) (1 Tm 1:1; 1 Tm 2:3; 4:10; Tt 1:3; 2:10; 3:4);

Revelation as Father

- Discussed above.

Revelation as Son

- Θεός gifted Jesus (‘his Son’) to the sinners (Rm 5:16–17; Ga 4:4); [The Father has sent Jesus: Jn 5:37; 6:44, 57; 8:16, 18, 42; 12:49; 14:24; 20:21; 1 Jn 4:14;]; [The Father glorifies Jesus: Jn 8:54];
- Θεός made Christ a (great) priest forever (He 7:21; 10:21);
- Θεός raised Jesus from the dead (1 Cor 6:14; 15:15; Ga 1:1; Col 2:12; 1 Pt 1:21);
- Christ is now seated at the right hand of Θεός (Col 3:1; He 10:12, 12:2; 1 Pt 3:22; Ac 2:33);
- Christ is the mediator/advocate between Θεός and humankind (1 Tm 2:5; 1 Jn 2:1);
- Θεός made Jesus the head over everything for the church (Eph 1:22);
- Christ Jesus will act as judge with his Second Coming (2 Tm 4:1).

Revelation as Holy Spirit

- Θεός gave the Holy Spirit (as a deposit) (2 Cor 5:5; Ga 4:6; Eph 1:14; 1 Th 4:8; 2 Tm 1:7; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5);
- Θεός gifted the Holy Spirit to his people (1 Cor 2:12; 2 Cor 11:4; 2 Tm 1:7; 1 Jn 3:24; 4:13; He sent him to his people (Jn 14:26; 15:26; Ga 4:6); The Spirit went out of the Father (Jn 15:26); the Holy Spirit was sent from Heaven (1 Pt 1:12);
- Christ has received the Holy Spirit from the Father and poured it out on his people (Ac 2:33);
- The followers of Θεός have access to him ‘by one Spirit’ (Eph 2:18).

In his revelations as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it is obvious that Θεός plays the decisive role in determining what each Person does – in fact, what he does through each Person. However, Θεός does not only coordinate the three mentioned Persons, but he also ensures that humans live in a close relation and proximity to his three revelations:

- Humans are the handiwork of Θεός (Eph 2:10);
- Humans are the special possession of Θεός (1 Pt 2:9);
- Humans become the *Imago Dei*²⁸ – like Θεός (Eph 4:24);
- Humans become the heirs of Θεός (Ga 4:7);
- Θεός has equipped humans with full (spiritual) armour (Eph 6:10–20);
- Humans become a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit of Θεός (Eph 2:22);
- Humans become co-workers for Θεός (2 Cor 6:1);
- Humans become stewards of the grace of Θεός (1 Pt 4:10);
- Θεός has given his people eternal life (1 Jn 5:11);
- Θεός has given his people his Scriptures, which are God-breathed (2 Tm 3:16);
- The word of Θεός is alive and active between humans (He 4:12).

Θεός, who is the Creator of Earth, therefore takes good care, specifically of the humans that he has put on Earth, in order to give them the full opportunity to live according to his will. He has therefore created a ‘visible’ harmony between his creation (especially his followers on Earth) and his threefold revelation.

A last word

Just as it should not be our priority to try and understand the OT in light of the NT (instead of *vice versa*), so it should not be our focus to understand the NT (and for that matter the entire Bible) in light of the Creeds, Statements of Faith and Councils. The NT should rather be understood in light of the OT and in light of the NT itself, being self-revelatory. The question, however, could be posed: But what about the Councils then? The Councils can be regarded as an interpretation of the Bible, especially the NT – *for its time*. However, that time has already passed long ago. Instead of looking at the Bible from an Early Church perspective, the time is ripe for the people of God to convene a new (world) Ecumenical Council and interpret the Bible anew from a 21st-century perspective, also with reference to the Holy Trinity.

Having stated all the above, it is important to add that we will not know Θεός in his fullness before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ: ‘God is more than our collective efforts to understand, capture or define God, which points to God’s transcendental nature’ (cf. Bentley 2023:4 of 7). However, this does not imply that we must hide Θεός behind terms like ‘mystery’ and ‘transcendence’. Added to these: The best document to look for answers about Θεός is the Bible. In most cases, it would be better to change the term ‘best’ to ‘only’, as all the other literature is, like this article, only an *interpretation* of the Bible.

According to this research, God is mostly depicted in the NT as the Father of his people and of Jesus Christ. Jesus is sent by God (the Father) to his people to act as saviour for them. The Holy Spirit is also sent by God.

28. Bentley (2023:3 of 7) identifies *Imago Dei* as follows: ‘[T]he image of God refers to the notion of the immanent Trinity, namely that the nature of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity extends to find expression in the lived experiences of humanity’. This is a very good definition, provided that the term ‘Trinity’ be replaced by ‘God’.

Although God is depicted as three separate Persons in the NT, these are only his revelations, as he remains One, although, for the sake of his followers, he has revealed himself as three separate Persons. It therefore looks as if the NT does not have a theology of a mysterious Trinity in itself. Van De Beek (2022:1 of 9; emphasis added) makes a very true statement (from his point of view): '[T]he Trinity is not *more than a formula* for telling that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are real [P]ersons, and really [O]ne, as well'.

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