

The Trinity between Athens and Jerusalem

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I. Sola scriptura and the Doctrine of the Trinity

„That the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone”¹, is the common conviction of the Reformers and an essential link between the Reformation movements in Wittenberg, Zürich and Geneva. In the time of the Reformation appealing to the authority of Scripture meant appealing to a catholic authority that was universally upheld and affirmed in the Christian church. The emphasis on Scripture, however, *alone* had a critical impetus that granted the tradition of the church, the theology of the church fathers and the present teaching of the church a secondary authority, relative to the authority of Scripture. Understanding the ecumenical creeds of the early church as relative to the authority of Scripture not only questioned any claim to an authority independent of Scripture (which they never had), but also underlined their significance as interpretation and summary of Scripture. It is clear, however, that the so-called ‘scripture principle’ made it obligatory for theology in the tradition of the Reformation to interpret every doctrine of the church in relation to Scripture in such a way that reference to Scripture implied both its vindication and its criticism. The task of relating doctrine to Scripture is therefore underlined by the understanding of the relationship of Scripture and doctrine in the Reformation. This is common ground between all Reformers. How this requirement is to be met, however, allowed for rather different theological uses of Scripture in the different strands of the Reformation.

The intrinsic connection between the authority of Scripture and the derived authority of the teachings of the church could from the Reformation onwards also be used as a tool for the criticism of the received doctrine of the church. This is particularly evident with regard to the doctrines of the Trinity and of the person and work of Christ. The beginnings of antitrinitarian teachings in the churches of the Reformation all show that the ‘scripture principle’ is

¹ Epitome of the Formula of Concord 1.

employed to criticise Trinitarian teaching or to reject it as ‘papist’, as a doctrinal extravagance bound up with tradition and structure of the church of Rome.² Responding to such criticism could not simply invoke the authority of tradition or the authority the church but had to show that anti-trinitarian teachings contradicted scripture.

However, if one looks carefully at the way the Reformers defended the doctrine of the Trinity by appealing to Scripture, one can see that they did not try to prove the wording and conceptuality of the doctrine of the Trinity from Scripture, but attempted to show that Scripture provides an account of the ground and subject-matter of the creedal formulations. What they attempted was to show by means of scriptural exegesis that the conceptuality of the creedal formulae could be theologically justified. If we take “Athens” as a convenient abbreviation for Greek philosophy and “Jerusalem” as a name-tag for a scriptural approach as manifested in the Hebrew Scriptures, one can say that the Reformers attempted to show that Athens was right by means that had their home in Jerusalem. Judging doctrine from scripture was, however, for the Reformation never abstracted from the use of Scripture in the liturgy, in the proclamation of the word, the celebration of the sacraments and in the invocation of the triune God in prayer.

This is particularly important in Trinitarian matters. For Luther, for instance, the doctrine of the Trinity is not only the highest article on which all others are based, it is also the one which explains how the content and the constitution of faith belong together.³ In the Large Catechism, this is explained in terms of the threefold divine self-giving of God. While this as to be seen as proceeding from the Father through the Son and the Spirit, we can only accept this gift, which grants us communion with God in faith, through the Spirit in the Son in whom we can see the deepest abyss of the Father’s heart. It would not be claiming too much to say that the Trinitarian understanding of the constitution of faith also explains the role and authority of Scripture. By the internal testimony of the Spirit vindicating the witness of Scripture, the external word, the truth of the Gospel of Christ is confirmed so that believers can see Christ as the true revelation of God the Father. Therefore Scripture had a twofold, but connected, systematic place in the theology of the so-called Old Protestant Orthodoxy, one in the prolegomena, reflecting on the principles of theological knowledge, the other in the section on

² Cf. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962 esp. chapter 25 “Anti-Trinitarian Anabaptism in Poland”, 639-669.

³ Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, *The Triune God of Grace: Trinitarian Thinking in the Theology of the Reformers*, in: *The Christian Understanding of God*, ed. by James M. Byrne, Dublin: Columba Press, 1993, 49-64.

the means of salvation under the heading of the doctrine on the “grace of the Holy Spirit in application”.

The link between the doctrine of the Trinity and the interpretation of Scripture which the theology of the Reformers exemplified was radically questioned when in the aftermath of the Enlightenment the interpretation of Scripture became an exercise of historical investigation, independent of church doctrine and of the use of Scripture in the liturgy of the church. The overall effect of this approach was the view that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be found in Scripture. If it has no real scriptural basis, it must have its basis in another form of reasoning, which can perhaps be seen in the “Greek spirit”. In this way the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a typical example of the character of dogma, famously summarised in the bold statement of Adolf von Harnack’s *History of Dogma*: “Dogma is in its conception and in its structure a work of the Greek spirit on the ground of the gospel.”⁴ However, the thesis of the “Hellenization of Christianity” with its criticism of the influence of Athens on the “conception” and “structure” of Christian doctrine did not lead to a corresponding positive evaluation of the roots of Christianity in Jerusalem, in the Old Testament. As Harnack equally famously stated:

“Rejecting the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake that the main body of the church properly rejected; keeping it in the sixteenth century was a destiny from which the Reformation was not yet able to extricate itself; but to continue keeping the Old Testament within Protestantism as a canonical authority after the nineteenth century is a consequence of a paralysis of religion and the church.”⁵

Does doctrinal criticism, as Harnack practised it, lead to severing the links between what he called “the simple Gospel of Christ” and both Athens and Jerusalem?⁶

⁴ Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 3 volumes, 5th ed. Leipzig 1931, vol. I. 20.

⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (1924), 2nd ed. Leipzig 1960, 217.

⁶ It should be clear that I am using Harnack here as an illustration. His scholarly achievement is far too great to be summarized by two rather exaggerated quotations. A closer view can show that Harnack’s historical reconstruction of the genesis of Christian doctrine depends itself on ‘dogmatic’ presuppositions. For a detailed analysis of Harnack’s reconstruction of the essence of Christianity cf. Christoph Schwöbel, *Das Wesen des Christentums in der Vielfalt der Konfessionen*, in: *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus. Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2003, 61-84.

Harnack's historical views, which must be seen as rather extravagant expressions of widely held opinions in contemporary historical scholarship, have in recent years been exposed to radical revision. Many scholars today would see the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first four centuries as one characterised by more similarities than sharp contrasts. Sharp contrasts appear most often in attempts at Jewish and Christian self-definition,⁷ which do not accurately reflect the similarities and structural analogies we find in the first three centuries between Judaism and Christianity, precisely because of their normative orientation. The need for self-definition arose because both religious movements found it difficult to distinguish themselves from one another – especially with regard to their understanding of God. Jewish texts from the time of the New Testament present us, as Larry Hurtado⁸ has reminded us, with a variety of transcendent beings in relation to the one God, executing the will of God. Hellenistic Judaism with its classical exponent Philo of Alexandria can refer to divine beings beside the one God as “God”. Moses is portrayed in Philo as God’s “partner” who deserves being called “god” by God himself,⁹ and in even Palestine the *memra* JHWH could be seen as a personified agent beside the one God, as Daniel Boyarin¹⁰ has shown, so that the *memra* JHWH could appear as the active voice of God in Genesis 1,3. Reading the Old Testament with a view to the many forms of relationship of the one God to creation, which somehow belonged to the being of the one God, thereby conserving the monotheistic principle,¹¹ is not a Christian but already a Jewish invention. Conversely, one can show that the metaphysical tradition of Greek thought in all its varieties in the first three centuries AD made it difficult to arrive at something like the doctrine of the Trinity since its one pervasive agreement seems to have been that the many always need to be seen as a deri-

⁷ Cf. E.P.Sanders (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition. Vol. I: The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1980, summarized

⁸ The material is successively presented in three major books by Larry W. Hurtado: *One God, One Lord. Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, London: SCM Press 1988; *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press 1999; and the magisterial: *Lord Jesus Christ. Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003.

⁹ Vit. Mos. 1.155-158.

¹⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John*, HThR 94, 243-284.

¹¹ For the term „monotheistic principle“ cf. Christoph Schwöbel, *Art. Monotheismus V. Systematisch-theologisch*, in: TRE 23, Berlin / New York 1993, 256-262.

vation from a higher unity. Employing the conceptual means of Greek philosophy in shaping Trinitarian doctrine always implied conceptual redefinition, which went against the original semantic import and pragmatic purpose of the conceptuality so redefined. Is the doctrine of the Trinity then much more a flower, which could grow on the soil of Jerusalem, rather than being nurtured by the spirit of Athens?

These historical questions, however, may bring us closer to the theological heart of the matter but they will not solve the theological issues at stake. An account of the genesis of Trinitarian doctrine will not by itself answer the question of its truth, although the two questions cannot be completely divorced from one another in a faith that claims to be grounded in a historic revelation and that appeals to the paradigmatic origin and to the normative witness of truth by appealing to the testimony of Scripture. Furthermore, one needs to keep in mind that it was the claim to truth that enabled and demanded the handing on of the biblical witnesses in the processes of tradition so that a truth claim lies at the heart of any genetic explanation that seeks to keep in touch with the processes of tradition. What then are those elements of Trinitarian discourse on God in the biblical witnesses which, employing and mirroring Jewish forms of talking of God and his relations to the world, as well as utilizing the means of Greek philosophical reflection and redefining them in the process that have led to the synodical definition of Trinitarian dogma in the fourth century and that provide the ground for explicating dogma from Scripture?

II. Trinitarian Patterns in the New Testament

It has been customary to offer as proof texts for Trinitarian teaching in the New Testament mainly those texts which offer a triadic enumeration which seems as close as possible to later statements of Trinitarian dogma. The locus classicus is, of course, the great commission in Matthew 28, 19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” While such texts present a relative similarity to Trinitarian dogma, their logic can only indirectly be discerned. It is probable that in a pagan environment, baptizing simply in the name of Jesus as the early Christian communities did (cf. Acts 2:38; 8:16), remained ambiguous so that it had to be explicitly stated that baptizing “in the name of Jesus” established a relationship to the one God. Furthermore, baptism is always seen as a gift or an activity of the Spirit, so that the attempt of resolving ambiguity led to stat-

ing explicitly what seems to have been presupposed implicitly. Reference to ‘the name’ establishes in the context of an understanding of God shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures the connection to the one God who is known by his name.

The logic we have to conjecture to have been at work here is in other contexts explicitly developed. I have therefore suggested a number of years ago to see such texts as demonstrating a prototrinitarian grammar of Christian discourse on God, following grammatical rules that could be fleshed out in various ways and associated with various contents.¹² A very early example is the passage in 1Cor 12:4-6: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” The grammatical pattern is employed here explain how “spiritual gifts” are to be understood: are they manifestations of a spiritual power with no inherent link to Jesus, or is there an inherent link between Jesus and the spiritual gifts? Such a link would imply establishing a link between the Spirit as the origin of the spiritual gifts and Jesus. The link is established by introducing relations of origin, thereby relating the varieties of gifts, services and activities to their respective origin. The unity of the variety of gifts is their one giver, the unity of services is the one Lord who commissions these services, the unity of all activities in their variety is the one God who is the source of every activity in everybody. The relations of origin relate diverse effects to their origin, but the different origins are related to one another in a structural order of increasing comprehensiveness. Gifts are comprehended in services, services are included in the comprehensive term activities. This suggests a relationship between the varieties, their unitary origin and the respective origins. They all have a particular emphasis (gifts – Spirit, services – Lord; activities – God), but these particular emphases have a particular irreversible order which is emphasised by the relative clause attached to God “who activates all of them in everyone”. The logic by which the ambiguity of “spiritual gifts” is resolved by relating them to their origin, and by relating these “origins” or sources in an irreversible relationship which finds its

¹² Cf. *Christology and Trinitarian Thought*, in: Christoph Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today. Essays on Divine Being and Act*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995, 113-146. An excellent overview can be found in: Hans-Joachim Eckstein, *Die Anfänge trinitarischer Rede von Gott im Neuen Testament*, in: Michael Welker/Miroslav Volf (eds.), *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität. Jürgen Moltmann zum 80. Geburtstag*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2006, 85-113. For a full bibliography cf. *Bibliografia Trinitaria. Nuevo Testamento (1990-2005)*, *Estudios Trinitarios* 40 (2006), issue 1-2, 31-123.

ultimate source and origin in God. The effect is that there is no other origin of spiritual gifts than the origin of everything there is, God. The passage presents a relationship of variety and particularity to universality in a way which does not take away the particular emphasis on particularity.

A similar logic of relations can be shown to be at work in 2 Cor 13:13: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” Again we find that particular gifts are related to a giver, grace to Christ, love to God and communion to the Holy Spirit, but they form one comprehensive reality, which is pronounced as one blessing. The particularity of the gifts and their particular givers are not in a relationship of competition but a in correlative relationship, which related relations and the “point” from which they proceed. They can be summarized in a single “be with” and are communicated in inextricable but differentiated unity.

The way in which particular relationships between God and Christ on the one hand and the creation or the believers on the other hand are ordered so that they do not contradict one another or could be understood to replace one another can also be seen in 1 Cor 8:6. The context is important here, the discussion of food offered to idols. Christians know that “no ideols in the world really exist”, a fundamental conviction of Israel’s faith. There are many so-called gods in heaven and on earth, however Christians know with Israel: “There is no God but one”. Against this background of the denial of a plurality of gods and the invocation of the Shema Israel in Deut 6:4 it is stated: “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one LORD, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” The reference to the singularity and unity of God makes it quite clear that Israel’s monotheistic principle is the background of these statements about God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It seems that the phrase consciously introduces the title-terms (God, the Lord) first and then adds “the Father” and “Jesus Christ” as the proper names which give one inexchangeable and irreplaceable identity to the God and the Lord. However, the prepositions “from whom” and “through whom” make it quite obvious that although the Father and Jesus Christ are two identities that can be referred to by proper names, nevertheless they are not two beings but one reality. One preposition “from” denotes the origin of our existence, the other “through” the medium of our existence. The two are related in such a way that in relating to Christ we relate to God. The combination of “from” and “through” is complementary, but both denote the relationship to the ground of existence. There is a necessary

order: origin comes before medium, but this does not denote any ontological difference since it is framed by the statement of the singularity and unity of God quoted from Deut 6:4. Since the statement concerns the relationship to the ground of existence one has to say that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ belong to the one creative reality from whom and through whom we have existence.

This logic can also be expanded to a full triadic statement, masterfully in one sentence in Romans 8:11: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” Again we have the same logic of the ultimate origin of divine activity, this time expressed not through a proper name but through a descriptive clause: “he who raised Jesus from the dead” (cf. Rom 4:24). Again we encounter the same order of relationships God – Jesus – Spirit. However, being related to one in that order always implies relationship to the other two. Being in relationship with the Spirit means being in relationship with Christ, being in relationship with Christ means being in relationship with God. This is poignantly illustrated by the fact that Paul answers the question: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom 8:35) with the statement that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). Although there are different terms in the relationship, being related to one means being related to the other, since the terms of the relationship are related in such a way that they are distinct identities but nevertheless a differentiated unity.

The grammatical rules that govern this kind of discourse about God can be expressed in the following way:

- The one God of Israel can be referred to by the three proper names “the Father”, “Jesus Christ” or “the Son” and “the Spirit” which denote different identities in the one reality of God but no gradation of divine being.
- These identities are ordered by their relations in such a way that the Father is the ultimate “point of origin” of all relations between the Father, Jesus Christ/the Son and the Spirit. All activities of Christ and the Spirit can be related to their origin in God the Father, although the mode of agency is particular to the Father, the Son and the Spirit.
- Because of their one “point of origin” in the Father, being related to Christ or to the Spirit implies being related to God the Father. In this way “being in relation

with Christ” is an incomplete expression of “being in relation through Christ with the Father”. The same applies to the Spirit.

- In these relationships the Father is both the initial “point of origin” and the ultimate “terminus of all relationships”, “who activates all (activities) in everyone” (1Cor 12:6), and so the beginning of everything refers to the same God who in the end “may be all in all” (1Cor 15:27)
- These identities (Father, Son/Jesus Christ, Spirit) form one ordered relational unity, which is clearly distinguished from everything that has its created existence from God.

It is common parlance in New Testament scholarship to say that these are functional and relational differentiations but that they have no ontological character in the sense of later doctrinal formulations. However, what is ontology? If ontology is a technical discipline where terms like “ousia”, “hypostasis” and “homoousios” are employed, the Pauline language is clearly not ontological. If ontology concerns the relationship between what there is to from whom it is and through whom it is, then a statement like 1Cor 8:6 clearly is an ontological statement, and expressions like “who activates all (activities) in every one” (1Cor 12:6) or “may be all in all” (1Cor 15:27) are clearly ontological expressions, terminologically not very different from the classical technical terminology of metaphysics which we find in Aristotle. Only if relations are not ontological in a primary sense, Paul’s language can be seen as not ontological. That relations are ontological in a primary sense was the great discovery of the Cappadocians, but with this the only expressed on the second-order level of theological reflection what already asserted in first-order theological language in Paul.

It would go beyond the scope of a brief essay to demonstrate that these grammatical rules also apply in other parts of the New Testament, most notably, of course, in John’s gospel.¹³ John’s gospel demonstrates one point that is only implicitly stated in the Pauline corpus. The mode of identity between the Father and the Son is not one of numerical identity but of an (ontological) relational identity. “I and the Father are one” (Jo 10:30) can thus be specified

¹³ Cf. Udo Schnelle, *Trinitarisches Denken im Johannesevangelium*, in: Labahn, M. / Scholtissek, K. / Strotmann, A. (eds.), *Israel und seine Heilstraditionen im Johannesevangelium*, FS Johannes Beutler SJ, Paderborn: Schöningh 2004, 367-386.

to mean: “The Father is in me and I am in the Father” (Jo 18:38b). The unity between Father and Son is therefore one of communion and relationship which includes different personal identities. This relationship is a communicative relationship in which being one means knowing the other. In John this even extended to the Holy Spirit. Knowing the Holy Spirit (Jo 14:17) means being reminded of Jesus’ message: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you.” (Jo 14: 26) However, what Jesus told his disciples is nothing other than the words of the Father: “The words that I say unto you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.” (Jo 14: 10b) The way in which John fills the prototrinitarian grammar with content clearly has its own theological profile. But is it a different grammar? And is it too audacious to claim that this grammar can also be found in other writings and genres of the New Testament, always developed with the particular content and style of the writing in question?

III. Looking back on the Presuppositions: Trinitarian Patterns in the Old Testament?

If the New Testament did not appropriate this way of talking about plurality within the unity of God from its pagan environment – and its staunch defence of the singularity and unity of God expressed in the *Shema Israel* makes that highly unlikely – there is no other possible background for this kind of language about God than the Old Testament. Traditionally, the Trinity in the Old Testament was associated with expressions that come close to the doctrine of the Trinity in its normative synodical form from the fourth century.¹⁴ The visit of the three men to Abraham at Mamre (Gen 18:22), the trishagion in Is 6:3 and the threefold structure of the blessing in Num 6:24ff have traditionally been interpreted in a trinitarian sense. The divine plural (“Let us...” Gen 1:26) and the hypostatized forms of the agency of God, the “Lady Wisdom” (Prov 8:21-31; Sir 24), the “Word” (Jes 55:10f) and reference to the “Spirit” or the “Son of God” (Ps 2:7; 110:2; Is 9:6) have also been interpreted in this sense. In view of the rich material that points to plurality in Israel’s experience of God’s presence, is there a theo-

¹⁴ For an overview cf. Manfred Oeming, *Vestigia Trinitatis? Vorahnungen der Trinität im Alten Testament*, GuL 17 (2002), H.1 41-54.

logical rule, a kind of depth structure that underlies these various manifestations of plurality which seems to form a tensive unity with the insistence on the singularity, oneness and exclusiveness of God?

Robert Jenson has pointed to a number of instances of differentiation in the Old Testaments language of God that seem to suggest such a theological rule.¹⁵ The texts, which he discusses in detail, take “the angel of the LORD” as an exemplary case. In the narrative of the *Akedah* in Gen 22 it is first God who addresses Abraham, telling him to take his Son and go to the land of Moriah (Gen 22:1f.). Just when Abraham is about to kill Isaac, the angel of LORD calls him from heaven, addressing him in the same way as God addressed Abraham at the beginning of the story. After Abraham has offered the ram as a burnt-offering and called the place “The LORD will provide”, the Angel of the LORD addresses him again and first relates the word of the LORD to Abraham (“By myself I have sworn, says the Lord...” (Gen 22:16), only to go on to say in first person: “I will indeed bless you...” (Gen 22:17). The angel of the Lord appears at the same time as different from the Lord and as identical with the Lord. He is no intermediary being but “from heaven” and speaks the Lord’s own blessing. The unity between the angel of the Lord and the Lord is the point of the story which initially presents a dramatic contrast between what God says in commanding Abraham to offer the son he loves as a burnt offering (Gen 22:3), and the message of the angel of the Lord as Abraham is about to kill his son: “Do not lay your hand on the boy” (Gen 12:3) The juxtaposition is most obvious where the angel of the Lord says: “...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.”

The other instances, which Jenson cites point to the same differentiation, juxtaposition and narrative unity, bringing the two voices together. The angel of the Lord finds Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness (Gen 16:7) and after ordering Hagar to return to Sara offers the promise: “I will so greatly multiply your off-spring...” (Gen 16:10). Again we have the angel of the Lord acting as a messenger (*mal’ak*), but then addressing Hagar with the divine promise in the first person. The unity-in-difference where the angel of the Lord is one with the Lord in offering his promise and at the same time related as a different identity to the Lord as the one who sends him, is explicitly reflected upon in the text which says of Hagar: “So she named the LORD who spoke to her. You are El-roi; for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’” (Gen 16:13) In Genesis 31, where Abraham relates his dream to Rachel and Leah (Gen 31:10-14), the angel of the Lord who addresses him, explicit-

¹⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *The Bible and the Trinity*, in: *Pro Ecclesia* XI (2002), 329-339.

ly introduces himself: “I am the God of Bethel...” (Gen 31: 13), connecting the new message to the dream at Bethel with the promise offered by the Lord (Gen 28, 12-15). In Ex 3 it is the angel of the Lord who appears to Moses in the burning bush (Gen 3:2), and after the self-introduction of the Lord by the revelation of his name, Moses is ordered to tell the elders of Israel: “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me...” (Gen 3:16).

Jenson points to many other examples of what he calls the “Old Testament phenomenon of the doubled identity of the Lord”¹⁶: the *kabod* JHWH, his name (*sh^emo*, Deut 12:11) and, of course, the *shekinah*. They all appear as identities, as active presences and communicating *personae* related to the Lord who is then described as addressing Israel directly: I say. One of the most intriguing passages Jenson refers to, is Ex 23: 20-22 where we have “my angel” and “his voice”, the presence of “my name” in the angel and then the direct address “do all that I say”:

“I am going to send my angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will pardon your transgression; for my name is in him. But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes.”

The context with its repeated prohibition of bowing down to the gods of the tribes living in Canaan and its commandment “you shall worship the LORD your God” (Ex 23:25) excludes any reading in terms of a plurality of gods and points to what Jenson has called “the doubled identity of the Lord”.

It is perhaps significant that all the examples we have quoted are placed in the context of communicative relations. The angel of the Lord addresses individual people or the people of Israel in the desert. He communicates with his words the words of the Lord and promises, and enacts the actions of the Lord. In terms of their communicative relations to others, what the Lord says and what the angel of the Lord says are not simply identical, but are made identical in the narrative progression of the story. That the angel of the Lord relays God’s message, and then does so by speaking in the first person as the Lord, makes it quite clear that the angel of the Lord is indeed a “mode” of God’s communication, but this “mode” has a kind of dis-

¹⁶ Jenson, *op. cit.* 332.

tinctness from the Lord that involves that God is communicating through a personal agent who, in turn, is defined by his communicative relation to God, simply by being God's *mal'ak*. The being of the angel of the Lord is defined in relation to the ones he addresses by the fact that he communicates God's voice and, as if to underline that, switches to God's words in his address by speaking the divine "I". In relation to the Lord, the identity of the angel of the Lord is defined by being sent to communicate. However, the angel of the Lord is never an independent focus of worship. Worship is only offered to the Lord. Therefore discourse of the angel of the Lord never questions the monotheistic principle of the Shema Israel in Deuteronomy 6,4. Not only is the Shema structurally similar to the address of the angel of the Lord, furthermore, the point of the address to Abraham in connection with the *Akeda*, "for now I know that you fear God" (Gen 22:12) seems to be very close to the commandment of the Shema. The question of the ontological status of the angel of the Lord provokes answers, which would at least be very similar to the synodical formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity of the 4th century.

The observations, which Jenson offers with regard to the "angel of Lord", can be supplemented with similar observations concerning the *ruach JHWH*. Even a most cursory glance on the literature of the Old Testament shows that *ruach* is one of the most frequently employed ways of talking about God's activity.¹⁷ The range which *ruach* language covers concerns all dimensions of life in relation to God: the giving of life to creation through the transcendent Spirit where God gives *his ruach* to the creatures (Gen 2:7), appropriates it to them for a while so that it becomes *their* spirit and then takes it away so that they return to dust (Ps 30a und 29b). *Ruach* is God's transcendent gift to creation and the medium by which creation responds to creation in the process of the life of creature. In addition to this, *ruach* can be employed to denote specific gifts like the ability to interpret dreams (Gen 41:38-39; Dan 4,8) or specific gifts of leadership (Ex 35,31; Num 27:18). These instances are similar to the cases in the book of *Judges* where the spirit of the Lord comes upon somebody (3:10 Othniel), takes possession of a person (6,34 Gideon) or stirs in a person (13:25 Samson). Here spirit possession leads to persons performing extraordinary deeds which bring a creative transformation of the situation of Israel which does not follow from its antecedent conditions. Early descriptions of prophecy appear to be similar as in the case of David: "The spirit of the

¹⁷ Cf. for a more extensive discussion Christoph Schwöbel, *Der Geist Gottes und die Spiritualität des Menschen*, in: *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus. Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2003, 323-359.

Lord speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue.” (II Sam 23:2) However, what seems to be harmoniously correlated here, the spirit (*ruach*) and the word (*dabar*) of the Lord, could also be perceived as a contrast. Is that the reason why pre-exilic prophecy did not refer to the *ruach* and in its concentration on the word of the Lord seems intent to distance itself from the early examples of prophecy (cf. Am 7:14-15). Exilic and post-exilic prophecy again emphasizes the *ruach JHWH* as the source of prophecy, especially in Ezekiel (11:5; 3:12; 2,2-3) and applies this interpretation of prophecy even to the pre-exilic prophets: ”They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets.” (Zech 7:12) In Nehemiah the *ruach* can become an integral part of comprehensive history of salvation and rebellion recited as a “national confession”(9:6-37). *Ruach*-discourse has its place not only in the social and historical dimension of Israel’s life. It can also refer to the personal transformation of the heart of believers that enables them to open their lips in praise of the Lord: “Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me ... and my tongue will sing aloud your deliverance.” (Ps 51:11-14b)

The look back on Israel’s history and the element of transformation can also open up vistas of a future which belongs to a messianic King from the tribe of David: “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” (Is 11:2) Here we can see a particular element of spirit language: *ruach* is on the one hand the *ruach JHWH*, but on the other it summarizes the specific *ruach*-attributes of the messianic king in relation to his people. This vision can also be extended from a spirit-bearing person to all humankind including the gentiles, even to all flesh: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28).

Although the origin of the Spirit in the Lord is always clear from the expression *ruach JHWH*, the Spirit is nevertheless communicated to people as an ability that transcends creaturely possibilities and directs people them so that they can speak the word of the Lord, do the will of God or turn to the Lord in praise. The tension between a personal centre of activity and an impersonal power is maintained consistently as is the social and individual dimension of the Spirit as well as his relationship to the past and the future. The specific preserve of the Spirit of the Lord seems to be in the empowerment of creatures for something that, without

the Spirit, lies outside the possibilities of created agents, just as the Spirit is seen as the external source of the life of creatures, which is not under the control of those to whom it is given. Because of the multi-dimensional character of the Spirit's operation and of its characteristic of enabling, empowering and endowing others, the identity of the Spirit cannot be read off the Spirit's activities. If that is the case it must be located in its relations of origin. A familiar problem announces itself, the fact that the Spirit somehow is the self-effacing person, the person whose face consists in pointing to the face of others.

Like discourse of the "angel of the Lord" the role the *ruach JHWH* plays is placed in the communicative relations of God to creation. Its specific point seems to be to enable created agencies to speak the word of God or to do the will of God and so the Spirit relates creatures to God. Spirit language not only points to an external source of this empowerment in creatures, but also sees the capacity to respond to God as an ability that is not an intrinsic property of creation but an ability creation is invested with by the creator. Although discourse of the *ruach JHWH* introduces an element of differentiation in God's relationship to what is not God, it is never seen an entirely independent agent, but as an agent of relative independence, an independence that is always relative to the Spirit's dependence on the Lord. The Spirit's relative independence points to a personally active identity, which does not exclude impersonal effects. Where the Spirit elicits response from creation it is not directed at the Spirit but to the Lord.

The prototrinitarian grammar of discourse of God in the New Testament developed on the basis of Old Testament discourse on God. Against this background the New Testament does not seem to introduce complete novelty into discourse of God. Rather it adopts and adapts the forms of discourse that enabled the writers of the Old Testament to speak of the unity of the Lord with identities such as the angel of the Lord or the Spirit of the Lord to the new experience of God in Jesus and the Spirit. The logic, which seems to determine this adaptation, is to read the story of the Jesus and the beginning church as the continuation of the overall narrative the Old Testament presents. The element of discontinuity in this continuity, which consists in the conviction that belonging to God's chosen people is no longer the only condition for being included into communion with the God of Israel, but that faith in Christ is the presupposition, which opens this communion for everybody, even for gentiles, is conceived eschatologically. In Jesus the communion which God establishes with his people becomes universal, because in Jesus God who spoke "to our ancestors in many and various ways

by the prophets ... in these last days has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (Heb1:1). The Trinitarian logic, which the New Testament employs, is intended to express this eschatological finality because the resurrection of Jesus and the new experience of the God of Jesus in the Spirit has vindicated this claim to eschatological finality. The unity in plurality, which is expressed in forms of language like the angel of the Lord or the *ruach JHWH*, achieved for those who believed in Jesus’ resurrection and experienced the God’s presence in the Spirit its definitive form, the form appropriate to the opening of God’s relationship with Israel to all people in faith. The eschatological understanding of Jesus’ resurrection and of the sending of the Spirit therefore invited appropriating those elements of discourse of God in the Hebrew Scriptures which enabled believers in Christ to express the relationship between God, Jesus and the Spirit and, conversely, to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures as expressing that form of relationship from the beginning.

Viewed from this perspective, the formulation of Trinitarian doctrine is dependent on the language of God, expressing that differentiated unity in the Old as well as in the New Testament. Its technical expressions “hypostasis”, “ousia”, “homousios”, “koinonia”, “idion” etc. appear as abbreviations of what could already be found in the Old and New Testaments in narrative and doxological forms. In order to say exactly what they mean, one has to go back to the biblical texts and their grammar, their way of relating different identities within the unity of agency and being of the one Lord. This would mean that the technical expressions of the doctrine of the Trinity constantly need to be filled with the content of the biblical witnesses, because this is their subject-matter.¹⁸

¹⁸ It is one of most promising changes in the relationship between Jewish theology and Christian theology that Christian theological attention to the trinitarian logic of the Hebrew Scriptures is seen by Jewish scholars as opening new avenues for fruitful conversation. Cf. Peter Ochs, *Dreifaltigkeit und Judentum*, in: *Concilium* 39.4 (2003), 433-441. For the hermeneutical presuppositions of this approach cf. Peter Ochs, *Returning to Scripture*, in: *Cross Currents* 44.4 (1994/1995), 437-452. For the way this approach is applied to a theology of history cf. Peter Ochs, *Recovering the God of History: Scriptural Life after Death in Judaism and Christianity*, in: *Jews & Christians* (2003), 114-147.

IV. The Question of Metaphysics: Becoming a Greek to the Greeks?

So far we have mainly engaged with the heritage of Jerusalem, the biblical witnesses and the task of their interpretation. What about Athens? The early Christians could not express the identity of their God without referring to the narrative of God's conversation with his people in the Old Testament, because it is the God of Israel whom Jesus addressed as Father. This has remained a characteristic of Christian faith and theology ever since. To this we must now add: The early Christians could not express the universality of the truth they claimed for God's self-disclosure through Christ in the Spirit without engaging in an often controversial discussion with Greek philosophy. The engagement of Christian theology with Greek metaphysics is an inevitable development given the eschatological finality, which they ascribed to the resurrection of Jesus and its vindication in the Spirit as the ultimate word of God. This eschatological finality provided the ground for claiming that the Christ has opened the access to God the Father in one Spirit for everybody (Eph 2:18), provided they are moved by the Spirit to believe that Jesus is the Christ. The universality ascribed to the truth claims of faith is an implication of the eschatological finality of God's self-disclosure in Christ through the Spirit. This universality is not an additional feature of the Christian message but a corollary of its prototrinitarian discourse of God.

This eschatologically founded claim to universality is the reason why Christian faith is a thinking faith from the beginning, engaging with all other forms of reflective interpretation of the ground, meaning and end of everything there is. It is this claim, which motivated the mission to the Gentiles and brought Christian faith in an often controversial conversation with Greek philosophy. By claiming to be *vera philosophia*, Christian theology took on the interpretation of reality as a whole which had shaped the development of philosophy in Greece since the Ionic philosophers of nature who were devoted to understanding the whole of the world from its foundational principle. One can even claim that Christian theology was from the beginning influenced by the philosophical critique of Homeric religion as Plato had practised it.¹⁹ Perhaps one can also see Philo's identification of the one God of Judaism with Plato's doctrine of the One as a precursor of this mode of doing theology. Furthermore, it has to

¹⁹ Cf. Rep. 377 E ff.

be taken into account that Greek philosophy of the first four centuries was no longer practised in the schools of their founders, but scattered throughout the Mediterranean, it was devoted to the exegesis of the writings of their founding fathers and to a philosophical form of life that could be understood as ‘cure of the soul’ and could be practised as spiritual exercises.²⁰ All this provided a basis for a controversial and fruitful interchange. Christian theologians perfected the exercise of snatching the intellectual weapons from their philosophical opponents, modifying and reshaping them for their purposes, to a fine art. All this, of course, for the purpose of demonstrating the truth of the Christian message by the most sophisticated intellectual tools available.

However, appropriating the weapons of the enemy, as much as it contributed to providing intellectual sophistication to Christian theology, had a high price. The metaphysical conceptuality, which was appropriated and put to service in defence of the Christian message, was not a formal tool that could be filled with any possible content. Philosophical method contained material implications, which threatened to transform the explication of Christian faith, based on the biblical witnesses into quite different thought forms. One was the shared belief of the large majority of philosophical schools that truth belongs to the realm of spiritual, immaterial and imperishable being which can only be attained by liberation from the material, bodily, historical, empirical forms of existence. This turned the Incarnation, which continues and underlines the emphasis of the Hebrew Scriptures on God’s involvement in the temporal, historical, material existence of Israel, into a major problem. Furthermore, the ontological concepts that were employed in Greek metaphysics, were all focussed on different accounts of forms, substances and their attributes. Relation, which plays such an enormously important role in biblical discourse about God’s engagement with the world in communicative relations, was regarded as the lowest category, an external attribute that does not contribute to the constitution of substances.

This represented a serious dilemma: On the one hand, it was clear that in the doctrinal debates of the third and fourth century an ontological account of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit had to be provided, especially once the ontological question was raised with radical insistence by Arius. However, the ontological clarification was not only necessary to reject suspected heresies. It was also an inner necessity if one wanted to defend the claim of Christian faith to be the true philosophy. On the other hand, the ontological conceptuality provided

²⁰ Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. with an Introduction by Arnold I. Davidson, Oxford 1995.

by the various schools of philosophers could not without modification express the unity of God in different identities, which we have interpreted as a major characteristic of biblical discourse of God. This was an implication of a pervasive characteristic of almost all schools of Hellenistic philosophy: the relationship between the One and the Many could not be conceptualized in any other form than by the subordination of the Many under the One which implies a hierarchical ontology of gradations, the great chain of Being. This contradicted not only the biblical witnesses but also the practice of Christian worship, which following the biblical pattern of discourse of God, had adopted ways of addressing God the Father through the Son in the Spirit and offered doxological praise to the Father and the Son and the Spirit.

The way out of the impasse, introduced by the Cappadocians and adopted at the Council of Constantinople (381) in the formula *mia ousia – treis hypostaseis*, involved major conceptual surgery in distinguishing *hypostasis* from *ousia* and in interpreting hypostasis as person. Relation from being the lowest category was elevated to being the key category for conceiving how the three persons are related within the one divine essence. The upshot of this is an astonishing metaphysical thesis: The One and the Many are compatible in the triune being of God, universality and personal particularity do not have to be perceived as incompatible categories. The echo of this astonishing thesis can be felt throughout the history of Western philosophy. However, the *homoousios* of Nicea as it was conceptuality applied to the whole Trinity at Constantinople, was not capable of a purely conceptual justification. Its theoretical justification was only possible by referring back to Scripture and elucidating the concept in the form of scriptural reasoning, demonstrating how the Father and the Son are of one essence and yet distinct persons, and by directing the attention to the Christian liturgy, which manifests the celebration of addressing God as we are – according to Christian faith – addressed by God. The solution, which was found for the ontological question posed by the biblical witnesses in conversation with philosophy, remains bound to the interpretation of Scripture. To put this anti-Hegelian point in Hegelian language: the representations of lived religion cannot be sublated to the level of philosophical concepts. On the contrary, philosophical conceptuality remains – at least in Trinitarian matters – bound to the primary language of witnessing to the triune God and invoking the triune name in liturgy.

V. Trinitarian Uses of Scripture – Scriptural Uses of the Trinity

The argument we have tried to develop through engagement with the prototrinitarian grammar of discourse on God in the New Testament and its presuppositions in the Old Testament points to a conclusion which is crucial for the identity of Christianity: The unity of the Christian canon of the Old and New Testament stands or falls with the truth of Trinitarian discourse about God. The unity of the canon is built on the foundation that Jesus addressed the God of Israel as Father and that the story of God's conversation with Israel, in which "God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets" culminates in speaking to us "by a Son" (Heb1,1). It is based on the conviction that the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth, is also the one, who as the *spiritus creator*, is the "Lord and Giver of Life ... who spoke by the prophets". If this is the case, then the uses of Scripture should mirror this connection between the Trinity and the unity of the canon. One of the first implications of this is that biblical hermeneutics have to be practised as canonical hermeneutics.²¹ The second implication is that the use of Scripture in biblical interpretation and its use in the liturgy of the church, where it is placed within a framework of trinitarian worship, have to be reconnected. This is not a call for reading the doctrine of the Trinity back into the witnesses of the Old and the New Testament or for the discarding the achievements of two hundred years of critical scholarship, but for understanding the task of biblical interpretation as being concerned with the same realities which form the focus of Christian worship. This will inevitably involve time and again testing the conceptual formulae of the doctrine of the Trinity against the biblical witnesses, which they attempt to express. This enterprise involves taking the biblical witnesses conceptually seriously, and this implies taking them ontologically or metaphysically seriously as expressing a comprehensive view of reality. Only in this way, Christian philosophy, as the enterprise we call systematic theology in the West is still called in the East, will prove to be a valuable partner in conversation with philosophies that have other commitments.

The Trinity between Athens and Jerusalem? Doing theology in a Trinitarian fashion will always have to start from Jerusalem, from the biblical witnesses which provoked the

²¹ Cf. the contributions in: Bernd Janowski (ed.) *Kanonhermeneutik. Vom Lesen und Verstehen der christlichen Bibel*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag 2007.

formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity necessary. The doctrine of the Trinity was not invented at Athens. The only doctrine of the Trinity that was ever invented at Athens, at least metaphorically, if not geographically, the triadic philosophy of Porphyry, was decidedly anti-Christian.²² However, starting from Jerusalem, from the biblical witnesses, Trinitarian theology will have to travel to Athens, because the truth claim involved in the Trinitarian claim that God's history with Israel finds its eschatological form in Christ through the Spirit necessitates engagement with competing philosophical claims to universality. However, having arrived at Athens Trinitarian theology will have to touch base with Jerusalem again in order to link the concepts of philosophical reasoning to the contents of biblical witness. There is no middle road, no *via media*, between Athens and Jerusalem. Rather, Trinitarian theology will have to act as a constant go-between between Jerusalem and Athens. This may lead to the kind of scriptural reasoning for which not so much Athens and Jerusalem, but perhaps Wittenberg and Geneva provide the metaphorical locations.

²² Porphyry did indeed spend some time at Athens as a pupil of Longinos before he went to Rome to study with Plotinus. For an excellent concise summary of his philosophy, including his doctrine of the Trinity and his anti-Christian polemics cf. Jens Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus*, Munich 2004, 142-152.