



THE TRINITY: A HISTORY

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When the first Sunday of Advent comes and the new liturgical year begins, the Church once again relives the Mysteries of Christ for a whole year. She also summarizes all of history, from Creation to the end of time. The four Sundays of Advent symbolizing the four thousand years of the Old Testament (if we rely on the Vulgate, not the Septuagint), we are, as it were, mystically transported back to the time before the Incarnation of the Man-God. It is opportune, then, to dwell during this time on the Law of types and figures to see New-Testament realities hidden in it.

Saint Augustine has it that *novum testamentum in vetere latet. Vetus testamentum in novo patet* — “the New Testament is hidden in the Old. The Old Testament is revealed in the New” (see reference information [here](#) and [here](#)).

This canon of interpretation is a standard part of the Catholic approach to the Bible. Let us look, then, for the Blessed Trinity “hidden” in the Old Testament.

We begin at the beginning, Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created heaven, and earth.” The Hebrew for “God created” is *bara Elohim*, which has the linguistic peculiarity of a plural noun followed by a singular verb, something which actually does not violate the grammatical rules of Hebrew.

The particular kind of plural here used means three or more, (there is, in Hebrew, a plural that indicates only two). A conventional way of dismissing the trinitarian interpretation of this name for God is to say that it is a plurality “of majesty,” much as the queen or the pope might say “we” instead of the first person singular.

This, of course, is not how Christian exegetes classically understood such passages. See, for instance, [Saint Lawrence of Brindisi](#), a man learned enough in Hebrew to preach in it:

“Therefore, since Moses, inspired by the Holy Ghost, wrote bara Elohim, literally, ‘the gods, he-created’ (a plural subject with a singular verb), without doubt we understand the sense of these words: he means plurality of divine Persons in the word Elohim and the unity of essence in the singular verb, ‘he-created.’ That is to say, three divine Persons are not three gods, but one God” ([Explicatio in Genesim](#), Ch. 1).

Nobody, of course, says that this passages *proves* that there is one God in three divine Persons. That would be a reach. But it does foreshadow what the New Testament later reveals clearly when it indicates a plurality of Persons in the Godhead.

We can say the same about two other passages in Genesis where the so-called "plural of majesty" is found: "And he said: Let us make man to our image and likeness..." (Gen. 1:26), and "Come ye, therefore, let us go down, and there confound their tongue, that they may not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:7). The first is the divine utterance preceding the creation of Adam, while the second concerns the builders of the Tower of Babel.

God created man in *His own image*, in the image of God. He was not speaking to the angels, in whose image man was not created, but to Himself in Gen. 1:26. In both Latin and English, we have a plural hortatory subjunctive verb, "Let us make..." in verse 26, followed in the next verse by the singular indicative verb, "God created." This is substantially the same in the language of inspiration: see an interlinear translation of the Hebrew — [v. 26](#) and [v. 27](#) — for proof.

In confounding the tongues at Babel, there is a similar structure: in [Genesis 11:7](#), the two verbs for "let us go down and confound..." are plural, while the subsequent [verse eight](#) has a singular verb for "the Lord [Yahweh] scattered..."

In both cases, Moses was privileged to know — and we to read — the internal counsels of God, speaking in a plurality of Persons.

Remaining in Genesis for one more account, we turn to Chapters [eighteen](#) and [nineteen](#), where Moses relates the interaction of the three angels with Abraham and then with Lot. This is the account that terminates in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The whole thing is quite mystical, for Genesis alternately calls these three persons "men" and "angels" —

as do the Gospels, by the way, concerning the angels who appeared to the women after the Resurrection. More mysterious is that these three angels show up just after Genesis eighteen mentions that "[Yahweh](#)" appeared to Abraham, of whose appearance *nothing else is said*, unless we assume that the appearance of the three angels *is* the appearance of Yahweh. Moreover, Abraham "adored down to the ground. And he said: Lord [[Adonai](#)], if I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away from thy servant" (Gen. 18:2-3).

If

these angels did not stand in the place of God, such an act would be a shocking violation of the Old Testament's strict monotheism. By comparison, when Saint John bowed down to the feet of an angel ([Apoc. 22:8-9](#)), the angel stayed him, and forbidding that he should receive such honors: "See thou do it not: for I am thy fellow servant... Adore God." But the angels who received similar honors from Abraham made no such remonstrance, probably because they were standing in the Person(s) of God.

Saint Augustine interpreted this passage in a Trinitarian sense in [book two of his *On the Trinity*](#) (see [here](#) for a brief but interesting discussion of this passage). According to Monsignor Pohle, Saint Augustine was of the opinion that the three angels of Genesis eighteen were just that, angels, not actually God Himself, but their mission was such that the words they spoke were understood to be the words of God; they were, in other words, standing in God's place. This opinion was shared by Saints Athanasius, Basil, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Jerome, Gregory the Great, and others. This "standing in the place of" would help us to make sense out of the Angel's willingness to allow Abraham to "adore down to the ground": the adoration was going to the three divine Persons whom they were visibly manifesting.

As can be seen from the list in the last paragraph, it is not only Western but also Eastern Fathers who read this episode as a Trinitarian [theophany](#). One of Christian Russia's most celebrated icons, [the *Trinity*, by Andrei Rublev](#), is a depiction of Abraham's hospitality to these three angels, but with a clear Trinitarian interpretation.

Still

remaining in the Pentateuch, we come to the Book of Numbers 6:24-27. This is the blessing that God instructed Moses to teach to Aaron and his priestly sons: "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee. The Lord shew his face to thee, and have mercy on thee. The Lord turn his countenance to thee, and give thee peace." The blessing is threefold, leading many Christian commentators to see in it the Holy Trinity. Notice that the "face" the Levitical priest wishes God to show us is the second of the three: it is the [Holy Face of Jesus](#)! For a brief explanation of this blessing by an exegete who is apparently not a Catholic, [see this YouTube video](#).

Many

Franciscan priests will use this formula of Numbers six to bless people. The story of how this blessing came to be known as "the blessing of Saint Francis" [is edifying](#).

We pass now to the Prophecy of Isaias, [chapter six](#), which gives us the *Sanctus* in our Holy Mass. Here is what Monsignor Joseph Pohle says on it in his text on the Trinity ([pg. 12](#)):

"The clearest allusion to the mystery of the Blessed Trinity in the Old Testament is probably the so-called Trisagion ["thrice holy"] of Isaias (VI, 3): "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God of Hosts, all the earth is full of his glory," which is rightly made much of by many Fathers and not a few theologians. This triple "Holy" [uttered by the seraphim, the highest angelic choir] refers to an ecstatic vision of the Godhead, by which Isaias was solemnly called and consecrated as the Prophet of the Incarnate Word, an office which won for him the title of the "Evangelist" among the four major prophets."

The Hebrew word for "holy" is *Kadosh* (or [qā-dō-wōš](#)).

Regarding the tripling of the word, some authors claim that there is no regular way of forming the comparative and superlative degrees of the adjective in Hebrew, and that this triple utterance of the adjective is an effort at the superlative. I've seen this contested by others, who say that the tripling of the adjective is merely an "intensifier." I will let the Hebrew specialists fight it out; either way — whether constrained by the conventions of Hebrew usage or the desire to be

"intense" — the Holy Isaias taught us that God is not simply "holy," but "Holy, holy, holy"; and the Church has seen in this sublime utterance of the seraphim a foreshadowing of the full revelation of the Trinity.

In

another indication of plurality in the Godhead, the same Isaias also presents the future Messiah as God. Here are some of his descriptions of Christ to come: "the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the Prince of Peace... God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come" (Is. 9:6, cf. Luke 1:32); "Emmanuel," literally, "God with us" (Is. 7:14, cf. Matt. 1:23); "God himself will come and will save you" (Is. 35:4; cf. Matt. 9:5); "Prepare ye the way of the Lord... Behold, the Lord God shall come with strength" (Is. 40:3, 10; cf. Mark 1:3).

Of the Messianic Psalms, I

will select only two passages: "The Lord hath said to me: Thou art my son, this day I have begotten thee" (Ps. 2:7) and "The Lord said to my Lord: Sit thou at my right hand . . . from the womb before the day star I begot thee" (Ps. 109 [110]:1-3). Here, the Messiah is shown to be the *Son of God*. Moreover, He is "my [David's] Lord," who is at the same time the Son of "the Lord"; He is, in other words, both *Son of God* and *God*. During His public life, Our Lord confounded the Pharisees with the mystery hidden in Psalm 109 (cf. [Matt. 22:41-46](#)).

If they had had good will, His enemies would have asked Him to explain the passage, which was perfectly fulfilled in Himself, but they held their tongues. Concerning Our Lord's enemies, Saint Augustine pointed out that the unbelieving Jews of His day understood more of Christ's claims than the Arians did, for the unbelievers understood Him to call Himself God simply because he called God His Father (cf. [Jn. 5:18](#), and [Jn. 10:33](#); note that Jesus did not deny the accusation), whereas the heretics missed that point, and denied Him divine honors. All of this shows a plurality of persons in the Godhead, at least as concerns the Father and the Son.

One last strain of Old-Testament prophecies that show

the plurality of persons in God comes to us from the Wisdom Books. To keep this *Ad Rem* from getting too long, I will refer the reader to Monsignor Pohle's page sixteen and following: ["The Teaching of the Sapiential Books"](#).

Those who would like to read more of our offerings on this tremendous Mystery are invited to view [a small catalogue of them on Catholicism.org](#).

The Mystery of the Holy Trinity is a "pure Mystery" or an "absolute Mystery," meaning both that we have no way of knowing it without the benefit of supernatural revelation, and that we cannot comprehend it fully. Because It is such a Mystery — indeed, it is the greatest of our Mysteries — we cannot know *everything* about It, but we can know what God has taught us through the Church. And that is both true and sufficient for us to adore the Three:

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen!"

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The [photo](#) shows, "The Holy Trinity," by Luca Rossetti da Orta, fresco, 1738-9, St. Gaudenzio Church at Ivrea (Torino).

