

CHRIST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

"You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham?" "Amen, amen, I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was, I am!" (Jn. 8:57-58).

Jesus' remarkable statement about his pre-existence from the beginning suggests that we can see the ontological presence of Christ in the Old Testament. While it is correctly pointed out that the Old Testament does not explicitly teach the doctrine of the Trinity, it is also fair to say that it lays the foundation for the later revelation of the Trinity, and indeed, there are significant places where the Old Testament offers fascinating hints about what would be revealed more fully later on. This is especially true regarding the person of Christ.

THE WORD TRINITY

The word "Trinity" is not in the Bible. It first appears in the early church fathers in the late 2nd century, a Latin word trinitas meaning "three in one." Tertullian coined the formula "three persons in one substance," which became a typical way of describing the Trinity. God is one with respect to his Nature, but he is three with respect to his inner Being, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The God Who is a Complex One

The word "one" in Hebrew (*'echad*), which is used in the basic confession of Israel's faith (Dt. 6:4), "Hear O Israel, Yahweh our God is one Yahweh," is a word that can mean not merely a mathematical one but also a unity or a complex one. For instance, it is the same word used in the creation of the first humans who were to be united into one flesh (Gen. 2:24). It is used to describe the various pieces of the Tabernacle so that, when it was set up, "the Tabernacle was one" (Ex. 26:6). It should be no surprise, then, that in the *Shema*, the name Yahweh (singular) is coupled with the name Elohim (plural): "Yahweh, our Elohim, is one Yahweh!"

In the Hebrew Bible, the common designation for God is the plural form Elohim, but when it is used to refer to Yahweh God, it invariably has a singular verb (and in biblical Hebrew, verbs drive the sentence). The meaning seems to be that there is but one God, but he is a plurality of majesty and divine attributes. The underlying reason for this grammatically plural form is to indicate the all-inclusiveness of God's authority as possessing every conceivable attribute of divine power.

While most pronouns used for God appear in the masculine singular form, there are several places where a plural pronoun is used, especially when God himself is speaking. He can say, for instance, "Let us make mankind in our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). And later, "The human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:22). And still later, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language" (Gen. 11:7). And in Isaiah, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' (Isa. 6:8). While one might suppose that these plural pronouns are simply the "royal we," the early church fathers understood (correctly in my view) that there was something more profound going on—that these passages lay the groundwork for God's revelation as the Trinity, and especially, the revelation of Christ Jesus, his Son.

The Agent of Creation

How did God create the universe? On the face of it, Genesis simply describes God as speaking, “Let there be...” However, the writers of the New Testament saw something deeper. John describes this Word as personal: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,¹ and the Word was God. All things were made by him, and apart from him was not anything made that was made” (Jn. 1:1-3). John is not alone in this confession of Christ as the divine Agent of creation. Paul also says that “by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth...all things were created by him and for him” (Col. 1:15). Indeed, Paul would go so far as to say that the universe itself only coheres because Christ “holds [it] together” (Col. 1:17). In the Letter to the Hebrews, it says that the hymn of creation in Psalms 102:25-27 was also “about the Son” (Heb. 1:10-12), who “laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your [his] hands.” Finally, the Book of Revelation says that Jesus is the *arche* (= first cause, origin) of God's creation (Rev. 3:14).

Hence, when the universe began, the preexistent Word—who was Someone, not merely something—was already there. In his prayer on the night of his arrest, Jesus affirmed that he was loved by the Father before the universe was created (17:24) and that he possessed divine glory with the Father before the world came into existence (17:5).

It is likely that John and other writers, when speaking of Christ as the Agent of creation, had in mind the personification of Divine Wisdom as it appears in Proverbs 8:22-31. Here, Wisdom is both older than the creation and fundamental to it. Not a speck of matter (8:26b) nor a trace of order (8:29) came into existence but by Wisdom. In the creation, Wisdom was the craftsman at God's side (30). In the New Testament, St. Paul can speak of Christ as the “Wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24).

God Speaks to God

The Psalms have some intriguing passages, such as, the opening of Psalm 110, where, “Yahweh says to Adonay (my Lord), ‘Sit at my right hand...” When David speaks of “my Lord,” he must have been referring to a divine person, since there was no one greater than David himself. Who was this divine person if not Christ? (Jesus would use this very Psalm to silence his detractors, cf. Mt. 22:41-46). Similarly, in Psalm 45:6-7 it says, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever...therefore, God, your God, has set you above your companions...” In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews pointedly says that this passage was “about [God] the Son” (Heb. 1:8).

The Angel of the LORD

The Angel of the LORD is a theophany² of God who comes to perpetuate God's covenant and to protect his people. He appears first in the Hagar stories (Gen.

THE ANGEL

Beginning in the Book of Genesis, the reader encounters a special revelation of God through an angel variously called the Mal'ak Yahweh (= angel of the LORD), the Mal'ak ha-Elohim (= angel of God) or the Mal'ak Panim (= angel of the face).

¹ In the Greek expression *pros ton Theon* (= with God), the preposition *pros* is related to the Greek noun *prosopon* (= face). Hence, the Word was, as it were, face-to-face with God.

² Theophany means “God appearing.”

16:7-13; 21:17) and later in the binding of Isaac narrative (Gen. 22:11-18). In the latter, we find the Angel of the LORD calling out to Abraham (Gen. 22:11, 15). Here, the figure takes oath to bless and fulfill his promises to Abraham by saying, "I swear by myself..." Clearly, the Angel not only speaks *for* God, he also speaks *as* God. This interchangeability between the Angel of the LORD and Yahweh appears in other passages as well, such as, when Moses stood before the burning bush, and the Angel appeared to him from within the flames (Ex. 3:2). This same Angel of the LORD then says, "I am the God of your Father, the God of Abraham..." (Ex. 2:6). Clearly, the Angel is in some sense Yahweh himself. **He is, to use the words in the Nicene Creed, "God of God...very God of very God." Who is this Angel if not the Son of God, who speaks both *for* God and *as* God?**

Similarly, though the title "Angel of Yahweh" is not given in the story of Jacob's wrestling match at Peniel (the text simply calls the figure "a man"), the prophet Hosea certainly understood the story to refer to the Angel (Gen. 32:22-30; Ho. 12:4). Afterward, Jacob named the place Peniel (= face of God), because, as he said, "I saw God face to face..." (Gen. 32:30). Hence, at times the Angel of the LORD seems to be distinguishable from God and at other times the figure merges into God. The Angel can speak on behalf of God in the third person, i.e., "Yahweh has heard of your misery..." (Gen. 16:11; 21:17; Jg. 6:11-12), but he can also speak as God in the first person, i.e., "I am the God of your father..." (Ex. 3:4-6). When one has seen the Angel of the LORD, he/she can claim in some sense to have looked upon God (Gen. 16:13; cf. Gen. 32:30; Jg. 6:22; 13:22).

THE ANGEL AND THE COVENANT PEOPLE

*It is in the interests of the covenant and the protection of the covenant people that the Angel of Yahweh intervenes to warn and to defend. He warned Jacob when he should leave Padan-Aram (Gen. 31:11). On his deathbed, Jacob could summarize the activities of God during his lifetime, as well as during the lives of his father and grandfather, as being under the providential care of "the Angel," and the word "the Angel" stands in apposition to the word "God" (Gen. 48:15-16). The Angel of Yahweh traveled with the children of Israel as their leader (Ex. 14:19). When Moses rehearsed the events of the exodus, he said, "Yahweh sent an Angel and brought us out of Egypt" (Num. 20:16; cf. Isa. 63:9). The promise was that God's "Angel" would lead them all the way to Canaan (Ex. 23:20, 23; 32:34). This Angel of the LORD continues to appear during the period of the judges (Jg. 2:1-4; 5:23; 6:11; 13:3) and the period of the kings (2 Sa. 24:15-17; 1 Chr. 21:14-19; 2 Kg. 1:3-4, 15; 19:35; 2 Chr. 32:21; Isa. 37:36; Zec. 3:1-10). As before, he can both speak for God and as God (Jg. 6:11, 14). **The early church fathers properly identified this Angel with Christ.***

Since the Angel of the LORD frequently appears in a protective or redemptive role, the figure seems to express the nature of the covenant God who reveals himself to save his people. On one occasion, when the returned exiles were suffering great hardship, the Angel of Yahweh is even depicted as a Mediator interceding for the people (Zec. 1:12-13), very much the same role that Christ now has (Heb. 7:25). When Malachi predicted the coming of the Messiah, he called him the Angel of the Covenant, a designation that probably refers to the one who would establish the new covenant foreseen by Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Mal. 3:1; cf. Je. 31:31-34; 33:19-22; Eze. 16:60-63; 34:25ff.; 37:24-28). **It is this redemptive aspect of the Angel of the LORD which led many of the church fathers to view the figure as an early manifestation of the preexistent Son of**

God. The interchangeability between the Angel of the LORD and God himself, sometimes speaking as God and sometimes speaking for God, seemed to be referring to Christ, the second person of the Trinity, the *Logos*, who was with God but who at the same time was God (cf. Jn. 1:1-2). The fact that the figure disappears altogether in the New Testament suggests that the ancient theophany was no longer appropriate after the incarnation of God's Son. The One who appears on rare occasions to New Testament Christians is the resurrected figure of Christ himself (cf. Ac. 9:3-5//22:6-8//26:13-15//1 Co. 9:1; Ac. 7:55-56, 59-60; Rev. 1:10-18).

Jacob's Ladder

When Jacob fled northward after having gained the birthright and blessing (Gen. 28), he encountered one of the most unusual yet specific acts of grace in all the Old Testament, and considering Jacob's character, it was grace indeed! As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway between heaven and earth with Yahweh standing above it, his angelic retinue ascending and descending. In the dream, Yahweh reconfirmed to Jacob the covenant he had established with Abraham and Isaac. Jacob experienced the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*,³ the mystery, awe and fascination that accompanies a genuine encounter with God. His exclamation, "This. . . is the house of God" (Gen. 28:16-17), provided the name of the place, *Bethel* (= house of God).

What is especially important is the fact that Jesus identified himself as the ladder between heaven and earth, the bridge crossing the uncrossable chasm between God and humans. Jesus knew that the full nature of his identity was still to be revealed, and he indicated as much to Nathanael. In the end Nathanael and the others would come to know Jesus as the bridge between heaven and earth (Jn. 1:50-51). By directly identifying himself as the ladder in Jacob's dream, Jesus implied that he was himself the gate of heaven, the abode of God, and the mediator between God and humans. His pronouncement was solemn and emphatic, beginning with the Hebrew expression, "Amen, amen."⁴

The Rock was Christ

Already, we have seen that the Angel of the LORD was the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the great desert. On one occasion, in particular, when the people of Israel had no water, Moses was instructed by God to take his staff and walk forward until he found a rock with Yahweh standing on it. Moses was to strike the rock, and when he did so, water would gush out to sustain the people (Ex. 17:1-6). How is it that Yahweh "stood upon" this rock? Obviously, some kind of theophany is intended, and theologically, it speaks directly to God as the sustainer of his people, giving them water when they most needed it from a source that seemed impossible. **However, what is most fascinating is St. Paul's explanation, where he directly says, "They all...drank from the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:3-4).**

³ This Latin phrase gains its theological prominence from the classic work by R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford, 1950).

⁴ Jesus' use of the Hebrew expression *Amen* is unique in that, unlike the traditional usage that puts the *Amen* at the end of a statement, Jesus places it at the beginning of a pronouncement. In the synoptic gospels, the *Amen* occurs as a single word, but in the Fourth Gospel, it appears as a double expression, i.e., "Amen, amen."