

# ON THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA

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Michelangelo is forever remembered as the Italian sculptor, painter, poet, engineer and architect who exerted an unparalleled influence on the High Renaissance period. His legacy lives to this day. He left some famous words that leave a window into his mind. For instance ...

*I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.*

*Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish.*

*Genius is eternal patience.*

Food for thought! And who hasn't been enthralled looking at his paintings and statues? One of his depictions in particular has often puzzled me. Why does Michelangelo paint or sculpt Moses with horns coming out of the top of his head? Ever noticed this peculiarity? Yep, for Michelangelo, Moses had horns!

It goes back to Michelangelo's reading of Moses descending from Mt. Sinai. Moses' face shone with the glory of the LORD, and the people were frightened to look on him, so he put a veil over his face when he talked with them. But why did Michelangelo give Moses horns?

A little research reveals that Michelangelo only had a copy of the Latin version of the Bible. And the Latin Bible translated Moses' face shining with the glory of the LORD with the word "horns"! A tragic mistake indeed, and a terrible legacy.

The upshot is that to this day, Michelangelo's interpretation is forever inscribed in paint and set in stone. It's easy for a myth to begin innocently and become forever etched in the public psyche.

This story gets me to wondering: Is it possible we could be holding on to other distorted interpretations that have come down to us over the generations? Well, it's not only possible, but has happened. The story of how the apostolic church with its roots firmly planted in Jewish soil, was infiltrated by the Gentile Graeco-Roman world-view only a generation or two from Jesus himself, has been thoroughly documented by many fine scholars.

However, in spite of this massive evidence of mythological infiltration, most believers remain unaware of the extent to which the Church has become the vehicle for pagan interpretation. The machinations and decrees of Church synods and councils, both subtle and strident, have delivered the head of the Bible Jesus on the platter of ecclesiasticism no less effectively than Herod's famous decapitation of John the Baptist! **(1)**.

## THE TRIADIC BAPTISMAL FORMULA.

Allow me to demonstrate just one clear case: The belief that “God the Spirit” is the so-called Third Member or Person of the holy Trinity.

One of the most-used ‘proof-texts’ for the Holy Spirit being the Third Person in the Trinity is the triadic baptismal formula given by Jesus:

**“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19).**

It is argued, that since the Father is a Person, and Jesus is a Person, and all three subjects are subsumed under one name in a triadic formula, the Holy Spirit must also be a Person. To have Three Persons under “the name” must indicate God is a Tri-unity, surely? So say the majority.

This line of reasoning is apparently strengthened by Matthew’s account of Jesus’ own baptism. According to the traditional view, all Three Members of the Triune God were there at the Jordan River. God the Father is in Heaven and says, **“This is My Son”**. “God the Son” is in the Jordan being baptized by John. And the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, so there is “God the Spirit”: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit --- all Three Persons of the Trinity are present and accounted for!

### **Context, Context, Context.**

The recurrent temptation when reading our Bibles is to read back into them our own inherited “horns”, rather than letting the original context determine the interpretation.

There are at least 3 contexts that must be considered when looking at Matthew’s triadic baptismal formula and his account of Jesus’ baptism. First, the overall and general context into which Matthew fits, specifically his ‘immersion’ (!) in the OT Scriptures. Second, the way Matthew himself deals with “the Spirit” in his own book, and third, the immediate contexts in which Jesus’ own baptism, and his command to baptize, sit.

**1. Matthew’s Old Testament Context.** Of the four Gospels, Matthew’s is considered the most ‘Jewish’. Matthew is concerned to give the royal genealogy of Jesus from Abraham and David and through these credentials to prove Jesus is none other than the promised Messiah and King of Israel. We will shortly see that Matthew stays right in tune with the OT understanding of the “Spirit of God”. Matthew does not suddenly at Jesus’ baptism introduce a new doctrine of “God the Spirit”.

We note that throughout Israel’s history “the Spirit of the LORD” came upon and empowered men and women to ‘step up to the plate’ and perform the office and the task God wanted them to accomplish. Even the most conservative of Trinitarian scholars admit the Hebrew Scriptures do not support the doctrine of “God the Spirit” as Third Member of the Trinity. [George Eldon Ladd](#) for instance admits:

The *ruach Yahweh* [Spirit of the Lord] in the Old Testament is not a separate, distinct entity; it is God's power --- the personal activity in God's will achieving a moral and religious object. God's *ruach* is the source of all that is alive, of all physical life. The Spirit of God is the active principle that proceeds from God and gives life to the physical world (Gen. 2:7). It is also the source of religious concerns, raising up charismatic leaders, whether judges, prophets, or kings. The *ruach Yahweh* [Spirit of God] is a term for the historical creative action of the one God which, though it defies logical analysis, is always God's action. (2)

This sentiment is the general consensus of the vast majority of scholars:

The continuity of thought between Hebraic and Christian understanding of the Spirit is generally recognized ... There can be little doubt that from the earliest stages of pre-Christian Judaism "spirit" [*ruach*] denoted *power* ---the awful, mysterious force of the wind [*ruach*], of the breath [*ruach*] of life, of ecstatic inspiration (induced by divine *ruach*) ... in particular, "Spirit of God" denotes *effective divine power* ... in other words, on this understanding, *Spirit of God is in no sense distinct from God*, but is simply the power of God, *God Himself acting powerfully in nature and upon men*. (3).

So, "the Spirit of God" is Yahweh Himself in action in His world. In OT understanding, "the Spirit of God" is not a distinct Other Person who is a second (or a third) Yahweh God. Unless there is very strong textual evidence to suggest otherwise, we have to believe Matthew stays 'on song' and 'in tune' with his Hebrew roots that "Yahweh is One".

The first time **Matthew** speaks of "the Holy Spirit" is in **chapter 1:18**. There he informs us that "the birth (Grk. *genesis* or *origin*) of Jesus Messiah" is the result of Mary being with child "**by the Holy Spirit**". This is repeated in **verse 20** where fiancé Joseph is reassured, "**Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived** (Grk. *gennethen ... begotten, fathered, generated, procreated, caused to exist*) **in her is of the Holy Spirit.**" "The Holy Spirit" is responsible for Jesus' birth.

It might be well to pause and consider the difficulty the Trinitarian doctrine causes if we think Matthew suddenly introduces the novel idea that the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person --- rather than God Himself acting in His world as per the OT understanding. If suddenly out of nowhere, "the Holy Spirit" is "God the Spirit", Jesus now has *two Fathers!* But where is the evidence that Jesus (or any other NT witness for that matter) imagined "God the Spirit" was his father! (Official Trinitarian doctrine is that the Persons must not be confused!)

Perish the thought. When Matthew speaks of "the holy Spirit" he is speaking from the OT paradigm, and not a post-Nicean model of "God the Spirit". Matthew knows "the holy Spirit" is accepted terminology for God Himself acting powerfully in His world, and in this case, in the miraculous procreation of Jesus.

**2. The Immediate Context With John the Baptist.** The next significant reference Matthew makes to the Holy Spirit is in relation to John the Baptist's ministry. Jesus stands subsequent to John and is introduced by John.

John the Baptist's prophetic ministry stands at a critical point in human history. There has been no prophet in Israel for over 400 years. The rabbis said the Spirit of God had been silent for that 400 years. But John the Baptist was "filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15), and his whole life was dedicated to being "a voice crying in the wilderness" for Israel to welcome her Messiah.

The expectation of all in Israel when they heard this Spirit-filled prophet in the desert, clad in camel's hair, eating locusts dipped in honey, was that at last their great deliverer, the promised Davidic descendant and king, would bring in the Messianic age. What kind of an age would this be?

If John baptizes in water, the one coming after him would baptize in "the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt. 3:11). John's baptism thus was symbolic and preparatory for the new Messianic age, and that age was to be characterized by a baptism in the Holy Spirit defined as, "the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning" (Is. 4:4). Israel, and through her the world, was thus at the crossroads of God's prophetic timetable. Israel had better get ready because the Messianic New Age required a holy Spirit immersion characterized by purifying fire.

What precisely then, was John's role in baptizing Jesus? Jesus says there was nobody born of women greater than John the Baptist, and that "all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John" (Matt. 11:11-13). Yet for all that, the least significant in the [new] kingdom age was greater than John!

On Jesus' own testimony then, John was the greatest of all prophets. How come? Precisely because he announced *Jesus* to be the Messiah. John's greatness was related to the timing, as no other prophet in Israel had ever had this privilege of announcing Messiah's presence (though many of course, would have died for the honour).

If Samuel was the anointer of David, and if Elijah anointed kings (I Sam. 10:1; 16:13; I Kgs. 19:15-16) then John was the baptizer of Messiah Jesus. Remember that for 400 years there had been no prophet filled with the Spirit of Yahweh, no prophetic voice. Jesus' baptism was his 'official' anointing for Messianic mission and it came through one who was recognized in Israel as its last genuine prophet.

Jesus' baptism was a critical point for him and all 4 gospels record it. When we read about God the Father's declaration from the 'split' or 'torn' heavens, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased", how did John the Baptist (and Matthew) interpret the message? When we read about "the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon" Jesus at his baptism, what lesson(s) did they draw?

John was told that the one on whom he saw the Spirit of God descend and remain was the one who would himself baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This is 'code-speak' for bringing in the new Messianic age.

So there is a significant difference to Jesus' anointing by John the Baptist from any previous anointing by the prophets in all of Israel's long history ... John could only stand by while God in Heaven Himself poured out the anointing, not with symbolic oil, but by a direct outpouring of His Spirit made visible in the form of a dove!

And what of God the Father's words, "This is My Son, in whom I am well pleased"? They are a direct quote of the prophetic Spirit from **Psalm 2** and **Isaiah 42**.

In **Psalm 2**, Yahweh God says to His Anointed (Heb. *Messiah*. LXX *Christ*), "But as for Me, I have installed My king upon Zion, My holy mountain." The Messianic king replies, "I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "Thou art My Son."

In **Isaiah 42:1**, Yahweh God says in prophecy to His [still future] Messiah, "Behold My servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My Soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon him ..." God proceeds to say this Anointed one will be appointed "as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations," etc. (v. 6f).

Bottom line: God's word to Jesus at his baptism declared him to be the Son and King of Psalm 2 and the Servant of Isaiah 42 on whom His Spirit would rest for the task of bringing in the Kingdom of God. Up until this moment Jesus had been a private citizen going about his normal business of carpentry. But now none other than the God of Israel Himself designates Jesus as His Servant-Son.

John, having witnessed God's anointing of Jesus, now preaches, "this is the Son of God", that is, the King of Israel and the Saviour who takes away the sin of the world (**John 1:29**).

Surely Matthew's Gospel is introducing the claims of Jesus as Messiah! One must logically ask, where in all this is Matthew's intention to introduce a Trinity of Persons in the 'Godhead'? To introduce *that* from such a momentous occasion in Jesus' life is a 'curve ball' from 'left of field' surely? Or, to change the metaphor, that's got horns on it!

**3. The Entire Context of Matthew's Gospel.** Throughout Matthew and the other gospel writers, Jesus understood his ministry in terms of the Spirit of God operating through him. After his baptism in the Jordan the Spirit "impelled" Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. Jesus then enters public life and his first sermon in the synagogue at Capernaum was based on the text,

**"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor ... (Lk. 4:18f).**

Jesus understood his entire mission was by the empowering of "the Spirit of the LORD" ...

**"Behold, My servant whom I have chosen; My beloved in whom My Soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon him ..." (Matt. 12:18f).**

Significantly, Jesus sees his anointing with God's Spirit in the context of being locked in a do-or-die battle with Satan and his demonic hordes. The exorcism of demonic spirits was a central feature in his kingdom work. Have you ever noticed that when Jesus first mentions the sin of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" that it is in connection with his ministry of exorcism (**Matt. 12:31-32; Mk. 3:28-29; Luke 12: 10**)?

The dire warning against blasphemy testifies how seriously Jesus viewed his exorcisms as credentials for his calling. For him they were a key proof he was the

Anointed One, the Messiah. His exorcisms were a sure sign that God's end-time Kingdom had arrived. To deny this evidence was to put oneself outside the possibility of forgiveness, and outside that eschatological kingdom: It was nothing less than blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

The entire kingdom-mission of Jesus is summed up this way:

You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how he went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil; for God was with him (Acts 10:38).

All of this is to say that Jesus (and his followers) understood his Messianic call as introducing the Kingdom of God, and that kingdom was characterized by the effective power of God's Spirit in healings, exorcisms, and teaching. Without God's backing Jesus would have been no Messiah! But now surely, the end-time rule of God was being inaugurated by displays of the power of the new age of "the Spirit". Sufficient to say, there is an undeniable and unbreakable link between "the Spirit" and the Kingdom in Jesus' thought ...

But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Matt. 12: 28).

So, the kingdom work of Jesus is by the power and anointing of God's Spirit upon him. John tells us God gave "the Spirit without measure" to him (John 3:34). In days gone by "the Spirit of God" was given in varying degrees to Moses, and Elijah, and all the OT prophets ending with John the Baptist. But here stands Jesus *the Messiah* --- *the Anointed One* --- as the first man through whom the "Spirit of the LORD" flows *unmeasured, unhindered, uninterrupted*.

Let's see how other gospel writers interpret Matthew's phrase, "I cast out demons by the Spirit of God." Luke's variation reads:

But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come among you (Luke 11:20).

It is clear the expressions "I cast out demons by the Spirit of God" and "I cast out demons by the finger of God" are equivalent. And certainly, "the finger of God" is not a description of a person! Such terms of equivalence are a dead giveaway that "the Spirit of God" is not a Person *per se* but represents the Personal God Himself in powerful action, as per OT usage.

Another case: In Matthew's gospel Jesus encourages his disciples that when they are hauled before the courts for his name's sake they must not be troubled for, they will be taught in that self-same hour what to say:

For it is not you who speak, but it is "the Spirit of your Father which is speaking in you (Matt. 12:20).

Mark has a slight variation,

“...say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit” (Mk. 13:11).

But observe Luke’s elucidation on the same report,

I [Jesus!] will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute” (Luke 21:15).

Thus, when we put all three parallel accounts together we learn that “the Holy Spirit” is “the Spirit of your Father” is Jesus himself speaking through the disciples. So, when we compare the 3 verses do we have a description of the Three Persons in the Godhead working together harmoniously on behalf of the disciples, or do we have the wonderful truth the disciples are promised that the same Father God Who empowered their Master by His Holy Spirit will give them convincing speech too?

Let’s hold that question and gather a bit more data before definitively answering.

### **The Holy Spirit is Likened to “Good Things”.**

Remember Jesus’ words,

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him (Luke 11:13)?

Now turn to Matthew’s exact parallel:

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt. 7:11).

Matthew’s “good things” are interpreted by Luke to mean “the Holy Spirit”! Wait a minute. Has “God the Spirit” now become “good things”, whether they be spiritual (such as love, joy, peace, patience, etc.) or material (such as daily bread, clothes, etc.)? This is a dead give-away that Matthew does not believe in “God the Spirit” as confessed in the Trinitarian creed of today.

There are many verses that present “the Holy Spirit” as being a god-like attitude or quality. For example, the twelve apostles instructed the congregation of disciples to pick seven men of good repute who were “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” Two verses later Stephen is described as a man “filled with faith and the holy Spirit” (Acts 6: 3f). Similarly Barnabas is a man “full of the holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:24). Later, “the disciples were filled with joy and with the holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). Paul said that the servants of God commend themselves, “by purity, by knowledge, by patience, by kindness, by the holy Spirit, by genuine love, by truthful speech and the power of God” (2 Cor. 6:6).

John wrote, “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree” (1 John 5:7-8). All three subjects --- the Spirit, the water and the blood --- are unified in their testimony and “agree” together. At least two of the elements in this text are not persons, though they are certainly personified because they “testify” and “agree”. Personification in Scripture does not necessarily prove personhood.

This sample proves “the Holy Spirit” is one subject among many subjects that are *not* persons, but rather qualities, emotions, abstractions and yes, even physical objects. Or to use Matthew’s shorthand “the holy Spirit” promised by Jesus is a description of all the “good things” God gives us, both material and spiritual. The “good things” we receive are evidence of God’s gracious operational Presence in our daily experience.

### Consistency Please!

Therefore, those who wish to argue that just because the Holy Spirit is mentioned together with the Father and the Son in the baptismal formula in **Matthew 28:19**, that therefore, “He” must be the Third Person of the Godhead, need to note that the argument runs the other way, too ... Since the Holy Spirit is mentioned alongside all kinds of “good things” --- whether material, emotional, or spiritual --- then “He” is *not necessarily* a Person in His own right. We will need more evidence than the triadic baptismal formula, which frankly as we have seen in Matthew, is not forthcoming. **(4)**.

The leading Roman Catholic theologian **Karl Rahner** after an exhaustive study of the word “God” in the NT concluded with this extraordinary conclusion:

“We may outline our results as follows. Nowhere in the New Testament is there to be found a text with *o theos* which has unquestionably to be referred to the Trinitarian God as a whole existing in three Persons [God as Trinity]. In by far the greater number of texts *o theos* refers to the Father ... In addition, *o theos* is never used in the New Testament to speak of the holy Spirit.” **(5)**.

Rahner states the stubborn fact: In the NT (true to it’s OT foundation) the Holy Spirit is not once called “God”! **Patrick Navas**, a friend of mine in the USA, puts this very well:

“If the inclusion of the “Holy Spirit” along with the “Father” and “Son” in Matthew 28:19 is a basis for arguing in favour of the distinctive ‘personhood’ of the Spirit, i.e. the traditional view, then it seems that one could easily argue that the conjoining of the Spirit with concepts/qualities like “wisdom,” “faith,” “joy,” “purity,” “knowledge,” “patience,” “kindness,” “genuine love,” and even inanimate objects like “water” and “blood” (or an element like ‘fire’), would militate against the traditional view.

“Anyone who meditates on the above texts will quickly see that there is nothing in them that lends itself naturally to the notion that the Spirit is a distinct “divine person” of the “Godhead,” or the like. The general impression is, arguably, that the Spirit is some kind of holy/virtuous, invisible, breath-like influence that comes from God and that faithful people can possess or be filled with (I say ‘breath-like’ based on the fact that both the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma* mean ‘breath’/‘wind’/‘spirit’) ... The expressions “my Spirit” and “Spirit of God” in the book of Matthew (and in other texts) make clear that the Holy Spirit belongs to God. Thus, the Holy Spirit is portrayed in Matthew’s Gospel as belonging to God and as that which comes forth from God.

“Elijah has a spirit (Lk. 1:17); each man has a spirit (1 Cor. 2:11; James 2:26); and the world has a spirit (1 Cor. 2:12). “The living God,” the source of all life, logically, has a Spirit too—leaving one with the impression that the Spirit is more like a property of

God's being ('the Spirit of your Father'; Matt. 10:20) as opposed to a second "person" of God, or the like." (6).

### **The Spirit of a Person is not a Second Person.**

So, when the Bible speaks of "the spirit" of a person, what does it mean? When we read that John the Baptist will go forth "in the spirit and power of Elijah" we automatically know a second individual named Elijah is not meant. We know it means John the Baptist will exercise a powerful ministry under God's anointing as Elijah did.

When Jesus died on the cross and "yielded up his spirit" we instinctively know there are not *two* men by the same name of Jesus! Jesus was surrendering his very "breath" or life-force. When Paul writes, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him" we know "the spirit" is not a second individual duplicating ourselves, but is a reference to our inner mind and thinking process (1 Cor. 2:11).

And when Jesus speaks about "the Spirit of God", or "the Holy Spirit" as "the Spirit of your Father", why do we not follow the universal Scriptural pattern and understand there are not two Individuals who are God? "The Spirit of your Father" is a **metonym for the Father God Himself Personally working.**

If we insist on making "the Spirit of God" the Third person in a Trinity, what will we do with the rest of the verse:

"Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2: 11)?

If no one knows the thoughts of God except "God the Spirit", then His thoughts are not known by either God the Father or God the Son! Thus to insist the "Spirit of God" must be the third Person in the holy Trinity, is to invite a non-sense.

No, no. The Holy Spirit is the very Spirit of the Father God Himself. "The Holy Spirit" is the Father's mind and power working on behalf of His people. Should any doubt remain this is so, just note where the Scriptures use the phrase "the Spirit of the Lord" interchangeably with "the mind of the LORD"...

After discussing God's incredible plan of salvation through Christ Jesus, the apostle Paul bursts out forth in praise,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! [Now he quotes from the OT] For who has known the mind of the LORD, or who became His counselor? (Rom. 11:33-34).

Now, turn back to **Isaiah 40:13** where Paul quotes that verse from. Notice the change:

Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as His counselor has informed Him?

Paul knows that to have "the mind of the LORD" is the same thing as being "directed by the Spirit of the LORD".

## Conclusion.

Those who insist the triadic baptismal formula in **Matthew 28:19** is proof that God is a Trinity of Persons --- and in particular that it proves the Personality of “God the Spirit” --- are faced with a dilemma. **If this was a crucial part of the faith of Jesus, why did his apostles fail to obey this command?** For there is not one recorded instance of them in the Book of Acts ever using the triadic formula when they baptized a new convert. Not one! Every new Christian was baptized in the Name of Jesus, and as far as is recorded in the Scripture (our ultimate authority), the triadic formula was not used.

Matthew’s Gospel itself knows nothing of “God the Spirit” but he knows a lot about “the Spirit of your Father”, and he knows a lot about his Old Testament heritage, where “the Holy Spirit” is a metonym for Yahweh God Himself in operational power. By being consistent and by noting the context and the parallel passages where “the Holy Spirit” is mentioned, we avoid putting “horns” on our doctrine.

May God our Father bless you wonderfully by the power of His Spirit in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## Footnotes

1. I have devoted an entire chapter in *They Never Told me This in Church!*
2. Ladd, G.D. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974. p. 287.
3. Dunn, James D.G. *Christology in the Making*. London: SCM Press, 1989. Second Edition. p. 132-133. (Italics Original)
4. For a fuller treatment of this theme see the chapter *Another Spirit* in my book, *They Never Told Me This in Church!* I also give further exegetical reasons why the triadic baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19 does not refer to the Trinity of Persons in the Godhead in my article “Fairy Tales, Anecdotal Antics, And Tragic Magic: When the Church Makes Belief!” in this web site.
5. Rahner, Karl. *Theological Investigations*, Helicon, 1963, 1:143.
6. Navas, Patrick. *Response to The Trinities Podcast 107-108 (October 12, 2015)*  
*Dr. Robert M. Bowman Jr. On Triadic New Testament Passages.*  
(Article sent to me in private correspondence.)