EQTH105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 3c Scriptural Teaching About the Trinity

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Let's wrap up this unit on the study of the Trinity by reviewing the fact that everything we know about the Trinity comes from Scripture. Within that framework, it will be valuable to conclude this unit by exploring how the Old Testament and the New Testament reveal this nature of the Trinity. Now, to start, we have to remember that from a theological perspective, the doctrine of the Trinity was not clearly formulated as a doctrine of the church until after the New Testament was written. And without the teachings of the New Testament, we would not be aware of this doctrine. However, there were anticipations of the doctrine in the Old Testament. Although not explicitly mentioned, the basis of the doctrine can be detected when exploring the Old Testament.

So first, let's start by saying that there is a plural noun used with a singular verb, and in that, a hint of the doctrine of the Trinity can be found in the very first verse of the Bible. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." [Gen 1:1] Now, I'm not a language scholar, so bear with me. But my research tells me that the Hebrew word for God is Elohim. I should probably say a Hebrew word for God is Elohim. Elohim is a plural noun, but it's used here with a singular verb. In the remainder of the Old Testament, when Elohim speaks of the true God, it is always used with a singular verb. The conclusion to be drawn is that in some sense, God is both singular and plural. And that is the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity. That doctrine states this: that within the nature of one God, there are three eternal persons.

We find a further hint of the Trinity in Genesis 1. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'" [Gen 1:26] The phrase "let us" again gives this idea of plurality. The word "us" in that sense cannot refer to angels, which would have been the only other beings in heaven at the time, but it can't refer to "us" because angels do not create. Therefore, in the first chapter of the Bible, we have a hint of the Trinity within the plural title Elohim used with a singular verb and God speaking and saying, "Let us."

Now, it's not just Genesis 1:1. The words "let us" are used elsewhere of God speaking in Genesis. After Adam and Eve sinned, the Bible records, "Then the Lord said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.'" [Gen 3:22] At the incident at the Tower of Babel, we read God saying, "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so they will not understand one another's speech." [Gen 11:7] Isaiah the prophet recorded God saying, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for Us?'" [Isa 6:8] That, by the way, is another example of this mixed sense where a reference to God is both singular and plural. He says, "Whom shall I send?" and then in the same sentence says, "Who will go for us?"

There is another instance in Isaiah where there is this second plural name for God. "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called." [Isa 54:5]   The word translated maker is plural in Hebrew. And so we have a second instance where a plural word is used of God. The clearest Old Testament statement that gives a clear indication of the Trinity is in Isaiah.

It reads, "Come near me and listen to this: 'From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there.' And now the Sovereign Lord has sent me with his Spirit. This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.'" [Isa 48:16-17]

In verse 16, God the Son is speaking. He identifies the Father, the Sovereign Lord, and his Spirit as having sent him. In the next verse, the Son is clearly spoken of as the Lord when he refers to the Redeemer. As you can see, these verses identify three distinct persons who are God without denying the fact that there is only one God. In addition, each member of the Trinity is mentioned individually in the Old Testament. In Isaiah, we read, "For you are our Father, although Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name." [Isa 63:16] Malachi wrote, "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?" [Mal 2:10]

So those are two verses that refer to the Father. But the Son is also found in the Old Testament. In Psalm 2, we read, "I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill. I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you." [Psa 2:6-7] Later in that same psalm, he says, "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him." [Psa 2:12] In the Book of Proverbs, we read, "Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands? Who has wrapped up his waters in his cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name and the name of his son? Tell me if you know!" [Pro 30:4] Interesting. In that verse, we see reference to both God the Father and God the Son.

It goes deeper, however. God's son, the Messiah, is described with divine titles. We read, "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.'" [Jer 23:5-6] Isaiah wrote, and perhaps you remember these words from Handel's Messiah, "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." [Isa 9:6] Again, we see these cross references in the same verse. It says a son is given and he will be called Everlasting Father.

The Holy Spirit or the Spirit of the Lord is also mentioned in the Old Testament. In the Book of Genesis, we read, "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." [Gen 1:2] Isaiah recorded the following: "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears." [Isa 11:2-3]

The Trinity is foreshadowed in the triple benediction of Numbers 6. It says, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." [Num 6:26-27] When Jacob blessed his son Joseph, he used the name of God three times. Each time, God's name was identified differently. It says, "Then he blessed Joseph and said, 'May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth.'" [Gen 14:15-16] Now, I know this is not conclusive, but the triple benedictions are consistent with the doctrine of the Trinity.

On the flip side, however, is a valid question. If the doctrine of the Trinity is true, then why don't we find it more explicitly referred to in the Old Testament? Well, part of the answer may lie in the culture in which the Old Testament was written and the culture in which the Israelites existed. Israel was surrounded by nations who were all polytheistic. They believed in many gods. It was important for Israel to realize that the God of the Bible is the only God who existed. Consequently, the oneness of God was stressed. After this truth was firmly understood by Israel, then the Lord revealed further the truth about his basic nature: that he is a Trinity.

So although the Trinity is not explicitly taught in the Old Testament, the basis of this doctrine is certainly found there. First, there is the use of the plural noun for God, Elohim, that is used with a singular verb. This gives us a hint of the Trinity. The Hebrew word for maker, which describes God, is also in the plural. There are also passages where God speaks of himself with the words "let us." This is another possible reference to the Trinity. There are also specific passages where the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are mentioned. Add to this the passages that foreshadow the Trinity with the triple benediction. These passages, however, do not reveal the doctrine of the Trinity. They just hint to it. This was left for the New Testament to accomplish. The Old Testament does not have a developed doctrine of the Trinity. However, truths about the Trinity are foreshadowed in the Old Testament. And most importantly, nothing in the Old Testament contradicts the doctrine of the Trinity.

So now let's turn our attention to the New Testament where a number of New Testament passages mention the three persons of the Trinity. To start, we find all three members of the Trinity at the baptism of Jesus. It says, "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" [Mat 3:16-17] What we see here is that God the Father acknowledged God the Son while God the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus. All three persons.

So that was the beginning of the ministry of Jesus' life on earth. But towards the end, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit as another comforter. He said, "I will ask the Father (another person), and He will give you another Helper (another person), that He may be with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you." [Jhn 14:16-17]

Jesus also said, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." [Jhn 14:26] In preparing the disciples for their future ministry, Jesus, God the Son, tells them he will pray to God the Father to send a helper or a comforter. This is a clear distinction between all members of the Trinity.

We also find the members of the Trinity in greetings of several authors in their letters. In his greeting, Peter makes the distinction between various members of the Trinity when he wrote to believers, "According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure." [1Pe 1:2] Paul's benediction links them together as well. At the end of 2 Corinthians, we have all three members of the Trinity involved. He writes, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all." [2Co 13:14] Paul linked all three members of the Trinity when speaking of the sending of the Holy Spirit. He writes, "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" [Gal 4:6] All three members are mentioned together by Paul when referring to prayer. "For through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father." [Eph 2:18]

All three are linked to God's salvation. Paul, for example, places the three together in speaking of salvation. He writes, "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory." [Eph 1:13] All three members of the Trinity are also linked to the death of Christ. The writer of Hebrews refers to all three members in Hebrews 9:14. "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

So we see the Old Testament alludes to and foreshadows the doctrine of the Trinity, while the New Testament more clearly develops this doctrine. The three distinct members of the Trinity are mentioned a number of times together in the New Testament. We find them at Jesus' baptism where the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus like a dove and God the Father acknowledged Jesus from heaven. Jesus said the water baptism of all believers was to be done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The promise of the Holy Spirit also involved all members of the Trinity. Each member of the Trinity is mentioned in greetings to the church. The Trinity is also mentioned in benedictions. The Bible says that each of the three members of the Trinity provide access to God the Father in all of these examples. And in all of these examples, the members of the Trinity are always assumed to be equals.