

WHAT *Is the* TRINITY?

The Crucial Questions Series

By R. C. Sproul

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R. C. SPROUL

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Chapter One

MONOTHEISM

The concept of the Trinity has emerged as a touchstone of truth, a non-negotiable article of Christian orthodoxy. However, it has been a source of controversy throughout church history, and there remains much confusion about it to this day, with many people misunderstanding it in very serious ways.

Some people think that the doctrine of the Trinity means that Christians believe in three gods. This is the idea of tritheism, which the church has categorically rejected throughout its history. Others see the Trinity as the church's

retreat into contradiction. For instance, I once had a conversation with a man who had a PhD in philosophy, and he objected to Christianity on the grounds that the doctrine of the Trinity represented a manifest contradiction—the idea that one can also be three—at the heart of the Christian faith. Apparently this professor of philosophy was not familiar with the law of non-contradiction. That law states, “A cannot be A and non-A at the same time and in the same relationship.” When we confess our faith in the Trinity, we affirm that God is one in essence and three in person. Thus, God is one in A and three in B. If we said that He is one in essence and three in essence, that would be a contradiction. If we said He is one in person and three in person, that also would be a contradiction. But as mysterious as the Trinity is, perhaps even above and beyond our capacity to understand it in its fullness, the historic formula is not a contradiction.

Before we can talk about the Trinity, we have to talk about unity, because the word *Trinity* means “tri-unity.” Behind the concept of unity is the biblical affirmation of monotheism. The prefix *mono* means “one or single,” while the root word *theism* has to do with God. So, *monotheism* conveys the idea that there is only one God.

THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIONS

The issue of whether the Bible is uniformly monotheistic came into question in the fields of religion and philosophy during the nineteenth century. One of the most dominant philosophers of the nineteenth century was Friedrich Hegel. He developed a complex and speculative philosophy of history that had at its core a concept of historical development or evolution. In the nineteenth century, thinkers were preoccupied with the concept of evolution, but not simply with respect to biology. *Evolution* became almost a buzzword in the academic world and in the scientific community, and it was applied not only to the development of living things, but also to political institutions. For instance, so-called social Darwinism understood human history as the progress of civilizations.

Hegel's followers also applied these evolutionary ideas to the development of religious concepts. They worked with this assumption: All spheres of creation, including religion, follow the pattern of evolution we see in the biological realm, which is evolution from the simple to the complex. In the case of religion, this means that all developed religions evolved from the simple form of animism.

The term *animism* denotes the idea that there are living souls, spirits, or personalities in what we would normally understand to be inanimate or non-living objects, such as rocks, trees, totem poles, statues, and so on.

The idea that primitive religion was animistic seemed to be confirmed by scholars who examined primitive cultures that had survived to the present. Scholars who went to the remote corners of the world and studied the religions of these cultures found that they contained strong elements of animism. So, the assumption was accepted that all religions begin with animism and progressively evolve.

Some scholars believed that animism could be found in the earliest pages of the Old Testament. They often cited the account of the fall, for Adam and Eve were tempted by a serpent that assumed personal characteristics (Gen. 3). He could reason, speak, and act with volition. Critics also referred to the experience of Balaam, whose donkey was enabled to speak (Num. 22). They said this showed that the biblical writers believed there was a spirit in the donkey, just like there was a spirit in the serpent. When I was in seminary, I heard a professor say that animism was being practiced when Abraham met the angels by the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18). The professor said that Abraham was

really conversing with the gods in the trees. However, there is not a shred of evidence in the text that Abraham was engaged in any kind of animism.

Those who hold to an evolutionary view of religion say that the next step in the process is polytheism: many gods. Polytheism was common in the cultures of antiquity. The Greek religion, the Roman religion, the Norse religion, and many others had a god or a goddess for almost every human function: a god of fertility, a god of wisdom, a god of beauty, a god of war, and so on. We're all familiar with this idea from our studies of the mythologies of the ancient world. Simply put, people believed that many gods existed to serve various functions of human life.

After polytheism, the next stage of religious development is called henotheism, which is a sort of hybrid between polytheism and monotheism, a transitional stage, as it were. Henotheism is belief in one god (the prefix *hen* comes from a Greek word for "one," a different word from *mono*), but the idea is that there is one god for each people or nation, and each one reigns over a particular geographical area. For example, henotheism would hold that there was a god for the Jewish people (Yahweh), a god for the Philistines (Dagon), a god for the Canaanites (Baal), and

so on. However, this view does not posit that there was only one god ultimately.

Henotheistic peoples recognized that other nations had their own gods, and they often saw battles between nations as battles between the gods of the peoples. Some scholars find this idea in the Old Testament because many of the conflicts recorded there are cast as the God of Israel going up against Dagon, Baal, or another pagan god, but that does not mean Israel was henotheistic.

THE BIBLE: MONOTHEISTIC FROM THE OUTSET

Assuming this evolutionary framework, the nineteenth-century critics challenged the idea that the Bible is consistently monotheistic. There was an ongoing debate as to when monotheism began in Israel. The more conservative of these critics said there were hints of it at the time of Abraham. Others said that monotheism did not begin until the time of Moses. Some even rejected the idea that Moses was a monotheist, saying that monotheism did not begin until the time of the prophets, such as Isaiah around the eighth century BC. A few were even more skeptical, arguing that monotheism did not begin until after the Israelite

exile in Babylon, making it a rather recent development in Jewish religion. So, orthodox scholarship has had to battle for the past hundred-plus years to defend the idea of the unity of God in Scripture.

Orthodox arguments hold that monotheism was present at the very beginning of biblical history. We read in the very first verse of Scripture, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The creation narrative affirms that the God who is introduced on the first page of the Pentateuch has the entire creation as His domain, not just the limited geographical boundaries of Old Testament Israel. God is sovereign over heaven and earth, having made them at the word of His command.

Critics often note that in the early chapters of Scripture, there is a vacillation between two names for God. On the one hand, God is referred to as Jehovah or Yahweh; on the other hand, He is called Elohim. That name, Elohim, is striking because the suffix, *him*, is the plural ending of the Hebrew noun, so one could translate the name Elohim as “gods.” However, while the name Elohim has a plural ending, it always appears with singular verb forms. So the writer was saying something that could not be interpreted to mean “many gods.” Plus, as I noted above, God

is revealed to us in the opening chapters of Genesis as the one who is sovereign over all things. So I think that those who hold that the name Elohim hints at polytheism are jumping to an incorrect conclusion.

When we come to Exodus 20, the account of the giving of the law, we see that the first commandment God gave on Sinai was strongly monotheistic. God said, “You shall have no other gods before me” (v. 3). Some would say this verse gives evidence of henotheism, because God is implying there *are* other gods, and the commandment is declaring that the people must not let those other gods outrank Him; He must be the chief deity in their lives. But the Hebrew indicates that when God says “before me,” He is saying, “In My presence.” His presence, of course, is ubiquitous; He is omnipresent. So when God says, “You shall have no other gods before me,” He basically is saying that when a person worships anything apart from Him, whether that person lives in Israel, Canaan, Philistia, or anywhere else, he engages in an act of idolatry, because there is only one God. The second commandment therefore reinforces the first with its blanket prohibition of all forms of idolatry.

Later in the Pentateuch, we find a striking statement of monotheism. It appears in the *Shema*, ancient Israel's confession of its belief in one God: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4).

In the prophetic books, we see an almost constant diatribe against the false gods of other religions. These gods are seen not as competing deities but as useless idols. In fact, the prophets characteristically make fun of people who worship trees, statues, and other things they have made with their own hands, as if a block of wood could be inhabited by an intelligent being. They ridicule the ideas of animism and polytheism consistently.

These affirmations of monotheism are a startling dimension of Old Testament faith because of the rarity of such assertions in the ancient world. Most of the cultures of antiquity from which we have historical records were not monotheistic. Some have argued that the Egyptians were the first monotheists because of their worship of Ra, the sun god, but there is a uniqueness in the monotheism that was native to Old Testament faith. The idea that there is one God was firmly established in the religion of Israel from the earliest pages of the Old Testament.

IF GOD IS ONE, HOW CAN HE BE THREE?

It is precisely because of this clear teaching of monotheism that the doctrine of the Trinity is so problematic. When we come to the New Testament, we find the church affirming the notion of monotheism, but also declaring that God the Father is divine, God the Son is divine, and God the Holy Spirit is divine. We have to understand that the distinctions in the Godhead do not refer to His essence; they do not refer to a fragmentation or compartmentalization of the very being of God.

How, then, can we maintain the Old Testament doctrine of monotheism in light of the clear New Testament affirmation of the triune character of the biblical God? Augustine once wrote, “The New [Testament] is in the Old [Testament] concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.” To understand how the doctrine of the Trinity came to be such an important article of the Christian faith, we need to see that there was a development of the church’s understanding of the nature of God based on the Scriptures. When we look into the Scriptures, we see what we call in theology “progressive revelation.” This is the idea that, as time goes by, God unfolds more and more of His plan of

redemption. He gives more and more of His self-disclosure by means of revelation. The fact that there is this progress in revelation does not mean that what God reveals in the Old Testament He then contradicts in the New Testament. Progressive revelation is not a corrective, whereby the latest unveiling from God rectifies a previous mistaken revelation. Rather, new revelation builds on what was given in the past, expanding what God has made known.

Therefore, we do not see a manifest teaching of God's triune nature on the first page of Scripture. There are hints of it very early in the Old Testament, but we do not have full information about the Trinitarian character of God in the Old Testament. That information comes later, in the New Testament, so we have to trace the development of this doctrine throughout redemptive history to see what the Bible is actually saying about these things.