

TRINITY A description of the God of Christian Scripture, revealed and understood as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; a fundamental doctrine of Christian theology. 🗝

Introduction

The word *Trinity* does not appear in the Bible. However, the doctrine is based on several emphatic assertions that are found throughout the biblical writings:

1. There is only one God ([Deut 6:4](#); [Isa 43:10](#); [46:9](#); [Rom 3:30](#); [1 Cor 8:4](#); [Jas 2:19](#)).
2. The one whom Jesus called “Father” ([John 6:27](#); [1 Cor 8:6](#)), the incarnate Son ([Matt 1:23](#); [John 1:1](#); [Rom 9:5](#); [Col 2:9](#); [Titus 2:13–14](#); [Heb 1:1–3](#)), and the Holy Spirit ([Acts 5:3–4](#); [28:25–27](#); [2 Cor 3:7–18](#)) all possess the necessary attributes of this God.
3. These three are not identical; they interact with one another and their identities are constituted with respect to one another ([Matt 3:16–17](#); [12:32](#); [17:5](#); [Luke 3:21–22](#); [4:1](#); [John 15:26](#); [16:7–16](#); [2 Cor 13:14](#)). They act distinctly but in concert with one another ([Gen 1:1–3](#); [John 1:1–3](#); [2 Cor 4:6](#); [Col 1:15–17](#); [Heb 1:2–3](#)). 🗝

The doctrine of the *Trinity* was increasingly systematized in the post-New Testament era, as certain teachings that were not consistent with the apostolic faith

increased in popularity. 🚩 From AD 325–787, seven ecumenical councils were called to deliberate aspects of at least one member of the *Trinity* 🗝. Although most discussion focused on the person of Christ (e.g., the relationship between His humanity and divinity), it inherently involved the Church’s attempt to understand God’s revelation of His Triune self.

The *Trinity* in the Old Testament

The doctrine of the *Trinity* relies mostly on the New Testament 🗝, but certain groundwork is implicitly present in the Old Testament. This does not reflect a change in the Godhead, but rather a change in how God chose to reveal Himself before the “fullness of time” ([Gal 4:4](#)) and how pre-Christian worshipers observed God’s activity in the world 🗝.

God as Father in the Old Testament

The personal designation of God as “Father” seems to be more developed in the later literature of the *deuterocanonical Old Testament* (e.g., [Tob 13:4](#); [Sir 23:1](#); [51:10](#); [Wis 14:3](#)). Even so, these depictions of God as Father relate primarily to God’s relationship with His followers, and not the pre-incarnate Word. Designations of God as Father in the earlier Old Testament canon make this clear, as the texts frequently depict Israel as God’s adopted child ([Exod 4:22–23](#); [Deut 32:6, 18–19](#)).

During the time of the monarchy, the relationship between God and the king

was initially described in filial language: “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me” (2 Sam 7:14). The Psalms echo this language. For example, Psalm 2:7 states, “You are my son; today I have begotten you” (see also Pss 68; 89); the Church would later take this particular psalm as evidence of the pre-existence of the Word (e.g., Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5). Although the Prophets favored marital metaphors when describing the relationship between God and His people, paternal metaphors are present (e.g., Jer 31:9; Isa 1:2; 30:1; 40:3–4; 42:16; 43:19–20; Hos 11:1–4).

The Son in the Old Testament

The Son, Jesus, does not appear as such in the Old Testament; neither is there any precise, explicit analogue for the incarnate Son in the Old Testament. However, there are two divine personifications—the Word and Wisdom—that allowed New Testament writers and the church fathers to make connections between the incarnate Son and the hidden Trinity of the Old Testament. Both of these personifications are connected to the work of God’s Spirit.

1. The Word is instrumental in creative activity, emanating as a speech-act from the mouth of God (Gen 1:1–2:4; Psa 33:8–9; Sirach 43:26; Judith 16:14; Wisdom 9:1–2). Deuterocanonical literature also depicts the Word as a warrior instrumental in the exodus

(Wisdom 18:15–16).

2. Wisdom often embodies creative and even salvific attributes of God; usually depicted through feminine language. Wisdom is located with God and is fully accessible only to God (Job 28; Prov 2–4; 8–9). The deuterocanonical work of Sirach (especially Sirach 1:1–30; 24:1–34; 51:1–27) and the Book of Wisdom of Solomon (especially Wisdom 7, 9–10) offer much more developed personifications of Wisdom.

The Spirit in the Old Testament

The Spirit is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament to describe the activity of God in the world. Though the Hebrew (רוח, *rwch*) and Greek (πνεύμα, *pneuma*) may be rendered as “wind” or “breath,” both still reference their originator, God. Activities of God’s Spirit in the Old Testament include the following:

- The Spirit hovered over the surface of the waters of creation (Gen 1:2).
- The Spirit empowered leaders, judges, and prophets (e.g., Num 11:16–17, 24–25; Judg 3:10; 6:34; 1 Sam 10:6, 10; Ezek 2:1–3).
- The Spirit rested within the nation of Israel (Isa 63:11–13; Hag 2:5).
- The Spirit will empower Israel’s Messiah (Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1–2).

The Spirit is very much personally from God and described by His activity; the Old

Testament does not probe the depths of the Spirit's origination or essential unity with the one God of Israel.

Although the Word, Wisdom, and the Spirit are not considered unique gods separate from the one God in the Old Testament (and thus deserving of their own worship), neither are they treated as mere modes of God's existence. This would allow for the earliest Jewish Christians to accept more readily Jesus' teachings concerning His relation to the Father and the Spirit. The first commandment (to have no other gods before Yahweh) and the Shema (Deut 6:4) could still be confessed along with the Trinitarian reality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Trinity in the New Testament

The New Testament focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ; the entire corpus confesses and demonstrates that Jesus is the Son of God. The nature and role of the Spirit continues to be more implicit than explicit, with the exception of His outpouring at Pentecost. But the revelation of God in the New Testament is generally couched in Trinitarian language.

Trinity in the Gospels

From the beginning of the Gospel accounts, the writers' focus is to link Jesus with God through His miraculous birth. In Luke's account, the angel proclaims to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will

overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Having no earthly father, Jesus can openly confess His intimate relation with the heavenly Father; Jesus receives directions and knowledge from God (John 5:19; 14:12), and He prays to God by addressing Him as Father (John 17:1; see also Mark 14:36; Matt 16:17; Luke 22:29).

The Trinitarian nature of God as revealed in the Gospel accounts is especially clear in two major events:

1. Jesus' baptism . In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus allows John the Baptist to baptize Him; the Father speaks clearly, announcing Jesus' identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). The Spirit then descends upon Jesus "like a dove" (Mark 1:10), empowering Him for His mission and (according to Mark) driving Him into the wilderness to undergo temptation (Mark 1:12). Jesus ministered afterward according to the power of the Spirit (Matt 12:18, 28; Luke 11:20).
2. The Transfiguration of Jesus . The Synoptic Gospels (and also 2 Pet 1:16–18) describe a miraculous revelation to three of Jesus' disciples: Peter, James the son of Zebedee, and John (Matt 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). Elijah and Moses appear and converse with Jesus, and Jesus is not only transfigured in glorious bril-

liance before the disciples, but a voice declares from heaven, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him” (Luke 9:35). The disciples do not fully understand the event, but Christians reading the accounts would perceive that Jesus is again directly and powerfully linked to God the Father.

In addition to these explicit revelations of the Triune God, Jesus’ command in Matt 28:19 to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” has had lasting theological and liturgical impact in the Church. Although there are no further references to baptism being performed in the name of the Trinity in the New Testament, this formulation becomes rooted in the consciousness of the Church.

Trinity in Acts and The Letters

The period between the ascension of Jesus and the formation of the early church was characterized by rapid growth through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus instructed His disciples to wait for the outpouring of the Spirit, who would empower the Church to fulfill His mission. Both the Father and the Son are instrumental in this outpouring at Pentecost insofar as the Father sends the Spirit at the behest of the Son (Acts 2:32–33).

Later, Peter uses Trinitarian language to express the outworking of salvation among the persecuted Church: “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom

you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:30–32). This theme is present throughout the New Testament corpus, appearing frequently in the Pauline Letters. For instance:

- In 1 Corinthians the distribution of various spiritual gifts is explained with reference to “the same Spirit,” “the same Lord” (Jesus), and “the same God” (the Father) who are all present in the Church—three in one (1 Cor 12:4–6).
- The benediction of 2 Corinthians is tripartite: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor 13:14).
- Ephesians includes four Triune formulations:
 - a. “So he [Jesus] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:17–18).
 - b. “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father ... I pray that ... he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and

that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” ([Eph 3:14–17](#)).

- c. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” ([Eph 4:4–6](#)).
- d. “Be filled with the Spirit ... singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” ([Eph 5:18–20](#)).

These identifications of the persons and work of the [Trinity](#) are not separate theological musings, but are connected directly with the life of Christians. [First Peter](#) further exemplifies this, beginning by intentionally locating its readers within the realm of salvation-history: They “have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood” ([1 Pet 1:2](#)). The Church cannot separate itself from the [Triune God](#), who has acted to save it.

Despite the lack of formal theological exposition of the nature of the [Triune God](#), it is clear that by the close of the New Testament era, God was understood to be Triune. Centuries of further exposition would seek to clarify God’s Triune nature.

Exposition of the [Trinity](#) in the Early Church

In the following centuries, the Trinitarian doctrine was expressed predominantly through worship. Yet persecution and internal discrepancies in teaching soon forced Christians to think more systematically about God. Early Christian documents offer insights into how early Christians understood the [Trinity](#).

- The [Didache](#) recommends that baptism be performed only “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” ([Didache 7:1, 3](#); Holmes, [Apostolic Fathers](#), 355).
- [Clement of Rome](#) continues the tradition of the New Testament writers by distinguishing the roles of the members of the [Trinity](#) without clarifying how the roles are connected with their essence: “The majestic scepter of God, our Lord [Christ Jesus](#), did not come with the pomp of arrogance or pride (though he could have done so), but in humility, just as the [Holy Spirit](#) spoke concerning him” ([1 Clement 16:1–2](#); Holmes, [Apostolic Fathers](#), 65).
- [Justin Martyr](#), writing primarily on the meaning of [Jesus](#) as the Word and in defense of Christian theology, expresses the Trinitarian nature of God with reference to the worship of the Church and the activities of God in creation, salvation, and prophecy, often echoing what may have been early credo statements ([Justin Martyr](#),

First Apology, 6; 13; 61).

- [Irenaeus](#) of Lyons, writing to counter the teachings of [Marcion](#) and Valentinus, relies upon the traditions handed down through baptismal practices and Scripture to demonstrate that [Jesus](#) is the Son of the Father (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*). [Irenaeus](#) reminds his readers that no one can fully comprehend the [Trinity](#) and that there is a limit to what can and cannot be said about Him (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 2.28.6).
- [Tertullian](#), writing in response to [Marcion](#) and modalist monarchians (who saw the Son and the Spirit as alternate “modes” of existence of the one Father, and not as distinct persons), was the first to categorize God as [Trinity](#) systematically and to hypothesize God’s existence as three persons (*tres personae*) of one substance (*una substantia*; [Tertullian](#), *Adversus Praxean*).
- The Alexandrian [Origen](#), attempting to correct those who claimed that [Jesus](#) was merely a man “adopted” by the [Holy Spirit](#) at His baptism, formulated the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son through exegesis of [John’s Gospel](#). He also sought to correct Valentinian [Gnostics](#) who held that in the eternal generation of the Son, the Father’s [divine essence](#) was split ([Origen](#), *De Principiis*).

Although some confusion would exist between the Latin West and the Greek East over vocabulary (“essence” versus “substance,” for example), the Church was beginning to use philosophical logic to interpret Scripture and develop a theology of the [Trinity](#) that would account for three distinct persons somehow all being divine (and especially account for a man who was both fully God and fully man).

Ecumenical Councils

Origen’s language and influence would cause several problems for the Church, as the Alexandrian [Arius](#) (ca. AD 250–336) further systematized Origen’s theology. [Arius](#) upheld Origen’s teaching that the Father, Son, and [Holy Spirit](#) were three distinct subsistent realities, but he subordinated each person, claiming that although the Son shared in the Father’s divinity (and likewise the Spirit), the Son and Spirit should be considered as created things. [Athanasius](#) of Alexandria attempted to eradicate this heresy from the Church ([Athanasius](#), *Contra Arianos*).

Participants in the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 developed a [creed](#) that reflected the orthodox views of the Church regarding the revelation of God the [Trinity](#) as *ὁμοούσιος* (*homoousios*, “of one substance”).

The First Council of Constantinople in AD 381 would later expand the creed to its most lasting form, which is still

used in worship today. The three main articles of the creed assert belief in one God, who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and describe how these three persons are related. Even this creed would not prove universal for the Church, however, as East and West eventually divided partly over the issue of the Spirit's procession: The West held that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*), a statement that was added to the creed at the anti-Arian Council of Toledo in 589 but was not present in the original Greek text.

Even in the first major exposition of the divinity of the Holy Spirit—Athanasius' Letters to Serapion—the seminal theologian was not willing to proceed that far; however, the teaching did exist outside of this particular council. Hilary of Poitiers, for example, writing in the mid-fourth century, speaks to the Spirit's origination from both the Father and the Son, or coming from the Father through the Son (Hilary, *De Trinitate* 12.56). Hilary was one of the first to write explicitly on the Trinity for its own sake, and he especially attempted to explain differences and similarities between Western and Eastern formulations of the Trinity.

Additional Writings

Two other early major corpi emerge from the Trinitarian controversies of the fourth century:

1. The writings of the Cappadocians

—Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330–379),
Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 332–395), and
Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329–389);

2. *De Trinitate* by Augustine of Hippo (354–430).

The Cappadocians. The Cappadocians made major contributions to the formulations of the creed finalized at Constantinople in AD 381. They were concerned primarily with the interaction between Christian theology and Greek philosophy for the sake of stamping out all forms of Arianism and Eunomianism. This led to reflection on how humanity could understand the united yet differentiated nature of the Trinity, best explained as one substance (οὐσία, *ousia*) in three persons (ὑποστάσεις, *hypostaseis*).

All three Cappadocians affirm that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of the same substance (ὁμοούσιος, *homoousios*). For example, Basil, like Athanasius, argues for the full divinity of the Holy Spirit in *De Spiritu Sancto* by appealing to the activity of the Spirit and the subsequent logical implications of His origination from the Godhead. Basil also reflects on the origination of the set ordering of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” by pointing to its usage in the New Testament.

Augustine's De Trinitate. Whereas the Cappadocians wrote primarily in a polemical context, Augustine wrote *De Trinitate* over an extended period of reflection. Augustine focuses particularly on how

humanity is able to perceive and understand the [Trinity](#), developing a series of analogies that rely on Scripture and philosophy.

In Book 8, [Augustine](#) develops a model of the [Trinity](#) based on love:

- the Father is the Lover;
- the Son is the Beloved; and
- the [Holy Spirit](#) is the mutual love they share.

The limitation of this model is the possibility of depersonalizing and reducing the Spirit. This model buttressed earlier Western assertions of the double procession of the Spirit.

In Book 9, [Augustine](#) explores a second analogy based on intrapersonal psychology (the mind existing, knowing itself, and loving itself):

- the Father as Being or Presence;
- the Son as [Conscience](#) or Self-Knowledge; and
- the [Holy Spirit](#) as Self-Love.

[Augustine](#) later refined his analogy of love ([Augustine](#), [De Trinitate](#) 15).

[Augustine](#) readily admits that humanity must ultimately regard any exploration of the [Trinity](#) as being handicapped by insufficient language and, when necessary, be content to rest in what has been revealed of divine mystery ([Augustine](#), [De Trinitate](#) 5).

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