



“... IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT” (MT 28:19)
TRINITARIAN SPEAKING ABOUT GOD IN A JEWISH CONTEXT

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When Christians talk about God, it is Trinitarian; Christians speak of the triune God. But why is that? And how do the Three and the One come together? How is that to be understood? The doctrine of the Trinity that was formulated in the early Church is considered to be one of the striking points that separates Christianity and Judaism. Indeed, even to this day there are people who believe that this clearly expresses that Judaism and Christianity each have a different God. However, the people in the early Church who developed and formulated the doctrine of the Trinity, wanted nothing other than to give an appropriate voice to the biblical and above all New Testament testimony to God in their own intellectual context, which was formed by Greek ontology and metaphysics. I don't want to and cannot discuss whether and to what extent they succeeded. I am a New Testament scholar at a time when our mental horizon is no longer determined by Greek metaphysics and ontology. I am a New Testament scholar who has discovered for himself that most of the New Testament writings are originally Jewish writings, which is to say, in their creation and content, and therefore they have to be read and understood in the Jewish context, even though the New Testament as a whole is of course a Christian book. Now I don't want to proceed in such a way that I critically examine the biblical passages quoted by the Church Fathers and how they used them. I am only going to interpret very simply one New Testament text, and with its help, I shall attempt to give an answer to the questions that arise. The text is at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew. Mt 28:16-20 says:

The eleven pupils went to Galilee to the mountain to which Jesus directed them. When they saw Jesus, they fell down before him; but they also doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them: “All power in heaven and on earth is given to me. Therefore, set out and let all peoples learn with you! Baptize them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Teach them to keep everything that I have commanded you! But see: I am with you all days until the end of world time.”

Before this passage, at the beginning of the chapter, the text tells of women at Jesus' empty tomb. They were told by an angel to send the pupils of Jesus to Galilee, where Jesus would meet them. Following this, the women meet Jesus himself, who gives them the same task. So now “the eleven pupils” have gone to Galilee. They should really be twelve. But one of them, Judas, is no longer with them. In any case, when the eleven pupils are mentioned, those who read and hear the Gospel are reminded of the twelve; and twelve is not a chance number. It stands for the twelve tribes of Israel. So when the pupils of Jesus are counted in this way, they represent the people of Israel.

When they see Jesus in Galilee – this Jesus who just shortly before was executed on a Roman cross – they react in a very contradictory way. It first says that they fall down before him. When someone whose death is known to them encounters them alive, God the Creator must have had a finger in the pie; then, falling down is meant for God as the one who acted creatively with the dead Jesus by creating life. What follows in most translations is: “But some doubted.” However, according to the far more probable translation, it should say; “But they also doubted.” For Jesus is encountering them in a different way to before his death. They can’t take him by the hand and show him to others. Later, they will have nothing but his words, words that he says now and words he spoke before and to which he refers. They can accept these, and when they notice that they can rely on these words, they will experience that certainty comes over and over again and their doubt will be overcome.

And what are the words that he now says? “All power in heaven and on earth is given to me.” Power, Greek *exousía*, Latin *potestas* – that was a highly political word. It meant the power of the emperor in Rome; he implemented it, as did those to whom he gave a mandate. And now, someone stands up here – someone who had just been a victim of this imperial power – and denies the emperor’s power, claiming it for himself: “All power in heaven and on earth is given to me.” The power does not belong to the so obvious force with its numerous and strong legions, but rather to this victim of force. He does not have it through himself; it is “given” to him, because in his being raised from the dead, God has spoken his creative word.

That is why Jesus can call upon his pupils: “Set out!” They are to be his messengers; they are to proclaim among all nations him to whom all power belongs. Here Jesus is sending his pupils, the representatives of Israel, to the peoples of the world. What are they to do with them? Here, I think the translation of the “Bibel in gerechter Sprache” [literally: “Bible in Just Language”] is really a stroke of genius: “Let all nations learn with you!” This translation corresponds very exactly with the Greek text. In addition: Those who are supposed to do this are themselves called “pupils”. In the school of Jesus, you have never finished learning; there, you always remain a pupil, even when you teach others. I can testify to this from my own experience. I am now 70 years old, and for the majority of my life I have been a teacher of theology, and yet I am still a pupil who continues to learn and who still has to learn. And when you remain a pupil and yet are also a teacher, that can only happen in such a way that you let others learn with you.

What are the pupils of Jesus supposed to teach the people from the world of the nations? “To keep everything that I have commanded you.” For the people who read and hear the Gospel according to Matthew and who have reached its end here, this means that they now start over again to read and to hear the Gospel from the beginning. In so doing, they experience what Jesus commanded his pupils, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. And at the very end of the text, there is the promise: “But see, I am with you all days until the end of world time.” Precisely he, to whom – contrary to all appearances – all power belongs.

Between the two demands to let the nations learn with them and to teach them what Jesus commanded, we now have another one: “Baptize them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!” Other texts in the New Testament speak of baptizing in the Name of Jesus. The expression probably comes from something being credited to the person whose name is mentioned. So whoever is baptized in the name of Jesus is credited to Jesus’ account. He or she thus belongs with Jesus, indeed belongs to Jesus. From very early on, baptism was a rite of admission to the community that received its orientation from Jesus, and which was a community within Judaism until at least the end of the 1st century. The fact that he or she belonged to Jesus, distinguished this Jewish person from others in Israel; and that was expressed through baptism.

In the text at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew, people from the world of the nations come into view, people who do not yet know the One God, the God of Israel. And there it says:

“Baptize them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!” We Christians know this formulation so well that we don’t even notice how conspicuous it is. I also needed a very long time until I noticed it. For: this text speaks of a *Name*, but then no name is mentioned. Father, Son and Spirit are not names, but conceptual terms. But it is evidently about God. This connection – that when speaking of God, one speaks of a Name but then no name is named and instead something else is said, can only be explained from Jewish tradition. Which is to say, the tradition that the God of whom the Bible testifies, has a Name, but that this Name is not said; rather it is circumscribed. Names have the function of being able to distinguish specimens of the same genus from one another. If God were to be called by God’s Name, one would be acting as if one had to distinguish God from other gods, as if there were other gods. But God is only the One. That is why already long before the time of Jesus, the Name of God was not spoken in Judaism; rather, it was circumscribed. In the present-day Luther Bible, this has been taken into the Old Testament as follows: Where the Hebrew text has the four consonants of the Name of God, “Lord” is written, but with four capitals: LORD – in order to show clearly that not just any lord is meant, but rather God’s Name.

So when the text speaks of baptizing “in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, it is first of all clear that the text is talking about the One God, Israel’s God, the Creator of the world. Through baptism, people from the world of the nations are given to him. But why is the Name of God circumscribed here as “the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”? Jesus and the evangelists know God as Father from their Jewish Bible, which we Christians have as the Old Testament. Thus for example, God is called upon in the book of the prophet Isaiah: “You are our Father” (Isa 63:16). God is thereby called upon as someone to whom one belongs very closely; he is called upon as the protector from whom one seeks help and security. God cannot be anything other than merciful. “As a father has mercy on children, so the Eternal has mercy on those who revere him” (Ps 103:13).

So it is understandable that the image of the father is good for making clear who God is and what God is like, and then Father can also be good for circumscribing the Name of God. But why does this text from Matthew continue with “the Son and the Holy Spirit” after the Father when it talks about baptism in the Name? Well, Jesus’ eleven pupils as representatives of Israel are here being sent to the world of the nations who are to get to know the One God, the God of Israel. They get to know him by being told about Jesus, by hearing what is proclaimed to them about him. The assumption thereby is that in what Jesus said and did, as well as in what he suffered, one encounters no one less than God. If God was just now called “Father”, then Jesus is now called “Son”. That too is already in the Bible. There, Israel as a whole is “son of God”, as is the king and then the Messiah as individual persons. The image of “son” expresses a particularly close relationship to God as Father, but also a task. Israel as son of God – and the Messiah in particular – are sent to be “a light to the nations” (Isa 42:6; 49:6), a witness for the world to the One God. That is how the proclamation of Jesus was effective. Through it, our ancestors and we together with them came to faith in the One God and thus became God’s children, his sons and daughters. “Children of God”, “sons and daughters of God” is what the members of the community are called already in the New Testament.

So because this is about us, about people from the nations who do not belong to the people of Israel and who got to know the God of Israel as the One God through the proclamation of Jesus, we can understand that in the circumscription of the Name of God, the Son is named after the Father. But then why also the Holy Spirit? Well, I already said that after his death on the cross, “the Son”, Jesus as Messiah, cannot be taken by the hand by his pupils or even less by us and shown. After Easter, he is present in a way that is different to that before Easter. He is present in the Word that proclaims him as alive, present and active. But the fact that this proclamation is certainly “not just words”, that it has strength and is effective, is expressed in talking about the Holy Spirit.

That doesn't automatically make sense to us with the English word "spirit". In English – as in German – the first thing one thinks of when hearing the word "spirit" is either a "ghost" or the mind, what you have "in the head". Thus in German, there is a word for "people working with their hands" and one for "people working with their mind". For example, I count as a "worker with the mind", although in my work I write a lot by hand. In Hebrew and in Greek, it is entirely different with the words that stand for our word "spirit". There, the first meaning is "wind", and thus it is about strength, energy. The fact that words have strength, that the proclamation of Jesus is effective, that people trust in them, is not in the control of those who do the proclaiming. That is entrusted to God's strength; that is why there is talk of the "Holy Spirit". For that which belongs to God is "holy".

So that is why we Christians speak of the triune God and yet mean no other than the One God, the God of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth, to whom the Bible testifies: because we, together with our ancestors, came from the nations to this One God through the proclamation of Jesus in the strength of the Holy Spirit. We pray to him in lamentation, petition and intercession, we praise him and we thank him as the Father through the Son in the strength of the Holy Spirit. And in so doing, we are placed alongside of Israel, alongside of Jews who pray to this same God and who praise him – and who do not do so "through the Son", because they already know "the Father" from the beginning, ever since Abraham.

Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff

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