

Trinity

Do you believe in the Trinity?

The following entry has been adapted from the author's article, "What Does the Shema Really Mean?"

We believe that God, *Elohim* in Hebrew (אלהים, a plural word), has revealed Himself to humanity in the co-existent manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is clear by any cursory reading of the Holy Scriptures. What is commonly called the Trinity was determined by the emerging Christian Church to be the easiest attainable understanding of God that allowed for a plurality of manifestations to exist without succumbing to the heresies of Arianism, which denied the Divinity of Yeshua, or Modalism, which advocated that God could only exist in one particular form or "mode" at a single time. A standard summary of what the Trinity is, in a great deal of Christendom, is offered by the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*:

"The Christian church's belief that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three Persons in one Godhead. They share the same essence or substance (Gr. *homoousios*). Yet they are three 'person' (Lat. *personae*)."¹

When one encounters the subject of the plurality of *Elohim* or God in much of today's Messianic movement, there is no shortage of statements or Messianic writing and literature that will denounce the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity—that God is composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as somehow being "pagan." For some reason or another, any possible parallel or detectable connection to another religion, as small as it might be—of God being composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—means that the concept is to be flat rejected. This is a problem, because the historic doctrine of the Trinity is one of a *multitude* of potential beliefs that can be rejected via such a method, because of possible parallels or connections with paganism. There are scores of possible connections to be made between the early chapters of the Book of Genesis, and Ancient Near Eastern mythology—yet there is no widespread clamor in the current Messianic movement to say that the Noahdic Flood is really just the Epic of Gilgamesh repackaged into Israel's Scriptures.² Flippantly claiming that something is just outright "pagan," often without any substantial evidence, has been used far too frequently in today's Messianic movement to reject things that are legitimately communicated by the Bible.³

Of course, the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is something that specifically developed in the Second-Fourth Centuries C.E., with much of the Christian Church having been cut off from its Hebraic Roots, leads a great number of Messianic people to treat it with some suspicion. Some are prone to reject any doctrine or belief that originated in Christendom, precisely because it is Christian. Others, however, know that this is inappropriate, because the Christian Church of the Second-Fourth Centuries C.E. used the same Holy Scriptures—both the Tanach and Apostolic Writings—that we use today. Millard J. Erickson properly advises all of us, "While those who give special authority to church councils have their authoritative answer [about the Trinity], that answer does not necessarily suffice for those Christians who do not consider the pronouncements of the church councils infallible."⁴

¹ Donald S. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 288.

² This is discussed further in the author's article, "Encountering Mythology: A Case Study From the Flood Narratives" (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*).

³ It has to be noted that Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics, against the more common convention seen in much of the Messianic movement, have never argued that the holidays of Christmas and Easter are "pagan," per se. What we have instead argued is that these *holidays* are non-Biblical, because the *events* that they are intended to commemorate, the birth of the Messiah and His resurrection, are Biblical. We have preferred to state things along the lines of Christmas on 25 December and an Easter Sunday significantly divorced from the Passover, "not being God's original intention."

Consult the relevant sections of the *Messianic Winter Holiday Helper* and *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 15.

Our attention needs to be placed squarely upon the Biblical text, to see if the concept of a God composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is something that can be legitimately derived from Scripture.

Much of the confusion, that can arise from Bible readers wondering where a doctrine of some Trinity appears in Scripture, is that they typically look for a specific formula of *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* to be found. It is widely recognized that today, the so-called Johannine Comma of **1 John 5:7-8** in the Textus Receptus,⁵ is unoriginal to what was originally written, which was, “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.”⁶ However, the immersion formula of **Matthew 28:19**, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” is something which is not unoriginal to the ancient copies of Matthew’s Gospel,⁷ and it has been argued on theological grounds by some that immersing in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a theme that naturally arises from what has been communicated by Matthew’s Gospel.⁸

It would be too simplistic for any Bible reader to think, though—as those who oppose any doctrine of God being composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit commonly do—that these are the only two places in the Apostolic Scriptures where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are seen functioning together. While the formula *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* is not always used as such, there are a selection of passages in the Apostolic Scriptures where these manifestations of the Godhead are seen functioning together, and co-existing side by side:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same **Spirit**. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same **Lord**. There are varieties of effects, but the same **God** who works all things in all *persons*” (1 Corinthians 12:4, NASU).

“The grace of the **Lord Yeshua the Messiah**, and the love of **God**, and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit**, be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14, NASU).

“*There is* one body and one **Spirit**, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one **Lord**, one faith, one baptism, one **God and Father** of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6, NASU).

“But we should always give thanks to **God** for you, brethren beloved by the **Lord**, because **God** has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the **Spirit** and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our **Lord Yeshua the Messiah**” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, NASU).

“Peter, an apostle of **Yeshua the Messiah**, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of **God the Father**, by the sanctifying work of the **Spirit**, to obey **Yeshua the Messiah** and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure” (1 Peter 1:1-2, NASU).

“John to the seven [assemblies] that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven **Spirits** who are before His throne, and from **Yeshua the Messiah**, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and

⁵ “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one” (1 John 5:7-8, KJV).

⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), pp 715-717.

⁷ R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1117 states, “There is...no evidence that this is not an original part of the Gospel of Matthew.” For a Messianic evaluation of this, consult the article “In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit: Matt 28:19 – A Later Addition to Matthew’s Gospel?” by Tim Hegg, available for access at <www.torahresource.com>.

It cannot go unnoticed that the Shem Tov Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, which various Messianics think is superior to the canonical Greek Matthew, does lack any reference to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Matthew 18:19. The Shem Tov Matthew, though, was put together from a Jewish anti-missionary work entitled *Even Bohan* (אֵבֶן בּוֹחַן), and dates from the Fourteenth Century C.E. An evaluation of the Shem Tov Matthew is provided in the author’s article “Is the Hebrew Matthew an Authentic Document?” (appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*).

⁸ In the view of John Nolland, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1269,

“The choice of language is well rooted in earlier Matthean language. So it seems natural to think of Matthew as taking up important strands of the story he has been telling. In 1:1 Matthew summarized in a triad of names the genealogy to follow, by means of which he defined Jesus in relation to the history of God’s prior dealings with his people. Now at the end Matthew sums up his own narrative and identifies in briefest compass the significance of his chief protagonist by speaking of Jesus as the Son in relation to the Father and as closely linked with the Holy Spirit. Matthew’s story has been about the action of the Father through the Son and by means of the Holy Spirit.”

released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to His **God and Father**—to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:4-6, NASU).

If you were to remove Matthew 28:19, the customary immersion formula, from your deliberations, you will still have to reckon with the above passages, which give us significant clues about the composition of God. Is it at all reasonable to conclude that a plural *Elohim* or God is composed of the co-existent manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? There is ample evidence from the Biblical text that those who affirm the doctrine of the Trinity are **not** on unsafe ground. They have had to make decisions that affirm the Son as Divine, and the Holy Spirit as something separate from the Father, as both being integrated into the Godhead along with the Father. At the same time, when one sees references to “the seven Spirits who are before His throne” (Revelation 1:4), or to “a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Messiah” (1 Corinthians 10:4)—it might be said that the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity can be **incomplete** in a few areas. A Godhead composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being **incomplete**, however, is a **far cry** from the Trinity being pagan. Working with the Biblical evidence, rather than to conclude that *Elohim* or God is *only* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—it might instead be that *Elohim* or God is *widely* demonstrated to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As mortal human beings, none of us wants to ever find ourselves placing inappropriate limits on our Eternal God, and conclude that there are no other manifestations of Him beyond Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A great deal of Messianic Judaism to the present time has never had a problem with viewing the plurality of *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) as being *at least* composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁹ Messianic Judaism has demonstrated some aversion to using the term “Trinity,” as employed by much of Christianity, and instead preferred—and we should think rightfully so—to use valid alternative terminology like **tri-unity**, or perhaps in some cases, **revealed tri-unity**. Such terms would align with the Biblical evidence that God is composed of the co-existent persons or manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but it does not discount the possibility, or even probability, that there is more to God which has been largely disclosed to mortals. A rather recent perspective is offered by Barney Kasdan in his commentary *Matthew Presents Yeshua, King Messiah* (2011). Remarking on Matthew 28:19, “Therefore, go and make people from all nations into *talmidim*, immersing them into the reality of the Father, the Son and the *Ruach HaKodesh*” (CJB), he summarizes,

“...While Messianic Jews affirm the concept of the tri-unity of the one God, we may not necessarily agree with [some of] the Greek words and explanation [historically offered]...Undoubtedly some of the Hebrew background would have made a great contribution to this doctrinal discussion. Even though it is good and proper to ask some deeper questions about the nature of God, we should emphasize that Yeshua himself called the *Sh'ma* the greatest commandment (cf. Mark 12:28-34). One thing is for sure: Whatever the New Testament teaches about the pluralistic aspect of the one God, it must be consistent with the full revelation of the *Tanakh* (cf. Matthew 5:17).

“Some conclusions from a Messianic Jewish perspective lead us to view God as One and yet as a mysterious plurality within that unity. This is reflected in the words of the Great Commission of Yeshua, as the disciples are to go ‘in the Name’ (reality) of *the Father, the Son, and the Ruach HaKodesh*. It must be pointed out that even with the mention of the three realities of God, Yeshua uses the singular word ‘name’ in describing all three. This is consistent with the mystery of the one God revealed in a plurality of manifestations.”¹⁰

It is absolutely true that there are others in Messianic Judaism, as well as the One Law/One Torah and Two-House sub-movements, who would repudiate the idea that the *Elohim* or God of Israel can reveal Himself to humanity in the co-existent persons or manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Where this has Biblical evidence, tends to be lacking. Where this has emotional evidence, as though everything that the historic Christian

⁹ Michael Schiffman, “Messianic Jews and the Tri-Unity of God,” in John Fischer, ed., *The Enduring Paradox: Exploratory Essays in Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer, 2000), pp 61-69; Michael L. Brown, *Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume 2: Theological Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), pp 52-59.

¹⁰ Barney Kasdan, *Matthew Presents Yeshua, King Messiah: A Messianic Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books, 2011), pp 396-397. It cannot be overlooked in the case of both Schiffman, in Fischer, 69 and Kasdan, 396, that they have referred to the Zohar and its assertion of there being “three heads” of God. While this could be used as a reference to claim that the idea of the One God of Israel made up of three persons or manifestations is not incompatible with Jewish theology, the Zohar originates from the Middle Ages and is thus not reflective of the Jewish theology of the broad First Century—much less the fact that the Zohar is a main work of the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. This is why we should think that the approach detailed in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), of Yeshua being integrated into the Divine Identity of the LORD or YHWH, better corresponds to views present within the broad First Century period, and to the Biblical text itself.

Church has believed is to *always* be rejected, is something quite plentiful. Yet for all of us, **our loyalty should be to whether or not a God composed of (at least) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can be reasonably deduced from the Biblical text.**

If I had to answer “yes” or “no” to the question, “Do you believe in the Trinity?”, I would answer “yes.” If I could explain myself following this question, I would add that “God might be more than the Trinity, though.” This is why *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) or God might be better considered to be a **revealed tri-unity**, or to adapt traditional Christian terminology, a **principal trinity**. To deny that God is surely composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is to go against what has been communicated to us in Holy Scripture, and how it is to mold the worldview of Believers.¹¹ In all likelihood, *there is more* to our Eternal God that goes beyond the co-existent manifestations or persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that would, at the very least, confuse us as limited mortals. Many evangelical Christians I know would be open to this, because God, after all, is far bigger and more wonderful than any of us can humanly imagine. At present, much of who God is and how He has acted in human history, has to be left as a mystery, something yet to be revealed to us until the Eternal State.

That there is One God, as the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 commands us to believe, cannot be denied. For Believers in the Messiah of Israel, we are to recognize Him as the One Lord, as His early followers did (1 Corinthians 8:6), with Yeshua integrated into the Divine Identity. And beyond this, that there is more to the composition of *Elohim* or God, can surely be recognized, even if much of it remains a mystery to us at present.

¹¹ Some useful thoughts on this are offered by Brian Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).