Chapter 11b

my notes

One and All – The Trinity and Monotheism

I am first; I have no father.
I am last; I have no brother.
And beside me, there is no God.
I have no son.
—Shemot Rabbah 29, 5

Let's review…

The doctrine of the Trinity is essential to the Christian faith, because if Jesus was only a man he accomplished nothing on the cross. No created thing can be give to God to balance the scales of justice for our sins, because as the Creator, God already owns everything. The cross only matters if Jesus was the divine Son of God.

> *I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. (Ps 50:9-10)NIV*

Here are a few of the scriptural reasons for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity:

- Jesus' statements of both distinction and unity between himself and the Father and Spirit.
- God's use of plural pronouns in reference to Himself.
- The use of a plural noun to describe God (Elohim, Elohenu)
- The Bible's references to each "person" of the Trinity as possessing a will, an intellect and emotions.
- God's repeated reference to Himself three times when explaining or describing Himself.
- Use of a word that can mean "singular" or "unified" (*echad*) in the *Shema* (**Dt 6:4**) rather than *yachid*, which means only "singular."
- The Father's and Jesus' mid-sentence or mid-thought shifts from first to third person point of view, especially when describing or themselves, each other, or the Holy Spirit.

Maimonides' objection…

Following is a quote regarding the Trinity from one of Rabbinic Judaism's most well-known rabbis:

> *If one believes him to be One and to possess a number of attributes, one in fact says that he is One and thinks that he is many. This is the same as what the Christians say: he is one, but he is three, and the three are one. (Maimonides,* Guide of the Perplexed*)*

Maimonides was a physician, Bible scholar and an accomplished philosopher in the twelfth century, whose commentaries form part of the foundation of the

Copyright © 2006 Author Author, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
This document was obtained under license for use at no charge by study groups only, and may not be distributed, copied or used for any other purpose without advance written permission.
Contact Author Author, Inc. at www.AtholDickson.com

(continued)

Orthodox Jewish faith today. His main objection to the Trinity can be explained this way:

> *"Since God is the first cause, he must have established everything, including such things as justice, righteousness, holiness, mercy, and love. As creations, then, these things must not be thought of as part of God, or as attributes of him, because the Lord was first and they came after. They cannot be part of God if he created everything, because "everything" includes them. God is the cause; they are the effect. And as I have said before in this book, it is cause first, then effect—never the other way around."(TGAM)*

But does the Christian doctrine of the Trinity depend upon God's attributes? In other words, if God has no attributes, does it mean there is no Trinity? To explore this idea, we must first define "attribute."

- What is the difference between saying a chair is "good," and saying the same chair is "wooden"?
- Does God have "attributes" in the sense of a chair's "goodness"? (Search the Bible for descriptive statements about God, beginning with **Lv 11:45**.)
- Does the Trinity doctrine teach three divine "persons" in the same sense as a chair's "woodenness"? (Hint: ask yourself, when someone dies but their body remains, where is that "person"? Also remember last week's definition of a "person.")
- Does the Trinity Doctrine teach three divine "persons" with attributes like a chair's "woodenness"?

Consider the following…

> *"Maimonides had his own problems in this area. For example, as I have mentioned before, the Torah makes it clear that God is everywhere, but it also sometimes describes him as being present in one place in a way that is different from his presence in other locations…" (TGAM)*

- Can you think of examples of God revealing himself from within a physically limited place or thing? (Hint: think about how God interacted with Moses and the Israelites in the Exodus story.)
- What difficulty does this present for Rabbinic Jews like Maimonides, who assert that God cannot possess a tangible attribute?

Another Jewish objection… Jews today find at least one reason to deny the Trinity within Christianity's own scriptures. Consider…

> *"The Shema is not the only Jewish basis for objecting to the divinity of Jesus or the Trinity, as I learn when I make the acquaintance of Betty, a round and rosy red-headed newcomer to Chever Torah. Betty has just revealed that she was once a Methodist."*
>
> *'Why did you convert?' I ask.*
>
> *'I just couldn't believe all that stuff about Jesus being God.'*

Copyright © 2006 Author Author, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
This document was obtained under license for use at no charge by study groups only, and may not be distributed, copied or used for any other purpose without advance written permission.
Contact Author Author, Inc. at www.AtholDickson.com

(continued)

> *'Why not?'*
>
> *'Well, for one thing, if you read the New Testament, he never says, 'I am God,' does he?'*
>
> *"Christians may be shocked to realize that Betty's statement is true. Nowhere in the four Gospels are the simple words "I am God" uttered by Jesus. Betty believes this means Jesus is not God, but there is another explanation."*

- Imagine you have gone back in time one hundred years and you must explain the Internet. How will you go about it? How does this relate to the various ways Jesus chose to explain who and what he is? (See **John 6:35**; **9:5**; and **10:9** for examples of Jesus' method of self-revelation.)
- Look at **John 14:6**. Does Jesus say, "I know the way and the truth," or "I know how to find life"? What is the significance of this?

The Jews of Jesus' time did not believe the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied a messiah (*mesiach* in Hebrew and *christos* in Greek) who would be divine. (This is also true of most Jews today.) We see this in **John 6:15**, where the Bible says some Jews wanted to "make him king by force." Of course there was also no concept of a triune God during Jesus' time.

- What insights does this offer to the undercurrents of meaning in the questions and answers recorded in **Luke 22:67-70**, where Jesus is being tried for blasphemy by the Jewish ruling body? (For more context, see also **Daniel 7:14**.)

Note Jesus' final two words in the **Luke 22:67-70** text above. Compare that statement to Jesus' statements in **John 8:24; 28** and **58**, below. Note that there is no subject modifier in the original Greek after the word "am" in any of these verses from John 8. (This fact is indicated in better translations by the placement of the inserted words in brackets or parenthesis, or by printing the added words in italics.) Now compare all of these statements to **Ex 3:14**.

> *I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am [~~the one I claim to be~~], you will indeed die in your sins." (John 8:24)*
>
> *So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [~~the one I claim to be~~] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. (John 8:28)*
>
> *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58)*
>
> *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: `I AM has sent me to you.'" (Ex 3:14)*

It is interesting to note that God refers to his "I Am" name three times in the **Ex 3:14**. The three times are not clustered together as with **Dt 6:4** and **Ex 34:6**, but they are there. Also, this Hebrew word, *hayah* ("I AM") is sometimes used of plural subjects (see **Ge 1:5** for the first example).

Copyright © 2006 Author Author, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
This document was obtained under license for use at no charge by study groups only, and may not be distributed, copied or used for any other purpose without advance written permission.
Contact Author Author, Inc. at www.AtholDickson.com

(continued)

- Do you notice anything strange about the verb tenses Jesus uses in **John 8:58**, above? Why might he have expressed himself in this unusual way? Do you think the presence of the words "I am" in all these verses is coincidental? (See **Ex 3:14**)
- Why do you think translators added the subject modifiers after Jesus' statement, "I am"?

The Sanhedrin handed Jesus over for crucifixion after his final words in **Luke 22:70**, just as some attempted to stone him after he said, "Before Abraham was, I am!" (**John 8:59**) They also tried to stone him when he said, "I and the Father are one." (**John 10:30-39**) In this last case, they explained, "…you, a mere man, claim to be God."

- The reason they believed the "I am!" statements were blasphemous is obviously because they were direct references to God's name given to Moses at the burning bush, but why were some Jews offended when Jesus said, "I and the Father are one"?
- Do you think those Jews would have agreed with the modern translators' additions of subject modifiers after "I am" in **John 8: 24** and **28**?

A final objection… Some might explain these things away with skepticism that the Creator of the Universe, the Master of all that exists, would deign to take such pains to explain Himself to mere creatures such as us. But consider…

> *"…God has allowed himself to be influenced by human actions before. I remember prayer. I remember free will. I remember Abraham bargaining with the Lord for the lives of ten people in Sodom, and Moses negotiating with him at Mt. Sinai on behalf of a rebellious Israel. I remember that God seems to relish the idea of my involvement in his plans. Jesus' humble approach to self-revelation is consistent with such a God. Rather than an argument against his divinity, it is just what I should expect if the God of the Hebrew Scriptures reentered history as a man to meet me where I am." (TGAM)*

Copyright © 2006 Author Author, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
This document was obtained under license for use at no charge by study groups only, and may not be distributed, copied or used for any other purpose without advance written permission.
Contact Author Author, Inc. at www.AtholDickson.com