

*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

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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”?
 - ✓ “Goodness” is an intangible moral quality.
 - ✓ “Woodenness” is a tangible physical condition.
 - ✓ Note that by “tangible” and “intangible” we mean a thing is or is not a physical way of being.
- ▶ 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**.)
 - ✓ God Himself says “I am holy” (**Lv 11:44**), thus claiming the attribute of holiness for Himself.
 - ✓ Throughout the Psalms we see statements such as “The Lord is...
 - “Righteous” (**Ps 11:7**)
 - “Good” (**Ps 34:8**)
 - “Compassionate and gracious” (**Ps 103:8**, quoting God’s own self description in **Ex 34:6**)
 - ✓ So God does have attributes if “attributes” means intangible things like holiness, righteousness, goodness, compassion and grace.
- ▶ 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.”)
 - ✓ In one sense, the answer is no. The “persons” of the Trinity are defined by their will, intellect and emotions, which are all intangible attributes, just as are God’s holiness, righteousness, goodness, compassion and grace. There is nothing in the Scriptures that suggests God does not “possess” (Maimonides’ word) multiple intangible attributes in this sense, in fact it is just the contrary.
 - ✓ “Persons” are not tangible “attributes”.

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- ▶ Does the Trinity Doctrine teach three divine “persons” with attributes like a chair’s “woodenness”?

- ✓ Not three, but Jesus is fully human in a tangible sense.

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.)

- ✓ The burning bush (**Ex 3:4**).

- Note the word rendered as “within” here is the same as “among” in **Ex 25:8** (*tavek*).

- ✓ The cloud on Mt. Sinai (**Ex 24:15-16**). Again, the word is *tavek*.

- ✓ The promise God made in **Ex 25:8** is fulfilled in **Ex 40:34-35**.

- Note that very similar language is used to assert that the Lord’s “glory” filled Solomon’s temple, too. (**2 Chron 7:1-2**)

- The same word (*malay*) is used for “filled” in both cases.

- The word for “glory” (*kabod*) is the one used in **Ex 33:18-23** when Moses asks to see God’s “glory” but God says Moses may not see His “face” (*paniyim*) because no one can see Him and live.

- ▶ What difficulty does this present for Rabbinic Jews like Maimonides, who assert that God cannot possess a tangible attribute?

- ✓ “Because the Hebrew Scriptures include many similar references to God dwelling in space and time, the rabbis faced a dilemma similar to that of Christianity’s struggle to understand Jesus. How can references to God’s interaction with creation in a limited way be explained without attributing any kind of limitation or division within his nature? How can he be here in a special way yet everywhere else at the same time unless he has the capacity to manifest himself differently here and there?” (TGAM)

- If God can “dwell among,” people in a certain place, or appear from “within” something like a cloud or a burning bush, or “fill” a tabernacle or temple in a way it was not previously filled, then God can exist in a tangible way involving space and time.

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.”

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The Gospel according to

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'Why did you convert?' I ask.

'I just couldn't believe all that stuff about Jesus being God.'

'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.)
 - ✓ It would be necessary to resort to analogies. For example:
 - We could compare the Internet to a telegraph without wires, letters without paper, a library without books, a museum without walls, or a newspaper without ink.
 - We could say it is everywhere, all at once.
 - We could say it can be seen and heard, but not smelled or touched.
 - We could say it is made of light (fiber optics).
 - We could say it is made of one and nothing (binary system of 1's and 0's).
 - ✓ These are exactly the kinds of esoteric things Jesus was always saying about himself. See Jesus' attempts to communicate the truth about himself and list the "I am..." part of his statements. (See **John 6:35; 8:23; 9:5; 10:9; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 14:20; 15:1; 18:37**. See also **Rev 1:17-18 & 22:16**.)
- ▶ 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?
 - ✓ No. Jesus says "I am" these things.
 - ✓ This sets him above humanity, which cannot be these things, but can only know of them. It is a claim of divinity.

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**.)

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- ✓ When Jesus says, "...you will not believe me," he may be referring to their misunderstanding of who and what the Messiah is.
- ✓ He then refers to himself first as the "Son of Man" (a common Messianic title) and describes himself elevated to divine status (seated at the right hand of God), in a clear reference to the prophecy in Dan 7:14.
- ✓ The Jews understood his meaning to some extent, because they (sarcastically) twisted "Son of Man" to become "Son of God." Although they did not know it, they had just spoken the truth. Jesus confirms this when he says, "You are right in saying that I am." Immediately after hearing him say this, they led him to Pilate to be crucified for blasphemy.

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).

- ▶ 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**)
- ✓ The mixed verb tenses "was" and "am" in **John 8:58**, indicate Jesus exists outside of time. This is similar to the "multiple personality disorder" shifts in point of view when discussing himself in relation to the Father and Spirit that were discussed in the last lesson.

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- ✓ From this it seems that Jesus has been alluding to the **Ex 3:14** ineffable name of God all along in this discussion, therefore the modern additions in the translations are probably wrong.
- ▶ Why do you think translators added the subject modifiers after Jesus' statement, "I am"?
- ✓ They did not understand Jesus' dilemma—the fact that he was trying to tell people who and what he is by using terminology they could understand.

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"?
- ✓ It is a reference to the *Shema*.
- ▶ 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**?
- ✓ Obviously not. They believed he was saying, "I am God," not simply "I am the one I claim to be."

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)

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