

## THE BIBLE AND THE TRINITY IN RECENT THOUGHT: REVIEW, ANALYSIS, AND CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSAL

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**Abstract:** *The Bible and the Trinity are bound together at the heart of the Christian confession. The present article considers the relationship between the Bible and the Trinity from two vantage points and by means of engagement with some of the most significant recent studies on the Bible and the Trinity. First, the article considers how the Bible is “in the Trinity,” addressing the Bible’s place within the triune God’s self-presentation to his people. Second, it considers how the Trinity is “in the Bible,” focusing on three patterns of divine naming that recur throughout Holy Scripture. The article observes a monotheistic pattern that identifies the three persons with the one God of Israel, a relational pattern that distinguishes the persons by virtue of their mutual, asymmetrically ordered, dialogical relations, and a metaphysical pattern that indicates how the person transcend categories of creaturely being and creaturely naming.*

**Key Words:** *Trinity, divine names, monotheism, relations, metaphysics*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Christians confess the Holy Trinity: “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:6). Christians confess the Holy Trinity on the basis of Holy Scripture. The Bible proclaims a triune creator (Ps 33:6; John 1:1–3) and a triune redeemer (Gal 4:4–6). The Bible, moreover, promises a triune reward to its faithful readers: “The river of the water of life ... flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev 22:1) is our promised inheritance (Rev 21:6–7). Holy Scripture mandates baptism in God’s triune name (Matt 28:19), calls us to bless God’s triune name (Eph 1:3–14), and blesses us in God’s triune name: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14). The Trinity is the foundation of typological reasoning: God’s agency through Christ and the Spirit connects Israel’s exodus and Christian baptism because in both events both parties “drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 10:1–4; 12:13). And the Trinity is the foundation of moral reasoning: Paul urges the Ephesians to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3) because “there is one body and one Spirit ..., one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4–6). The unified testimony of Holy Scripture is

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that “all things” are “from” and “through” and “to” the triune God (1 Cor 8:6): “To him be glory forever” (Rom 11:36).

Christian theology’s interest in the relationship between the Bible and the Trinity follows from their mutual implication within the Christian confession. When Christian theology directs its attention to the relationship between the Bible and the Trinity, it confronts a number of important questions. There is the fundamental question of *whether* the Trinity is actually in the Bible, a question disputed since the rise of modern biblical criticism that remains with us today. There is also the question of *what* kind of Trinity is in the Bible. Recent evangelical controversy surrounding the Trinity reveals that agreement on the former question does not guarantee agreement on the latter question. There is, finally, the question of *how* the Trinity is in the Bible. How does the triune God teach us to confess his holy name in and through the writings of Holy Scripture? Addressing the “how” question, I suggest, best prepares us to address the “whether” and the “what” questions. Indeed, the controversy of recent days indicates that missteps regarding the question of what kind of Trinity is in the Bible are intrinsically connected to missteps regarding the question of how the Trinity is in the Bible.

In what follows, I want to focus on the question of how the Trinity is in the Bible by taking a tour of some of the most significant recent studies on the Bible and the Trinity. Along the way, I will seek to chart a constructive pathway for analyzing the Bible’s Trinitarian discourse. Our tour will proceed in two broad movements. First, I will engage in a bit of methodological ground clearing. Second, I will discuss three patterns of divine naming that indicate how the Trinity is in the Bible, each of which is found in 1 Cor 8:6, our lodestar for the present lecture. In 1 Cor 8:6, as well as in a host of other biblical texts, we see a *monotheistic pattern* of divine naming, a *relational pattern* of divine naming, and a *metaphysical pattern* of divine naming. Taken together, these patterns reveal how the Trinity is in the Bible. In learning to recognize and read these patterns rightly, Trinitarian theology may better learn to follow the Word as it leads us into the knowledge and love of the triune God.

## II. METHODOLOGICAL GROUND CLEARING

1. *The Bible in the Trinity.* We cannot fully appreciate how “the Trinity is in the Bible” without observing how “the Bible is in the Trinity.”<sup>1</sup> While the Bible is the cognitive principle of the Trinity, the supreme source from which our knowledge of the Trinity is drawn, the Trinity is the ontological principle of the Bible. The Trinity is not simply one of the “things” about which the Bible speaks. The Trinity is the speaker from whom the Bible and all things proceed: “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things ... and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things” (1 Cor 8:6). All things in heaven and on earth, including Holy

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 44, 88–91.

Scripture, are “produced by the creative breath of the Almighty” (Ps 33:6; 2 Tim 3:16).<sup>2</sup>

Much recent work on Scripture and hermeneutics rightly locates the Bible and its interpretation within a Trinitarian economy of revelation.<sup>3</sup> According to the late John Webster, “A prudent theology will treat questions concerning the nature and interpretation of Scripture ... as corollaries of more primary theological teaching about the relation of God and creatures.”<sup>4</sup> Adopting this approach leads us to see “Holy Scripture and its interpretation” as “elements in the domain of the Word of God,” a domain whose source and scope are Trinitarian in nature. “In fulfilment of the eternal purpose of God the Father (Eph. 1:9, 11), and by sending the Spirit of wisdom and revelation (Eph. 1:17), the Son sheds abroad the knowledge of himself and of all things in himself,” Webster declares.<sup>5</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer and Dan Treier agree. Viewing the Bible within the domain of the Word enables us to perceive its *nature* as “a text that is authored (ultimately) by God, with God (Jesus Christ) as its ultimate content, and with God (Holy Spirit) as its ultimate interpreter.”<sup>6</sup> Viewing the Bible within the domain of the Word also enables us to perceive its *purpose* as “part of a divinely administered economy of light by which the triune God establishes and administers covenantal relations with its readers.”<sup>7</sup> “Scripture,” Vanhoozer and Treier affirm, “is a means of God’s self-presentation.”<sup>8</sup>

Fred Sanders’s recent book, *The Triune God*, demonstrates the hermeneutical payoff of adopting this standpoint. Sanders draws upon Greg Beale and Ben Gladd’s work on the biblical theology of “mystery” to anchor his understanding of the Trinitarian economy of revelation.<sup>9</sup> Attending to the mysterious shape of biblical revelation, he argues that “the Trinity is ... a mystery in the New Testament sense of the term: something always true, long concealed, and now revealed.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948), 296.

<sup>3</sup> Representative works include Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009); J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* (T&T Clark Theology; London: T&T Clark, 2011); John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (T&T Clark Theology; London: T&T Clark, 2012); Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Vanhoozer and Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 75. The contemporary emphasis upon Scripture’s status as the Word of the triune God that ministers the presence of the triune God is not without precedent among an earlier generation of evangelical theologians. J. I. Packer describes the Bible as “God the Father preaching God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit” (*God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* [3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 91).

<sup>9</sup> G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, *Triune God*, 37.

More specifically, Sanders argues that the full revelation of the triune God comes by means of the personal presence of the Son and the Spirit in their respective missions: “In order to inform us that the Father has a Son and a Holy Spirit, the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit in person.”<sup>11</sup> According to Sanders, the OT “adumbrates” this revelation of the Trinity, “shadowing forth” the revelation of the Trinity *before* the Son and the Spirit appeared in person to save and to sanctify us, while the NT “attests” it, bearing witness to the revelation of the Trinity *after* those saving and sanctifying appearances.<sup>12</sup> Sanders’s work not only opens up promising possibilities for responsible Trinitarian exegesis of the OT and NT, it also offers an intriguing account of “the unity of the Old and New Testaments.” According to Sanders, the Trinitarian economy of salvation “binds the two testaments together as one canon,” “whose center of attention is the *oikonomia* (Eph 1:10) but whose horizon includes the eternal being of God above history.”<sup>13</sup>

2. *The mode of the Trinity’s presence in the Bible.* The Bible is the product of the triune God through which he (mysteriously) adumbrates and attests his self-presentation to his people. This, in part, is what it means to affirm that the Bible is in the Trinity. Turning toward our focal question about how the Trinity is in the Bible requires that we attend more closely to the mode of God’s self-presentation in Holy Scripture. The triune God adumbrates and attests himself *here*, in the writings of the prophets and apostles. How so?

The Trinity does not present himself to us in Holy Scripture in the form of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Some, of course, claim this as evidence that the Trinity does not present himself to us in any form in the Bible and that the church’s Trinitarian dogma is the product of later, extrabiblical influences on its thinking, life, and liturgy. Wilhelm Bousset argued that it was only when the church had forgotten its Jewish monotheistic roots that it could, under the influences of its Hellenistic context, affirm the deity of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> The church’s Trinitarian dogma, according to this view, is “a work of the Greek Spirit on the soil of the Gospel,” to use Adolf von Harnack’s famous description.<sup>15</sup> Martin Hengel and others have undermined Bousset’s sharp distinction between an early Palestinian form of Christianity and a later Hellenized form.<sup>16</sup> Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado, representatives of what Hengel dubbed the “new history of religions school,” have further discredited Bousset’s theory, demonstrating that the early church identified Jesus *with* and worshipped Jesus *as* the one true God of Israel.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, chaps. 7–8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (trans. John E. Steely; Nashville: Abingdon, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (trans. Neil Buchanan; Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1905), 1:17.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

The suggestion that Greek philosophical influences drove the church to a Trinitarian confession is, at any rate, highly implausible. As Mark Edwards observes, “the paradoxical notion of three persons, each identical with the one God but none identical with the other two, is one that no philosopher would have permitted to ensnare him if he were entirely free to choose his own premises.”<sup>18</sup> Something else must have pressed the church to confess a triune God.

As stated above, the church confesses the Trinity on the basis of Holy Scripture. If we admit, though, that the Trinity does not present himself to us in the Bible in creedal form, where does that leave us? And what is the relationship between the biblical form of God’s triune self-presentation and the creedal form of the church’s Trinitarian confession?<sup>19</sup>

Recent studies suggest different ways of thinking about the presence of the Trinity in the Bible. According to Ben Witherington and Laura Ice, the NT provides “raw data” which the church later synthesizes in the form of a “developed doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>20</sup> Matthew Levering appeals to Witherington and Ice’s metaphor to describe the Trinitarian theology of Thomas Aquinas. According to Levering, “Aquinas draws upon the ‘developed doctrine’ as elaborated by the Fathers and by his medieval predecessors, and as enunciated by the Church’s creedal formulations” and “sapientially illumines” the “raw data” of “the New Testament’s revelation of the Trinity . . . with contemplative clarity that, by purifying our knowing, crystallizes (as it were) the steps of the mystical dance revealed in Christ who, through the Spirit, invites our participation in the inexhaustible life of the Father.”<sup>21</sup> Employing slightly different idiom, Gordon Fee describes Paul as a “latent trinitarian,” whose “experience” of God through Christ and the Spirit affords him “new and expanded ways of talking about God as Saviour—while at the same time rigorously maintaining his monotheism.”<sup>22</sup> The Trinity is in the NT, according to Fee, not as “fully developed doctrine,” but as “experienced reality.”<sup>23</sup> While Fee agrees that Paul’s experience of the Trinity informs later creedal statements of the doctrine, he warns us not to “spend our labors on the ontological questions in such a way as to lose the essential narrative about God and salvation that raised those questions in the first place.”<sup>24</sup> According to Witherington and Ice, Levering, and Fee, then, the Trinity is in the Bible in an *undeveloped form*. On this construal, the task of Trinitarian theology in relation to the Bible is to develop what is undeveloped without

<sup>18</sup> Mark Edwards, “Exegesis and the Early Christian Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 80.

<sup>19</sup> For an intriguing treatment of the latter question, see Craig A. Blasing, “Creedal Formation as Hermeneutical Development: A Reexamination of Nicaea,” *ProEcal* 19 (2010): 371–88.

<sup>20</sup> Ben Witherington III and Laura Ice, *The Shadow of the Almighty: Father, Son, and Spirit in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xi (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 196.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon D. Fee, “Paul and the Trinity: The Experience of Christ and the Spirit for Paul’s Understanding of God,” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium* (ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

destroying the natural narrative habitat that generated the undeveloped form of the doctrine in the first place.

In a short essay devoted to Paul's teaching about God in Romans and Galatians, Richard Hays suggests an alternative construal of the presence of the Trinity in the Bible. While Hays acknowledges that Paul "did not know the doctrinal formulae worked out in the fourth-century church's theological reflection about the one God in three persons," he argues that Paul's "prayers, praises, and narratives about ... God point to the same complex reality with which the ecumenical councils later grappled."<sup>25</sup> The relationship between the mode of the Trinity's presence in the Bible and the mode of the Trinity's presence in the creeds is not, according to Hays, a relationship between raw data and developed doctrine. Drawing upon the work of Frances Young and David Ford, Hays argues that the relationship between the Trinity in the Bible and the Trinity in the creeds is similar to the relationship between the fluent speaker of a language and the theoretical grammar of that language. As Hays explains, "A person does not need to know theoretical grammar constructs in order to speak grammatically. In fact, it is the reverse: 'Grammar' is developed to explain the linguistic practices of those who speak a complex language with unreflective fluency. In the same way, the later doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to describe and analyze the way in which Jesus Christ and the Spirit had 'become intrinsic to Paul's way of referring to God.'"<sup>26</sup>

Hays's metaphor correlates well with Oswald Bayer's conception of theology as a "grammar of the language of Holy Scripture."<sup>27</sup> Trinitarian *theology*, according to this conception, is commentary upon and reflective analysis of the primary and normatively fluent Trinitarian *language* of Holy Scripture. As we will see more fully below, what we have in the Bible is not merely an "experience" of the Trinity or the as yet undeveloped raw data of Trinitarian reflection. What we have in the Bible is well-formed Trinitarian discourse: primary, normative, fluent. More specifically, we have the triune God's self-naming in the form of the Spirit-inspired prophetic and apostolic testimony to that self-naming. The Trinitarian theology of the church's creeds, proclamation, and liturgy, therefore, is not a refinement of or an improvement upon God's self-naming in Scripture. It is rather the church's attempt, in prayerful thought and speech, to *follow* the divine Word as it leads us out of the misery of idolatry into the happiness that lies before us in the vision of the triune God.

3. *On divine naming.* The divine name is the primary mode of God's self-presentation in Holy Scripture. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the interpretation of the Bible's triune naming for the instruction, conversion, consolation, and

<sup>25</sup> Richard B. Hays, "The God of Mercy Who Rescues Us from the Present Evil Age," in *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology* (ed. A. Andrew Das and Frank J. Matera; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 141.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Bayer draws this phrase from Hamann who, in turn, is dependent upon Luther. See Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way* (ed. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 81, 94–96, 125–26, 170.

direction of the church in its pilgrimage toward the place where the triune God will no longer address us in Holy Scripture but rather face to face.<sup>28</sup>

The foundational act of divine naming that the Bible adumbrates and attests is not the creature's naming of God, but God's naming of himself.<sup>29</sup> God sanctifies and commissions prophets and apostles to be ministers of his Word by naming himself in their presence. At the burning bush, YHWH expounds his name to Moses: "I am who I am" (Exod 3:14). Again at Mount Sinai, God reveals his glory to Moses by proclaiming his name, "YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod 34:6).<sup>30</sup> In similar fashion, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John are set apart for their apostolic ministry, becoming eyewitnesses of God's glory as they become "ear-witnesses"—to borrow Vanhoozer's happy term—of an intratrinitarian event of divine self-naming: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (2 Pet 1:16–18; John 1:14).<sup>31</sup> The foundation of the prophetic and apostolic witness, and thus of the prophetic and apostolic writings, is the self-naming of the triune God.

While divine self-naming is the *foundational* form of divine naming that we witness in Holy Scripture, it is not the *only* form of divine naming that we witness in Holy Scripture. By naming himself in the presence of prophets, God sets them apart to "proclaim the name of the Lord" (Deut 32:3). The proclamation of God's holy name by God's holy prophets in turn awakens the entire congregation of God's creatures to call upon the name of the Lord: "My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever" (Ps 145:21). In similar fashion, God's triune self-naming at Jesus's baptism (Matt 3:16–17) leads, through the ministry of the apostles, to the foundation of a community that baptizes "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19; 1 John 1:1–3). The foundational revelatory act of divine self-naming thus endows a community of divine naming.<sup>32</sup>

The various additional forms of divine naming that comprise the community of divine naming that is the prophetic and apostolic writings are no less the Word

<sup>28</sup> Khaled Anatolios states, "The task of trinitarian theology is not to claim fully adequate expressions or analyses of divine being but to clarify the rules generated by God's self-revelation that enable us to successfully refer our being and activity, knowingly and lovingly, to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (*Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 292).

<sup>29</sup> William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 281. Contrast this with modern mediating theology's attempt to ground the Trinity in either history or experience (Samuel M. Powell, *The Trinity in German Thought* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001]).

<sup>30</sup> According to Mark Gignilliat, "YHWH's proclamation of his own name *is* the revelation of his glory" (Gignilliat, "The Trinity and the Old Testament: Real Presence or Imposition?" in *The Essential Trinity: New Testament Foundations and Practical Relevance* [ed. Brandon D. Crowe and Carl R. Trueman; London: Apollos, 2016], 181).

<sup>31</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Desmond, *God and the Between*, 281.

of God than God's foundational acts of self-naming.<sup>33</sup> If the hermeneutical task of Trinitarian theology is the interpretation of the divine names, then that task must include analyzing the patterns that various biblical forms of divine naming adumbrate and attest. To that dimension of the hermeneutical task we now turn.

### III. THREE PATTERNS OF DIVINE NAMING

First Corinthians 8:6 plays a central role in recent debates regarding the nature of monotheism and Christology in the NT writings. Paul's self-involving confession regarding the identity and activity of God and Christ is relevant to the present discussion insofar as it illustrates three patterns of divine naming that recur in various forms across various biblical texts.

1. *A monotheistic pattern of divine naming.* "For us there is *one God* ... and *one Lord*" (1 Cor 8:6). The first pattern of divine naming that 1 Cor 8:6 attests is a monotheistic pattern of divine naming. In this pattern of divine naming, the primary Trinitarian language of the Bible *identifies* God, Jesus, and the Spirit *with* YHWH the one true God of Israel. First Corinthians 8:6 offers an example of this pattern in its application of Deut 6:4 to God and Christ.<sup>34</sup> Much of the literature relevant to our topic in recent years demonstrates the various ways in which the NT exhibits a monotheistic pattern of divine naming.

Larry Hurtado's several works on this subject detect the presence of both an "exclusivist monotheism" and "an inclusion of Christ along with God as rightful recipient of cultic devotion" within the NT.<sup>35</sup> Richard Bauckham demonstrates how early Christian writings include Jesus within the identity of the one God by applying to Jesus not only the unique divine name but also the unique identifying descriptions of Jewish "creational" and "eschatological monotheism."<sup>36</sup> Chris Tilling and N. T. Wright reveal further texture in this pattern of divine naming by demonstrating how OT language of God's unique covenant relationship to Israel and of God's promised return to Zion are applied to Jesus by NT authors.<sup>37</sup> In his book, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*, the first of a promised two volumes on this topic, Kendall Soulen traces the extent and manner in which the NT applies the Tetragrammaton, by means of its Greek surrogate *kyrios* as well as its radiant

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<sup>33</sup> Henri Blocher's recent treatment of inspiration is relevant here: "God and the Scripture Writers: The Question of Double Authorship," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), esp. 531.

<sup>34</sup> Summaries of recent discussions may be found in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 631–38; and N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Book II, Parts III and IV (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 634–56, 661–70.

<sup>35</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 50; see also idem, *One God, One Lord*.

<sup>36</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 653–56.

“corona of connotation,” to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.<sup>38</sup> The detailed exegetical analyses of Kavin Rowe, Gordon Fee, and Richard Hays further confirm the ubiquity of this monotheistic pattern of divine naming in Holy Scripture.<sup>39</sup>

Although this monotheistic pattern of divine naming has not gained universal acknowledgement among Bible interpreters,<sup>40</sup> its presence is difficult to refute, especially in light of the preceding studies. For this reason, there is more reason now than there was two decades ago to affirm David Yeago’s seminal thesis that while the NT does not use the *concepts* of the Nicene Creed to declare that Jesus is consubstantial with the Father it does render the same *judgment* through its monotheistic pattern of divine naming.<sup>41</sup>

2. *A relational pattern of divine naming.* “For us there is one God, *the Father*, ... and one Lord, *Jesus Christ*” (1 Cor 8:6). The second pattern of divine naming that 1 Cor 8:6 attests is a relational pattern of divine naming. In this pattern, the primary Trinitarian language of the Bible *distinguishes* God, Jesus, and the Spirit from one another *by means of their mutual relations*. First Corinthians 8:6 exemplifies this pattern in identifying God as “the Father” of Jesus Christ, who is by implication identified as God’s “Son.” The second pattern of divine naming does not benefit from the sheer quantity of studies that our first pattern enjoys. Nevertheless, a couple of important studies are worthy of mention.

Building on programmatic essays by Nils Dahl, Leander Keck, and Francis Watson,<sup>42</sup> and attentive to potential contributions from the history of biblical interpretation, two recent studies consider what the *relations* between God, Jesus, and the Spirit reveal about the identity of the triune God.<sup>43</sup> In his book, *The Birth of the Trinity*,<sup>44</sup> Matthew Bates addresses the emergence of Trinitarian doctrine in the early church, focusing on the role played by “prosopological exegesis” in the doctrine’s development. In prosopological exegesis, a reading strategy attested as early as the second century BCE and employed by first century CE authors such as Philo and Paul, the “riddle” of unnamed speakers in ancient texts is resolved through the

<sup>38</sup> R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*, vol. 1: *Distinguishing the Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 211.

<sup>39</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” *ProEcl* 11 (2002): 295–312; idem, “Romans 10:13: What is the Name of the Lord?” *HorBT* 22 (2000): 135–73; Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013); Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> See *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (ed. Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis; Leiden: Brill, 1999); and, more recently, J. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested by God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> David S. Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis,” *ProEcl* 3 (1994): 152–64.

<sup>42</sup> Nils Dahl, “The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology,” *Reflection* 73 (1975): 5–8; Leander Keck, “Toward the Renewal of New Testament Christology,” *NTS* 32 (1986): 362–77; Francis Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity: Reflections on Pauline God-Language, in Disagreement with J. D. G. Dunn,” *JSNT* 23 (2001): 99–124.

<sup>43</sup> The following two paragraphs are adapted from my review of Bates’s and Hill’s books in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19 (2017): 110–12.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament & Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

identification of speakers by a text's interpreter. Bates observes this interpretive practice in the NT authors' interpretation of the OT, especially the Psalms, as well as in postapostolic interpretation of the Bible. According to Bates, this exegetical method of "solution by person" best explains the emergence of the Trinitarian concept of "person" in the early church and better accounts for the development of creedal teaching on the Trinity and Christology than other theories of doctrinal development. Bates seeks to confirm his thesis by tracing the ways early Christians interpret conversations between the persons of the Trinity in various OT texts, following the arc of a "theodramatic" plot from the Son's eternal generation from the Father, through his incarnate mission and crucifixion, to his praise for divine deliverance and exaltation at the Father's right hand.

Whereas Bates focuses on the dialogical relations of the Trinity as exhibited across the biblical canon and suggests a hermeneutical origin for the term "person" in Trinitarian theology, Wesley Hill's *Paul and the Trinity*<sup>45</sup> focuses more specifically on debates surrounding Pauline God-talk and retrieves a concept of "relation" that is fruitful for interpreting the Bible's relational pattern of divine naming. Hill argues that the binary of "high" and "low" Christology, though commonplace in the contemporary literature, is inadequate for making sense of Paul's language about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In place of this binary, Hill attempts to retrieve the traditional category of "relation." In doing so, he avoids the vague and impressionistic appeals to "relationality" that plague a familiar stream of modern Trinitarian thought and, by means of critical interaction with recent scholarship on pro-Nicene theology and particularly its Thomist appropriation, refines a concept of relation that enables him to account for two registers of Pauline discourse about God (i.e. "redoublement"): discourse that indicates what God, Christ, and the Spirit hold in common as the one God of Israel and discourse by which they are distinguished from one another by means of relation. Conscious of the threat of anachronism in applying later theological concepts to the interpretation of the Bible, Hill tests his refined concept of relation in the exegesis of key passages in the Pauline letters (Phil 2:6–11; 1 Cor 8:6; 15:24–28, among others). He concludes from his exegetical analysis that such texts are more faithfully mapped by these dual registers of discourse than by the categories of high or low Christology. According to Hill's analysis, the relations between God, Christ, and the Spirit are *mutual, asymmetrically ordered relations* that "do not compromise the fundamental 'oneness' or 'unity' that obtains between them."<sup>46</sup>

The studies of Bates and Hill do not detract from the monotheistic pattern of divine naming. In fact, they explicitly presuppose and affirm it. But they also demonstrate that, taken by itself, the monotheistic pattern of divine naming cannot account fully for the self-presentation of the triune God in Holy Scripture. The God who names himself as YHWH our God also names himself as Father, Son,

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<sup>45</sup> Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

and Holy Spirit. And so, we confess that within the one Lord God there are three “persons” who are distinguished from one another by their mutual, asymmetrically ordered, dialogical relations.

3. *A metaphysical pattern of divine naming.* “For us there is one God, the Father, *from whom are all things and for whom we exist*, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom are all things and through whom we exist*” (1 Cor 8:6). The third pattern of divine naming that 1 Cor 8:6 attests is a metaphysical pattern of divine naming. In this pattern, the primary Trinitarian language of the Bible indicates that God, Jesus, and the Spirit *transcend the categories of creaturely being and creaturely naming*. First Corinthians 8:6 exemplifies this pattern in identifying God and Christ by means of the language of what Gregory Sterling calls “prepositional metaphysics.”<sup>47</sup> God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are not two of the “things” about which the Bible speaks. They are the source and goal of “all things” about which the Bible speaks. As such, they transcend creaturely classifications of being and creaturely modes of naming.

The metaphysical pattern of divine naming is the most understudied pattern of divine naming among recent works on the Bible and the Trinity. It is still common to read that the Bible is not concerned with “the inner nature of the one God” but rather with his relationships with his creatures.<sup>48</sup> Theologians such as Robert Jenson, Matthew Levering, and Thomas Joseph White have countered such a perspective, arguing (in different ways) that metaphysical questions are unavoidable in interpreting biblical teaching about the Trinity.<sup>49</sup> To admit their point, however true, is not yet to address the issue of whether the primary Trinitarian language of the Bible *itself* exhibits metaphysical patterns of divine naming that might inform the grammar of constructive theological discourse. I believe that it *does* and that it *should*, and I would appeal to a handful of recent studies in support of this conviction.

Andrea Saner’s book, “*Too Much to Grasp*,”<sup>50</sup> offers a sustained theological interpretation of Exod 3:13–15, God’s foundational act of self-naming to Moses at the burning bush. The author surveys the decidedly anti-metaphysical conclusions of modern critical approaches to these verses and argues that their preoccupation with etymology and religious-historical reconstruction imposes severe methodological limitations when it comes to interpreting the theological subject matter of the text. Convinced “that Old Testament studies would do well to take greater care in addressing ontological implications of Old Testament texts,”<sup>51</sup> Saner develops a more sophisticated approach to interpreting the literal sense of God’s self-

<sup>47</sup> Gregory Sterling, “Prepositional Metaphysics in Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Early Christian Liturgical Texts,” *SPhiloA* 9 (1997): 219–38.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 624, 626, 627. Similarly, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Pentecost and Trinity,” *Int* 66 (2012): 14.

<sup>49</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 1999); Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*; Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

<sup>50</sup> Andrea D. Saner, “*Too Much to Grasp*”: *Exodus 3:13–15 and the Reality of God* (Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements 11; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

revelation in Exodus 3 through interaction with the work of Brevard Childs, Hans Frei, and Augustine. With this approach in hand, she provides a close reading of Exod 3:13–15 within the context of the book of Exodus and the Pentateuch's portrayal of Moses's role as covenant mediator. She concludes that God's self-naming in verse 14 functions as a "wordplay" and "commentary" upon the Tetragrammaton. According to Saner, the self-referential nature of Exod 3:14's wordplay—"I am who I am"—indicates the Tetragrammaton's transcendence of ordinary patterns of creaturely naming. The Tetragrammaton is not a definition for God, identifying God's essence by means of genus and differentia. Nor is it a proper name for God, picking God out as one individual within a larger class. Nevertheless, while Exod 3:14 manifests God's transcendence of creaturely modes of naming, its purpose is not ultimately to hide YHWH from his people but to disclose his transcendent uniqueness as the self-subsisting one and to make YHWH "available to Israel" as the one upon whose name they may call and as the one they may trust to fulfill his covenant promises in history.<sup>52</sup>

Approaches such as Saner's,<sup>53</sup> which are attentive to correspondences between the Bible's unique manner of naming God and God's unique manner of being and acting, help us better appreciate other examples of the metaphysical pattern of divine naming that are present in the Septuagint and the Greek NT, whether it be the Septuagint's translation of Exod 3:14 and the NT's various appropriations of that translation<sup>54</sup> or the NT's various ways of actualizing central features of the broader Greco-Roman philosophical and theological cultural encyclopedia, such as the language of negative theology and causal metaphysics.<sup>55</sup> As noted above, 1 Cor 8:6 provides a specific example of this sort of actualization in using the language of "prepositional metaphysics" to describe God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ as the sole first and final cause of "all things."<sup>56</sup>

The Bible's metaphysical pattern of divine naming identifies the triune God as the self-subsistent source and goal of all things. In identifying the Trinity in this manner, the metaphysical pattern of divine naming indicates that both the oneness that binds the three persons together as well as the relations by which the three persons are distinguished exist and operate in a manner that transcends the categories of creaturely being, understanding, and language. Unfortunately, attention to

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>53</sup> See also Michael Allen, "Exodus 3," in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (ed. Michael Allen; London: T&T Clark, 2011), chap. 3.

<sup>54</sup> On which, see Sean M. McDonough, *YHWH at Patmos: Rev. 1:4 in Its Hellenistic and Early Jewish Setting* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> On NT appropriation of the language of negative theology, see Jerome Neyrey, "'Without Beginning of Days or End of Life' (Hebrews 7:3): Topos for a True Deity," *CBQ* 53 (1991): 439–55. On NT appropriation of the language of causal metaphysics, see Robert Grant, "Causation and 'The Ancient World View,'" *JBL* 83 (1964): 34–40; and Sterling, "Prepositional Metaphysics." For further discussion of Jewish and early Christian use of Greco-Roman philosophical and theological terminology, see Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 173–79.

<sup>56</sup> See Andrey Romanov, "Through One Lord Only: Theological Interpretation of the Meaning of  $\delta\iota\acute{\alpha}$  in 1 Cor 8,6," *Bib* 93 (2015): 391–415.

the Bible's metaphysical pattern of divine naming is not a central feature of contemporary Trinitarian biblical exegesis, and this explains in part the often flat- and wrong-footed character of much contemporary Trinitarian theology. As the preceding discussion suggests, neglect of metaphysical analysis in biblical interpretation is not simply a failure to grapple with the subject matter of the biblical text. It is also a failure to attend to the forms of biblical discourse. For theology to speak *fluently* of the Trinity, it must speak *metaphysically* of the Trinity, not just as a matter of drawing good and necessary consequences from the Bible, but as a matter of keeping in step with the Bible's primary Trinitarian language.<sup>57</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Christians confess the Holy Trinity on the basis of Holy Scripture. The triune God adumbrates and attests himself to us in Holy Scripture through foundational revelatory acts of divine self-naming which in turn endow a community of divine naming. Attending to the Bible's primary Trinitarian language reveals three patterns of divine naming that recur across various literary forms and across various redemptive-historical epochs. A monotheistic pattern of divine naming identifies the three persons with YHWH the one God of Israel; a relational pattern of divine naming distinguishes the three persons by means of their mutual, asymmetrically ordered, dialogical relations; and a metaphysical pattern of divine naming indicates that the three persons transcend the categories of creaturely being, understanding, and naming.

The one God who presents himself to us in Holy Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit identifies himself as the self-subsistent source and goal of all things. In doing so, he calls us to epistemological and hermeneutical humility, reminding us that he is unlike any of the things that we meet, or of which we speak, in creation. "There is no one like the Lord our God" (Exod 8:10). In doing so, he also invites us to call upon his name with confidence—in prayer, proclamation, and praise, as well as in the theological disciplines of biblical exegesis and dogmatics. The one God who names himself in Holy Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit gives his name to us that, by the same Spirit, we may confess, "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3), and cry, "Abba! Father!" (Gal 4:6). And so, by the Spirit, we confess with prophets and apostles and with the church throughout the ages: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and we exist through him." To this great

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<sup>57</sup> In learning to follow the lead of the Bible's primary Trinitarian language, contemporary biblical exegetes and theologians may find assistance from patristic, medieval, and Reformation biblical exegetes and theologians, for whom the monotheistic, relational, and metaphysical patterns of divine naming were often a central feature of theological interpretation of Holy Scripture. The work of retrieval is not easy. Nor is it without its dangers. And traditional patterns and practices of biblical exegesis sometimes run counter to the canons of modern biblical criticism. Nevertheless, the work of retrieval is worth it: learning to better follow biblical patterns of divine naming holds great promise for leading us more deeply into the knowledge and love of the triune God who presents himself to us in Holy Scripture.

God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever and ever, world without end. Amen.