

Chapter Four

Three? One? The Uniqueness of God's Being

As a trial lawyer, I live in the world of analogies and pictures. Sometimes I get to explain scientific concepts to lay jurors, many of whom, I suspect, didn't like science when they took it decades before in school. Other times, I need to explain economic ideas for which the non-economist jurors have no base of knowledge. Many trials I have had to explain aspects of engineering to jurors who might have thought the term itself meant "someone who builds engines."

For example, once I was trying a case about whether the drug pioglitazone caused bladder cancer, I needed to teach my jury some concepts of molecular biology. Yet I didn't have any biologists of any ilk on the jury much less microbiologists. The closest I came was a butcher!

In molecular biology speak, I needed to teach that jury how a group of trans-nucleic receptor proteins termed "peroxisome proliferator-activated receptors" ("PPARs," for short) function in a human cell. Layered on that, I needed to explain how these PPARs were able to transport the pioglitazone molecule through a cell's cytoplasm, across the nucleic border, and into the DNA.

If anyone reading this has a strong science background, and certainly if one is a molecular biologist, what I have written in the preceding paragraph should make sense in itself. But with a non-scientific jury, those words don't readily translate into understanding, especially if one isn't allowed to Google while listening.

As a trial lawyer, I have several choices. One, I can decide that I don't need to educate the jury, and just hope they grasp the essence of what I am saying, trusting in me and my witnesses to be telling the truth, even though they aren't sure what that truth is. Two, I can hope that one or two of the more biologically-savvy jurors understand enough to then influence or educate the other jurors in deliberations.

A third option can often compound the problem I am seeking to solve. This option involves defining concepts that my jurors don't understand using more scientific words they don't understand. It layers misunderstanding on top of misunderstanding to become a hopeless puddle of confusing and boring words. It would be me telling the butcher,

“PPARs play essential roles in the regulation of cellular differentiation, development, and metabolism (carbohydrate, lipid, protein), as transcription factors regulating the expression of genes. This ability can also make them tumorigenic in higher organisms.”

I don't like any of those options. First, leaving someone uneducated about important aspects of what they must decide seems both ludicrous and lazy. If that is what our jury system is to be, then we should seriously consider having something more than a lay jury for science-rich cases. (Which I DON'T believe is the answer! But that is a different book.)

Nor can I accept the second option of hoping one or two science minded jurors might be able to grasp my evidence and then educate the other jurors. I am the trial lawyer. My job is to educate the jury. I cannot relegate that job to someone(s) I don't know, especially if I am uncertain that someone is up to the task!

The third option is no option at all, although I have seen lawyers do this very thing. I am reminded of a trial when an issue was whether a certain drug (a “Cox-2 inhibitor”) caused blood clots, and hence, myocardial infarctions, or in laymen's terms, “heart attacks.” I worked hard to explain the necessary science and medicine, but my opposing counsel was content to use words, explain them with more words the jurors didn't know, and move on, trusting the jury now had the necessary knowledge. I almost chuckled out loud when the lawyer said some like,

Hemostasis exists in our blood, modulating levels of prostaglandins like thromboxane and prostacyclin to ensure that the body can both continue blood flow while being able to stop hemorrhaging when the need arises. Let me explain. When there is a hemorrhage, the endothelial cells of vessels express a heparin-like molecule and thrombomodulin and prevent platelet aggregation with nitric oxide and prostacyclin.

I leaned to a lawyer next to me, commented on the glazed look of jurors, and whispered, “I've lived with this case for three years, I have deposed countless doctors and scientists, and I don't have a clue what she just said! I am sure the jurors don't!”

Rather than any of the three options I have briefly described above, I believe it incumbent on me as a lawyer to do something different. I need to educate the jury. I need to explain to them the concepts in a way that they can grasp what I am saying, have a firm foundation from which to understand key terms and concepts in

documents, and be able to listen to experts in the fields discuss the fields, comprehending what those witnesses are saying.

A principal tool for me is rooted in “anchoring.” Social scientists and educators use the word “anchoring” to describe the process of finding something someone already knows and using it to explain and then tie-in or “anchor” into the mind a new concept. As a simple example, let me teach you three Hebrew words we quickly learned in first-year Hebrew class.

In ancient Hebrew, אָנִי is the ancient word we usually translate as “he” or “it.” A second word you can gloss over, unless you read Hebrew, is אִנִּי, usually translated “she.” The third word is דָּג, usually translated simply as “fish.” Now giving you those words, using letters most readers don’t know, isn’t going to teach much of anything. Yet if I told you how to pronounce the words, we would be a good way down the road to you learning them. אָנִי is pronounced “hū.” אִנִּי is pronounced “hē,” and דָּג is pronounced “dag.” Now the “anchoring” comes in.

Here is the way to learn and remember those three Hebrew words:

“In Hebrew, ‘Hu’ is ‘he?’ ‘he’ is ‘she!’ And the ‘dag’s’ a ‘fish!’”

If that still doesn’t register, use more proper English spellings of the English words that sound like the Hebrew and remember that in Hebrew, “Who” is “he.” “He” is “she,” and a “dog” (if you pronounce it “dag” like you are from Boston) is a “fish.”

This is a long introduction to the chapter, but long for a purpose. I am seeking to anchor into the reader’s mind the importance of analogies and metaphors when teaching. This importance lies, I believe, in the way the Bible explains the essence of God as a being. Anchoring through metaphors and analogies are useful tools in our understanding the nature of God.

Here is the problem. Our knowledge base extends to things we are, things we see, things we experience, and things we imagine. Our understanding is almost always put into language form, with words forming in our heads to express our thoughts. It is a phenomenon of neuro-science. It is how we are. But God is something beyond our knowledge base. We aren’t God. What’s more, we can’t see him as he is since he is “spirit.” While we can experience God, and while evidence of him is present in his creation, those experiences do not fully reveal his essence as

a being. Our creative brains can imagine things – real things – about God, but that is much different than having visual inspection as a basis of knowledge.

In light of this, as we read of God and think of God, we tend to do so in our human words and experiences. As noted in the last chapter, the Hebrew Bible speaks of the “arm of God.” This isn’t because God is human-esque, with arms and legs. The Hebrew uses “arm” as a metaphor to refer to the actions and work of God. Most people use their arms to lift, to carry, and do basic work. (I have known several people without arms, and am constantly amazed at how they are able to work just as industriously. For them, the most useful metaphor for God’s working might be the legs of God, or even the mouth of God.)

As explained in the previous chapter, our best knowledge base of God comes from how he has revealed himself to humanity in the stories and language encapsulated in Scripture. God’s revelation was not what in my profession of trial law is called a full-on data dump. In other words, God didn’t send down a treatise or instruction manual that gave humanity in one fell swoop, everything that could be or needed to be known about God.

Instead, God interacted with humanity and in the stories of those interactions, as well as the occasional verbal proclamations through the voices and pens of prophets, God progressively revealed more and more of who he is. In the process of this growing revelation, God used metaphors, analogies, proclamations, parables, figures of speech, and more – all to teach and illuminate human minds to see God for who he is and what that means to us.

Even beyond the pages of Scripture, over time through prayer contemplation, spirit-led discussions, and careful deliberative thought, God’s people have grown to understand insights in Scripture beyond that which earlier generations understood. God’s Spirit “bears witness” to God (Jn. 15:26), guiding the apostles, and the church today, into truth (Jn. 16:13). It is not surprising, therefore, that the church has developed ideas and understandings about God that are firmly rooted in God’s revelation of Scripture, yet put into modern terms and ideas, anchoring unusual concepts to those we more readily understand. This recognition lays a good basis for understanding the Trinity.

The Trinity as a Word

The word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible. Neither is the word “science.” But that doesn’t mean that the Bible doesn’t discuss scientific ideas. Don’t get me wrong, the Bible isn’t a science text book, as some might try to make it out to be. When the Psalms talk about the sun rising and setting (Ps.113:3) while the earth doesn’t move (104:5), they aren’t speaking scientifically.

God used pictures and language understood by the people of the day to convey important ideas about God’s love abiding from daybreak to sunset and through the night. The words are no more scientific than the Psalm that speaks of God himself as “a sun and shield” (Ps. 84:11). Similarly, we err if we read the Psalms talking about where the earth “ends” if we think that means the earth isn’t round (Ps. 72:8). Our goal in reading those passages needs to be first to understand why they are written, and then what they meant to the original readers. Only then can we properly understand them in light of today.

So even though the Bible doesn’t use the word “science,” and isn’t a “science book,” it doesn’t mean that science isn’t firmly rooted in an understanding of God and Scripture. The Bible does teach that this is a world of consistency, created by a consistent God. The Bible teaches cause and effect, a core truth of all physics and life. Consider the early Biblical story of Onan.

Onan’s brother, Er, had died, leaving a widow. As per the day’s culture, Onan was responsible for marrying his brother’s widow and helping her bear children to inherit Er’s resources and responsibilities. Onan didn’t want a child by this woman. So we read in Scripture that,

Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother’s wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother (Gen. 38:9).

The Bible isn’t a science or health book on the biology of reproduction. Yet it bears out the truth that without the sperm, a woman will not bear a child. It would take divine intervention to obviate this rule of nature.

No one I know of says, “there is no such thing as science because the word isn’t used in the Bible.” Yet I have often heard people challenge the idea of the Trinity “because the word isn’t used in the Bible.”

Before looking at the Biblical basis for the Trinity, it is helpful to consider the word itself. “Trinity” is an English word that surfaced in Middle English, a period the Oxford English Dictionary dates from 1150 to 1500. This period is best known today for producing Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

“Trinity” developed over time through Old French (“*trinite*”) being sourced from the Latin *trinitas*, related also back to the Greek *trias* (τριάς). The Latin, *trinitas* means “three-ness,” from *tribus*, the Latin word for “three.” Don’t get lost in the muddle of my working back through the languages. The key is to understand that “Trinity” is an English word that at its core means simply “three-ness.” This word was and is used by the church to express the Biblical idea that the one God has a “three-ness” to him. This doesn’t mean that there are three Gods. There is one.

How can this be? How can there be one God who is “three-ness”? Before answering this ultimate question, the approach needs to start with a close inspection of how Scripture speaks of God as “one” and as “three.”

The Trinity (three-ness) of God in Hebrew Scriptures

God as plural

Scriptures earliest revelation of God is found in the first chapters of Genesis. There God is referred to by the generic Hebrew word for “God” *Elohim*. Genesis 1:1 says,

In the beginning, God [plural form *Elohim*] created the heavens and the earth.

Interestingly, *Elohim* means “God” in a plural form. The singular form “*El*” is not what is used in Genesis 1. In spite of using a plural noun “literally “Gods,” the Hebrew uses a singular verb form (“*he* created,” not “*they* created”). Is this an early indication of a plurality within the one God or is it an ancient anachronism of the Hebrews inheriting a concept of more than one God and reducing it do to the idea of one God? Scholars disagree.

This gets more interesting where God creates humanity. Genesis 1:26 explains,

Then God [again, the plural form *Elohim*] said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”

Notice the plurals again? God didn't say, "I will make mankind in my image." He said "our" image. Again, scholars have different explanations for why this might be so, but one is an indication that God is more than simply a singular being.

This plural language is similar to that found in the throne room experience of Isaiah the prophet. From the throne we read of God,

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I [singular] send, and who will go for us [plural]?" (Isa. 6:8).

This same perplexing singular/plural exchange goes on in the story of the Tower of Babel. There we read,

Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

The "us" is clearly plural, yet the "LORD" who does the action is singular.

God as Spirit

This same chapter is the one that references the "the Spirit of God" hovering over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2). Now some will point out that the Hebrew word for "Spirit" can also mean "breath" or "wind," but even there we see an extension of God beyond the simple "God" designation.

Over and over in the Old Testament one reads of the "Spirit" of God. The prophet Ezekiel was frequently taken away by the Spirit of God (see, e.g., Ezek. 3:14; 11:24). Haggai spoke of God's Spirit remaining in the midst of his people (Hag. 2:5). The contrite Psalmist, confessing his sin, asks that God won't "take your Holy Spirit from me" (Ps. 51:10). When Zachariah proclaimed the word of the Lord to the people, he was first, "clothed" with "the Spirit of God" (2 Chron. 24:20).

Lest one think that the "Spirit" of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is just a breath or impersonal wind, Isaiah 63:10 proclaims clearly,

But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.

The idea of grieving an impersonal wind seems nonsensical.

God as Three

Even beyond God as Creator and as Spirit, the Old Testament has interesting stories like that of three visitors to Abraham. On an otherwise normal day, Abraham looks up and sees “three men were standing in front of him” (Gen. 18:2). Interestingly, this story is introduced in the previous verse. The appearance of the three men is preceded by this,

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:1).

This story unfolds with Abraham speaking to the three in the singular form as if they are one.

O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, you [singular] do not pass by your servant (Gen. 18:3).

Even as Abraham used the singular “you” in the verb “do not pass by,” Abraham recognized and used the plural form when referencing their presence:

Let a little water be brought, and wash your [plural] feet, and rest yourselves [plural] under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you [plural] may refresh yourselves [plural] (Gen. 18:4-5).

Then the three “men” talk as one in responding to Abraham. “*They* say, ‘Do as you have said’” (Gen. 18:5). The story doesn’t have “one of them” saying it, but the three speak as one. This happens over and over in the story, most notably in verses 9 and 10.

They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.”

In these two verses, the “They said” is followed quickly by “The LORD said.” One can easily understand in this storyline that the LORD has appeared as the three men. (This storyline and the interchange of singulars, plurals, and the LORD continue through the next vignette dealing with Abraham and God’s judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah.)

God as One

We are remiss if we fail to note the key capstone idea of God's revelation to the Israelites. There are not multiple Gods. There is one God. Israel's most hallowed prayer, one to be repeated multiple times a day, comes from Deuteronomy 6:4,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Yet even in this passage, the Hebrew word for God is used in its plural form rather than its singular (*Elohim* rather than *El*). The unity proclamation is one that expresses that the plural God is one God.

All of these passages convey ideas that are in themselves perplexing, if not downright confusing. Yet in the consideration of the Trinity, the idea of God being a three-ness in his unity, these passages can make sense on a new level.

The Trinity (three-ness) of God in the New Testament Scriptures

The New Testament are not to be considered the "Christian Scriptures" as opposed to the Old Testament that are the "Hebrew Scriptures." For the Christian, both the Old and New Testament are equally "Scripture." But as one considers the New Testament, one sees the unfolding picture of the three-ness of the one God in ways that lend further insight into God's nature.

God as One

The New Testament does not take away one bit of truth that God is one. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote of God as one, noting it was a truth even the demons understood.

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! (Jms. 2:19).

James was not the only to write of God as one. Paul was unequivocal in his language as well.

- "God is one" (Gal. 3:20).
- "Since God is one..." (Rom. 3:30).

- “For there is one God...” (1 Tim. 2:5).
- “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, *the only God*, be honor and glory forever and ever.” (1 Tim. 1:17).
- “We know that ... ‘there is no God but one.’” (1 Cor. 8:4).

James and Paul were not resurrecting some Old Testament idea that was lost on Jesus. Jesus also knew, understood, and taught on the unity of God. When asked which commandment was the most important of the whole Bible, Jesus answered,

The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one... (Mk. 12:29).

But none of this should take away from the recognition of these New Testament witnesses to Jesus as God and the Holy Spirit as God. Even as Jesus prayed to God the Father as “one God,” he placed himself in the same category,

And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (Jn. 17:3).

Jesus as God

The New Testament over and over emphasizes that Jesus is God. This wasn’t something “new” decided by Christians looking to prop up their nascent faith in the generations after the death of Jesus. It was a confidence that drove the believers to gladly die a martyr’s death, rather than deny the truth.

Some of the earliest New Testament writings are those of the rabbi turned apostle Saul known by both his Hebrew name Sha’ul (or “Saul” when spelled with Greek letters) as well as his Roman name “Paul.” Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi comes, at the latest, just three decades after the death of Jesus. In that letter, Paul uses what most scholars consider a well-known song or verse in speaking of Jesus, urging his readers to model the humility of Jesus. Paul illustrated Jesus’ attitude of others first recanting the hymn¹ saying of Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,

¹ Some scholars consider Paul’s passage simply poetic, and not an early Christian hymn.

even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5-11).

This is a bold and clear affirmation of the deity of Jesus. Jesus was “in the form of God” before taking on a human form. Jesus post-resurrection has returned to an exalted position of “Lord.”

Paul was writing in Greek, and the word “Lord” in Greek can mean simply “master.” But the Greek word held special meaning for scholars like Paul who were steeped in both the Hebrew scriptures and in the Greek translation of those Scriptures. There the word “Lord” was the word used for the holy God who revealed himself to Moses from the burning bush.

This is the “Lord” of which the Hebrew prayer says, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” This understanding gives greater depth to Paul’s instruction that no one can say “Jesus is Lord” with real understanding unless filled by the Holy Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12:3). Consider the way Paul interchanges “Lord” from the Old Testament with Jesus being “Lord” in several chapters of Romans:

- “for the *Lord* will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” And as Isaiah predicted, “If the *Lord* of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”” (Rom. 9:28-29).
- “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is *Lord* and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Rom. 10:9).

Paul clearly speaks of Jesus as Lord interchangeably with the Lord of the Old Testament. Just three verses after the above, Paul writes,

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same *Lord* is *Lord* of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the *Lord* will be saved.”

Paul has already referenced Jesus as the “Lord” whose name saves. Yet he also accords Jesus as the Lord who bestows riches, echoing his praise of God in Romans 2:4 as the God who bestows “riches” of kindness.

Paul was not alone in his exalted view of Jesus as God. The Gospel of John begins with the affirmation that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was God*.” Lest there be any doubt about who John is referencing, in verse 14 of the same first chapter John explains that he means Jesus, the “Word” that “became flesh and dwelt among us.”

John would later record the prayer of Jesus where Jesus gives further insight into the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son. In the prayer Jesus offered before his arrest, Jesus prayed that God would restore him to where he was before the creation of the world.

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed (Jn. 17:1-5).

Another passage that speaks of Jesus as God that isn't as readily apparent to 21st century readers who often aren't as steeped in Old Testament prophecy as the faithful in New Testament times comes from the first verses in the Gospel of Mark. Mark begins,

Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ (Mk. 1:2-3).

In these verses, Mark melds together two prophetic promises from the Old Testament. Malachi 3:1 says that, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.” The “me” in Malachi is the Lord God Almighty. When Mark appropriates that verse for the story of the gospel of Jesus, Mark is letting his readers know from the very beginning that Jesus is the Lord God.

The second verse that Mark uses is from Isaiah 40:3 which reads,

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

This is again, the Lord who is coming. As Mark uses this verse in its prophetic sense, he is leaving no doubt that Jesus who is spoken of, is the coming Lord God of Isaiah.

The Holy Spirit as God

To be continued...