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# The Triune God of the Bible

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Not a few of us have had the experience of talking to a pair of folks from the religious group known as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and being confronted with the assertion that the word *trinity* is not in the Bible, in neither the Old nor the New Testament. Now, what you should not say at that point is: Yes, it is; the word *trinity* is in the Bible. Don't claim that; it is not true. The word is absent, but in this program on *Groundwork*, we want to show the biblical basis for our Christian belief in the Holy Trinity; and so, we will explore where we find this in scripture. Stay tuned.

## DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, this is now the first of a three-part series, and it is fitting that the series has three parts, because we are considering the Holy Trinity; and so, this first episode will ponder the biblical building blocks that led to the doctrine of the Trinity. The next program we will think about each of the three Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and then, the final program will consider how the Trinity influences our worship, our preaching, our Christian lives generally; and for this series, Darrell, we are pleased to welcome back to *Groundwork*, Dr. Sue Rozeboom, who is the Professor of Liturgical Theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. So, welcome back to *Groundwork*, Sue. You have been on here before. Glad to have you with us, and introduce yourself a little bit, and mention, maybe, some of the courses you typically teach at Western.

## SUE ROZEBOOM

Thanks, Scott; it is terrific to be back, and it is great to be here with you, Darrell. At Western Seminary, I teach *Worship Foundations*; that is one of the principal courses that I teach; but then, I also have two electives that I enjoy teaching regularly. One is entitled: *By Christ: Washed and Well-fed*, and in that course, we explore the sacraments together, rather deeply; and then, another entitled: *We All Worship*; and that is a course on worship and disability.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Thank you.

## DARRELL DELANEY

So, in this episode, we are glad to have you, Dr. Rozeboom, join us; and I mean, *trinity* is actually something very central and bedrock to the faith that we carry, and it is very, very important for us to understand, but it is actually kind of confusing for those who don't know what is going on. The idea that there is one God in three Persons, and the fact that there is one God, being a monotheistic religion is very important, to start with, Scott.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and Sue, maybe you could comment on that a little bit, that we do need to stress that Christianity is monotheistic, right?

## **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Yes; in the ancient Near East, or during the Old Testament time period, there were a multiplicity of religions, and many of them were polytheistic—claiming that there were several or many distinct gods; and one of the significant settings forth, if you will, of God’s proclamation in scripture is: There is one God, and I am that God. As opposed to those that you will encounter in other religious settings with multiple gods, I am the true God, and I am One.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I think that in the Old Testament this is set forth very clearly. In Deuteronomy 6:4, 5: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>5</sup>Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Darrell and Sue, in Jewish circles, that is known as the *Shema* because that is the Hebrew word for the first word there: *Hear* or *listen*. Shema, Israel; Yahweh Eloheinu; Yahweh echad. God is one; and that is very important for us to remember.

## **SUE ROZEBOOM**

It is; and this is a confession of faith, as well as an ethical command for how to live faithfully before the face of that one God—of *our* one God.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

Knowing that God is one set them apart as far as Israel’s history, because, I mean, there is a god for every day of the week; there are all types of gods: a god for fertility; a god for crops; a god for war; a god for peace; a god for party; a god for this; a god for that; but when Israel decides: No; this is the one true and living God, that sets them apart theologically from everyone else and makes them distinct.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, there is no doubt that the Old Testament establishes the one God idea. What about the one God in three Persons idea? God as triune, as we now understand God. Are there any passages in the Old Testament that are a preview, shall we say, for a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity?

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

Definitely there are, Scott. In Genesis 1, you see this in verse 26, when God is creating humanity, he says: “Let *us*...(not me)...let *us* make mankind...(humankind)...in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

This word *us* is there. It is also clear in Genesis 11, when the Tower of Babel is being built, God says: Let *us* go down there and see what is going on. So, that word *us* is *Elohim*; it is plural in Hebrew.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Sue, maybe you can comment on this a little bit, too; probably, although, again in retrospect, we might say: Oh, that sounds trinitarian, probably the original readers didn’t hear it that way at all, because of what this form of speech was.

## **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Yes; very likely not. It is a manner of speaking; it is a royal *we*. So, someone with such distinction as a king, might refer to himself in the plural with *we*; and that doesn’t sound very conventional to us, but it was conventional for them.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; so, the Israelites who heard this wouldn’t have said: Oh, wait a minute; there must be more than one person in God. No, it was just a royal form of address; but in retrospect, we see some of that; and there are some other places, too, in the Bible that try to make a trinitarian connection, particularly when using the word

*spirit.*

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

So, in Genesis 1, it is said that the Spirit of God was said to be hovering or brooding over the waters—the face of the deep. In some Bible translations, that word *Spirit*, which is actually a reference to the Hebrew word *ruach*, which also means breath, might be capitalized; and by capitalizing it, they are suggesting that maybe here is a whispering reference to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Another place we experience this is in Psalm 51. In the midst of David's confession, he implores God: <sup>11</sup>Do not cast me away from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Now again; Holy Spirit there in Psalm 51 is capital H, capital S; and that is a decision on the translator's part. There are no capital letters in Hebrew, right? So, they are trying to say: See, this is the Holy Spirit; this is one of the Persons of the Trinity; but again, the people who wrote Genesis 1...the people who wrote Psalm 51...and there are lots of passages, in the Psalms in particular, where you will see spirit capitalized. Again, for us, in retrospect, we would say: Yes, that is probably the third Person of the Trinity; but the authors who wrote that didn't have any such intuition. They would just use God and Spirit interchangeably...kind of synonymously; in retrospect, we can say: Oh; but, you know, they were saying more than they knew, because we now know there *is* a third Person; but that wasn't really the intention of the teaching of those passages.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

But this is part of the beauty of God's revelation, and of the work of the Spirit in inspiring the Word. I mean, is it possible that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the biblical authors sometimes said things more than they knew?

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Oh, yes.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Did their words contain wider ramifications and meanings than they could possibly be conscious of? I don't want to discount the possibility that that would be, but to surmise that they had a conception of a discrete person within the Godhead such as the Holy Spirit...that probably would not be the case for Old Testament writers.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes; I would agree with you, Sue, because the emphasis of what they were writing about was to make sure that people understood that the one true living God is the Creator, Sustainer, Provider, etc., etc. So, they wanted to make sure they emphasized the monotheism. So, if they brought in these other concepts it might have been a little bit too confusing to kind of think about, and to think that they would come up with something like that in a plan, it is probably confusing to try to think through; but the goal for us, as we look back on these things, and we now have the full counsel of God, we can see: Okay, there are some hints in the Old Testament. Just like when we look at the Old Testament, we can see the hints of Jesus, the Son, and what Christ has done. We can see it there, but it wasn't infused there when it was originally written to the audiences they were talking to.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

But that wasn't true of the New Testament, and this is where we really find a lot of biblical building blocks for the doctrine of the Trinity; and we are going to turn to that in a moment. So, stay tuned.

*Segment 2*

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee and Sue Rozeboom, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

We just noted a few things from the Old Testament that weren't put into the Bible to lead people to eventually conclude there is a plurality of Persons within the one single God of Israel. What *does* lead to this? Well, Sue, the go-to place for most of us is the story of Jesus' baptism.

## SUE ROZEBOOM

Indeed; this is an early revelation that takes place at the outset of the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, when Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan; but let's consider this account in Matthew: 3:13<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14<sup>14</sup>But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15<sup>15</sup>Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. 16<sup>16</sup>As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17<sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

## DARRELL DELANEY

And there it is; you see the Trinity right there in the context of Jesus' baptism. You have the Spirit alighting on him like a dove; you have the voice from heaven, which is the Father's voice, because he says: This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased. Of course, Jesus is in the water right there. So, many people have gone back to this specific passage to prove that there is a Trinity, because those are all the aspects of God's Personhood right there.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

It is one of the clearer examples in the New Testament. Again, as we have said, is the word *trinity*, or *triune* in the Bible? No; but there we see it, that there are three distinct players here, who do not appear to be all...you know, one person who is throwing his voice, or you know, throwing an image of a dove up. So, now we are getting somewhere.

Then, Sue and Darrell, it is also significant that after his baptism, and then following the temptations, when Jesus begins his ministry, he is so often going to refer to his Father in heaven. I mean, it is the first line of what we call the *Lord's Prayer*; but there are lots of other examples, too.

## SUE ROZEBOOM

Yes; so, one of the distinctive things about the *Lord's Prayer*, though, is he refers to *our* Father. So, he is inviting us, in that moment, to identify with him, even as he is...in coming to earth...in being incarnate...is identifying with us; and so, elsewhere, too, in still the *Sermon on the Mount* he says: 5:16<sup>16</sup>"In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." The intimation there is this is *our* Father in heaven. By our goodness, we glorify God the Father.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

In Matthew 10: 32<sup>32</sup>"Whoever acknowledges me before others (Jesus says), I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven."

## DARRELL DELANEY

And in John 10, it says: 27<sup>27</sup>"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28<sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29<sup>29</sup>My Father, who had given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30<sup>30</sup>I and the Father are one."

## SUE ROZEBOOM

And it is later in the Gospel of John that we get these really intense...I mean, complex passages, really, where Jesus is talking about the Father and just how profoundly one they are. So, later in John 14 he says: 10<sup>10</sup>"Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. 11<sup>11</sup>Believe (in) me when I say

that I am in the Father and he is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup>Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” Then, in John 17, when Jesus is, in fact, praying to the Father on behalf of the disciples, and indeed, on behalf of us, he longs for us to be one in him, even as he is one with the Father; and so, we see the overflowing love of the Trinity being expressed and embraced there by Jesus, not just with regard to himself as the beloved, begotten Son, but also for us, who are God’s adopted children through Christ, the Son.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; Jesus almost sets a record there for the use of the word *in*: In me, in you, in him, in me... It is all...

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

In us...

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

In us. So, it is very clear: Yes, there is Father and Son, and eventually, the Spirit, too; but there is undeniable unity; there is distinction and there is unity, and that is extremely, extremely important.

Darrell and Sue, another key building block for the doctrine of the Trinity is this: The disciples, turned apostles later...they had been raised and steeped in the Shema; they believed there is only one God; and yet, when it came to Jesus, sometimes they...well, they worshipped him!

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

And Jesus actually accepts worship. So, you know, when you think about the resurrection, when the woman is the first one at the tomb, and then he says: Mary, and she recognizes him, it says that she worships him. If Jesus wasn’t God, then he would have said: Oh, no, no; don’t do that! Don’t worship me! You need to go to the synagogue and worship. But he accepts worship; and even in Matthew 14, we see here, it says:

<sup>33</sup>Those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

So, Jesus, if he wasn’t God, he would have said: No; that is blasphemy; you are going to get yourselves in trouble. But he accepts worship.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Yes; at the end of his ministry...at the end of his *earthly* ministry...he greets the disciples, and many of them came to him and clasped his feet, and again, worshipped him; and he didn’t stop them: <sup>Matthew 28:16</sup>Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>Then Jesus came to them and said, (and here is this Great Commission; and again, we hear reference to the Trinity) “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

The Church has said all along that for any baptism to be legitimate, it has to be in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit because that is exactly the baptism Jesus authorizes right here at the end of Matthew 28; and so, you know, Matthew’s reading audience was the most thoroughly Jewish of the four gospels; so, when devout Jews read these stories, they would have to say one of two things: When the disciples worshipped Jesus, they were either guilty of idolatry or Jesus really was divine. And of course, the Bible makes clear they weren’t guilty of idolatry; Jesus really is divine. And these are the things, Sue and Darrell, that the early Church saw; and they recognized that this leads to a plurality of Persons who make up the one true God. It is a great mystery. I once heard someone say that if a scientist...no matter how bright...if a scientist tells you that he fully understands quantum physics, he is lying; and if anybody ever tells you: Oh, yeah, yeah; I’ve got the Trinity cased. I know the Trinity up and down. Nah, they are probably not being straight with you.

Well, there is much more that could be added here, but you get the idea; the word *trinity* is not in the Bible, but the teachings that lead to it are; but in a moment, we will shift our focus to the ecumenical creeds to help us understand the trinitarian mystery. So, stay tuned for that.

*Segment 3*

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

I am Scott Hoezee.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

I am Sue Rozeboom.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And we have been, in this *Groundwork* episode, looking at the biblical building blocks for the doctrine of the belief in the Trinity; and as we conclude, we can ponder how the Church has set the boundaries for understanding this mysterious truth about who God is; but we don't want to make it sound academic or ivory-tower-like. Sue and Darrell, we should want to understand the Trinity as best we can, right?

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

You know, just a moment ago, you said something about if someone says to you that they apprehend all of quantum physics, they are lying; a scientist once said this; and you could say the same with regard to a theologian who might make such a claim with regard to the Trinity. No one of us can comprehend the mystery that is the Trinity; but just because we don't understand it doesn't mean we don't live by it. I mean, we cannot comprehend the laws of physics, but we also cannot live apart from all the things that those laws of physics explain.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

We experience rather than comprehend; and this, I think, is what the Apostle Paul captures for us with his blessing, that reference to the Trinity:

2 Corinthians 13:14 [May] the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

He is inviting us into an experience there; not into a radical, summative, comprehensive understanding of the Trinity, but rather an experience of the Trinity.

Catherine LaCugna is a theologian who once said that the doctrine of the Trinity is the Church's teaching of the radical nearness of God to us...the radical nearness of God to us; and I hope that is something we can explore in this segment, but then, in the next two shows, too.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; wanting to understand the Trinity as best we can, Darrell, you know, I mean, it is part of our loving relationship. When you are a lover of someone, like your spouse, or a child, you want to know everything you can about them. I mean, that is what we do when we are dating, when we first get... You want to hear your lover's stories and background, and it should be the same for God.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

And the more time we spend in God's Word, and the more time we spend with God's people, we can experience the aftereffects and the beautiful presence of God there; and I loved that blessing that you just talked about, Sue, where Paul...he is not going to give you two divine aspects and not one divine to go with

it. I mean, he is elevating each Person of the Trinity there to show that they are all equally divine; and that is the reality that we as believers live into, whether we are cognizant or conscious of it or not.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And Sue, we just said that we wanted to look at some of the creeds, and we are going to look at part of the Nicene Creed in a minute, Sue, because establishing the divinity of Jesus was the first step to getting the doctrine of the Trinity; and so, can you talk a little bit about that?

**SUE ROZEBOOM**

Yes; so, the Council of Nicaea...perhaps you familiar with the Nicene Creed...well, it comes from the Council of Nicaea initially; and that Council pitted two theologians against each other. First was a man named Arius, who claimed that, as the Son of God, Jesus was not fully divine. If Jesus is the Son, and if Jesus prays to God, Jesus cannot be praying to himself if Jesus is also God. So, Jesus must be some sort of coach-class divinity, if you will. On the other side was Athanasius, who said: Oh, no; Jesus is fully divine; just as divine as the Father; and this is so important, because if Jesus is not divine, then Jesus cannot be fully the one who accomplishes the redeeming work that the Father has in mind.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly.

**SUE ROZEBOOM**

And so, Athanasius won the day; but very interestingly, the Creed itself has a prehistory. So, before it was a creed for the whole Church, it was actually a baptismal confession for one church or locus of churches along the Mediterranean; and a delegate came to them and said: Well, here is what we confess; here is what we look to when we are practicing baptism. This is what we teach from and this is what we expect folk to confess. See if this sounds familiar.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

And we believe in the one Lord, Jesus Christ; the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages. God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of the same essence as the Father.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, the creed there is hammering home the decisions made at the Council of Nicaea. It is saying everything emphatically that God from God, light from light, true God from true God; makes it clear that the Son is begotten, not made; and begottenness is an eternal trait of the Son. There is no before and after of being begotten like there is if you are created or made; and then the real kicker: Of the same essence as the Father. When we say this creed in Christian worship, all of us should really savor how important it was to get that line right. Arius wanted to say Jesus was of a *similar* essence to the Father, you know. No, it is of the same essence.

Before we wrap up here, we can also just mention that the creed also wants to make clear that despite that unity, there is still three distinct Persons.

**SUE ROZEBOOM**

Yes; there is another creed that helps us understand that, and that is the Athanasian Creed: That we worship one God and Trinity and the Trinity in unity; neither blending their Persons nor dividing their essence. For the Person of the Father is a distinct Person; the Person of the Son is another; and that of the Holy Spirit still another; but the divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is One. Their glory equal, their majesty co-eternal. Thus, the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; yet, there are not three gods; there is but one God.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

It is a profound mystery, Darrell. Again, we are never going to fully comprehend it. How could we fully comprehend God? But what a blessing that we know as much as we do.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

It's a beautiful thing. I know that scripture says the secret things belong to God, but the things revealed belong to us and our families forever; and God has revealed basically in scripture and in the history of scripture, the threeness and the oneness of God; and even though we may not understand every single detail of that, we still can live in the reality of the fact that God is present in our lives.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; I like, Sue, what you said earlier from the theologian who said the Trinity emphasizes the nearness of God to us. That is a beautiful thing; and you know, if we can live with the sense of being engulfed in this wider mystery of God, what a great gift it is to live with that; and we give thanks to God for that amazing gift.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney; and we are joined today by Sue Rozeboom. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue our study of the Holy Trinity by looking at scripture that help us understand the nature and work of each of the three Persons within God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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## **DARRELL DELANEY**

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