

YAHWEH, THE TRINITY: THE OLD TESTAMENT CATECHUMENATE (PART 1)¹

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“The trinitarian dimension of divine reality cannot but have a specifically trinitarian impact, however trammelled human perception may be by its own limits.”

*Now multiple is magnified to less . . .
a motionless immensity of oneness.*

1. Dogma and perception

1.1 The impersonal dimension of the technical term

The fact that throughout the history of Christianity the word “Trinity” has never become a proper name to refer to God should give us pause. Consider the following: (1) The word is not generally

¹This is the second in a series of three articles that explore the perceptual dimension of trinitarian reality. The first, “The Trinity in a Mesopotamian Perspective,” was presented at a conference on “The Historical-Critical Method and Scripture, the Soul of Theology,” held at Mount Saint Mary Seminary in Emmitsburg 23 June 2006 (the proceedings are to appear in a book edited by Robert D. Miller). The third, “Trinity *spermatiké*: The Veiled Perception of a Pagan World,” is in preparation. I am much indebted to Robert Sokolowski for his comments on a first draft of this article. It goes without saying that the final redaction is wholly my responsibility.

used without an article. Articles define a level of referentiality that is otherwise already built into a proper name: in a given context, “the Pope” (not a proper name) refers to the current successor of Peter, and the article is required to make this reference explicit; whereas “Benedict XVI” does not allow the presence of the article, because an even higher degree of referentiality is already present—it is this particular individual who is the successor of Peter. (2) The word “Trinity” is not generally used in the vocative. Thus we do not have invocations or prayers of the type, “Help me Trinity!”² (3) The word “Trinity” is used preferentially as the subject of predicates that express condition, beginning with the copula (“the Trinity is

²Even in cases where a prayer is explicitly addressed to the Trinity, the use of the term as a vocative remains tenuous, as, for instance, in the Lauds of Trinity Sunday (*Benedicta sit sancta creatrix et gubernatrix omnium, sancta et individua Trinitas*), where the Trinity is invoked in the third person, or in the spirituality of Elizabeth of the Trinity, whose well-known prayer begins with the invocation “O my God, Trinity Whom I adore” and ends with the invocation “O my Three, my All, my Beatitude, infinite Solitude, Immensity in which I lose myself.” In other words, even here the word “Trinity” does not occur in the vocative. There are of course exceptions, as in the prayer by Catherine of Siena: “Eternal Trinity, Godhead, mystery deep as the sea,” or in late liturgical prayers, e.g., a ninth-century prayer (later in common use after the celebration of the Mass) that begins: *Placeat tibi, sancta Trinitas, obsequium servitutis meae*; the hymn *Vexilla Regis prodeunt* (*Te, fons salutis Trinitas, / collaudet omnis spiritus*, a verse added at a later date to the original hymn of Venantius Fortunatus) or a prayer in the ritual for Baptism (*O sanctissima Trinitas, Pater, Fili et Spiritus Sancte! gratias tibi ago*). Robert Sokolowski gives a subtle and original trinitarian interpretation of the first lines of the *Te Deum* in *Christian Faith and Human Understanding. Studies in the Eucharist, Trinity and the Human Person* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 147–149. All the Latin texts quoted here can be found on the excellent website www.precelatinae.org by Michael Martin.

A Google search for “O Most Holy Trinity” will yield a large number of invocations in prayers from modern times. A “technical” term (of Christian theology) that can more easily be used in the vocative is “triune,” but it is an adjective (as in “O triune God”), not a proper name. Poetic imagery introduces complex analogies, as in Jessica Powers “O Water, Wave and Tide in One” (“Doxology,” in *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers* [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1999], 91), not to mention Dante’s supreme vision: “O luce eterna che sola in te sidi, / sola t’intendi, e da te intelletta / e intendente te ami e arridi!” “Oh eternal light singly dwelling in yourself, singly conscious of yourself, and who, self-understood and understanding, you smile and love yourself” (*Paradise* 33:124–126). From Jessica Powers, too, derives the epigram cited at the opening of this article, from the poem “Not Garden Any More,” in *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, 18.

. . .”), and very infrequently, if ever, with verbs of action (“the Trinity helped me”). (4) In English, the word “Trinity” is neuter (speaking of the Trinity, one would say “*its* glory”), a linguistic nuance that discourages personal connotation.

One may consider, by way of contrast, how words like *Elohim* “gods,” *Ba`al* “lord,” or *Allah* “the god” became, respectively, proper names in ancient Hebrew, in various Canaanite dialects, and in Arabic, from the common nouns they originally were. This is not insignificant, particularly in view of the emphasis that is otherwise placed on naming, as in the well-known cases of Yahweh himself in the Old Testament, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter. It is not just a matter of linguistic niceties or philological pedantry. A personal name evinces the directness and uniqueness of a “personal” knowledge that starts from the presupposition of an established polarity—the polarity wherein a person expects a person. Modern terms like “(mother) nature,” “(father) time” or “(lady) luck” show how generic concepts that are felt to be linked to some aspect of a superhuman, if not divine, realm evoke the need for personification, however fictitious one may perceive it to be. The terms of the paradox, or mystery, of the Trinity can in part be articulated in just these terms—that we claim a personal dimension, yet we do not address “it/him/them (?)” in personal terms.

1.2 *The reality behind the dogma*

Even the various creeds do not affirm belief in the Trinity as a named concept.³ In fact, it is only secondarily that the creeds articulate concepts to be seen, intellectually, as truths. Primarily, they propose realities to be assented to.⁴ This is well expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §188:

³Except occasionally, and then as a concept that summarizes the naming of the three individual persons, e.g., in the Constitutions of the Egyptian Church (about 500 A.D.): “I believe in one true God, the Father . . . , his Son . . . , his Holy Spirit, *one consubstantial Trinity*” (Denzinger and Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 3–4) or the Armenian baptismal formula: “We believe in *the most holy Trinity*, in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (ibid., 6; see also 71, 73, 75).

⁴For a proper understanding of the notion of “assent” one should refer to Newman’s classic *A Grammar of Assent*.

The Greek word *symbolon* meant half of a broken object, for example, a seal presented as a token of recognition. The broken parts were placed together to verify the bearer's identity. The symbol of faith, then, is a sign of recognition and communion between believers. *Symbolon* also means a gathering, collection or summary. A symbol of faith is a summary of the principal truths of the faith and therefore serves as the first and fundamental point of reference for catechesis.

What I will seek to do in this essay is to recapture the perceptual impact of trinitarian reality within the biblical perspective, apart from specific intellectual categorizations.⁵ I will do so by working my way back from the most explicit confrontation ever—the perception of those who faced Jesus during “his days-of-flesh” (Heb 5:7)—to the earlier, implicit, mode of confrontation in the Old Testament. The basic premise is that the trinitarian dimension of divine reality cannot but have a specifically trinitarian impact, however trammled human perception may be by its own limits. The converse of this premise is that we should not fall prey to the possible delusion that a clear categorical statement of dogmas may generate. Understanding the terms of the dogma is given to all, redeemed or otherwise. But perceptual openness to the reality behind the dogma is a special moment of grace, where that reality reaches out to touch, through whatever conceptual veils, the inmost of human cords. Let me review briefly the two central themes of this essay.

1.3 The first impact: The Annunciation as a state

The Trinity was never announced as an intellectual construct. Rather, various human beings faced the dynamic interaction of the divine persons when a fellow human being, Jesus,

⁵A similar approach, if at a higher philosophical and theological level, can be found in the thought of Robert Sokolowski, particularly as expressed in the article, “The Revelation of the Trinity. A Study in Personal Pronouns,” in his *Christian Faith*, 131–148 (originally published in Guy Mansini, O.S.B., and James Hart (eds.), *Ethics and Theological Disclosures: The Thought of Robert Sokolowski* [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003], 162–177). The article emphasizes the way in which Jesus speaks of the Father in the first person, hence, we may say, the trinitarian self-perception of Jesus—an aspect which I do not treat here.

emerged in their consciousness as one such divine person. We know the first announcement as the Annunciation. Not that Gabriel spoke to Mary, theologically, about the trinitarian dimension. But as in every other confrontation with the reality of this dimension, the impact of the announcement was meant to stir awareness of a live reality, and to elicit a response. And it was all through the channel of the incarnate Logos, Jesus. It was as though there were an overlay of his relating, on the one hand, to the sphere of divine personality and, on the other, to the common sphere of human personality, evinced through day-to-day human encounters. It was this matter-of-fact bracketing of the two realities, this confrontation with a fellow human whose whole being was simultaneously rooted in a world beyond, that proclaimed, existentially, the trinitarian reality.

One can call to mind countless episodes, after the Annunciation, where such confrontation came to the fore—and we will see several in the second part of this article. The Emmaus realization is most emblematic of this: “Were not our hearts burning?” (Lk 24:32). On the other hand, consider the Petrine confession. Jesus would seem to speak against the very point I have just made: “Neither flesh nor blood has lifted the veil for you, but my father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17). At first, this may seem like a belittling of the very impact of the incarnation: is there no need for contact with the flesh and blood of Jesus? Clearly, the opposite is true, for it is the culturally conditioned exchange between Jesus and the apostles that elicits Peter’s affirmation: Jesus asks his question in a specific location (the recollection of Caesarea Philippi must have been “burning” in the memory of the participants); he expresses a human curiosity through human language (“he asked saying,” 16:13); he pursues an active dialogue (“but how about yourselves,” 16:15); he draws conclusions (“you are the Rock,” 16:18); and he enjoins them not to reveal his identity (16:20). The Messianic secret itself is indicative: Jesus does not seek communication of information, but an individual confrontation with all who are to encounter him.

The simple fact of facing the human person Jesus was coterminous with facing the divine person of the Logos. Not that the encounter would ever cause an intellectual articulation of the distinction of natures (as per later theological parlance). The encounter was never schizophrenic, no more than Jesus ever was. Rather, the encounter with this particular human person Jesus was always and inevitably a lived encounter with the divine person of the Logos. It was a slow perceptual discovery, and one that took on

as many hues as there were people who faced him—from Mary to Peter, from Nicodemus to Caiaphas. But it was out of these many individual discoveries that our collective historical discovery arises, out of their confrontation that our confrontation is nourished.

1.4 The training of sensitivity: Advent as a state

Nor did this confrontation have the nature of a stupefying intrusion. Even the moments that might have most lent themselves to such a disruption of normalcy are couched in a setting that evokes continuity rather than rupture—e.g., an angel known from the Old Testament (Gabriel) conveying the message of the annunciation, or Moses and Elijah conversing with the transfigured Jesus.

The confrontation with the Trinity that occurred at that finite moment in time when Jesus appeared within the temporal framework of history was not lived by the protagonists as a jarring break with the past. On the contrary, Jesus himself clearly felt he was in debt to his cultural heritage—which was that of his interlocutors as well. And this debt included a perception of divine reality that was already essentially trinitarian. God did not begin to interact with our world, *qua* Trinity, only at Pentecost. Nor could the earlier human perception of God be wholly unreceptive to this inherent trinitarian dimension—just as awareness of the sun’s splendor was not any dimmer simply because the intellectual construct of the planetary system had not yet taken shape. We ought to eschew a simplistic view of trinitarian revelation as a mechanical break, but also as a kind of “extrinsicism” that limits continuity to accidental echoes (however valid they may be, if nothing else for their poetic dimension—as with the episode of the visit to Abraham, made famous *inter alia* by Andrei Rublev’s icon). The fundamental point is that in the perception communicated by Jesus there is no shattering, but rather an explicit adherence to a self-proclaimed continuity.

Where, then, can we find trinitarian anticipations in the Old Testament perception of divine reality? We will seek them, in this article, in the impossible conflating of universality and particularity in the perception of God. On the one hand, God is absolute in terms of his control on all reaches of human perception, from the physical to the spiritual dimension. On the other hand, God is hopelessly enmeshed in the details of a human group, ancient Israel,

which was, by all objective standards and by its own self-perception, a marginal and insignificant participant in the political and cultural scene of its day. This paradox is made even more evident by the Christian claim (solidly anchored in Jesus' own perception) that God not only obstinately clings to this provincial past but reduces even further any possible "éclat" by becoming identified with a single individual, Jesus, who could offer but the most limited cultural, not to mention political, credentials.

The continuity, then, is to be found not in any conceptual articulation, but in the training of sensitivity. By exploring the Old Testament in this light, we will see how we can gain much insight into our own posture vis-à-vis the core of the Christian mystery.

1.5 Polytheism, monotheism, and Trinitarianism

In order to better understand the continuity with the Old Testament, it is good to reflect for a moment on the contrast between polytheism and monotheism, which is much deeper than generally acknowledged.⁶ It is a radical contrast between two irreducible modes of thought, so that monotheism can in no way be regarded as a mere rarefaction of polytheism. They are, in effect, two opposing polarities.

In the polytheistic polarity, the absolute is accepted as *cumulation*, as the sum total of numerable fragments. The relative is thereby inserted in the very heart of the absolute and, as it were, sublimated by it. The very juxtaposition of relative elements, of *all*

⁶I have developed this theme more fully in "On Christic Polytheism and Christian Monotheism," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22 (1995): 113–138; "The Trinity in a Mesopotamian perspective," forthcoming (see above, note 1). A forceful approach along similar lines, especially from a philosophical perspective, is to be found in Robert Sokolowski's work, see in particular *The God of Faith and Reason. Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), where the notion of a Christian "distinction" is vigorously and brilliantly argued, in contrast especially to the ever pervasive pagan (polytheistic) dimension. Inspired by phenomenology, Sokolowski's approach provides a strong theoretical foundation for the emphasis I place on perception. Also see his "Revelation of the Trinity," 143: "Jesus could not have revealed the Father within a pagan setting; he could not have said 'Father' to a pagan divinity. Only within the context set by the Old Testament [what I call "catechumenate"] could the Fatherhood of God [have] been revealed."

possible relative elements, is viewed as constituting the absolute. The concept of totality is the defining criterion for absoluteness. The polarity is resolved, we might say, in terms of inclusion.

In the monotheistic polarity, the absolute is accepted as the beyond, as a different mode of reality that *does not admit numeration*. The relative is thereby opposed to the absolute. No matter how complete, totality is never seen as meeting the standards of absoluteness, for it remains a congeries of numerable fragments. Here the polarity is resolved, as it were, in terms of exclusion.

But monotheistic apprehension of the divine sphere is already *essentially trinitarian*, however much *ante litteram*. We do not have, I claim, a three-stage sequence, with progressive reduction and derivation of one stage from the other—polytheism, monotheism, Trinitarianism. Rather, the contrast is exclusively between two irreducible perceptions—polytheistic vs. monotheistic/trinitarian. But then, what are the aspects of the trinitarian absolute that we find already present in the Israelite perception of Yahweh? I will refer briefly to three, and then examine one in particular.

Innumerability—God is at the same time the whole and the only. Divine *oneness* becomes progressively clearer, but what remains constant is the *uniqueness* and *singularity* of the innumerable God. What matters about oneness is not the numeric property (which would yield, through a reductionist approach, but a polytheism of one), but the irrepeatability. Wherever else we see a trend away from multiplicity (the most famous being the Aton episode in fourteenth-century Egypt), it presents itself as the reductionist need for simplification, not as the essential realization of an altogether different, a truly absolute, simplicity. But in the Old Testament, God remains unnumbered at the very moment that numeration (oneness) is predicated of him. The Old Testament trains our sensitivity to *predicate number without ascribing numerability*.

Particularity—An essential aspect of the Old Testament perception is that God, for being the absolute “whole and only,” is emphatically not the “amorphous.” There is no implosive indefiniteness: rather, God is seen to explode in creation, through the seesaw relationship with ancient Israel in her historical development, through the anguished mysticism of the patriarchs, the psalmists, the prophets. There is no anonymity, there is no generic projection of abstract divinity. Consider for instance the notion of choice and vocation. God calls individuals and the whole nation by name. The very notion of a “chosen people” acquires a psychological dimen-

sion that contrasts sharply with that of the Syro-Mesopotamian sphere—where the reverse is true: a successful people (say, the Assyrians) have a chosen god (Assur), who is but the projected emblem of their socio-political congruence. The profound insight in the Old Testament is that human particularities do not limit or circumscribe divine particularity. God calls by name Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Israel herself—but is not reduced to the finitude of those he calls.

Relatability—Perhaps the most far-reaching trinitarian anticipation of the Old Testament lies in the recognition that God, while wholly above relativity, does nevertheless relate. Such is not the quality of fate in a polytheistic system, fate remaining the broadly underlying, wholly amorphous, and statically inert matrix of reality. Fate does not relate. But the monotheistic God does. He expects a response that is the more acceptable the more confrontational it becomes (from Jacob’s wrestling to Jeremiah’s anguished acceptance of the call). Thus we may say that the great Old Testament intuition (or revelation) is that the absolute is not so implosive as to exclude the relative. God’s absoluteness is not tainted by virtue of his openness. The Old Testament presents us with the notion of a polarity that is no less real for being wholly asymmetrical. God is not tainted by love.

Of these three points, I will focus here on the aspect of particularity.

2. *The Annunciation as a state*

2.1 *The great divide*

The Incarnation is the trinitarian integration within time and space. Our perception of the Trinity in time and space takes place through the finite situation of our existence and through the finite situation of Christ the Son. That is why there is no specific reference to the Trinity on the part of Jesus—because the Trinity is perceived in and through his Incarnation. Obviously, it was not Yahweh as the Trinity that became flesh, and in this respect the ancient Israelite perception was not affected by the Incarnation. The *word* of God had already become integrated within human historical culture in the biblical tradition, an early anticipation of the Incarna-

tion of the *Word* of God, the Son. With Jesus, the Son as the Logos, a person of Yahweh-Trinity, became flesh.

The Annunciation is the most profound locus of human perception of the trinitarian reality—that is, if one accepts, as I do, the historical dimension of Jesus’ virginal conception, and Mary’s and Joseph’s full awareness of this fact.⁷ It seems to me that whenever we seek to refine our sensibility for the trinitarian mystery we should place ourselves in a receptive mode as though facing the Annunciation. What was once an event, if we so recognize it, remains for us a state—the dynamic state through which we constantly face and perceive, in-fleshed, the innumerable who becomes numbered.

To reflect on the state, we should concentrate on the event. It was the moment when history split, but it was at the same time the moment when history was joined again. The great divide is the performative self-unveiling of the Trinity, i.e., not through a verbal declaration, but because the *verbum* “detached” himself from the Trinity when he was accepted as such by Mary, and Joseph. The correlative great suture is in the human apprehension of this fact by Mary, and Joseph: without explaining it, they understood the mystery. The Old Testament roots of their spirituality allowed them to assimilate the essence of a “detachment” which never cracked the absolute whence the Announced had come.

We will do well to reflect on the ranges of the historical perceptual responses that the event elicited when first confronted by our fellow humans—Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, the apostles, the first followers and believers as well as the non-believers. The echo that resonates from those past encounters can richly nurture our constantly renewed confrontation with, and acceptance of, the Announced and the mystery whence he became “detached” when the announcement was first received.

2.2 *The Marian perception*

The Annunciation is just that, an announcement, not a request. Mary does not dialogically confront God himself—or

⁷I have developed this theme in “The Prophetic Dimension of Joseph,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33 (2006): 43–99. Some of the themes mentioned here are more fully developed there.

rather, the dialogue unfolds on a more complex level than the simple exchange between interlocutors. That is perhaps what emerges as the prototype of any trinitarian “dialogue.” Mary confronts the Trinity dynamically, concretely. The angel relates the will of the Father—and with her *fiat* Mary responds to him, it would appear, rather than to the angel.

For a better appreciation of the greatness of the *fiat*, and of what it means for Mary’s perception of trinitarian reality, we will do well to remember that she accepts as a fact what she cannot immediately verify. There is no outward sign of her conceiving. Not only does she accept the incarnation, she also believes in it. Hence, for her, the incarnation is, from the beginning, the Incarnation. She accepts, on faith, something very physical, which, however, cannot be physically verified for a few weeks. Yet everything revolves on that physicality—to begin with, her relationship to her husband.

The conception of a child obviously affects her marital status, and it is her responsibility to let her husband know. Thus it is that Mary’s perception becomes Joseph’s perception for he too, accepts, on the strength of Mary’s word, the incarnation and sees in it the Incarnation. It is a shared secret that will remain with them and, from all we know, with them alone, during the lifetime of the Announced who will indeed manifest himself, after a few weeks, in the womb and then be born and grow to mature age.

The Annunciation was re-experienced by Mary, and Joseph, each time they would face Jesus and remember the simple fact of his virginal conception. For them, Jesus remained always the Announced. Never a monstrous being unnaturally implanted as if a foreign body. Rather, a true son, flesh of the flesh of Mary, and thereby human. Yet not flesh of the flesh of Joseph, and thereby divine. Ever aware of this foundational reality, their perception of Jesus was not of an alien being, but truly of a child conceived, and born, and growing into adulthood—and yet a child announced as belonging to the divine beyond. They were supremely aware of him as a person—all the more human as years passed in anonymity, all the more divine as the memory of the initial virginal conception never faded, nurtured by their own mutual, virginally marital relationship.

In that re-experiencing there was each time a true awareness of trinitarian life, the initial paradigm of every subsequent Christian perception of the Trinity—through the confrontation with Jesus as

concretely known in daily experience. Daily, Mary and Joseph faced the full personhood of the child even as his personality developed, without any further announcement to strengthen the initial annunciation and the events that surrounded it: it was just and plainly him. They knew his “genesis” to be firmly rooted in their world (Mt 1:1), and yet they knew it to be a “genesis” that beckoned unequivocally and very concretely (he *was* conceived, if virginally) to a world beyond (Mt 1:18). However dotting they may have been, he never replaced for them the two pivotal points around which the annunciation explicitly turned: the will who had taken the initiative (the “Lord God,” the “most high,” Lk 1:28, 30, 32) and the *dynamis* who had made it possible (the “holy spirit,” Lk 1:35). Whatever the formulation,⁸ Mary did respond to a very explicit call, and the factual elements of the call could not have been substantially different from what is retained for us by Luke. She was aware of the initiative (the Father’s) and the modality (the Holy Spirit’s), as she was most concretely aware of the issue (the Son). It is this awareness, this Marian perception of the Trinity, that she shared with Joseph. It was to remain their personal secret as long as Joseph lived. It was then for Mary alone to go through all the subsequent stages wherein the confrontation with the Trinity, via Jesus, developed, all the way up to her supreme confrontation with the *pleroma*, when she became part of it through her Assumption.

2.3 *The Baptist’s perception*

The Epiphany is rightly celebrated in the Eastern Church as a major moment in the life of Jesus and the history of the church. It refers specifically to the episode of the Magi, but it subsumes in its liturgical intent the various first public manifestations of Jesus, culminating with his baptism. Elizabeth, the shepherds, the Magi,

⁸While the formulation is Luke’s, I believe it to retain the kernel of a remembered factual event, see my article “The Prophetic Dimension of Joseph,” already cited. It is all the more significant, historiographically, that the event should be known to Matthew; this implies that knowledge of the event had become part of a shared body of knowledge about Jesus’ origin before the individual research undertaken by Luke. However much (Lucan) editorializing may have come to be overlaid on the words attributed to the angel, the terseness of Mary’s part of the dialogue bears otherwise the hallmark of individual memory, her own.

Simeon, and Anna all share in the early epiphany. But theirs remains a circumscribed perception, inconsequential in its wider reach. It is as though an extended private revelation.

Only on the occasion of the Baptism is epiphany really translated into a lasting public perception. In this regard, the baptismal epiphany is the proper converse of the annunciation. The deep and proper impact of the annunciation was meant to remain hidden and private (*lathra*, “in secret,” as Mt 1:19 puts it, to characterize just one of the pertinent events). The extraordinary nature of the child is intrinsically private, and, when a plurality of persons (Joseph next to Mary) is made aware of it, their perception is meant to remain private. When inadvertently a notification of it reaches beyond the private sphere for which it was intended (Herod and the Magi), disaster ensues. The Baptism, on the other hand, is set within a spiritual context that had already seared public consciousness. Jesus is one of a multitude so that, when he goes to be baptized, he walks deliberately onto the public stage. Hence the Baptist’s recognition of Jesus remained the fixed point of departure for the followers of Jesus—especially as they looked back, in the moments following the crucifixion and the resurrection, at the early history of their confrontation with this person who, in a short temporal whirlwind, had so dramatically impacted their lives.

What is especially important is what we may consider the explicitly trinitarian dimension of the baptismal epiphany: in Mk 1:10–11 | Mt 3:16–17 | Lk 3:21–22 the Spirit descends in the shape of a dove and a voice proclaims the divine sonship of Jesus. It seems at first plausible to attribute such explicitness to later theological reflection. But I would like to argue instead for the plausibility of such a perception at the place and time it occupies in the gospel account. As with the Annunciation, we have a confrontation presented as a living situation, not as an abstract statement. It is not clear how public the confrontation was, but what is stressed is the factuality of the event as such: Jesus is praying (in Luke) and there is a visible and an audible component, a dove and a sound. Whoever may have seen or heard, whoever may have interpreted the event in its specific valence as a sign (presumably only the Baptist, who then explains it to the followers and the bystanders, as is suggested in Jn 1:32), a specific perceptual dimension is plausibly intended. Jesus is perceived not as a “god” the way the people of Lystra in Asia Minor will perceive Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:11–18). With the Baptist, the Old Testament perception of the divine absolute is

in no way affected. Jesus is neither seen as one god among many, nor is he seen as one who arrogates for himself exclusive divine dimension, i.e., as Yahweh transposed. He is rather perceived to be interacting in a living dialogue on par with the world beyond, a world that is in itself differentiated. In this lies the embryonic perception of the trinitarian reality.

What is presented is a concrete interaction within the divine world, one that would not have been alien to a genuine Old Testament spirituality. The particularity, the vitality, the relatability that defined the earlier human perception of Yahweh are now operative in the Baptist's perception. It is in this sense that we can recognize such perception as being specifically, and not anachronistically trinitarian. In Luke's understanding, "the word of God happened upon" him (Lk 3:2). The substance of this "word" was both his urgent preaching of penance and the presentiment about the one whose sandals he was unworthy to untie and who would come to "baptize in spirit and fire" (Mk 1:8 | Mt 3:11 | Lk 3:16). The presentiment finds its fulfillment when Jesus appears in front of him to be baptized. The Baptist's sense of unworthiness takes shape concretely in his refusal to confer baptism on the one who should instead baptize him (Mt 3:14). But having proceeded with the baptism at Jesus' insistence (Mt 3:15), the Baptist sees the dove descending and hears the voice proclaiming (Mk 1:10–11 | Mt 3:16–17 | Lk 3:21–22). Thus the "word" that "had happened upon him" takes a more concrete form. He witnesses the dynamics of divine life. He senses Jesus' utterly special status, his belonging to the sphere of Yahweh without replacing "it." It is in this crystal clear obscurity that we can recognize the Baptist's first intuition of the trinitarian reality—perfectly in line with the Old Testament perception, yet embryonically aware of infinitely deeper and richer dimensions.

In later apostolic memory, the Baptist's first realization emerges as a defining moment. It was not just that he was the first public figure to welcome Jesus. His centrality in the apostles' and Jesus' own awareness depends, it seems to me, on his prophetic pre-understanding of what the reality of Yahweh meant when one came to confront Jesus. He is the precursor not so much because he points to the future, but because he lives the future, and the future will recognize itself in him. The anticipations of this are many: (a) The very phenomenon of baptism: it is a symbolic washing, but with Jesus' insistence at receiving it, it becomes the sacramental locking of humanity and divinity. (b) The awed sense of unworthiness: the

recoiling of one such as Peter before Jesus takes place toward the end of their companionship, and in retrospect the memory of the Baptist's early reaction must have resonated loudly as Peter, and the others, were reliving the *pathos* of the same response. (c) The outward manifestation of divine interaction: the Transfiguration re-proposes to the three apostles the explicit "parithetic" exchange within divine reality that the Baptist first sensed "in the desert of Judea . . . by the river Jordan" (Mt 3:1.6 | Mk 1:4–5 | Lk 3:1.13 | Jn 1:19–34).

It is this new posture vis-à-vis Yahweh that was the true measure of the Baptist's prophetic stance. And it was this posture that evoked an ever sharper response as time passed. Re-lived in memory, the Baptist's first perception echoed in the hearts and minds of those who had first been his followers as they found themselves sharing, at a wide temporal remove, the first public impact of the Trinity on human consciousness. Nowhere do we sense this as clearly as in the beginning of John's gospel, where the depth of the evangelist's reflection is suffused with a warm nostalgia for moments cherished so long ago in the past. "It *was* in Bethania across the Jordan The next day (John) *sees* [switching to the present] Jesus coming and he *says* Again the following day John *was standing* with two of his disciples [one is the evangelist], and seeing Jesus walking by he *says* And Jesus *turning* to the two *says* And the two *went* and *saw* where he was staying and *remained* with him for that day. And *it was about the tenth hour*" (Jn 1:28–39). Apart from the Passion narratives this is one of the most substantial overlaps between the synoptics and John. The details with which the situation is narrated evoke not only the tenderness of that first encounter, on that afternoon near Bethania, but also the psychological and intellectual impact that the Baptist's perception had on the two youngsters. For here again I would not consider anachronistic the substance of the Baptist's words that the evangelist quotes: "Look, the lamb of God! . . . This is the one about whom I said: A man will come after me who existed before me. . . . I saw and witnessed that he is the son of God . . ." (Jn 1:29–34). Herein, the roots of John's understanding of Jesus as the *logos* are made explicit.

2.4 *The disciples' perception*

What Mary and Joseph had lived in secret wonderment for a long period of time, and what the Baptist had seen in a flash and

shared in public, the disciples, and especially the apostles, discovered over the period of almost three years of daily contact with Jesus. Looking back at this period from a greater remove in time, John is the one who most strikingly communicates the sense of the confrontation as well as the depth of reflection which it elicited: “what we heard, what we looked at with our eyes, what we contemplated and our hands have touched” (1 Jn 1:1); “nobody ever looked at God—the single generated god, the one whose existence is in function of the womb (*ho òn eis tòn kólpon*) of the Father, he was the one who led the way (*ekeínos exēgēsato*)” (Jn 1:18).

In John’s memory, this “being led” culminated in one of the most astounding pronouncements he attributes to Jesus: “I have called you friends, because I have made known to you *all the things which I have heard* from my Father” (Jn 15:15).

Such dialogue as this, among friends, lies at the core of trinitarian revelation. In the Annunciation, the revelation had been at its most dramatic but also at its most hidden: the embryo is in himself the message, and the reception of the mystery by Mary, and Joseph, implies some deep understanding on their part of that pre-existence which had, ontologically, necessitated the virginal dimension of his conception. In the Baptism, there was a second annunciation, which John the Baptist made public: his perception of the inner vitality of Yahweh made it possible for him to accept this new message of multi-dimensionality within the wholly a-dimensional, and like the prophets of yore he forged the sensitivity of those around him. Both annunciations had been flashes, which Mary and Joseph and John had arduously to re-live and re-discover in their daily experience: “they did not comprehend what he was saying as he spoke to them” (Lk 2:50), “are you the one who comes, or do we wait for another?” (Mt 11:3 | Lk 7:19–20). But now, as Jesus himself “leads the way,” the Annunciation truly becomes a state, as the disciples strive with great effort to appropriate its message: “the kingdom of the heavens is now being conquered (*biázetai*) and those who have great strength (*biastai*) seize it” (Mt 11:12 | Lk 16:16).

The “trinitarian dialogue,” as encapsulated in John’s lapidary text, “I have called you friends, because I have made known to you all the things which I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:15), is both *ad intra* (Jesus hears from the Father) and *ad extra* (Jesus identifies his friends as those to whom he makes known the

mystery).⁹ Whether or not the Aramaic equivalent of John's text would have been the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, I believe that the concept expressed was his *ipsissima notio* and *intentio*. Without attempting to explore the question of Jesus' self-consciousness and its development, I accept that the essence of what emerged as his message was indeed the expression of what *he*, consciously, intended to convey. We can look, in other words, at the disciples' perception of Jesus' self-perception. What bears stressing in this regard is the trinitarian confidence that Jesus exhibits. The recollection of this attitude was sharply etched in the apostles' memory not because of any detailed verbal instructions imparted by their "rabbi" but rather because of the lived experience that transpired through Jesus' behavior.

Emblematic in this respect is the episode related by John that involved Thomas and Philip (Jn 14:5–11). In this case Jesus verbalizes the essence of trinitarian life by describing his relationship with the Father. But his answer is not encased within a systematic theoretical presentation. Rather, it was as if a casual answer to a casual question, or, in fact, two casual questions, both very human and understandable. These questions are almost the equivalent of the one we are presupposing here and was, as such, never asked: "Who are you?" Thomas and Philip ask, instead, more concrete questions that arise from their confrontation with the person of Jesus as much as from what he had been saying. Let us review the episode more closely.

First, Thomas asks for clarification of Jesus' reference to his going to the house of the Father: "We do not know where you are off to, so how can we know the way?" (Jn 14:5). This elicits an answer that points to Jesus himself as the way, and thus the ultimate truth and the only possible life, since only through him can one know the Father. To this in turn comes Philip's retort: but then why don't you simply show us the Father, which, it would seem, is really all we need? ("it will suffice to us," Jn 14:8). At this, Jesus expresses a moment of pained frustration, underscored by the vocative with which he addresses his interlocutor and by the almost annoyed repetition of his words: "Oh Philip, all this time I am with

⁹In this respect it may be noted that my whole emphasis on the role of perception takes for granted, and illuminates, the assumption forcefully expounded by Karl Rahner of the identity between the economic and the immanent Trinity.

you, and you still do not know me? . . . How can you say ‘Show me the Father?’” (Jn 14:9). Encased in this very human exchange is one of the most profound trinitarian statements: “The one who sees me, sees the Father” (Jn 14:9). Continuing in the established dialogical tone, Jesus addresses Philip once more in a very personal way: “Don’t you believe that . . .” (Jn 14:10). He has been with them, day and night, for many months; they have been exposed to the impact of his personality, so they ought to know what they have experienced: the Father in the Son.

Emblematic about this episode are the details, embedded in John’s memory, about a very live exchange with two apostles who do not normally share front stage. The narrative gives us a profound glimpse into Jesus’ matter-of-fact attitude in proposing what to him is a lived reality, not an imagined abstraction. That the episode is a true recollection of factual events and not John’s fabrication is shown by the subtle correlation with the episode of the Petrine confession as related by Matthew. On that occasion, Jesus asks his disciples a question that would strike us as odd were it not for the frequency with which we have heard the gospel text read to us: “You, who do you say I am?” (Mt 16:15). The oddity lies in the fact that the question relates to a person the interlocutors know well. You do not expect a close friend to ask you that question about himself, because the answer would normally entail a personal name, a professional qualification, a place of origin—or some other detail that you as a friend would already know (Jesus, carpenter, Nazareth). Jesus is trying to elicit the same answer that he would expect Philip (in John’s account) to be able to give. When Jesus says to Philip, “you still do not know me” (Jn 14:9), he has in mind the same question he poses in Matthew’s episode. When he asks Simon, “who do you say I am?” he asks in effect, “do you really know me?” The frustration at Philip’s obtuseness is matched by the elation at Simon/Peter’s insight: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For neither flesh nor blood has unveiled this for you, but my Father who is in the heavens” (Mt 16:17). The exact converse of the reaction to Philip! Jesus would have been less pained if Philip had posed earnestly the same question that he, Jesus, elicits in Matthew’s account, something along these lines: “you have told us such things before, but who are you, really? Why is the Father so important?” Instead, Philip not only fails to ask that question, but pre-empts the answer that Peter gives by saying, in effect: “forget about who you might be, show us rather the one who really matters . . .”

In each case the undercurrent is profoundly trinitarian, and the medium profoundly dialogical. The disciples, and the apostles in particular, were the ones constantly in contact with the progressive revelation of the Trinity during Jesus' lifetime, and it is through their perception of the events that touched them that Jesus' self-perception is made known to us so that we may be touched in turn. And Jesus' self-perception is, of course, all we know about the Trinity. Which is in fact a great deal: "all the things which I have heard from my Father" (Jn 15:15). Space allows us to consider only, and only very briefly, one further aspect of this dynamics.

In his adult life, Jesus referred insistently to the correlative notions of *mission* and *fulfillment*. His "being sent" does not come across as an impersonal passive. Rather, Jesus communicates clearly the sense of a personal agency that is operative at the origin, and with which he is coherently linked. A double relationship becomes awesomely explicit: with the one who sends, and with the one who fulfills. Rather than setting out to "explain," Jesus projects his awareness of the double presence that shapes his life. And it is a suffered attitude, one that involves his whole being. On the one hand, he must do the will of the one who sent him, a will and a *person* he shows to know intimately. On the other hand, he must let his own response, his own enactment of this will be fulfilled through the intimate concurrence of another, another *person* he also shows to know intimately. His attitude before both is suffered because of the obstacles that rise to block him, and that culminate with the cross. Throughout it all, he adheres to the original will that sent him—and it is through this adherence more than through any programmatic statement that we come to perceive the Father. And he adheres to the fulfilling will that shall bring it all to fruition—so that, again, through this adherence we come to perceive the Spirit. Herein the disciples touched the Trinity. They could sense the profound tensionality that defines the unique plane where they became engulfed in the mystery through the non-mystery of the presence of Jesus. He displayed this presence outwardly and they could perceive it inwardly. It was his concrete posture wherein the uniqueness of God was never called into question, while he himself emerged more and more clearly as totally immersed in uniqueness, relating, within it and with the utmost particularity, to the one who sent and to the one who would fulfill.

2.5 The crowds and the individuals

From all we know, Jesus did not set out to choose his apostles with a job description in mind, as if aiming to fill the slots of a well-defined organizational chart. They gathered incrementally, over a short period of time, and they seemed to coalesce quickly to a fairly unified group, to which no more were added. Just as Jesus showed no tendency to teach abstractly, so he did not show any concern for creating an organized cadre of retainers. Still, the group around him developed a remarkable cohesion. But even so, it never became a barrier or a screen to the rest of the world. Jesus did indeed spend a good deal of time alone with the apostles, but not in order to avoid further contact with “outsiders.” He dealt with these, whether a crowd or individual, with the utmost ease. His attitude toward them was no different than it was toward the inner circle: he did not so much engage in descriptive statements but rather disclosed a living presence, wherever he went, to whomever he met.

People did gather to listen, in crowds, and Jesus obviously did articulate his thoughts in words; he taught. But he did so by projecting the experience of his inner life, not by expounding principles of an intellectual vision. There is not, for the most part, a record of the crowds’ response (tragically, the record is more explicit in the confrontation with Pilate, where, however, we are told that their response was instigated and choreographed). We know mostly that they gathered in ever larger numbers, and we know their feelings: “they all marveled to the point that conferring with each other they would say: ‘What is this? A new teaching, with authority?’” (Mk 1:27 | Lk 4:36; cf. Mt 7:28; 9:8). We are also told that the fame (Mk 1:28) and resonance (Lk 4:37) of his deeds spread: in other words, the crowds were struck by his personality, his words, his actions. But this could work both ways: first they wanted to make him king (Jn 6:15), then they wanted him crucified (Mk 15:13f | Lk 23:21 | Jn 19:6).

The articulated responses came at the individual level. It was the sense of a communicated life that captivated people. They were not so much listeners, as participants in an encounter. To each, individually, was given the chance to live John’s experience, i.e., to hear, to see with their own eyes, to contemplate and touch with their own hands (cf. 1 Jn 1:1). He whom they heard, saw, touched—was the physical Jesus. But therein they inescapably

heard, saw, touched “the *logos* of life” (1 Jn 1:1). And just as inescapably they sensed his integral connection with another dimension: they heard, saw, touched “the eternal life” (1 Jn 1:2). They heard, saw, touched, through him, the Father, because that tangible eternal life, the Jesus they met, “was abiding in the Father” (*hētis ên pròs tôn patéra*, 1 Jn 1:2). It is as though John were echoing Jesus’ words to Philip: those who heard, saw, touched Jesus, heard, saw, touched the Father.

Out of these occasional encounters came some of the most profound flashes of understanding—the intuition of Jesus’ integration within a higher reality, the Trinity. Take the case of the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well by Sychar (Jn 4). The distance between her and Jesus is gradually bridged as he elicits understanding through analogy. The characteristic Johannine blend of concreteness and loftiness encapsulates the depth of the confrontation: through the narrative, we sense the woman’s response to Jesus’ striking personality. We seem in truth to hear not John’s, but her own report of the encounter. Jesus’ words become progressively loftier and seem to reflect John’s style—and yet, they also make sense if we hear them through the woman’s own perception. After all, the woman’s profound change of heart must have been occasioned by something she intuited that was conveyed not through silence, but in actual words. Thirst and water are the more immediate vehicles for the development of the analogy. But so is the sudden switch to the talk about God, which *she* initiates (Jn 4:20). It is in answer to her question that Jesus introduces the notion of the Father (Jn 4:21). And so *we* go imperceptibly, just as imperceptibly as *she* must have, from the notion of thirst for physical water to an incipient awareness of a flowing spiritual force; and then from a question about the appropriateness of a place of worship (Samaria or Jerusalem) to the reality of a single Father, in a spiritual realm (“God is spirit,” Jn 4:24) that transcends location and ethnicity. Jesus “leads (her) along the way” (*exēgēsato*, Jn 1:18); he elicits a startled wonder and points concretely to a higher plane of reality. Thus it was that common human encounters became electrifying moments that opened, with dim clarity, widely unsuspected new vistas. Through Jesus whom she encounters sitting by the well, the woman from Sychar comes to sense the higher plane to which Jesus belonged: a prophet? (Jn 4:19), the Messiah? (Jn 4:25.29), and ultimately she comes to sense the Son’s relationship to the Father. Through this incipient sense of wonderment, Jesus channels her attention through

a subtle dynamic. She had spoken of “our fathers” (Jn 4:20), and he answers by referring to “the father” as the target of worship (Jn 4:21.23), shifting then to “the Father” as subject: “the Father seeks such worshipers” (Jn 4:23). Imperceptibly, the father as common noun (the target of worship) becomes the Father as a proper name (the Father whose intimate wish Jesus knows). At that point, Jesus brings her attention back to himself: “I am (the Messiah), the one who is speaking to you” (Jn 4:26).

Through a live, if occasional, encounter such as this, Jesus articulates for an “outsider” the higher reality that Peter intuits on his own (or rather, through a special act of grace, Mt 16:17) and that Philip has failed to recognize in spite of his long familiarity with Jesus (Jn 14:9). It is another mini-Annunciation, a properly trinitarian confrontation: not because the woman from Sychar can now speak about “it” in theological terms, but because she has faced the live interaction of the Son with the Father. (As if inspired by the woman’s reaction, Jesus goes on, in the second part of the episode, to expand the sensitivity of his inner circle for the same reality, telling them about the “will of the one who sends me,” “whose work I will bring to completion,” Jn 4:34.)

2.6 The spirits’ perception

The angelic and demonic perceptions of Jesus exhibit an interesting complementary distribution in the gospel narratives: at the beginning and at the end we encounter only the angels, and during the public ministry we encounter only the demons. Also, it is only the demons who show emotional, human-like responses to Jesus, whereas the angels are as if impassive participants who do not interact with him with any degree of psychological dynamism.

The angels appear in the beginning as messengers and helpers, from Gabriel’s annunciations (to Zachariah and Mary, Lk 1:19.26) to the temptations in the desert (Mt 4:11 | Mk 1:13, the only New Testament episode, along with the agony at Gethsemane, for which no other human witness is known, and which, accordingly, could only have been related by Jesus himself—unless one assumes it to be pure invention). The temptations mark a farewell of sorts: there is no angelic presence following the episode until Gethsemane. That the angels should so remain in the background is significant—and it is acknowledged by Jesus: “Do you really

think,” he says to Peter just before being apprehended in Gethsemane, “that I am not able to call on my Father and that he would not make available to me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Mt 26:53). As a matter of fact, the angels are often mentioned *by* Jesus, especially when referring to the eschatological plane of reality, but they are not shown to interact *with* him as interlocutors. Then, during the prayer before the Passion, “an angel appeared to him, strengthening him” (Lk 22:43f, a passage which occurs only in the later strand of the manuscript tradition). From that moment onwards, the demons are no longer mentioned, and in their stead the angels are present once more, notably at the resurrection and the ascension.

The devil appears for the first time as the tempter in the desert. He emerges immediately with a vivid personality, engaging Jesus in a dialectical mode. His opening line is dramatic: “If you are the son of God . . .” (Mt 4:3.6 | Lk 4:3.9). We may understand this in a dual sense. First as a search for a response, arousing from a genuine doubt about the possibility that this straggling human may indeed embody the wonder of the Incarnation. Second as a taunt, challenging the sensed divine presence to rise above the mists of humanity. The ministering angels who appear at the end of the exchange frame the whole episode in a unique way; this is the only time demons and angels appear together in the gospels in a mirror image relationship. Both the angelic and the demonic spirits are aware of the answer to the question and to the taunt: this hungry nobody is indeed the son of God. They are ready to watch the unfolding of his life, the angels from a silent distance, the demons through a series of encounters during Jesus’ public ministry, encounters that are often just as vivid as the initial one in the desert.

Let us look at one among many. The episode in the region of Gadara/Gerasa/Gergesa/Gergusta brings up again the matter of divine sonship, not as a question but as an acknowledged fact (Mt 8:28–34 | Mk 5:1–20 | Lk 8:26–39). The understanding in the narrative is clear: there is a discrete demonic presence¹⁰ within a

¹⁰Matthew speaks of two human beings and the demons refer to themselves in the plural: “Why do you torment *us*,” “the *demons* begged him: ‘If you expel *us*, send *us* . . .’” (Mt 8:29.31). In Mark and Luke, there is one human being, and the demonic presence refers to itself both in the singular (“Do not torment *me*,” Mk 5:7 | Lk 8:28, “*My* name is Legion,” Mk 5:9) and in the plural (“Because *we* are many,” Mk 5:9, “*They* begged him not to order *them* to go down into the abyss,”

human shell. It is the physical human being who moves and who exhibits an irrational and self-destructive superhuman strength (Mk 5:3–5 | Lk 8:29), but it is the demon within him who takes the initiative and who speaks: “a human being in (the hands of) an unclean spirit” (Mk 5:2), “a man having demons” (Lk 8:27), “the man from whom the demons had gone out” (Lk 8:38). Jesus emphasizes the discreteness in addressing the demon as distinct from the man: “He said to him: ‘Come out, you the unclean spirit, from the man!’” (Mk 5:8); “He ordered the unclean spirit to come out of the man” (Lk 8:29). Through the physical voice of the man, then, the demon/unclean spirit addresses Jesus, recognizing him as “Son of God” (Mt 8:29); “Jesus, Son of God the Most High” (Mk 5:7 | Lk 8:28). The distinctiveness of the demonic reality is further brought to light by the outcome: it is transferred to a herd of swine “numbering about two thousand” (Mk 5:12), and the whole herd, just as self-destructively as the man had acted, plunges into the lake and drowns (Mt 8:32 | Mk 5:13 | Lk 8:33).

An important detail in the episode appears as an almost incidental phrase in Matthew: “You did come here *before the time* (*prò kairoû*) to torment us?” (Mt 8:29). The demons in the man experience a subjection they expected from a more glorified incarnate God. The *kairós* they refer to is, in their perception, the time when subjection would have come to them from a higher plane, the plane of a Trinity unsullied by any incarnation. They could accept that. But subjection by a simple human? This is the patristic understanding of the angelic fall. The demons in the man of Gerasa have a pre-emptive knowledge of the Trinity, one that does not allow for trinitarian particularity to express itself in a manner of its own choosing—and this is their sin of pride. They are tragically baffled by the authority they now experience, instead, in a mere man. They expected the Trinity, and they are confronted, instead, with the Incarnation. Pathetically, they have no recourse but to ask for an explanation from this very son of man, as he calls himself. And yet they are forced to acknowledge him as “the Son of God the Most High.”

The angelic reserve and the demonic impotence are two aspects of the same reality, the one that underlies the Messianic secret as well. The higher plane to which Jesus belongs, the

Lk 8:31, “the unclean *spirits* came out,” Mk 5:13, “the *demons* came out,” Lk 8:33).

trinitarian plane, must not overpower human perception to a point where it (that is, we, men and women of this world of ours) can no longer see his lowly incarnate status. For this is the only locus where we can find the Trinity, with that perfect balance that found its supreme manifestation in Mary's response at the Annunciation. And so the angels withdraw—in adoration. And so the demons see a light flickering at them through the cracks of an all-enveloping darkness—in powerless rage. And so we, the men and women of this world, are called to give the angelic response of adoration through the cracks of a demonic darkness.

2.7 *The Caiaphas perception*

Tragically, one of the most lucid trinitarian confrontations is the one sought by the High Priest Caiaphas at the trial of Jesus. It is tragic precisely on account of the clarity with which the terms of the matter are stated, a dim clarity that echoes that of the demons. The clearest formulation of this encounter is found in Matthew. Caiaphas, in whose presence Jesus has been brought (Mt 26:57), asks Jesus to tell him with the full solemnity of an oath (*exorkízō se*, 63), taken in the name of the living God (*katà toû theoû toû zôntos*, 63), whether he, Jesus, is “the Christ, the son of God” (*ho Khristòs ho huiòs toû theoû*, 63).

The question comes after a string of witnesses has been called: they cannot satisfy the judicial criteria of the Sanhedrin, even though they have been induced to give testimony to conform to the design of the accusers (Mt 26:59–61 | Mk 14:55–59). They are called “false witnesses,” but in point of fact, the one statement that is related in the gospel (Mt 26:61 | Mk 14:58) about Jesus' claim that he could tear down the Temple and rebuild it in three days, is not false. And if they could have been made to say what the judges really wanted to hear, there would have been little need for Caiaphas to ask the question directly of Jesus. The fact that he does, suggests a certain basic fairness and a genuine intent to establish the truth of the matter. If Caiaphas questions Jesus under oath it is not because he could not bribe somebody to attest to what he suspected Jesus' blasphemous claim to be.

It is almost as though Caiaphas could not believe that Jesus would go to such lengths as to assert his supreme claim explicitly. True, Caiaphas and others in the Sanhedrin wanted to eliminate

someone they perceived as dangerous to the well-being of the community as much as of the establishment. And given that Jesus had no high level connections it would have been quite easy to condemn him on political grounds (which is what happens with Pilate). But the situation is more subtle. The trial was presumably the first occasion for Caiaphas to meet Jesus face to face (he probably had the same veiled curiosity as Pilate). And it appears as though Jesus had the same psychological impact on him that he had on so many others: his personality was clearly not something to be trifled with. In the encounter, Caiaphas intuits the enormity of Jesus' claim, and becomes both horrified and captivated by the ultimate question that vastly transcends politics—and which for him signifies the supreme blasphemy. He can hardly believe first that Jesus could possibly really mean it, and, furthermore, admit it. But admit it he does. In fact, Jesus proclaims in no uncertain terms that he will be seen “sitting at the right sides of the Power” (Mt 26:64 | Mk 14:62 | Lk 22:69, the only phrase in this episode that is identical in all three synoptics). The “Power” is one of the euphemistic terms used in lieu of the unpronounceable name of God, Yahweh, which in writing was rendered by the four, unpronounced, consonants (YHWH) known as the Tetragrammaton.

The words as related leave no room for doubt. Caiaphas invokes an oath taken “by the living God” (Mt 26:63), and the question is whether Jesus does indeed claim to be “the Anointed, the son of God” (ibid.), i.e., the son of the same God in whose name the oath is administered. In Mark (14:61), the semantics are even more sharply defined: “the Anointed, the son of the Blessed One.” The term “Blessed One” is another euphemism for YHWH, and so Mark's formulation is equivalent to saying: “are you the son of the Tetragrammaton?” Jesus' answer claims equal status with the same. The point is that there is no question as to what is involved. Jesus is not just claiming to be a high level prophet, a Messiah acting as religious leader. Nor is he claiming to be Yahweh, *tout court*. That would have looked superficial and laughable. He is effectively claiming a trinitarian status. The term is ours, but the basic understanding was Caiaphas' as well. This is Caiaphas' annunciation. But it remains a lower-case annunciation. And the scandal that follows, the rending of the garments (Mt 26:65 | Mk 14:63), is not a hypocritical or hysterical gesture. It is sincere, and it is, tragically, Caiaphas' equivalent to Mary's *fiat*. They both understood, however much through a glass darkly, what was at stake. But while Mary's

Annunciation brought the Logos to life, Caiaphas' annunciation brought him to death.

If we fast forward to a few years later, we find another revealing situation in the contrast between the two reactions to Paul's preaching in Lystra. Following the miraculous healing of a cripple, the (pagan) crowds identify Barnabas as Zeus, and Paul as Hermes (a lesser god because Paul was the one speaking and thus appeared to be the mouthpiece of Barnabas, Acts 14:11). "Oxen and garlands" are brought to be sacrificed to them as gods (13). The apostles are scandalized—in a technical sense, i.e., they consider it a blasphemy to be so identified, a scandal that is signaled by "tearing their clothes" (14), which had also been Caiaphas' gesture (Mt 26:65 | Mk 14:63). To counteract the blasphemy, Paul and Barnabas excitedly begin to speak about the "living God" (Acts 14:15). At that point, some Jews arrive who are just as scandalized: their reaction is to stone Paul, leaving him for dead (19). The Jewish reaction (of Paul and Barnabas, and then the others) is coherent, however different in its outcome: humans cannot be identified with the divine sphere. There is a profound sense of the infinite break between the absolute and the relative. The Christian revolutionary realization, born out of the Annunciation, is that this infinite gap can be bridged, and that the bridge originates *within* the absolute. The trinitarian reality of the absolute, if not its theoretical description, is what is communicated in these actual confrontations, in these many annunciations.

2.8 *The Cross*

The Cross is the reef against which all waters break with violent hopelessness. It seems to validate the answer Caiaphas gave to his private annunciation: this man who stirred the greatest doubt in Caiaphas' heart, now truly dead, must indeed have been but an ordinary man. Jesus' anguished cry projects doubt as well: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mt 27:46 | Mk 15:34).

The moment of his death deeply seared the consciousness of his followers: "Jesus, uttering once more a loud scream, yielded the spirit" (Mt 24:50); "Jesus, uttering a loud sound, breathed his last" (Mk 15:37); "Speaking with a loud voice Jesus said: 'Father in your hands I hand over my spirit,' and saying this he breathed his last" (Lk 24:46); "Jesus said: 'It is finished,' and having dropped his head

he gave up the spirit” (Jn 19:30). The finality of his death is also echoed by the muted response of the scattered followers. They go through the motions, numbed by the enormity of their loss: “the crowds . . . turned back beating the breasts” (Lk 23:48); Joseph of Arimathea goes through the legal procedure of obtaining a burial permit (Mt 27:57–61 | Mk 15:42–47 | Lk 23:50–56 | Jn 19:38–42); Nicodemus brings the supplies (Jn 19:39); the women sit speechless (Mt 27:61 | Mk 15:47 | Lk 23:55). It is out of the psychological distance of the non-followers that a new clarity emerges. The particular relationship of Jesus to the divine world (in our terms, his trinitarian dimension) is sensed by Dismas and by the centurion.

Dismas is the name tradition assigns to one of the “co-crucifieds” (Mt 27:44 | Mk 15:32 | Lk 23:39). In our record, he is the last one to speak to Jesus, and his words carry an awesome weight. Here is someone in the throes of the most agonizing death, someone who must at best have seen Jesus by accident and from within a crowd—but one who can still muster enough strength to give a *fiat* to his annunciation: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23:42). Mindless of the loss at hand, an attitude that had so numbed the followers, Dismas focuses on the beyond. He senses that Jesus will come, beyond death, into his own and he gives as if the Father’s answer to Jesus’ own anguished cry: Jesus is not forsaken, and, in Jesus, Dismas now knows he is not forsaken either. And thus, in one of the most tragic moments imaginable, it looks as though it is this co-crucified thief who gives Jesus the strength to die (echoing the angel who “appeared to him, strengthening him, Lk 22:43f), and helps him reaffirm his trinitarian consciousness. With the renewed courage that follows the exchange with Dismas, Jesus can now say, as he expires, “*Father*, into your hands I place my spirit” (Lk 23:46). It seems as though Dismas intuits the trinitarian status of Jesus at the very moment that everything works against it. He is the solitary pillar against which Jesus can lean.

In a reflective mood, the centurion projects an analogous awareness: “The centurion who stood facing him, seeing that he had thus breathed his last, said: ‘Truly this man was the son of God’” (Mk 15:39; slightly different in Mt 27:54 and Lk 23:47). Being a Roman, he would have picked up the term “son of God” from the jargon he would hear in his daily interaction with the Jewish world around him. What he senses is the bracketing of Jesus with a beyond that is all the more real to him for being so emphatically and tragically denied by the accusers who have brought Jesus to death. While the followers are

crushed by the evidence against this awesome bracketing, the evidence provided by Jesus' definitive end, the centurion, not previously exposed to the daily confrontation with the subtle self-revelation of Jesus, brings to his experience all the freshness of a first encounter. And his words, spoken, it seems, primarily to himself, are a de facto answer to Caiaphas's question. Caiaphas had asked: "I ask you under an oath by the living God to tell us whether you are the son of God" (Mt 26:63), and the centurion answers: "Truly this man was the son of God" (Mk 15:39).

2.9 *The paschal perception*

The Resurrection jolted all previous perceptions, but only in order to reconfigure them into a new, single, and unified perception that, building on all previous experiences, brought to its effective end the Old Testament catechumenate. This new paschal perception is intimately entwined, it seems to me, with the Eucharistic perception.¹¹

Let us reflect for a moment on the pertinent time frame, and on the moments that punctuate it. (1) Jesus enacts the Eucharistic meal, apparently for the first time, on the night before he is to be betrayed and killed, with only the closest circle of the twelve. (2) On the day of his Resurrection, at Emmaus, he seems to re-enact the meal with the two discomfited disciples whom he had sought out along the way (Mk 16:12–13 | Lk 24:13–35). Each of the other meetings with the apostles reported in the Gospels,¹² before the last

¹¹There is no record of either an explicit eucharistic training of the apostles on the part of Jesus, or of a "theological" reflection that would have elaborated the formalities of the actual re-enactment. But the profound coherence with which this re-enactment is carried out (and attested to, in the first place, by Paul, 1 Cor 11:23–26) provides the strongest evidence for the unequivocal impact of the original intent, that of Jesus. On the correlation between presence and the Eucharist, central to my current argument, see another important book by Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence. A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), and the chapter on "The Eucharist and Transubstantiation," in *Christian Faith*, esp. 99–101, which deal in an illuminating way with the "celestial focus" of the Eucharist and its importance for our trinitarian apprehension.

¹²Paul's references to the meetings with the five hundred, the apostles, and James, as well as with himself (1 Cor 15:6–8), give no detail as to the nature of the encounters, or even whether it was before the Ascension or after (as in his own case).

one of the Ascension, involves a meal: (3) while they are sitting at table (Mk 16:14), (4) when Thomas is absent and Jesus asks for bread and fish to eat (Lk 24:41–43), (5) eight days later when Thomas is present and they are again in the house, presumably gathered once more for a meal (Jn 20:26), (6) on the shores of the lake when he calls the apostles to have breakfast after they had gone fishing on the lake (Jn 21:12–14). Only the Emmaus episode attributes a special meaning to the breaking of the bread: Cleopas and his companion had not recognized Jesus, but they do so at the breaking of the bread, at which point Jesus “becomes unseen” (Lk 24:30). In the other episodes, Jesus is instead recognized before the meal, and the act of eating is seen as proof of the physical reality of his body. However, the strong impression of the Last Supper would have lingered on to characterize all of these repeated, convivial encounters.

The time span is incredibly short, the encounters occasional, the exchanges of information minimal. And yet it is within these brief five weeks, with only sporadic and seemingly unplanned meetings, that a whole new dimension is added to the disciples’ perception of the Trinity. During this exceptional time interval they are confronted at once with the resurrected presence and with the Eucharistic presence of a human being who, until then, had been as physically concrete as each of them, and who now shows, explicitly, that he belongs to the divine sphere. Seemingly, the only anticipation of such a higher state of being had been the Transfiguration, to which only three apostles had been privy, under strict orders not to make it known to others. The other anticipations (related especially by John) are obscure and lacking in specifics. But in fact, the whole trinitarian dimension of the pre-paschal Jesus had been an anticipation. It was a confrontation with a presence that evoked at the same time finality and tensionality, and that was now re-proposed in the dual mode of an extra-ordinary physical human body and its identity with the inert qualities of bread and wine (the latter mentioned only with reference to the last supper). A specific aspect of the paschal period, i.e., the period between Easter and the Ascension, is the overlap of the resurrected and Eucharistic presences, and the strengthening of the trinitarian perception of Jesus that the disciples had slowly been forming.

There was no time or pre-disposition for an intellectual reflection on what was happening to the apostles. It was rather a time, as the first two and some years had been in a different respect, to face a new reality and register their deeper perception of it. In

this perception, the unexpected bodily appearances merge with the correlative non-bodily appearance within the bread and wine. This is the same sort of impossible bracketing that Jesus had manifested in the earlier display of his trinitarian substance—the bracketing between alternative modes of being that seem to be mutually exclusive and yet impact us with such full reality that a deeper apprehension of their necessary compatibility emerges. Jesus is the terminal point of reference, and yet he refers in turn. That had been a central aspect of his personality up until his death. It remains so after the Resurrection, accentuated. For even in his new clearly superior mode of being, he still does not become, as it were, un-trinitarian. Now that Jesus had emerged in unsuspected glory, it was all the more tempting for his followers to forego the trinitarian dimension and see Jesus as the absolute end, as the un-trinitarian Yahweh. A hint of this creeping misconception is found in the remarkable question the apostles are reported as asking at the end of the forty days: “Lord, might it be that in this time you will restore kingship to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). “Lord”—a term the apostles used when expecting Jesus to exercise power on his own, and a term that echoed the Tetragrammaton itself. “*This time*”—a notion of human time that shows how far the apostles still were from comprehending that Jesus was going to bring about the “fullness” of time. “Restore kingship”—expecting Jesus to take things into his own hands and show *his* absolute power. We might say that the trinitarian perception exhibited by these remarkable words is at best still very weak. At the very moment of the Ascension, they seem more ready to think of Jesus as the incarnation of Yahweh rather than of the Son.

As in his lifetime, Jesus does not launch into explanations. Rather, he offers a presence.¹³ It is from the substance of this presence, even of his glorious paschal presence, that the proper

¹³An important correlate, which I cannot develop here, is the degree of properly divine self-consciousness that the institution of the Eucharist exhibits. If Jesus meant, as I believe he did, for the Eucharist to be the sacrament we understand it to be, then there was a lot more to its institution than a simple, sentimental expectation to be remembered through the repetitive performance of a ceremonial act. If he indeed thought of the Eucharist as an actual transfer of presence (what later reflection came to call “transubstantiation”), that would entail a keen understanding of a divine power extended through and beyond all time, much greater than the self-consciousness underlying any of the other miracles. Hence it is that in the Eucharist we do indeed come to terms, more closely than in any other way, with the divine self-consciousness of Jesus.

trinitarian realization emerges: he does not replace the Father or the Spirit. At the very moment in which he seems to be more absolutely terminal, he refers, more than ever. Rather than excluding reference, the assimilation with him, resurrected and eucharistic, gives new substance and meaning to the disciples' referential, trinitarian, existence. He remains unique—an absolute point of reference who is an end in himself. He remains particular—and does not evanesce. He remains living—all the more so as he retains a degree of physicality verified by somatic and cultural traits (involving eating, clothing, physical contact, etc.). He remains relatable—as a point of reference that refers outside himself. Inverting the terms of the passage in Revelation (1:8) he is the Omega and the Alpha—the Omega as the absolute culmination, and the Alpha as pointing to “another” absolute.

Consider specifically two central aspects of his paschal behavior. First, for all the glorious transcendence that emanates from this utterly unexpected new Jesus, a Jesus who has visibly overcome death and belongs to a completely different plane of existence, there is never a moment when he appears to replace the Father. He is the “pantocrator” (as Revelation in particular will choose to call him, 1:8, 4:8, etc., for a total of nine occurrences), but in no way does he pre-empt the essential relatability of his divine being. Second, for all the freedom of movement he now has, and the unsurpassed control and authority over the world of space and time, there is never a moment when he appears to exclude the role of the Spirit. The unequivocal affirmation of his continued “dependence” on this “other” absolute emerges from the fact that he does not linger: the moments of his paschal visibility remain just that, moments. For a little after a month's time, his paschal presence comes to a final end.

2.10 The pleroma perception

Forty days after his passion, Jesus' encounters with the apostles and disciples come to a definitive end, and he is no longer seen. All pre-Ascension encounters aimed at showing the continuity of the physical Jesus. The visions that follow Pentecost (Stephen, Paul) are just that, visions rather than encounters, visions that underscore Jesus' exalted new status “at the right hand of the Father.” For with the Ascension Jesus had “entered” the Trinity with his full humanity, truly bringing about the fullness of time,

when both time and space came to be impossibly embedded within the Trinity.¹⁴ Paul gave a verbal shape to this concept: the “economy of the fullness of the ages (*toú plērōmatos tón kairón*)” is “to recapitulate everything in Christ” (Eph 1:10); “when the fullness of time (*tó plērōma toú khrónou*) came, God sent his son” (Gal 4:4). But the apostles faced the fullness concretely—“because in him” (these are Paul’s words as well) “dwells bodily the fullness of divinity” (Col 2:9).

Times are accelerating at a geometric rate. After the thirty some years during which only Mary and Joseph were aware of Jesus’ unique status; after the two and some years of his public life; after the forty days of his paschal presence; there is now an extremely brief period of ten days between Ascension and Pentecost. Is it a mere transition, a token interval, or does it in some way affect the disciples’ progressive training of their growing trinitarian perception? I would assume the latter, and would look for an answer at the way in which their awareness of the Eucharist may have developed in those days. They were now wholly on their own, with a certainty (the physical Jesus would no longer be with them) and a promise (they were to expect yet another divine manifestation, the Spirit). They were anchored in the awareness of how the mode of Jesus’ presence had changed, and of how it was echoed in some mysterious way in this new meal, fraught with a presence that loomed much larger than the mere coziness of remembrance.

During that interstice, the Eucharist was the physical mode that remained, as they began to enact it on their own. The implications on their developing trinitarian perception were subtle but momentous. The institution of the Eucharist was one of the supreme manifestations of Jesus’ divine self-awareness. He had meant what the apostles and disciples were now discovering. As they began to repeat his words and to re-enact his gestures, they realized that he had spoken to them from a plane of existence that transformed the gestures far beyond a mere catering to nostalgia. He meant a continuity of presence that went beyond all cultural models, a presence that humans could appropriate in their physical state. This appropriated presence would absorb individual humans in a

¹⁴I have so argued in my article “Ascension, Parousia and Sacred Heart: Structural Correlations,” in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 25 (1998): 69–103.

new mode of being whereby human physicality would enter, in the fullness of time, into the heart of timelessness and of spacelessness. Without the Spirit—without, properly speaking, the Church—Jesus' eucharistic presence was all they had as a means of physically bonding with the disappeared Jesus. It was the suffered, brief new Advent leading to the discovery, or the reception, of full sacramentality at Pentecost. The Eucharist of those ten days was, impossibly it would seem, a sacrament without the Church.

One way to look at this correlation between Ascension and Eucharist is to reflect on the notion of “deification,” so central to Eastern Christianity and to Western Christian mystics. Consider the following: God, in a Christian perspective, is properly the Trinity, but “deification” is not meant to suggest that humans become the Trinity. Rather, humans are assimilated into trinitarian life through their identification with Jesus. One might speak more properly of “logofication,” because it is through becoming one with Jesus as the *logos* that we enter the Trinity and are thereby “deified.” Such a state of affairs would dramatically affect the disciples who were the first to be exposed to it after the Ascension, when the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the cup resonated the loudest and shaped indelibly their changing perception of their relationship to God the Trinity via Jesus the *Logos*. They had known Jesus in his temporal corporeality, and saw him now as he lifted this physical dimension upwards “into” the *shekinah*. As they clung to him, physically looking upwards, they perceived as no one else could, before or after, their own incorporation with him, their being grafted in the same ascension. They were the lonely witnesses of the dawn of a new time, a time now “full” because it is anchored in the eternal. The perception of this novelty, the *pleroma* perception, was brusquely brought about by Jesus' ultimate departure. As they lost the transitory human time of daily companionship, they were made forcefully aware of the fullness of the new Christian time. The newness was precisely in the interlocking relationship of time and eternity—not in an abstract sense, but in the very personal dimension of the Jesus they knew who was now being absorbed, always *qua* Jesus, within what they knew as the *shekinah*. And this new Christian time was their time as well: they could ascend into the fullness, enter the Trinity, by appropriating, in the new meal, the double presence of the Jesus they had known earlier and the now ascended Jesus.

2.11 *The pentecostal perception*

As the book of Acts relates it, full closure came ten days after the Ascension, with a specific event. The Holy Spirit now took the initiative, descending “suddenly from the sky,” with the attributes of sound, motion, and fire (Acts 2:2). It is interesting to reflect on the psychological state of the disciples after the event of Pentecost: we find no record of any nostalgia for the pre-ascensional Jesus, no regret for his having disappeared (when disappearance did not seem, on the face of it, inevitable), no panic about having to make decisions without his explicit advice. The closure was indeed full, as they felt, it appears, ushered into a new mode of relating to God. After the Ascension, Jesus is wholly absent, with a finality we normally and properly associate with death. There is a paradox here that can bring to light an important psychological dimension. For all intents and purposes, the disciples had perceived the paschal Jesus as being alive, however altered his actual state may have been. Why not expect a continuity of interaction with him? Why accept the relationship one has with a dead person when all evidence points to that person being alive?

The answer may emerge from two concomitant observations. The first pertains to the realization on the part of the disciples of what we would call the full trinitarian dimension of Jesus. They accepted Jesus’ absence from their plane of reality because it had finally become apparent to them that, in his transfigured physicality, he was present in a different plane of reality (here again their reflecting on the nature of his presence in the Eucharistic meal would have had an impact). Stephen’s vision (Acts 7:56) was their vision: the man Jesus seen physically within the *shekinah*. They had, in other words, developed a full and live perception of Jesus’ trinitarian status, and this canceled any sense of loss for the Jesus they had known till then.

The second observation is that Pentecost added to their psychological response, to their perception of the Trinity, the explicitness of an interaction with the “thirdness” within the divine sphere, if we may say it thus. The significance of Pentecost for the human “understanding” of the Trinity was that then, for the first time, the Spirit interacted with the disciples directly and autonomously, without the intermediary of Jesus. This perhaps, even more than extraordinary events such as speaking in tongues, was the hallmark of the new era. This was the new pentecostal perception of the Trinity. The lack of nostalgia reflected this new fullness. Not that

the Spirit was lacking before Pentecost. John, for instance, reports that Jesus had “breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (20:22). But then it was Jesus, not the Spirit, who was taking the initiative—an initiative that was all the more momentous because it was one of those subtle, yet powerful, echoes of Yahweh’s actions in the Old Testament, in this case the echo of Yahweh “breathing into man’s nostrils the breath of life” (Gn 2:7).

There is another important aspect of this special revelation of the Spirit—the “advent” aspect. The disciples did not anticipate, just as Mary had not, that any “thirdness” could even exist. Nor should their response, once the Spirit had been revealed, be one of appropriation, but of availability. We have already seen (2.4) how Philip’s attempt to pre-empt the meaning of Jesus’ relationship to the Father had floundered and met with veiled disappointment on the part of Jesus. The model was rather Mary’s, and Joseph’s, availability: the openness to accept. The Spirit is not conquered, he is “received.” The time frame that leads to this “receiving” underscores the nature of the fundamental attitude: he comes chronologically after the life span of Jesus, and there is in fact, even after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, one further moment in time that punctuates the wait. They are not to grasp, they are to receive. They are to be surprised. Such an element of surprise is not only absent in the Mesopotamian, and generally in the polytheistic, mindset—it is in fact abhorrent. Predictability is at the core of the Mesopotamian, the polytheistic, experience. And surprise is at the antipodes of predictability.

What comes to the fore at Pentecost is a new manifestation of the same distinctive trinitarian traits of the absolute that had already characterized the original Old Testament perception. The innumerably unique is split into “divided tongues as if of fire” (Acts 2:3), and from this new incarnation of a reality that remains undivided (the flames of a single fire) a new perception emerges of particularity (the flames “sit down on each single one of them”), of vitality (they are flames that flash and dart), of relatability (the house is “filled” with the wind and the individuals present are “filled” with the Spirit). The concept of “receiving” seems particularly important because it encapsulates all of these traits in a single manifestation. It is the culmination of advent not only in a temporal, but also in a modal sense: it signals internalization. It never would have been possible to say that the Father had been received. Jesus had been received, in this sense, only by Mary, and vicariously by Joseph—not until the new

mode of Eucharistic incarnation could one say that the mode of receiving Jesus was one of absorption. But with the Spirit this is the proper, the only, the exclusive mode. He becomes apparent in the very act of reception *qua* internalization—which may account for the fact that the Spirit presents the greatest difficulty to the instinctive human effort at achieving some form of visualization.¹⁵

Thus it is that Pentecost brought to its conclusion the itinerary through which the perception of the trinitarian God had become fully articulated in the experience of the disciples. The same itinerary had been compressed, at the Incarnation, in the experience of Mary, and Joseph. I have stressed the trinitarian dimension of the annunciation (2.1 and 2.2). What emerges more clearly now, having reviewed the itinerary of the disciples, is how they rediscovered the Annunciation (to which they had not been privy) through an evolving annunciation that slowly took roots in their consciousness. The sudden moment of the angel's summons to Mary, and of her sharing it with Joseph, had been a remembered state in the life of those two protagonists, and then of Mary's as she survived Joseph. The same state is a state discovered by the disciples over a longer, if not overlong, stretch of time. The final moment of this process occurs when the autonomy of the Spirit is once again perceived as in the initial moment of the Annunciation to Mary. The Spirit had been announced to her as being the autonomous, operative factor in bringing forth the child in her womb. At Pentecost, the Spirit is once more autonomously operative. Mary had faced him, the Spirit, as she virginally conceived, in faith. Mary and the disciples face him, once more, in the Upper Room. For Mary, it is the second time; for the disciples, the first. But in either case it is a conclusion and a closure. Their discovery of the Trinity is now complete. The catechumenate is over.

2.12 Beyond the divide

The specifics of the election of Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:15–26) are informative. A significant detail is that it takes

¹⁵Sokolowski, "Revelation of the Trinity," 144–146, stresses the fact that the Spirit does not properly speak in the first person, and attributes this primarily to the fact that there is no "other" person whom the Spirit is meant to reveal.

place in the days before the reception of the Spirit; it is in fact the only event that is related for the ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost. The only requirement stated is that the person chosen be one who had been with them throughout the public life of Jesus, from the baptism of John to when he, Jesus, was taken up from them (21–22). Thus the process harks back to the physical connection with Jesus, the only criterion available at the time to ensure continuity.

Pentecost established a new criterion. Continuity was to be had beyond the earthly contact with Jesus, beyond the divide. Paul is the great figure that inaugurates the new phase. His discovery of the trinitarian God did not unfold through a personal confrontation with moments in the life of Jesus. He looked rather back at the dynamics of the completed cycle—as all Christians thereafter did, as we do. While it is every Christian’s call to live the Annunciation as a state, none of those who followed after Pentecost, none of us, was to witness the Annunciation as a sequence of successive moments of incarnational exposure, such as it had marked the experience of the disciples. Beyond the divide, we hark back to it as the foundational moment where our perception is rooted.* □

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*Part 2 of this article, to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Communio*, deals with the Old Testament perception of trinitarian reality and draws some overall conclusions.

YAHWEH, THE TRINITY: THE OLD TESTAMENT CATECHUMENATE (PART 2)*

• Giorgio Buccellati •

“Waiting for God means that we, as the subjects of the action, wait for a finite moment, while knowing that he, as the object of the desire, never will be such a finite moment.”

3. *Advent as a state*

3.1 *Messianism: in praise of waiting*

But we should now retrace our steps to the time before the great divide; we should look at the major moments through which the catechumenate passed in time. This will help us more adequately to recapture the impact of the Annunciation as the series of moments that led from Mary and the angel to Pentecost; it will help us to recapture the long advent that prepared the protagonists, and to bend back in time and consider the stages that defined the pre-trinitarian perception of the trinitarian reality.

Waiting is a fundamental religious attitude that sets the ancient Israelite perception quite apart from that of Mesopotamia and of polytheism in general. Waiting for a faithful God is indeed one of the attitudes most strikingly wanting in Mesopotamian and

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polytheistic spirituality. It is, by contrast, an essential dimension of monotheistic spirituality, where one is called to let God's operation unfold through time, whether through the long wait of the Old Testament or the short wait of the *triduum*. To put it in Jessica Powers' words:

Come is the love song of our race and Come
our basic word of individual wooing

...

It is the shaft of the flame-hungry Church
in Paschal spring, or the heart's javelin tossed
privately at the clouds to pierce them through
and drown one in the flood of some amazing
personal Pentecost.¹⁶

In this perspective, Messianism emerges as a spiritual attitude. The monotheistic perspective, from the Old Testament to us, proclaims a wait that is an intrinsic component of the earthly relationship to God. Even when a given phase in the process has reached its culmination, most of all in the Incarnation, we must still live the implications of that particular wait, we must wait in turn as our personal history unfolds. The past advents are to be re-lived as we discover how our own advent can and should be lived as a state.

The trinitarian implications of waiting may not be immediately apparent, but they are real and significant. They tell us in a most concrete way about the internal dynamics of the absolute—who also waits. The promise of the Messiah, this supreme object of the waiting, declares God's total and yet unsoiled involvement with time.¹⁷ The absolute remains such, yet not as a sort of parallax conditioned only by the perspective of the viewer—ultimately, an illusion. The absolute remains such, while being wholly incarnate in his dealing with creation. The Old Testament incarnation of the word is as real as the New Testament Incarnation of the Word. And it is in this detaching of the undetachable, in this articulation within time of what cannot be articulated, in this waiting where there can

¹⁶From the poem "Come Is the Love Song," in *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1999), 49.

¹⁷On the seriousness of God's involvement with time, see the eloquent and profound pages of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (1959) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

be no wait, that humans first perceived, in history, the revelation of the trinitarian absolute.

In other words, waiting is the form taken by the perception of a dynamics within the absolute—and it is a non-vectorial perception of what appears at first to be an exclusively vectorial dimension. Waiting in time implies a direction from one finite point to another. When waiting, we look to a point in time, a finite moment when an event might happen. Waiting for God means that we, as the subjects of the action, wait for a finite moment, while knowing that he, as the object of the desire, never will be such a finite moment. In some ways we expect God to share in our deferring while remaining beyond it. We perceive God to be involved in our directional, vectorial being because of a real, if non-vectorial, dynamism in his inner life—because of the trinitarian essence of the divine absolute. Messianism is, in this light, the other face of creation. The creation ethos of the Old Testament underscores the involvement of the absolute with the relative, as the latter is posited by the former: a vectorial movement is set in motion that tends toward a target from a given starting point, while neither the start nor the end are, properly speaking, “points” at all.

In this recognition of a dynamic dimension within the absolute we are aided by the yearnings, perhaps more than by the insights, of contemporary deconstructionist thought.¹⁸ Deconstruction may be viewed as the philosophy of advent, one that opens the door to a deeper apprehension of trinitarian reality. For deconstruction senses a dynamics that is, and is not, within the absolute, proposing that the already and the not yet are one, that the one who is to come has come already. In this light, its paradoxical stance, which is so uncomfortable in one respect, provides the comfort of a frame of mind within which to think of the absolute in what is effectively a trinitarian mode: advent as a motion toward and as a state within. And this uncomfortableness serves at the same time as a warning against a dangerous presumption, one that unwittingly assumes we “own” the term “Trinity,” and thereby also the reality for which it stands. A trinitarian mode of thinking emerges, thereby, as the one that most closely suits the contemporary restless search for a deeper rest, for that higher plane where dynamics and stasis are one.

¹⁸This I will develop more fully in a forthcoming article entitled “Trinity *spermatiké*: The Veiled Perception of a Pagan World.”

3.2 *The Old Testament catechumenate*

At the basis of my current effort is a description of what I would like to call the Old Testament catechumenate, the search for an explicitly trinitarian dimension of the Old Testament—after we have seen, in the preceding section, how this catechumenate shaped the perception of those who first came in contact with the disclosure of the Trinity in and through their human counterpart, Jesus. God has no perception, because he is infinite. Only we have perceptions, and our perception of the Trinity is through the Son. The beatific vision entails a sharing in a non-perceptual vision of Yahweh, sanctified as we are through the sacraments which in-Christ us to him as he in-fleshed himself to us.

It is not just a matter of re-reading the Old Testament in trinitarian terms.¹⁹ Rather, Yahweh is active in the Old Testament *qua* the Logos: *to en autois pneuma Xristou promarturomenon*, “the spirit of Christ who was in them testifying ahead of time” (1 Pt 1:11). Conversely, Jesus speaks as Yahweh in the New: *Hē petra de en ho Xristós* “The rock (from which our fathers drank in the desert) in fact was the Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). The Old Testament *is intrinsically* trinitarian, not just as a foreshadowing, much less as a locus for pious retrospection or retrojection of later theory and doctrine.

Reviewing the moments in history when specific traits of such a pre-trinitarian trinitarian mode of thinking seem to take shape would entail writing a history of ancient Israelite spirituality. And a proper historiographic validation of such a proposed history would entail going well beyond the biblical narrative as such. The best I can do here is the least—to point at some specific modes of perception. I will leave aside an articulation of the reasons as to why and where

¹⁹Of the authors who have seriously looked at the Old Testament as a locus of trinitarian experience, I have found Bruno Forte particularly significant: *Trinità come storia. Saggio sul Dio cristiano* (Milan: San Paolo, 1997) (1st edition 1985; Eng. trans. *The Trinity as History. Saga of the Christian God* [New York: Alba House, 1989]), esp. ch. 2.2.a. For a recent review of various Old Testament themes pertaining to the Trinity, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity. Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), esp. 4–7, 8–10. None of these themes, however, is in line with the emphasis I am placing here on the psychological impact of a perceived reality. At the opposite end, one can find a singularly obtuse reading of Christian trinitarian spirituality in Harold Bloom, *Jesus and Yahweh: the Names Divine* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).

these apprehensions can be understood as facts, can be located on a temporal sequence, can be, in other words, seen as properly historical—and not because I feel it cannot be done.²⁰ I will only briefly describe the varying perceptual ranges of the way in which the *particularity* of God is apprehended (see above, 1.5), through varying manifestations that emerge in time as alternative modes of a single, coherent attitude of waiting. Whether such a typological seriation²¹ does in fact correspond to a chronological sequence is not important for our present purpose, which is simply to focus on the typology of the pertinent attitudes.

3.3 *The God of Abraham: the particularity of the call*

The first aspect to consider is the *particularity of the call* as attributed to Abraham. The singling out of a particular individual is marked with great significance through a number of relevant details. The call is late in time: Abraham is seen as arising out of a well-established civilization, which has run a long developmental course and which he is called to leave behind. The call is unexpected: there is no preparation for its reception, no cultural humus from which it might be expected to grow of its own accord. The call is asymmetrical: Abraham is low on any scale of greatness, precariously uprooted and on the move. The call is suffered: the profound contradiction inherent in the expected sacrifice of the first in a promised long line of descendants sheds a tragic light on the rapport between the caller and the called. In all respects, the call stands outside normal patterns. Abraham is not, by any means, a typical figure. Far from being a *topos*, he is the most specific representation of the particular. God relates to him as he would to no one else. God depends on Abraham's answer. God waits for him.

²⁰With regard to the patriarchal tradition, for example, I have argued in a number of articles, written primarily from a Mesopotamian point of view, for an essential historical kernel that underlies not only events and individuals, but also, I believe, the ideological innovation embodied in that tradition. The latest of these articles, entitled “Il secondo millennio a.C. nella memoria epica di Giuda e Israele,” was published in *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 3 (2004): 521–544.

²¹“Seriation” is a technical term specific to archaeology: it refers to a procedure whereby the typological arrangement of objects is presumed to reflect a given chronological sequence.

This reciprocal waiting is closely linked with the notion of particularity. Abraham does not wait idly for something generic to happen. He faces a specific promise that he thinks he understands, but which nevertheless has to take shape in its progressive modalities. No sooner does he arrive at a promised destination than the destination itself is called into doubt, the potential loss of his first-born being the most tragic. God is shown as waiting, too: “because *now* I know that you fear God” (Gn 22:12). It is not a question of a generic passing of time. Each waits for something very specific. The particularity of the call expects the particularity of the response. It is the very reciprocal confrontation that proclaims particularity, one that is wholly foreign to the polytheistic mindset where, ironically, the very multitude of “particular” deities betrays an undercurrent of pantheistic amorphousness. They are in fact but generic icons, without the dynamics of personal and truly particular interaction, one which entails waiting with all the attendant connotations of risk and faith.

Beyond the emblematic figure of Abraham, the notion of a particular call emerges as central to the whole biblical ethos. It applies to countless individuals (Moses, David, Jeremiah, and so on), with the coherence of difference. It develops to include the whole social group—uniquely “chosen.” It proclaims a tensional interaction that excludes being taken for granted, and rests instead on the risk of waiting for each other’s response. Abraham’s ascent to the mountain of Moriah (Gn 22:2) tells this in the most dramatic way. It speaks against all staticity: no manifestation of divine grace should ever be seen as something to be owned. Abraham must consider even his son, Isaac, as a dynamic gift, not as a static given. It is against the static Isaacs of his own days that Jesus takes a strong position. Even stones, he claims, can receive a call to sonship (Mt 3:9). Conversely, when biological descent is viewed as mere automatic sonship that lifts the responsibility of consequent dynamic action, then these biological descendants are effectively turned into stones (“If you are children of Abraham, then do the works of Abraham,” Jn 8:39). Everyone, in other words, must be alert to the particularity of his or her call, must be dynamically alive, not passively inert.

3.4 The face of God: the particularity of the confrontation

The call is particular in the specific sense that it addresses a multitude of diverseness, while retaining the profound coherence of

oneness. And it evokes responses that are just as particular, all the more so as they often emerge out of unexpected dimensions of harshness and suffering. Emblematic in this respect is Jacob's fight, at Peni'el, with an unknown man who in the end is obliquely identified as God (Gn 32:24–32, see Hos 12:3–4). It is the nature of the confrontation that is of interest in our context. Within Jacob's loneliness a human figure appears who, without a stated cause or argument, wrestles with him. It is a protracted struggle, in which Jacob's endurance ("until daybreak" and "I will not let you go") emerges as a signal virtue. He remains himself, without yielding (the unknown man "cannot prevail"), yet, it seems, without arrogance ("unless you bless me"). There is no glorious epiphany. It is as if the "adversary" were long since known—and yet perennially unknown, to be rediscovered each time. The episode as related leads to the specificity of a greater definition: Jacob's disjointed hip results in a permanent limp; his name is changed to embody the merit of confrontation as if for its own sake ("Israel, for you have striven with God and humans"); the confronter's face emerges as the supreme referent ("for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved"); but his name remains unsaid ("Why such a question—that you should ask my name!").

The contrast between revealing the face and hiding the name is significant. The stress is on the priority of confrontation over representation. The face can be seen only in real time, while the interlocutors are present to each other. It cannot be appropriated, except through memory. Its primary reality lives in the direct encounter. A name, on the other hand, is intrinsically a referential representation. It is based on a one-to-one correspondence. It is, in other words, a univocal signpost, wherein a segment of reality is grafted onto a segment of expression that retains its referential consistency whether or not the referent is physically in view. (Hence the great importance of onomastics in both the biblical and the Syro-Mesopotamian world.) In the Peni'el episode, confrontation is privileged to the exclusion of referentiality. The significance is underscored by the fact that the unnamed presence not only clings to the mystery of his own unreferentiality, but also alters the referential dimension of Jacob—whose name is changed. An unexpected depth of insight can be seen in this stark contrast of the unnamed²² claiming

²²Note the contrast with Mesopotamia. As a result partly of syncretism, and partly

to impose a new name. Far from being denied, the value of the name is heightened. It is rooted in the actual presence.

In that it signals the primacy of presence, without devaluing referentiality, the episode signals the primacy of life—and of mystery. Countless are the other episodes where a face to face confrontation defines, in the Old Testament, the human experience of God—from Adam to Moses, from David to Elijah, and, applied potentially to each member of the community, in the Psalms or in the Wisdom texts. Everywhere, a lived and suffered confrontation is at the core of religious experience. Paradoxically, and all the more dramatically, one comes face to face with a god whose face one cannot see, following a dynamic that is set up as emblematic in the primordial episode in Genesis. There, it is the humans who escape from a physically perceptible presence (Gn 3:8), and as a result an impenetrable barrier is set up to keep them from the easy access they had enjoyed (Gn 3:24). But this boundary does not annul the need for some access in whatever form. If anything, it reinforces it, as is powerfully expressed in a psalm: “O God, you are my God, I search for you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you, in a land of drought and thirst, without water” (Ps 63:2). As if referring to the situation described in Genesis, with an effort to reverse the effects deriving from the new barrier, the psalms plead: “Do not hide your face from me” (Ps 27:9; 144:7).

The later attitude in Judaism vis-à-vis the divine name (it could no longer be uttered, and could only be written in its consonantal skeleton YHWH; see above, 2.7), and the correlative development of the notion of *shekinah* (“dwelling” in the sense of “presence”) show a profound coherence with the earlier biblical situation I have briefly described. It could easily develop into a

of the concern not to omit unwittingly any “portion” of the divine referent, the names of God are multiplied, to the point that, for instance, the last tablet of the *Enuma Elish* is devoted almost entirely to the detailed exposition of fifty names of Marduk. It is an attempt to proclaim the cumulative notion of the absolute on the one hand, and to merge at the same time its portions into a single intellectual construct. Analogously, the “unknown god” to whom an altar is dedicated in Athens (Acts 17:23) is not a signpost of mystery; rather it reflects the intent of the Athenians not to forget any fragment of the divine world, even one so possibly minute or remote as to escape attention. Paul interprets this attitude in a positive (and possibly ironic) way as being indicative of great religiosity (or superstition: Acts 17:22).

mannerism, where the skeleton (the “Tetragrammaton”), which was supposed to deflect attention from the referent (the name) and direct it to the referenced (the present and living God), becomes instead itself the referenced, the center of attention. It is at this point in time, and in this milieu, that the Annunciation takes place, when, suddenly, the confrontation with the face of God acquires a whole new dimension. The search had been for a face unpredictable except, perhaps, for the firm expectation that it would be far from amorphous. The attitude of the search, passionate, insistent, had in fact stressed the particularity of the search’s target. And in the apprehension of this particularity of the unknown face lay the presentiment that the face may indeed be endowed with particularity within itself—that the face may be that of the trinitarian absolute.

*3.5 The Torah as logos:
the particularity of the ordered system*

What we normally translate as “law” can be seen in a more properly metaphysical light if we consider the profound unity between being and goodness and between being and knowledge. Outwardly, the law is a conglomerate of ordinances. But, by virtue of being anchored in the creative will of God, it is at the same time the matrix of reality. The profound difference from the Mesopotamian notion of fate helps to understand its nature. There is no Torah in Mesopotamia because fate does not will it—in fact, fate does not will anything, but is rather itself the sum total of what happens and can ever happen. Interestingly, the basic moral precepts outlined in the Bible are found almost verbatim in Mesopotamia, and even in the New Testament there are important, almost literal, echoes.²³ The real difference is in their foundational origin. In the Bible they derive from, and are founded on, the explicit will of a creator God who posits the rules not to coerce a pre-existing reality, but to establish reality itself with its particular teleological nature. In other words, the rule is the same as both the creation and the goal.

²³I have outlined in particular the correlation to the Decalogue and to the Beatitudes in my article “Ethics and Piety in the Ancient Near East,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson (New York: Scribner, 1995), vol. 3, 1685–1696.

For our current argument, it is the particularity of the systemic order of reality that is of interest. God is so enmeshed in creation that he establishes the very last detail of finality, for which the Torah serves as though it were a blueprint. But it is a living blueprint, as it were, for there is a constant correlation between it and the “living God” who has posited it—or, rather, constantly *posits* it, through a mysterious match between the eternal and the temporal present. The Torah is not a fossil, but a living organism, identical with the personal will from which it issues forth and which nurtures those for whom it is meant:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. I called them—but they went from me, sacrificing to the Baals, offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. As a man would do, I led them with supporting straps, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos 11:1–4)

To this living Torah, humans must relate with the adherence of a lived response—prophetically:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will give [to be] within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your body and I will give you a heart of flesh. Yes, *my* spirit I will give [to be] within you, and I will make it so that you walk in the line of my willed decisions and I will make it so that you adhere to my particular determinations. (Ez 36:26–27)

The live interaction between God as the *constitutive* order and humans as the *constituted* order of reality presents us with the utmost degree of particularity: the most minute element of order is willed because it is so established. The Torah is the logos because it is both the rationale of being and the rationale of its adherence to its foundational point of origin, in every single manifestation of its nature. Hence it is that the Torah is a presentiment of the Logos. What would otherwise be a mere set of rules is transcended into a living principle, one that articulates the totality of details in their most minute particularity.

Two additional remarks are pertinent here. The first concerns the objectification of the divine grand order of things on stone tablets. Diverging details are given about the giving of the law.

First, “the law and the injunction” (Ex 24:12) are written by God’s own finger (Ex 31:18; 32:16), so that the tablets can be qualified as the “tablets of the testimony” (Ex 31:18), because they give witness to God’s direct involvement. Then, after the first tablets are shattered by Moses, God asks him to cut a second set of “two tablets of stone like the first ones” (Ex 34:1) saying that he, Yahweh, will “inscribe on them the words that were on the first tablets” (Ex 34:1). In the end, though, it is Moses who inscribes the tablets with “the words of the covenant—ten words” (Ex 34:28). While reminiscent, on the surface, of the Mesopotamian “tablet of destinies,”²⁴ the differences are more striking than the similarities. The Exodus tablets are written *by* a particular agent (they do not exist as primordial entities with a self-endowed power); they are written *for* a specific purpose (their use by the people with whom Yahweh establishes a covenant); their breakage causes no particular commotion (in fact, they come eventually to be reproduced by a lesser agent); the very fact of reproducibility entails that their eventual total loss represents no special metaphysical problem. In other words, the objectification in the shape of physical tablets is ultimately subordinated to the overriding control of divine will.

The second remark pertains to the reflections about canon law as developed by Eugenio Corecco.²⁵ Like the legislative component of the Torah, canon law is a codification system that spells out a detailed framework within which human relations are regulated. If mechanically objectified, both become the unbearable yoke about which Jesus speaks when he argues against intellectuals (scribes) and outwardly religious people (pharisees) who arrogate to themselves Mosaic authority (“scribes and pharisees sit on the chair of Moses,” Mt 23:2) and “tie and place on people’s shoulders heavy

²⁴See my article, “The Trinity in a Mesopotamian Perspective,” presented at a conference on “The Historical-Critical Method and Scripture, the Soul of Theology,” held at Mount Saint Mary Seminary in Emmitsburg 23 June 2006, forthcoming in a volume edited by Robert D. Miller.

²⁵See especially *The Theology of Canon Law. A Methodological Question* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1992). The book develops the notion of the “unity of law” as a paradox that is rooted in both love and institution, freedom and limitation, because “canonical discipline guarantees the unity of the symbols of faith, of the Sacraments, of the preaching of the Word, of the ecclesial constitution” (3); in fact, it ultimately guarantees “fidelity to communion” (ibid.) and assumes “salvific worth” (77).

and oppressive burdens” (Mt 23:4). And yet, for this same Jesus, even the smallest stroke of a letter in the Law’s written embodiment must command our fullest attention (“until heaven and earth go by, not one iota, not one small serif in a letter will go by” Mt 5:18). What gives life to the law is the inherent proclamation that God is directly involved in the particularity of time and space, of human life in its unfolding. Poetry offers a good parallel: its inner life is not in the strictures of meter, and yet meter is self-declared the moment the poet begins to channel feelings through the medium of particular words. Similarly, canon law, like the Torah, can be seen as God’s poetry in articulating the particular details of the finite as it relates to the un-hemmed dimension of the absolute. That is why seemingly absurd regulations that seem to choke individual freedom can be received instead as a spiritual sign of an explosive divine grace.

*3.6 The covenant:
the particularity of the relationship*

It seems rather contradictory that a most universal notion of the absolute, as it emerges from the Old Testament, should be tied to a social group of such a persistent and consistent marginal provincialism as ancient Israel. The unique religious flowering that characterizes it had absolutely no influence on the broader course of civilization, not until its prophetic period came to an end and Christianity claimed to pick up and bear the torch of that deeper prophetic dimension. It is important to stress that the self-perception of ancient Israel shows little evidence of any delusion of grandeur in the political or cultural sphere. Their epic memory clings to an inglorious nomadic past;²⁶ their cultic reenactment eternalizes an early condition of slavery; their greatest political achievement is but

²⁶My understanding of the record is that the text of Genesis contains a relatively ancient epic memory of an even more ancient, real past (see my “Ethics and Piety in the Ancient Near East”). If one accepts the opposite prevailing view—namely, that it was instead a learned invention of the exilic period—it is even more striking that these savants, uprooted from their homeland for which they professed great nostalgia (Ps 137:1–6) and immersed into a glittering urban culture in which they eventually prospered to the point that the nostalgia became a literary topos, should have picked for a reconstruction of their origins such an unflattering and decidedly non-urban set of themes as the ones found in Genesis.

a minor provincial kingdom; their art and architecture is essentially derivative; their social fabric is torn to shreds when they lose all measure of political integrity. But they proclaim unflinchingly that the God of all-that-they-are-not has chosen to be bound to the very-little-that-they-are. There is never a sense of embarrassment at the curious logic that they embrace, namely that such a lofty deity should be bound by the constraints of so particular, and so particularly humbling, a relationship.

If anything, the logic becomes more self-assured as the reasons for potential scandal increase. Thus the notion of remnant celebrates the poverty of the human base, as if it could drag the absolute into an ever greater situation of finitude. There is an inverted proportion between such poverty and the ever more elevated notion that the God of the small remnant is in fact the one and only universal God: the particularity of this God emerges as all the more stunning because of the insignificance of the human pole in the relationship. The perception grows that he is “faithful” just as his promise seems to wane. He had promised universality to Abraham, and now the death from which Abraham’s son had been spared hovers ominously upon his latter-day children. God is perceived to be attached to an ever slimmer portion of the universe he is supposed to rule. And yet, he is faithful, in the eyes of the remnant, to the covenant he had offered. True, God freely chooses these covenantal bonds, but they are bonds nevertheless. They proclaim a very particular aim in the choice of the terms of his relationship.

These terms could not be more explicit, for they are embedded in a covenant that posits obligations. The seeming contradiction is precisely in the proclamation of limits placed on the absolute. Nor does the fact that these limits are seen as being self-imposed reduce their impact. The notion of covenant is as important for what it tells us about God as for what it tells us about the human recipients of its benefits. It tells us that particularity is built into the very essence of the divine absolute, because of the explicit choices made and the specific consequences that ensue from them. Herein we can see one of the clearest anticipations of the notion of person, as it will be elaborated in the early centuries of Christianity. The absolute is not amorphous—the strictures of the covenantal interaction bring this out sharply. It is as if the reality of the personal dimension were perceived not statically, but as the point of origin of a web of ties, very

explicit and well-defined as to their limits and conditions by virtue of the specificity of the originator of those very ties.

To appreciate properly what this means, it is useful to consider how the notion of covenant reflects another strong contrast with Mesopotamia, all the more so as the two conflicting perceptions address one and the same fundamental human need, that of security. Mesopotamian polytheism seeks security in predictability as a form of control, while biblical monotheism seeks security in trust as a form of surrender. In the former, the divine sphere is discovered through the progressive accretion of knowledge, which is appropriated and remains as such at the disposal of human enterprise. In the latter, the divine person proclaims faithfulness to a commitment, a faithfulness that cannot be grasped and owned, and to which humans are called to adhere even and especially when (un-controllable) events and phenomena contradict, at all appearances, the reliability of the divine signatory. As in other respects, here, too, we can see an important parallel with the modern situation. When science aims to provide the ultimate answer, as if in contrast with religion, it relies on the predictability of laws that entail control. Faith by no means excludes the validity of such laws, but it sees them as applicable only within partial domains of reality. When it comes to the question of ultimate predictability, faith proposes trust in an absolute that is at the same time universal and particular, i.e., capable of affirming, for himself, limits set in a covenantal mold. It is on these limits that the predictability of trust is based. And it must be noted that, in the final analysis, a science as a “universal theory of the universe” relies just as much on trust, trust in the coherence of laws and of the conceptual construct within which such laws are articulated—ultimately, trust in the impersonal.

The profound significance of the notion of covenant is underscored by the solemnity with which the “new covenant” (*kainē diathēkē*) is announced by Jesus when he offers the cup of wine at the last supper: “this is my blood of the covenant” (Mt 26:28 | Mk 14:24), “this cup is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20). In one of the many subtle instances where Jesus acts as the Yahweh of old, we see the originator of the covenant emerge in his full personality and individuality. The awesome echo inherent in the word “covenant” (*bʿrīt* in Hebrew) would not have escaped the addressees of the proclamation, the apostles gathered in the upper room. The newly established covenantal links could not be tied more explicitly and specifically to the originator. It is not only that

the person Jesus emerges as the lord of the covenant, but also that his physical participation remains linked to the covenant beyond, and through, his death. Note the seemingly curious phrasing: “my blood of the covenant” (*to haima mou tes diathēkēs*). The pronominal qualification of the blood (“my blood”) is not in opposition to somebody else’s blood—for there is no other “blood of the covenant.” Rather, the genitive functions as an adjective (“my blood-of-covenant”), and it brings to the fore the personal involvement of the lord of the covenant. It underscores how such an involvement was true of the covenantal mode in the Old “Testament” (i.e., covenant) as well. While there was then no blood shed by Yahweh, the particularity of the involvement was the same.

The dynamism of this covenantal relationship, with all the particularity deriving from the personal, in fact physical, involvement of Jesus, is also the humus that nurtures the eventual apprehension of the Spirit as a trinitarian person. The covenant is always in flux, yet always anchored. And so is the Church. The Old Testament training is in the proposition that God is so particular as to be at the same time the foundation of the covenant (the covenanter) and the energy that sustains and inspires the covenanted. The human trust in the absolute is not of human making. It rather flows *from* the absolute in the first place. That is why the Church, like the covenant, does not immobilize interaction into a frozen construct. It is rather rooted in a spirit who is like wind that blows or fire that sparks. The human acceptance of God-the-spirit allows the interaction with God-the-creator. So the relationship not only originates in, not only is drawn toward, but is also sustained by a particular action of the absolute, in the most personal of modes. Again, it is such an insight that shapes the perceptual background against which the dynamics of God the Trinity unfolds from the Annunciation onwards. The Spirit as the announcer and the Son as the announced bespeak the Father as the originator.

3.7 The word of God: the particularity of the articulation

God expresses himself. What he has to say is embodied in articulate human speech. His “word” emerges more and more sharply, through all the definiteness of human language, as something circumscribed, hence very particular. The “word of God” (*dəbar ha’elohîm*) is the term of comparison used for the counsel given by a

royal advisor (2 Sam 16:23): that is to say, it is a very specific expression, fully articulated not only as to manner of speech, but as to content as well. There is no equivocation, either in the way it is expressed or in the way it is understood.

This definiteness finds its full manifestation especially in the prophetic realm. The prophet's voice gives utterance to His word: it is a "vehicle" that carries in all its specificity what God intends to communicate. Such is the etymological valence of the Hebrew word we translate as "oracle" (*maššā*, from *našā*, "to carry"). We find the full formulation as the title of a prophetic book: "vehicle of the word of Yahweh" (*maššā d'əbar YHWH*), i.e., "oracle to Israel at the hand of Malachi" (Mal 1:1). In the many other occurrences of the word *maššā*, the qualification "word of Yahweh" is missing, and may be understood as a systemic deletion (somewhat like *šeqel*, "weight," omits the specific mention of "silver," which is implied when the term refers to a unit of payment). But, if deleted, we may assume that "word of God" is the operative element in all cases, even when missing.

At any rate, God speaks a specific word to which humans and the whole of creation must pay close attention: "Listen, heavens, and open the ears, earth—for Yahweh speaks" (Is 1:2). And what follows in Isaiah are specific "words," specifically attributed to Yahweh as the speaker. This is the overriding sense of the Old Testament. The "word of God" is not just an anonymous "Word" (however much with a capital W) seen as a generic and inarticulate creative force. It is in fact articulate speech, a discourse where specific "words" bring out the full particularity of the speaker and of his will. Herein, once more, lies the great difference vis-à-vis polytheism as in Mesopotamia—where the "word" of a given god (such as Marduk in the *Enuma Elish*, 4:15-27) refers not so much to a communicative linguistic utterance, as to a nod that results in a given effect.

The built-in antinomy between the absolute and the particular is the dimension that matters to us here. Yahweh's word is reductive because it communicates at a level that is truly human. It is reductive in the specific sense that it encapsulates the divine within a frame of reference that is culturally bound and definable. The Word is made word, the universal translates to the particular, the absolute to the relative. This unique property, which allows the functional bracketing of two dimensions that cannot be bracketed as to their substance, is the genius of ancient Israel. And it is this

perceptual openness that makes it possible, at the Annunciation, for the Logos to be accepted as history.

3.8 *The prophetic “I”: the particularity of the address*

The prophet’s involvement in communicating the specific divine “words” goes well beyond serving as a mere vehicle (*maṣṣā*), as a mouthpiece. In a way, it almost seems as though the prophet gives voice to Yahweh’s shedding blood in the Old Testament as well. His “blood of the covenant” (anticipating Jesus’, see above, 3.6) is the intense degree of passion with which he is perceived to address those who are supposed to listen, even (in fact, especially) when they do not. God speaks—unpredictably, unexpectedly, unimaginably. And God bears the hurt of his word being unreciprocated. The dramatic tension built into this profound antinomy shows, at its most apparent, the poignancy of divine particularity. For Yahweh’s particularity emerges not only in what he posits or what he does—but also in how he personally acts, in how he suffers for the ensuing consequences. Let us touch briefly on three salient aspects of this dynamics.

God speaks in the first person when addressing, singly, specific individuals in a variety of different situations (Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Hosea, etc.). The episode of Samuel is particularly telling: the young boy hears physically a voice in the night, and through inexperience cannot identify the speaker. But it is not only to individuals that God speaks in the first person. Through the intermediary of the prophets, he speaks to the community as well. Thus, through Hosea (2:21): “I will pay the final bride price for you—I will do so through righteousness and justice, through kindness and through mercy.” The prophetic message broadcasts the mystical insight of the individual, thereby making it, as it were, a mystical experience on a broad social scale. This is one of the sharpest contrasts with the polytheistic religious reality, such as the Mesopotamian, where such a first-person address on the part of any of the gods is hardly ever documented. It is also in contrast, one might note, with the wisdom tradition within the Bible itself: there God is predicated essentially in the third person, through a reflection that speaks more *about* him rather than *qua* himself.

The second aspect is that the poignancy of the personal involvement is all the more striking because the first person is used

not only as a form of address but also to externalize divine feelings. It is in fact a strong lyrical component of the biblical text that it should be giving voice to the divine urge to share emotions. These come to the fore with special intensity when they relate to love, and to the hurt of love unrequited. “What shall I do with you, Ephraim? What shall I do with you, Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early” (Hos 6:4). The emphatic, emotional participation of the divine “I” is without parallel in the ancient Near East. However less anthropomorphic Yahweh may seem on the superficial level of figurative imaging, the more “human” he emerges as to the deeper reaches of the psychological realm.

Finally, Yahweh’s “I” is seen in even sharper focus through the “I” of Jesus. In subtle but clear ways, Jesus projects the same persona that Yahweh did in the Old Testament.²⁷ The prophetic “I” reaches its culmination because Jesus does not present himself as the mouthpiece of Yahweh, but rather speaks altogether in the first person: “As an absolute truth I say to you that before the coming into existence of Abraham, I am” (Jn 8:58). In retrospect, this helps to understand the Old Testament. The prophetic mouthpiece was not a poetic nicety. Yahweh’s passionate involvement had to find a real way out of the divine beyond. Like the magma of a volcano, it had to explode through the cracks of human expression and so become incultured. The supreme explosion was to be the infleshing in Jesus. The voice is now personified. The Logos himself *is* the voice, he is the “I” who speaks even through merely being.

The reason I believe this has a bearing on my search for a pre-trinitarian trinitarian apprehension is the sharpness of the polarity that we see emerge within the absolute (see already above, 1.5). By relating emotionally, God places himself on the same level as the recipient of his emotions. We see true inter-action develop, and not a benign condescending to an inferior counterpart. And yet—God remains absolute, not fragmented into his own emotions. That is the wonder of the Old Testament apprehension: God’s particularity explodes incultured (if not yet infleshed) in the most real of human dialogues, and yet God remains above and beyond the culture that might otherwise seem to imprison him. God is an agent within

²⁷See the insightful comments of J. Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus. An Intermillennial Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), especially 66–74.

culture, and yet he acts wholly beyond it. Thus there is an apprehension of personal definition within the divine reality. Personal interaction *ad extra* is an essential aspect of Yahweh, of such an overriding intensity as to prepare human sensitivity for what, through Jesus, will come to be known as personal interaction *ad intra*.

One might say that the figures of the polytheistic pantheon, the gods and the goddesses, are also endowed with “personality.” And that is true, inasmuch as they appear as lively protagonists of narratives rich with character. But there is never any recognition, let alone any exclusive emphasis, on the absoluteness of the divine agent. They are always multiple actors on the same stage, interacting and limiting each other, with no claim whatsoever to absoluteness. Fate on the other hand, which might appear to claim such absoluteness, never does project a personality, never does achieve the stature of a person. “It” does not speak in the first person—in the specific sense of the passionate, prophetic “I” that is so deeply characteristic of the Old Testament God. Truly, Fate never feels and expresses feelings as a “who,” but only acts impersonally as a “which.”

3.9 *The living God: particularity as self-awareness*

Perhaps the most poignant emergence of a trinitarian dimension is the notion of the “living God” that punctuates different strands of the Old Testament. For it goes to the epicenter of divine self-awareness in ways that the polytheistic conception never could fathom. The predication of God’s life is not so much in contrast with a state of death to be predicated of the “other” gods as it is in contrast with their effective immobility. God is felt to be alive because in him we face divine self-consciousness: whatever mystery may shade the absolute from *our* awareness, we stand reassured that the absolute is not a mystery for himself. God is awake to his own mystery.

The theme of wakefulness is a telling one because of the contrast it proposes with the Mesopotamian perception. When Psalm 121 describes the watchfulness of Yahweh (“your guardian will not fall asleep, indeed, the guardian of Israel will not grow drowsy to the point of falling asleep,” 3–4), the obvious echo for any listener familiar with Mesopotamian religious lore is from Atram-hasis or Anzu: there, the supreme god, Enlil, does grow drowsy to the point

of falling asleep, and the whole order of things is subverted in the process. Sleep is as much a counterpart of self-consciousness as death is. God's sleep, his tumbling into unawareness, causes the collapse of, we might say, all metaphysical regularity. By contrast, the living God is a god awake, awake in the first place to himself as the foundation of all being.

In this Old Testament perception we witness the Absolute bending over onto himself, as it were. To the outside, God being awake, God being alive matters because humans can rest assured that he will not neglect them, that (more broadly) the cosmic order will not be undermined. But the notion of the living God prefigures, at the same time, the *ad intra* dynamics of God's very life. It is an explicit denial of genericity in the divine absolute, and a proclamation instead of the supreme particularity of the person as a fulcrum of self-awareness.

This perception comes to a culmination with Jesus, through a double paradox. Jesus is the living God in the most concrete way: for in him we touch, physically, the Logos (see above, 2.4). And yet—he sleeps, he dies.

After a tiring day, he falls asleep, on a cushion, in the back of the boat. A great storm arises, and his disciples, experienced sailors, are afraid of capsizing and drowning. They turn to Jesus, asleep, for help: “They woke him up saying: Lord, save [us]! We are perishing!” (Mt 8:25); “They woke him up saying: Chief, chief, we are perishing!” (Lk 8:24); “They wake him up and say to him: Teacher, it doesn't matter to you whether we perish?” (Mk 4:38). Jesus, awakened, “reproaches” (*epetimēsen*) the wind and the sea. But he also rebukes the apostles for their lack of faith (Mk 4:40 | Mt 8:25 | Lk 8:26). This second reproach seems curious at first: after all, the apostles had turned to him precisely because they expected him to be able to save them. So why does he accuse them of being lacking in both faith and courage? (Courage appears only in Matthew and Mark—and remember, they were more experienced sailors than Jesus was.) Should they have let the boat capsize? Should they not have awakened the sleeping Jesus? What we may be witnessing here is a moment in the counterpoint training whereby the apostles slowly gain an insight into what came to be known as the dual nature of Jesus. Jesus asleep is God awake. On the one hand, he is very tired, and so truly and deeply asleep that not even the noise of the storm can wake him up. The apostles know him as thoroughly human and fear that he, along with the rest of them, will

be engulfed in death-threatening waters if the boat capsizes. Yet on some level they know that he belongs to some untold beyond: in Mark's formulation, "doesn't it matter to you" suggests they know he is in some ways above and beyond sleep. Jesus' disappointment is clearly not that they are disturbing his sleep. Rather, it is that they do not sufficiently set store in that instinctive knowledge; that they should fear he may not exercise the power they perceive he has over wind and water, whether asleep or awake; that the apparent inaction, not the sleep as such, should perturb them.

There is, in this episode, a subtle anticipation of the apostles' perception of his death. While asleep, Jesus retained his unique connection with the Father. The apostles should have known. Just so, while dead, just as absolutely and truly so as when he had been asleep, Jesus remains "the one whose existence is in function of the womb of the Father" (Jn 1:18, see above, 2.4). The apostles should know. Jesus' disappointment on the way to Emmaus (Lk 24:25) is not unlike that during the storm on the lake.

Jesus remains the living God while asleep, while dead. This is well in line with the Old Testament perception. The "guardian of Israel" does not sleep, does not die, even when his great silence and distance seem to suggest so. Divine self-consciousness transcends all such appearances. God is aware of himself—and that will lay to rest any and all fears humans may nurture in their "timidity" (as Jesus says of the apostles on the lake, Mt 8:26 | Mk 4:40).

3.10 The articulation of the absolute

The Old Testament perception of particularity within the divine sphere is intrinsically trinitarian, I submit, because it consistently and steadfastly faces a major paradox—the presence of articulation within an absolute who is, at the same time, wholly above any split within his deepest reality. In other words, the Old Testament never flinches from upholding the co-presence of a fully articulated particularity on the one hand and, on the other, of a oneness that can never be ripped apart. This is in the manner not of a theoretical statement, but of a coherently developing experiential awareness.

The contrast with polytheism helps us to elucidate the significance of the monotheistic apprehension. On the surface, it would appear that the presence of many divine beings entails a real

articulation within the divine sphere, and that by contrast the obsessive emphasis on a single deity does not. On the contrary. The gods and goddesses effectively limit each other. They are, in other words, neither singly nor collectively, proper embodiments of the absolute. There is articulation, indeed. But an articulation of relatives. The wonder of the monotheistic position is that articulation is inscribed within the very heart of the absolute, who is never relativized as a result of it.

It should be noted that in this, as in many other respects, polytheism in no way differs from pantheism. In both, it is the sum total of the particulars, the bracketing or bridging of the articulation, that constitutes the essence of the absolute. In polytheism the accent is on the articulated fragments, while in pantheism it is on the very phenomenon of articulation. Both are true to their name—"poly-" referring to the segmented multitude of constituents, "pan-" referring to the re-composition of the same into an overall totality. But, in both, the articulated many are the starting, and ending, target of attention. In monotheism, on the other hand, the absolute is the starting, and ending, point. Transcending fragmentation, the absolute is nevertheless articulated.

It is the sensitivity for this reality that is proposed and steadfastly maintained in the Old Testament, even as the sensitivity develops in its details over the centuries. I have used the term "particularity" to refer to such a wholly idiosyncratic trait: distinctiveness within an absolute who transcends definition, numeration (of one) where there is no numerability, articulation without fragmentation. All of this, in turn, evokes a trinitarian dimension. Not, clearly, in the specific manner intimated by Jesus and then made explicit and theoretically defined by later, abstract theological reflection. The trinitarian aspect of Abraham's call, I suggest, lies in his apprehending an inner dynamics within divine reality that safeguards absoluteness while proclaiming particularity. One simple way to put this is to consider the following juxtaposition. A Plato, listening to Jesus speaking about the Father and the Spirit, would come up with abstract concepts that give a sense of intellectual grasp and ownership (as it well may have happened along the way to the concept of "Trinity," which we may sometimes think we do "own"). There would be here no waiting for the particulars to meet (that is, the human and the divine particulars); there would be no Advent; there would be no Incarnation. On the other hand, an Abraham (and of course a Mary or a Joseph) reflecting on the same

issue would look at Jesus and realize with wonder that one would not call Jesus “Father,” nor the Father “Jesus,” and that one is called to adore each without numbering either. Here there would indeed be an Advent that leads to the eventual encounter of the particulars, to a suture of the waiting, to the Incarnation—because the divine particular does indeed come.

4. *Perception and coherence*

Against the backdrop of continuity, Pentecost had sealed the new beginning that was first set in motion by the Annunciation. The bracketing of the time span between the conception of Jesus and what is rightly perceived as the conception of the Church sets off that specific moment in history when, through the human Jesus, humans come in touch with the *Logos*—and the Trinity. Like all watersheds, the peak symbolizes the coherence of the slopes. It is on this coherence that we want to focus now, linking the Old Testament perception with that of the Christian church.

4.1 *Models of early Christian experience*

The *pleroma* perception (see above, 2.10) caused the apostles to bracket two contrasting experiences: they had known a physical Jesus, and they came to know now, after the Resurrection, a Jesus still physically perceivable, but elusively so, until the Ascension robbed them of even this elusive new state of being. I have stressed (2.12) how, before Pentecost, it was considered important to link apostleship with the personal acquaintance of the pre-Paschal, physical Jesus: the group of men out of whom Matthias was chosen (Acts 1:15–26) had gone together through the growing pains of the confrontation with the temporally perceivable humanity of Jesus. Matthias, like the others, had come slowly to accept Jesus as belonging to the two spheres, human and divine. His apprehension of Jesus’ trinitarian mode of life had gone through stages marked by the progressive self-revelation of Jesus.

When Stephen is chosen along with six others (Acts 6:5), the aspect of historical continuity plays no role: it is very likely that the seven had indeed known and followed Jesus during his ministry, but not necessarily intimately nor “from the baptism of John” (Acts

1:22), as had been the requirement for Matthias. At any rate, the very mode of election sets the seven at one remove from Matthias. Theirs is clearly a post-Pentecostal election. What this means for my line of argument is that it signals a change in the perception of Jesus as the Logos. The emphasis is now more on the transposed mode of being, on the permanent Transfiguration, as it were. For the apostles (in fact, for just three among them) the Transfiguration had been a single and exceptional event, and their primary mode of acquaintance with Jesus had been the day-to-day normal human contact. Stephen's vision (Acts 7:55f), which led to his execution, represents the full crystallization of this new perception: the permanent Transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus remains himself, and yet he is incomprehensibly (blasphemously, for his accusers) absorbed within the *shekinah*. He is not "the" *shekinah*: this is the deeply trinitarian aspect of Stephen's perception. Jesus' "standing at the right side of God" conveys a sense of the dynamics of what the apostles had already seen develop in their human interaction with Jesus the "son-of-man."

Paul may well have known Jesus from a distance, but clearly not as a disciple. He had not grown slowly to see his other dimension, or rather: he had grown to see and so well appreciate his *claim* to this other dimension that, aligning himself with the Caiaphas perception (see above, 2.7), he became a committed activist against the followers of Jesus after his death. Thrown to the ground by a sudden burst of light, he hears a voice that articulates a reproach: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Notice that he does not see anyone, he only hears, and seeks to identify who had spoken: "Who are you, sir?" (Acts 9:3–5). Saul had been seeking to eradicate what he perceived to be a blasphemy: the claim of Jesus that had led to the condemnation by Caiaphas—the claim of Stephen, whose punishment Saul had personally witnessed. They were explicitly trinitarian claims. Now, on the road to Damascus, Saul does not see Jesus "standing at the right side of God" (Acts 7:55), as Stephen had. But the voice out of the light-borne darkness speaks to the same trinitarian reality as the vision: "I am Jesus whom you persecute" (Acts 9:5). The flashback in Saul's mind was to Stephen's words explaining his vision: Jesus "standing at the right side of God." It is as if Saul could see in his darkness through the brightness attested to by Stephen. The trinitarian claim Saul had rejected now claims in turn Saul's full attention—and assent. The subsequent encounter with Ananias brings this out ever more explicitly: "May you receive

the fullness of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17). Saul has no hesitation. “Immediately,” he goes out to proclaim that “Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). The “blasphemy,” which now Saul fully embraces, is not in seeing or hearing Jesus as one would a ghost beckoning from a “human” afterlife. The “blasphemy” is in recognizing that the afterlife to which Jesus belongs is not human, but properly and fully divine. The “blasphemy” is in accepting the profound trinitarian implications of Jesus’ being in the *shekinah*.

Yet another paradigm of the early Christian experience is in the Gospel of John, accepting that the writer is the same as the first (in time) of the apostles to follow Jesus (Jn 1:35–39). We see there a remarkable blending of vivid and heartfelt harking back to an experienced physical reality and, at the same time, a reflection about the deeper impact and nature of that reality. While the synoptics are still extremely close to the physical reality, and while Paul is overwhelmed by the spiritual dimension of the post-Pentecostal Jesus, John embraces both, in ways that only his experience could have made possible. John fully re-lives his early experience in the light of the post-Pentecostal ethos. And so the expression of his trinitarian perception is at once soaked with history (the Logos for him was the Jesus he had seen and touched) and transfigured in post-history (that physically real Jesus is indeed the Logos). Mary’s perception would have been even sharper than John’s, spanning a fuller arc of time, from the Annunciation to Pentecost. But she was not called to articulate it in words—unless, as tradition aptly proposes, she influenced John’s own perception.

4.2 *The Christian trinitarian ethos*

After the time of those who knew Jesus “in his days-of-flesh” (Heb 5:7), comes the experiential confrontation with the Trinity of those who did not so know him—including us. I have suggested that there is a deep, if often implicit, trinitarian dimension to the Christian apprehension of the divine, and that such apprehension is rooted in the Old Testament experience, with special regard to the notion of particularity (which is as far as I can take the present argument). Let us consider how this notion manifests itself in the mental and attitudinal template of the average Christian, in the Christian ethos, if you will. We will do this briefly from the

perspective of the Eucharist and of grace, focusing also on the Christian (and specifically, the Catholic) attitude toward the saints.

The Eucharist has never been known to be conceived as the locus where a saint, instead of Jesus, may be found. However one may intellectually construe the doctrine of transubstantiation, and however one may devotionally approach the exposed host, no one who ever bothered to relate to the Eucharist could ever see in it any other sacramental presence but that proclaimed at the Last Supper. It can safely be assumed, in other words, that no one who ever approaches the Eucharist with the intention of partaking physically of a hidden presence does ever think that this hidden presence may have been that of a saint. Nor does anyone, we may further assume, ever presume to see in the Eucharist either the Father or the Holy Spirit. In other words, the fundamental Christian perception, however unreflecting or even unconscious it may be, is based on clear distinctions that unhesitatingly affirm the particularity of Jesus, if and when the question itself is posed. The trinitarian dimension of Jesus comes to the fore by virtue of the very fact that, when juxtaposed to alternatives, his singular claim to divine personhood emerges without shadows. The most average of Christians shares, then, in the Marian perception we have outlined above (2.2).

Conversely, it is an important dimension of sacramental reality that every sacrament addresses a person in his or her very specific particularity. Even in the case of celebrations with large masses of people, the sacramental encounter is always at the most personal level. This is most emphatically made evident when large crowds receive Communion. It remains an event that always concerns the individual person, regardless of logistical difficulties and long timeframes. It is not in the nature of this, or any other sacrament, to be transmogrified into an amorphous mass equivalent, where the particularity of the encounter becomes blurred. The particularity of the recipient remains central at all times.

Similarly, a Christian's posture vis-à-vis God's intervention in his or her own personal history is intrinsically awake to the unique singularity of the divine interlocutor. It is called "grace." Grace is God's interaction with history writ large and, at the same time, writ small, involving our own individual lives. It is the locus where we face the absolute each moment he touches us. And it is precisely in the experience of each such moment of grace that we relate to God trinitarily, i.e., in the specificity of God's answer to our desire. Even the dimmest Christian perception of the role of Jesus in one's

own personal life construes grace as his friendship—because we relate to him (Jesus, not the Father) as the brother in whom we are ingraced and through whom the Father accepts us as sons in turn. We will just as specifically construe grace as the Father’s (not Jesus’) bending down to touch and lift us to his level of transcendence. And we will construe grace as the Spirit’s enabling us from within, inspiring us with the inner disposition actually to relate to the absolute.

Nor will any of these interactions ever be possibly attributed to any of the saints. While superficial onlookers may assume that the saints usurp the status proper to God, some simple observations should disabuse them of that notion. Thus, there can never be the feeling that the saints are the very source of grace. For it is an abiding Christian sentiment that we live by the grace of God, and neither in speech nor in thought could one ever articulate the notion that we live, say, by the grace of Mary or any other created being. This emerges all the more clearly if we consider the real dimension of intercession. The saints do intercede for us; in fact we all intercede for each other. But intercession does not happen extrinsically. We do not intercede from outside, but from within the Trinity. It is by virtue of the Spirit’s enabling us actually to share in God’s life, i.e., in the Trinity, that our intercession comes to be integrated, from within, with God’s own desire. It is because we are divinized (as a longstanding tradition teaches us) that our intercession itself becomes a divine action. Herein lies a profound contrast between the Catholic and the Protestant positions. We are, in the Catholic view of redemption, ontically integrated into God’s own life, not just legally renamed. We are truly redeemed, regenerated, not just redefined. Thus intercession is not an imposition on the will of God from the outside, but rather a rising to where we desire the desire of God. Clearly, the converse will never enter a Christian’s mind: one could never imagine God as interceding. It can never be that the boundaries become blurred. Particularity remains, in this perspective as well, a hallmark of the trinitarian apprehension.

4.3 *Trinitarian vs. triadic*

It appears, then, that particularity is not only a distinctive trait of the Old Testament catechumenate, it is also a center-post of the Christian ethos. The Old Testament recognition of a very

specific particularity exhibited by the absolute in his relationship to the finite human world provides, I suggest, a perceptual backdrop for the Annunciation and all that developed in its wake. The disclosure of a trinitarian reality was not like the appearance of an alien being from outer space. It was more like a flower known from its bud. It also teaches us to view the very term “Trinity” in a different light. The emphasis need not be on the triadic aspect of the concept, fundamental and real though that aspect is. The New Testament disclosure does not, in fact, focus on it—which is why the term “Trinity” is not found there. It rather focuses on the presence of particularity, of articulation, within an absolute who nevertheless remains truly absolute. Hence when we speak of a “trinitarian” dimension we do not necessarily refer to the triadic aspect of the divine reality: Jesus’ disclosure entails that indeed there is no fourth person, or whatever other “numeric” dimension we might imagine. But this is revealed as a fact, not explained as deriving from the essence of divine life. In other words, the triadic dimension is not an inescapable derivation of the trinitarian dimension, however central to the mystery it is. “Trinitarian” refers not so much to a numeric triad, but more broadly to the essential quality of particularity and articulation (alongside oneness and relatability) within the divine reality.

In this light, Rahner’s concern,²⁸ that doing away with the concept of Trinity would not in fact impact many a Christian, may not exactly hit the mark. Christians, however little sophistication or reflection they may bring to their faith, do have an intrinsic bent toward the “trinitarian” dimension of the divine in the sense just stated, i.e., awareness of divine particularity. What is profoundly trinitarian in the Christian experience, and what is adumbrated already in the Old Testament, is the adeptness to accept the narrowing of the frame of reference of the absolute, without collapsing it. This is a proper trinitarian apprehension. The import of the triadic dimension, in and of itself, may instead become a stumbling block. One tends to focus on it when speaking of, rather than confronting, the Trinity. Of course it is the three persons we face in the mystery. But an excessive emphasis on the triadic, as if the divine persons were truly numerable, may in the end lead us away from the mystery of an articulated oneness.

²⁸K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

An important theological contribution along these lines is the concept of person, which originated and developed precisely as human thought (beginning with Augustine) grappled with categories suitable to refer to the mystery as perceived. That to this day even the most unreflecting Christian attitude would relate to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as persons, not as individuals, is indicative of the deep awareness for the properly trinitarian (rather than triadic) dimension of the basic Christian perception. They are, indeed, persons whose particularity (“personality,” as it were) is never in doubt. While individuals are equivalent and not necessarily unique, persons are irreducible in their particularity. And even the simplest Christian apprehension of trinitarian relations will so perceive the divine reality—not as a blurred threesome of interchangeable individuals, not as the sum of three ones, but as a form of life that is properly absolute, wholly beyond, and yet just as properly particular, just as definably articulate. A mark of this is that there is, properly speaking, no syncretism in the Christian apprehension of the Trinity.²⁹ While at a loss (fortunately!) if asked to “define” the divine persons and their relationships, no Christian would ever think of the incarnation of the Father, or of Christ descending at Pentecost.

4.4 Advent—active and passive

Our life is soaked with the mystery of death. Not morbidly, but rather, in a Christian perspective, as a form of Advent. We wait for the ever-renewed revelation of the particularity of God. Emmanuel is both the God who is with us and the God who will come. He is the God of the *parousia*, the presence with us now and the presence that is to come. He is the Lord who came (*maran atha*) and the Lord whom we ask to come (*marana tha!*).³⁰ In other

²⁹Just such syncretism is instead found, for example, in Mesopotamia where a hymn may identify a particular deity with another as a sign of excellence, as in this hymn to Marduk: “Sin (the moon god) is your divinity, Anu your sovereignty, / Dagan is your lordship, Enlil your kingship” (B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, vol. 2 [Bethesda: Capital Decisions Ltd., 1993], 605). It is inconceivable for any Christian to praise the Son by calling him “the Father.”

³⁰On this see my article “Ascension, Parousia, and Sacred Heart: Structural

words, what we expect, beyond death, is neither a blurred, nor an already evident, vision. We know God in a particular way already, but we expect him to reveal an even more sharply defined particularity.

Such particularity connotes what we may call an active form of Advent. Its opposite, identified by passivity, is a wait for the apogee of a generic line of progress, a wishful expectancy for a higher level of a situation we already own.³¹ The future is a given that needs to be unraveled by us. There is no expectation, in a pagan polytheistic setting, that the future may take the initiative and come toward us. Wholly impersonal, it needs to be found out in its constitutive pieces, grasped, conquered. In this sense it is neither active nor transitive, but properly inert and passive.

By way of contrast, an active Advent, a Christian Advent, is the expectation of something, or in fact someone, coming from an altogether different plane, an explosion that is to happen as a specific event. We are in the dark as to the modality of the event that is to happen; we are in the dark as to the definition of the subject who is to come. And yet we expect someone we know already. The explosion does not destroy, but rather builds on, a fundamental attitude of trust. The one who comes does not negate our present being, but neither does he come out of it. We do expect the one who comes, but he truly comes, he is not fashioned out of building blocks of our making. Going through Advent, we are in the dark even as we know where the light is to come from.

Christian death aims for the ultimate revelation of the living God, of the self-awareness of God. The particularity that is intrinsic to this (see above, 3.9) is supremely trinitarian on the level of the individual person. We wait for an encounter where the divine self-awareness will bring out the fullness of the human counterpart, our own self-awareness. Our particularity as persons will be at its fullest because grafted onto the particularity of the trinitarian God. In contrast, non-Christian death leads to landscapes of unawareness. They are anticipated and welcomed as the dissolution of our human self.

Correlations,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 25 (1998): 73.

³¹On “owning,” see the next section. Sokolowski’s book cited above (n. 6) discusses in depth, and from a different perspective, the sharp contrast between a pagan view wherein the divine and the world are a continuum, and the Christian view defined by an unbridgeable distinction.

Advent is properly trinitarian in a liturgical sense as well. It is a period of preparation for the birth of Jesus, and it is also a recollection of the entire Old Testament experience. The birth is the moment when the Incarnation becomes public, emerging from the privacy of the Annunciation. So the conception and the birth, the Annunciation and Christmas, are the culmination of a waiting that is far from generic and aimless. It was a waiting for the Incarnation even while there was no inkling that it would be the Incarnation. The whole drama of the messianic ethos lies precisely in the contrast between specificity on the one hand and surprise on the other. It is such specificity that is ultimately trinitarian: before the triadic dimension of this particularity had come to the fore, the essential quality of an inner articulation within the divine sphere was already central to the human perception of God.

4.5 *Waiting vs. owning*

The reason why a non-Christian Advent is passive is that it basically excludes the possibility of a real surprise. In that perspective, we already “own” the future. Instead of revelation, we have discovery. It is the same contrast we see in comparing the constantly renewed revelation of the personality of someone we love with the discovery of a new scientific fact. The latter excludes a real surprise, because whatever comes to be known in the future, to be “discovered,” is fully anticipated in our present control of its roots. In it, we do not search for communication, but only for greater possession; we do not expect a revelation, but a clarification of what is already known. A passive Advent is essentially incremental.

In the same sense that Advent was a dynamic state in the Old Testament, it must so remain for us after the Annunciation and the Incarnation. The liturgical season reminds us of this need. And so does the very essence of the *lex orandi*. The reason why it is perceived to be the *lex credendi* is not primarily, it seems to me, of an intellectual, but of an attitudinal, order. In praying we do not so much develop a construct as we seek a face. And a face that seeks us in turn. We do not fashion the target of our prayer; we rather wait for the face we seek to smile back at us, to disclose³² the will that

³²That is why, even intellectually, the notion of a reality that discloses itself is so

establishes, through a constantly developing movement of creative impulse, our most intimate reality—our destiny. As a mode of being, Christian prayer cannot be but profoundly trinitarian, because through it we wait for the self-disclosure of God. This self-disclosure affects us as the target, of course, but at the same time, it inevitably affects God himself as the origin. Discovering the will of God, in prayer and in life, is the locus where the dynamism of a trinitarian absolute discloses itself to our finite consciousness.

Tragically, the drug culture of our modern times points, fiercely and hopelessly, to the very reality of the Trinity. It desperately wants to grasp and hold on to a drug-induced, heightened state of awareness because it senses the possibility of sharing in the dramatic dynamism of the absolute—except that it does so by aiming, if unwittingly, to achieve “control” of that dynamism. It is, ultimately, a suicidal attempt; too often, alas, literally so. In this light, we may well recognize an unsuspected ontological dimension of the drug culture and of the growing justification of suicide. Through the first (a drug-induced state of awareness), humans seek to own the target—the source of happiness. Through the latter (self-induced death), humans seek to assert that they own the subject—themselves.

Not that waiting should be understood as sitting idly by. “The kingdom of the heavens is forced open through determination [*biazetai*] and it is the forceful ones [*biastai*] who seize [*harpazousin*]³³ it” (Mt 11:12). “The kingdom of God is announced as the good news [*euangelizatai*] and anyone [who can] enters it through force [*biazetai*]” (Lk 16:16, see above, 2.4). The virgins waiting for the bridegroom must be alert and prepared (Mt 25:1–13); from which the disciples must learn their lesson: “stay awake!” (*grēgoreite*, Mt 25:13), “shut out all sleep” (*agrupneite*, Mk 13:33 | Lk 21:36). The men waiting for their master to come home from the wedding must be awake (*grēgorountas*, Lk 12:37). Peter, James, and John are scolded

critical, a notion profoundly developed by Sokolowski in his writings cited above.

³³The root is used with a negative connotation in Paul: Jesus did not consider his being equal to God “a seized possession” (*harpagmos*) (Phil 2:7–8); see my article, “The Trinity in a Mesopotamian Perspective,” cited in Part 1 of this article, n. 1. There, I deal at greater length with the notion of “owning” as it applies in particular to trinitarian thought.

at Gethsemane because they cannot stay awake (*grēgorēsai*) with him (Mt 26:40 | Mk 14:37). So waiting is an alert state of determined expectation and deep openness. It is, in line with the theme of this essay, an attitude that grows out of, and tends toward, a high degree of particularity. It must always be the case that a particular human being seeks a particular intervention on the part of a dynamic God. It cannot be the case that humanity in general rests inertly in the knowledge that things are encased within a generic higher force anyhow.

4.6 Coherence and tradition

I have argued for the significance of the experiential component: the divine reality is, and has of course always been, intrinsically and essentially trinitarian, so that on some level this trinitarian dimension could not have escaped human perception. This would have been especially the case within the historical setting reflected in the Bible, where a dynamic confrontation unfolded over the centuries which reached its climax with Jesus. This confrontation we call “revelation.” Even with the stone tablets at Sinai (see above, 3.5), revelation was never seen as a static objectification: it was always properly a “confrontation,” on a personal level, rather than the handing over of a frozen construct. This confrontation is founded on, and bolsters, particularity. The human target of the confrontation is particular as a collectivity (ancient Israel as a highly specific human group) and in its individuals (Abraham, Moses, the prophets, etc.). Just as particular is the source of the confrontation, Yahweh, who relates very personally to Israel and the individuals within it. It was the strong perception of this divine particularity that molded the sensitivity behind the human encounters with Jesus the Logos, from the Annunciation to the Ascension.

Therein we recognize the strong element of coherence in the tradition. Coherence speaks to the way in which the object of perception perdures as such, even while the perspective from which it is viewed changes. Thus it is that we can legitimately consider the Old Testament as a single whole on the one hand³⁴ while fully

³⁴In this light, the notion of a “biography” of God is justified: Jack Miles, *God. A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

realizing that it is articulated along the lines of a long and varied developmental history. A reflection on the coherence of perception sheds light on the significance of tradition. The “deposit” which Timothy is urged to guard (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14) is not an automatic continuance of time-honored practice, but rather a shared effort with the one who has the power to guard that same deposit (2 Tim 1:12). Tradition is a profound spiritual culture, alive with the dynamic sense of interaction. It is like being carried at the top of a wave, always moving, yet always cresting. Thus the question I have asked is: if God *is intrinsically* trinitarian, then how did human perception of this trinitarian aspect of God take shape in terms of normal human culture? Two main themes have helped us in answering the question.

First, it is obviously not the case that God *became* trinitarian when Jesus began to speak of the Father and the Spirit. Nor will God *become* trinitarian when, as per our hope, we humans will be associated with the fuller vision of Paradise. The human confrontation has always been with a trinitarian God, and will so remain. The glass through which we seek, we have ever sought, to see him retains various degrees of darkness. But through this changing darkness the God we humans seek cannot be but God, i.e., the trinitarian God. The “you” that everyone seeks, like Augustine (*inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te, Confessions 1.1.1*), has always been, however obscurely, a trinitarian “you.”

Second, the Trinity, “revealed,” did not suddenly come on the stage as if a *deus ex machina*. It was rather, we may say, a *deus ex homine*. Jesus addressed a human experience of the divine that, within the stream of a long lived tradition, was already awake to the dynamics of God’s inner life—of God’s trinitarian dimension. It is not as though Jesus reshaped Yahweh into the Trinity. Rather, Yahweh had been the Trinity all along.³⁵ The Old Testament sense of Yahweh was, in its depth, profoundly trinitarian already. With Jesus, there came the full and live disclosure of a presence long since sensed and perceived, however dimly.

³⁵As a minor point, I would differ in this respect from Sokolowski when he says “Jahweh is the same God as the Father of Jesus Christ” (“Revelation of the Trinity,” 144). Note, for example, that Jesus never addresses the Father as Yahweh.

4.7 *Yahweh, the Trinity*

We may look back at our initial question. Why is it that the word “Trinity” has not, for all intents and purposes, become a proper name? And why is it that, in spite of such a missing dimension, the Trinity is in fact central to Christian spirituality and more deeply rooted in Christian perception than one is inclined to think? A deconstructionist turn of phrase may help us in proposing an answer: we do address the ~~Trinity~~ under erasure³⁶. . . God, we may say in Derrida’s mode of thought, is and is not the Trinity.

On the one hand, God is not the Trinity as a frozen concept, as a mental construct to be dissected analytically, as a collectivity to be addressed above and beyond the divine persons. Such conceptualizations may very well be valid as abstractions, but do not reflect the personal reality who sought us out, and whom we seek. A good reason why the word “Trinity” has not become a proper name is because, biblically, the Trinity is never as such the subject of any verbal process, whether action or condition. It is not only the word that is missing as a lexical item in the biblical text. The very referential reality of the word is missing as an operative agent in the biblical narrative.

And yet God is essentially and intrinsically trinitarian and it is in a trinitarian mode that he inevitably, if inexpressibly, deals with us. Biblically, this comes to the fore most dramatically in the tensionality that is always present in the posture Jesus takes vis-à-vis the divine dimension. He takes this so much for granted that, in our case as in Philip’s (see above, 2.4), we wish he would spend more time in *explaining* it. Instead, he simply *lives* it. All the more strikingly so when, risen, he remains as profoundly trinitarian as in his earlier bodily dimension (2.9).

Trinitarian revelation is emphatically not contained in a treatise that Jesus in fact never wrote. More than through a “revelation” in the sense of such an argued exposition, we confront the trinitarian dimension through our own private annunciations. Lest we reduce God as a collective triad to the status

³⁶See my article “Sacramentality and Culture,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 30 (Spring 2003): 31f. In the third of the articles I mentioned in Part 1 of this article, n. 1 (“Trinity *spermatiké*”), I develop further the natural disposition and inner urge, in modern thought, toward trinitarian reality.

of the “Trinity” as a legal person, we are called to face, each in our own way, the reality of the *living* God, the reality of the divine persons who are indeed alive in the supreme particularity of their interaction. We relate to the persons because they relate to each other. In a similar way, to affirm that God is love does not entail equating him with “love” as a mere concept. It is rather to face the inexpressible whirlpool of a supreme divine dynamics where love is particular and yet absolute. And our call is not to watch an unfolding process from the outside, as spectators. Rather, we are called to enter the whirlpool and dare to sear the divine persons, in their absolute particularity, with the totality of *our* nothingness. □

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