

TERNARY PATTERNS IN PAUL'S LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS¹

by Robert Letham

Ephesians?

AS I AM SURE you are aware, the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ (“in Ephesus”) in Ephesians 1:1 are not found in the best early MSS (Ⲙ, B, p⁴⁶) or in references to the letter in the second century fathers. The writer does not seem familiar with the readers, whereas Paul knew the Ephesian church well, having planted it. Hence, the suggestion has gained ground that this was a circular letter with the destination left blank, to be filled in appropriately for each church as the courier delivered it. However, taken as a whole the great body of the fathers assume it to have been directed to Ephesus. Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Ephesians*, for example, do not even discuss the question. Moreover, the phrase τοῖς οὖσιϛ would stand alone awkwardly if a blank space followed. C. E. Arnold has argued that if we assume the reliability of Ⲙ, B, and p⁴⁶ here, no satisfactory account can be given for the state of the original text. Finally, even if this *were* a circular letter there seems no good reason why it could not have been intended for Ephesus, even as the principal destination.

Paul?

Until the nineteenth century all agreed Paul wrote the letter. Today, most consider it pseudepigraphy, written by an unknown author to unknown recipients. It is claimed the language differs from agreed Pauline writings. However, pseudepigraphy is

¹Lecture delivered at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on Nov. 9, 1999.

exceedingly rare in early Christian circles and the fathers all assumed Paul was the author. Besides, who was the unknown genius who wrote it if not Paul—and why do we have no other examples of his creative artistry? As for the language, do we have enough instances of Paul’s writing to say definitively that he could not have written in the manner he displays in Ephesians? The theory appears to rest on the fallacy that a person must write in a limited number of ways on each and every occasion he takes up a pen. We should not forget that Paul on occasion used an amanuensis and so it is not improbable that he could have entrusted this or others of his writings to such a person while ensuring that the thought and details were in accord with his wishes.

The Trinity in Ephesians?

The dogma of the Trinity was not established until the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). This was a development from the New Testament. Arthur Wainwright considers that in the New Testament there is what he calls a “threefold pattern” in relation to God, something evident in Paul, while in its later writings there develops an awareness of a “threefold problem,” of how—if Christ and the Holy Spirit are God—Jewish monotheism is preserved. This latter element he sees as present in John but not yet in Paul.² On the other hand, the Dutch Reformed New Testament scholar, Herman Ridderbos, in his compendious volume on Paul’s theology, had not a single reference to “God” or to the “Father” in his index of principal subjects. Neither did he refer in his 550 pages to any of the texts we shall cite!³

Most discussions of the underlying basis for the later development of the doctrine of the Trinity consider only isolated texts (e.g., Mt. 28:19 et. al.) or else follow particular themes across the New Testament, such as Christ as the Son of God. It is exceedingly rare to find the discussion focus on the content of a particular book. This is made worse in the case of Ephesians by the critical claim that Paul did not write it.

²Arthur Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1963), 237ff.

³Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

In the context of this essay I shall be using the term “trinity” in connection with a three-fold pattern, as Wainwright describes it, not in terms of the later developed doctrine as the church unfolded it. I shall argue that in Ephesians Paul pervasively thinks of God in a ternary, or triadic, form, all the more significant for its being so unselfconscious and artless. He gives no consideration to relations between the three, nor any awareness of problems that might arise from such a view of God. In itself, this buttresses the claim that Ephesians was written early, before John’s Gospel had introduced such questions, and so in turn it gives further support to Pauline authorship. However, I shall seek to establish that Paul brings it into connection with everything on which he writes and so it is the underlying base of his whole view of the Christian faith.

This argument runs counter to much recent comment on Ephesians. Lincoln pays some attention to a threefold pattern in the writer’s understanding of God⁴—and he considers him to have lived much later than Paul—but most others ignore the point. Schnackenburg thinks the writer has a basically monotheistic view of God and passes over such passages as 2:18 without any significant comment. The Holy Spirit is simply “the power that comes from Christ.”⁵ Ralph Martin recognizes that the writer has “a rudimentary trinitarian faith” and sees the triadic patterns as “suggestive,” but he does not elaborate further.⁶

1. The Trinity and the Plan of Salvation

We shall concentrate here on two major sections in which Paul unfolds the purpose of God for the salvation of his church.

1:3-14

This is, of course, one huge sentence—“the most monstrous sentence conglomeration that I have encountered in Greek,” in the words of the early twentieth century German scholar E. Norden.

⁴Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word, 1990).

⁵Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), on 2:18 and 3:17.

⁶Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1992), on 1:3-14 and 4:1-6.

Here is a clear case where “the reality grasps the language.” The flow of thought is from the pre-temporal (v. 4) to the past historical (vv. 3, 7) to appropriation in the past (vv. 13-14), on to the present (v. 7) and thence to the future (v. 14). There is also an overlap between the present and the future (vv. 10, 14). In short, the sentence encompasses everything, from the eternal purpose of God, to a sweep through human history and on to the ultimate fulfillment.

Underlying all God’s blessings described here is the action of the Trinity. The Father is the origin of all the blessings we receive in Christ (v. 3), the first of which are election (v. 4) and predestination (v. 5). The Son is the one in whom we have redemption (v. 7) and it is he who will head up all things (v. 10). Indeed, all God’s blessings from beginning to end are given in Christ, the Son. Each element in the whole sentence is given “in Christ” or “in him.” The Holy Spirit is the one who sealed us when we believed (v. 13) and who is the guarantor of our inheritance (v. 14). Thus, the whole panorama is of a sweeping movement of God’s grace towards us, from the Father in or through the Son and by the Holy Spirit.

Paul presents the Father as the source of all God’s grace. He is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (3). In relation to the Son he is Father. Since these are evidently relations within God, it is a reasonable inference to conclude they are eternal. This is corroborated by the reference in verse 4 to election “before the foundation of the world.” The Father has brought to fruition his covenant with Abraham. Back in Genesis God promised to bless Abraham and his seed—in terms of land, progeny and also in general. Now every blessing has been given, in fulfillment of that ancient promise. These blessings are given by the Holy Spirit, for they are “spiritual blessings” (εὐλογίαι πνευματικῆς). The singular “blessing” denotes the unity of the whole. These are not so many disparate and disconnected blessings but are part of one movement of God’s grace begun with Abraham and now fulfilled in Christ. This phrase (ἐν Χριστῷ) indicates that the Father’s blessing is given by the Holy Spirit and in the Son. We hinted above that this theme is right at the heart of the whole sentence.

Eternal election is the first work of the Father to be distinguished. The Father is its source or origin. His action in choosing us was before creation. As such, it transcends time. It was a decision by the Father over which we had no input whatsoever. In accord with the

previous statement it was a decision made ἐν Χριστῷ—a reality that exists not merely at some future point in world history, or in the life experience of particular persons, but at the point of election itself. Elsewhere in the New Testament the Son claims the right to choose us (Jn. 16:15) and so too the Holy Spirit chooses Saul and Barnabas for the missionary task described in Acts (Acts 13:1ff). However, Paul considers election to be supremely a work of the Father, although not apart from the Son in whom he chose us, nor from the Spirit who is the one by whom the blessing comes (cf. v. 3). Indeed, since this is the first of all, the rest of the blessing by the Holy Spirit flows from here. So much is clear by reason of the fact that the purpose of election is that we be holy and blameless before him (the Father).

Foreordination to adoption as sons is also a work of the Father. It is the Father who foreordained us through the Son to himself. This is through the Son (διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ), since we can only be adopted in union with the natural Son. Christ is the Son and we were chosen in him as sons by adoption. Thus election, foreordination and adoption are all founded in the relation between the Father and the Son in eternity, a relation that takes fully into account the Holy Spirit by whom these realities are effected.

In Christ, the Son, we have redemption through his blood, deliverance from slavery by the power of God on the payment of a price (v. 7). This redemption occurred at the cross. Christ's death secured our release. As a payment it could only be offered to the Father, for the devil had no rights or authority over the human race. Again, the relation between the Father and the Son is in the background, echoing Paul's comments in Romans 8:32, where he refers to the Father not sparing his Son but giving him up for us all, and to Romans 4:25 and the comment that Jesus was "delivered up" to the cross for our trespasses.

In the Son the Father's cosmic purpose will be realized whereby he is made the head of all created things (v. 10). The phrase τὰ πάντα (all things) can only refer to the entire universe. Paul proceeds to define it as "things in heaven and things on earth." The Father's will is realized in Christ the Son, bringing the creation together into a unity, restoring harmony under his leadership. Thus the Father makes Christ head of both the church (see later) and the cosmos.

The Holy Spirit seals us (v. 13). The Spirit, we have seen, effects the blessing promised to Abraham, and thus is dynamically active in

all the elements of the Father's plan we have already considered. However, it is particularly in the aspects here in verses 13-14 that he comes to more prominence. The verb σφραγίζω denotes putting a seal on something either for security, or to indicate ownership, or again to assure of authenticity. These ideas are all closely related and it is hard to be dogmatic as to which is preferable here. Certainly, the idea of security is in the foreground and, for that reason, may be close to the author's intention. This action of the Spirit occurs concurrently with faith—the aorist participle is most likely a participle of attendant circumstance. If so, it is not so much a specific action of the Holy Spirit Paul has in mind as the person of the Spirit himself who seals believers

The Holy Spirit is the guarantor of our future inheritance (v. 14). The word ἀρραβὼν meant a down-payment confirming a transaction, making it legally binding and so leaving no room for a change of mind. In turn, it was part of a greater whole that was yet to come when the remainder of the payment was made. It followed that it was *of the same kind* as the rest. It guaranteed that the rest would follow. Here the future inheritance is in view. The Holy Spirit, who seals all believers, establishes that the Father will give the full possession of his eternal inheritance in Christ his Son.

According to this monstrous sentence conglomeration, the plan of salvation, promised to Abraham, fulfilled by Christ, is an engagement of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit together by which they, in unbreakable unity, from before creation through the whole panorama of human history, secure our eternal inheritance in Christ. This pattern remains in a second passage where Paul focuses more precisely on deliverance from sin.

2:4-10

The background is the hopeless and utterly helpless condition in which the human race finds itself as a result of sin. Paul describes this as a situation of “death,” from which we are incapable of rescuing ourselves. Only outside help will avail, only the help of God himself. Mercifully, he has acted in power and grace.

God the Father raised us up together with Christ the Son (vv. 5b-6). As Pannenberg points out, in the New Testament θεός invariably refers to the Father. Here the Father has made us alive, where previously we were “dead in sins” (v. 1). In turn, he has raised us up with Christ. This is sovereign action by the Father. Moreover, we are not

raised up in isolation. The verbs in verses 5 and 6 consistently have συν- prefixes. We are brought to life in conjunction with others, as part of a corporate body. Even more, we are given life in connection and union with Christ, whom the Father raised from the dead. So we too share in his resurrection. If we bear in mind Paul's comments in Romans 8, the Holy Spirit is also actively engaged in the resurrection of Christ and so in our participation in it—the Father effects it by the Spirit.

God the Father enthroned us with Christ the Son in the heavens (v. 6b). Here is the continuation and consequence of what we just considered. Christ ascended into heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God. In union with him, we are seated together with him (and in him) in heaven. The point again is that the Father continues to be the subject of this clause.

To sum up thus far: the plan of salvation in its entirety as well as in its details is a fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham, was prepared from before the creation, is focused corporately in Christ and—above all—is an engagement of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who have one purpose, one will, and one effect.

2. The Trinity and Our Knowledge of God

According to Paul in Ephesians, what shape does our knowledge of God take? Is there a reflection from our side of the movement of God's grace that expresses itself in the threefold pattern we have recognized? A number of sections of the letter are relevant.

1:17

Knowledge of God is a gift of God the Father. Paul prays that the Father will give the readers a knowledge of himself. This gift he considers to be continuous throughout life. As Thomas Goodwin described it, it is “a prayer for grown Christians.” The source of this knowledge is the Father—“the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,” a genitival phrase where the second noun δόξης “of glory” (in the genitive) has adjectival force. Glory is thus the mode of the Father's being. The Father is Father in relation to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Son. The Father reveals himself in the Son.

The noun πνεῦμα is used by Paul consistently of the Holy Spirit, with or without the article. See 3:5, Col. 1:9, 1 Cor. 2:6-16. The stress of the text is on the creative function of the Holy Spirit, his giving of faith, revelation and wisdom. The Father of Christ, the Son, thus gives knowledge of himself by the efficacy of the Holy Spirit.

The knowledge the Father gives is not some superficial notional knowledge. Paul uses ἐπίγνωσις, which denotes a real, deep, personal knowledge in contrast to superficial acquaintance. Personal communion with God is clearly in view. This knowledge of God comes from the Father, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit, and is continuous and progressive. Moreover, it is of first importance on Paul's agenda for the church. It is the first category on his prayer list, the single most important thing he mentions.

2:18

Paul has stressed that Christ has secured access to God by the cross. In the Old Testament there was a distance between God and the people. The priesthood and sacrificial system stood between God and the people. To the Holy of Holies there was no general access. Moreover, the Gentiles were excluded from the temple, effectively on penalty of death. However, now that Christ has come we have open access to God. We are reconciled through the cross. This reconciliation also has effect between Jew and Gentile.

Martin points to the immediately obvious reference—the temple balustrade debarring Gentiles from the temple enclosure. This is now set aside by the one perfect sacrifice of Christ that renders the temple ritual obsolete. However, he considers the point of the writer to be the Mosaic law with its scribal interpretation. Either way, Christ has set aside the law and so destroyed that which distinguished Israel and so kept Jew and Gentile apart.

This is the background for the key statement in verse 18. Both Jews and Gentiles now have access to the Father. The Father's rich mercy has delivered us from sin, raised us with Christ, and reconciled us through Christ's death. Salvation can therefore be seen as access to, and consequently fellowship with, the Father. This access is δι' αὐτοῦ, through Christ. He is the one who made peace and who is our peace (v. 14). The access is effected ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι, referring to the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, while the plan of salvation is brought about *from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit*, from our side we experience a reverse movement *by the Holy Spirit through the Son to the Father*. The Spirit gives faith (cf. 2:8-9) and is the source of all the ways in which we respond to the grace of God. He enables us to trust Christ and through him and his mediation we have fellowship with the Father. Christian experience is therefore trinitarian through and through. Lincoln recognizes this when he comments on his putative author “how naturally his thought expresses itself in the trinitarian pattern of ‘through Christ in the Spirit to the Father.’” Indeed, it is the unselfconscious nature of this statement that underlines it as an integral part of Paul’s thinking. Unfortunately, Ridderbos does not even mention this statement throughout his volume.

3:14-17a

There is no reference to this passage in Ridderbos either. This is another prayer for the readers based upon the preceding content (although the precise reference of *τούτου χάρις* is ambiguous). He asks the Father to strengthen the readers through his Spirit (vv. 15-16). In turn he describes this as Christ dwelling in your hearts through faith (v. 17).

The Father, he says, is “rich in glory.” The stress is on the Father’s greatness as the source of this blessing. He is the creator and lord of all family groups. These families are named *ἐξ οὔ*. Naming denoted sovereignty in the ancient world, so here the sovereign authority of the Father over all peoples is in view.

The Holy Spirit has already been described as the seal of our salvation (1:13) and the one who indwells the church (2:22). Here the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit is parallel with the indwelling of Christ in the hearts of the faithful. The result is that they will be rooted and grounded in love, with further consequences that Paul spells out in the following clauses. Faith, strengthening, love – all features of the life of Christian believers—are seen by Paul as the fruit of the concerted engagement of the three.

5:18-20

We merely note that Paul’s request to the church to be filled with the Spirit (v. 18), anticipates as an inseparable corollary the

singing of psalms to the Lord (v. 19), κύριος being his consistent term for the post-resurrection Christ. In turn, they will give thanks for everything “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to the God and Father” (v. 20). Once again, Paul sees Christian experience as thoroughly trinitarian. His formula is not smooth, but this feature demonstrates the natural way he recognizes the reality and also points to his writing early in the church’s development.

6:10-17.

Note the threefold pattern in this famous section. Be strong in the Lord, Paul urges (v. 10). To do this the readers must put on the whole armor of God (v. 11). The one piece of offensive equipment is “the sword of the [Holy] Spirit, which is the word of God” (v. 17).

Let us summarize what we have found here. In response to the grace of God, planned and effected in the threefold pattern we described earlier, Christian believers are taken up, enveloped and empowered by a corresponding threefold pattern—this time *by the Holy Spirit through the Son to the Father*. The air they breathe is, so to speak, trinitarian.

3. The Trinity and the Church

Finally, we shall look at two sections of Ephesians where Paul considers the church in some detail.

2:20-22

Here Paul describes the church as a temple, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. There is some debate as to whether Paul considers Christ to be the cornerstone, laid down before the rest of the structure is built, or instead whether he has a capstone in view, in which case Christ would be the final part of the building, setting it off and completing it. The imagery seems to favor the former, for the structure grows upwards after the apostolic foundation is set in place and so after Christ founded it. If he were the final capstone,

the developing building would be without Christ for the entirety of its construction, an obvious incongruity.

The picture is of harmonious growth and development. The building is a living one, composed of people, not stone. It grows organically. The implication is that its development, like the existing temple in Jerusalem, or we may add, like the construction of many an ancient cathedral, is a long process. It is growth in holiness—its goal is as a holy temple (αὔξει εἰς ναὸν ἅγιον), one belonging to God. Moreover, this holy temple is such “in the Lord” (ἐν κυρίῳ). The church’s identity is in Christ and not for one instant outside. This temple is a dwelling place of the Father by the Holy Spirit (εἰς κατοικητήριον τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν πνεύματι). Thus Paul brings all three persons into direct connection with the church. The church itself reveals the Trinity, for it exists in Christ and the Father indwells it by the Holy Spirit.

4:4-6

Paul’s attention at this point has moved from the church as a growing temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, to its unity. There are hints beneath the surface of a disunity he is trying to correct (4:1-3).

The section before us has a strong hymnic or creedal feel to it. There are “seven acclamations of oneness,” as Lincoln puts it, divided into two groups of three each, together with one concluding statement which is itself arranged in a threefold form. The main point of this citation (if citation it be) is the need to maintain unity at Ephesus. This is the only course consistent with the foundational unities—the unity of the church, the unity of the Christian faith, the unity of God himself. Let us look at it in more detail.

Verse 4: *One body* is presumably a reference to the church, the body of Christ. This will be the central theme of the following paragraph and is, of course, a point spelled out in great measure by Paul in his first letter to Corinth. *One Spirit* obviously means the Holy Spirit. *One hope of your calling* looks back to 1:18 where Paul prays that the Ephesians would know what is the hope of their calling and where it points to the final eschatological fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation, the cosmic unity that will be realized in Christ. This has added significance if, as chapter 2 indicates, there was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians in the church, for it

would then underline that whatever the ethnic differences the unity Christ established in his church transcends them.

Verse 5: One Lord means Jesus Christ, the Son who is the cornerstone of the church (2:20). *One faith* in turn points to the unity of the content of the Christian gospel, possibly as some have argued the faith confessed by baptismal candidates on their conversion from paganism. *One baptism*: only one, since in baptism we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and as there is only one Christ, and only one cross and resurrection, baptism can occur but once.

Verse 6: One God and Father of all. God the Father is in view, and he is *over all*, transcendent over his entire creation, *through all* and *in all*, both pointing to his thorough immanence. This threefold description of the Father in relation to all things cannot be taken as a reference to the Trinity as such, although its threefold aspect may possibly reflect Paul's consistent understanding of God in threefold terms.

Here in this passage Paul stresses that the unity of God takes a threefold pattern. More than that, since the Lord and the Spirit share with the Father in the qualities of God, they are equally personal. Paul's threefold pattern is a definitely personal one, although he does not of course use those terms, which were to emerge later over the course of time. The Holy Spirit is in view in verse 4, the Son in verse 5, and the Father in verse 6. From this flows the unity of the faith and the unity of the church. We should note that this is a unity-in-diversity. Perhaps plurality might be a better word. As he goes on to expound it, Paul sees the unity of the church consisting of a diversity of persons with a diversity of gifts (vv. 7-16). This is of a piece with his view of God, who is not a solitary monad but whose unity evidences a threefold pattern of personal activity.

There is no reference to this passage in Ridderbos.

Conclusions

1. Paul consistently views God as one, his unity evidencing a threefold pattern of personal activity. As Donald Guthrie wrote shortly before his death, "it may be said that Paul does not work with a conceptual framework which would lead naturally to

speculations about the essence of God. . . . Yet the evidence lays foundations for the later developed doctrine. The problems which that later doctrine grappled with had their roots in the New Testament itself.⁷⁷

2. However, he has not reached the stage John reached, which was to consider the relations *between* the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and how these were compatible with the rigorous Old Testament monotheism. This may be another argument in support of Pauline authorship of Ephesians, for it argues strongly for an early date for the letter.

3. The manner in which Paul handles the matter is instructive since, apart from the hymnic or creedal section in 4:4-6, he refers to the triadic pattern in a natural, unforced and unselfconscious way. This indicates that it was a deeply held conviction that he did not believe required extensive elaboration, for it was recognized widely, if not universally among his readership.

4. Not only is this triadic, or ternary, pattern clearly evident, but it comes to expression in all the key areas of the letter. It is *persuasive*. As such, it underlies all that Paul says, whether about the plan of salvation and its implementation, our own knowledge of God, or the church. It impinges too on the practical consequences of Christian faith, expressed in the unity of the church and in how Christian believers interact with one another. We may therefore say that it is *at the very center* of Paul's theology in the letter to the Ephesians.

⁷⁷Donald Guthrie/Ralph P. Martin, in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 367.