TRINITARIAN BELIEF, BINITARIAN MONOTHEISM, AND THE ONE GOD:
REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTIAN FAITH IN AFFILIATION TO LARRY HURTADO’S
CHRISTOLOGICAL APPROACH

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1. Triadic Formulae and the Belief in One God

1.1. Triadic Formulae in the New Testament

The belief in the Trinitarian God belongs to the decisive characteristics of Christianity, developed in the course of its first centuries. It distinguishes Christian faith in a distinctive manner from Jewish belief in the one God and departs in another way also from pagan veneration of many gods. At the same time, it has to be noted, however, that this particular view of God was developed in close affinity to Jewish belief in the one and only God. Christian faith in the Trinitarian God can therefore be described as a specific modification of Jewish monotheism, based on the perception of Jesus Christ as God’s decisive revelation. In order to take this process into sharper focus, I will begin with a look at the earliest traces of faith in the Trinitarian God in New Testament texts.

At the outset, it has to be noted that the term “Trinity” itself does not occur in earliest Christian confessions nor is there any explicit reflection about a “Trinitarian God” in a conceptual or terminological way. At the earliest stages one finds instead individual formulae expressing the faith in God and Jesus Christ or Christological convictions about Jesus’ pre-existence, his resurrection and exaltation, indicating that

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2 Cf. already R. Deichgräber, Gotteskynmus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit: Untersuchungen zu Form, Sprache und Stil der frühchristlichen Hymnen (SUNT 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967). For the more recent discussion about “hymns” or “epideictic passages” in earliest Christianity cf. G. Kennel, Frühchristliche Hymnen?
they were used in the worship of the early communities. These formulae as well as the writings of the New Testament have therefore to be distinguished from concepts about the relationship of God and Jesus Christ and the Trinitarian nature of God, developed by Christian theologians as e.g. Tertullian, Theophilus of Antioch or Origen from the middle of the second century onwards on the basis of biblical traditions and philosophical thoughts. They have also to be differentiated from the elaborated creedal texts of the fourth and fifth century, as e.g. the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed or the Creed of Chalcedon in which the consubstantiality of God and Jesus Christ and the emanation of the Holy Spirit from the father (and the Son) are expressed.

Despite these differences, in some passages of the New Testament God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are mentioned together, indicating that in Christian faith from its very beginning the three “persons” of what was later called the “Trinitarian God” were perceived as manifestations of the one God. It is therefore useful to start with a look at these passages to put the question into sharper focus how the relationship of “manifestations” of God can be interpreted.

The earliest of these formulations appears in 1 Cor 12:4–6:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. (NIV)

Paul deals here with the various gifts within the Corinthian community which have only one origin, namely “the same spirit, the same Lord, the same God”. Two observations are of special interest for our topic: First, Paul describes these gifts with the almost synonymous terms χαρίσματα,