

The Triads by [Brendan Paul Valiant](#) Matthew 28:19

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The Frequent Use of Triads in the Gospel of Matthew - A Key to Understanding the Literary Force of the Matthean Baptismal Formula.

In recently studying the Gospel of Matthew, it has become abundantly apparent that there is a frequent use of the literary device of "triad". This is also a commonly recognised technique of John's Gospel, but it thoroughly permeates Matthew.

A triad is a group of three connected people or things. In literature, triads are often found to reinforce or draw attention to something. Matthew appears to use triads for both emphasis and organisation of the narrative. From the very beginning, Matthew structures his account in a triadic manner by dividing the genealogy of Jesus into three parts. He begins with a triadic statement of emphasis (Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham), then follows this up with a structural triad of the complete genealogy (verses 2-17).

Here is a list of many of the triads in the Gospel of Matthew. Some of these will be emphatic, where three people, things or concepts are listed together. Others will be structural, involving a larger portion of text.

The introduction to the Genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1)

- The Genealogy of Jesus split into three lots of 14 generations (Matthew 1:2-17)
- Gabriel comes three times to Joseph (1:20; 2:13, 19)
- The wise men bring three gifts to Jesus (2:11)
- Three temptations in the wilderness (4:1-11)
- Jesus' ministry composed of teaching, preaching and healing (4:23)
- Nine (3 x 3) blessings in the beatitudes (5:1-11)
- Three sins connected with anger and insults are condemned (5:22)
- Three "your" petitions and three "us" petitions in the Lord's prayer (6:9-10/6:11-13)
- Three anxieties (6:31)
- Three examples of petition - "ask", "seek", "knock" (7:7-8)
- Three sets of three healings with interludes (8:1-22/8:23-9:17/9:18-38)
- Six (3 x 2) types of healing (11:5)
- Three small parables about growth between Sower parable and explanation (13:24-30)
- Three additional parables about kingdom (13:44-50)
- Three petitions for help by the Canaanite woman (15:21-27)
- Jesus announces His suffering three times (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19)
- Three translated beings and three disciples and mention of three booths at the mount of transfiguration (17:1-8)
- Peter asked three questions (17:25)
- Discipline among believers has three steps (18:15-17)
- Jesus to suffer three punishments - "mocked and flogged and crucified" (20:19)
- Three parables in the conflict over Jesus' authority (21:28-22:14)
- Three in the greatest commandment - Love God with "heart", "soul" and "mind" (22:37)
- Three weighty things about the law - "justice and mercy and faithfulness" (23:23)
- Three missionaries of God - "prophets and wise men and scribes" (23:34)
- Three parables about Jesus' return (25:1-46)
- Jesus prays three times in Gethsemane (26:36-46)
- Three denials of Peter (26:69-75)
- Three people are crucified (27:38)

- Triple commission - make disciples, baptising them and teaching them (28:19-20)
- Baptism in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (28:19)

This list is by no means exhaustive. The number three also appears many times throughout the Gospel narrative, and there are other structural triads which are more readily discernible through the use of Greek connectives. As can be seen though, from this representative list, Matthew uses triadic lists and structures quite often. That this is deliberate can be seen by comparing some of these instances above with their parallel passages in other synoptic Gospels. For example, while both Mark and Luke list four elements of Love for God - "heart", "soul", "strength" and "mind" (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27), Matthew has stylistically truncated it into three. Other examples show that Matthew has either an expanded or reduced version of lists, or in larger passages has restructured the narrative into triadic components.

It is self-evident that each triad clusters around a common idea or notion. Structural triads tie together a thematic idea, while smaller triadic lists serve different purposes of emphasis, which will be explored further below. To summarise the triads of Matthew's Gospel so far, we can see that it is a common structural and emphatic device which permeates the entire literary work and that each triad revolves around a common thread.

In looking at the purpose of the use of triads, there may be several reasons for Matthew to employ the device so frequently in his work. The first use which might bear mentioning would be for memorisation. Triads are common to the Johannine literature as well, which might serve to show that in the day when copies of sacred documents were scarce, these may have been among the various devices which were relied upon to aid cognitive retention. Structural and Emphatic triplets are part easily recalled. Examples in modern use would be "past, present and future", "father, mother and child", "beginning, middle and end".

One reason, perhaps, that both Matthew and John's writings feature heavy uses of triads is that this device seems to have been widely used in Hebrew literature. More study needs to be done on this, but triads may be found at times throughout in the Old Testament and the Rabbinical literature. For example, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel wrote, "The world is sustained by three things: By justice, by truth, and by peace" a list that is similar to many of the themes of Jesus in the Gospels, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus Matthew can be seen to be resting upon a literary tradition. The extent to which triads are employed in these writings is something that should be investigated further.

Perhaps the most significant purpose behind some of Matthew's use of triads might be the principle from the Torah that, "On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness" (Deuteronomy 17:6). Matthew actually features Jesus quoting this verse in the teachings on discipline within the Church. It is also apparent that the idea of witnesses was important to John's writings. The prologue for John's Gospel involves appeals to the witness of John the baptist, while the discussion of witnesses to Christ's divinity and divine mission are further picked up in chapters 5 and 8. It is also a minor theme in John's first epistle. With the Old Testament principle directly quoted or alluded to by these writers, it should come as no surprise that they employ triads to reinforce major ideas in their writings. Of course, not all smaller triadic lists would count as being for this purpose. Common sense and context are determinative as to whether this level of importance is attached to any triad.

One of the first steps in investigating the meaning of the baptismal triad in Matthew 28:19 would be to look at whether there are any parallel passages in the other Gospels. As seen above, Matthew has a habit of expanding or contracting so as to arrive at a triad in some instances. The Gospel of Luke's account of the final sayings of Jesus contains words which overlap the themes in Matthew's Great Commission.

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:45-49)

Here we can see a few parallels between the two accounts. Both accounts speak of "all nations" and a "name" and there is a parallel between the actions of "proclaiming" and "teaching". There is also a parallel that can be seen between the two "behold" statements. Matthew's account closes with the words, "Behold, I am with you always", while Luke's has "Behold, I am sending the Promise of My Father upon you". These two statements speak of the abiding presence. Jesus likely said a lot of things in his final discourse which included the Great Commission. Matthew and Luke chose different parts from that discourse to preserve. Luke highlights whose the name is with the words "His name", while Matthew highlights what the name represents. It is significant that in Luke's "Part II" in the book of Acts, the disciples who heard the words of Jesus practiced baptism "in the name of Jesus Christ" (see Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:46; 19:5).

So how should we understand the triad in Matthew 28:19? The final words of Jesus in this Gospel account span the last three verses. The "Great Commission" is sandwiched between two statements from Jesus from which it takes its impetus.

1. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.
2. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
3. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

There is also a chiasmic structure to these words:

A--All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.
B----Go therefore
C-----and make disciples of all nations,
D-----baptizing them
X-----in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
D`-----teaching them
C`-----to observe
B`----all that I have commanded you.
A`-And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The first statement of Jesus references the Father as the Source of Christ's authority. The second statement, which contains the Great Commission, describes the continuation of the ministry Christ instituted in His time on Earth. The final statement describes Jesus' unseen, spiritual, abiding presence as the Holy Spirit. So we can see that the broader triadic outline of the last words of Jesus in Matthew fits the pattern of the central triad of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The pattern is one of Source-Standard-Supply. That is, God the Father is the Source of the authority for the Great Commission; Jesus the Son is the Standard by which we should carry on our Mission; and the Holy Spirit is the Supply given for us to fulfill the Great Commission.

Looking at the chiasm, it is evident that it is not just baptism that should be done "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", but that this taking center-stage, all the verbs in the arms leading into this are connected. We are to:

"Go therefore... in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."
"Make disciples of all nations... in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."
"Baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."
"Teaching them... in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."
"To observe... in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."
"All that I have commanded you... in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

With this fuller understanding of the text, we can see that limiting the triad to baptism alone hinders the force of the text. This more complete view conforms more closely to Luke's account which says, "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:47) and further statements in Acts which show salvation, teaching, healing, casting out demons, baptism, etc being done "in the name of" Jesus, such as:

Acts 2:21 - "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."
Acts 2:38 - "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"
Acts 3:6 - "But Peter said, 'I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!'"
Acts 8:12 - "But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."
Acts 9:27-28 - "But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord."
Acts 10:48 - "And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days."
Acts 16:18 - "And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour."
Acts 19:5 - "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."
Acts 21:13 - "Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'
Acts 22:16 - "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."

So what is the meaning of the phrase "in the name of"? The Greek word *ὄνομα* has several different nuances of meaning, depending on the context. It can mean a proper name, surname/family name, title or appellation (the same word is used for each of these separate categories in English). It can mean the character by which someone is known. It can also mean the authority by which a name is invested and the power a name carries by reputation. In the Lucan literature, it is clear that "in the name of" has a meaning closest to the latter of these options - that of power and authority. One narrative section demonstrates this very clearly.

In chapter 3 of Acts, Peter and John heal a crippled man at the temple. From this they launch into a sermon to the crowd, where among other things they say, "And His name--by faith in His name--has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all" (Acts 3:16). Here we see the name connected to the power of faith. In the next chapter, Peter and John are put on trial, where they are asked, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (Acts 4:7). Peter's answer to this question is that "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Whom you crucified, Whom God raised from the dead--by Him this man is standing before you well" (Acts 4:10). As Peter reaches a peak in his discourse, he states, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The result is that the Sanhedrin (futilely) forbids the disciples from speaking or teaching "in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18).

From this account we can see two things. Firstly there is a literal use of an actual proper name - that of Jesus Christ. The second thing is that the force of nuance over "name" (ὄνομα) extends to embrace power and authority. That this is also the force of the word in the closing words of Matthew is apparent by the context. The central statement of Jesus, containing the Great Commission proper, follows a statement by Jesus about His authority as to both its extent (all... in heaven and earth) and source (from the Father).

Peter J. Leihart in his paper, "Jesus as Israel: The Typological Structure of Matthew's Gospel" (<http://bit.ly/fErv9y>) gives a fascinating hypothesis of how Matthew's Gospel structure reflects the entire history of the Old Testament from Genesis right through to where the traditional Hebrew text culminates with the commission of Cyrus (a type of Christ) in 2 Chronicles 36:23. We can see that this Old Testament commission has the same features as the Great Commission in Matthew:

1. Statement regarding universal authority
2. Statement regarding source of authority
3. Commission to "go"
4. Statement regarding the abiding presence "with" God's people.

2 Chronicles 36:23 - "Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and He hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all His people? The LORD his God be with him, and let him go up."

Matthew is clearly choosing to conclude his Gospel account in the same way as the Hebrew canon closed - another interesting stylistic choice. Jesus is greater than Cyrus in that His authority is over heaven as well as earth. Jesus' commission is also greater, but related. Jesus' commission is to go and build up the Spiritual Temple of God - the Church. The commission would be carried out in the literal name and authority of Cyrus. Looking at Ezra, it is abundantly clear that the commission to build the temple was carried out "in the name of" Cyrus (Ezra 4:3; 5:13-17; 6:3, etc).

Coming back to Matthew, we can see that Jesus' name is the one which fulfills all the contextual, stylistic, antitypical and parallel considerations of the passage. So the final question we need to understand is this: "How does the name 'Jesus' relate to the three parts of the triad - 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit'?"

The syntax of the statement makes it clear that there is a single name to which the three titles of "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit" bear a genitive relationship. We have seen that this singular name is "Jesus Christ" and the semantic nuance of "name" extends to include authority and power. With the emphasis on authority in Matthew 28:18-20, we can understand that there is a genitive of representation here. When we say, "the ambassador of France", we mean "the ambassador WHO REPRESENTS France". Thus the "of" can be switched out with "which represents". This same type of sense is what we see happening in Matthew 28:19 - the "name" Jesus represents the triad of "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit".

The way in which Jesus represents the three offices can be discerned from the context of everything He says in these closing words, however there are additional insights that can be gleaned from other passages as well.

Jesus represents the office of "Father"

- Jesus represents the Father having been invested with Authority by Him (Matthew 28:18).
- The name "Jesus" which is given by Heaven (Matthew 1:21) literally contains the name of the Father - "Jesus" ("Yeshua" in Hebrew) literally means "YHWH Saves" (see also Exodus 23:23).
- Jesus also holds a title of "Father" over humanity in the sense that He stands as the Second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45).

Jesus represents the office of "Son".

- Jesus is known as the "Son of God" representing His divinity.
- Jesus is known as the "Son of man" representing His divinity in humanity.
- As the Second Adam, Jesus took the title "Son" in a new sense.

Jesus represents the office of "Holy Spirit"

- In the words immediately following the Great Commission Jesus gives assurance of His personal abiding presence giving power to fulfill His words. (Ephesians 4:9-10)
- Jesus understood His Words to be "Spirit and Life" .
- Jesus as the Second Adam "became a Life-Giving Spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45).

Thus we have the Great Commission carrying the authority and power of the Father Who invests authority in Jesus, the authority and power of Jesus the Son, and the authority and power of the abiding presence of Christ through His Words as the Holy Spirit. The name "Jesus" represents these three economic offices. In a further sense, Jesus Himself also holds all three titles by virtue of being the Second Adam. An Old Testament prophetic passage which has Second Adamic force also has one "name" representing multiple offices:

"For to us a Child is born,
to us a Son is given;
and the government shall be upon His shoulder,
and His name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
(Isaiah 9:6)

The Second Adamic nature of this prophecy can be seen clearly throughout. Christ is seen in Scripture as a "Father" over the redeemed (see Isaiah 8:17-18 quoted in Hebrews 2:13). The idea of the "government... upon His shoulder" is not just a Davidic image, but also invokes the responsibilities of dominion granted to Adam in Genesis. We see clearly in this verse "Father" and "Son" as titles for Christ, but there is also a very clear link that can be found between the imagery of "Counselor" here and the role of "Comforter" in the New Testament, especially in light of "Counsel" being one of the attributes of the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2. So we can see that as the Second Adam, Jesus is worthy of the titles "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit", and that His name also represents His Father, and His words of promise are to us the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. We are to "go", "make disciples", "baptise", "teach" and "obey" everything that has been "commanded" in the name of "Jesus" - the One Who stands to us in power and authority representing the offices of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Matthew's choice to use these words of Christ, out of all the words Jesus must have preached as part of the Great Commission, others of which are represented in parallel passages such as Luke, show his affinity for triadic formulas. Matthew, like John, liked to reinforce his message with small triplets of emphasis and larger triadic structural components. The more significant of these appear to be used by Matthew so as to abide by the principle of Moses requiring "two or three witnesses" to confirm the truth of something. Thus, Matthew's choice of the triad "of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" in place of the Lucan use of "His name" or the larger theme of "the name of Jesus" gives superlative weight to the Great Commission Matthew closes with in a stylistic parallel to the close of the Hebrew canon. Matthew equates the three offices to the singular "name" of Jesus, as the context reveals and as confirmed by comparison to the parallel in Luke. What is abundantly clear is that Matthew did not intend the superficial Trinitarian meaning most see today by his use of the triad any more than Isaiah intended a Quartet (or Quintuplet depending whether you read "Wonderful Counsellor" as one or two titles) in Isaiah 9:6. Matthew simply wished to summarise the Great Commission

with the greatest literary force he could muster! The message that we should take from Matthew is that our entire Christian mission centers in the Authority Christ received from His Father and that His abiding presence enables us to carry out His Assignment to us.