

Book Review of Systematic Theology Vol. I

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book *Systematic Theology Vol. 1, The Triune God* by Robert W. Jenson.

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Article:

JENSON, ROBERT W. *Systematic Theology Vol. 1, The Triune God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xii+244 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

Robert Jenson has devoted the last thirty years—from *God after God* (Indianapolis, 1969) to volume 1 of *Systematic Theology*—to telling the story of the triune God in ever more successful and provocative ways. This is another, more splendid at-tempt at the peculiar metaphysics of the narrative: the attempt to rule the concepts by the story, to invent a philosophy adequate to theology rather than the other way around—always with trinitarian consequences. "Since the Lord's self-identity is constituted in dramatic coherence, it is established not from the beginning but from the end, not at birth but at death, not in persistence but in anticipation" (p. 66). If the interest of what a theology says about the Spirit is often an index of the liveliness of the trinitarian narratives in it, Jenson has always passed that test with colors defiantly flying. In *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia, 1982), biblical narratives of eschatology reform metaphysics, so that the Spirit becomes the witness to the fullness of deity reunited at the end, the *finis* beyond the *fons deitatis*. In *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia, 1984), narratives of concrete callings of disciples reform metaphysics, so that not only is Jesus Christ the electing God, but even the Holy Spirit is the electing God. In *Unbaptized God* (Minneapolis, 1992), the narrative-metaphysical and ecclesial-ecumenical aspects of Jenson's authorship come together as he casts a pox on Protestants and Catholics alike because their sinfully inadequate cleavings to origins insulate them from the work of the Spirit. Like the plot of a good Aristotelian narrative, volume 1 of

Systematic Theology breathtakingly extends these themes in accountable yet unexpected ways. This time the ecumenical conversation partner is Israel (perhaps in the person of Michael Wyschogrod), and its history is the test of the liveliness of trinitarian thinking, the root of narrative metaphysical proposals. In the twentieth-century Christian West, doctrines of the Trinity and of Israel have both flourished, but more often in conflict than in complementarity. If (as Barth and Jenson have argued) God is adequately identified only by reference to Jesus, the one he called Father, and their common Spirit, what does that do to the newly emphasized claim that what baptism washes away is (as Kendall Soulen puts it) the Gentiles' lack of relation to the God of Israel? Are Jews inadequately related to God if they do not identify God by Jesus? And can Christians be adequately related to the same God if they can identify God without constitutive reference to Israel? Since it has lately been dogmatically defined by the Catholic Church and large numbers of Protestant churches that the continued existence of practicing Jews is God-willed, to say at once that God is the God of Israel and that God is Trinity has recently become as difficult as it was in the first centuries to say, This human being is God-and, Jenson thinks, for the same reasons. The solution is bold. "God is a God identified by and with the events of Israel's history" (p. 71). If so, then, "what the Lord does to Israel he does to himself, in that the Shekinah shares Israel's lot and the Lord's being" (p. 76). "The narrative identification of God by his involvement with Israel displays a mutuality of personae whose differing relations are between God and Israel and somehow between God and God. ... God is identified with Israel in that he is identified as a participant in Israel's story with him" (pp. 76-77). If students of Christianity have often doubted whether from a Jewish perspective the Trinity allows God to love a real other, Jenson daringly insists that real otherness first exists in God. God's relation with Israel becomes intratrinitarian. As Jenson's christology reads the human being Jesus into the Godhead, here Jenson's israelology reads the people Israel into the Godhead. "Israel's 'deification' will be... that we come to be identified by and with the events in the life of God" (p. 71). The theme traced here does not by any means exhaust the book. From its reflections on what theology is, to its use of Scripture, its descriptions of the roominess of God, and its pithy phrasing, it is more in the genre of patristic centuries or Anselm's prayers than the prolix dogmatics of our time. But this is reason enough to read and ponder it.

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