

## Joachim of Fiore's Symbolical Depictions of the Trinity and the Interpretation according to the Principle of Similitude

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### Abstract

The aim of my article is to analyze the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity is interpreted in the preserved manuscripts of Joachim of Fiore, taking into consideration the images that represent in a symbolical manner the intra-Trinitarian relations and the text accompanying them, focusing mainly on the version of the Sächsische Landesbibliothek in Dresden (ms. lat. A. 121). I also followed the arguments that addressed the possible critique made by the Abbot to the definition of the Trinity in the way that Peter the Lombard expressed it in his *Sentences*, reminding in the same time the other two controversial opinions of Arius and Sabellius as they are to be found in Joachim's writings. The allegorical depictions of the Trinity trace for Joachim of Fiore marks of the Trinity according to the principle of similitude through which he also understood to observe nature.

**Keywords:** Joachim of Fiore, Trinity, unity, ms. lat. A. 121, similitude, *perfidia*, Peter the Lombard

Discussing the doctrine of the Trinity, Joachim of Fiore argued that there is a single divine *essentia* of the Three Persons, and that, notionally speaking, divine essence could not beget divine essence; the Father could not beget the Son, for in a metaphysical understanding of the problem, both existed simultaneously as a unity of divine being. As the

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Father could not be separated from His divine attributes like wisdom or power, which were not beget from His divine essence, so He did not beget the divine essence of the Son (Lee 1980, 133). When speaking about the Trinity one must not imply any distinction with respect to divine essence or else one may speak about a “quaternity” of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and the Divine Essence or Substance. This last observation attributed to Joachim is responsible for triggering one of the most substantial and, yet, controversial critique in the history of medieval philosophy and in the philosophy of history, in the same instance, understood from an ideological point of view.

The critique it is said to be oriented towards Peter’s the Lombard interpretation of the Trinitarian doctrine together with two other approaches discussed by Joachim pertaining to two authors considered by the Church as heretics: Arius (250/256-336) for his opinion that denies a coequal Trinity and, in the same time, the Homoousian (gr. ὁμοούσιος) Christology that represent God the Father and Christ the Son as “of one essence” consubstantial and coeternal preferring instead a type of Homoiousian (gr. ὁμοιούσιος) understanding of the second Person of the Trinity as merely of a similar essence to God the Father and Sabellius (approx. 215) who asserted that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three different “modes” or “aspects” of God and not three distinct persons within the Godhead (Stokes 1877-1887, 567). Sabellius also considered the Father and the Son to be “one substance” meaning that, to him, the Father and the Son were one essential person, though operating as different manifestations or modes.

Joachim of Fiore expresses his critique of the above mentioned opinions through the means of a drawing present in the work *Liber figurarum*, image that has been known since then as the contra Lombard figure present in the manuscript lat. A. 121, fol. 89r from the Sächsische Landesbibliothek in Dresden edited by Leone Tondelli in Torino in 1953 (Tondelli 1953, XXVI). The figure illustrates in the above part of the folio a circle (that has been mainly interpreted by the exegesis as a water recipient) from which one may observe three

emerging channels in the same direction without any interference applied to the point of emergence. Inside the circle one may observe the word *Pater* and above each channel the following words starting from the top: *Pater, Filius, Spiritus Sanctus*. The channels *Pater* and *Filius* are connected together and divided somewhere in the middle. Attached to the margin written in *littera textualis*, on the left margin one may find the inscription *fides catholica* and on the right one the paragraph:

*Singulum istorum aqua et simul tria una aqua. Tres sunt qui testimonium dant in terra: spiritus, aqua et sanguis. Hii tres unum sunt. Aer diffusus aer est: aer conspissatus in nebula aer est: aer motus in ventus aer est: horum singulum aer: et simul tria unus aer. Alius est in aliis, et tamen tria sunt. Tria sunt in vocabulis et tamen unum sunt nature et separationem non admittunt.*

The phrase includes also a reference to a scriptural passage present in the Vulgate (1. Ioannis 5, 8) when speaking about the three witnesses as spirit, water and blood as one essence. By the means of a metaphor of “air”, he is also trying to explain the diversity of the Trinity that represents in the same time a unity of being, that is no matter the state of aggregation regarding air, air remains air even if it is spread in the atmosphere, condensed in the mist or moved by and along with the wind: three different types or shapes in which air can be found without altering its condition of air. Three different names or words to express an aspect having an identical substance as the passage reveals. Joachim often sees the elements of nature in an allegorical manner as representing *vestigia* of the divine Trinity. In this case, water (*Singulum istorum aqua et simul tria una aqua*) is the most discussed one as *similitudo* of the one God manifested into three Persons. *Spiritus* is a synonym of *aër* (air) and as water is considered allegorically an image of the Trinity, similar to it as air may be found in three conditions in nature (*diffusus/* air, *conspissatus/* mist, *motus/* wind) and, although it changes its shape and form, it remains present in all of them as the same natural element.

The words spirit, water and blood from the Johannine passage have been interpreted by authors like Augustine in

*Contra Maximum* (Augustine II, 22, 3, PL 42, 795) as representations of the Trinity in which the Father is the spirit as the creator of life that vivifies the entire world; the Son is the blood due to the fact of Incarnation, but also because of the sacrifice by means of crucifixion for the salvation and redemption of man; the Holy Spirit as water reminding the incipit of redemption through the Sacrament of Baptism but also as a reference to the scriptural expression of *aqua viva* (Ioannis 7, 37-39). Joachim uses the fragment not to present a relation of identity between the elements, but to illustrate their connection by means of similitude, as depicting an image of the Trinity.

Bellow this figure one may observe another interpretation that has been named *Perfidia Sabellii* with the reference to Sabellius from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century depicting one horizontal simple red segment line with the notation:

*Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus est una persona.*

A heretic approach of the doctrine of the Trinity that stipulates clearly that God in the Christian faith represents Three Persons and only one Essence.

The following representation speaks about *Perfidia Arrii* that tends to define a hierarchical understanding of the Trinity: three horizontal parallel red segment lines one under the other, the first one being longer than the second one and the second one longer than the third one. The text added to this image refers to a metaphor in which each Person of the Trinity is view as a metal: the Father is greater, therefore he is gold; the Son is less great, therefore he is silver; the Holy Spirit is the less great of them all, in this sense he is like copper or bronze:

*Pater est maior: Pater est aurum.*

*Filius est minor: Filius is argentum.*

*Spiritus sanctus est minimus: Spiritus sanctus est eramentum.*

The last figure present on the folio is the one named simply *Perfidia* without any name added. It is similar to the first one representing the circular water recipient, the only difference to observe here could be that the two channels *Pater* and *Filius* seem to be united in a vague manner at the

beginning and not in the middle and that the opening is obstructed by a red curved line segment. The word *Pater* is not to be found in the middle of the circle in this case. The idea inspiring this illustration has been attributed to Peter the Lombard's view of the Trinity and the text accompanying it is the following one:

*Essencia est quedam summa res communis tribus personis nec ingenita, nec genita, nec procedens.*

A definition of divine essence that according to Joachim's interpretation is questionable because it transforms the essence in the fourth "person" of the Trinity as a separate entity becoming the sum of common aspects or attributes of the three Persons that is neither born, nor unborn, nor proceeded.

One seeing and reading the folio can address the legitimate question: why are the other two *perfidiae* explicitly named, but this one does not bear the name of or any reference to Peter the Lombard? And if it does not do so, why was it then associated with him? An answer regarding this situation is to be found in another work of the Abbot that discusses the rule of Saint Benedict and namely, *Tractatus in expositionem vite et regule beati Benedicti*. In the treaty Joachim compares the three positions naming the authors explicitly: *impietas Sabellii, pravitas Arrii, blasphemia Petri*. In the following passage of the treaty Joachim criticizes Peter for separating the unity of the Trinity transforming it thus into a quaternity (Fiore 2008, 208-209):

*[...] abolita primo impietate Sabellii, qui personas negavit, secundo pravitate Arrii, qui unitatem scidit, tertio blasphemia Petri, qui unitatem a Trinitate dividens quaternitatem inducit.*

If Sabellius denies the Trinity of divine persons asserting that the three Persons of the Trinity are in fact one, if Arius splits the unity of the Trinity by understanding it in a hierarchical manner expressing that one person is greater than the other, Peter is responsible in Joachim's view of creating a different instantiation of the other three Persons in the divine Essence as a sum of their attributes in a negative manner: neither born, nor unborn, nor proceeding. The

passage was considered so impious for the memory of Peter the Lombard that some versions of the text are altered after the Lateran Council in 1215 from *blasphemia Petri* to the expression *blasphemia illorum* who separate the unity of the Trinity thus transforming it into a quaternity.

The analysis of the manuscripts of Dresden and of Reggio Aemilia has proven that the direct reference to Peter the Lombard is absent and that only a variant of the text present in Oxford follows this specification as an emendation of the text made by a copyist (Tondelli 1953, 32-33). If the figures and the text accompanying them that are to be found in *Liber figurarum* have no direct reference to the interpretations of the doctrine expressed by the Magister Sententiarum there is still the problem of the reference present in the *Tractatus in expositionem vite et regule beati Benedicti*. Eugène Honée has analyzed the exegetical opinions expressed by both sides that view the work either as an incomplete treaty or as a coherent work, Valeria De Fraja and Gian Luca Potestà who interpret the work as a collection of four independent texts, which were written at different times but later artificially combined under a single heading and Alexander Patschovsky who reverts to the older view of Herbert Grundmann and regards the *Tractatus* as a sketch for a real work, which Joachim drafted in a short time, then laid aside and never subjected to a final revision (Honée 2012, 67-104). It is difficult to render a conclusive analysis of the exposed issue also due to the fact that Joachim's treatise *De unitate et essentiae Trinitatis* in which he expressed his arguments defined as "a significant attack" on Lombard's Trinitarian views is now lost. The work may only be observed by analyzing fragments present in the decree of the Lateran Council of 1215 (Mansi 1758-1798, 981-983) and in the Protocol of Anagni (Denifle; Ehrle 1885, 49-142).

Regardless of what might have been written in the lost work, the clearest image of the Trinity and of the interpretation of the doctrine expressed by Joachim remains the one present in *Liber figurarum* depicting the Trinitarian circles. It dominates the time of the two Testaments, the entire course of the history of salvation. The first circle

expresses the status of the Father, the second the one of the Son, the third the one of the Holy Ghost (the different colors of the circles symbolize the Trinity of the Persons itself: green the Father Creator of nature, blue the Son that has come down on earth from Heaven, red the Holy Ghost who is love). The unity of the divine substance is indicated by the oval middle in the conjoint center of the three circles. The intra-Trinitarian relations are delimited by the intersection of the circumferences and by the succession of letters present inside them (the name of God, the Tetragrammaton IEUE in this case): **I** (Father)-**E** (Holy Ghost)-**U** (Son)-**E** (Holy Ghost). The Holy Ghost comes also from the Father (**IE**), as from the Son (**UE**). **I**- the God of Abraham, the first time of the law through Moses; **E**- the God of Isaac, the time of the Gospel and the law, Elijah; **U**- the beginning of the time of the typical intellect, the fulfillment of the Gospel, John the Baptist; **E**- the God of Jacob, the beginning of the time of the anagogic intellect, the time of the intelligence of the Gospel, Elijah.

The image of the Trinity depicted as three circles crossing each other is also present in another manuscript of the Vatican Apostolic Library, Vat. lat. 3822, fol. 12r in a more simplified depiction (the drawing is made only with red and black ink, no other colors are used, the technique is evidently simplified in order to highlight the theoretical approach) where the accent of the interpretation that covers more folios is placed on the Tetragrammaton IEUE, but also on explaining that the letters *alpha* and *omega* from the Greek alphabet have no casual meaning in understanding the doctrine of the Trinity and that a mark of it can be found in a symbolical manner in almost every aspect of the created world. Even in letters as this case reflects. In this sense, Joachim explains that *Alpha* illustrates the way in which the two Persons, the Son and the Holy Ghost, come from the One, the Father (in the center of the image present in *Liber figurarum* one may have also read "Trinity- one single God" very similar to the other approach of Joachim from the manuscript in Dresden depicting the doctrine of the Trinity by means of the water recipient in which inside the recipient one may read the word *Pater*). *Omega* shows how One, the Spirit,

comes from two, the Father and the Son. The circles indicate in this case periods in the history of salvation according to the three status of spiritual evolution (the time when the law was received – the status of the Father, the time when the Gospel had to be obeyed – the status of the Son, and the time of the typical intellect – the status of the Holy Ghost).

The analysis of the ideas and images reflecting Joachim's approach of the Trinity from the various manuscripts that were discussed in this article reveals that Joachim had no evident intention in criticizing Peter the Lombard's view of the doctrine, but merely the fact of opposing the views that were in his opinion contrary to the catholic faith (and also to the common acceptance of the Catholic Church in the cases of Arius and Sabellius) as he understood it, not by means of dialectics and rational arguments, but more by allegorical depictions observing in the created world marks of the Trinity according to the principle of similitude that he most highly valued as one may read in all of his preserved works.

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