



## Philological and Patristic Evidence for the Personhood of the Holy Spirit: Reassessing Binitarian Pneumatology in Early Christianity

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### Abstract

This study examines the question of the Holy Spirit's personhood in early Christianity by integrating biblical, philological, and patristic analysis. The research addresses ongoing debates between binitarian and trinitarian interpretations and highlights gaps in previous studies that often overlook linguistic and early theological evidence. Using a qualitative method, the study analyzes New Testament texts, key linguistic terms such as *pneuma*, *ruach*, and *rucha*, and writings of early church fathers to trace the development of pneumatology. The findings show that early Christian texts describe the Spirit through functional and relational language that reflects personal agency but lacks a fully defined ontological framework. This indicates that early pneumatology developed gradually within a dynamic theological context. The study concludes that the personhood of the Holy Spirit emerged through interaction between scripture, language, and theological reflection, rather than as a fixed doctrinal concept from the beginning.

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### Introduction

The question of the identity and status of the Holy Spirit has long occupied a central place in Christian theological reflection (Hasker, 2021). Early Christian communities sought to maintain strict monotheism while also accounting for their experiences of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit's activity in the life of the church (Hasker, 2021). This tension generated various theological interpretations concerning the nature of the Spirit (Hasker, 2021). In this context, debates emerged over whether the Holy Spirit should be understood as a divine person or as God's active power (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). The issue became one of the most significant themes in the historical development of Christian pneumatology (Schaab, 2023).

Previous research has explored the historical and theological development of Trinitarian doctrine within

early Christianity (Venter, 2022). Scholars such as Larry W. Hurtado, in *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, have argued that early Christian devotion often reflected a form of "binitarian" pattern of worship centered on the Father and the Son (Hurtado, 2003). Similarly, works such as J. N. D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* and Khaled Anatolios's *Retrieving Nicaea* examine the gradual development of Trinitarian theology within the early church (Kelly, 1978; Anatolios, 2011). These studies demonstrate that early Christian theology evolved through complex theological debates rather than emerging as a fully formed doctrine (Smiles & Rao, 2020). At the same time, research on pneumatology has highlighted the diversity of interpretations regarding the identity of the Holy Spirit in early Christian thought (Vondevy, 2020)



Academic studies also approach this topic through biblical exegesis and historical theology (Juriček, 2020). Many scholars analyze New Testament passages describing the activities of the Holy Spirit to evaluate whether these descriptions imply personal agency or symbolic representation (Hasker, 2021). Other researchers examine the writings of early church fathers to trace the development of theological reflection on the Holy Spirit in patristic literature (Coman, 2022). These studies reveal that early Christian theology did not present a single unified perspective on the Holy Spirit but rather reflected a range of interpretive traditions (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). As a result, the development of pneumatology must be understood within the broader framework of early Christian theological discourse (Schaab, 2023).

Historical developments within the early church further shaped the understanding of the Holy Spirit (Smiles & Rao, 2020). Theological controversies concerning the nature of God and the status of Christ eventually extended to debates regarding the Holy Spirit (Hasker, 2021). These discussions influenced ecclesiastical decisions and doctrinal formulations within the institutional church (Venter, 2022). In particular, the theological conflicts of the fourth century led to formal doctrinal clarifications regarding the identity of the Spirit (Smiles & Rao, 2020). These developments demonstrate that theological reflection on the Holy Spirit was closely connected to broader debates concerning the doctrine of God in early Christianity (Coman, 2022).

Despite differences in interpretation, much of the scholarly literature agrees that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit developed gradually within the early Christian tradition (Venter, 2022). The emergence of Trinitarian theology reflected the church's attempt to articulate the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit within a coherent theological framework (Smiles & Rao, 2020). At the same time, historical evidence indicates that earlier theological patterns, including forms of binitarian thought, played a role in shaping this development (Hurtado, 2003). Consequently, the study of early Christian pneumatology remains an important field for understanding the historical formation of Christian doctrine (Schaab, 2023).

Despite extensive discussion of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in early Christian theology, several limitations persist in current scholarship (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). Many studies focus on the development of the doctrine of the Trinity as a whole but

pay limited attention to the specific question of the Holy Spirit's personhood in the earliest stages of Christian thought (Vondey, 2020). As a result, the historical emergence of the concept of the Holy Spirit as a distinct divine person remains insufficiently clarified (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). In particular, the relationship between early Christian experience of the Spirit and later doctrinal formulations has not always been systematically examined (Coman, 2022). This gap indicates that further investigation into the ontological status of the Holy Spirit in early Christian theology remains necessary (Zahl, 2022).

Another limitation appears in the imbalance of focus within previous research (Schaab, 2023). Many theological studies emphasize the development of Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity, while the role of the Holy Spirit often receives comparatively less attention (Schaab, 2023). In particular, discussions of early Christian theology frequently prioritize the relationship between the Father and the Son (Vondey, 2020). As a result, the pneumatological dimension of early Christian theology is sometimes treated as secondary or derivative (Grassi, 2022). This imbalance leaves important questions regarding the development of early pneumatology insufficiently explored (Schaab, 2023).

Limitations also exist in the scope of existing studies (Coman, 2022). Many investigations focus primarily on conciliar theology or the doctrinal outcomes of later theological debates (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). While such studies provide valuable insight into the institutional development of doctrine, they often overlook the earlier stages of theological reflection within biblical texts and patristic writings (Juriček, 2020). Consequently, the connection between scriptural language, early theological reflection, and later doctrinal formulations is not always clearly articulated (Coman, 2022). A more integrated approach is necessary in order to understand how early Christian pneumatology developed historically (Juriček, 2020).

Another gap is evident in the limited analysis of philological evidence on the Holy Spirit (Juriček, 2020). Although terms such as *pneuma*, *ruach*, and *ruha* frequently appear in biblical scholarship, their linguistic implications for understanding the personhood of the Spirit are not always examined in depth (Juriček, 2020). Differences in grammatical gender and semantic range across Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic traditions may offer important insights into early Christian interpretations of the Spirit (Vondey, 2020). However, cross-linguistic

analysis of these terms remains relatively underdeveloped in many theological discussions (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). As a result, the linguistic dimension of early Christian pneumatology still requires further scholarly attention (Juriček, 2020).

In light of these limitations, a more comprehensive investigation is needed to reassess the question of the Holy Spirit's personhood in early Christianity (Vondey, 2020). Such research should integrate biblical analysis, philological evidence, and patristic theology in order to provide a more balanced understanding of early Christian pneumatology (Coman, 2022). By examining both textual and historical sources, it becomes possible to reevaluate the role of binitarian interpretations within early Christian thought (Juriček, 2020). This approach may also clarify how theological reflection on the Holy Spirit developed prior to the consolidation of Trinitarian doctrine (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). Therefore, new research is necessary to reassess the foundations of pneumatological theology in early Christianity (Schaab, 2023).

The primary objective of this study is to reassess the question of the Holy Spirit's personhood in early Christianity by examining both philological and patristic evidence (Vondey, 2020). The research seeks to clarify how early Christian sources described the identity and role of the Holy Spirit before the formal consolidation of Trinitarian doctrine (Coman, 2022). In particular, the study investigates whether early Christian texts present the Holy Spirit primarily as a divine person or as God's active power (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). By addressing this issue, the research aims to provide a clearer understanding of how pneumatological concepts developed within early Christian theology (Schaab, 2023). The study, therefore, focuses on the historical and textual foundations of the debate between binitarian and trinitarian interpretations of the Holy Spirit (Zahl, 2022).

This research employs a qualitative approach that integrates biblical analysis, philological examination, and historical-theological study (Juriček, 2020). The philological component analyzes key linguistic terms used for the Holy Spirit in biblical languages, including Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic (Juriček, 2020). The historical dimension examines early Christian writings in order to trace the development of theological reflection on the Holy Spirit (Coman, 2022). In addition, the study considers how early church fathers interpreted the identity and function of the Spirit within their theological frameworks (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). Through

this interdisciplinary approach, the research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of early Christian pneumatology (Schaab, 2023).

The analysis focuses on several key dimensions of the question under investigation (Vondey, 2020). First, the study examines biblical descriptions of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, particularly passages that attribute personal actions to the Spirit (Juriček, 2020). Second, the research investigates the interpretation of the Holy Spirit in early patristic writings, including discussions found in the works of early theologians (Coman, 2022). Third, the study evaluates philological evidence on the terminology used for the Spirit across different linguistic traditions (Juriček, 2020). By examining these dimensions together, the research aims to connect scriptural language with historical theological development (Schaab, 2023).

This study is important because the question of the Holy Spirit's personhood remains central to the broader understanding of Christian theology (Zahl, 2022). Clarifying how early Christian communities understood the Spirit contributes to a deeper understanding of the development of Trinitarian doctrine (Vondey, 2020). In addition, reassessing the role of binitarian patterns in early Christian thought may offer new insights into the historical diversity of early theological reflection (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). Understanding these developments also helps illuminate the intellectual processes through which early Christian doctrine was formed (Coman, 2022). Therefore, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions concerning the historical formation of Christian theology (Schaab, 2023).

The expected contribution of this research lies in its attempt to integrate philological analysis with patristic and biblical studies to examine early Christian pneumatology (Juriček, 2020). By bringing together these different analytical approaches, the study seeks to provide a more balanced and comprehensive reassessment of the personhood of the Holy Spirit in early Christianity (Schaab, 2023). The research also contributes to the reevaluation of binitarian interpretations within the broader history of Christian doctrine (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). In doing so, the study aims to clarify how linguistic, textual, and historical factors interact in shaping early Christian theological reflection (Coman, 2022). Ultimately, the research seeks to enrich contemporary scholarly understanding of the origins and development of Christian pneumatology (Vondey, 2020).



## Research Methods

### 1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design with a historical-theological and textual analytical approach. The research aims to reassess the personhood of the Holy Spirit in early Christianity by examining philological and patristic evidence. A qualitative design allows the study to analyze theological concepts, historical sources, and linguistic data in a systematic and interpretive manner. The research integrates biblical studies, historical theology, and philological analysis in order to evaluate how early Christian texts described the identity and role of the Holy Spirit. Through this design, the study investigates the development of early Christian pneumatology within the broader debate between binitarian and trinitarian interpretations.

### 2. Population and Samples / Materials

The population of this research comprises textual sources on early Christian pneumatology. Primary materials include selected passages from the New Testament that describe the activity and role of the Holy Spirit. Additional materials include writings of early church fathers that discuss the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These patristic texts represent early theological reflections that contributed to the development of Christian doctrine. The study also considers historical documents and theological writings that reflect early debates concerning the nature of the Holy Spirit. These sources were selected because they provide direct evidence for analyzing the linguistic and theological understanding of the Holy Spirit in early Christianity.

### 3. Instruments

The main research instrument in this study is textual analysis supported by a historical-theological framework. Biblical texts are analyzed through exegetical reading in order to identify descriptions of the Holy Spirit and their theological implications. Philological analysis is used to examine key terms associated with the Holy Spirit, particularly *pneuma* in Greek, *ruach* in Hebrew, and *rucha* in Aramaic. In addition, patristic writings are analyzed to trace how early Christian theologians interpreted the identity of the Holy Spirit. These analytical tools allow the researcher to examine linguistic meaning, theological interpretation, and historical development simultaneously. The combination of these instruments enables a comprehensive evaluation of early Christian

pneumatology.

### 4. Procedures

The research follows several systematic steps. First, relevant biblical passages and patristic texts related to the Holy Spirit are collected and selected based on their relevance to early Christian pneumatology. Second, the selected biblical texts are analyzed to identify descriptions of the actions and characteristics attributed to the Holy Spirit. Third, a philological analysis is conducted to examine the semantic and grammatical features of key terms associated with the Spirit in different biblical languages. Fourth, the study analyzes patristic writings in order to understand how early Christian theologians interpreted these biblical concepts. Finally, the results of the biblical, philological, and patristic analyses are synthesized to reassess the personhood of the Holy Spirit in the context of early Christian theological development.

## Findings

### 1. Personal Agency of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament

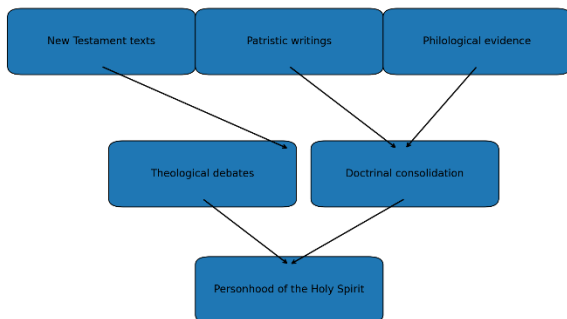
The analysis of New Testament texts indicates that the Holy Spirit is frequently described through actions that imply personal agency. Several passages attribute activities to the Spirit, such as teaching, guiding believers, distributing spiritual gifts, and speaking to the early Christian community. These actions suggest intentional activity rather than an impersonal force. The narrative of the early church often presents the Spirit as directing missionary work and guiding apostolic decisions. These descriptions provide textual evidence that the New Testament portrays the Holy Spirit as an active and relational agent within the life of the early Christian community.

### 2. Conceptual Ambiguity in Early Christian Pneumatology

Historical analysis of early Christian writings reveals that the personhood of the Holy Spirit was not immediately articulated in systematic theological terms. Early theological discussions focused primarily on the relationship between the Father and the Son. As a result, the theological status of the Holy Spirit often remained implicit rather than explicitly defined. Some early writers described the Spirit primarily in functional terms, emphasizing prophetic inspiration and divine activity. This situation indicates that early Christian

pneumatology developed gradually and initially contained a degree of conceptual ambiguity.

Conceptual Framework for Reassessing Binitarian Pneumatology



early Christian thinkers attempted to explain the relationship between God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit within a monotheistic framework. Binitarian patterns of thought often emphasized the relational structure between the Father and the Son while interpreting the Holy Spirit as the active power or presence of God. In contrast, trinitarian interpretations gradually emphasized the distinct personal identity of the Holy Spirit alongside the Father and the Son. These differing interpretations reflect attempts to reconcile scriptural testimony with theological reflection. The debate eventually played a significant role in shaping later doctrinal formulations.

#### 4. Philological Evidence and the Language of the Spirit

Philological analysis highlights the importance of linguistic evidence in understanding early Christian interpretations of the Holy Spirit. The Greek term *pneuma* is grammatically neuter, while the Hebrew term *ruach* often appears with feminine grammatical features, and the Aramaic *rucha* may appear with masculine usage. These variations demonstrate that grammatical gender does not directly determine theological interpretation. However, some New Testament passages employ masculine pronouns when referring to the Spirit, suggesting a deliberate emphasis on personal identity. This linguistic pattern supports the interpretation that early Christian authors sometimes intended to portray the Holy Spirit as a personal subject.

#### 5. Doctrinal Consolidation in the Fourth Century

The study also finds that theological controversies in the fourth century significantly influenced the clarification of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Groups that denied the Spirit's full divinity or personhood prompted theological responses from prominent church leaders. These debates eventually led to clearer doctrinal statements within the institutional church. Theological reflection during this period emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, revelation, and divine communion. As a result, the identity of the Holy Spirit as a distinct divine person was articulated more clearly within the developing Trinitarian framework.

No.	Theme	Main Finding	Theological Implication
1	Personal agency in the New Testament	The Holy Spirit is described as acting through teaching, guiding, speaking, and distributing gifts.	The Spirit is presented as an active relational subject, not merely an impersonal force.
2	Conceptual ambiguity in early Christian pneumatology	Early Christian writers often discussed the Spirit functionally rather than in fixed ontological terms.	The doctrine developed gradually, not in one final step.
3	Binitarian and Trinitarian interpretations	Early Christians tried to explain Father, Son, and Spirit within monotheism.	The debate shaped later doctrinal development.
4	Philological evidence	Terms such as <i>pneuma</i> , <i>ruach</i> , and <i>rucha</i> show linguistic variation and grammatical complexity.	Language supports careful, context-based interpretation of the Spirit.
5	Fourth-century doctrinal consolidation	Later controversies pushed the church toward clearer doctrinal language about the Spirit.	The Spirit's personhood became more explicitly articulated in Trinitarian theology.

Table 1. Summary of Findings on the Personhood of the Holy Spirit in Early Christianity

### 3. The Emergence of Binitarian and Trinitarian Interpretations

The study also finds that the debate between binitarian and trinitarian interpretations emerged as

### Discussion

The analysis of New Testament texts shows that the Holy Spirit is described through actions that indicate personal agency, such as teaching, guiding, distributing spiritual gifts, and speaking to the early Christian



community (Yankyera, 2023). These actions appear in several narratives that portray the Spirit as actively involved in the life and mission of the early church (Nuekpe, 2022). The Spirit is presented not only as a theological concept but also as a subject that interacts with believers (Brahinsky et al., 2024). Such depictions suggest intentional activity rather than an impersonal force (Hasker, 2021). Therefore, the biblical portrayal of the Holy Spirit provides important evidence for understanding the early Christian perception of the Spirit's personal role (Robeck, 2025).

These descriptions provide textual evidence that, in the New Testament narrative, the Holy Spirit is portrayed as an active and relational agent within the life of the early Christian community (Yankyera, 2023). The Spirit is often presented as guiding missionary activity and shaping important decisions among the apostles (Nuekpe, 2022). This relational activity demonstrates the Spirit's dynamic involvement in the development of the early church (Diboro & Blewusi, 2021). The narrative structure of the New Testament frequently depicts the Spirit as participating in the unfolding of God's redemptive work (Hasker, 2021). Consequently, the biblical testimony forms a significant foundation for later theological reflection on the personhood of the Holy Spirit (Robeck, 2025).

Although indications of the personhood of the Holy Spirit appear in biblical texts, historical analysis shows that this concept was not immediately formulated in systematic theological terms within the early church (Venter, 2022). Early Christian writers often described the activity of the Spirit without defining the Spirit's ontological status in precise theological language (Coman, 2022). This lack of systematic formulation reflects the early stage of doctrinal development within the Christian community (Smiles & Rao, 2020). Theological reflection was still shaped by ongoing debates about the nature of God and the identity of Christ (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). As a result, the concept of the Holy Spirit as a distinct divine person developed gradually over time (Vondey, 2020).

This situation indicates that early Christian pneumatology developed gradually and was often understood in functional terms as divine activity related to revelation, inspiration, and spiritual guidance (Yankyera, 2023). Early theological discussions frequently emphasized the role of the Spirit in prophetic inspiration and the transmission of divine truth (Brahinsky et al., 2024). In many cases, the Spirit was described in terms of the functions it performed within

the community rather than through explicit doctrinal definitions (Hasker, 2021). This functional language reflects the Spirit's practical experience within the early church (Diboro & Blewusi, 2021). Therefore, early pneumatological reflection must be understood within the broader context of emerging theological discourse (Schaab, 2023).

The findings of this study show that the debate between binitarian and trinitarian interpretations emerged as a theological attempt to explain the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit within the framework of Christian monotheism (Sivasubramanian, 2020). Early Christian thinkers sought to maintain the unity of God while also accounting for the roles of Christ and the Spirit in salvation history (Hurtado, 2003). The binitarian pattern emphasized the relationship between the Father and the Son while interpreting the Spirit primarily as divine power or presence (Sivasubramanian, 2020). In contrast, the trinitarian interpretation gradually articulated the Holy Spirit's distinct personal identity (Kelly, 1978). These differing approaches illustrate the diversity of theological reflection in early Christianity (Anatolios, 2011).

Unlike some previous studies that emphasize the final formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, this study highlights the historical and textual processes that reveal the diversity of early Christian understandings of the Holy Spirit (Venter, 2022). Rather than focusing solely on later doctrinal conclusions, this research examines earlier stages of theological development (Smiles & Rao, 2020). The study demonstrates that early Christian thought contained multiple interpretive trajectories concerning the identity of the Spirit (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). These trajectories emerged from the interaction between biblical interpretation and theological reflection (Juriček, 2020). Consequently, the development of pneumatology can be understood as a dynamic historical process rather than a fixed doctrinal starting point (Schaab, 2023).

The philological analysis of the terms *pneuma*, *ruach*, and *rucha* demonstrates that linguistic variation and grammatical gender have important implications for the theological interpretation of the Holy Spirit (Kirabaev & Chistyakova, 2023). These linguistic differences illustrate the complexity of interpreting biblical language about the Spirit (Juriček, 2020). In different linguistic traditions, the term for spirit may carry different grammatical and semantic associations (Kirabaev & Chistyakova, 2023). Such variation can

influence how readers understand the nature and identity of the Spirit (Vondey, 2020). Therefore, philological evidence plays an important role in interpreting early Christian pneumatology (Juriček, 2020).

These findings emphasize that linguistic and philological approaches are essential for understanding how biblical authors and early Christian communities interpreted the identity and role of the Holy Spirit (Yankyera, 2023). Careful analysis of language helps clarify how theological ideas were expressed within different cultural and linguistic contexts (Kirabaev & Chistyakova, 2023). It also reveals how biblical authors intentionally shaped their descriptions of the Spirit (Ford, 2023). By examining these linguistic features, scholars can better understand the theological intentions embedded in the texts (Juriček, 2020). Thus, philological study contributes significantly to the broader interpretation of early Christian theology (Schaab, 2023).

This study shows that the understanding of the personhood of the Holy Spirit developed through the interaction between biblical testimony, patristic reflection, and theological debates in the history of the church (Coman, 2022). These three dimensions together shaped the evolving interpretation of the Spirit's identity within early Christian theology (Venter, 2022). Biblical texts provided the foundational descriptions of the Spirit's activity (Hasker, 2021). Patristic writings expanded these descriptions through theological reflection and doctrinal discussion (Hermanin de Reichenfeld, 2022). Through this process, the concept of the Holy Spirit gradually gained clearer theological articulation (Vondey, 2020).

By integrating biblical, philological, and patristic analysis, this research provides a more comprehensive reassessment of early Christian pneumatology and clarifies the dynamics of binitarian interpretations in early Christianity (Sivasubramanian, 2020). This integrated approach allows the study to connect linguistic evidence with historical theological

development (Kirabaev & Chistyakova, 2023). It also offers a more balanced perspective on the diversity of early Christian interpretations of the Spirit (Coman, 2022). The research, therefore, contributes to a deeper understanding of the formation of Christian doctrine (Anatolios, 2011). In doing so, the study helps address existing gaps in the scholarly discussion of early Christian pneumatology (Schaab, 2023).

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the question of the personhood of the Holy Spirit in early Christianity cannot be reduced to later Trinitarian formulations, but must be understood through the combined analysis of philological evidence and patristic reflection. The findings show that early Christian texts present the Spirit through functional and relational language that often reflects personal agency, but does not yet express a fully developed ontological definition. This indicates that early pneumatology operated within a fluid theological framework in which binitarian patterns coexisted with emerging trinitarian interpretations. Therefore, the personhood of the Holy Spirit in early Christianity should be understood as a concept that developed progressively through the interaction of language, scripture, and theological discourse.

This research contributes to both theological theory and interpretive practice by offering a more nuanced framework for understanding the development of early Christian doctrine. It challenges approaches that treat Trinitarian theology as a fixed starting point and instead emphasizes the historical and linguistic processes that shaped doctrinal formation. In practical terms, this study encourages scholars to integrate philological analysis more consistently into theological investigation, particularly in the study of biblical language and early Christian texts. As a result, it opens space for a more historically grounded and textually sensitive approach to pneumatology, while also providing a clearer basis for reassessing the role of binitarian thought in the formation of Christian theology.

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