

Focus on the Kingdom

Vol. 10 No. 10

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July, 2008

The Muddle We Are In

People of restorationist persuasions are convinced that something has gone wrong with church. Jesus prayed for a united group (John 17:11) and Paul urgently advised his Christian converts to “be perfectly united in one mind and one judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). Can anyone deny that thousands of separated denominations cannot correspond to the ideal set forth by Jesus and by Jesus’ envoy Paul? Something has gone badly wrong.

There is a mass of good historical material available from writers over at least the past 500 years, since the Reformation, to show us where the problem lies. It is well-known to many specialists in church history that the whole tenor of the teaching of the Church had been dramatically altered by about 150 AD, some 50 years after the death of the last Apostle, John.

What went awry? Quite simply there occurred an invasion of the Church by Greek philosophy, which confused and complicated the more simple teaching of the very Jewish Jesus and Paul. Greek philosophy believed in a distant God who could be approached only through various mediating powers. The biblical view was that God was active in His creation, using angels and prophets to convey His will.

When the New Testament was completed it was easy for a Greek philosophically trained “church father” to imagine that the bridge between the distant God and humanity, in Old Testament times, was a **preexisting Son of God**. In other words God must have generated or **begotten** a Son sometime before Genesis and used him throughout the Old Testament, finally asking him to cease being an angelic figure and become a man by entering the womb of his mother.

This was a dramatic anti-biblical shift with lasting consequences. Hebrews 1 states categorically that Jesus was never an angel. To no angel did God ever say “you are My Son. Today I have begotten you [= become your Father, brought you into existence]” (Heb. 1:5). God, says the writer to Hebrews, expressly did *not* speak in the Old Testament times in a Son, but only after those times, in New Testament times (Heb. 1:1-2). That should have put an end to speculation about a Jesus, Son of God, who, if he lived *before* he came into existence in Mary (i.e. was begotten in her, as Matt. 1:18, 20 announce), *could not really be a genuine member of the human race!* An angel is *not* a human being and the Incarnation of an angel is not the promised Messiah. It is the wrong kind of Jesus. The true Jesus is the lineal and

biological descendant of David. He must be just this, to qualify as Messiah.

When in John 1:41 the disciples exclaimed with joy, “We have found the Messiah!” they had not located an angel-man, much less a God-man, but simply the promised Messiah man, the one true mediator between God and mankind (1 Tim. 2:5). That creedal statement of Paul in 1 Timothy 2:5 was designed to ward off, once and for all, the endless speculation that ensued once the philosopher church fathers launched the Church on to a stormy sea of speculation about a *preexisting Son*. They later used John’s gospel (1:1) to accommodate their new system. But John of course did not write “In the beginning was the Son.” He wrote “word” (no capital letter is appropriate for “word”) and said that all things were made through “it,” as all the nine English translations of the Bible before the KJV read. Translators now expect you to resonate with the second-century speculative theology of Justin Martyr and the later tradition leading to the Trinity. They want John to agree with later church tradition and make him say “In the beginning was the Word, i.e. Jesus the Son.” That concept of a preexisting and thus non-human Messiah has been pasted over the original Greek texts, which reflect the unanimous Messianic Christology that Jesus is in fact the **Son of God, precisely, as Luke says, because of the miracle worked by God in Mary** (Luke 1:35).

Unity can be based only a common view of the Bible as the God-given words to us about the great immortality program which the Creator, the Father of Jesus, is working out for the benefit of all who believe in it and act on it. The Gospel asks us to believe and *obey* Jesus and his Apostles. Salvation is of course by grace, but grace does not cancel the need for obedience to Jesus. Baptism in water is commanded by Jesus until the end of the age. Peter was obedient to Jesus when he commanded water baptism in the name of Jesus (see Acts 10, 11). Baptism is the public demonstration by responsible adults who have grasped the Gospel of the Kingdom, that they intend to follow Jesus until the end of their lives.

Christians in the New Testament met for fellowship meals to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. This was certainly not once a year, and it was not just an ordinary meal taken individually at home. It was a community meal held when the church gathered, since Paul on one occasion told the church members to stay at home and eat *there* if they could not behave responsibly at the

church's Lord's Supper celebration. The Lord's Supper involved the breaking of bread and drinking wine in memorial of the death of Jesus and looking forward to the banquet at his return. It was known as a love feast.

Christians currently divide over what obedience means. They are at two opposite poles, some seeing no point in water baptism or any official celebration of the Lord's Supper and others insisting on picking from the Old Covenant observances, with insistence on the Sabbath sign of the Old Covenant (Exod. 31) as necessary obedience to Jesus. The Sabbath however is defined by Paul in Colossians 2:16-17 as every bit as much a shadow as the Feasts and New Moons. The New Testament does not require obedience in the letter to a special calendar. But it does command the observance of the Lord's Supper and initiation into the faith by water baptism. It is against the teaching of Paul, commissioned by Jesus, to insist on Old Covenant ordinances which obscure the power of the spirit offered by the risen Jesus who is the new and final prophet. Jesus came to bring the law to its intended fulfillment, not just to repeat Moses. "The Law," says John, "was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). There is a contrast here not well grasped by some.

If we are to return to the Bible, it will first be necessary to return to a plain and simple definition of God as the God of the Jewish and Christian creed, guaranteed by Jesus in Mark 12:28-34. God is the Father of Jesus and He is one Person, not two or three. Jesus is the miraculously begotten — brought into existence — Son of God, who preached the saving Gospel of the Kingdom, demonstrated and confirmed the restoration/immortality program of God his Father, died for the sins of all, was raised on the Sunday following his Friday crucifixion on the 15th Nisan and is now waiting to return (no date setting is advisable or possible) to restore sanity to our very troubled planet. On this basis we suggest unity may be restored to our fragmented versions of the faith. ✧

John Biddle, the Father of Unitarianism in England

Searchers for truth in our time, especially in the West, should thank God daily for the immense freedom we enjoy to discuss our faith both privately and openly. It was not always so. Those who found the doctrine of the Trinity an impossibly complex and unbiblical notion were at one time severely punished by the government with the Church applauding. It was a crime against the state to question the Trinity. This appalling abuse of power by government and Church took its toll in bloodshed. Michael Servetus was put to death in a brutal and senseless burning by fire in 1553. This judicial murder was instigated by the reformer John Calvin, who never regretted his action. Servetus' non-Trinitarian

theology cost him his life in his forties. There are multiple stories equally horrifying, and the Church was responsible for killing dissenters, a policy totally foreign to the teaching of Jesus.

An example of a brilliant and courageous exponent of free investigation of the Bible was the Oxford-trained schoolmaster John Biddle. As you read his story, please be grateful for your religious freedoms. This magazine, *Focus on the Kingdom*, would not have escaped the inquisitor's power to burn and destroy in the 1600s.

John Biddle was born in 1615. He was a brilliant student who was described as a man who "outran his instructors and became tutor to himself." He went to the University at Oxford in 1634, was made a B.A. in 1638 and an M.A. in 1641. After leaving Oxford he was appointed as a teacher in the Free School of St. Mary de Crypt in Gloucester. Here he began to re-examine his religious views, and began to doubt the validity of the doctrine of the Trinity. He was influenced by the thought of the European unitarians, for the teaching of Socinus had by now made its way to England. A Latin version of the Racovian Catechism had been sent to England with a dedication to King James. It was burnt by the hangman in public in 1614. But its contents caught the interest of the public. Steps were taken to discredit it. John Owen, who was commissioned by the Council of State under Cromwell to refute the teaching of Socinus, is recorded as saying, "Do not look upon these things as things far off wherein you are little concerned; the evil is at the door; there is not a city, a town, scarce a village in England wherein some of the poison is not poured forth."

These attempts to uphold the accepted dogmas of the Church met with opposition. William Chillingworth (1602-1644) condemned "the mischief of creeds which led to the persecution, burning, cursing, damning of men for not subscribing to the words of men, as the word of God." Jeremy Taylor and Milton both affirmed that "the faithful pursuit of reason did not make a heretic. The mischief lay in the influences that perverted the will." The debate spread, and more steps were taken by those in authority to protect belief in the Trinity. In June 1640, the Conventions of Canterbury and York decided to prohibit the import, printing and circulation of Socinian books. Priests were ordered not to preach the Socinian doctrines, and everyone was warned that anyone who believed in these doctrines would be excommunicated. A number of authors and thinkers denounced this decision, but to no effect.

It was in this climate of reappraisal and fresh examination that Biddle's own views underwent a change, especially in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity. He spoke freely about them and as a result was asked by the magistrates to give them a written

confession of faith in 1644. This he did in simple language: "I believe there is one Almighty Essence called God."

He also published a pamphlet at this time entitled "Twelve Arguments Refuting the Deity of the Holy Spirit." It was addressed "to the Christian reader." In 1645, the manuscript of the "Twelve Arguments" was seized and Biddle was imprisoned. He was called to appear before Parliament but still refused to accept the Deity of the Holy Spirit. He reprinted the pamphlet in 1647. On September 6th of the same year, Parliament ordered that the pamphlet be burnt by the hangman, and this was done. On May 2nd, 1648 a "Severe Ordinance" was passed. It stated that anyone who denied the Trinity, or the Divinity of Jesus or the Holy Spirit, would suffer death without the benefit of clergy.

Some of the "Twelve Arguments," the cause of such extreme measures, follow:

- "He that is distinguished from God is not God. The Holy Spirit is distinguished from God. Therefore the Holy Spirit is not God."

Biddle further explained this syllogism with these words: "The major premise is quite clear inasmuch as if we say that the Holy Spirit is God and yet distinguished from God then it implies a contradiction. The minor premise that the Holy Spirit is distinguished from God is confirmed by the whole current of Scripture. The argument that the Holy Spirit is distinguished from God if it is taken personally [as a Third Person] and not essentially is against all reason:

"First, it is impossible for any man to distinguish the Person from the Essence of God, and not to frame two Beings or Things in his mind. Consequently, he will be forced to the conclusion that there are two Gods.

"To speak of God taken impersonally is ridiculous as it is admitted by everyone that God is the Name of a Person, who with absolute sovereignty rules over all...None but a person can rule over others; therefore to take Him otherwise than personally is to take Him otherwise than He is."

- "He that gave the Holy Spirit to the Israelites is Jehovah alone. Then the Holy Spirit is not Jehovah or God."

- "He that speaks not for himself is not God. The Holy Spirit speaks not for himself. Therefore the Holy Spirit is not God."

- "He that is taught is not God. He that hears from another what he shall speak is taught. Christ speaks what he is told. Therefore Christ is not God."

Here Biddle quotes John 8:26 where Jesus says, "Whatsoever I have heard from Him, these things I speak."

- "He that is sent by another is not God. The Holy Spirit is sent by God. Therefore the Holy Spirit is not God."

- "He that is not the giver of all things is not God. He that is the gift of God is not the giver of all things. He that is the gift of God is himself given. The gift is in the power and at the disposal of the giver. It is therefore absurd to imagine that God can be in the power or at the disposal of another."

Here Biddle quotes Acts 17:25: "God gives to all, life, breath and all things."

- "He that changes place is not God. The Holy Spirit changes place. Therefore the Holy Spirit is not God."

Biddle also discussed the one verse in the New Testament which the established Church quoted to support their view of the Trinity. It is 1 John 5:7: "For there are three that bear record in heaven — the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one." Biddle said the verse was contrary to common sense. It only signified union of consent and agreement but never of essence. Furthermore, the verse did not even appear in the ancient Greek manuscripts. It seemed therefore that the verse had been interpolated, and was rejected as such by interpreters both ancient and modern.

Despite the Act of 1648, Biddle published two other tracts, and would probably have been hanged for doing so had he not been helped by a number of independent members of Parliament. One of the works was called "A Confession of Faith Touching the Holy Trinity According to the Scripture." It was composed of six articles, each illustrated with passages from the Bible and supported with his arguments. In the preface, he boldly talked of the evils resulting from belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. He said that the arguments used by Trinitarians were "fitter for conjurers than Christians." Here is an excerpt from Biddle's "Confession of Faith":

"I believe that there is one most High God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, and the first Cause of all things, and consequently the ultimate object of our Faith and Worship. I believe in Jesus, to the extent that he might be our brother, and have a fellow feeling of our infirmities and so become more ready to help us. He has only human nature. He is subordinate to God. And he is not another God. There are not two Gods. The Holy Spirit is an Angel who due to his eminence and intimacy with God is singled out to carry His message."¹

After a long wait in prison, a magistrate stood bail for Biddle, and he was released. The name of the magistrate was kept secret since he feared for his safety. Biddle had not enjoyed his liberty for very long before he was again thrown into prison. The magistrate died soon after, and left a small legacy to Biddle. It was soon

¹ Most biblical unitarians define the Spirit as the operational presence and power of the God of Jesus. It is possible that the Spirit is mediated by angels (Luke 22:43; Acts 8:26, 29) — *ed.*

eaten up by the high costs of the prison, and for a while Biddle's food was reduced to a small quantity of milk taken in the morning and in the evening. His situation was eased when a London publisher employed him while still in prison as a proofreader for a new edition of the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Bible.

On February 16th, 1652 the Act of Oblivion was passed and Biddle was set free. An English version of the Racovian Catechism was printed in Amsterdam during the same year, and immediately became popular in England. Biddle printed a book on unitarianism in 1654, again in Amsterdam, and it was widely read in England. During this period of freedom, Biddle began to meet with other unitarians every Sunday to worship God in their own way. On December 13th, 1654 Biddle, who had recently published two catechisms, was again arrested and sent to prison. He was forbidden the use of pen, ink and paper and was not allowed to have any visitors. All copies of his books were ordered to be burnt. He appealed, and was released on May 28th, 1655.

It was not long before Biddle again clashed with the authorities. During a public debate it was asked if there was anyone present who denied that Christ was God most high. Biddle promptly and firmly declared, "I deny it." When he supported this statement with arguments which his adversaries could not refute, it was decided to halt the proceedings and to continue on another day. Biddle was then reported to the authorities, and before the day fixed for the debate he was again arrested and put in prison. To begin with, Biddle was denied the services of a lawyer, perhaps because it was doubtful whether there was a law in force at that time under which he could be convicted. His friends who were well aware of this decided to approach Cromwell directly. They drew up a petition and sent it to him. Before it could reach him the petition was so altered and disfigured that its authors had to openly disown it as a forgery.

Cromwell, who was at his wits' end, found a way out of this difficult situation by banishing Biddle to the Scilly Isles on October 5, 1655. He was to remain in custody in the Castle of St. Mary's for the rest of his life and would be paid an allowance of one hundred crowns per annum. During his captivity there, Biddle wrote a poem, a few lines of which follow:

"The conclave met, the judge was set,
Man mounted on God's throne;
And they did judge a matter there,
That rests with Him alone;
A brother's faith they made a crime,
And crushed thought's native right sublime."

The more he suffered, the more convinced he became about the errors of the prevailing religion supported by the established Church. Thomas Firmin, who had assisted Biddle in the past, continued to help

him financially which made his life in prison as comfortable as it could be. Meanwhile sympathy for Biddle increased far and wide. The more he suffered, the more popular his creed became. The government asked Dr. John Owen to counteract the effect of Biddle's teaching. After holding a survey in which he discovered that a large number of Englishmen were unitarians, he published a reply to Biddle in 1655. In a way Cromwell's actions helped Biddle: Supported by the allowance, Biddle was out of reach of his enemies and could spend his time in contemplation and prayer. He remained a prisoner in the Castle of St. Mary's until 1658 when, due to the increased pressure for his release, he regained his freedom.

Released from prison, he began to hold public meetings in which he examined the Scriptures to demonstrate the unity of God and show the falsehood of the doctrine of the Trinity. These meetings developed into regular unitarian worship according to their faith.

On June 1st, 1662 Biddle was again arrested together with some of his friends during one of their meetings. They were all put in prison and bail was refused. There was no statute under which they could be punished so they were prosecuted under Common Law. Biddle was fined one hundred pounds and condemned to lie in prison until it was paid. His fellow worshippers were fined twenty pounds each. Biddle was ill-treated in prison and kept in solitary confinement. This, together with the foul air of the prison, brought on a disease which resulted in his death in less than five weeks. He died on September 22, 1662, age 47. ✧

Did Isaiah Really See Jesus?

A Note on John 12:41

by Clifford Duroseau

"In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; his train filled the sanctuary. Above him stood seraphs, each one with six wings: two to cover its face, two to cover its feet and two for flying; and they were shouting these words to each other: 'Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Sabaoth. His glory fills the whole earth.' The door-posts shook at the sound of their shouting, and the Temple was full of smoke. Then I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh Sabaoth.' Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding in its hand a live coal which it had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. With this it touched my mouth and said: 'Look, this has touched your lips, your guilt has been removed and your sin forgiven.' I then heard the voice of the Lord saying: 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I, send me.' He said: 'Go, and say to this people, "Listen and listen, but never

understand! Look and look, but never perceive!” Make this people’s heart coarse; make their ears dull, shut their eyes tight, or they will use their eyes to see, use their ears to hear, use their heart to understand, and change their ways and be healed” (Isa. 6:1-10).

“Isaiah said this because he saw his glory, and his words referred to Jesus” (John 12:41, New Jerusalem Bible).

Did Isaiah, the greatest and most eloquent of the Hebrew writing prophets, see Jesus in his lifetime as we read in John 12:41 in the New Jerusalem Bible? It was the common view of the early Church that the theophanies (appearances of God) of the Hebrew Bible were Christophanies, that is, appearances of the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. Even today, if one were to ask many Christians this question, the answer would be an overwhelming yes. For example, according to the online catechism “I Believe: A Short Exposition of Orthodox Doctrine” under the article “God the Father,” the catechumen is taught to say as follows:

“I believe and confess that God the Father never became the likeness of any material form nor was He ever incarnate. In the theophanies of the Old Testament, as our Holy Fathers bear witness, it was not God the Father Who appeared, but rather it was always our Saviour, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity (i.e., the Word or *Logos*, the Angel of the Lord, the Lord God of Sabaoth, the Angel of Great Counsel, the Ancient of Days) Who revealed Himself to the prophets and seers of the Old Testament.”

Nevertheless there was not unanimous agreement among the church fathers concerning John 12:41. In their commentaries Augustine and Chrysostom disagree with each other. Augustine wrote about this verse: “He showed himself, therefore, even before his incarnation, to the eyes of men, as it pleased him, in the creature form at his command, but not *as He is*” (*Tractates on John*). Chrysostom, on the contrary, in his commentary on this verse proclaimed: “Whose [glory did Isaiah see]? The Father’s.”

What, then, is the correct view? How is the issue to be decided? If we were to decide on the basis of majority opinion, clearly the Augustinian interpretation would be decisive. There is a host of commentators, not to mention church fathers, who could be marshaled in support of this view. For example, Matthew Henry in his commentary on Isaiah 6:1 uses John 12:41 to show that we have “incontestable proof of the Divinity of Jesus.” Adam Clarke, commenting on John 12:41, writes:

“**Verse 41.** *When he saw his glory.* Isaiah 6:1: ‘I saw Jehovah,’ said the prophet, ‘sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim; and one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah, God of hosts; the

whole earth shall be full of his glory!’ It appears evident from this passage that the glory which the prophet saw was the glory of Jehovah: John, therefore, saying here that it was the glory of Jesus, shows that he considered Jesus to be Jehovah.”

John Gill, who wrote a commentary on the Bible full of rabbinic lore, says that in John 12:41 we have “a clear and strong proof of the Divinity of Christ.” Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown call John 12:41 “a key of immense importance to the opening of Isaiah’s vision (Isa. 6:1-13), and all similar Old Testament representations.” Albert Barnes says that “this passage is conclusive proof that Christ is equal to the Father.”

Lending support to the above views of John 12:41 as “incontestable proof,” “clear and strong proof” and “conclusive proof” of the pre-existence and Divinity of Jesus are 1 Corinthians 10:9 and Jude 5 in the Vulgate and Douay-Rheims-Challoner versions. According to those long-used versions, Jesus was present with the Israelites when they came out of Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years: “And tempt not Christ as some also tempted and were killed by snakes” (1 Cor. 10:9; see also the New American Bible and the New Revised Standard Version). “I should like to remind you — though you have already learnt it once for all — that **Jesus** rescued the nation from Egypt, but afterwards he still destroyed the people who refused to believe him” (Jude 5). But Jude 5 no longer reads “Jesus” in any modern version of the New Testament. And many versions read “Lord” instead of “Christ” in 1 Corinthians 10:9 (see, for example, the New Jerusalem Bible, New American Standard Version, New International Version, Revised Standard Version, and Schonfield’s Original New Testament).

Please observe that the two major modern Catholic translations disagree on the true reading of 1 Corinthians 10:9. The New American Bible reads “Christ,” but the New Jerusalem Bible reads “Lord.” The disagreement is the same among major Protestant translations. The New Revised Standard version reads “Christ,” but the Revised Standard Version (!), New American Standard Version and New International Version read “Lord.”

But what about John 12:41? Doesn’t it state that Isaiah saw Jesus? That depends on how one views that verse, as we saw above. Augustine, and many others before and after him, see here proof that Isaiah saw Jesus, the preexisting Son. Chrysostom, who was equally orthodox, and who is now venerated as one of the greatest teachers of Christianity and honored with the title of Saint, took an opposing view.

We side with Chrysostom. That Jude 5 and 1 Corinthians 10:9 were corrupted in the transmission of the text through the centuries makes suspicious to us the reading at John 12:41. In fact, there is a different

reading of John 12:41 in Codex D (Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis), a sixth-century manuscript of great weight: “These things Isaiah said when he saw the glory of his God and spoke concerning Him.” Several other manuscripts also bear witness to a similar reading: “These things Isaiah saw when he saw the glory of God and spoke concerning Him.”²

The New Jerusalem Bible, cited at the beginning of this essay, reads: “Isaiah said this because he saw his glory, and his words referred to Jesus.” But this is a non-literal translation of the Greek, and “Jesus” in the last clause is an imposed interpretation of the Catholic translator. The Greek simply has a pronoun, *autou* (=him), in the original Greek text. The ambiguity of the personal pronoun, which occurs twice in this verse in the Greek, is similar to the ambiguity of the demonstrative pronoun *outos* in 1 John 5:20b: “This [outos] is the true God and eternal life.” In both places many Christian readers have stumbled and opted for a Trinitarian interpretation, when another interpretation is equally possible, plausible, and probable.

The note at John 12:41 in the New American Bible reads: “Isaiah saw the glory of Yahweh enthroned in the heavenly temple, but in John the antecedent of *his* is Jesus.” This is not correct. The immediate antecedent of the pronoun “his” in John 12:41 is the “me” of the preceding verse, a quote from the Septuagint version of Isaiah 6:10, and it refers to Yahweh: “He has blinded their eyes, he has hardened their heart, to prevent them from using their eyes to see, using their heart to understand, changing their ways and being healed by **me**” (John 12:40). The second antecedent prior to “his” is the pronoun “he,” which occurs twice in this verse and refers to Yahweh.³

“John’s interpretation of Isaiah 6:10 forced the Church Fathers to see in all the theophanies of the Old Testament the Son of God,” writes Christos Voulgaris in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*.⁴ But was their reading the true reading of the text? Jude 5 in the Vulgate has been judged corrupted, and 1 Corinthians 10:9, as we saw above, is uncertain.

Do Codex D and others preserve the true reading of John 12:41? At the very least, this was how the canonized and highly celebrated John Chrysostom read it. Along with Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nazianzus, he is considered

² Kurt Aland says of these minuscules: “In a study of the text of the minuscules these have proved themselves of equal if not superior value to many uncials” (Introduction to the 26th edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece*, p. 47).

³ The Massoretic text reads differently, consisting of imperatives addressed to the prophet Isaiah by the voice of Yahweh in the vision.

⁴ “The Biblical and Patristic Doctrine of the Trinity,” Vol. 37, Nov. 1992.

to be one of the four great doctors (teachers) of the Greek Orthodox or Eastern Church. (The four great doctors of the Western or Roman Catholic Church are Ambrose, Augustine, Pope Gregory the Great, and Jerome [Hieronymus].)

After all, how could Jesus exist before he existed? John says that the words referred to “him,” and this can mean either Yahweh (the near antecedent, as Chrysostom took it) or Jesus (the far antecedent [John 12:36b], as Augustine and the majority take it), but in Isaiah 6 the words refer to Israel.⁵✧

The “Word” in Isaiah

A Key to New Testament Understanding

by Sarah Buzzard

“The reason why John chose to call the...Son by the title Logos has caused much research. It is generally assumed that there is a Greek background (*logos* was a prominent concept in metaphysical philosophy) and a Hebrew background (for the word of God is virtually personified in parts of the OT — e.g., Prov. 8).”⁶

In understanding the Hebrew background of the “word” in the Old Testament and why John chose to use that concept for the Messiah, Isaiah is particularly helpful. The prophet provides quite a detailed description of the “word of God.” And since the New Testament writers often draw from Isaiah, it is enlightening to read his concept of “the word” into their writings, especially John’s gospel.

The very early chapters of Isaiah contain “the word” in its typical Old Testament sense, as God’s instruction or law. The synonymous parallelism of both Isaiah 2:3 and 5:24 define “the word of God” as His law. The last two lines of 2:3 read: “For the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” Similarly, Isaiah 1:10 defines “the word” as God’s instruction: “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah.” From these three passages, we could define “the word” as God’s instruction or law.

However, in Isaiah 9:8, the concept of “the word” is expanded through personification. “The Lord sends a word against Jacob, and it falls on Israel.” Although here “word” can be translated “message,” one commentator suggests a more personal interpretation: “The word is both in nature and history the messenger of

⁵ There is another possible solution to the difficulty. John refers to two different passages in the Old Testament. It is wrong to confine one’s reference to the passage in Isa. 6, forgetting John 12:38. Isaiah often foresaw the glory of the Messiah. Indeed his whole book is a vision of the Messiah’s Kingdom. — *ed.*

⁶ Merrill Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987, p. 1069.

the Lord: it runs quickly through the earth, and when sent by the Lord, comes to men to destroy or to heal, and never returns to its sender void.”⁷ This description of the messenger can be compared to Christ. The “word” here is self-fulfilling; it has more personal power than a simple message or instruction.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8). One commentator paraphrases this verse: “Man and his power are but transitory, whereas the word, the proclaimed purpose, of God endures forever.”⁸ The “proclaimed purpose” in the context suggests especially the good news of the revealing of the glory of the Lord. Here Isaiah illustrates what is thought to be an exclusively New Testament concept of the word as the message of the kingdom. Another commentator interprets this passage:

“Men living in the flesh are universally impotent, perishing, limited; God, on the contrary, is the omnipotent, eternal, all-determining; and like Himself, so is His word, which, regarded as the vehicle and utterance of His willing and thinking, is not something separate from Himself, and therefore is the same as He.”⁹

It is interesting that both of these commentators, in expounding Isaiah, have clarified John 1:1. In the beginning was the Word — “God’s proclaimed purpose” or “the vehicle and utterance of His willing and thinking” — and this word was with God, and was “the same as He.” This word became flesh in Jesus.

Isaiah 45:23 and 55:11 are similar to each other in their description of “the word of God.” Both explain that it has gone forth from God’s mouth in righteousness, and will not turn back. “It shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (55:11). Jesus, the ultimate personification of “the word” did not ascend to God without succeeding in accomplishing God’s desire for Him. One commentator’s explanation of “the word” here also perfectly describes Christ:

“As it goes forth out of the mouth of God it acquires shape, and in this shape is hidden a divine life, because of its divine origin; and so it runs, with life from God, endowed with divine power, supplied with divine commissions, like a swift messenger through nature and the world of man, there to melt the ice, as it were, and here to heal and to save; and does not return from its course till it has given effect to the will of the sender.

⁷ F. Delitzsch and C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989, p. 256.

⁸ Arthur Peake, ed., *A Commentary on the Bible*, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1919, p. 461.

⁹ Keil and Delitzsch, p. 143.

This return of the word to God also presupposes its divine nature.”¹⁰

In personifying “the word,” Isaiah makes clear that it is more than simply communication, instruction or law. Instead, he illustrates that “An utterance was looked upon by the Hebrews almost as a personal power fulfilling itself.”¹¹ And so Isaiah aids in understanding “the word” in John 1:1 as God’s self-fulfilling personal power, which became flesh in Jesus and accomplished God’s purpose. ✧

“The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he does not exist.” — 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire; quoted in *The Usual Suspects* (1995 movie)

Comments

“Two or three years ago I started looking into who Jesus really is and there is a lot of different information on the internet but yours made the most sense. Also, the reality about the Kingdom and not going to heaven was a bit of a shock at first but the Bible does clearly state it as truth. I never heard many different viewpoints until recently. I grew up Catholic and then converted to more of a Protestant belief about 10-12 years ago. I was ‘baptized’ as a baby and then re-baptized about two years ago. Now that I have changed my beliefs about God, Jesus and the Kingdom I am considering getting re-baptized again.” — *Florida*

“Most people, in my experience — including many Christians — don’t know what the ultimate Christian hope really is...I believe the Church needs to recapture the classic Christian answer to the question of death and beyond, which these days is not so much disbelieved (in world and church alike) as simply not known...The voice of the early Christians has not been disbelieved but simply not heard at all...Scripture, in fact, teaches things about the future life that most Christians, and almost all non-Christians, have never heard of...”

“Earth — the renewed earth — is where the reign will take place, which is why the New Testament regularly speaks not of our going to be where Jesus is but of his coming to where we are.”

— N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*, HarperCollins, 2008, pp. xi, xii, 27, 190

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

¹¹ Peake, p. 468.