

Jesus of Nazareth: Messiah and Son of God

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When one abandons Trinitarianism, he is immediately confronted by the question, Who, then, is Jesus? My own experience has been a gradual shift from Trinitarianism to Arianism to Socinianism. (I use these terms loosely, only as they pertain to the person of Christ.) Having made the shift, I realize now it may be expressed in another way: from trinitarianism to binitarianism to biblical unitarianism. I hasten to add, however, that my conversion has not been made within the context of dogmatics or an exploration of theological systems. It has been made within the exegetical experiences of a pastor. And here I must mention several things, before explaining why I believe Jesus is Messiah and Son of God, not “God the Son.”

As a pastor, most of my study time has been in the Scriptures, not in theological textbooks, although the latter were always at hand for reference. This is normal, I believe, to the pastoral life, and is the way it should be, if one is to obey Paul’s injunction, “Preach the word.”¹

However, I believe that the pastor’s lesson or message preparation must begin with an examination of a passage in its Hebrew or Greek text.² This is an imperative and, I feel, is mandatory, if a pastor or any student of the Scriptures is to ascertain for himself what Scripture really says. A

¹2 Timothy 4:2.

²Cp. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. by G. T. Thomson, New York: Philosophical Library, n.d., 11, 12.

door of discovery is opened,³ and deliverance from “translation theology” is at hand.

As I look back over the years, I did not set out to study myself out of or into a position. I believed that the so-called orthodox theology received in seminary was true—even virtually infallible! And so my purpose, almost always, was simply to prepare a message or lesson for presentation. But that is where discovery entered in—from simple attempts to exegete a passage of Scripture, in order that I might expound it more accurately to a congregation or class.

For these reasons, I believe my theological transition has been providential. And for these reasons, I present here primarily the Scripture texts that have influenced me, not the polemics of theology. I believe, therefore, that Jesus of Nazareth is God’s Son and the Messiah for the following reasons.

I. THE SCRIPTURES PRESENT HIS BIRTH AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Luke 1:35 is the angel Gabriel’s explanation of the birth of a human being, not the incarnation of a deity. The creative power of God overshadowed Mary and provided that which a human father would necessarily provide. But since God was providing it—creating it—that which was being begotten in her would be called “Son of God,” not “God the Son.”

Alfred Plummer, in his commentary on Luke, points out the parallel between Luke 1:35 and Genesis 1:2.⁴ As the Spirit of God moved upon the waters at creation, so the creative power of God moved upon Mary. Luke 1:35, then, describes the creation of the Messiah.

Here, then, is the explanation of John’s phrase, “only begotten Son.”⁵ It must be understood in a biological sense (albeit miraculous), not a metaphysical one. Jesus was the result of a miraculous supernatural biological event upon Mary. He was the only begotten *Son* of God, not the only incarnated God. Created in the womb of Mary, He was born into the world. The first Adam, by way of contrast, was formed from the soil of the earth.

Subsequently, Luke 2:40 and 52 present a normal human development

³Psalm 119:18, 99, 162.

⁴Rev. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke (The International Critical Commentary)*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1922, 24.

⁵John 3:16.

of Jesus, although by the word “normal” we do not rule out the grace or favor of God being upon Him. There was a steady advance in wisdom, stature or bodily size, and favor before God and man. Thus “docetism”⁶ is ruled out, and here also is the explanation of that marvelous episode which we commonly call “the boy in the Temple.”⁷ The latter is not an instance of deity shining through, but of that ideal increase in wisdom which God would like all men to have, and which He intended the first Adam in Eden to experience.

II. THE SCRIPTURES CLEARLY ASSERT THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST TO THE EXCLUSION OF DEITY

Here I must begin with a negative note. Those impressive Greek words *theanthropos* and *homoousios*⁸ are not found in the Greek New Testament. The adjective “theanthropic” is a part of the English language. But this does not make it a biblical word—or add it to the text of Scripture. So also *homoousios* has become a part of our language. But the Spirit of God has denied it access to Holy Writ. Edwin Hatch, in his book, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, explains that *homoousios* first occurs in the sphere of Gnosticism.⁹

I mention these matters because, unless we are able to free ourselves from the “pitiless iron vise”¹⁰ of theological formulations, we are unable to receive the plain words of Scripture. It is with relief, then, that we consider a small portion of the biblical evidence in favor of the above proposition.

Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, describes “Jesus of Nazareth” as “a man approved of God.”¹¹ The word which Luke puts in Peter’s mouth is *aner*

⁶From the Greek word *dokeo* meaning to seem or have the appearance of something. To the Docetae of the second and third centuries, Christ only seemed to have a human body. His human body was phantasmal. Cp. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, three vols. in one, Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1907, 670.

⁷Luke 2:46-50.

⁸“God-man” and “of the same substance” with God.

⁹Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1970, 274. Gnosticism was a religious and philosophical movement in pre-Christian times and later. Here one must consult the Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias.

¹⁰An expression used by George H. Williams in *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962, 619. This is in his discussion of “The Relationship of Anabaptism and Anti-Trinitarianism,” 617-21.

¹¹Acts 2:22.

which simply means a man or human being, a male person of the human race.¹²

Peter goes on to say that God has raised this person from the dead, because it was not possible for Him to be held by death. But this was not because He was deity—in that case He could not really have died. It was because His prophesied destiny was to be raised from the dead and sit at God’s right hand.¹³

In 1 Timothy 2:5, the Apostle Paul asserts the unity of God. “There is one God” or, possibly, “God is one.” (This passage must take its place along with 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:6 as a New Testament text asserting a nontrinitarian God.)

But as there is one God, so also there is one mediator. The thought here, I believe, is “the mediator is one.”¹⁴ God is one in His essence or nature; so also the mediator is one in His nature. And that nature is *anthropos* or humanity! The stress here is on the humanity of Christ.¹⁵

We now turn to the simple and clear testimony of John in his first Epistle. There John definitely distinguishes between the Father and the Son,¹⁶ and the Son he defines as “in flesh” or a human being.¹⁷ The proper relationship between God and Christ Jesus is simply that of Father and Son,¹⁸ not God the Father and God the Son.

First John 5:20 speaks of “him that is true” and “the true God.” A careful exegesis of this verse indicates that “the true God” is the God of heaven. He is known *through* His Son Jesus Christ. It is an astonishing fact of Scripture that, in the writings of John, Christ is never called “the true God” or, in the Greek, *ho alethinós theos*.¹⁹ This point is not refuted by such passages as John 1:1 or John 20:28. (See my discussion below.)

I close this second proposition with a brief reference to Revelation 22:16. There we learn that at God’s right hand in heaven is one who is “the

¹²Jesus, then, was not androgynous, as I once heard suggested. This idea, I submit, is offensive.

¹³Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:24-36.

¹⁴Cp. the translation of J. N. Darby, one whose “fundamentalist” credentials would be impeccable. *The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation from the Original Languages*, London: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, 1940, p. 290 of the New Testament.

¹⁵J. E. Huther, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistles of Timothy and Titus (The Meyer Commentary)*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885, 97-98.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 623.

¹⁷1 John 4:8; cp. 2 John 7.

¹⁸1 John 2:22-24.

¹⁹Huther, 623.

root and the offspring of David.” This is a Messianic title and is telling us that it is the Messiah who is there in heaven, not the second person of a triune God.

The word “root” is used here in the Hebrew sense of a root or scion growing from the root.²⁰ To say that our Lord is “the root and the offspring of David” is an emphatic way of indicating His descent from David.

We are entitled here to some remarkable inferences. A glorified man and a glorified descendant of David, a Jew, is at God’s right hand. And if He is a human being and a descendant of David, He could not have preexisted His birth in Bethlehem. Only by *inventing a theanthropic* being can theology get around the truth of Revelation 22:16.

At the risk of belaboring our point, I would point out that Revelation 22:16 also refutes transmutation theories. In this ascension to heaven there is no conversion of Jesus’ humanity into deity.²¹ “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever”²² must be taken, not in a metaphysical sense, but in a Jewish Messianic sense. The Man of Galilee was a human being, a descendant of David, when He walked this earth. He remains the same in His exaltation and glorification, and He will be that in His reign over the earth when every knee will bow to Him.²³

III. THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST’S PREEXISTENCE RESIDES IN THE OMNISCIENCE AND PURPOSE OF GOD

If Christ is a human being—an *anthropos*—who first came into existence in the womb of Mary, the question of His preexistence is settled. Scripture passages which seem to indicate an actual preexistence must be interpreted in the light of this fact; more specifically, in the light of the biology of Luke 1:35.

However, I am well aware that, to the traditional mind, the problem cannot be dismissed out of hand. We must consider several significant passages of Scripture, namely John 1:1-14, 1 Corinthians 15:45-47, Philippians 2:5-12, and perhaps one or two others. Furthermore, this is

²⁰William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th revised and augmented ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 743.

²¹George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus the Christ*, (etc.), Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1952, III, 538-39.

²²Hebrews 13:8.

²³Philippians 2:10.

consistent with our approach in this article. I begin, therefore, with the opening verses of John’s Gospel.

The key to the introduction of John’s Gospel is the phrase *ho logos*. It must be understood in an etymological way, not in a Gnostic, Greek, or philosophical way.

In its simplest sense, *logos* means a spoken word, a saying, a declaration, speech, or discourse. Here in John 1:1 *ho logos* means “the spoken word” or “the declaration.”

The subject of John 1:1-5 is the spoken word of God. It was “in [the] beginning” or “at first.” All things began with it. It was with God, and it was *theos*. Here *theos* has the force of the Hebrew *elohim* which means the putter forth of power.²⁴ Certainly at creation the spoken word of God was a putter forth of power!

We read in John 1:3, then, that all things were made by the *logos* or spoken word, this *theos* or *elohim*, this putter forth of power. In English we would say, “All things were made by it,” not “by him.” This is confirmed by Psalm 33:6-9 which says, “By the word [Hebrew *dabar*] of the LORD were the heavens made. . . . For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.”

Finally, we read in John 1:14 that “the Word”—the spoken word—became flesh and dwelt among us. Hence we have here an incarnation of God’s message, not an incarnation of a preexistent spirit being. This is in keeping with Hebrews 1:1, 2 which tells us that in many ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days He has spoken to us in the person of a Son.

I turn now to 1 Corinthians 15:45-47. Here is another passage which is sometimes taken to indicate a deity and incarnation of Christ, but which really indicates His humanity.

In verse 45 we read: “And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.” The question is, Does the word “spirit” indicate that Christ preexisted as a spirit being? He is called here “a quickening” or “life-forming spirit.” The Greek word is *zoopoieo* and speaks of resurrection from the dead. In His resurrection our Lord became a “life-forming spirit,” a capacity or ability

²⁴Rev. Robert Baker Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948, 26. Cp. A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907, 41. Cp. also the use of *elohim* in John 1:1 in Franz Delitzsch’s Hebrew New Testament.

which will be exercised to the fullest at His *parousia*.²⁵ Hence the word “spirit” refers to Christ in resurrection, not in preexistence.

In 1 Corinthians 15:47 we read: “The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven.” These, of course, are the familiar words of the King James Version. In agreement with the textual evidence, and most modern translations, we must leave out the phrase, “the Lord.” Hence we have: “the second man [is] from heaven.”

The first part of verse 47 obviously refers to the creation of Adam as recorded in Genesis 2:7. The second part refers to Christ, but in what way? The idea of preexistence is eliminated by the removal of the phrase, “the Lord.” *The International Critical Commentary* says “from heaven” (*ex ouranou*) refers to the Second Advent.²⁶ H. A. W. Meyer says the phrase *ex ouranou* is used of “heavenly derivation” and applies to the glorification of the body of Christ. This glorification originated from heaven or, in other words, it was a work wrought by God.²⁷

We begin, therefore, to understand the significance of the phrase “from heaven” or “out of heaven” (*ex ouranou*). It refers to a work wrought or created by God. Jesus, therefore, is “from heaven” or “out of heaven” in the sense that He is a work wrought by God. He is the only-begotten Son, created in the womb of Mary.

(Compare also the reference in 2 Corinthians 5:2 to our resurrection body.²⁸ It is “from heaven” or, in Greek, *ex ouranou*. This does not mean that our resurrection body preexists in heaven, but simply that it too will be a work wrought by God.)

Now we must consider that crux of interpretation, Philippians 2:5-7. The King James Version expresses quite succinctly the orthodox view: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.”

²⁵H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistles to the Corinthians*, trans. from the 5th edition of the German by D. Douglas Bannerman, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884, 379-81.

²⁶Right Rev. Archibald Robertson and Rev. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914, 374.

²⁷Meyer, 382.

²⁸Meyer, *ibid.*, calls attention to the occurrence of *ex ouranou* also in 2 Corinthians 5:2. The inference therefrom that Christ did not actually preexist is my own. But I believe my inference is justified and correct.

From the preceding words, we gain the following impressions: (1) Christ preexisted in heaven in the form of God; that is to say, He was deity. (2) However, He considered not His equality with God as something to be grasped or held on to. (3) Consequently, He made Himself of no reputation or emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives, and (4) took upon Himself the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. God the Son left heaven above and became incarnate.

We are all familiar with the chorus of the old hymn, “Ivory Palaces,” which expresses the foregoing impressions in music and song. But, despite its beauty, is that what Philippians 2:5-7 really says? I do not think so, and make the following suggestions.

(1) The context of Philippians 2 is about humility, and the passage presents the humility of Christ in contrast with Adam’s disobedience or lack of humility.²⁹

(2) As the first Adam was in the form of God, so also the second Adam was in the form of God. The word “form” must be interpreted in its simple sense, not a philosophical sense.³⁰

(3) Christ Jesus considered not an act of robbery so as to be equal with God. He resisted the blandishments of the devil. By way of contrast, Adam and Eve succumbed to the Satanic lie, “Ye shall be as gods [God],”³¹ and took of the forbidden tree.

(4) Whereas Adam would have exalted himself, Christ “made himself of no reputation.” Here the paraphrase of the King James Version is excellent. The Greek *kenoo* means to empty, but it does not mean that He emptied Himself of the glory of deity and heaven. Rather, Jesus the Messiah emptied Himself of all self-will and self-exaltation, and carried out His Father’s will.

(5) In His life He assumed the role of a servant—the Servant of Jehovah—being made in the likeness of men. And, as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Consequently, God has highly exalted Him, and to Him every knee shall bow.³²

²⁹Darby, footnote “v” on Philippians 2:6, p. 275 of the New Testament. Here Darby says that this passage presents what is in contrast with the first Adam!

³⁰Cp. the discussion of the Greek *morphe* in H. A. A. Kennedy, *The Epistle to the Philippians (The Expositor’s Greek New Testament)*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d., 435-36.

³¹Genesis 3:5.

³²Philippians 2:8-10.

Philippians 2:5-7 does not tell of a preexistent God who assumed human form. It tells, rather, of the humility, obedience, death, and exaltation of the Messiah. Jesus Christ lived to the fullest His own exhortation: "For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."³³ He demonstrated that humility is the passport to promotion in the Kingdom of God.³⁴

Before bringing the discussion of our third proposition to a close, brief reference must be made to one more subject, the fact that Christ is called "the beginning" and "the beginning of the creation of God."³⁵

The Greek word involved in these phrases is *arche* which means beginning, origin, first cause, ruler, etc.³⁶ In Colossians 1:18 we read of Christ as "the *beginning*, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence." The meaning here should be obvious: as the firstborn from the dead, He is the beginning of God's congregation and new order of things for the Kingdom of God. As such, He has the preeminence.

But in Revelation 3:14 we read: He is "the *beginning* of the creation of God." It is here that a philosophical definition of *arche* may enter in and Christ is seen as "the first cause," as indicated by the lexicon of Arndt and Gingrich. But Arndt and Gingrich's lexicon goes on to say that the meaning "beginning" in the sense of first created is linguistically possible.³⁷ This need not mean "first created" in an Arian sense, but, in the light of the overall testimony of Scripture, may mean "beginning" of God's new order by virtue of His resurrection and glorification.³⁸

Adolf Harnack, in his *History of Dogma*, explains how the Greeks combined Peter's words, "foreordained before the foundation of the world,"³⁹ with the philosophical idea of Christ as the *arche* or "first cause" of creation. They then equated Him with the Logos of the Greeks. "Cultured men," Harnack says, regarded the Logos as the beginning and principle of the creation!⁴⁰ But this is to read philosophical ideas into the

³³Luke 14:11.

³⁴Plummer, 358. Comment on Luke 14:11.

³⁵Colossians 1:18; Revelation 3:14.

³⁶Arndt and Gingrich, 111-12.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Here the interlinear translation of Alfred Marshall renders the passage, "the chief of the creation of God." The Reverend Alfred Marshall, *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, London: Samuel Bagster and Sons Limited, 1958, 966.

³⁹1 Peter 1:20.

⁴⁰Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. from the 3rd German ed. by Neil Buchanan, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976, 328.

Scripture—ideas which never entered the mind of Peter! Moreover, foreordination is something quite different from actual preexistence. I close this discussion of our third proposition by saying that foreordination—to be foreknown and in the purpose of God—is the only Scriptural preexistence of our Lord.

To be concluded in a subsequent issue