

# The Challenge Facing Trinitarianism Today

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Contemporary Trinitarianism faces a formidable battery of arguments which have undermined some of its cherished biblical “proofs.” Unknown to most churchgoers there is a corpus of non-Trinitarian (in fact, if not in name) rather than anti-Trinitarian literature which in various ways abandons some of the main props of Trinitarianism. Anti-Trinitarianism has long presented its case by showing that various orthodox Trinitarians have explained key Trinitarian verses in a unitarian way. A remarkable compendium of *Concessions of Trinitarians* was produced by John Wilson in 1845.<sup>1</sup> The work has relevance for the ongoing discussion of the Trinity. Surveying a vast amount of scholarly writing, it documents non-Trinitarian explanations by Trinitarians of verses popularly thought to support the Trinity. Contemporary as well as nineteenth-century theological literature provides evidence of similar concessions. The following article examines some of the points presented as Trinitarian “proofs” in more popular literature on the Bible. It appears that a large number of Trinitarians no longer rely on these arguments to support an orthodox view of the Godhead.

## I. THE PLURAL FORM OF *ELOHIM*

The organization Jews for Jesus and other evangelical groups continue to find the Triune God in the Hebrew Scriptures. The plural form of the

<sup>1</sup>Boston: Munroe & Co.

1993, *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Fall 1993, Vol. 3, No. 1.

Hebrew word for God, *elohim*, however, does not provide clues pointing to the Trinity. It is as misleading to talk of *elohim* as a “uniplural” word as it is to say that *echad*, “one,” hints at a plural Godhead. One cannot successfully argue the Trinity from the fact that *echad* can modify a noun like “cluster” or “herd” and therefore might lead us to think that God is compound. *Echad* is simply the numeral “one” in Hebrew. “God is one Yahweh,” so the creed of Israel states.<sup>2</sup> *Echad* appears as a modifier for “Abraham”<sup>3</sup> and it may sometimes be properly rendered as “unique.”<sup>4</sup> Its normal meaning is “one and not two.”<sup>5</sup> There is nothing at all in the word “Yahweh” which suggests a plurality, especially since the word occurs with singular verbs and pronouns in all of its multiple thousands (about 5,500) of occurrences. If singular pronouns, designating the one God constantly, cannot persuade the reader that God is a single individual there is little else in language that can. *Elohim* has singular verbs in nearly all of its 2,500 references to the one God. An occasional anomaly proves as little as the fact that Joseph’s master is described by a plural noun several times.<sup>6</sup> Will anyone contend that “Joseph’s master [plural in Hebrew] took [singular verb] him” is incorrectly translated? Abraham is the “masters” (plural in Hebrew) of his servant.<sup>7</sup> Is there plurality in Abraham? No one would want to alter the translation of another passage in Genesis: “The man who is lord of the land spoke harshly to us.” But though the verb is singular the noun has a plural form, “the lords of the land.”<sup>8</sup> We have in these examples the same plurality in Abraham, Potiphar and Joseph as is supposedly found in *elohim* when it refers to the Supreme God. These facts warrant the observation of the writer in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*:

It is exegesis of a mischievous if pious sort that would find the doctrine of the Trinity in the plural form *elohim*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Deut. 6:4.

<sup>3</sup>Ezek. 33:24; Isa. 51:2.

<sup>4</sup>Ezek. 7:5.

<sup>5</sup>Ecc. 4:8.

<sup>6</sup>Gen. 39: 2, 3, 7, 8, 19, 20.

<sup>7</sup>Gen. 24:9, 10.

<sup>8</sup>Gen. 42:30. See also verse 33: “The man who is ‘lords’ of the land.”

<sup>9</sup>W. W. Fulton, “Trinity,” T & T Clark, 1913.

The article on the Trinity in the same work concludes:

There is in the Old Testament no indication of distinctions in the Godhead; it is an anachronism to find either the doctrine of the Incarnation or that of the Trinity in its pages.<sup>10</sup>

The definition of *elohim* (“God”) supplied by the *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* contradicts the notion that God is “three Persons”:

Though a plural form, *elohim* can be treated as a singular, in which case it means the one supreme deity. . . . There is only one supreme God and He is a *Person*.<sup>11</sup>

## II. GOD IS ONE

A consideration of the use of the numeral “one” in connection with God is enlightening. No one has any difficulty with the following statements. According to Ezekiel “Abraham was one [Heb. *echad*, Gk. *heis*].” The NIV translates this fact into plain English: “Abraham was only one man.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus used the word “one” in the same way to mean a single individual: “Do not be called Rabbi; for one [*heis*] is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for one [*heis*] is your Father, who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for one [*heis*] is your Leader, that is Christ.”<sup>13</sup> In each case “one” means one person. For Paul Christ is “one person” [*heis*]: “[God] does not say, ‘and to seeds’ as of many, but rather to one, ‘and to your seed,’ that is Christ.”<sup>14</sup> A few verses later exactly the same language applies to God. Paul says: “Now a mediator is not for one party only [literally ‘not of one,’ *heis*]. But God is one [*heis*].”<sup>15</sup> The meaning is that God is “one party” or “one person.” All this is consistent with the uniform testimony of Scripture that the one God is the Father of Jesus. It is true that *heis* can designate a collective unity: “you are all one in Christ.”<sup>16</sup> This meaning

<sup>10</sup> Eugen Mogk, art, “God.”

<sup>11</sup> Intervarsity Press, 1980, 571, emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> Ezek. 33:24.

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 23:8-10.

<sup>14</sup> Gal. 3:16.

<sup>15</sup> Gal. 3:20.

<sup>16</sup> Gal. 3:28.

is quite inappropriate in the case of God who is constantly described by singular pronouns and equated with the Father, who is obviously one person.

These facts present an acute problem for Trinitarianism. Some have been driven to the extreme of maintaining that the word “Father” in the New Testament may describe not one Person of the Trinity but all three, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Sometimes “Father” is used not of One who is distinct from the Son and the Holy Spirit—a distinct Person of the Godhead—but of the Godhead Himself. Let us give some examples of this. . . . [Paul says that] there is only one God who has real existence, and it is the One that Christians worship. So he writes, “But to us there is but one God, the Father” (I Corinthians 8:6). Here the word “Father” equals the words “One God.” Paul is saying that there is but one God, and is not thinking of the Persons of the Godhead at all. It is in this sense that he uses the word “Father,” just as he does in Ephesians 4:6, where he writes of “one God and Father of all.”<sup>17</sup>

The writer struggles with Paul’s plainly unitarian definition of God as “One God, the Father.” The strength of Olyott’s own conviction that God is really three forces him to imagine that “the Father” actually means three Persons. The theory is imaginary. The writer cannot allow himself to think that Paul might not have been a Trinitarian.

## III. IS JESUS “MAD, BAD OR GOD”?

Trinitarians are trapped by the well-worn slogan that Jesus must be either a liar, a lunatic or the Supreme God. They have not been able to conceptualize another category—that of the Messiah. When Anderson Scott described the view of Jesus presented by the Book of Revelation, he gave us the clue to the biblical picture of Jesus:

[John] carries the equating of Christ with God to the furthest point short of making *Them eternally equal*.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Olyott, *The Three are One*, Evangelical Press, 1979, 28, 29.

<sup>18</sup> “Christology,” *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, Vol. 1, 185, emphasis added.

Assessing Paul's Christology he says:

St. Paul never gives to Christ the name or description of God. . . . Reviewing the whole of Paul's utterances regarding Christ, the total impression is that of a monotheistic conviction consistently resisting the impulse to do this very thing—to call Jesus God.<sup>19</sup>

The correctness of this evaluation is confirmed by the startling fact that there is no text in the New Testament in which the term *ho theos* ("God") means "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." This is because no writer thought that God was "three-in-one." It ought to be a matter of concern to Trinitarians that when they say "God," they mean the Triune God, but when the New Testament (or indeed the whole Bible) says "God," a Triune God is never meant. It would be hard to find more conclusive evidence that the Triune God is not the God of Scripture. Our point is confirmed by Karl Rahner:

Nowhere in the New Testament is there to be found a text with *ho theos* [literally, "the God"] which has unquestionably to be referred to the Trinitarian God as a whole existing in three Persons. In by far the greater number of texts *ho theos* refers to the Father as a Person of the Trinity.<sup>20</sup>

We disagree that the Father is part of a Trinity, but Rahner's observation is correct: God in the New Testament almost invariably means the Father of Jesus and never three persons or "Persons."

#### IV. INCARNATION IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

An important question about Trinitarianism is raised by the complete lack of evidence for the doctrine of the Incarnation in the Gospel of Luke (the same may be said of Matthew). Raymond Brown observes:

There is no evidence that Luke had a theology of Incarnation and Preexistence: rather for Luke (1:35) divine sonship seems to have been brought about through the virginal conception. . . . Jesus was

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>20</sup> *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961, 143.

conceived and born, and that is solidarity enough with the human race.<sup>21</sup>

Luke defined who Jesus was with complete precision when he first called him "the Lord Messiah," i.e., "the Lord Christ," and a few verses later designated him "the *Lord's* Christ [Messiah]." <sup>22</sup> The title "Lord Messiah" is found also in Jewish literature contemporary with Luke.<sup>23</sup> It describes the promised deliverer of Israel, the age-old hope of the nation. The same Messianic description is given to a historical sovereign of Israel in the LXX of Lamentations 4:10. In no case does this royal title imply that the Messiah was God. It is derived from Psalm 110:1 where the Messiah is to be David's "lord," i.e., his king.

Luke selects a second title for Jesus, "the Lord's Messiah," because it is exactly equivalent to the Old Testament expression "the Lord's Anointed," the king of Israel. David speaks of King Saul as "my lord, the Lord's Anointed [Messiah]." <sup>24</sup> Abner should have guarded Saul, "the lord, your king," "your lord, the Lord's Anointed [Messiah]." <sup>25</sup> Jesus is the ultimate anointed one, the promised king of Israel. Luke's descriptions of him are in complete harmony with John who introduces Jesus as "Son of God" and "king of Israel." <sup>26</sup> Paul recognizes that Christians serve "the Lord Messiah," <sup>27</sup> and Peter, who had declared in an early sermon that God had appointed Jesus "Lord and Messiah," <sup>28</sup> towards the end of his life urges believers to sanctify "the Lord Christ in your hearts." <sup>29</sup> In the last book of the Bible the glorified Jesus is still "the Lord's Anointed [Messiah]." <sup>30</sup> The much overlooked title of Jesus as "the Lord Messiah" is constantly brought before us in the New Testament's favorite name for him, "the Lord Jesus Messiah."

Trinitarianism confuses the Lord God with the anointed or *appointed* Lord, the king. The category of Messiah is entirely adequate to account for the New Testament understanding of Jesus. The Bible does not need

<sup>21</sup> *The Birth of the Messiah*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 432.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 2:11; Luke 2:26.

<sup>23</sup> Ps. Sol. 17:32; 18:7.

<sup>24</sup> I Sam. 24:6. Cp. v.10.

<sup>25</sup> I Sam. 26:15, 16.

<sup>26</sup> John 1:49.

<sup>27</sup> Col. 3:24.

<sup>28</sup> Acts 2:36.

<sup>29</sup> I Pet. 3:15.

<sup>30</sup> Rev. 11:15; 12:10

the “help” of further developments in Christology which go beyond the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. As Christ, Jesus is the perfect image of the One God. The character and work of Jesus demonstrate the character and work of his Father, as an agent represents his sender.

#### V. ETERNAL SONSHIP

It is an uphill battle for Trinitarians to support the notion of “eternal Sonship” from Scripture. A contemporary Trinitarian informs us that Jesus proceeded “by eternal generation as the Son of God from the Father *in a birth that never took place* because it always was.”<sup>31</sup> We wonder whether such mystifying language helps to promote the truth of the Christian faith. In Scripture the begetting of the Son *did* take place and it took place in time. The classic prediction of the Messiah’s appointment to kingship appears in Psalm 2. The One God declares: “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.” Luke knew that the Son of God was miraculously begotten in the womb of Mary.<sup>32</sup> In a sermon at Pisidian Antioch Paul preached about the birth of the Messiah, showing that God had “raised up Jesus,” i.e., brought him on the scene fulfilling the “begettal” prediction of Psalm 2.<sup>33</sup> Luke has already used the same expression—“raise up”— of the birth of the promised prophet.<sup>34</sup> There is no such thing in Scripture as a begetting or generation of the Son in eternity, other than in the decrees of God.

A distinguished Trinitarian of the last century expressed his bewilderment at the idea of a sonship which has no beginning and thus of the whole doctrine of an “eternal Son.” Speaking of Luke 1:35 Adam Clark noted:

We may plainly perceive here that the angel does *not* give the appellation of *Son of God* to the *divine nature* of Christ, but to the *holy person or thing, to hagion*, which was to be born of the Virgin,

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Wuest, *Great Truths to Live By*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952, 30, emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>33</sup> See Acts 13:33, quoting Ps. 2:7. “Raising up” here refers more naturally to the birth of Jesus, not his resurrection. Paul goes on to refer to the raising of Jesus *from the dead* in the next verse. The KJV seems to have confused the issue by inserting the word “again” after “raised up” in v. 33.

<sup>34</sup> Acts 2:30 (Rec. Text); Acts 3:22; 3:26; 7:37.

by the energy of the holy spirit. . . . Here I trust that I may be permitted to say, with all due respect to those who differ from me, that the doctrine of the *eternal Sonship* of Christ is, in my opinion, anti-scriptural and highly dangerous. This doctrine I reject for the following reasons. 1. I have not been able to find any express declaration in the Scriptures concerning it. 2. If Christ is the Son of God as to his divine nature, then he cannot be eternal: for son implies father, and father implies the idea of generation, and generation implies a time in which it was effected and time also antecedent to such generation. 3. If Christ is the Son of God as to his divine nature, then the Father is of necessity prior, consequently superior to him. 4. Again, if this divine nature were begotten of the Father, then it must be in time, i.e., there was a period in which it did not exist and a period when it began to exist. This destroys the eternity of our blessed Lord and robs him at once of his Godhead. 5. To say that he was begotten from all eternity is in my opinion absurd, and the phrase eternal son is a positive self-contradiction. Eternity is that which has no beginning, nor stands in any reference to time. Son supposes time, generation and Father: and time also antecedent to such generation. Therefore the conjunction of these two terms Son and eternity is absolutely impossible, as they imply essentially different and opposite ideas.<sup>35</sup>

An eminent biblical scholar, known as “the father of American biblical literature,” Moses Stuart, had the following to say on this subject. He spoke as a Trinitarian:

The generation of the Son *as divine, as God*, seems to be out of the question— unless it be an express doctrine of revelation, which is so far from being the case, that I conceive that the *contrary is plainly taught*.<sup>36</sup>

But can the doctrine of the Trinity stand if there is no scriptural support for “eternal generation”?

<sup>35</sup> *Commentary on the Bible*, 1836, on Luke 1:35.

<sup>36</sup> Moses Stuart, *Answer to Channing*, cited by Wilson (emphasis is Stuart’s), *Concessions*, 315.

## VI. DISPUTED TEXTS

Discussion of the Trinity often centers around a handful of New Testament verses which are meant to prove that Jesus is the Supreme Deity rather than the perfect reflection of Deity, the authorized human ambassador of the One God. Some modern proponents of Trinitarianism produce these verses as though it were self-evident that their testimony favors Trinitarianism. There is a strong tradition among Trinitarians of the highest repute, however, that these texts do not establish the Deity of Jesus. Other texts seem clearly to preclude his Deity.

*Titus 2:13; II Peter 1:1*

A number of contemporary discussions advance the so-called “Granville Sharp’s rule” to support their claim that Jesus is called “the great God and Savior” in Titus 2:13. Sharp contended that when the Greek word *kai* (“and”) joins two nouns of the same case, and the first noun has the definite article and the second does not, the two nouns refer to one subject. Hence the disputed verse should read “. . . our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,” and not as the King James Version has it, “. . . the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.” The rule about the omission of the article, however, cannot be relied on to settle the matter. As Nigel Turner (who writes as a Trinitarian) says:

Unfortunately, at this period of Greek we cannot be sure that such a rule is really decisive. Sometimes the definite article is not repeated even where there is clearly a separation in idea. “The repetition of the article was not strictly necessary to ensure that the items be considered separately (Moulton-Howard-Turner, *Grammar*, Vol. III, p. 181. The reference is to Titus 2:13).”<sup>37</sup>

Since the absence of a second article is not decisive, it is natural to see here the appearing of God’s glory as it is displayed in His Son at the Second Coming. There is an obvious parallel with Matthew’s description of the arrival of Jesus in power: “For the Son of Man is going to come in

<sup>37</sup>*Grammatical Insights into the New Testament*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1965, 16. An unfortunate misprint occurs in Nigel Turner’s statement. The word “not” is omitted before “repeated,” reversing Turner’s intention to point out that the article does not have to be repeated to separate two distinct subjects. We had ample opportunity to discuss this matter with the late Dr. Turner.

the glory of his Father with his holy angels.”<sup>38</sup> Since the Father confers His glory upon the Son (as he will also share it with the saints), it is most appropriate that Father and Son should be closely linked.

A wide range of grammarians and biblical scholars have recognized that the absence of the definite article before “our Savior Jesus Christ” is quite inadequate to establish the Trinitarian claim that Jesus is here called “the great God.” At best, the argument is “dubious.”<sup>39</sup> It is unfortunate, as Brown says, “that no certainty can be reached here, for it seems that this passage is the one which shaped the confession of the World Council of Churches in ‘Jesus Christ as God and Savior.’”<sup>40</sup> It should also be noted that the Roman emperor could be called “God and Savior,” without the implication that he was the Supreme Deity. Even if the title “God and Savior” were most exceptionally used of Jesus, it would not establish his position as “co-equal and co-eternal with the Father.” It would designate him as the One God’s supreme agent, which is the view of the whole Bible.

The same grammatical problem faces expositors in II Peter 1:1. Henry Alford is one of many Trinitarians who argue that Jesus is not called “God” in this verse. For him the absence of the article is outweighed here, as in Titus 2:13, by the much more significant fact that both Peter and Paul normally distinguish clearly between God and Jesus Christ. The writer of the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* agreed that “the rule that the one article indicates the one subject [cannot] be too strongly relied upon as decisive. . . .”<sup>41</sup> A Trinitarian writer of the last century was much less generous to those who sought proof of the deity of Christ in the omission of the article:

Some eminently pious and learned scholars. . . have so far overstretched the argument founded on the presence or absence of the article, as to have run it into a fallacious sophistry, and, in the intensity of their zeal to maintain the “honor of the Son,” were not aware that they were rather engaged in “dishonoring the Father.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Matt. 16:27.

<sup>39</sup> See Raymond Brown, *Jesus, God and Man*, MacMillan Pub. Co., 1967, 10, 15-18. <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Cp. Nels Ferre’s objection that this title implies a docetic Jesus (*Expository Times*, Dec., 1962).

<sup>41</sup> A.E. Humphreys, Cambridge University Press, 1895, *ad loc. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Granville Penn, *Supplemental Annotations to the New Covenant*, 146, cited in Wilson, *Unitarian Principles Confirmed by Trinitarian Testimonies*, 431.

The last statement may in fact be true of the whole effort of orthodoxy to make Jesus equal in every sense to the Father.

#### *Romans 9:5*

Some Trinitarians offer Romans 9:5 as conclusive proof that Jesus is “God over all” and therefore part of the Godhead. It depends which translation one reads, because there are some seven different ways of punctuating the verse in which either Christ or the Father is called “God blessed forever.”<sup>43</sup> The issue is: Should we read “. . . of whom, according to the flesh, is Christ, who is over all. God be blessed for ever,” or “. . . of whom, according to the flesh is Christ, who being God over all, is blessed forever?” Among older commentators Erasmus, though a Trinitarian, was cautious about using this verse as a proof-text:

Those who contend that in this text Christ is clearly termed *God*, either place little confidence in other passages of Scripture, deny all understanding to the Arians [unitarians], or pay scarcely any attention to the style of the Apostle. A similar passage occurs in Second Corinthians 11:31; “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever;” the latter clause being undeniably restricted to the Father.<sup>44</sup>

Using the principle of comparison of text with text, it is most likely that Paul describes the Father as “God over all.” Paul uniformly makes a distinction between God and the Lord Jesus. In the same book<sup>45</sup> Paul blesses the Creator and there is no reason to doubt that the Father is meant. In another passage<sup>46</sup> he speaks of “God our Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.” Romans 9:5 is an obvious parallel. It should not be forgotten that the word *theos*, “God”, occurs more than 500 times in Paul’s letters and there is not a single unambiguous instance in which it applies to Christ. A number of well-known textual critics (Lachmann, Tischendorf) place a period after the word “flesh,” allowing the rest of the

<sup>43</sup> For a full examination of the various possibilities, see the essays in the *Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis*, 1883.

<sup>44</sup> *Works*, Vol. 6, 610-611.

<sup>45</sup> Rom. 1:25.

<sup>46</sup> Gal. 1:4, 5.

sentence to be a doxology of the Father. Ancient Greek manuscripts do not generally contain punctuation, but the *Codex Ephraemi* of the fifth century has a period after “flesh.” More remarkable is the fact that during the whole Arian controversy, this verse was not used by Trinitarians against the unitarians. It clearly did not attest to Jesus as second member of the Godhead.

In modern times Raymond Brown finds that “at most one may claim a certain probability that this passage refers to Jesus as God.”<sup>47</sup> In the conservative *Tyndale Commentary* on Romans 9:5, F.F. Bruce warns against charging those who treat the words as applicable to the Father with “Christological unorthodoxy.”<sup>48</sup> It is proper to add that even if Jesus is exceptionally called “God,” the title may be used in its secondary, Messianic sense of one who reflects the divine majesty of the One God, his Father.

When the detail of grammatical nuance has been fully explored, balances of probability will be weighed in different ways. It is incredible to imagine that the Christian creed should depend on fine points of language about which many could not reasonably be asked to make a judgement and experts disagree. The plain language of Paul’s and Jesus’ creed is open to every student of the Bible: “There is no God except one. . . . There is for us [Christians] one God, the Father.”<sup>49</sup>

That “one God” is as distinguished in Paul’s mind from the “one Lord Jesus Messiah” as He is from the many gods of paganism. The category of “one God” belongs exclusively to the Father, that of “Lord *Messiah*” exclusively to Jesus. Jesus himself had provided the basis of Paul’s simple understanding of the phrase “one God.” Both master and disciple shared the creed of Israel who believed in God as one, unique person.

#### *The Technicalities of John 1:1*

John 1:1 has been subjected to a minute analysis by commentators of every shade of opinion. It is obvious that some modern translations are blatantly Trinitarian *interpretations*. *The Living Gospels*<sup>50</sup> reads: “Before anything else existed there was Christ, with God. He has always been

<sup>47</sup> *Jesus, God and Man*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> *Romans*, InterVarsity Press, 1985, 176.

<sup>49</sup> I Cor. 8:4, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Tyndale House, 1966.

alive and is Himself God.” But that is to raise the whole Trinitarian problem. Suddenly God is two Persons. A little known fact is that the “word” was not assumed to be a second *person* in translations prior to the King James Version. The Bishops’ Bible of 1568, replaced by the King James Bible in 1611, understands the word to be impersonal, and uses the pronoun “it,” as does the Geneva Bible of 1560.

It is an assumption that by “word” John meant a second uncreated personal being alongside the One God. John elsewhere recognizes that the Father is the “only true God” and “the one who alone is God.”<sup>51</sup> Many have recognized an obvious connection between the “word” and what is said of Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible. In Proverbs “Wisdom” is personified and is said to be “with” God.<sup>52</sup> John says that the “word” was “with [*pros*] God.” In the Old Testament a vision or word is said to be “with” the person who receives it. The word has a quasi-existence of its own: “The word of the Lord is with him,” “the prophet who has a dream with him.”<sup>53</sup> In the New Testament something impersonal can be “with” a person, as, for example, where Paul hopes that “the truth of the Gospel might remain with [*pros*] you,” present to the mind.<sup>54</sup> At the opening of John’s first epistle, which may provide just the commentary we need on John 1:1, he writes that “eternal life was with [*pros*] God.”<sup>55</sup> On the basis of these parallels it is impossible to say with certainty that the “word” in John 1:1-2 must mean a second member of the Trinity, that is, the Son of God pre-existing.

John goes on to say that “the word was God.”<sup>56</sup> Intense discussion of the exact meaning of “God” (which has no definite article) has made the whole passage seem complex. According to some a rule established by Colwell demands that the absence of the article does not weaken John’s intention to say that the word was fully God and identified with Him. Others have insisted that “God” without the article is John’s way of telling us that the word had the *character* of God and was fully expressive of His mind. The Trinitarian Bishop Westcott’s opinion is much respected and has the tentative approval of Professor Moule:

<sup>51</sup> John 17:3; John 5:44.

<sup>52</sup> Prov. 8:30.

<sup>53</sup> II Kings 3:12; Jer. 23:28.

<sup>54</sup> Gal. 2:5.

<sup>55</sup> I John 1:2.

<sup>56</sup> John 1:1.

Bishop Westcott’s note [on John 1:1], although it may require the addition of some reference to idiom, does still, perhaps, represent [John’s] intention: “[Word] is necessarily without the article (*theos*, not *ho theos*) inasmuch as it describes the nature of the Word and does not identify His Person. It would be pure Sabellianism to say that “the Word was *ho theos*.”<sup>57</sup>

The Bishop’s point was that the “word” cannot be distinct from God (with God) and at the same time identified with Him. This would blur all distinctions in the Godhead. Rather, John describes the nature of the “word,” and the absence of the article before God:

... places stress upon the qualitative aspect of the noun rather than its mere identity. An object of thought may be conceived of from two points of view: as to *identity* or *quality*. To convey the first point of view the Greek uses the article; for the second the anarthrous construction is used.<sup>58</sup>

After a close analysis Philip Harner suggests: “Perhaps the clause should be translated, ‘the Word had the same nature as God.’”<sup>59</sup> He adds that “there is no basis for regarding the predicate *theos* as definite.”<sup>60</sup> “Thus,” says another scholar, “John 1:1b denotes, not the identity, but rather the character of the Logos.”<sup>61</sup>

The difficulty facing translators is how to convey these subtle nuances into English. James Denny insisted that the New Testament does not say what our English translations suggest: “The Word was God.” He meant that in Greek “God” (*theos*) without the article really means “having the quality of God,” not being one-to-one identified with God.<sup>62</sup> One attempt to convey the right shade of meaning is found in the translation: “The word was god.”<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately standard English translations convey the wrong sense. As Harner says, “The problem with all these translations

<sup>57</sup> C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 1953, 116.

<sup>58</sup> Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, New York: Macmillan, 1955, sec. 149.

<sup>59</sup> “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns; Mark 15:39 and John 1:1,” *JBL*, 1973, p. 87.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> D. A. Fennema, “John 1:18: ‘God the Only Son,’ ” *NTS*, 1985, 130.

<sup>62</sup> *Letters of Principal James Denny to Robertson Nicoll*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920, 121-126.

<sup>63</sup> C. C. Torrey, *The Four Gospels— A New Translation*, second edition, 1947.

[*Revised Standard Version, Jerusalem Bible, New English Bible, Good News for Modern Man*] is that they could represent [the idea that word and God are interchangeable].”<sup>64</sup>

The prologue to John’s Gospel does not require belief in a Godhead of more than one Person. It is most likely that John is correcting a contemporary Gnostic tendency to distinguish God from lesser divine figures. John’s intention is to bind the “Wisdom” or “word” of God as closely as possible to God Himself. The word is God’s own creative activity. Thus he says that from the beginning God’s wisdom, which the one God had with Him as an architect has His plan, was fully expressive of God. It was God himself in his self-manifestation. All things were made through this plan. The same “word” was finally embodied in a human being, the Messiah, when Jesus was born, when the “word became flesh.”<sup>65</sup> Jesus is therefore what the word became. He is the perfect expression of the mind of God in human form. Jesus is not to be identified one-to-one with the word of John 1:1, as though *the Son* existed from the beginning. Jesus is the divinely authorized messenger of God and, like the word, has the character of God.

James Dunn’s conclusion about John’s intention confirms a non-Trinitarian reading of John 1:1-3, 14:

The conclusion which seems to emerge from our analysis [of John 1:1-14] thus far is that it is only with verse 14 [“the word became flesh”] that we can begin to speak of the personal Logos. The poem uses rather impersonal language (became flesh), but no Christian would fail to recognize here a reference to Jesus—the word became not flesh in general but Jesus Christ. *Prior to verse 14* we are in the same realm as pre-Christian talk of Wisdom and Logos, the same language and ideas that we find in Philo, where as we have seen, we are dealing with *personifications rather than persons*, personified actions of God rather than an individual divine being as such. The point is obscured by the fact that we have to translate the masculine Logos as “he” throughout the poem. But if we translated Logos as “God’s utterance” instead, it would become clearer that the poem *did not necessarily intend the Logos of vv. 1-13 to be thought of as a personal divine being*. In other words, the revolutionary signifi-

<sup>64</sup>Harner, 87. The equivalence of “word” and “God” he lists as “clause A,” *ho theos en ho logos*, and it is described on p. 84 of his article. The translation “the Word was God” misleads readers into thinking that John is promoting the Trinitarian idea that the word (and therefore Jesus) is equivalent to the Supreme God.

<sup>65</sup>John 1:14.

cance of v. 14 may well be that it marks not only the transition in the thought of the poem from pre-existence to incarnation, but also the transition from *impersonal personification to actual person*.<sup>66</sup>

This reading of John has the enormous advantage of harmonizing him with the testimony of Matthew, Mark and Luke and allowing the undivided unity of the One God, the Father to remain undisturbed.

#### *Mark 13:39*

This verse reports Jesus’ statement that he did not know the day of his return. It seems plainly contradictory to assert that omniscient deity can be ignorant in any respect. Some Trinitarians appeal to the doctrine of the divine and human natures in Jesus to solve the problem. The Son did in fact know, but as a human being he did not. This seems little different from saying that one is poor because one has no money in one pocket, though in the other pocket one has a million dollars. In this text it is the Son as distinct from *the Father*, i.e., the Son of God, who did not know. It is therefore quite impossible to plead that only the human nature in Jesus was ignorant. The Bible anyway does not distinguish “natures” in Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man. Both are Messianic titles for the one person. If a witness in a court of law were to be asked whether he had seen the defendant on a certain day and he replies in the negative, meaning that he had not seen him with his defective eye, though he did with his sound eye, we would consider him dishonest. When Jesus said “I,” he could not have meant a part of himself. The theory by which Jesus did and did not know the day of his future coming would render all of his sayings unintelligible. The plain fact is that a confession of ignorance is incompatible with the theory of the absolute deity of Jesus.

A comparable difficulty faces Trinitarians when they assert that only the human part of Jesus died. If Jesus were God, and God is immortal, Jesus could not have died. We wonder how it is possible to maintain that “Jesus” does not represent the whole person. Nothing in the Bible suggests that Jesus is the name of his human nature only. If Jesus is the whole person and Jesus died, he cannot be immortal deity. It appears that Trinitarians argue that only deity is sufficient to provide the necessary atonement. But if the divine nature did not die, how on the Trinitarian theory, is the atonement secured?

<sup>66</sup>*Christology in the Making*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 243, emphasis added.



*Matthew 1:23*

It is sometimes asserted that the name Immanuel—“God is with us”—given to Jesus proves that he is God. If that were so, then the child born soon after the prediction was given in the days of Ahaz would also have been God. The name, however, does not tell us that Jesus is God, but that in his life God has intervened to save His people. The parents who in Old Testament times called their son Ithiel<sup>67</sup>—“God is with me”—did not believe their offspring to be deity. Names of this type indicate the divine event associated with the life of the individual so named. God, the Father of Jesus, was certainly with Israel as He worked through His unique Son. In the life of Jesus, the Son of God, God had visited His people.

A Trinitarian scholar of the last century wrote:

To maintain that the name Immanuel proves the doctrine [of the deity of Jesus] is a fallacious argument, although many Trinitarians have urged it. Jerusalem is called “Jehovah our Righteousness.” Is Jerusalem also divine?<sup>68</sup>

*John 10:30*

In this verse Jesus claimed to be “one” with his Father. The word “one” in this much discussed text is the Greek term *hen*. It is not the numeral *heis* which describes the Godhead in the Christian creed announced by Jesus.<sup>69</sup> It is unfair that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are sometimes attacked in popular presentations of the Trinity for saying only what even conservative evangelical commentators admit:

The expression [“I and the Father are one”] seems mainly to imply that the Father and Son are united in will and purpose. Jesus prays in John 17:11 that his followers may all be one (*hen*), i.e., united in purpose, as he and His Father are united.<sup>70</sup>

This is what unitarians (and numerous Trinitarians) have maintained for many centuries. The Trinitarian Erasmus saw the danger of pushing this verse beyond its natural meaning:

<sup>67</sup> Prov. 30:1.

<sup>68</sup> Moses Stuart, *Answer to Channing*, cited in *Concessions*, 236.

<sup>69</sup> Mark 12:29.

<sup>70</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *Tyndale Commentary on John*, 136.

I do not see how this text is of any value in confirming the opinion of the orthodox, or in restraining the pertinacity of the heretic.<sup>71</sup>

The meaning of the statement is quite clear in its context. Jesus has been talking about the Father preserving the sheep. Since Jesus’ power is derived from his Father, that power is able to keep the sheep safe. Jesus and the Father are one in respect of the preservation of the sheep. John Calvin was at this point wiser than some of his modern exponents. He remarked that:

. . . the ancients improperly used this passage to prove that Christ is of the same substance as the Father. For [Jesus] does not argue concerning unity of substance, but speaks of his agreement with the Father; so that whatever is done by Christ will be confirmed by the Father’s power.<sup>72</sup>

Another Trinitarian authority observes that:

. . . if the doctrine of the Trinity, and the unity of essence, be immediately inferred, this is a faulty application of the dogmatic system, because the context of the passage is neglected.<sup>73</sup>

It is customary for Trinitarians to assume that the hostile Jewish impression of Jesus’ words must be the correct one. Since they accused him of blasphemy and “making himself equal with God,”<sup>74</sup> it is maintained that Jesus must have been making a Trinitarian claim. It is unfair to assume that the Jews had properly evaluated Jesus’ words. If they had, there would have been no need for Jesus to justify himself further. He need only have repeated that he was in fact the Supreme God. In his much neglected response to the angry Jews<sup>75</sup> Jesus argues: “Since magistrates and judges are in Scripture expressly called ‘gods,’ it is unjust to charge me with blasphemy because I, whom the Father has appointed as the Messiah and therefore one greater than all kings, superior to all prophets

<sup>71</sup> Cited in *Concessions*, 353.

<sup>72</sup> Cited in *Concessions*, 354.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in *Concessions*, 355.

<sup>74</sup> John 5:18.

<sup>75</sup> John 10:34-36.

announce myself to be the Son of God, that is the Messiah, perfectly reflecting the will of my Father.” Jesus links his own authority with that of the human “gods,” whom God so designated.<sup>76</sup> Granting that he was far superior to any previous “divine authority,” a correct idea of his status is to be gained, so Jesus maintained, by considering that even Israelite leaders were entitled to be called “gods.” Jesus is the highest human authority, fully and uniquely authorized by the Father.

Trinitarian conviction about unity of substance causes them to mis-read John’s “sender/agent” description of Jesus. In seeing Jesus men were seeing God; in believing in him they were believing in God; in honoring him they were honoring God and in hating him they were hating God.<sup>77</sup> None of this requires a Trinitarian explanation. John gives us a beautiful picture of a miraculous human individual in whom God has invested His spirit and to whom God has extended His authority and character—and all this in a way never seen before or since. Jesus is the unique ambassador for the One God. It is not that God has become man, but that God has provided in the promised descendant of David the man who is the *raison d’être* of his cosmic plan.

#### *John 20:28*

The well-known words of Thomas to Jesus, “My Lord and my God,” are supposed to be decisive for the full deity of Christ. Jesus, however, had already denied being God (see above on John 10:34-36). John distinguishes Jesus from the one and only God, his Father.<sup>78</sup> Readers of the New Testament often do not realize that the word “God” can be applied to a representative of God. There is good evidence that John incorporates into his portrait of Jesus as Messiah, ideas drawn from the Messianic Psalm 45. In answer to Pilate, Jesus declared that he was a king whose task was to bear witness to the truth. There is an Old Testament background to this theme. Psalm 45 is written in praise of the Messiah,<sup>79</sup> who is addressed as “most mighty,” and urged to “ride prosperously in the cause of Truth.” The Psalmist foresees that the king’s enemies “will fall under you.” The royal status of this leader is emphasized when the writer addresses him with the words “O God.”<sup>80</sup> The career of the Messiah outlined in Psalm 45

<sup>76</sup> Ps. 82:1, 6.

<sup>77</sup> John 14:9; 12:44; 5:23; 15:23.

<sup>78</sup> John 17:3.

<sup>79</sup> Heb. 1:8.

<sup>80</sup> Ps. 45:6.

is reflected in John’s observation that Jesus’ enemies recoiled at his claim to be the Messiah and “fell to the ground.”<sup>81</sup> Thomas’s recognition of Jesus as “God” is a beautiful fulfillment of the Psalm’s highest address to the King of Israel. In that Psalm the Messiah is acclaimed as the Church’s Lord and “God.” But the “God” Messiah has been appointed by his God, the One and Only Infinite God.<sup>82</sup>

Jesus himself was interested in the use of the word “God” for human rulers.<sup>83</sup> The Messiah is supremely entitled to be called “God” in this special sense, particularly because he embodies the “word” which is itself *theos*.<sup>84</sup> It is possible that John adds one further statement about Jesus as “God”: He declares him to be (if this is the correct manuscript reading—the point is disputed) “unique son, ‘God’ [*theos*].”<sup>85</sup> This is the ultimate Messianic description, expressing the fact that Jesus is the image of the One God. As Son of God, however, he is to be distinguished from the one who is underived, namely his Father. It remains a fact that John wrote his entire book to prove that Jesus was the Christ<sup>86</sup> and that the God of Jesus is also the God of the disciples.<sup>87</sup>

#### *1 John 5:20*

Some writers who promote the idea that the New Testament calls Jesus God in the same sense as his Father tell us that 1 John 5:20 definitely says that Jesus is the true God. The text reads: “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding so that we might know the true one; and we are in the true one, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and life eternal.”

Many Trinitarians do not think that Jesus is here described as the true God. Henry Alford, the distinguished British expositor and author of the famous commentary on the *Greek New Testament*, refers to a tendency which has played a major role historically in the interpretation of the Bible. He remarks that the Fathers interpreted 1 John 5:20 doctrinally rather than exegetically.<sup>88</sup> In plain words they were influenced more by a

<sup>81</sup> John 18:6.

<sup>82</sup> Ps. 45:7.

<sup>83</sup> John 10:34; Ps. 82:6.

<sup>84</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>85</sup> John 1:18.

<sup>86</sup> John 20:31.

<sup>87</sup> John 20:17.

<sup>88</sup> *Greek New Testament, ad loc. cit.*

desire to defend their already established theological position than a determination to give the actual meaning of the text.

Alford compares John's statement about the one God in 1 John 5:20 with the structure of similar sentences in the epistles of John. He also notes the obvious parallel in John 17:3, where Jesus is carefully distinguished from the one God. He concludes that expositors seeking the plain sense of this passage will not see the phrase "true God" as a reference to Jesus but to the Father. "This" (*houtos*) in the last sentence of 1 John 5:20 does not have to refer to the nearest noun (Jesus Christ in this case).

Henry Alford cites two passages from John's epistles to make his point: "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ. This is the antichrist. . . ." <sup>89</sup> "For many deceivers went forth into the world, namely they who do not confess Jesus Christ coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist." <sup>90</sup> From these two passages it is clear that "this" does not necessarily refer back to the immediately preceding noun. If it did, it would make Jesus the deceiver and the antichrist. The pronoun "this" in 1 John 5:20 refers rather to the preceding phrase "Him who is true," describing the Father, not Jesus. If we compare John 17:3 we shall see 1 John 5:20 as an echo of that verse: "This is eternal life, that they should believe in You [the Father], the only true God, and in Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

In his book *The Trinity in the New Testament*,<sup>91</sup> the Trinitarian Arthur Wainwright comes to the same conclusion. He does not think that Jesus is called "true God" in 1 John 5:20. Henry Alford, who had the highest regard for the Scriptures, concludes:

I own I cannot see, after this saying of our Lord: "You are the only true God (John 17:3)," how anyone can imagine that the same apostle can have had in these words (John 17:3) any other reference than that which is given in those (1 John 5:20).

If we carefully weigh the evidence, it seems beyond question that John never departed from belief in the unipersonal God of his Old Testament heritage. This brings him in line with his beloved Master who likewise never veered from devotion to the one God of Israel.

<sup>89</sup> 1 John 2:22.

<sup>90</sup> II John 7.

<sup>91</sup> S.P.C.K., 1962, 71, 72.

## VII. CONCLUSION

It appears that expert Trinitarian exegesis often weakens the attempt to base the Trinity on Scripture. There are no texts advanced in support of the orthodox understanding of the Godhead which have not been assigned another interpretation by Trinitarians themselves. Can the biblical doctrine of God really be so obscure? It may be simpler to accept the *shema* of Israel and its belief in a unipersonal God. Since this was the creed spoken by Jesus himself, it would seem to have an absolute claim to be the Christian creed. Nothing of the glory of the Son is lost if he is recognized as the unique human representative of God, for whom God created the whole universe.