

Focus on the Kingdom

Vol. 12 No. 7

Anthony Buzzard, editor

April, 2010

Maybe the Gnostics Won After All by Keith Relf, New Zealand

As we read the history of the early Church there is one group that seems to keep popping up — the Gnostics. They believed they had, or some of their number possessed, secret knowledge which allowed them to “interpret” Scripture better and with more authority than others. There were various other groups who corrupted copies of the text of the New Testament to make it appear more favorable to their particular views, but it was said of the Gnostics that they were so imaginative they didn’t always need to alter the wording. All they had to do was “interpret” any text to make it mean just what they wanted it to say. Today there appear to be people with the same ability. Today the majority of Christendom will claim special revelation and declare Trinitarianism to be true, adding that it is essential to salvation. All this in spite of the fact that neither Jesus nor the apostles breathed a word about it. Jesus and Paul knew nothing at all about a triune God.

History reveals that those who got to call themselves “orthodox” — meaning those having “the right way” — achieved that honored estate by forcibly removing their opposition, including some they labeled Gnostics. My grandmother had a saying about “The pot calling the kettle black.” Although in those days cooking was often done over an open fire, it still applies. As one attempts to understand what the current “orthodox” now declare as doctrine, it appears that they have employed similar arts to the early Gnostics they had so vigorously opposed! Making Scripture say what they desire.

The label “orthodox” is said to mean “the right way.” This is a misnomer, as any sincere group could and would, even if not in so many words, describe themselves as “the right way.” They wouldn’t be in that “way” if they didn’t think it was the right way. Those who call themselves orthodox today did not arrive there with a divine stamp of approval on their doctrine. They were the political “winners” of the ideological struggle to be top dog. In fact the group that started to set the rules of today’s orthodoxy were mainly ex-pagans with a Greek philosophical bent. They found leadership eventually in a pagan, sun worshipping emperor called Constantine. Constantine saw the political advantage of a single state religion for the peace of his empire. The resulting state-approved Christianity was the forerunner of the Roman Church, a church that still today sets itself

and its traditions above the Bible and calls itself “apostolic.” Authentic. Based on Peter.

The Emperor Constantine is euphemistically referred to as a “Christian emperor.” But he was a priest in a cult of Sun Worshippers almost until the day he died. One of his successors, Justinian, when tidying up the laws of the Roman Empire, helped ensure the continuance of Constantine’s particular version of Christianity by enacting laws that forbade any other opinion on pain of death. The Greek word for opinion is the word from which we get “heresy.” The self-appointed orthodox party called the shots and had the only permissible “right opinions.” So it is to this very day.

As a result of the relentless state enforcement of “true” doctrine by violent means, we find today’s orthodox theology has been literally “burned into” the psyche of the Church (how many heretics — martyrs — did the Church put to the fire?). Then, during centuries of illiteracy, the doctrines were passed on for generation after generation by a self-appointed elite, building an ingrown philosophical structure, so that today most of the faithful are incapable or afraid to question the dogmas of orthodoxy, even though they admit they don’t understand them. Leadership of the majority group labors valiantly to make persuasive argument. Many harbor inner doubts and uncertainty. To dampen the zeal of any persistent questioners, veiled or explicit threats are made of an orthodox hell and damnation as a reward for disbelief.

This doctrine about a triune God is all so foreign to the words of Jesus and the apostles. They had strong words to say about those who abused and misled “the flock,” but they never tried to befuddle believers with “mysteries,” meaningless language and impossible mathematics. Jesus’ teachings and parables were, in fact, an attempt to cut through the theological jargon of the day and present a simple truth in plain language with the help of pictures and comparisons, so that ordinary folk could understand. It is noteworthy that Jesus usually gives an interpretation to his parables (comparisons), yet many modern teachers manage to see all manner of “hidden meanings.” This reminds us again that maybe the Gnostics are with us after all.

In recent years, a number of orthodox doctrines have been “overhauled” and several discarded for what they were, paganism masquerading as Christianity. The immortality of the soul is just one of these. These doctrines are being shown to be false by some of the

most eminent, even conservative theologians of our time, yet other esoteric teaching of the same genre is still enforced in spite of much expert scholarly exposition to the contrary.

The doctrine of the Trinity is spoken of as “the cornerstone of Christianity,” while the second Adam, the “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” is “the stone the builders rejected.” To demonstrate what I have said, try to study the subject and then engage a Trinitarian believer in meaningful dialogue, and in most instances you will be quickly shut down or turned away, even excommunicated. Gnosticism cannot abide logic and God’s truth is logical. God has not concealed the truth about how many He is in a tangle of mystery. God sent His Son and gave us His Holy Spirit so that we may enjoy the freedom of knowing the truth and by that knowledge acquire a “living hope.”

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is incorruptible and undefiled, and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:3-4). There is no hint in any part of Scripture that one must believe in the Trinity to be saved. Were Jesus or the Apostles negligent in not teaching us the “the right way” of salvation? Or is today’s orthodoxy not in fact what it claims, sometimes so vociferously?

Dear friends, you must answer these questions or your faith could ever be compromised by an element of uncertainty as you attempt to believe doctrines that (admit it!) you do not and cannot understand, about the most basic truth of the Gospel — who was Jesus? And who is God? The right understanding of the Atonement rests on knowing that Jesus was the “second Adam.” Jesus died for our sins in our place. Paul made it plain in Romans 5:19: “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (ESV. Better read the whole chapter). It is interesting that many translations appear to leave out the second “man,” saying instead “by *one*’s obedience” in an attempt to give the words a Trinitarian “spin.” But Scripture is plain — only a true descendant of Adam could remove the curse. God, who is **immortal** (1 Tim. 6:16), could **not die** for our sins.

Come on now! Do you know that your church is committed to belief in a God the Son who cannot by definition die? God is immortal. In fact, the suggestion that only God could “pay the price” induces belief in a *mortal* God who must die! “Only God dying for us is sufficient,” they say, and yet in the same breath “God cannot die.” So who died? Paul says it was the Son of God. He was straightforwardly right. Paul did not imagine that God could die, or that God was more than

one Person. Why surrender to the often incomprehensible jargon of some “theology”? The Gnostics were the first “theologians,” said prince of church history, Adolf Harnack. Why not free yourself of dependence on them? Don’t let the Gnostics fool us. ✧

Who Knows Best Who Jesus Is? Jesus!

If you will agree with the above common-sense proposition, let us see what Jesus had to say about his own identity. Churches gather under a longstanding banner — belief that Jesus *is* God, Jesus is Yahweh, the God of Israel.

But did Jesus say any such thing? He could so easily have gone about declaring: “I am God.” But he never did. Not once. Who then did he claim to be?

The question swirled around in those frenzied days of the ministry of Jesus. Some thought Jesus was one of the prophets, restored to life. Others had other opinions. Jesus as a master teacher, in love with unity and good order, posed the question to his chief students: “But who do *you* say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15). Forget popular guesses, and let’s get to the real truth. Peter answered confidently, “You are **the Messiah, the Son of the living God.**” Is it clear? Wanting to side with Jesus, I am listening carefully to Jesus’ response to Peter’s enlightened answer to the big question — the really big question on which the whole Christian faith depends.

Jesus greeted Peter’s splendidly correct answer with overflowing joy. Peter, said Jesus, had been gifted with a miracle of understanding and was able to define who Jesus was and is correctly. He is **the Son of God and the Messiah.** “Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven,” and I propose to build my own Church on this stupendous insight that I am the **Son of God and the Messiah** (Matt. 16:17-18).

Jesus thus told us in clear terms: “**I am the Son of God, the Messiah.**” He knew who he was.

After New Testament times that foundational, unifying and stabilizing truth did not remain in place. It suffered the ravages of Greek philosophy which reworked — and confused — the whole biblical teaching about God and **His Son, the Messiah.** But while Scripture was being written and the apostles were still alive to hold the fort, the cry continued to go out: “These things [the whole gospel of John] were written that you might believe that **Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God**” (John 20:31). Sound familiar? Even later in John’s farewell communications in his epistles, the note of urgency has if anything increased. “He who denies that **Jesus is the Christ**” has lost out — he who denies that **Jesus is the Son of God.** Look up 1 John 2:22; 4:15; 5:1, 5, 10, 13, 20 for a blockbuster emphasis on this point.

All this is quite simple and straightforward, as long as we keep later philosophical language like “two natures,” “three hypostases” and “one substance” at arms length, lest it blind us to the much easier words of Jesus. On the rock foundation that **I am the Christ, the Son of the living God**, Jesus’ Church is founded. Nothing about his being God!

What more can we say about Matthew? He seems to have paid careful attention to who Jesus is. He opens his whole book with the caption that Jesus is the **son of David and of Abraham and also, of course, of God** who was the Father of Jesus, causing his *genesis, origin* (Matt. 1:18; note the word carefully).

Ah, but the book of John, how does this fit the plain teaching that **Jesus is the Son of God and Christ**? Perfectly. Did not John say expressly that his whole book was written that you might believe that **Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God** (20:31)? Look carefully at Jesus’ early days. What do the disciples say? “We have found **the Messiah**” (John 1:41). We have found **the Son of God** (see John 1:49). Were they mistaken? Absolutely not.

Now come the precise and confirming words of Jesus in John 4 where he encounters, at a well, a paganized lady in Samaria. Jesus, with his marvelous all-embracing style allowing him to talk to all and sundry, engages her in conversation. This much she does know: “We know that **the Messiah** is coming” (v. 25). Looking her squarely in the eye, Jesus replied, “**I am he**, the one speaking to you” (John 4:26).

Jesus was not playing games and shifting the whole conversation, thus deceiving the lady. Some would have us believe that there is no connection between “the **Messiah**” of the lady’s statement and Jesus’ response “**I am he**.” We have learned from John himself that he wrote all he wrote to convince us that Jesus is **the Messiah, the Son of God** (20:31). “**I am he**” (hallelujah!) confirms the lady’s expectation that the **Messiah** was indeed coming. She was privileged to meet that very person. Jesus ought to know who he was and is! He said it here in John 4:26, just as he said it in the other gospels. **I am he — the Messiah**.

The Greek for this wonderful saying “I am he” is *ego eimi* (pronounced in modern Greek *ego eemee*). John has skillfully set up this phrase as the code for “I am the Messiah” — certainly not “I am God”! The first and key occurrence of the “I am he” saying is the one we have just examined. There are several others in John. Consistency of course requires that the same phrase be put into English by the same words each time. Sadly your translations, keen to make you think in another direction, have not allowed you to see that Jesus makes exactly the same “I am the Messiah” utterance in John 8:58. Quite unfairly the translators left off the important

word “he” when they translated “*ego eimi*” in John 8:58. In so doing they made it hard for you to recall the claim to Messiahship in 4:26: “**I**, the one speaking to you, **am he**.”

Jesus persistently and consistently continues to maintain his claim to **Messiahship**. After all, it was his stated intention to found his Church on this insight.

Even before Abraham, who joyfully looked forward to the Messiah, Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one expected to come. “I am he, the Messiah.”

A few chapters later in John 10 Jesus is confronted by hostile Jews who are deeply unhappy with his claim to **Messiahship** and unique **Sonship** — meaning that he was speaking and acting uniquely for his Father, the one God, whose “**own Son**” Jesus claimed to be. Angrily and maliciously the Jews (at least some of their leaders) accused Jesus of making himself out to be God.

What an opportunity for Jesus to confirm exactly what they suspected — that he *was* claiming to be God, or at least “a God.” Why did not Jesus simply reply by saying, “Yes, that is right; that is who I am — God”?

He did no such thing. He explained that he was acting as unique spokesman for that one God, his Father, but far from being God himself (which would have rightly been judged as blasphemy), he was **the Son of God**. Why are you so perturbed that as the one God sent on a mission as the Messiah, “I said ‘**I am the Son of God**’?” (John 10:36). There from the lips of Jesus himself we have the true identity of Jesus. Are you prepared to believe that he knew who he was and was able to tell them and us?

At his trial with complete consistency he affirmed the charge that he was “**the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed one**” (Mark 14:61-62). Does it sound familiar? To crown it all Jesus summarizes our whole duty as believers: “This is the life of the age to come [eternal life]: that we come to know you [the Father], the only one who is truly God, and Jesus **Christ** whom you sent” (John 17:3).

516 times, no less, in the New Testament, Jesus is called the **Christ**. Is the point about identity clear?

Go through the book of Acts and you will find exactly the same truth being broadcast everywhere. “**Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?**” “God has made Jesus both **Lord and Christ**” (Acts 8:37; 2:36).

Another title has surfaced here, requiring your utmost care — **Lord**. You will immediately recall that Jesus is “the Lord Jesus **Christ**,” “our **Lord Jesus Christ**,” “**Christ Jesus my Lord**.”

Our most extensive of all New Testament writers and teachers is Luke, companion of Paul on his journeys. Luke’s primary information about the identity of Jesus appears in the early chapters of his work. The

angel Gabriel is charged with making clear **who Jesus is**. In Luke 1:32-35 Gabriel carries out his teaching ministry in a few brief, instructive words, which ought never to have been overlooked or misunderstood. Mary's baby is identified as the **Son of the Most High**. Jesus is also the son of David due to his blood relationship through his mother, a descendant of David.

Then, in answer to Mary's very reasonable question as to a pregnancy without the benefit of a human husband, these words, needing to be shouted from the rooftops: "Holy spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and that is precisely why the baby to be begotten will be holy, **the Son of God**" (Luke 1:35). Once this extraordinary baby was born, the believing shepherds were told, "Today has been born in the city of David a savior who is **the Lord Christ**" (Luke 2:11). Not, I hasten to add, the *Lord God!* But the **Lord Christ and Son of the Most High**. Sounds familiar!

Those trusting blind men were theologically correct when they addressed Jesus as **Lord, son of David** (Matt. 20:31; 15:22). This is the exact equivalent of the **Lord Messiah/Christ**.

Son and **Christ** are titles, of course, rooted in Psalm 2 where the One God of Israel and of us all announced: "Today I have begotten you...I will set My King on My holy hill...Ask of Me and I will give you [My **Son**] the whole earth as your inheritance."

That begetting of **the Son** happened some 2000 years ago. We know this by merely tracking the "begetting" word from Psalm 2:7 to the same word in Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the beginning, begetting and birth of the Son. The decree, "Today I will beget you" (Ps. 2:7) came true on the day in which Mary conceived by miracle and the angel reassured Joseph, "What has been **begotten** [brought into existence] in her is from the holy spirit" (Matt. 1:20). The child thus fathered (begotten) was of course **the Son of God**.

Luke reports the same good news from Gabriel: "Precisely because of" (*dio kai*) the miracle in Mary, the child will be called (=will be) the **Son of God** (Luke 1:35). Take that as the most brilliant definition of the Son of God and cling to it throughout the rest of the New Testament. But beware of turning it on its head or standing it upside down and destroying it by turning it into "God the Son." There is no such person in the Bible.

In Acts 13:33 Paul, traveling often with Luke, and naturally in harmony with Luke, places the begetting, beginning, coming into existence of **the Son** at the start of Jesus' life (hardly rocket science, as they say!). It was when God "raised up," i.e. put on the human scene just as He raised up Moses, Pharaoh or David, that the

begetting of Jesus happened. Just exactly as we learned from Matthew 1:20 and from Luke 1:35 (above).

Don't be misled by the KJV adding the word "again" to "raised up" in Acts 13:33. This would confuse the simplicity of truth by making Jesus Son of God *only at the resurrection*: "raised up *again*." But the resurrection of Jesus is described in verse 34, and a different Old Testament text provides the proof of the resurrection.

Then look at the same simple truth about the begetting, beginning and birth of Jesus in Romans 1:3-4. Jesus is there **God's Son, a descendant of David** (Paul and Luke in Luke 1:32-35 in perfect harmony) according to the human blood line, and installed as **Son with power** at his exaltation to the right hand of the Father.

Jesus did not become Son at the resurrection, nor at his baptism. He was God's Son by being miraculously procreated in Mary (Luke 1:35 again).

Then to Hebrews 1. God did *not* speak through a Son in the Old Testament times (Heb. 1:1-2). This should put an end to any speculation about the Son being the Old Testament angel of the Lord! The whole point of Hebrews 1 is to remind us that Jesus is not an angel, never was, and not therefore an archangel (a high-ranking angel). If Jesus were the angel of the Lord, his coming *into existence* in Mary would be impossible and the story we have outlined above would be derailed and put beyond recognition.

Hebrews 1:1 to 2:5 gives us an account of the new covenant creation in Jesus, the "society to come about which we are speaking" (2:5). This began when God fulfilled His promise given in 2 Samuel 7:14 that He would one day father, beget, bring into existence His own Son: "I will be his father and he will be My son." We saw how that promise came to be reality in Luke 1 and Matthew 1.

To make the same point about the begetting, procreation of the **Messiah, Son of God**, the Hebrews writer quotes Psalm 2 about the beginning of the Son of God ("You are My Son; today I have begotten you," Ps. 2:7 quoted in Heb. 1:5). A third quote clinches the point: "When he brings the Son into the world," i.e. has him born by supernatural begetting.

Putting this New Testament-wide information together, data which is entirely consistent and coherent, we are urged to believe simply that Jesus is, as he himself declared, **the Son of God** (John 10:36). And he really ought to know, and we really ought to believe him — we claim to be believers!

The alternative to this belief is to subscribe to the strange idea that Jesus is God the Son, an eternally existing member of a triune God. This concept, judged to be an impossibly difficult and illogical mystery even by experts, derails the biblical identity of Jesus completely. Worse still it precipitated the most awful

conflicts, excommunications, heresy-hunters, inquisitions and burnings at the stake.

Ask your Jewish friends. They will tell you that the **Messiah, God's anointed**, is not God Himself, making two Gods, since the Father is God. Luke 2:11 and 26 provide the elementary and fundamental distinction between God and Jesus.

There are two Lords in the Bible. Firstly, the Lord God who is one single Person, so described by thousands of singular personal pronouns. Second, the **Lord Messiah**, who began to exist some 2000 years ago (Luke 2:11).

Those two Lords are beautifully described and distinguished by the most popular verse quoted from the Old Testament in the New. Psalm 110:1 speaks of YHVH addressing David's lord, the Messiah. That second lord is **adoni** ("adonee") in the Hebrew text. That form of the word for Lord *never* means God. Obviously not, since in the Bible God does not speak to another absolute God. That would be polytheism and this is the ultimate theological disaster.

Bibles which put a capital letter on that second lord in Psalm 110:1 mislead you. When the Hebrew word is *adoni* it is rendered properly as lord or master (not a title for God). But in Psalm 110:1 the translators of various versions broke their own rules for capitalization. You were supposed to imagine that the second lord was somehow the God-man of traditional creeds. But once people were taught that Jesus is Yahweh, this of course produced the "problem" (a favorite word in theological writings!) of how two Yahwehs could really be one Yahweh. Jesus after all believed that the most important of all truths is that we believe that "the Lord our God is one Yahweh," or Lord (Mark 12:29).

An expert writer on the Trinity committed himself in a theological journal to the proposition "God is simultaneously one Person and three Persons"!

The foundations of the universe were shaken and the course of church development permanently disordered by the Church Councils' decision to speak of three who were each God but mysteriously and illogically only one God. This involved the imposition on the very Hebrew-oriented Bible of categories drawn from the alien world of Greek philosophy. This was a disaster needing recovery and restoration, so that all who meet in the Christian church gather to believe in One God the Father, and one Lord *Messiah*, the man Messiah Jesus (see 1 Tim. 2:5). This is the simple truth so needed.

Abandoning Jesus' creed and substituting a different three-in-one creed has been a tragedy as so many expert observers have noted:

"In the year 317, a new contention arose in Egypt with consequences of a pernicious nature. The subject of this fatal controversy which kindled such deplorable divisions throughout the Christian world, was the

doctrine of three Persons in the Godhead, a doctrine which in the three preceding centuries had happily escaped the vain curiosity of human researches."¹

"When we look back through the long ages of the reign of the Trinity...we shall perceive that few doctrines have produced more unmixed evil."²

"Christological doctrine has never in practice been derived simply by way of logical inference from the statements of Scripture...The Church has not usually in practice (whatever it may have claimed to be doing in theory) based its Christology exclusively on the witness of the New Testament."³

"The Greeks distorted the concept of Jesus' legal agency to ontological identity, creating an illogical set of creeds and doctrines to cause confusion and terror for later generations of Christians."⁴

"Nowhere does the New Testament *identify* Jesus with God."⁵

"Because the Trinity is such an important part of later Christian doctrine, it is striking that the term does not appear in the New Testament. Likewise, the developed concept of three coequal partners in the Godhead found in later creedal formulations cannot be clearly detected within the confines of the canon."⁶

"How shall we determine the nature of the distinction between the God who became man and the God who did not become man, without destroying the unity of God on the one hand or interfering with Christology on the other? Neither the Council of Nicea nor the Church Fathers of the fourth century satisfactorily answered this question."⁷

"The adoption of a non-biblical phrase at Nicea constituted a landmark in the growth of dogma; the Trinity is *true*, since the Church — the universal Church speaking by its Bishops — says so, though the Bible does not!...We have a formula, but what does that formula contain? No child of the Church dare seek to answer."⁸

¹ J.L. Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, New York: Harper, 1839, Vol. 1, p. 399.

² Andrews Norton, *A Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrine of the Trinitarians Concerning the Nature of God and the Person of Christ*, Hilliard, Gray & Co., 1833, p. 287.

³ Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, London: SCM Press, 1974, pp. 54, 55.

⁴ Professor G.W. Buchanan, from correspondence, 1994.

⁵ William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 50.

⁶ "Trinity," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 782.

⁷ I.A. Dorner, *The History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1882, Div. I, Vol. 2, p. 330.

⁸ "Dogma, Dogmatic Theology," in *Encyclopedia*

Jesus is **the Son of God, the Messiah. Son of God** is defined by Luke 1:35 and God is the God and Father of Jesus the Messiah, the **Lord Messiah** born in Bethlehem some 2000 years ago. That **Messiah** is destined to come back to take over the reins of world government and save us from our astonishing loss of simple Truth. The truth sets us free, as Jesus said so well (John 8:32).

Two or three who are each God makes three Gods, however much we may protest. If each of the members of the triune God is Yahweh then they cannot together make one Yahweh. One will never be three, however much obfuscating language is produced to convince us. One X does not amount to three X's.

Jesus commanded belief in only **one** Yahweh (Mark 12:29), and of course in himself as the **Lord Messiah**, not as a second Lord God. Paul summed it up in a short and easy-to-grasp formula: "For us Christians there is one God, the Father and no God besides Him" (1 Cor. 8:4, 6). Paul here piles on the singular grammatical forms designating of course one singular and single Person, the Father. Access to that One God is obtained through the mediation of the one **man** Messiah Jesus, who is not the Lord God (making two!) but the **Lord Messiah**, the mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5).

With this pristine New Testament creed a new era of intelligent dialogue can be opened between three great world religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

It is time to renounce the brain-breaking, befuddling formulas of some Trinitarian experts. I cite in closing the exasperation of a Harvard professor who wrote a key book entitled *Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrine of the Trinity*. Andrews Norton lamented the appalling complexities to which loss of the pristine creed had led. He was referring to the attempts of "theologians" to explain how Jesus could be 100% God and 100% man. The teaching involved what was called the "Communication of Properties":

"The doctrine of the Communication of Properties," says LeClerc, "is as intelligible as if one were to say that there is a circle which is so united with a triangle that the circle has the properties of the triangle, and the triangle those of the circle."

"It is discussed at length by Petavius with his usual redundancy of learning. The vast folio of that writer containing the history of the Incarnation is one of the most striking and most melancholy monuments of human folly which the world has to exhibit. In the history of other departments of science we find abundant errors and extravagances; but orthodox theology seems to have been the peculiar region of words without meaning; of doctrines confessedly false in their proper

sense, and explained in no other; of the most portentous absurdities put forward as truths of the highest importance; and of contradictory propositions thrown together without an attempt to reconcile them. A main error running through the whole system, as well as other systems of false philosophy, is that words possess an intrinsic meaning not derived from the usage of men; that they are not mere signs of human ideas, but a sort of real entities, capable of signifying what transcends our conceptions, and that when they express to human reason only an absurdity, they may still be significant of a high mystery or a hidden truth, and are to be believed without being understood." ✧

Did Jesus really claim to be God in John 8:58? Or is your translation misleading you?

by "Theocrat"

Peter wrote: "I'm still waiting to hear from someone why the Pharisees picked up stones to stone Jesus if it wasn't for this kind of blasphemous self-identification in John 8:58."

Now here's an offer I can't refuse! I assume by this that you are taking the standard line on John 8:58, that Jesus was claiming to be the God of Exodus 3:14. This assertion is based on a kind of "translation theology," which isn't borne out in the original language.

In the LXX (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible used often by the New Testament writers), at Exodus 3:14 Yahweh declares "*ego eimi o ohn*" — "I am *he that exists*." The addition of the Greek "*o ohn*" (the existing one) is needed to reflect the fact that the Hebrew has the word "*ehyeh*" — "I will be." **In John 8:58 Jesus only says "*ego eimi*" (I am *he*). On this basis it isn't really fair to the text to force an unambiguous reference to Exodus 3:14. Jesus did not say "I am who I am," and so he does not say "I am God." Jesus said "I am *he*."**

Anyone could say "I am" or "I am he" without any allusion to a claim of divinity. Reebok advertises quote stars saying "I am what I am." Another more biblical example of this is found in John 9:9 where the man born blind says "*ego eimi*" — I am *he*. None of these individuals is claiming to be the Exodus God.

So "*ego eimi*" in John 8:58 is neither God's name nor an exclusively divine title. But **if Jesus isn't claiming to be God, what was he understood to have said that caused such offense?** The answer lies in the dialogue leading up to his statement. In the verses immediately preceding we see that this isn't the first time Jesus has said "*ego eimi*" in this exchange. He has already said it in verse 24.

(This calls into further question the widely asserted notion that the words "*ego eimi*" were

understood by Jesus' hearers to be a claim of "divinity," i.e. a reference to Exodus 3:14. Instead of seizing upon this as the long awaited and much sought after grounds to accuse him, they respond by asking, "Who are you?" (v. 25). Obviously Jesus has not identified himself sufficiently by this statement for them to know what the "he" in "I am he" referred to.)

Reading on from verse 25, the discourse moves to Abraham. "How can you claim to offer the life of the age to come?" they ask Jesus. "Even Abraham himself is dead; surely you're not claiming to be greater than he!" (v. 52-53).

Next, **they misunderstand Jesus' statement in verse 56** — "Abraham rejoiced to see my day" — by reading too much into it, because in verse 57 they accuse Jesus of claiming to have seen Abraham! He never said that. They had misunderstood him. Neither did he say that Abraham had seen him — only that Abraham had rejoiced to see **his Messianic day**. Abraham, having believed the Gospel preached to him by God (Gal. 3.8) rejoiced in hope, looking forward to the "day of Christ," as many Jews had done.

It is in response to this misunderstanding that Jesus makes his statement "Before Abraham was, **I am he.**" Notice however that he did not say "I was before Abraham" or "Before Abraham was, I was."

The present tense "**I am**" in reference to the past ("before Abraham **was**") simply does not work as a stand-alone sentence. Jesus did not say, we repeat, "I was alive before Abraham." He said, "Before Abraham came to be, I am he."

Jesus' "I am he" only makes sense if Jesus is referring back to some statement he has made previously about his present status with respect to the patriarch. I would suggest that Jesus is expanding on his statement in verse 56 by explaining how, in spite of his not being 50 years old, Abraham could still have rejoiced to see his day.

Bringing the two together what we get is: "Before Abraham was, I am *he*...whose day Abraham rejoiced to see." This is a clear identification by Jesus of himself as the seed promised to Abraham by Yahweh, the seed through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. Jesus is claiming to be the promised Messiah.

Abraham's greatness was based on his belief in the promise God made to him about his seed, the Messiah to come, and the fact that, by believing, he became the means through which God would bring His word to pass.

Jesus is greater than Abraham because he is the embodiment of God's end purpose, and the subject of the promise which Abraham rejoiced in. This is the staggering claim which so offended the Jews that they attempted to stone him.

In conclusion, though first-century Judaism regularly made use of poetic personification with regard to God's attributes, they had no expectation that God himself would become a man. How could they since God had promised that the seed, descendant of David, would be the Messiah — not a previously existing "God the Son" of post-biblical theology. A heavy burden of proof therefore lies upon anyone who would suggest that the apostles preached any such revolutionary thing.

With regard to John's gospel, I thought you would be interested in the statement below, expressed by respected scholar Colin Brown, himself a Trinitarian.

"The crux of the matter lies in how we understand the term Son of God...The title Son of God is not in itself an expression of personal Deity or the expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead. **Indeed, to be a 'Son of God' one has to be a being who is *not* God!** It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God's representative, God's vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God's Son...In my view the term 'Son of God' ultimately converges on the term 'image of God' which is to be understood as God's representative, the one in whom God's spirit dwells, and who is given stewardship and authority to act on God's behalf...It seems to me to be a fundamental mistake to treat statements in the fourth gospel about the Son and his relationship with the Father as expressions of inner-Trinitarian relationships. But this kind of systematic misreading of the fourth Gospel seems to underlie much of social Trinitarian thinking...It is a common but patent misreading of the opening of John's Gospel to read it as if it said, 'In the beginning was the *Son*, and the *Son* was with God, and the *Son* was God' (John 1:1). What has happened here is the substitution of Son for Word (Gk. *logos*) and thereby the Son is made a member of the Godhead which existed from the beginning."⁹✧

Anthony's two radio discussions with Dr. Michael Brown can be heard at <http://lineoffire.askdrbrown.org> (February 8 and March 23). His debate with Dr. James White on the British radio show "Unbelievable" is at www.premier.org.uk/unbelievable (March 13).



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⁹ "Trinity and Incarnation: Towards a Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Ex Auditu*, 7, 1991, pp. 87-89.