

Five ANOTHER JESUS

For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached...you bear this beautifully (2 Cor. 11:4)

In his introduction to *The Passover Plot* Dr. Schonfield wisely sets the standard for the debate in relation to Jesus' identity and mission in these words:

The only way in which we can hope to know the real Jesus is by first becoming conscious of him as a man of his own time, country and people, which necessitates an intimate acquaintance with all three. We have resolutely to refuse to detach him from his setting, and let the influences which played upon him play upon us. We have to mark the traits in him which were personal, individual, whether pleasing or unpleasing, which convey to us the attributes and idiosyncrasies of a creature of flesh and blood. Only when this Galilean Jew has made an impact upon us in the...(natural)...aspects of his mortality are we entitled to begin to cultivate him and estimate his worth, allowing him to communicate to us the imaginations of his mind and the motivations of his actions.¹

Dr. Schonfield reported that many Christians he spoke with were not even aware that the term "Christ" was simply a Greek translation of the Hebrew title Messiah, and thought somehow that it referred to the Second Person of the Trinity. "So connected had the word 'Christ' become with the idea of Jesus as God incarnate that the title 'Messiah' was treated as something curiously Jewish and not associated." He wrote:

I have often asked my Christian friends, "Is it not enough if you believe in One God, Lord of all spirits, and accept Jesus as his messianic messenger?" But it seemed that the Messiahship of Jesus in their view had only to do with the

¹ Hugh Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, p. 12.

Jews, and meant nothing in their experience. Many were not even aware that Christ was simply a Greek translation of the Hebrew title Messiah (the Anointed One), and supposed that it had to do with the heavenly nature of the Second Person of the Trinity. It took me a long time to appreciate that when we talked of God we were not speaking the same language, and that there was a serious problem of communication.²

N.T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham, agrees: “One of the most persistent mistakes throughout the literature on Jesus in the last hundred years is to use the word ‘Christ,’ which simply means ‘Messiah,’ as though it was a ‘divine’ title.”³

Mashiach

In Jewish parlance, a “messiah” (Heb. *mashiach*, an “anointed one”) could refer to a prophet, a priest or a king who was consecrated for service to God. The Hebrews believed that when God anointed that person, he or she was equipped to do God’s work because he/she received a measure of the Holy Spirit. God appointed such agents to sacred office. Thus, in the Hebrew Bible, there are *various* “messiahs,” numbers of “anointed ones,” or “Christs.” Twelve times King Saul is called *mashiach* (1 Sam. 12:3, 5; 24:6—twice, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16, 21). David is so designated six times (2 Sam. 19:21; 22:51; 23:1; Ps. 18:50; 20:6; 28:8). A priest is called “messiah” four times (Lev. 4:3, 5, 16; 6:22). The reigning king is called “anointed one” three times (Lam. 4:20; Ps. 84:9; 89:38). The patriarchs are so designated twice (Ps. 105:15; 1 Chron. 16:22); Solomon once (2 Chron. 6:42); a prospective king once (1 Sam. 16:6). And even the pagan king Cyrus is once nominated “messiah” in Isaiah 45:1! The coming or promised one, the ultimate “Messiah,” is so denominated nine times (1 Sam. 2:10, 35; Ps. 2:2; 89:51; 132:10, 17; Dan. 9:25, 26; Hab. 3:13). Thus, there were many “christs” who preceded Jesus, but he is the ultimate “Christ.” In the NT Christians are designated as “anointed ones,” that is, “christs” (see 2 Cor. 1:21). There is no hint that the title messiah designates the Deity. To be a messiah is to be an agent of the one God. As the ultimate and greatest *mashiach* Jesus combined

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* p. 57.

in his person the offices of prophet, priest and king. Certainly, God the Father anointed him above all his predecessors, above his companions (Heb. 1:9). It never occurred to a Jew to think that Jesus as Messiah was also somehow a second member of the Godhead now incarnated, that God the Son was roaming around in human flesh, having Himself become man. According to its OT usage, the term Messiah, the Anointed One, indicates a call to office. Most certainly, “It was not the title of an aspect of the Godhead.”⁴ This is a later Gentile invention that came about by ignoring Jesus’ Jewish context and inventing a doctrine called the Incarnation — the idea that a second member of the Trinity, God the Son, became a human being. As Lockhart says, Christianity ignored the “Messiah” and theologically worked the “Christ” up into the “God-Man.” “Jesus as the ‘Messiah’ is a human being; Jesus as the ‘Christ’ is something entirely different. This doctrine has it that the two natures — the God-nature and human nature — were so intrinsically fused that Jesus was simultaneously *all* human and *all* divine, a combination of opposites quite impossible of explanation or understanding.”⁵ As Don Cupitt captures the problem of Jesus’ double nature, “it is as if Jesus were at one moment Clark Kent and at the next Superman.”⁶ Or as Lockhart pithily says, to believe in the two natures as a literalism is “the equivalent of being asked to believe that Jonah swallowed the whale, and not the whale Jonah.”⁷

When a sincere Roman Catholic believer calls Mary “the mother of God” Christians of the Protestant heritage cringe. We are amused at the impossible prospect that one day the Almighty God should have humbly approached the Jewish girl Mary with the request, “Mary, would you please be My mother?” From our “objective” and detached “outsiders” perspective it is easy to see how this Mary-myth transgresses Scriptural bounds. We can spot a mile away how later tradition worked Mary up to being a perpetual virgin, who never subsequently enjoyed sexual intercourse with her husband Joseph (even though Scripture teaches she had children by Joseph after Jesus’ birth). We can spot the second Mary-myth which says that Mary herself was immaculately conceived, meaning that

⁴ Hugh Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, p. 47.

⁵ Lockhart, *Jesus the Heretic*, p. 44.

⁶ D. Cupitt, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, quoted in Lockhart, *Jesus the Heretic*, p. 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

she was always without sin, and was allegedly — and without any Scriptural justification — without dying miraculously lifted up into the heavenlies to be glorified next to her Son as “co-redemptress” (the official Roman doctrine of the Assumption). However, it’s much harder on “our” side of the fence to spot how the Christ-myth has also been created. When Jesus is called “God the Son” do we as readily see how this transgresses the Scriptural record? We will shortly see that in the Bible Jesus is nominated the Son of God, something quite different in meaning from God the Son. And when Jesus was in post-biblical times called “the God-man” we do not see the obvious blind spot in our Greek eyesight, for the Bible never once so describes him. Jesus calls himself “a man” (John 8:40) and the apostles call him “a man” (Acts 2:22; 1 Tim. 2:5). He is constantly contrasted with and distinguished from God, his Father. The Hebrew Bible predicted Jesus would be a man (Is. 53:3). But never does the Scripture use the term “God-man” to tell us who Jesus is. The Greek language of the day had a perfectly good word for “God-man” (*theiosaner*) but it never appears in the NT. So why do we persist with these extra-biblical terms? Why do we continue to employ non-biblical (i.e. unbiblical) language to describe Jesus? Or does it really matter?

That saying is true which says that we are very quick to spot the speck in the eye of another’s theology, but how blind we are to the beam in our own. Mary is not the mother of God, according to the Scriptures. And neither is Jesus God the Son, nor is he the “God-man” according to the Bible. And he is nowhere called “God from God” as the later Nicene creed called him. Protestants who claim to be people of the Bible ought to know that the contentious extra-biblical word used at Nicea, *homoousios*, meaning “of equal substance,” “did not come from Scripture but, of all things, from Gnostic systems.”⁸ The result was that such terminology introduced alien notions into the Christian understanding of God. In other words, “an epoch-making paradigm shift has taken place between scripture and Nicea.”⁹ In this chapter we ask how, in what sense, is Jesus the *Son* of God? Before we do that let me briefly say something about the second great traditional teaching I alluded to at the beginning of Chapter 3: namely, that there are “two natures”

⁸ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 500.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

found in our Lord Jesus. The Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 attempts to explain it this way:

Our Lord is truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body, consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days for us and for our salvation born of the Virgin Mary, the mother of God according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably, the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one person and one subsistence; parted or divided into two persons but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Once again that noted preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones says he stands in awe of this astounding statement, admitting that:

it is beyond reason; it is beyond our understanding. As we have had to say in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity, and with many other doctrines, our business is to submit ourselves to the Bible...We must cease trying to span the infinite with our finite reason, indeed with our sinful reason, and we must receive the truth as it is given.¹⁰

Again I want to say that to stand before mystery clearly revealed in Scripture is one thing, but to stand before man-made contradiction is quite another. Just who is Jesus the Christ? There are at least one billion people in the world who flatly deny that Jesus is in any sense the Son of God at all. To Muslims it is outright blasphemy to call Jesus God's Son. The Koran states:

They [Christians] say: "The Most Gracious has betaken a son!" Indeed ye have put forth a thing most monstrous! At it the skies are about to burst, the earth to split asunder, and the mountains to fall down in utter ruin, that they attributed a son to the Most Gracious. For it is not consonant with the majesty of the Most Gracious that He should beget a son (Sura 19:88-92).

¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, *God the Father, God the Son*, p. 283.

A large group claiming the name of Christian holds that Jesus *is* the Father Himself. In the Book of Mormon the chapter heading to the Book of Mosiah asserts, “Christ is both the Father and the Son”: “And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, being the Father and the Son — the Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son — and they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth” (Mosiah 15:2-4).

It may surprise some readers to learn that this doctrine, known as modalism, is held by some sections of the Pentecostal church today. It originated in the early post-apostolic Christological debates, and was also called “Patripassianism.” For modalists, Christ was the Father Himself, come down to earth in human flesh. In fact, the Father Himself came down into the Virgin, was Himself born of her, Himself suffered, indeed was Himself Jesus Christ.

There are, however, speaking generally of the broader Christian Church, three views on the Sonship of Jesus: The Nicene or Athanasian view, the Arian view, and the third view which is sometimes called the Socinian view, after Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), an Italian religious reformer who ministered especially in Poland. In view of this history, which Son of God are we to confess? Who is the Biblical Son of God?

The Nicene View

Many church historians and theologians have tried to trace how the death of Jesus as he was abandoned by both God and man on the cross led, just 300 years later, to the confession that he was none other than the God who had created the universe and who now “upholds all things by the power of his word” (Heb. 1:3). For in 325 AD with the backing of the same Roman power that had crucified him, the Jew Jesus was officially proclaimed to be of the “nature” of God the Father, “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God.” Jesus is “begotten, not made,” “of one substance with the Father” and through him all things in heaven and earth were made. A subsequent Church Council at Constantinople in 381 AD added that Jesus was “born of the Father before all time.” Then in 451 AD at the Council of Chalcedon the famous formula was added that Jesus was “true God, true man,” and was “consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, the selfsame consubstantial with us according to the manhood...Before all time he was begotten of

the Father as to his Godhead, but in the last days the selfsame, for us and for our salvation, was born of Mary, the Virgin, the bearer of God, as to his manhood.”

So, essentially formulated in the fourth century, this view speaks of “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” Historically this “Catholic” interpretation has been promoted by decree and force. Those who did not so confess were threatened with ex-communication from the Catholic Church. And in the sixth century the Roman Emperor Justinian decreed that anybody who did not confess faith in this Trinity and in the “two natures” of Jesus Christ would be executed.

The belief that Jesus is “the eternally begotten Son,” the second member of the Godhead, was championed by Augustine and prevails in the mainstream church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, today. It is the view that Jesus the Son of God has existed from eternity as the “eternally generated Son.”

Charles Swindoll is a well-known evangelical with a worldwide radio audience and readership through his many popular books. He is chancellor of the famous Dallas Theological Seminary. In his book *Jesus: When God Became Man* Swindoll typifies the universally accepted church belief in the Christmas story of the Incarnation:

On December 25th shops shut their doors, families gather together and people all over the world remember the birth of Jesus of Nazareth...Many people assume that Jesus' existence began like ours, in the womb of his mother. But is that true? Did life begin for him with that first breath of Judean air? Can a day in December truly mark the beginning of the Son of God? Unlike us, Jesus existed before his birth, long before there was air to breathe...long before the world was born.

Swindoll continues with obvious enthusiasm:

Jesus never came into being; at his earthly birth he merely took on human form...Here's an amazing thought: the baby that Mary held in her arms was holding the universe in place! The little newborn lips that cooed and cried once formed the dynamic works of creation. Those tiny clutching fists once flung stars into space and planets into orbit. That infant flesh so fair once housed the Almighty God...As an ordinary baby, God had come to earth...Do you see the child

and the glory of the infant-God? What you are seeing is the Incarnation — God dressed in diapers...Imagine him in the misty precreation past, thinking of you and planning your redemption. Visualize this same Jesus, who wove your body's intricate patterns, knitting a human garment for himself...Long ago the Son of God dove headfirst into time and floated along with us for about 33 years...Imagine the Creator-God tightly wrapped in swaddling clothes.¹¹

So here, in the traditional church interpretation, we have a Jesus who existed before his birth; a Jesus who never came into being; a Jesus who even as a baby continued to hold the universe (which he originally created) in his tiny clutching hands whilst cooing; a Jesus who is the infant-God needing his nappies to be changed in the very body which he had knitted like a garment for himself. The noted Anglican Dr. Jim Packer describes the Incarnation — when God became man, the divine Son became a Jew, the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught like any other child. “He who had made man was now learning what it felt like to be man. He who made the angel who became the devil was now in a state in which He could be tempted — could not, indeed, avoid being tempted — by the devil.”¹²

This Nicene understanding of Jesus Christ is the view that finally after much opposition triumphed over competing views. It is the “traditional” church view espoused to this day.

The Arian View

This is named after the priest Arius (died AD 336). Church history has so maligned Arius that his name has become a byword for despicable heresy. But it is difficult to locate exactly what Arius taught, because eventually his “heretical” works were destroyed. All we really have of his beliefs is what his enemies wrote about him. And it is well known that the victors write history from their winning position. But essentially this Arian view holds that Jesus preexisted his birth as a lesser “god.” Jesus was generated by God the Father, sometime before the Genesis creation of the universe.

¹¹ Charles Swindoll, *Jesus: When God Became Man*, quoted in *Focus on the Kingdom*, ed. Anthony Buzzard, vol. 7, no. 3, Dec., 2004, p. 2.

¹² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973, p. 50.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, with their idea that Jesus was an archangel (Michael to be precise), are the major proponents of this idea today, though their view goes beyond the view of Arius. I will not spend time on this position here, because Scripture clearly teaches that the Son of God was not and is not an angel (Heb. 1:4-14).¹³ In the third and fourth centuries Arius' understanding was quite pervasive (as already noted in chapter one).

The Socinian View

In this view Jesus' Sonship derives from an actual creation in the womb of Mary in history. Jesus did not personally preexist his own human existence. He is a true human being, although a unique human being. Jesus called himself "the only begotten Son." God the Father, by a special act of creation, brought him into existence. Jesus is the Son of God by a biological miracle.

Jesus came "out of" (Gk. *ek*) Mary and did not just pass "through" her from eternity into time and then proceed back to his former life in eternity. In a miraculous way God the Father created a human being, the Last Adam. Genetically speaking, Jesus is completely human, though a specially created human being.

In the light of these differing interpretations, it is appropriate to ask when we confess Jesus as the Son of God, *Which* Son are we actually professing? This is not merely an academic question. It is crucial because Jesus Christ himself came to build his Church on the solid rock of an informed and enlightened understanding of his true identity. "Who do you say that I am?" was his searching question to his disciples. It is this third view — the view that the Son of God came into existence in Mary by divine miracle — that I want to examine in some detail, because it is the view they never told me in church. It is a powerful view which makes excellent sense of the Bible, as I hope to show.

The Last Adam

The Bible tells the story of two men. The first man Adam ruined everything. The second man Jesus Christ came to put it all back together again, for God has "purposed...the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth" (Eph. 1:9-10).

¹³ Please see Appendix 2: "Jesus and Michael."

It is evident that Adam, “the red earth-man” as his Hebrew name suggests, was originally genetically perfect. That is, he had no sin nature and lived in harmony with God, himself, his wife, and the world. Put on the earth by his Creator to be His agent, His representative, God’s lord on earth, this man chose to rebel against God and so dragged himself and all his descendants down and away from the life and goodness of God. He who had originally reflected the glory of God was now a fallen being, only able to produce “disfigured” or “scarred” children in his own sinful likeness (Gen. 5:3). So the original Adam is the “one man” through whom sin and death entered this world (Rom. 5:12). Adam “wrecked it” for himself and everybody coming after him.

However, right there in the beginning when sin polluted the human species God proposed the solution. There was a prophetic announcement that one day a saviour, a redeemer would come on a giant rescue mission. “The seed” of the woman would come and crush the Serpent who had tempted Adam and deceived Eve (Gen. 3:15). But why would God call the coming Saviour a “seed”? When God created every kind of plant and animal he gave them the reproductive capacity to produce “after their kind.” The Scripture says they had “seed in them” (Gen. 1:12). They were to “be fruitful and multiply” and fill the entire earth after their respective kinds. And if he had remained faithful to his LORD, Adam would have produced a race of genetically flawless and happy people living in beautiful harmony with the Creator and all creation. But alas, his rebellion meant that all his descendants, you and I included, would bear his fallen image. But thanks be to God, true to His promise, He has brought into the world another “Adam.” Unlike the first Adam, this “seed” of Eve will generate a new humanity after his perfect image. Today Jesus is producing fruit “after his kind,” a new body of humans who are doing what Adam should have originally done — loving God with all their strength and loving their neighbours as themselves. This new humanity, with Jesus as its Head, will enter the new Kingdom-Age to come.

Now it is right here that a critical point of difference between our two main views of who Jesus as the Son of God is, arises. Just exactly what kind of a man is this “Son of God”? The first view, the majority view, the view they told me in church, the Nicene view, is that the salvation of mankind could only have been achieved by God Himself becoming a man and paying the price for our redemption.

The concept that God must be born as a man in order for a valid sacrifice for sin to occur is called the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Without getting too academic and technical the doctrine of the Incarnation states that in some sense God, without ceasing to be God, was made man so that He could save mankind. The *New Bible Dictionary* summarises it this way:

It appears to mean that the divine Maker became one of His own creatures...When the Word "became flesh," His deity was not abandoned or reduced or contracted, nor did He cease to exercise the divine functions which had been His before...The Incarnation of the Son of God, then, was not a diminishing of deity, but an acquiring of manhood.¹⁴

It is important to realize that although the "Incarnation" is assumed to be a basic tenet of Christianity, many scholars admit that the term and the concept it conveys do not appear anywhere in the Bible. One such scholar is James D.G. Dunn who says, "Incarnation, in its full and proper sense, is not something directly presented in Scripture."¹⁵

In other words it is a constructed doctrine beyond the boundaries of the Bible. It was formulated during several centuries of debate and massive upheaval in post-apostolic days. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* verifies this fact:

The doctrine, which took classical shape under the influence of the controversies of the 4th-5th centuries, was formally defined at the Council of Chalcedon of 451. It was largely moulded by the diversity of tradition in the schools of Antioch and Alexandria...Further refinements were added in the later patristic and medieval periods.¹⁶

The authors of *One God and One Lord* further explain:

The reason the councils and synods took hundreds of years to develop the doctrine of Incarnation is that it is not stated in Scripture, and the verses used to support it can be explained without resorting to a doctrine that bears more similarity to pagan mythology than biblical truth. Teaching the Jews that God came down in the form of a man would have completely offended those living at the time of Christ

¹⁴ *New Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 560.

¹⁵ James Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, London: SCM Press, 1989, p. 4.

¹⁶ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 696.

and the Apostles, and greatly contradicted their understanding of the Messianic Scriptures...This doctrine is derived most prominently from the Gospel of John, and in particular from the phrase in John 1:14 (KJV): “and the Word was made flesh.” But was “the word” synonymous with “the Messiah” in Jewish understanding? Hardly. The Jews would have understood it to mean “plan” or “purpose,” that which was clearly and specifically declared in Genesis 3:15 — a “seed” of a woman who would destroy the works of the Devil. This plan of God for the salvation of man finally “became flesh” in Jesus Christ. This verse is not establishing a doctrine of Incarnation contrary to all prophetic expectations, nor a teaching of preexistence. It is teaching of God’s great love in bringing into existence His plan to save mankind from their sin.¹⁷

Many prophecies indicate that the Coming One would arise from the “seed,” the stock of humanity, and in particular from Abrahamic and Davidic stock. The Messiah would be from the biological chain within the human family, specifically of Jewish pedigree: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet **like me** from **among you, from your own countrymen** [literally, brothers]; you shall listen to him” (Deut. 18:15).

In this passage Moses predicts that the coming Messiah would be a person “like me,” raised up from “among” the people of Israel, and that *God would not speak to the people directly*, because they were afraid that if God spoke without a mediator they would die (v. 16). The coming “prophet” would be a man of whom it is said that God would “put His words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And it shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him” (v. 18-19). To say that the Messiah is God *Himself* is to contradict the whole point of this prophecy. For it announces that the ultimate spokesman for God is expressly not God but a human being. The New Testament says that Jesus is the one who fulfilled this prophecy (Acts 3:22; 7:37).

¹⁷ Mark H. Graeser, John A. Lynn, John W. Schoenheit, *One God and One Lord: Reconsidering the Cornerstone of the Christian Faith*, Indianapolis: Christian Educational Services, 2003, p. 353.

The very first verse of the NT says that Jesus Christ is “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). On the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter confirms this Hebrew expectation that the Promised One would be a human being. Because David was a prophet he knew that “one of his descendants” would sit on the Davidic throne (Acts 2:30). Literally, Peter said that the promised Saviour would be “of the fruit of his loins.” Understandably, no Jew who believed these Scriptures ever imagined that the baby born in Bethlehem was going to be Jehovah Himself come as a human baby. The central Christian doctrine of the Incarnation as taught today is thus alien to the Bible. We suggest that this fact demands urgent attention from all lovers of God, Jesus and the Bible.

In addition, Jehovah God says clearly that He is *not* a man (Num. 23:19; Job 9:32). The converse is therefore true: If a person is a man, then he cannot be God. Take another clear verse: “The Egyptians are men, and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit” (Is. 31:3). Notice here that the men and the horses are placed in the one category of “flesh.” But God “the Holy One of Israel” (Is. 31:1) is in another realm altogether. To use Jesus’ own words, “God is Spirit” (John 4:24). On the authority of Jesus himself we know that the categories of “flesh” and “spirit” are never to be confused or intermingled, though of course God’s Spirit can impact our world. Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). And “God is Spirit.” The doctrine of the Incarnation confuses these categories. What God has separated man has joined together!

One of the charges that the apostle Paul levels at sinful man is that we have “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man” (Rom. 1:23). Has it ever dawned on us as we sit in church listening to how the glorious Creator made Himself into a man that we could be guilty of this very same thing? The doctrine of the Incarnation has reduced the incorruptible God to our own corruptible image. We are made in God’s image, not the other way round.

It is appropriate here to put this contrast in starker terms. The defining characteristic of the Creator God is His absolute holiness. God is utterly different from and so utterly transcendent over His creation that any confusion is forbidden. So here’s the question. Is it possible that this eternal and holy God who is Spirit could make Himself into a dog or a cat? How about a flower or a tree? Or what

about something inanimate like a rock? Even to pose the question is to be hit by its impossibility and absurdity. These are all created things which God has made. So how is it that we have become so conditioned as to be able to happily accept the equally dishonouring proposition that God could change Himself into a creature of flesh and blood?

One of the most famous names associated with this theory of the Incarnation is Athanasius. Athanasius was the priest who locked horns with Arius when the post-apostolic church was formulating the creeds confessed by mainstream Christianity even to this day. Athanasius said that God can choose to do anything He pleases and that for the sake of our salvation God chose to become a man. Athanasius insisted that Jesus Christ is not one of God's creatures but is rather God Himself incarnated in human form. It goes without saying that this kind of reasoning strikes at the very heart of Jesus' identity as a man by removing him entirely from our human kind.

In his book *When Jesus Became God* Richard Rubenstein presses the issue:

Can God do anything He chooses to do? Of course — *except* those things that are inconsistent with being God. Can He choose to be evil or ignorant? Could He be the devil — or nothing at all? No, the Christian God is the Eternal God of Israel, Creator of the Universe. Athanasius maintains that this utterly transcendent God transformed Himself into a man, suffered, died, and then resurrected Himself! Doesn't this mixture of Creator and creature sound pagan? The bishop recognizes this, and tries to avoid its implications. For example, he insists that God did not create Jesus, as the Arians believe, or adopt him as His Son, but that he "begot" him out of His own nature. As he says, the idea of God fathering offspring with human beings by natural means is too disgusting for any Christian to contemplate. He therefore hastens to add that the Father's method of generating the Son is beyond human understanding.¹⁸

Rubenstein wryly adds:

Indeed! Everything about this theory is beyond human understanding. The bishop ridicules the Arians for saying

¹⁸ Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, p. 118.

that Jesus, being a creature of God, had the power to grow or decline in virtue, and that he *chose* to be virtuous through the exercise of his uniquely powerful will. No, Athanasius says, Christ being God was perfect by nature and could not change as humans do. But how can Jesus be called virtuous if he had not the power to choose? How can he be a model for human behaviour if he was incapable of change? The answer: this is a matter that is beyond human understanding!¹⁹

Then Rubenstein rightly comments:

The problem is not only that Athanasius' theory mixes God with His creation, but that it removes Jesus entirely from human society, from the universe of moral turmoil, and places him in the unchangeable heavens. If Christ is not a changeable, choosing creature at least *something* like us, how can we hope to imitate him? And if he is God Himself, not our representative and intermediary, how can he intervene on our behalf?...What, one wonders, would Jesus have made of that?²⁰

Lockhart also rightly spots and expresses this dilemma: "If the Logos is inherently perfect and incapable of change, progress or suffering, he is no more able to mediate than the transcendent God himself."²¹

This is a huge difficulty for the theory of the Incarnation. The Bible clearly teaches that God cannot be tempted with evil things (James 1:13). God cannot sin. God is always true to His own unchangeable righteous character. He alone is good. So if Jesus Christ is fully God then his temptations that were "in all points like as we are" (Heb. 4:15) could not have been *real* temptations. If he was God then he *had* to win automatically. But the Scriptures clearly portray Jesus as a man limited by his human boundaries, gaining the victory through struggle by obedience to his Father.

Yet this confusing doctrine of the Incarnation of the eternal God is said to be essential to our salvation. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great reformed theologian, is typical of this approach. He says that the whole "doctrine of our redemption ultimately depends upon it

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²¹ Lockhart, *Jesus the Heretic*, p. 21.

[the Incarnation]. If He had not taken our human nature, He could not have saved us.” This position reflects the mainstream position of the Church, namely that “the eternal Son of God, the second Person in the blessed Holy Trinity, took unto Himself human nature,” so as to effect our salvation.²²

The Adam Paradigm

It is our contention, however, that this theory of the Incarnation destroys the striking parallel between the first Adam and the last Adam and actually *disqualifies* Jesus from being our Saviour:

Romans 5:12-19 clearly defines a critical, logical parallel between Adam and Jesus Christ in the context of the redemption of mankind. A major consequence of the doctrine that God became man is that it destroys this key parallel, for *Adam* is hardly comparable to an eternally preexistent being. Rather, he was a created being made in the image of the One who created him, God. Adam was not “fully man and fully God,” “100 percent man and 100 percent God,” “coequal with God the Father,” or “of the same substance as the Father.” Adam was a created, empowered being who chose to disobey a direct command of God, with dire consequences to himself and all mankind as a result.²³

Shortly, I will show from the Scriptures that Jesus, like Adam, was a created man just as Adam before him was a created man. But for the moment it should be sufficient to see that one critical problem with this Incarnational view is that there are *no Old Testament predictions that indicate that God Himself would become a man*. (Later we will look at a few verses that are supposed to teach this.) But for the moment let us clearly understand that:

Jesus could have no intrinsic advantage over Adam, or his qualification as Redeemer would be legally nullified. He was the Last Adam, not the first *God-man*. The differences between Adam and Jesus were circumstantial, not essential: Adam started tall with no navel; Jesus started short with a navel. Adam was created fully formed and fully able to

²² Lloyd-Jones, *God the Father, God the Son*, p. 255ff.

²³ Graeser et al, *One God and One Lord: Reconsidering the Cornerstone of the Christian Faith*, p. 366.

comprehend the voice of God. Jesus had to learn from his parents. Adam did not have to suffer the indignity of a humble birth and be considered illegitimate, the son of common folk. Adam had only to dress and keep the garden and care for his wife. He had to keep from eating the fruit, or die and bring death to all his descendants. Jesus had to drink the cup of suffering and die so he could be raised to conquer death and make it possible for others to eat of the “fruit” of eternal life.²⁴

Trinitarians argue that Christ had to be the infinite God; otherwise how could the death of one finite man possibly save mankind? Surely one man can only die for or redeem one man, it is argued. I have to be honest and say I once sincerely believed this line of reasoning. I now see it represents a complete failure to understand the Bible’s teaching regarding how the death of Jesus saves. Here is the testimony of another who also came to see the fallaciousness of this argument:

The error of this kind of reasoning became evident to me when I perceived the truth in John 3:14-15, “as Moses lifted up the serpent in wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” This refers to the incident recorded in Numbers 21:7-9 in which the people were dying from the bites of the poisonous snakes. Moses was instructed by God to make a serpent of brass and set it on a pole for all to see; those who *believed* as they looked were saved from the poison of the snakes. Jesus compares this incident to *faith* in him: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever *believes* in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). The point here should be extremely clear: the saving of the thousands who looked to the brass serpent had nothing whatever to do with anything inherent in that serpent — they were saved by *God* through *faith* in His promise that whoever looked would be saved: “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live’” (Num. 21:8). The next verse confirms that those who had the faith to look lived. The same is true for all those

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 366-377.

who are looking to Jesus for salvation through *faith* (Heb. 12:1-2); it is *God's* saving power in Christ which saves them from sin and death. It is, therefore, not something inherent in the constitution of Christ that saves, but it is God our Father (Yahweh) who saves us in and through Christ. For salvation is entirely God's work; it is by faith and through His grace alone...We fail to properly present Biblical soteriology (doctrine of salvation) if we fail to make it clear that God our Father is the ultimate or fundamental author of our salvation while Jesus is the mediating, or instrumental, agent for our salvation.²⁵

We should, of course, not overlook the fact that Jesus was a sinless person, always and fully pleasing to God. Thus he is entirely adequate to the task of dying for every human person. He alone qualifies as the "one mediator between God and men" yet himself remains "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

If Jesus was to satisfy the just requirements for redeeming us, whatever Adam was, Jesus Christ had to be also. This is why Jesus Christ had to be a created human being, with just one nature, a fully human one. He must have no unjust advantage of having "two natures." For this Adam clearly did not have.

And to push our point even further, how have we then accepted that this "Incarnate God" could *die* on the cross for our redemption? God cannot die. He is immortal (1 Tim. 6:16). To insist that Jesus was the "God-man" whose blood was of "infinite" value because of the Incarnation is to invite a huge difficulty and contradiction. To "explain" this impossibility Trinitarians maintain that Jesus actually had "two natures," the divine and the human, and that when he died it was only the human nature that died. But in the words of Anthony Buzzard:

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.

²⁵ Chang, *The Only True God*, p. 173-174, emphasis his.

But if the divine nature did not die, how on the Trinitarian theory is the atonement secured?²⁶

All of which brings us full circle to our original question: How and in what way is Jesus the Son of God? What kind of a man is he? It is significant that he himself never claimed to be Jehovah God. But he did claim to perfectly represent God his Father, to be His agent.

As the NT teaches the first Adam is the type or the pattern for the Last Adam, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:14). The coming Redeemer had to correspond in every way to *the original pattern, Adam*. Paul expressly states this in 1 Corinthians 15: “So also it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul.’ The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual” (v. 45-46).

Trinitarians who identify “the man from heaven” in 1 Corinthians 15:47 with a pre-existent Christ fail to notice the context which is:

focused on the resurrection and is built on a sequence of parallel contrasts — physical/spiritual, earthly/heavenly, first man/second man — where it is clear enough that the second half of each contrast refers to the resurrection state. This includes the description of the second man as “from heaven,” for it is precisely his heavenly image which provides the pattern for the resurrection state of others (1 Cor. 15:49). Paul has already made this clear earlier in the same chapter: Christ in his resurrection is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”; *as risen* he is the archetype of resurrected humanity (15:2-23). And in the immediate context he has been at some pains (for whatever reason) to insist that the spiritual does *not* precede the physical (15:46). Hence in relation to (first) Adam, Christ is *last* Adam (15:45). It would throw his argument into complete confusion if he was understood to mean that “the *second* man from heaven” was actually the pre-existent one, and therefore actually first, *before* Adam.²⁷

²⁶ Buzzard and Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 274.

²⁷ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, Foreword to Second Edition, p. xviii, emphasis original.

It is worth noting that this quote appears in Dunn's foreword to the second edition of his book. It is his response to those who continued to challenge his exegesis that "the man from heaven" cannot be a reference to the apostle Paul's supposed belief in Jesus as the eternally existing Son of God. Dunn confesses that his critics' failure to take full note of the resurrection context in 1 Corinthians 15 is "astonishing"! I might add that I also fully relate to his frustration when such obvious exegetical rules of context are ignored to prop up an unsubstantiated theory.

The physical man precedes the spiritual man! Traditional theology has reversed the order. The Son of God did not precede Adam in time, according to Paul. Jesus is the Second Adam. In the post-apostolic book II Clement, written early in the second century, some were already starting to sabotage God's programme. II Clement 9:5 reads: "Christ, the Lord who saved us, *being first spirit became flesh.*"

Harnack, the well-known church historian, comments on this statement: "That is the fundamental, theological and philosophical creed on which the whole Trinitarian and Christological speculations of the Church of the succeeding centuries are built, and it is thus the root of the orthodox system of dogmatics."²⁸ Harnack went on to describe this fateful development as "the history of the substitution of the historical Jesus by the preexisting Christ, of the Christ of reality by the fictitious Christ in dogmatics, the victorious attempt to substitute *the mystery* of the person of Christ for the person himself." Or, as others have well expressed it:

In order for him to redeem mankind, Jesus had to be whatever Adam was before his fall. Jesus Christ is the Last Adam, a man like Adam who could undo what Adam did. The Last Adam, by dying on the cross, sacrificed himself as an offering for the sin that the first Adam introduced into the world. This Adamic parallelism establishes one of the most foundational biblical truths regarding Christ, one that allows us to see the entire span of the Bible: two men, two gardens, two commands, two decisions, two deaths, two universal results, two races of people and two Paradises.²⁹

²⁸ Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, p. 328, italics original.

²⁹ Graeser et al, *One God and One Lord*, p. 27.

So the order of appearance is quite clear: Adam first, Christ second. Christ is the *last* Adam. Adam *precedes* Christ. Adam was not a copy of a heavenly, preexistent Christ, but “a type of him who **was to come**” (Rom. 5:17). *As a true man Jesus was patterned after the likeness of Adam!* In contrast to this biblical model, however, it will no doubt be a huge surprise for most who read this and believe that Jesus was born the Infant-God (as cited above in Swindoll, Packer, *et al*) that official Incarnational theology teaches that Jesus was *not* “a man” but was rather in fact impersonal “man.” *That is official Trinitarian teaching. It proposes that Jesus the Son of God has human nature, but is not a human person!* At the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) orthodoxy officially taught that God the Son united himself to a *personless human nature*. The “ego” of Jesus (i.e. his true centre of personality) is his Godhood because he is the second Person of the blessed Trinity. Because the Son of God had no beginning but simply came through Mary, he merely assumed impersonal human nature; therefore Jesus does not have a true human personal ego or centre. One commentator puts it this way:

Now the doctrine of the Incarnation is that in Christ the place of a human personality is replaced by the Divine Personality of God the Son, the second Person of the Most Holy Trinity. Christ possesses a complete human nature *without a human personality*. Uncreated and eternal Divine Personality replaces a created personality in Him.³⁰

Thus, the shocking truth of the official doctrine of the Incarnation is that Jesus is de-humanized. It turns out he really is not like the first man Adam, not like us after all, not a man, but “man” in a nebulous, generic sense. According to the Bible model this *disqualifies* Jesus from being the “seed of the woman,” the genuine descendant of David, and means he cannot be our Saviour!

The traditional Christian idea that Jesus is God in the flesh also creates other unnecessary inconsistencies. It is to assume that in some way when he was growing up he became aware of being Deity within himself. For most of his youth and young adult life Jesus had to somehow conceal his status as Deity from everyone he met. He had to suppress his latent powers. He must perform no miracle, heal no sick, so that ordinary people around him — including his own

³⁰ Leslie Simmonds, *What Think Ye of Christ?* quoted in *Focus on the Kingdom*, ed. Anthony Buzzard, vol. 7, no. 3, p. 5.

family — would have no inkling of his real ego and identity as Jehovah God.

If he was the same before his baptism as he was afterwards this could hardly fail to be manifest in his earlier years. After Jesus had been accepted as God it did not take Christians very long to appreciate this difficulty, and they produced a number of books purporting to relate authentically the prodigies he had performed as a boy...But quite evidently there had been no such exploits, and nothing to indicate that the young Jesus son of Joseph was other than he seemed.³¹

That is, Jesus was authentically human. Let us turn now to see how this man Jesus the Christ came into being.

The Origin of Jesus Christ

I remember a sincere man once telling me the story of how Jesus came to save us. Apparently Gabriel the archangel had become concerned. He noticed that the “eternal Son of God” was missing from heaven. Where had he gone? Anxiety quickly sprang up amongst all the angels. Rumours were rife. So Gabriel presented himself before the throne of God to ask where the Son of God was. Jehovah then let Gabriel in on the secret. Because of their great love for lost humanity, His Son had agreed in their eternal counsels to leave heaven. He was about to be born as a human baby so that men could be redeemed. And Gabriel had better make haste to announce this mind-blowing mystery to the virgin Mary!

It struck me at the time this man told me this bit of make-believe how easily genuine Bible lovers can swallow such lolly-coated myth as though it were gospel truth. To mainstream church people Jesus Christ is the second member of the Godhead. There never was a time when the “eternal Son” did not exist. He is God. Before He became man He was the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

The official explanation is that Jesus is “the eternally begotten Son of God.” We shall soon see that this is a contradiction in terms, for by definition to be begotten means to have a beginning. It is impossible to have a beginningless beginning. Even worse, it is a flat contradiction of the Scriptures. Speaking of His Son in that

³¹ Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, pp. 70-71.

wonderful Messianic Psalm God says, “Thou art My Son; **today** I have **begotten** thee” (Ps. 2:7). God states that His Son was begotten “today,” i.e. in time. But church tradition says Jesus is “eternally begotten,” outside of time, and there never was a time when Jesus did not exist! We may well ask, then, if no verse in the Scripture calls Jesus the *eternal Son* of God, where did this teaching come from? And why are there no Bible verses that speak of Jesus being begotten by the Father in *eternity*? It must be important, because without it there is no doctrine of the Trinity! The Bible’s silence on this subject is deafening.

This kind of “forked tongue” explanation has its roots way back in the church tradition of the early post-apostolic days. Athanasius wrote:

Nor again is it right to seek how God begets and what is the manner of His begetting. For a man must be beside himself to venture on such points; since a thing ineffable and proper to God’s nature and known to Him alone and the Son, this he demands to be explained in words. It is better in perplexity to be silent and believe than to disbelieve on account of perplexity.

This dreadful attempt to cover up a direct contradiction of the Bible should alert us to how Scripture has been severely mishandled. Indeed, it is not only Athanasius who confesses his inability to adequately expound this complex doctrine, but he acknowledges that the council fathers at Nicea were also troubled over the fact that they could not answer Arius in purely biblical categories (!).³²

So we trace how Athanasius and the council at Nicea set the tone. Since then Church tradition has dictated that “God, Whose nature and existence are above time, may not engender in time” (John of Damascus). So by the decree of these men, tradition has subsequently forbidden God to act in time and history within His own world! They told God what He could not do! Another, Gregory of Nazianzen, is equally lost in a fog of feeble explanation: “But the manner of the Son’s generation we will not admit that even angels can conceive, much less you. Shall I tell you how it was? It was in a manner known to the Father who begat, and to the Son who was

³² Athanasius, *Letters Concerning the Decrees of the Council of Nicaea*, 5.18-21; NPNF Series 2, 4.161-164.

begotten. Anything more than this is hidden by a cloud and escapes your dim sight.”

One of the first great proponents of this mainstream and traditional view was Origen (we have already noted Origen’s connections with Platonism). Let’s see how he also prevaricates on the clear testimony of Scripture. He disposes of the obvious meaning for the word “today” to make way for his own theology:

Christ as Son. When the words are addressed to Him, “Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee,” this is spoken to Him by God, with whom all time is today, for there is no evening with God, as I consider, and there is no morning, nothing but time that stretches out, along with His unbeginning and unseen life. The day is today with Him in which the Son was begotten, and thus the beginning of His birth is not found, as neither is the day of it.³³

How easily do these men explain away the clear meaning of words. And the Church has revered such men. I do not believe God talks such nonsense. God cannot lie. I also believe that the Scriptures are the inspired words of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Jesus also believed this. He said the Scripture cannot be broken. What is written is written and we are to listen intelligently to that. We are therefore not free to make up our own private interpretations (2 Pet. 1:20). Which will you believe? “Today” refers to time or eternity? “Begotten” means to be originated or does it mean to have no beginning? Are we to believe that the day of his birth is not to be found?

Matthew and Luke on the Begetting of Jesus the Son of God

More importantly, what did the apostles believe? Matthew begins like this: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). The KJV translates it “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ.” The Greek word translated “genealogy” here is the word “genesis.” And the word “genesis” means “origin.” The first words of the Bible in Genesis 1 read “in the beginning.”

Matthew tells us that this is the book of the *origin* — or *genealogy* — of Jesus Messiah. It reminds us of Genesis 2:4: “This is the account [literally, These are the generations, the origins] of

³³ *Commentary on John*, Book 1, 32.

the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven.” Just as the material universe is not eternal but has a point of beginning, so too Jesus the Son of God has a beginning.

Matthew goes on to explain the lineage of Jesus Christ: “To Abraham was born Isaac.” Wait a minute. Although this is a reasonable translation of what Matthew wrote, it is not precise enough and clouds something vitally important. At least the old KJV is accurate here when it translates, “Abraham **begat** Isaac; and Isaac **begat** Jacob; and Jacob **begat** Judas.”

There is no doubt as to the meaning here. Abraham fathered Isaac. Abraham generated Isaac. Isaac did not exist before being begotten. Then Isaac “begat” Jacob. Same meaning. Isaac sired a son. And so Jacob came into being. In fact, Matthew uses this “begat” word throughout his genealogy before he gets to the human birth of Jesus a total of 39 times. And in every single case we know exactly what Matthew means. The father procreated, generated, brought into being a son.

The same word “begat” is used of the coming into being, the origin of Jesus Christ. Is it not curious that our translations do not reflect this? In verse 16 the KJV says that of Mary “**was born** Jesus, who is called Christ.” An equally valid translation of what Matthew wrote is “Mary, of whom **was begotten** Jesus, who is called Christ,” though the natural sense in this instance is probably that Jesus was born of Mary. According to Matthew Jesus was born and came into existence, was procreated, had his origin in the same way as we understand all the others in this genealogy did. Well, actually not quite in the same way! For Matthew goes on to explain something unique about Jesus’ procreation: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows...” Whoa! That’s not what Matthew wrote. He wrote this: “Now the **genesis** of Jesus Christ was as follows...”³⁴

There it is again — the origin of Jesus! This is the “today,” the point in history when Jesus begins, comes into being. Unlike all the other human babies in Matthew’s list this baby does not have a human father begetting him. No. The angel appears in a dream to a worried Joseph who wonders how Mary has gotten herself into such

³⁴ I am aware that this is a disputed text. But this is not the place to enter into a matter of textual criticism. Currently the consensus amongst textual critics is that Matthew wrote *genesis*. For a scholarly discussion of this disputed text see Bart Ehrman’s *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.

a fix as to be pregnant when he knows perfectly well that he has not had sexual relations with her. The explanation is given in verse 20: “for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” Once again we must protest at the way the translators have handled what Matthew wrote. What he wrote was this: “for that which has been **begotten** in her is of the Holy Spirit.” *It is the same word Matthew has used throughout this chapter to indicate procreation.* We could translate it accurately this way: “For that which has been **generated** in her is of the Holy Spirit.” This is the action of God the Father who begets His Son.

Here then is the begetting of the Son of God in history on earth. But there is even more to what Matthew tells us. Four women’s names appear in the list before we come to Mary: “Zerah **by** Tamar,” (v. 3) “Boaz **by** Rahab,” (v. 5) “and Obed **by** Ruth” (v. 5); “Solomon **by** her who had been the wife of Uriah” (v. 6). Once again we have no trouble understanding what this means. The Greek word rendered “by” in these four instances is *ek* and means “out of.” The mother produces the egg out of which comes her baby. Now the same explanation is given for Mary’s baby Jesus. Verse 16: “Mary by [Greek *ek*: out of] whom was born Jesus.” So we note that Jesus came out of Mary, not *through* Mary. Again Jesus originated from true human stock, so to speak. In other words, there is no personally preexisting Son who enters Mary’s womb from eternity and passes into time. He comes “out of” Mary, as all babies originate in their mothers. (It is interesting that certain Gnostics made the claim that Christ did not come *from* Mary, *but came through her* “like water through a pipe.”³⁵)

This begetting or beginning of the Son of God is even more precisely described, if this is possible, in Luke’s account. Gabriel announces to the virgin Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

Gabriel tells us that Mary’s son is to be conceived in a miraculous way. “Holy Spirit” power will overshadow her. (There is no definite article before “Holy Spirit” in the Greek.) This indicates that God’s presence, His initiating power is the cause of Jesus’ conception and begetting. Raymond E. Brown says this “would be

³⁵ As quoted by Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies* I, 7, 2.

consonant with a theology of a new creation wherein God's Spirit, active in the first creation of life (Gen. 1:2) was active again."³⁶ Let us not miss the import of what is being said here, by either Gabriel through Luke or by Brown. The virgin Mary conceived by "the power of the Highest." Brown goes on to say it is not that we are to understand this begetting in a "quasi-sexual" way as if God takes the place of a male principle in causing Mary to conceive. There is more of a connotation of creativity. Mary is not barren; rather she is a virgin who has not had sexual relations with a man, and therefore the child is totally God's work — a new creation. The Spirit that comes upon Mary is directly parallel to the Spirit of God that hovered over the waters before the creation in Genesis 1:2. The earth was void and without form when that Spirit appeared; just so Mary's womb was a void until through the Spirit God filled it with a child who was His Son. In the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist we heard of a yearning and prayer on the part of the parents who very much wanted a child; but since Mary is a virgin who has not yet lived with her husband there is no yearning for or human expectation of a child — it is the surprise of a staggering new creation. No longer are we dealing with human request and God's generous fulfilment; this is God's initiative going beyond anything man or woman has dreamed of.³⁷

In contrast to the creeds of Christendom which tell us to believe that our Lord was eternal and uncreated, Gabriel says otherwise — the Son of God began in Mary's womb. We are dealing with the begetting of God's Son in the womb of Mary through God's creative Spirit. As Brown says, it is only in second-century writings that we find the Lucan and (misunderstood) Johannine concepts combined into an Incarnation of a preexistent deity in the womb of the virgin Mary.³⁸ Luke does not think of a preexistent Son of God. Luke therefore did not believe in the Trinity and would be excluded from membership in almost all churches today.

³⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, New York: Doubleday, 1993, p. 299.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 314, footnote 48.

Two Begettings?

It is true that there is *possibly* another occasion in Jesus' life where he is said to be "begotten." The day of his resurrection/coronation is said by some commentators to be a begetting. The prophetic decree of Psalm 2 ("You are My Son; this day I have begotten you") is applied not to his conception/birth, but to his resurrection/exaltation to the Father's right hand. The NT evidence for this claim is slim and dubious at best. The only passage I can locate that may give this impression is Hebrews 1:3-5. Here, after stating that Jesus rose from the dead and "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3), the begetting of Jesus is cited from Psalm 2. Some allege that on this basis the begetting of the Son into heaven by resurrection is a symbolic begetting. Therefore, since Jesus' resurrection did not initiate his personal beginning why should Luke's birth account of the begetting of Jesus not also be taken metaphorically? Taken this way, it would indicate that Jesus (who had supposedly existed from eternity) now only entered a new phase of his existence via Incarnation. His conception is therefore not a real personal beginning. His birth is symbolically important, but does not mark his personal origin. Jesus' virginal conception is merely metaphorical language for adoption. Is this a valid proposition?

On at least two separate occasions the Father spoke from heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son." These public declarations — one at his baptism, and one at his transfiguration — did not establish Jesus' Sonship; they rather confirmed openly what was already fact, namely that Jesus indeed was God's Son. Neither baptism nor transfiguration gave to Jesus a new status. The purpose of these public announcements was not to show the world that the Father was adopting Jesus as His Son. These events only revealed a sonship already real from his conception. But can this reasoning be applied to the announcement by God at the coronation of Jesus ("You are My Son; today I have begotten you") if indeed it was a post-resurrection announcement? When God set Jesus down at His own right hand in heaven, it was a confirmation — in the same vein as the Father's announcements at the baptism and Mount of Transfiguration — to all in heaven and on earth that this one who had been rejected by men was indeed His Son. But is more intimated than just universal recognition of Jesus as His now-resurrected Son? Is his resurrection a (metaphorical) begetting? If

so, how can there be two begettings — one at conception and one at coronation? Fortunately, we can turn to other parallel passages in the NT for light.

Psalm 2 is also quoted in the NT in Acts 13:33. Here there is no doubt at all that the Father's decree, "You are My Son; today I have begotten you" is a reference to Jesus' conception/physical beginning and to his life's ministry. As the apostle Paul announces "the good news of the promise made to the fathers" (Acts 13:32) he tells how God the Father "raised up Jesus" (v. 33) in fulfilment of His decree in Psalm 2. This clearly refers to Jesus' physical begetting, because only in the next verse is the *resurrection* of Jesus introduced: "And as for the fact that He raised him up from the dead, no more to return to decay..." (v. 34). (This point is lost to readers of the King James Version where there is an unfortunate mistranslation. The word "again" appears in verse 33 where it has no right to be. This gives the impression that the Psalm 2 citation refers to Jesus' resurrection when it reads, "God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that He hath raised up Jesus *again*." The original Greek does not introduce the word "again" until verse 34 where, as we have noted, the resurrection first comes into view.)

Earlier in Paul's sermon we find the same expression that God "raised up David to be their king" (Acts 13:22). Just as God raised David up to royal service God has raised Jesus up for ministry as David's literal descendant. This also finds an OT echo where God promises to "raise up" a descendant after David "who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom" (2 Sam. 7:12). Once again God's decree to raise up Jesus as a real flesh and blood descendant of David is a reference not to the resurrection, but to his actual physical birth and life. Our conclusion is that in view of both OT background and other NT references to God's decree, the begetting of the Son always refers to Jesus' physical beginning.

Perhaps another key in helping us to answer our question is found in the introduction to the letter to the Romans. Here we are told the Gospel concerns: "His Son, who was born of the seed of David **according to the flesh**; declared with power to be the Son of God **according to a spirit of holiness** by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:3-4).

There are *two* "according to's" here which throw light on our question. The first says that "according to the flesh" God's Son was born (literally, *came into existence*) of Davidic descent. He is a real

human being. As Paul states in Galatians 4, God sent forth (commissioned) His Son “born [again literally, *coming into existence*] of a woman” (Gal. 4:4). (If Jesus always existed as the eternal Son before his birth, these statements are false.) The second “according to” says that Jesus is “declared with power to be the Son of God according to a spirit of holiness by his resurrection.” Note that the resurrection does not constitute Jesus as the Son of God, it announces — “with power” — an already established Sonship. Jesus Christ is the only man so far to have experienced two realms of existence. As God’s Son “according to the flesh” Jesus lived in weakness and humility on this earth. Not many knew his true identity. But after he was resurrected, and taken to the right hand of God, this Son entered *a new phase of existence*. His coronation ushered him — for the first time — into the realm of the Spirit and immortality. Jesus’ resurrection is a powerful confirmation that his claims to be the uniquely begotten Son of God were true. It is a major enhancement of a sonship already enjoyed; as Son of God his status is intensified. His resurrection *may* be spoken of as a “spiritual begetting,” which marks him off “**with power** to be the Son of God.” But it came after the Son was literally and physically begotten in Mary. That conception in Mary marks the physical begetting that begins his actual existence as Son of God; his coronation though may be spoken of as a “spiritual begetting” which begins a new *phase* in his Sonship. Raymond Brown is quite adamant that Jesus’ begetting as Son of God in Mary’s womb is to be taken literally. His rationale is that the “coming” of the Holy Spirit in Luke 1:35b (which explains why the child is called “holy” in 1:35d) and the “overshadowing” by the power of the Most High in 1:35c (which explains why the child is called Son of God in 1:35d) “*really* beget the child as God’s Son — there is no adoption here.”³⁹

Professor Anthony Buzzard further underscores this:

We are presented in these verses [Luke 1:35], on the authority of God’s emissary, with a plain statement about the origin of Jesus as Son of God. The miraculous conception in Mary, according to Luke, was the immediate cause of the divine Sonship of Jesus. It is “*for that reason*” (Luke 1:35) — the conception by Mary through the power

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 313-314.

of God's Holy Spirit — that Jesus was to be called the Son of God. A French commentator on this passage nicely renders the Greek, *dio kai*, as “*c'est précisément pourquoi*” (“that is precisely why,” “for that reason indeed”) he shall be called the Son of God. It is not difficult to see that Luke's view of Jesus' Sonship is at variance with the traditional idea that one who already existed as God and Son of God had entered the womb of Mary. If this were so, the conception of Jesus would not be the cause of Jesus' divine Sonship. He would have been the Son of God already.⁴⁰

In another article Anthony Buzzard drives home this point even more tellingly:

The message is simple and clear. The Son of God of Gabriel's announcement is none other than a divinely created Son of God, coming into existence — begotten — as Son in his mother's womb. All other claimants to divine Sonship and Messiahship may be safely discounted. A “Son of God” who is the *natural* son of Joseph could not, on the evidence of Gabriel, be the Messiah. Such a person would not answer to the Son who is son on the basis of a unique divine intervention in the biological chain. Equally false to Gabriel's definition of the Son of God would be a son who *preexisted* his conception. Such a son could not possibly correspond to the Messiah presented by Gabriel, one whose existence is predicated on a creative act in history on the part of the Father. Gabriel does not present a Son of God in transition from one state of existence to another. He announces the miraculous origin and beginning of the Messiah...Conception and begetting mark the point at which an individual *begins* to exist, an individual who did *not* exist before!⁴¹

So Gabriel informs us that God's creative power initiated into history His uniquely born Son. Here is no metaphorical begetting. As another scholar puts it: “He [God] was creating a human being, the Last Adam, not a second God or second person of a triune God. In this way our Lord's humanity, by special creation, came from

⁴⁰ Buzzard and Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, pp. 68-69.

⁴¹ Anthony Buzzard, *Focus on the Kingdom*, vol. 5, no. 7, p. 1.

both God and Mary and he was completely, entirely, and purely human.”⁴²

When God breathed into the lifeless body of Adam he became a living soul. The fact that God’s spirit or breath animated Adam did not mean that Adam became a man with two natures, that he was fully God and fully man. No, he was purely, entirely human. Just so, when God overshadowed Mary and by His power created Jesus out of her maternal ovum, Jesus did not become a man with two natures. He too was purely, entirely human, *just like Adam*. For those who object to this striking Adam parallel it is informative to note that Luke draws this very lesson just a few verses later. He traces the lineage of Jesus the Son of God all the way back to Adam who likewise is called “the son of God” (Luke 3:38)! God who had created the first “son of God” — Adam — now by special miracle also creates the last Adam — Jesus — who is also designated “Son of God.”

In Nicene Christology this conception/begetting of Jesus does *not* bring the Son of God into being. In the traditional scheme the conception of Jesus is merely the beginning of his earthly career. But for Gabriel the miracle is the reason and the basis for the Son’s very existence. Jesus is the Son of God for “*this precise reason*” taught so beautifully by none other than the archangel in Luke 1:35:

*At stake here is the whole nature of the Saviour. Is he really a human being, or did he have the benefit of billions of years of conscious existence, before deciding to become a man?... The Son of God, Messiah and Saviour, is defined in precise theological terms by Gabriel, laying the foundation of the whole New Testament and fulfilling the promises of the Old... Jesus is the Son of God on one basis only, his miraculous coming into existence in Mary’s womb. This was God’s creative act, initiating His new creation and providing the model of Christian Sonship for us all. Though obviously we are not, like Jesus, brought into existence supernaturally, nevertheless we, like him, are to receive a supernatural birth from spirit by being born again under the influence of the Gospel... A Son of God who is *already* Son of God before his conception in his mother is a personage essentially non-human. Under that revised scheme what*

⁴² Sidney Hatch, *Brief Bible Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2. p. 10.

came into existence in Mary was not the Son of God at all, but a created *human nature* added to an already existing Person.⁴³

A definitive book, *The Virgin Birth in History and Faith*, was written in 1941 by Douglas Edwards. Edwards was himself a Trinitarian, which means that he believed Jesus was the second member of the eternal Trinity. However, he refuses to use the virgin birth for this belief. He categorically says that:

The New Testament never connects the Virgin Birth with the Divinity of Christ...The nativity narratives...connect the Virgin Birth not with the Deity of Jesus Christ but with His Christship and His Manhood...so far from marking Him out *as God* — His birth “of the Spirit” empowers Him to be *the Man for whom the Kingdom is a visible reality*.⁴⁴

Nothing could be plainer, according to Edwards:

The apostles did not believe that Jesus was God because he was born of a virgin, nor did they expect others to believe in his Divinity on this ground...It was not the *Godhead* of Christ that the miraculous birth attested. Nor would it have occurred to the early Christians to appeal to the Virgin Birth as a proof of the Divinity of Christ. Nor do they so appeal to it.⁴⁵

J.O. Buswell concurs:

The notion that the Son was begotten by the Father in eternity past, not as an event, but as an inexplicable relationship, has been accepted and carried along in the Christian theology since the fourth century...We have examined all the instances in which “begotten” or “born” or related words are applied to Christ, and we can say with confidence that the *Bible has nothing whatsoever to say about “begetting” as an eternal relationship between the Father and the Son*.⁴⁶

Raymond Brown goes so far as to say that Luke 1:35 is a positive embarrassment to mainstream belief: “Luke 1:35 has

⁴³ Anthony Buzzard, *Focus on the Kingdom*, vol. 5, no. 7, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Douglas Edwards, *The Virgin Birth in History and Faith*, London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1941, p. 191.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁶ J.O. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Zondervan, 1962, p. 110.

embarrassed many orthodox theologians, since in preexistence theology a conception by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb does *not* bring about the existence of God's Son. Luke is seemingly unaware of such a Christology; conception is causally related to divine Sonship for him."⁴⁷

The New Testament scholar and textual critic Bart Ehrman says, "In point of fact, there is nothing in Matthew's narrative, either here or elsewhere throughout the Gospel, to suggest that he knew or subscribed to the notion that Christ had existed prior to his birth."⁴⁸

For the moment let us press the issue home. To "beget" means to bring into existence, to cause to be. To say the Son was "eternally begotten" is like talking about square circles. You cannot begin and not begin at the same time! As Anthony Buzzard has pointed out, it is doubtful if this expression contains any more meaning than "hot ice cubes."

Where then is the "traditional" doctrine of the eternal begetting of the Son to be found in Scripture? *The traditional view says the Son was begotten, but was never given existence* — he was eternal. Such Church-speak is illogical nonsense. *If there is no eternal begetting of the Son then there is no eternal Son. Orthodoxy would have us believe that the Father is unbegotten and had no beginning, but the Son was begotten, and he also had no beginning!* Surely it is clear that it is crooked to assign meaning to words which no lexicon supports. This is just playing with words and making them mean whatever one claims they mean.

Other "explanations" are offered to justify the traditional creed. Christ is the Son of God "begotten, not created" and "begotten before all worlds," but this destroys the meaning of "beget" which is a form of creation or procreation. The well-known C.S. Lewis champions the traditional cause and asks what these words mean:

One of the creeds says that Christ is the Son of God "begotten, not created"; and it adds "begotten by his Father before all worlds." Will you please get it quite clear that this has nothing to do with the fact that when Christ was born on earth as a man, that man was the son of a virgin? We are not now thinking about the Virgin Birth. We are thinking about something that happened before Nature was created at all,

⁴⁷ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 291.

⁴⁸ Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, p. 76.

before time began. “Before all worlds” Christ is begotten, not created. What does it mean?

We don’t use the words *begetting* and *begotten* much in modern English, but everyone still knows what they mean. To beget is to become the father of; to create is to make. And the difference is this. When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, a man makes a wireless set — or he may make something more like himself than a wireless set: say, a statue...Now that is the first thing to get clear. What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God; just as what man makes is not man. That is why men are not Sons of God in the sense that Christ is. They may be like God in certain ways, but they are not things of the same kind. They are more like statues or pictures of God.⁴⁹

Lewis gets into the usual Hellenistic/philosophical tangle here, but at least we can begin by endorsing his statement that “to beget is to become the father of.” We are working from the same definition. Jesus had a beginning, albeit a beginning “that happened before Nature was created at all, before time began.” However, there are at least two problems with Lewis’ explanation. Firstly, *without any Scriptural warrant* for doing so, he places Jesus’ begetting as Son way back into a timeless eternity past. As we have just seen, Matthew and Luke place Jesus’ begetting in time — in first-century Palestine, three months after Elizabeth’s pregnancy — and in place — in the womb of Mary. There is not one word in the Bible anywhere that teaches Jesus was begotten in eternity. Not one.

Secondly, Lewis makes the arbitrary statement that God begets God. This would mean that the unbegotten God begets an unbegotten person. This directly contradicts the meaning of “beget” and the Scriptural fact that Jesus was the begotten Son of God. Lewis fails to account for the Bible’s understanding of what it means to be the Son of God. His distinction between “begetting”

⁴⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1943, p. 138.

and “creating” might be quite valid — if we were working in the realm of Greek philosophy and metaphysics. But we are not now working in that realm. We are now thinking with Hebrew minds. For in the begetting of Jesus by the miraculous overshadowing of the Spirit of God, God is working a new creation. In the Hebrew mind, the begetting of Jesus was the creation of the Son of God, as we have seen. And here is the key we need to gain clarity. It is found in the Bible’s own definition and background to the description “Son of God” and it is to this particular understanding we now turn.

Son of God

One of the world’s leading (and at the time of writing still living) systematic theologians is Dr. Colin Brown of Fuller Seminary. Dr. Brown is a leading contributor to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Dr. Brown speaks of “a systematic misunderstanding of Son-of-God language in Scripture.” Indeed, Brown says, “One may ask whether the term ‘Son of God’ is in and of itself a divine title at all. Certainly there are many instances in biblical language where it is definitely not a designation of deity.” He then illustrates this point from the Bible. This term is used to describe Adam the created vice-regent of God on earth (Luke 3:38); it is used to designate the nation of Israel and the king of Israel (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1; Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14, etc.); and in its plural form to designate even angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). He then says:

In the light of these passages in their context, the title “Son of God” is not in itself a designation of personal deity or an expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead. Indeed to be “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.⁵⁰

Indeed to be “Son of God” one has to be a being who is *not* God! This is easily demonstrated by the way the Bible uses the term “son of God.” But in none of these instances is it a title designating Deity in the “traditional” or “orthodox” sense. It is clear that

⁵⁰ Colin Brown, “Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Ex Auditu* 7, 1991, p. 88.

Sonship of God meant something quite different to the Jewish mind of the writers of the Bible than to the later Gentile mind.

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29). Luke expands Peter’s confession to “You are the Christ of God” (Luke 9:20). And Matthew has the fullest description: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). It is quite evident that these two titles Christ (Heb. Messiah) and Son of God are interchangeable. The one defines the other. Matthew’s “Son of God” is a synonym for “Christ.”

This confession of Peter’s must be understood in its Jewish setting. Peter’s frame of reference was his Hebrew Bible. And in that Bible the titles “Christ” and “Son of God” refer to Israel’s king. For instance, we see this clearly in Psalm 2, a widely regarded Messianic Psalm. In this Psalm we have “the LORD” who is Jehovah God. We also have “His **Anointed** [Messiah]” (v. 2). God declares this prophetic word: “But as for Me, I have installed My **King** upon Zion, My holy mountain” (v. 6). The next verse has God calling this Messianic King “**My Son**” (v. 7). To the Jews who awaited the fulfilment of God’s promise of the Messiah, the promised one was to be both King and Son of God. These three descriptions meet in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Anointed (Hebrew *Messiah*; Greek *Christ*) *is* the King, *is* the Son. “The title ‘Son of God’ used for Jesus has its origin in the Israelite royal ideology.”⁵¹ And when Peter acknowledged this, Jesus commended him as blessed. The Father has revealed it to him. “Jesus’ sonship to God is not described as a ‘divine nature,’ but as a result of divine creation/election and is fully worked out in Jesus’ obedience to the Father.” As Schonfield is at pains to point out again and again, “Jesus is the Archetypal Man, the archetypal Son of God.” And as Frances Young so astutely observes, “When Paul wrote: ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,’ he is unlikely to have envisaged a Nicene conclusion.”⁵² To sum up so far we have:

Son of God = King = Messiah = Christ

⁵¹ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 236.

⁵² Lockhart, *Jesus the Heretic*, pp. 172-173.

The Blasphemy of Jesus

Since the titles “King of Israel,” “Messiah/Christ” are synonymous with “Son of God” what do we make of John 10 where the Jews are about to stone Jesus for “blasphemy”? Our Bible reads, “The Jews answered him, ‘For a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy; and because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God.’”

To our tradition-bound ears this sounds as if Jesus was claiming to be God. But was he? Would it make sense in that land and time for Jews who were strict unitarian monotheists to accuse Jesus of being Jehovah Himself? Unfortunately, once again we have to clear up a simple matter of translation. The Greek here does not have the definite article before the word “God.” They did not accuse Jesus of claiming to be “the God,” that is, the LORD God. Nor does the Greek text capitalize the “G” for God. No Jew would for a moment believe this. To make them say that Jesus claimed to be God (the Supreme Being) is simply to read back into the text what is historically anachronistic and absurdly out of context. When we read the word “God” our Western minds immediately think of the Supreme Deity. But in the ancient world the word “God” was much more ambiguous and context always determined its meaning. What the Jews in fact accused Jesus of was that he was claiming an unprecedented authority to speak directly for God. They did not recognize him as the Messiah and thought his claims outrageous and false.

The apostle Paul gives us a good clue to this widespread and popular use of the word “god” when he tells us that in his society there were “many gods and many lords” so-called (1 Cor. 8:6). On one occasion Paul himself had to dissuade the adoring crowds who wanted to worship him and Barnabas. The crowd called out, “The gods have become like men and have come down to us” (Acts 14:11). Later in his life Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake. The locals expected Paul to swell up and die but when he showed no ill effects the same people changed their minds and began to say that Paul was “a god” (Acts 28:6). The translators know that the natives did not think that Paul was “God” so they wrote Paul was “a god.” Another instance: In Acts 12 King Herod gave a moving oration and the people cried out, “The voice of a god, not of a man!” (v. 22). The translators did not write “The voice of God...” because it is self-

evident those pagans did not say that Herod was speaking with the very voice of God. This is very plain to anybody.

We could cite many more examples where context determines which “God/god” is intended. Evidently the Bible, reflecting the common idiom of its day and age, calls several beings “God/god.” Whenever the Bible speaks of the one Supreme Deity who is the uncreated God it usually uses the definite article. The Father of Jesus is normally called “the God” (Greek: *ho theos*). In fact, some 1350 times in the NT whenever the Supreme Deity, the Father, is referred to He is called “the God” with the definite article.

Before we return to our passage in John 10 where the Jews accuse Jesus of blasphemy, saying that he is claiming to be “God,” let us lock this fact clearly into our minds by using a simple illustration. If I said to you that the minister was going to visit you today, you might think I meant a government minister. Then again, you might think I meant the local church minister. Or you might even think I intended to say the (Prime) Minister of our country was coming to speak to you. Only the context would help you fix in your mind which minister I meant. The word “minister” by itself is quite ambiguous. Just so, in the ancient world the word “God” was a flexible word whose meaning was determined by the wider context.

Back in John 10:24 the context is clear. The Jews say to Jesus, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ [the Messiah], tell us plainly.” Jesus lays out the credentials that mark him out as the long-promised Messiah. His works that are done by the Father’s authority prove his claim to be the anointed one, the Messiah. But these hardened Jews who refuse to believe that he is the Messiah will not listen because they are not his sheep (v. 26). His true sheep who hear his voice are safe (v. 28). In this matter, says Jesus, “I and the Father are one” (v. 30). That is, one in purpose and mission. The Greek word for *one* here is neuter (*hen*) and refers to the works or purpose that Jesus is talking about: keeping the sheep safe. (Compare 1 Cor. 3:8 where “he who plants and he who waters are one,” that is, one in purpose, or one in mission.) The Catholic exegete Karl-Josef Kuschel says of this verse:

Even Catholic exegesis now sees that John did not intend metaphysical statements about the unity of Father and Son...We need to be careful not to press the verse about unity, as Christians of later centuries did in the controversy

over the Trinity...Positively, John is concerned with a unity of revelation between Father and Son...Essentially we have a unity of will and action between God and Jesus...a unity of activity...So in defining the unity, John is not concerned with either mythological speculations or metaphysical conceptualizations of Jesus' Godhead, divine being or divine nature...He is not concerned to know that before the Incarnation there were two preexistent divine persons who were bound together in the one divine nature. This way of conceiving things is alien to John...The statement has nothing to do with any dogmatic-speculative statements about the relationship of the natures within the Godhead.⁵³

Quite right. Whenever God Himself is called *one* the masculine (*heis*) is used (see for instance, Gal. 3:28; Eph. 4:6 in the Greek). Sufficient then to say that those who try to make Jesus mean that he and the Father are one in *essence* or *nature* are reading into the text not out of it. This is to impose Greco-Western categories back onto the Hebrew mind which never thought of God in terms of essence.

At this point the Jews are ready to stone Jesus for blasphemy "because you, being a man, make yourself out to be..." ("the God" or "a god"? Which is it to be?) With other commentators I suggest that it should be translated to mean that Jesus is making himself out to be "a god" (just as they translated Acts 28:6 and 14:22 that we looked at earlier). This is because there is no definite article and in the very next two verses the translators follow common sense: "Jesus answered them, 'Has it not been written in your Law, 'I said, you are **gods**'? If he called them **gods**, to whom the word of God came...' (John 10:34-35).

Here is another reason why the translators are incorrect to say that Jesus was claiming to be "God." Look at verse 36: "Do you say of him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, you are blaspheming because **I said I am the Son of God?**"

If Jesus was claiming to be "God" then surely he would have come right out and said "I said I am (the) God"! But no. He says, "**I said I am the Son of God.**" As was discussed earlier, to be the Son of God means you are *not* God! Jesus' whole point is that if God in the OT called the human judges who were commissioned to act on His behalf "gods," then how much more should the one who is

⁵³ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* pp. 388-399.

“sanctified” and “sent” in the Father’s authority be called the Son of God. This interpretation that the Jews accuse Jesus of being “a god” — i.e. of being the representative or agent of the one true God of Israel — fits the whole context. Remember, the Jews had asked Jesus not to keep them in suspense but to tell them plainly if he was the Messiah (v. 24). Jesus does exactly that. He tells them he is the Son of God. And as we have already seen, in the Bible the titles “Son of God” and Christ (Messiah) are virtually synonymous. In John 10:22-36 the Jews accuse Jesus of claiming to represent God and to be His spokesman. Jesus explicitly denies that he is God. It is a pity the translators have obscured all this by injecting their own theology into the text, thereby giving the impression that Jesus was claiming to be God Himself, the Yahweh of the OT.

I Am

But what about the great “I am” statements of Jesus? Especially that classic one in **John 8:58** where Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born I AM”? Surely here Jesus makes the same claim for himself that Jehovah God made back in Exodus 3 where the LORD says to Moses at the burning bush “I AM WHO I AM.” Surely Jesus is claiming to be the I AM of the Old Testament as Trinitarian belief asserts?

Now here is something very obvious that they never told me in church (or at theological college). This expression from Jesus’ lips “I am” (Greek *ego eimi*) occurs throughout the Gospel of John and in no other text in John can it mean I AM the God of the Old Testament. Go back to John 4:25-26 for instance. The woman at the well said to Jesus, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when that one comes, he will declare all things to us.” And Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am *he*.” You will notice that in most Bibles the word *he* is in italics. This means that the translators have correctly supplied a word in English that is not in the Greek but that nevertheless makes the intended sense quite clear. Here Jesus says to the woman — in the context of her question about the Messiah — that he is the Messiah, the Christ. “I who speak to you am *he*.” In the Greek it reads *ego eimi*. Jesus simply says I am he, the Messiah. Definitely not “I AM is the One speaking to you!”

In John 9 Jesus heals the blind man. But is this really the beggar who used to sit groping in the dark? Some people said, “Yes, it’s

him all right.” Others said, “No, just looks like him.” But the beggar says, “*ego eimi*”! And the translators have no trouble writing, “I am the one.” So why aren’t the translators consistent? Why not capitalize what this man says as I AM? Because it is clear that he is not claiming to be the God of the Old Testament. Saying “I am” (*ego eimi*) does not make somebody God in the Bible!

Or look at John 8:24, 28 where the exact phrase “I am” appears and the translators supply the true meaning by adding in italics the little word *he* because it is clear that it simply means “I am the Messiah.” Verse 28: “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *he*, and I do nothing on my own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught me.” Jesus cannot be saying that the Son of Man who can do nothing apart from the Father will be seen to be the I AM when he dies. God cannot die. The consistent and natural explanation is that Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah. He is the duly authorized agent of God.

Actually, the I AM of Exodus 3 is introduced as I AM WHAT I AM or I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE. Jesus did not say this! Anthony Buzzard explains:

It is important to notice that Jesus did not use the phrase revealing God’s name to Moses. At the burning bush the One God had declared His name as “I am who I am” or “I am the self-existent one” (Ex. 3:14). The phrase in the Greek version of the Old Testament reads *ego eimi ho hown*, which is quite different from the “I am he” used by Jesus.⁵⁴

What Jesus is saying to these Jews is simply “Before Abraham was born, I am *he*,” that is, “I am the Messiah.” Notice the context in John 8:56 where Jesus says, “Abraham rejoiced to see my day.” That is, by faith Abraham looked forward and saw the coming Messiah before he came in history. He believed the promise that God would send the Promised One. On the other hand these Jews did not believe that Jesus was their Messiah. They were claiming to be Abraham’s descendants. Jesus said that this was impossible for they did not recognize him as their Messiah. But Jesus asserts that even before Abraham was born, he is the One who was always in God’s plan. This Abraham believed and saw. The Messiah preexisted in God’s plan and therefore in Abraham’s believing

⁵⁴ Buzzard and Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 220.

mind, because he trusted the promise of God. Jesus positively did *not* say, “Before Abraham was, I was.” Also, Jesus did *not* say, “Before Abraham was, I AM WHAT I AM.”

The conclusion is inevitable. Jesus’ claim “Before Abraham was born, I am *he*” is the straightforward claim that he is the long-promised one, the Messiah, the One in question. Jesus is the Saviour in God’s promise even before Abraham was born. In each of the other examples cited, the translators supply the word “he” to the phrase “I am.” Why not be consistent here in John 8:58 as well? The only reason not to is because of traditional bias. What Jesus said is this: “Before Abraham was born, I am *he*,” meaning, I am the Messiah that Abraham looked forward to. This is a very reasonable statement from one who thinks that God had the Messiah in mind from the beginning.

I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life

At this point it is appropriate to mention another of the “I am” statements of Jesus often used to support the notion that Jesus claimed to be God. Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Surely this is a claim to be the Supreme Deity?

The first thing to note is that this statement is not the whole statement. The rest of what Jesus says is that because of his unique mediatorial status as the Son, “no one comes to the Father, but **through** me.” Jesus is simply announcing that he is God’s mediator, God’s only authorized agent of approach. Elsewhere the Scripture clearly teaches this: “There is one God, and one mediator between men and God, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

By definition a mediator has to be a separate person from the other two parties who are seeking terms (see Gal. 3:20). To qualify as the mediator between God and men, one has to himself be a *man*! God cannot be the mediator. John 14:6 teaches this truth precisely. It says nothing about Jesus being God. Just that he is God’s mediator for all who would come to the Father through his Gospel announcement.

The second thing to note in these “I am” statements is that the whole context of the Gospel of John tells us how and why Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life,” namely because this authority has been *given* to him by the Father. The Father “has **given** all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22). The Father “**gave** to the Son to have life in himself” (John 5:26). Jesus’ own confession is quite clear: “I live

because of the Father” (John 6:57). Jesus said, “I can do nothing of my own initiative” (John 5:30). It is on “the Son of Man” that “the Father, even God, has set His seal” (John 6:27). We could multiply these sayings of Jesus many times over. His testimony is that he is subordinate to the Father. His testimony is that all this has come to him from his Father’s hand. His works, his words, his very life are all the result of God’s initiative. And precisely because these things are given to him, Jesus can say that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and that nobody can come to the Father but through his mediation. The “I am” statements do not prove his Deity; they demonstrate that God is the source of it all. Jesus has been given these things and therefore cannot be God Himself. By definition, the Father of Jesus possesses all things and can be given nothing.

One scholar shows that to take these I AM statements to mean that Jesus is claiming to be Almighty God borders on the ridiculous. Referring to John 8:28 (where Jesus says, “you will know that I am *he*, and I do nothing on my own initiative”) Barrett writes: “It is intolerable that Jesus should be made to say, ‘I am God, the supreme God of the OT, and being God I do as I am told.’”⁵⁵

And on John 13:19-20 where Jesus says “I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am *he*...He who receives me receives Him who sent me,” the same author ironically points out it would be equally intolerable that Jesus should be made to say, “I am God, and I am here because someone sent me.”⁵⁶ Perhaps it would be wise to stop saying that these “I am *he*” statements of Jesus mean that he is claiming to be God.

John Chapter One

Ah, I can hear an objection. What about John 1 (theologians call this the prologue) where we read, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:1-3)?

⁵⁵ Barrett, quoted in *Focus on the Kingdom*, ed. Anthony Buzzard, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

The first thing to be said is that the apostle John is not going to contradict anything Matthew and Luke (or the OT) have said about the origin and person of his beloved Lord Jesus. Scripture is a beautifully woven and harmonious testimony to God's Truth. If Matthew and Luke tell us unequivocally that Jesus had a beginning by the miraculous power of God in the womb of Mary, then John is not going to tell us that Jesus the Son had no beginning, that he always personally preexisted as God and was the second member of the eternal Trinity. Such a contradiction would destroy apostolic unity and the testimony of Scripture which Jesus said cannot be broken.

With this principle in mind, we should observe first what John's Prologue does *not* say. John did not write, "In the beginning was *the Son* and *the Son* was with God and *the Son* was God." (Some translations make this bold claim even though it is totally unwarranted from the text.) But our inherited tradition automatically makes our eyes run in that groove. One of the reasons we tend to read *into* it this meaning is the very fact that our translations have put a capital "W" for "Word." The capital W subconsciously dictates that we think John means a person when he speaks of "the Word." But for those not familiar with NT Greek rest assured that this is not the case. Every single letter in the earliest Greek manuscripts is capitalized. (These manuscripts are called uncials. Other manuscripts are written in all lower case.) So it is a matter of what the translator decides to do in his translation that will have a big bearing on how we will read it. Did John write "the Word" or "the word"? We will determine this after discussing a few other details first.

The next technical point we need to clear up is that in NT Greek, like many modern languages such as French, German and Spanish, all nouns are given gender. We do not have this in English because objects are neuter. But in these foreign languages a pronoun must always agree with the noun it refers to in gender, number and case. Anybody with any knowledge of French, Spanish or German is very familiar with this. For example, in German the word for "table" is a masculine noun. But no German when he talks about a table for a moment thinks it is a person when he says, "Help me shift this table because *he* is heavy." In NT Greek an object can be either masculine, feminine or neuter.

Now in NT Greek “the word” (*logos*) happens to be of the masculine gender. Therefore, its pronoun — “he” in our English translations — is a matter of interpretation, not translation. Did John write concerning “the word” that “he” was in the beginning with God? Or did he write concerning “the word” that “it” was in the beginning with God? As already stated, in NT Greek the *logos* or word is a masculine noun. It is OK in English to use “he” to refer back to this masculine noun if there is good contextual reason to do so. But is there good reason to make “the word” a “he” here?

It is a fact that all English translations from the Greek before the King James Version of 1611 read this way: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. **It** was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through **it** and apart from **it** nothing came into being that has come into being. In **it** was life; and the life was the light of men.” In fact, there are many English translations since the KJV that refer to the *logos* as “it.” Churches of Christ people will be no doubt surprised to learn that their esteemed Alexander Campbell translated John 1:1 as:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **This** was in the beginning with God. All things were made by **it**, and without **it** not a single creature was made. **In it** was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shone in darkness; but the darkness admitted it not.⁵⁷

To read it this way means, of course, that “the word” is not a person. This is a very acceptable translation. Indeed, I will now show that it is in fact preferable for the following reasons.

The word *logos* appears many, many more times in this very Gospel of John. And nowhere else do the translators capitalize it or use the masculine personal pronoun “he” to agree with it! They know the context will not stand for this. Take John 2:22 which reads, “When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he said this; and they believed the Scripture, and **the word which** Jesus had spoken.” “The word” here is clearly not Jesus the person himself, but rather his message. Another instance: John 4:37 translates *logos* as a “saying”: “For in this case **the**

⁵⁷ Alexander Campbell, *The Sacred Writings of the Apostles and Evangelists of Jesus Christ, Commonly Styled the New Testament, Translated from the Original Greek*, Brooke County, VA, 1826.

saying is true.” Another one: “The man believed **the word** that Jesus spoke to him” (John 4:50). Or take John 6:60 which reads, “Many therefore of his disciples, when they heard this said, ‘This is a difficult **statement**.’” And so on for the many other cases in this very Gospel.

The rest of the New Testament is the same. *Logos* is variously translated as “statement” (Luke 20:20), “question” (Matt. 21:24), “preaching” (1 Tim. 5:17), “command” (Gal. 5:14), “message” (Luke 4:32), “matter” (Acts 15:6), “reason” (Acts 10:29). So there is absolutely no reason to make John 1 say that “the word” is the person Jesus himself, unless of course the translators are wanting to make a point. *In all cases logos is an “it.”*

There is even strong evidence to suggest that John himself reacted to those who were already misusing his Gospel to mean that Jesus was himself the Word who had personally preexisted the world. When he later wrote his introduction to 1 John he clearly made the point that *what* was in the beginning was not a “who.” He put it this way: “**What** was from the beginning, **what** we have heard, **what** we have seen with our eyes, **what** we beheld and our hands handled, concerning **the word of life**...”

Four times John says that which was from the beginning was a “what”! Here the relative pronouns are neuter, not masculine. And to avoid all confusion as to his meaning he even says it was *the word of life* which was in the beginning with God. Surely John is his own best interpreter as to what he means. His introduction in 1 John is his answer to the misunderstanding that was even then being promoted by the Gnostics, namely the error that made Jesus into a preexisting heavenly redeemer, a mixture of flesh and spirit, human and divine, rather than a 100% human being.

These arguments, significant as they are, begin to take on strong proportions when we consider the next vital piece of information. That is, the apostle John’s background was in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is surely better exegesis to read the prologue to John’s Gospel with his Hebrew background in mind. And if we go back to the OT we can easily discover the framework for John’s understanding of “the word.” In the Hebrew Bible “word” is *never a person*. “Word” always means “promise” or “decree” or “proposal” or “plan” or “message” or just plain “word.” (See for example Gen. 41:37; Jud. 3:19; Dan. 9:25; Ps. 64:5-6; Is. 8:10.) In fact “the word” is used about 1450 times in the Hebrew Bible this way. Not once

does it refer to a preexisting Son of God. Not once does it mean a person. Not once!

The Hebrews certainly understood God's word to be the equivalent of His personal presence and power. What is announced is as good as done (Gen. 1:3, 9, 11, etc). He watches over His word to perform it and fulfill it (Jer. 1:12). God's word carries the guarantee that He will back it up with action (Is. 55:10-11). Not one word of His will fail. His word carries His power. His word is as His deed. God's word *is* God in His activity in Hebrew understanding. When "**the word of the LORD** came to Jonah" instructing him to go to the city of Nineveh and preach there, Jonah "ran away **from the LORD**" (Jonah 1:1-3). Here the word of God, which is His revealed will, equals God Himself expressing Himself. When God told Jonah His plan or His will and Jonah disobeyed, to the Hebrew mind Jonah ran away from God *Himself*.

The writer of the Gospel of John must be allowed to use his native categories and thought-forms. We must respect his Hebrew background. At the time his Gospel was composed, the Aramaic commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures known as the *targums* used the term *memra* (the word) to describe God's activity in the world. The *memra* (word):

performs the same function as other technical terms like "glory," "Holy Spirit" and "Shekinah" which emphasised the distinction between God's presence in the world and the incomprehensible reality of God itself. *Like the divine Wisdom, the "Word" symbolised God's original plan for creation.* When Paul and John speak about Jesus as though he had some kind of preexistent life, they were not suggesting that he was a second divine "person" in the later Trinitarian sense. They were indicating that Jesus transcended temporal and individual modes of existence. Because the "power" and "wisdom" that he represented were activities that derived from God, he had in some way expressed "what was there from the beginning." *These ideas were comprehensible in a strictly Jewish context, though later Christians with a Greek background would interpret them differently.*⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: From Abraham to the Present: The 4000-year Quest for God*, p. 106, emphasis added.

The fact that John introduces “the word” of God to us in personified terms is very much in keeping with his Hebrew culture. For instance, John’s prologue shows obvious parallels with Proverbs 8:22-30 where Wisdom is personified (but never hypostatized, never turned into a real person). Another example perhaps more in keeping with John’s imagery is found in Psalm 147:15 where we read, “He [God] sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly.” Here the command/word of God is indeed personified, but not hypostatized.

Also worthy of note is that many commentators are of the opinion that John 1:1-14 is poetic in its literary style. And a basic rule of interpretation is that poetry contains metaphorical language which must not be over-literalized. Thus John’s poetic introduction must be allowed to make use of figurative language in keeping with such personification. A personified *logos* is not a revolutionary idea to John! Roger Haight endorses this sentiment when he writes, “One thing is certain, the Prologue of John does not represent direct descriptive knowledge of a divine *entity or being* called Word, who descended and became a human being. To read a *metaphor* as literal speech is misinterpretation.”⁵⁹

Nor is this interpretation of a non-personal “word” a “Johnny-come-lately” understanding in the Church. Some of the early church fathers shared this view. Origen’s commentary on John states: “*logos* — only in the sense of the utterance of the Father which came to expression in a Son when Jesus was conceived.” Similarly Tertullian: “It is the simple use of our people to say [of John 1] that the word of *revelation* was with God.”⁶⁰ To these church fathers the “word” was not yet understood as a personally preexistent Son.

Or as eminent professor of New Testament T.W. Manson beautifully summarizes:

I very much doubt whether John thought of the *Logos* as a personality. The only personality on the scene is Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth. That personality embodies the *Logos* so completely that Jesus becomes a complete revelation of God. But in what sense are we using the word

⁵⁹ Roger Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, p. 210.

⁶⁰ *Ad Praxeus* 5.

“embodies”?...For John every word of Jesus is a word of the Lord.⁶¹

In the light of this background it is far better to read John’s prologue to mean that in the beginning God had a plan, a dream, a grand vision for the world, a reason by which He brought all things into being. This word or plan was expressive of who He is. We humans who are made in God’s likeness understand this idea exactly. Let us illustrate. Here is a man who loves to go fishing. He dreams about fishing all day long. By profession, however, he is a plumber. The thing that keeps him going during the week when he is digging trenches and fixing pipes is that the weekend is coming up. This is what revs him up and inspires him. He will escape all this hum-drum and soon be driving to the coast and fishing. This goes on for years. But then one day this man has one of those moments in life that we call a brain explosion. Why not buy a little beach shack right on the water’s edge? And why not own his own boat? A dream is born. From then on, he works like a man possessed. He works extra long hours to bring in the money needed to make his dream come true. In fact, he even foregoes most of his weekends of fishing so he can earn extra to buy his dream house and boat. Oh sure, every once in a while he will take time off to go and drop the line in. He is keeping the dream alive. When the fish aren’t biting his mind drifts off. He can “see” his beach shack. He can visualize his own boat. And all the years at work plumbing he can “see” the goal. He tells everybody and anybody who will listen to him about his beach shack and about his boat and about his life of fishing. Nobody doubts his intention. But one day to everybody’s amazement our plumber is gone. Where is he? “Oh,” they say, “Don’t you know? He has moved to the coast. He is living in a beach shack and fishing out of his own boat.” His dream — which till now has been *with* him, or *inside* his mind — has come true. It was, we may say, “his baby,” his favourite preoccupation, and it became reality!

The Word Was *with* God

There is good evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures that the prepositions “with” (*im* and *et*) often describe the relationship between a person and what is in his heart or mind. We have a

⁶¹ T.W. Manson, *On Paul and John*, SCM Press, 1967, p. 156.

common expression in English when we say, “What’s *with* him?” or “What’s the matter *with* her?” Something is going on *inside* somebody. Here are a few examples of this use of the Hebrew preposition “with.”⁶²

“Im (with), alone = in one’s consciousness, whether of knowledge, memory or purpose”

Num. 14:24: “He had another spirit with him” (operating in his mind).

1 Kings 11:11: “This is with you [Solomon]” (what you want).

1 Chron. 28:12: “The pattern of all that was in the spirit with him” (in his mind).

Job 10:13: “I know that this was with you” (hidden in your heart).

Job 23:10: “He knows the way which is with me” (the way of which I am conscious).

Job 23:14: “He performs the things which are appointed for me and many such things are with Him” (He has many such purposes).

Job 27:11: “That which is with the Almighty I will not conceal” (His purposes).

Ps. 50:11: “Wild beasts of the field are with Me” (known to Me, in My thought and care).

Ps. 73:23: “I am continually with You” (in your thoughts).

“Et: a dream or word of Yahweh is said to be *with* the prophet.”

Gen. 40:14: “Keep me in mind when it goes well with you” (literally, “remember me with yourself”). The word was what God had in mind.

2 Kings 3:12: “There is with him the word of the Lord” (2 John 2: truth is “with us”; Gal. 2:5: truth “remains with [*pros*] you”).

Isa. 59:12: “transgressions are with us” (in our consciousness). (Cp. John 17:5, the glory which Jesus had with God — present to God’s mind, as His purpose.)

Jer. 23:28: “The prophet with whom there is a dream” (the prophet who has a dream).

Jer. 27:18: “If the word of the Lord is with them.”

⁶² I am indebted to Anthony Buzzard for these examples, cited from *Brown, Driver and Briggs Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 768, 86.

Job 14:5: “His days are determined. The number of his months is with you” (known to you).

Prov. 2:1: “Treasure my commandments within you” (= with you).

Prov. 11:2: “Wisdom is with the humble.”

In view of this Hebrew usage and background, Anthony Buzzard suggests an accurate translation of John 1:1, 14 as follows: “In the beginning God had a Plan and the Plan was fixed as God’s Decree and the Plan was fully expressive of God’s mind...and the Plan became embodied in the Man Messiah Jesus.”

The Bible says “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is” (Prov. 23:7). God is no different. For before He created a thing He had this dream with Him. This word was fully expressive of Himself. And when He created the universe and the purpose of the ages He worked according to His master plan, His dream. As Peter says, “**by the word of God the heavens existed** long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and by water” (2 Pet. 3:5). A similar idea is expressed by John in Revelation 4:11: “for You did create all things, and because of Your **will** they existed, and were created.” This agrees with the OT. For example in Psalm 33:6, 9 we are told that “by the LORD’s word the heavens were made.” God spoke and it was done. He commanded and the world stood fast. There was divine power in God’s spoken word. All of this is simply to say that the Greek word for *logos* is masculine in gender but is not referring to a personally preexisting Son of God. “The word” for John is an “it,” not a “he.” On one occasion Jesus is given the name “the Word of God” and this is in Revelation 19:13. This name has been given to him after his resurrection and ascension, but we will search in vain to find it before his birth.

It is not until we come to verse 14 of John’s prologue that this *logos* becomes personal and becomes the Son of God, Jesus the human being. “And the word became flesh.” The great plan that God had in His heart from before the creation at last is fulfilled. Be very clear that it does *not* say that *God* became flesh. Not at all. It says “the word” became flesh. God’s master plan is now reality in the man Jesus. Jesus is the final and full expression of all that God’s wisdom planned “in the beginning.”

This is the conclusion also of the definitive study of the Incarnation *Christology in the Making*. Listen to James Dunn’s finding:

The conclusion which seems to emerge from our analysis thus far is that it is only with v. 14 that we can begin to speak of the *personal* Logos...Prior to v. 14...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 translate the masculine Logos as “God’s utterance” instead, it would become clearer that the poem did not necessarily intend the Logos in v. 1-13 to be thought of as a personal divine being. In other words, the revolutionary significance of v. 14 may well be that it marks...*the transition from impersonal personification to actual person*. This indeed is the astounding nature of the poem’s claim. If it had asserted simply that an individual divine being had become man, that would have raised fewer eyebrows. It is the fact that the Logos poet has taken language which any thoughtful Jew would recognize to be the language of personification and has *identified* it with a particular person, *as* a particular person, that would be astonishing: the manifestation of God become a man! God’s utterance not merely come through a particular individual, but actually become that one person, Jesus of Nazareth!⁶³

There are some NT Greek scholars who note that John was very specific in what he penned back in verse 1. He wrote “and the word was God.” He did *not* write “and the word was *the* God.” In other words these scholars take God (Greek *theos*) *here in the adjectival sense*. The word was expressive of God, had the character of God, was divine in its character. It is the difference between “The teacher was the man” and “The teacher was man.” The New English Bible captures this adjectival sense beautifully: “and what God was the word was.” Moffat’s translation also does well with “the logos was divine.” As Dunn definitively says, “Nowhere either in the Bible or in the extra-canonical literature of the Jews is the word of God a personal agent or on the way to become such.”⁶⁴ “The *logos* of the

⁶³ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 243.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

prologue becomes Jesus; Jesus was the *logos* become flesh, not the *logos* as such.”⁶⁵

It may well be that John actually mentions the virgin birth — that is, the beginning of Jesus’ existence — in his prologue, before verse 14. The verses under consideration are normally read in the following way: “But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name, who **were** born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

As this reads in our modern Bibles, it refers to the new birth that Christians experience through faith in Christ: Our relationship with God through Christ is not something of human origin, or human will-power, or human genius; our salvation is all of God’s doing through His Son. However, one day I read that this may not have been what John originally wrote. According to a number of Bible scholars, these verses have more than likely been tampered with. There is no doubt that they were the subject of much early debate. For example, Tertullian accused the Valentinian Gnostics of having altered the text to read as I have just quoted it, and as we find it in most modern translations. According to Tertullian the plural verb “were” should actually be the singular verb “was.” In this case the verse would read like this: “But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believe in his name, who **was** born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

As can be seen, this singular verb changes the sense completely. Instead of it being the Christians who are born by God’s will, it is now Christ himself who is born by God’s initiation. Tertullian thus accuses the Gnostics of trying to eliminate the idea of Jesus’ miraculous birth (“who was born”) by making it relate to their own experience (“who were born”). In support of this understanding, Irenaeus and Justin Martyr argue for the singular, in order to maintain that Jesus was not a mere man, born in the natural way, but was miraculously conceived by the action of God. A strong point in favour of this reading is that these three references *antedate* any of our extant NT manuscripts. However, in all honesty, it must still be said that the jury is either still out on this one, or currently leans

⁶⁵ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 382.

slightly in favour of the plural verb as appears in our modern Bibles (but not the Jerusalem Bible).

I confess, however, that whenever I read these verses with the plural they seem a little incongruous, just a little out of place, even though the plural meaning is quite in keeping with the Bible's teaching that our salvation is entirely of God's grace. To my mind, the more natural sense is to understand a reference to the birth of Jesus without human will. If we take it as plural (that is, that it speaks of the new birth of Christians) it points out in a puzzling manner the blatantly obvious: that the believers' spiritual birth "of God" has nothing to do with sexual intercourse, fleshly craving, or male will! On this reading, we must ask who would have supposed it did anyway? The more it is pondered, the more baffling it becomes that John should have three times over differentiated spiritual regeneration from physical generation! Read naturally, in the singular, the passage is an exact statement of the virgin birth, for Jesus was born "of God" without human agency, will, or natural craving. The verse would then be a strong statement of the virginal begetting of Jesus and would confirm that John did not intend to introduce a preexisting Son, as was later mistakenly thought. Without stronger textual evidence the point remains undecided, though this nuance appears the more natural and convincing.

1 John 5:18

There is, however, one verse that John wrote which clearly does speak of the begetting of Jesus in time. Unfortunately, the King James Version is based on a corrupted text and reads: "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not" (1 John 5:18, KJV).

This reads as though the Christian who is born of God keeps himself from Satan's schemes. With Douglas Edwards, and modern translations, we reject this variant reading because:

nowhere in either Testament is a creature of God, whether Jewish or Christian, said absolutely to keep *himself*. A Christian may be bidden to "keep himself pure" (1 Tim. 5:22), or Christians to "keep themselves in the love of God" (Jude 21); but, whether in the Old Testament or in the New,

never is a man regarded as his own keeper, nor is anyone but God ever said to “keep” another.⁶⁶

Quite right. It is always the LORD who is your keeper (Ps. 121:4-8). In the NT the phrase is only ever used of God and of Christ (John 17:11, 12, 15). However, the meaning is entirely altered if we read it as more accurately preserved in the Greek original: “We know that no one who is born of God sins; but he who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him” (1 John 5:18).

Read this way, the text tells us that the Christ who was born or begotten of God keeps the Christian safe. Jesus did promise that this keeping would be proof of his care for his sheep (John 10:27-28). Let us analyse this point in more detail. The first part of the verse, “We know that no one who is born of God sins” literally reads in the original text, “no one who has been born of God” and refers to an event of the past with present consequences (this is in the *perfect tense* in the Greek text). It clearly refers to the new birth every Christian has experienced. The new birth, having begun at a point in the past, has ongoing consequences for the believer — he/she does not habitually practise sinning. This phrase is used of the Christian six times previously in John’s letter, and on each of these six occasions John uses the Greek perfect tense. However, here in the second part of 1 John 5:18 we come to a unique turn of phrase. This second part of the verse correctly reads “but he who was born of God keeps him.” (This time John changes his tenses and uses what is called the *aorist tense*.) This is a reference to a once and for all and never to be repeated event of the past, that is, the supernatural begetting of Jesus Christ himself. He was brought into existence at a defined moment of past history. John states that Jesus “was begotten of God.”

What is the significance of this for our present discussion? Quite simply, to show that John is consistent with Matthew and Luke in maintaining that Jesus’ existence began from the moment of his conception. Jesus was begotten by a divine creation. Instead of being born, like other men, of sexual intercourse, of fleshly craving, or of a husband’s will, Christ was begotten by God. This is consistent with our interpretation of John’s *logos* in his Gospel prologue. John does not contradict himself, saying in one place that

⁶⁶ Edwards, *The Virgin Birth in History and Faith*, p. 129.

Jesus was the eternal Son of God with no beginning, and then in another place forget what he wrote and say that Jesus Christ began at a definite point in history.

The World Was Made Through Him

Perhaps I can hear you objecting at this point: Surely verses 10 and 11 of this prologue seem to cause a great problem for this interpretation? These verses read: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him.”

Does not this imply that the world was made by Jesus the Son? If he made the world he had to be alive before the world began. Does it not show that the *logos* was in fact a preexisting Person after all? We must remember what John has already written, i.e. his (Hebrew) context. We must not let our Western eyes start reading other ideas into the text. The *logos*, God’s master plan, His wisdom is behind the creation of all things. Perhaps John had this OT verse from Proverbs 3:19 in mind: “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens.”

Nothing exists that was not in His mind from the very beginning. Through His word, His “understanding” all things have come into being (John 1:3). What an amazing and comforting thought to know this universe is founded upon a purpose and a wisdom that is grounded in the very Being of our Eternal God! Just as all of creation evidences an Intelligent Mind and design, so too all of history is not haphazard. And what is the purpose of history? According to John it is Jesus Christ. God made the world with him in the centre of his mind and plan. Jesus is as one commentator puts it the “diameter” of the ages.⁶⁷ Let’s explore this thought briefly before answering the question from John 1:10-11 as to whether Jesus was personally existing before the creation of the world, and so was its Creator.

Where is our world heading? What is the purpose of history? Indeed is there any pre-determined end? The Scripture rings out loud and clear, yes! God has “made known to us the mystery of His will...which He purposed in him” namely, “the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth” (Eph. 1:9-10). So when God the Father brought the universe into

⁶⁷ Graeser et al, *One God and One Lord*, p. 63.

being He did it with His Son at the centre of His plan. God has purposed the drawing together, the summing up of all creation in Christ. He is the Lord of the ages. One day the goal will be accomplished. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11).

And then comes the end [Greek *telos*: goal, consummation, closing act], when he [Jesus Christ] delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when he has abolished all rule and all authority and power...and when all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself also will be subjected to [the Father], so that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:24, 28).

To be a Christian means you know that our Lord Jesus is the diameter, the purpose of the universe. His Kingdom is coming! This is God’s purpose and it will not be frustrated. Another verse saying the same thing is Hebrews 1:2. It says God has “appointed” His Son to be the “heir of all things” and that it was “through him that He made the world(s).” Here our translations are unfortunately not quite accurate and miss the author’s impact. What the author wrote was not that through Jesus God made the “world(s),” but “ages.” We get our English word *eon* from this Greek word. We will shortly examine this in more detail, but it is sufficient for now to know that God planned to complete His purpose for all creation *through the agency* of His Son Jesus. The preposition that is used in relation to Jesus and the world, or the ages, is “through” (Greek *dia* from which you will see comes our English word *diameter*). Those in the know tell us that *dia* is the “preposition of attendant circumstances” and signifies instrumental agency. Put simply, this means that *dia* denotes the means by which an action is accomplished. And Scripture tells us that God the originator is bringing His purpose, His *logos* to fulfilment through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Agent, the Mediator of God’s master plan. Jesus is always seen as secondary, or subordinate to the Father.

So we see in his introduction to Hebrews the author says God now speaks through Jesus (Heb. 1:1). God redeems through Jesus and He saves the world through Jesus (Heb. 1:3). This was Jesus’ own clear testimony throughout (e.g. John 5:19-27). Jesus is the channel through whom God comes to us. Jesus is the bridge between God and us.

There are occasional exceptions to this general use of the preposition *dia*. Sometimes blessings are said to come to us through God (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:9; Heb. 2:10). But usually there is a clear distinction made between God's initiating activity and the means through which God brings that activity to pass. The prepositions used of God's action are *hypo* and *ek* which point to primary causation or origin. Let's cement this idea in our minds by looking at one or two verses that highlight the difference: "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from [*ek*, 'out from'] whom are all things, and we exist for [*eis*, 'to'] Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through [*dia*] whom are all things, and we exist through [*dia*] him" (1 Cor. 8:6).

Prepositions are the signposts that point out the direction of a passage. The authors of *One God and One Lord* caution us to:

Notice the distinct and separate use of the Greek prepositions *ek* in relation to God and *dia* in relation to Christ. This should arrest our attention and keep us from speeding past these important signs on our way to a preconceived idea (and maybe getting a ticket for violating the laws of logic). *Ek* indicates something *coming out from* its source or origin, and indicates *motion from the interior*. Remember this last phrase, because it is central to understanding the precision of this verse. In other words, *all things came out from* the loving heart of God, or God's "interior," so to speak. This agrees with Genesis 1:1 which says, "In the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth." Both verses say that *the source* of "all things" is the one true God, the Creator of the heavens and earth and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶⁸

In contradistinction to this "one God and Father" out of Whom all things originate, the "one Lord, Jesus Messiah" is given the preposition *dia* which means "through." In other words, Jesus is God's agent *through* whom God accomplishes His plan for our lives. This is the consistent pattern all the way through the New Testament. God the Father is the source, the origin of all blessings, and Jesus His Son brings those blessings of salvation to us:

"Now all these things are **from** God, who reconciled us to Himself **through** Christ" (2 Cor. 5:18).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

“God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...has blessed us...in Christ. He predestined us to adoption as sons **through** Jesus Christ **to Himself**” (Eph. 1:3-5).

“For **God** has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation **through** our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9).

“**God** will judge the secrets of men **through** Christ Jesus” (Rom. 2:16).

“For **God**...has saved us, and called us...according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us **in** Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tim. 1:9).

“Blessed be **God the Father** of our Lord Jesus Christ, who **has caused** us to be born again to a living hope **through** the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3).

“**To the only God** our Saviour, **through** Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 25).

“Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by **God** with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed **through** him in your midst” (Acts 2:22).

Texts could be multiplied. Always God the Father is the source and origin of all works, deeds and salvation which come to us through the mediatorship of His Son. *From* Him comes all to us *through* our Lord Jesus Christ so that *to* God the Father may all the praise be directed. Kuschel also observes the critical function these prepositions perform in the NT's understanding of the essential distinction between the one God — the Father — and the one Lord — Jesus the Messiah. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 8:6 where Paul says that for us Christians “there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Messiah, through whom are all things, and we exist through him,” he says:

God, the Father, is past *and* future, beginning *and* end, origin *and* goal, creator (*ek*) and fulfiller (*eis*) of the world and human beings. By contrast, Christ is the present, the centre, life; he is the ruler over the earth who brings liberation in the present, and who as mediator (*dia*) of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), of a “new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6), can also be the Lord of all those “gods and lords” who rule in the present. Accordingly, the theological *ta panta* [“all things”] might refer to the very first creation of the world;

by contrast, the Christological *ta panta* refers (as is usual in Paul) to the prevailing circumstances in the present.⁶⁹

Armed with this vital information we can turn to our original question under this heading. When we read in John 1:10 that “he was in the world, and the world was made **through** him, and the world did not know him” does Scripture indicate that after all Jesus himself created the world? Not at all if we consider the whole uniform context we have been considering. The Father is the sole origin and Creator of “all things.” In contrast, Jesus is the Father’s commissioned Lord Messiah through whom God’s plan for the world is coming to completion. The whole Bible from cover to cover categorically states that God created the universe and all the ages with Jesus Christ at the centre of His eternal purpose. Jesus is the *diameter* running all the way through. And the tragedy that this verse highlights is that although Jesus the promised Messiah came to the Jews who knew God’s intention, they did not recognize him when he appeared. The Jews longed for, prayed for, yearned for the One who would come according to God’s promise and usher in this glorious hope for the world, but they were blinded by their man-made religious traditions. The Jews who craved for the promised Kingdom of God and the promised Lord Messiah who would finally unite all the world’s history under God, missed it. “The world was made **through** him,” i.e. with Christ in mind. Everything will be gathered up, summed up in him, yet even to this day our world does not see this nor know the One who in God’s purpose will bring the goal of creation to pass at his Second Coming.

It is this message which the apostles preached with such telling effect. Take Acts 2:23 for instance: “This man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death.”

What God determined by His will from before time began has come to historical actuality in Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth is the one who from the beginning had been pre-ordained for this role.

At the same time this may not be understood as an affirmation of Christ as himself preexistent. It is the divine *purpose* for Christ which “existed” from the beginning, not the one in whom it should be fulfilled; just as Paul can speak of the divine purpose similarly determined for those

⁶⁹ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 290.

who believe in Christ (Rom. 8:28-30). No thought of the personal preexistence of either Christ or believers is involved.⁷⁰

Did Jesus Exist Before John the Baptist?

As we continue through John's introduction, we come across another statement often used to justify faith in the eternal Son of God. John the Baptist testifies in verse 15, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for he existed before me'" (John 1:15). Here — according to many of our translations — we plainly read that Jesus existed before John the Baptist. And we know that John the Baptist was conceived six months before the angel Gabriel told Mary she would have a miraculous conception by God's Holy Spirit. Since John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus and yet his inspired word — according to some English renditions — is that Jesus existed before he did, surely the Baptist believed that Jesus preexisted his own birth because he was the second member of the Godhead?

What is the answer to this? Can the Son of God, who is the individual Jesus, be both older and younger than his cousin John the Baptist? Once again it is an issue of translation. The Greek may equally read — and is so translated in some English versions such as the Revised Version, Rotherham and the Geneva Bible — "because he is first [Greek *protos*] in regard of me," (RV), meaning, "he is better than me," my superior, my chief. Jesus' superiority over John the Baptist lies in the fact that he is the long-promised Messiah, and is destined to rule the world when God inaugurates his Kingdom. The Greek is ambiguous and "first" may refer to either rank or time. Just a little later in verse 30 the Baptist again states: "This is he on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who has a higher rank than I, for he...'"

Same difficulty. "For he existed before me" or "for he is before me in rank"? The Greek of this verse is the same as verse 15, so does not need to be translated differently. It is my conviction that the sense is, "he has gone ahead of me because he is my superior." Some might feel we cannot be dogmatic on this point, so let's examine more evidence.

⁷⁰ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 235.

Jewish “Ideal” Preexistence

In the English language, and certainly the way young people speak in Australia, we often speak about something that happened in the past as though it is happening in the present. For instance, a witness to a bank robbery may say, “And here I am standing in the queue minding my own business, when bursting through the door comes this hooded bank robber. He tells us all to get on the floor. He waves his gun around and threatens us. Then he goes up to the teller and yells, ‘Give me the money!’” We understand the events described occurred in the past, even though the narrative is in the present. Speaking of past events in the present is a peculiarity of the English language.

Most languages have peculiarities. The Hebrew mind and language has a peculiarity that English speakers are not accustomed to. They do the opposite of what I have just described. They often use the past tense or the present tense to speak of events yet future. The reason is that the Jews believed that whatever was determined in the mind of God existed before it came to be in history. God is the God who calls the things which do not exist as (already) existing (Rom. 4:17). God promised Abraham that He would give him the promised land and that he would be the father of many descendants: “Go...to the land that I will show you; and I will make you a great nation” (Gen. 12:1-2). God repeated this promise to Abraham a number of times: “Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever” (Gen. 13:14-15). Now here is an amazing thing. So sure is the fulfilment that sometimes this predictive language is in the past tense, as though it were already accomplished: “To your descendants I **have given** this land” (Gen. 15:18). It came to be a common feature of Hebrew thinking that whatever God had decreed already preexisted (in plan and purpose) before it materialised on earth. “When the Jew wished to designate something as predestined, *he spoke of it as already existing in heaven.*”⁷¹

In the verse alluded to above, where God “calls the things which do not [yet] exist as [already] existing” the context refers to Isaac

⁷¹ E.G. Selwyn, *First Epistle of St. Peter*, Baker Book House, 1983, p. 124, emphasis added.

who was “*real in the thought and purpose of God before he was begotten.*”⁷² Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ “was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times” for our sakes who believe in God’s word (1 Pet. 1:20). This does not mean that Jesus personally preexisted his appearance on earth, because in the same chapter we find that Christians have also been in the “foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Pet. 1:2). The words “foreknowledge” and “foreknown,” noun and verb, are exactly alike. Peter uses precisely the same idea to refer to both Christians and Jesus. Christians do not preexist in heaven before our birth on earth. Nor did Jesus. “It is the divine purpose for Christ which ‘existed’ from the beginning, not the one in whom it should be fulfilled; just as Paul can speak of the divine purpose similarly predetermined for those who believe in Christ (Rom. 8:28-30).”⁷³

Similarly, the Bible speaks of Jesus as the Lamb of God who was crucified before the world began (see Rev. 13:8). Every Bible reader of course knows that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate in Palestine in the first century. But God ordained his crucifixion to happen before He even created the universe. Therefore, in God’s mind, and in Hebrew understanding, that which came to be had already been. The prophetic future was spoken of in the past tense. We may call this the “prophetic past tense.” What God has decreed, He says is as good as done.

One day the Lord Jesus at his Second Coming will say to his own people, “Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). In Paul’s language this hope is “laid up for you in heaven” which means it is in God’s promise and plan and is certain of fulfilment (Col. 1:5). This hope is so certain that Paul can even speak of Christians as *already* glorified (Rom. 8:29-30, noting the past tenses). Indeed, this plan hatched in God’s mind “according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tim. 1:9). “The gift was *purposed* ‘ages ago,’ unless we are to take it that the actual giving and receiving, ‘us’ and ‘Christ Jesus’ were all alike preexistent.”⁷⁴ This hope of Christians

⁷² Everett F. Harrison, *Romans, Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 1976, p. 52, emphasis added.

⁷³ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 235.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

entering into the life of the Age to Come was “promised long ages ago” (Titus 1:2):

Here it is even clearer that what is thought of as happening “ages ago” is God’s promise; and it is that promise of eternal life which has been manifested. Indeed, the text says it is his word that he has manifested — that is, not Christ the Logos, but the word of promise, fulfilled in Christ and offered now in the *kerygma* [message]. In other words, we are back where we started — Christ as the content of the word of preaching, the embodiment of the predetermined plan of salvation, the fulfilment of the divine purpose.⁷⁵

A classic example of this way of thinking is the tabernacle that Moses built in the wilderness. Moses was instructed to build it according to a “pattern” that God showed him on the mount (Num. 8:4). Then Moses was told to ordain priests according to God’s clear directions. The high priest too was to follow this blueprint from God. The NT says that these servants and this tabernacle serve as “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5). And the fact that Jesus has now taken his seat at the right hand of God in the heavens as our High Priest, proves that he is serving on our behalf “in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man” (Heb. 8:2). The idea is that the institutions God revealed to Moses were mere copies of the real and true ones that existed long before in heaven. That is to say, they existed in heaven because they existed in the mind and planning of God before God revealed them on earth.

In fact, the Jews applied this thinking to many of their great national treasures. They developed:

the idea of a Jerusalem, divine, preexistent, prepared by God in the heavenly places, there from all time, and prepared some day to come down among men. The old house is folded up and taken away, and a wonderful new house which the Lord has built comes and takes its place (1Enoch 90:28, 29). The preexistent Jerusalem was shown to Adam before he sinned.⁷⁶

And in the same Jewish vein John speaks of the new Jerusalem, the holy city, “coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:10).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁷⁶ William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, Amsterdam: SCM Press, 1962, p. 136.

What John conveys is not that there is a literal city already built somewhere up in heaven that will be transplanted from outer space (no more than Jesus had been crucified in heaven before he died on earth). Rather, in good Jewish tradition, John is saying that there will be a renewed city of Jerusalem on earth when Messiah returns. This will indeed “materialize” and it is certain of accomplishment because God has promised it. God’s plan is so absolutely sure, and cannot be thwarted by anything man might do, that John can “see” it already coming down. The city preexists in an “ideal” state, that is, in God’s promise, but not yet in time-space actuality.

Thus, if we apply all of this to John the Baptist’s statements, “He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for he existed before me” (John 1:15), and “After me comes a man who has a higher rank than I, for he existed before me” (John 1:30), we will see him meaning, not that Jesus is a preexistent heavenly being, “but as the one who fulfilled God’s predetermined plan of salvation, as the one predetermined by God to be the means of man’s salvation through his death and resurrection.”⁷⁷ John the Baptist was only the forerunner, preparing the way for Jesus the Christ. The Baptist’s role was to point men to “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus, therefore, has greater rank than John, and in this sense was “before” John. Given the two possibilities of translating the Greek here, we must prefer that nuance of meaning that best fits the Jewish context of John the Baptist, that best dovetails with the wider context of Scripture, and so suggest the better translation: “He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for he was above me in God’s plan [to save the world].” Jesus did not personally preexist John the Baptist, nor did he consciously exist in heaven before he appeared in history on earth. He existed “ideally” in God’s decree and purpose so sure. It is the preexistence “more of an idea and purpose in the mind of God than of a personal divine being.”⁷⁸ The Messiah:

is present in the mind of God and chosen before the creation, and from time to time revealed to the righteous for their consolation; but he is neither divine nor actually preexistent. He is named and hidden from the beginning in the secret thoughts of God, finally to be revealed in the Last

⁷⁷ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 178.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Times as the ideal Man who will justify God's creation of the world.⁷⁹

The Son of Man Already in Heaven Before

This line of thought naturally takes us to two other difficult expressions spoken by Jesus himself in the Gospel of John: "And no one has ascended into heaven, but he who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man" (John 3:13). And "What then if you should behold the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" (John 6:62).

If we read these statements with our traditional (Greek) glasses on, we will again run into difficulty, thinking Jesus said he lived with the Father in heaven before transferring his existence into the womb of Mary on earth. In order to understand what Jesus is saying, we must again look at its "Jewishness." It is significant that Jesus here calls himself "the Son of Man." This title occurs about 82 times in the NT and with two exceptions all occurrences are in the Gospels. And in all but the two exceptions (Acts 7:56 and Rev. 1:13) this title comes from the lips of Jesus himself. We understand then that it held a dear place in his heart. We are under an obligation to discover why Jesus delighted to call himself "the Son of Man." The OT supplies the background, and when we examine this we can see that Jesus did not just invent the title out of thin air.

In the OT "son of man" simply means a human being and often appears as strictly parallel to the word "man" (see Num. 23:19; Is. 56:2; Jer. 49:18; Ps. 8:4; Ps. 146:3, etc.). In Ezekiel there is a slightly more specialized use of the phrase "son of man." Here it occurs more than 90 times, and always as an address by God to Ezekiel. "Son of man," says God to Ezekiel, "stand on your feet and I will speak with you" (2:1). "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel" (3:1). "Then He said to me, 'Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak My words to them'" (3:4). In Ezekiel the title points to Ezekiel's humanity, with all its attendant ignorance, frailty and mortality, in contrast with the glory and strength and knowledge of God.

Some commentators have latched onto this usage and have suggested that when Jesus called himself "the son of man" he was speaking in terms of the human part of his nature, and that when he

⁷⁹ Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, p. 256.

used the term “son of God” he was speaking in terms of the divine side of his nature. This cannot be for two obvious reasons. First, it is in fact when he uses the term “son of man” that Jesus makes many of his greatest and most divine statements and claims. Second, to partition Jesus’ life into times when he spoke humanly as Son of Man and divinely as Son of God is to leave him a split personality.

Other commentators suggest the title means Jesus was thinking of himself as the Representative Man, the Man in whom humanity finds its peak and its example. William Barclay quotes F.W. Robertson: “There was in Jesus no national peculiarity or individual idiosyncrasy. He was not the son of the Jew, or the son of the carpenter; not the offspring of the mode of living and thinking of that particular century. He was the Son of Man.” William Barclay debunks this immediately by saying:

this theory falls on two grounds. First, it is too abstract to have emerged at all in the world of New Testament thought. It is a violence to just rip Jesus out of his cultural context. Second, once again we have to note that it was precisely in terms of Son of Man that Jesus made many of his most superhuman claims and statements.⁸⁰

A third group of commentators suggest that the title Son of Man is used by Jesus to deliberately contrast himself with the national visions the Jews had of a Messiah who was a supernatural figure of power and apocalyptic wonder-worker. This picture of the identity of the Son of Man as the divine agent through whom God would establish His worldwide government of righteousness and peace is drawn from Daniel 7:

I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming, and he came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and his kingdom is one which will not be destroyed (v. 13-14).

Some suggest that when Jesus called himself Son of Man he was pointing to himself as a humble, unpretentious human with no aspirations for such a prophesied greatness as Daniel saw. He was

⁸⁰ Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, p. 70.

not claiming, they contend, to be this heavenly warrior-king, for whom the nation of Israel hoped and prayed. Again William Barclay explodes this line of thought when he says:

The one fact which makes that suggestion impossible is that it appears that in fact Son of Man was a Messianic title, and a title involved in one of the most superhuman pictures of the Messiah in all Jewish thought. If the title Son of Man had any contemporary Messianic meaning at all, it was the precise opposite of a simple, humble, human figure.⁸¹

There is no doubt that the ultimate origin of the title Son of Man is in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 7 the seer has a vision of the great empires which up until then had held sway over the Mediterranean world. He sees these empires under the symbolism of beasts; they are so callous, so cruel, so bestial that they cannot be typified in any other way. There was the lion with eagles' wings; there was the bear with three ribs in its mouth; there was the leopard with four wings and four heads; there was the fourth nameless beast with iron teeth, dreadful, terrible, irresistibly strong. These stood for the empires which up to that time had held sway, all of them of such savagery that beasts were the only picture of them. But their days were ended and their power was broken. Then the world power is given by God into the hands of a power which is not bestial and savage but gentle and humane and can be typified and symbolised in the figure of a man. Daniel predicts that the saints, God's people of both the Old and New Testaments, will possess the Kingdom. This is to say that at last the dream of Israel will be realized. That nation has gone through unspeakable things. They have been brutally treated. But the long-awaited Messianic age will dawn. And, naturally according to Daniel's vision, there grew in Israel's national consciousness the hope that this New Age would be brought into being by their national hero, the Messiah, the Son of Man. The title Son of Man becomes a title for the Messiah.

Jesus took this title for himself. When he called himself the Son of Man he was saying "I, myself." Compare his question "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13) with the parallel in Mark 8, "Who do men say that I am?" (v. 27). A look at the contexts will show that Jesus used this title to make some of his greatest claims and declarations. The Son of Man is the saviour of

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

the world (Luke 19:10). The Son of Man will rise from the dead (Matt. 17:9). The Son of Man will inherit the glory of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 19:28) and will come to earth and raise the dead for judgment (Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 17:26, 30). The Son of Man will come to earth with all the power of the angels of God (Matt. 13:41; 16:27-28).

However, there was an amazing twist to the plot that both the disciples and his listeners could not at that stage grasp. It was the fact that the Son of Man would suffer and be shamefully treated by the leaders of Israel and by the cruel Gentiles. The Son of Man would die. He used the title in this connection of humiliation and suffering more than any other connection (Matt. 17:12, 22; Mark 8:31; 10:33; 14:21, 41; Luke 9:44; 18:31; 22:22, etc.). It was after Jesus revealed this twist of a suffering Son of Man that Peter rebuked Jesus, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Matt. 16:22). For Peter and his fellow disciples the whole Jewish consciousness of the majestic, divine glory of the Son of Man had nothing to do with rejection and humiliation and *crucifixion as a common criminal*. This was an impossible contradiction of terms. Statements like this left Jesus' followers bewildered. But from the beginning he knew he faced a double destiny. He was indeed the Son of Man, the Messiah destined for ultimate triumph over all God's enemies. But he was also the Suffering Servant, who must get to the glory by way of the cross. Jesus therefore "took this title Son of Man and re-minted it...The Son of Man is the title which contains within itself the shame and the glory of Jesus Christ."⁸²

With this brief background we are now in a position to interpret John's puzzling statements that "no one has ascended into heaven, but he who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man," and "What then if you should behold the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" (John 3:13; 6:62). It is clear Jesus did not use the title Son of Man in a vacuum. His whole life was based on what was written in the OT Scriptures, that is, prophecy. "The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of him" (Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:22). "And yet how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?" (Mark 9:12).

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

How then can Jesus have said that the Son “has ascended to heaven”? Simply because this is what had been forecast about him in Daniel. Following a well-established principle of Hebrew thinking, God’s acts may be said to have happened already, once they are fixed in the divine counsels. The unexpected past tense “has ascended” may be explained as a past tense of determination in the divine plan. Thus “No one [as it is written in the book of Daniel] is destined to ascend to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who [in Daniel’s vision of the future] is in heaven.” The final phrase “who is in heaven” (omitted from some versions) is well-attested and may well be original; its omission from some manuscripts was due to the difficulty of understanding how Jesus could say he was in heaven during his ministry on earth. The difficulty disappears when the special reference to Daniel’s prophecy is taken into account. The Son of Man is identified with the figure who in the book of Daniel is seen in heaven. He is there not because he is actually alive prior to his birth, but because God has granted a vision of his future destiny. At the time of speaking, Jesus had not yet ascended to heaven; but the ascension is so certainly prophesied by Daniel that Jesus can say he has ascended, i.e., he is destined to do so.⁸³

When Jesus asks, “What then if you should behold the Son of Man ascending where he was before?” we believe he is seen in Daniel’s heavenly vision of the Messiah in future glory. This is the glory that Messiah, destined to rise from the dead and sit at God’s right hand of power, will have. Jesus is grasping by faith God’s picture of his ascension glory, in what was written. A further consideration that proves these verses do not support the doctrine that Christ is the “eternal Son of God” in heaven before his birth is that the “Son of Man” is a *human person* who preexists (in God’s decree in vision form) in heaven. Even Trinitarians do not claim that the Son of Man, the human Jesus, existed prior to his conception. Thus we establish again the very Hebrew understanding and background to these sayings of Jesus, namely, that God calls those things which do not yet exist as though they do. Like Father, like Son!

⁸³ Buzzard and Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, pp. 198-199.

John 6:62

In particular reference to Jesus' question in John 6:62, "What then if you should behold the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" the relevant discussion begins back in verse 22. After Jesus miraculously feeds the multitude they ask him for a sign that they might believe he truly is God's Messiah. Jesus berates the multitude for seeking him from purely temporal motivation. He admonishes the crowd to rather seek the food which endures to eternal life. This bread that "endures to eternal life" comes through the one upon whom the Father has "set His seal" (v. 27). The crowd wonders how they may do the works that please God, and Jesus tells them they must believe "in him whom He [the Father] has sent" (that is, commissioned) (v. 29). To be "sent" is to have God's "seal." From this point on, the issue at hand is whether Jesus fits this requirement: Is he the one "sent" from God? He demonstrates that he does "fit the bill," so to speak, because just like the manna God sent "out of heaven" Jesus also has "come down from heaven" (v. 38).

Is Jesus referring to the common belief that he personally preexisted in heaven before his birth as a man in Bethlehem? Or is there a better contextual explanation?

It is noteworthy how many times in the following verses the interchangeable phrases "out of heaven," "from heaven," "of God," "from God," "from the Father," and "sent" occur. Both the manna in the OT and Jesus are "from heaven" or "from God." So what did Jesus mean by this expression?

We are not left to conjecture because this is classic Hebrew phraseology/imagery. This expression "from heaven" is quite common in Hebrew idiom. John's baptism is also said to be "from heaven" (Lk. 20:4). Our resurrection bodies are said to be "from heaven" (2 Cor. 5:2). Every good and every perfect gift is said to "come down from heaven" (Mal. 3:10; James 1:17; 3:17). All of which is to say that whatever is "from heaven" is given and wrought by God and by His authority. Neither the manna, the gifts and blessings, John's ministry, nor our resurrection bodies literally preexisted in heaven before coming down to earth. Exist in God's purpose they did/do. Exist in God's plan, yes. Exist in His promises, certainly. But not literally in eternity past before materializing on earth in history.

Now, in the same vein, when Jesus says he has come down "from heaven" he surely intends that his person and his ministry are

commissioned by God, sanctioned by the Father, and are the LORD's miraculous provision for hungry men. Personal preexistence is not the topic. The issue under discussion is whether Jesus is the authorized agent (Son) of his Father or not; is he an imposter or really from God? Is God's seal upon him? What sign will he give to prove his credentials?

In this context Jesus states the ultimate sign that he is "from God" or "from heaven" is that he will at the last day "raise up" all who "eat and drink" of him. The resurrection will prove his credentials, so to speak. Again and again in this very passage Jesus mentions the resurrection from the dead as the great sign:

And this is the will of Him that sent me, that of all that He has given me I lose nothing, but **raise him up on the last day**. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in him, may have eternal life; and I myself will **raise him up on the last day**...No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will **raise him up on the last day**...He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life; and I will **raise him up on the last day**...As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me, he also shall live because of me. This is the bread which came down out of heaven, not as the fathers ate, and died, he who eats this bread shall live forever (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54, 58).

With this context of the resurrection of the last day for all who have believed in Jesus the Son of God in mind, we come to the critical verse 62: "What then if you should behold the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" Most modern-day readers take this to mean that Jesus is saying he will ascend back up to heaven to enjoy the kind of preexistent glory he had with God the Father before his Incarnation. In view of the entire context of resurrection from the grave this appears an out-of-context, indeed foreign idea that Jesus is not addressing.

The word in verse 62, "ascending" in the Greek simply means "going up."⁸⁴ Given the previous context of resurrection from the dead, and the whole Hebrew understanding we have been considering, Jesus may simply be asking if they would be offended

⁸⁴ The word for "go up" is found in Matt. 5:1; 14:23; 3:16; 13:7; Mark 1:10; 4:7, 8, 32; Luke 19:4, etc.

if they saw him “come up” (from death out of the ground), that is, be resurrected, and be where he was before, which is to say, alive again on the earth. Jesus may possibly be announcing that his own resurrection from the dead would be proof that he is indeed “from God.”

To some interpreters this may be stretching the import since Jesus’ resurrection is not termed an ascension. Fair enough. But I am not so sure that the context of resurrection throughout this chapter as already highlighted disqualifies this nuance out of hand.

There is one other piece of relevant information here that proves Jesus was not speaking of his personal preexistence before Bethlehem. In verse 51 Jesus defines the bread which came down from heaven as “my flesh.” *It is his flesh that preexists in heaven!* This tells us that it is the human Jesus, the son of man, who preexists. Furthermore, note that Jesus states they will “behold the **Son of Man** ascending where he was before.” The “Son of Man” is a *human being* and even Trinitarians do not claim that the Son of Man, the human Jesus, the man of flesh and blood existed prior to his conception! Thus, to claim that John chapter 6 shows Jesus personally existing in heaven prior to his coming to earth proves too much for the Trinitarian position. It is much better to stick with the explanation already given, namely that Jesus’ preexistence was “ideal.”

The bottom line according to context seems clear: Jesus is *not* announcing that he has come down from a conscious personal existence in heaven prior to his own human coming. Nor is he saying he will re-take any pre-incarnate or pre-human glory when he “ascends” again. He firmly believes in the prophetic word that “the Son of Man” will rise from the dead and sit in the promised glory of the future Messianic Age, just as the prophetic word has foretold.

The Glory Jesus Had with the Father Before the World Was

In John 17 Jesus prays just before his arrest in the garden, “I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given me to do. And now, glorify me together with Yourself, Father, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (v. 4-5)

If ever there was a statement that proved the personal preexistence of Jesus with the Father in heaven before he came to earth, surely this is it. Once again, we must caution against haste,

for “In biblical ways of speaking and thinking one may ‘have’ something which is promised in God’s plan before one actually has it.”⁸⁵ We have already seen this principle in operation, where God’s plan and promises are spoken in the “prophetic past tense.” God promised Abraham, “I **have given** you this land.” God says to Christians, “You **are** seated with Christ in the heavenlies; you are **already** glorified” (Eph. 2:6; Rom. 8:30). We have these things already in the plan and purpose of God — even though we do not (yet) have them! Scripture tells us that we have eternal life as a present possession, even though clearly we await the day of our entrance into the life of the Age to Come, whether by resurrection for those already dead, or the rapture of the living, when Christ returns. God calls the things that are not as though they already exist (Rom. 4:17). Clearly, in Hebrew thinking, the glory which Jesus had *with* God before the world was, is the glory that was present in God’s mind and purpose from the beginning. (Please refer again to the earlier section under the heading **John Chapter One** to see how common this is in Hebrew usage.)

When we examine the rest of Jesus’ prayer, it becomes quite clear that the glory Jesus claims to have had “with the Father before the world was” is a *glory in prospect*. Jesus is using the peculiar Hebrew way of thinking and speaking by which the past tense is employed to speak of the future. To confirm this all we need to do is follow Jesus’ prayer through. Jesus speaks as though he has already accomplished his work: he says I have “accomplished the work which You gave me to do” (v. 4). Quite obviously he has not actually finished the work because his crucifixion has not yet happened, and his cry from the cross, “It is finished,” has not yet been uttered. Next, Jesus speaks as though the disciples have *already* fully glorified him (through their preaching ministry) even though the resurrection has not yet happened: he prays, “I have been glorified in them” (v. 10). Jesus also says “I am no more in the world” (v. 11) even though he clearly is still in the world. In his own mind, he is already, by faith in his Father’s promise, sitting in heaven having been resurrected. Jesus says he has already sent the disciples into the world to preach: he prays, “I have sent them into the world” (v. 18), even though this did not fully happen until after the resurrection. Jesus prays for his disciples, and “for those also

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

who [will] believe in me through their word” (v. 20). That is, he prays for subsequent generations of Christians who will come to faith in Christ down the track. He prays that “the glory which You have given me I **have given** to them” (v. 22). He prays that all these believers “which You **have given** me” (the whole future community of faith) “may behold my glory, which You have given me; for You did love [choose] me before the foundation of the world” (v. 24). *The very same glory promised to Jesus has already been given to generations of believers not yet born!* The glory that the Father gave to Jesus in promise before the world began *has already been given* to those who will *in the future* trust in his Name. The promise of God is equal to the possession. Just as Jesus had promised his persecuted disciples that “your reward in heaven is great” (Matt. 5:12), even though they had not yet received it, so Jesus in the shadow of his cross was laying hold of the promise of God for himself. God had promised Jesus that after his suffering the glory would come. Knowing that he would be raised again, Jesus “endured the cross, despising the shame” for he would soon sit “down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 12:2). This glory that his Father had promised to him from before the world began, Jesus now prays to the Father to make good.

The use of the past tense in John 17 needs to be examined carefully. There are clear indications in this chapter that past tenses may indeed describe not what has actually happened but what is *destined to happen*, because God has already decreed it...Clearly, divinely planned future events may be described in the past tense.⁸⁶

The great Bible commentator Henry Alford notes that “our Lord stands by anticipation at the end of his accomplished course and looks back on it as past.”⁸⁷ In other words, throughout this prayer, Jesus is employing classic Hebrew thought. God’s predetermined plan is as good as already completed.

It really is quite incredible how deeply entrenched the notion is that Jesus Christ consciously lived in heaven before coming to earth. Some English translations have been quite biased here and add to this deep-seated misconception. Take for instance the following

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 294-295.

⁸⁷ Henry Alford, *Greek New Testament*, London: Rivingtons and Deighton, Bell & Co., 1861, p. 823, quoted in *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 205.

verses (quoted from the New International Version): “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God...” (John 13:3). The only problem is, the Greek text does not say that Jesus was *returning* to God. It simply reads that Jesus was *going to* God. The word “returning” has been substituted by the translators for no textual reason at all.

The same unfortunate impression is found in John 16: “I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going *back* to the Father” (v. 28). Here again we encounter the same problem: the word “back” does not appear in the Greek text at all. What Jesus really said is this: “I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.” In John 20:17 Jesus did not say, “I have not yet returned to the Father,” as the NIV reports. Once again we see the bias of preconceived ideas about the origin of Christ.

When Jesus says that he “came forth from the Father” we must not read into this that he meant he was alive with God before coming to earth. It was quite common for the Jews to say that something came forth “from God” or “from heaven” if God was its source. Thus, John the Baptist was a man “sent from God” (John 1:6). When God told Israel that He would bless them He promised to “open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing” (Mal. 3:10). This is plainly a figure of speech. Nobody expected God to literally pour out things from heaven. It simply means that God was the source of every blessing they would receive. Similarly, we are told that every good and perfect gift is “from above” and “comes down from the Father” (James 1:17). One of the clearest examples of this typical Jewish manner of speaking occurs when Jesus was challenged by his opponents, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (Matt. 21:23). Jesus cleverly answers this interrogation by asking them a question: “The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?” (v. 25). “This verse makes the idiom clear: things could be ‘from heaven,’ i.e., from God, or they could be ‘from men.’ The idiom is the same when used of Jesus. Jesus is ‘from God,’ ‘from heaven’ or ‘from above’ in the sense that God is literally his heavenly Father and thus his origin.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Graeser et al, *One God and One Lord*, p. 190.

“The Only Begotten God”?

As we continue through John’s introduction to his Gospel we come across verse 18. It is a verse that has also generated a lot of discussion, because there has been a dispute as to what John originally wrote. Did he write as some of our translations have it, “No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten **Son**, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained Him”? Or did he write “the only begotten **God**, who is in the bosom of the Father...”?

One of the best contemporary textual critics, Bart D. Ehrman, discusses this in his important book *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. Ehrman is able to show convincing reasons why the reading “the only begotten God” represents a corruption of what John wrote. (For those interested, this variant text is found only in the Alexandrian tradition, and has not fared well in virtually every other representative of every other textual grouping, whether Western, Caesarean, or Byzantine. And even within the Alexandrian group there is evidence for “the only begotten Son.”) Nevertheless, Ehrman argues that it is on internal grounds that the real superiority of “the only begotten Son” shines forth:

The problem, of course, is that Jesus can be the *unique* God only if there is no other God; but for the fourth Gospel, the Father is God as well. Indeed, even in this passage the *monogenes* [only begotten] is said to reside in the bosom of the Father. How can the *monogenes Theos* [only begotten God], the unique God, stand in such a relationship to (another) God?⁸⁹

Not only so, but Ehrman wonders what “the only begotten God” would have meant to its first-century audience? It would have made no sense within its Jewish-Christian context. Furthermore, Ehrman says the reading “the only begotten Son” is no doubt the genuine one, because it “coincides perfectly well with the way *monogenes* [only begotten] is used throughout the Johannine literature. In three other Johannine passages *monogenes* serves as a modifier, and on each occasion it is used with *huios* [son] (John 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9).”⁹⁰ This is a powerful point that even those who prefer the reading “the only begotten God” (because of theological bias!)

⁸⁹ Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, p. 80.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

concede. The conclusion? “There seems little reason any longer to dispute the reading found in virtually every witness outside the Alexandrian tradition. The prologue ends with the statement that ‘the unique Son who is in the bosom of the Father, that one has made him known.’”⁹¹ For Ehrman then, this variant reading, “the only begotten God” represents a corruption of the text. As already discussed earlier in this chapter, God cannot be begotten for He has no beginning. If Jesus were called God here, he is an only begotten God, and someone who is begotten is *not* God. We may be sure that Jesus is not here called the eternal God.

Is Christ “Over All, God Blessed Forever” (Romans 9:5)?

A verse frequently appealed to justify belief that Jesus Christ is God reads in most modern translations this way:

For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 9:3-5).

So translated it does sound very much as though Paul is teaching that Jesus the Christ is God because he “is over all, God blessed forever.” It is a particularly moving passage because Paul is appalled that his Jewish brothers with all the advantages of their heritage have rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Paul goes so far as to say that he would rather be accursed, cut off from all the blessings of Israel and her Messiah, if only he could convince the Jews to turn and be saved. In the midst of this emotional passage, Paul breaks out into deep praise. But praise to whom? To Christ as God? Or to God the Father of Christ? “To whom this praise is directed is one of the most disputed questions in the exegesis of Pauline Christology.”⁹² The reason for this dispute is that there are two ways of translating the Greek text, depending on where the translator places the punctuation. It may read: “they [the Israelites] have the patriarchs, and from them according to the flesh comes the Christ

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

⁹² Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 301.

who stands over all as God, he is praised for ever. Amen.” Taken this way, this is obviously an unambiguous praise of Christ as God Supreme. Alternatively, and equally legitimately, the text may be read: “And from them [the Israelites] comes Christ according to his physical origin. God, the Lord over all, be highly praised forever. Amen.” This interpretation directs the praise to the God the Father. Clearly, in light of both possibilities, we are going to have to appeal to wider considerations.

Exegetes who prefer to ascribe the praise to Christ as God (a Christological interpretation), admit this view suffers from the problem that Paul nowhere else calls Christ God. Kuschel notes that “in our analysis of the text so far we, too, have not come across a single saying in Paul which points in this direction (not even in Phil. 2:6). In Paul Jesus Christ is essentially the exalted Lord, who after his resurrection is appointed by God to his divine dignity.” Paul never loses sight of the fact that God the Father is always and ultimately the superior of Messiah (1 Cor. 15:28). In other words, Kuschel maintains that “the wider context of Pauline theology already makes a theological rather than a Christological interpretation of Rom. 9:5 more probable.”⁹³

But what of the more immediate context here in Romans 9? I believe it is this closer context that proves decisive in which way we are going to lean. In a passage where Paul is justifying his Christian position against the majority of Jews who reject Jesus as Messiah, it would seem odd to be saying that Jesus is Jehovah God. This would be like waving the proverbial red flag to a bull. Frankly, it would be a tactic that would not work, given the culture and context in which Paul operated. To appeal to Christ as God in a passage where Israel is the focal point is anomalous. As Dunn notes, “a doxology to Christ as god at this stage would be even more unusual within the context of Paul’s thought than an unexpected twist in grammatical construction. Even if Paul does bless Christ as ‘god’ here, the meaning of ‘god’ remains uncertain” (particularly in view of our earlier discussion on the various ways “god” is used in Scripture).⁹⁴

Anthony Buzzard observes that “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

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁹⁴ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 45.

the second member of the Godhead.”⁹⁵ Regardless of which way the reader may prefer to read Romans 9:5 — as praise to Christ as Almighty God, or as praise to God the Father — it must be thought an astounding thing that such a critical doctrine as the Trinity should depend on such fine points of grammar. (This same reasoning applies to other exegetically “doubtful” verses such as Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1.) Wherever else Paul ascribes praise to God in the same formula, it is always praise to God the Father “to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen” (Gal. 1:4-5). Come to think of it, even at the conclusion of this very book of Romans, Paul maintains his unitarian praise: “to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 16:27). It is highly unlikely that he so soon, in the space of a few chapters, would contradict himself!

Is God the Only Saviour?

I imagine by now you may be arguing with me and saying something like this: Well, if Jesus is not God in human flesh what do you say to the Scriptures that say only God can save? If Jesus is not God how can we possibly be saved? After all, God says, “I, even I, am the LORD; and there is no saviour besides Me” (Is. 43:11). If Jesus is not God then there are two saviours! And this is something the Bible here clearly excludes.

We have already seen that a strong argument against the idea that God became man in order to redeem us is that there is not one single OT prophecy that supports it. Not one verse foretells that God Himself was going to become a man in order to save us. The opposite is the case. The prophets predict a *human being who would under God’s anointing Spirit rescue us*.

Wherein lies the solution? Ah, let’s now read this through our Hebrew eyes and see what a difference it makes. Remember that dictum the Jews had about the law of agency where “the agent is as the principal himself”? It applies right here.

Let’s go back to Exodus 23. You remember that we used this chapter earlier to illustrate the Hebrew law of agency. We saw that the angel of the Lord acted in God’s stead. What the angel did and said was really what God Himself did and said, for “My name is in him” (v. 21). In verse 23 Jehovah explained, “For **My angel** will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites,

⁹⁵ Buzzard and Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 269.

the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and **I will completely destroy** them.” The angel was the instrument through whom God destroyed the enemies.

Now let’s proceed on in the chapter. God says to the Israelites, “**I** will send My terror ahead of you...**I** will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And **I** will send hornets ahead of you, that they may drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you” (v. 27-28).

To our understanding this sounds as if the LORD Himself is going to do the work. But then we come to verse 31: “**I will deliver** the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and **you will drive them out** before you.” So God expects *the Israelites* to drive their enemies out. Is there a contradiction here? Will God Himself drive out their enemies or will the Israelites do it? We note the principle again and again. God says He will act when in fact He is going to empower His angels and His people to do the work.

This kind of talk has a thorough Hebrew feel about it. Actions that are directly ascribed to God are in fact carried out by his commissioned agents. Take another instance: “And the LORD...He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam” (2 Kings 14:27).

Once again we observe the clear distinction between God who is the ultimate *Author* of deliverance and His appointed *agent* who in this case was King Jeroboam. Or take this verse: “Therefore You did deliver them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them. But when they cried to You in the time of their distress, You did hear from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You did give them **deliverers** who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors” (Nehemiah 9:27).

Commenting on this the authors of *One God and One Lord* make this pertinent point:

God, Christ and others are referred to as “savior,” but that clearly does not make them identical. The term “savior” is used of many people in the Bible. This is hard to see in the English versions because, when it is used of men, the translators almost always translated it as “deliverer.” This in and of itself shows that modern translators have a Trinitarian bias that was not in the original languages. The only reason to translate the same word as “Savior” when it applies to God or Christ, but as “deliverer” when it applies to men, is to make the term seem unique to God and Jesus

when in fact it is not. This is a good example of how the actual meaning of Scripture can be obscured if the translators are not careful or if they are theologically biased.⁹⁶

It has often been argued that the very name Jesus, which means “Yahweh saves,” proves Jesus is Jehovah because “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). But the logic is not consistently applied because the OT name Joshua means “Yahweh saves.” I have never yet heard someone who believes in the Deity of Christ argue that Joshua was God in the flesh. We know that in the OT Joshua was God’s appointed man to deliver Israel. As Joshua and Israel went forth in obedience to His word God saved them. Just so, in the matter of our salvation, God sent forth His Son into the battle. Through Jesus God has saved us. This is why both God and Jesus are called Saviour. But the Bible never loses sight of the fact that God the Father is the ultimate *Author* of our salvation *through* His Son.

This same line of reasoning applies to the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2. This is one of the most commonly appealed to Scriptures that allegedly proves that Jesus must be God, because “only God can forgive sins” (v. 7). When Jesus pronounces the man forgiven/healed, the Pharisees say that Jesus is “blaspheming” because he is claiming to be God. But a little careful attention to detail will show that Jesus is not claiming Deity. He is rather claiming “authority.” He says, “But that you may know that **the Son of Man has authority** on earth to forgive sins...” (v. 10). The parallel account in Matthew’s report is that once the people saw Jesus heal the paralytic, “they were filled with awe, and glorified God, **who had given such authority to men**” (Matt. 9:8). *We note that Jesus is claiming to be “the Son of Man,” that is, the human Messiah, with a God-given right to pronounce forgiveness.* Not too much later Jesus invests other men — his apostles — with the same authority to forgive sins: “**If you forgive** the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained” (John 20:23). If only God can forgive sins, then God and Jesus *and the apostles* are all God! Besides, there is no teaching anywhere in the Bible that says only God can forgive. Even Christians are commanded to forgive each other’s sins (Eph. 4:32;

⁹⁶ Graeser et al, *One God and One Lord*, p. 363.

Col. 3:13). The fact that the Pharisees say that only God can forgive sins does not make this an established Bible doctrine. The Pharisees often had wrong doctrine and were often corrected by our Lord Jesus. This was one such occasion.

It is traditionally argued that because Jesus is called “Immanuel, which translated means, ‘God with us’” Jesus is God in the flesh. But a little further reflection will debunk this reasoning very quickly. Elijah’s name literally means “God is Jehovah” but nobody says the prophet was really Jehovah. Bithiah means “daughter of Jehovah” but nobody argues that she must be the sister of Jesus (1 Chron. 4:18, KJV). Eliab’s name means “my God is my Father” but nobody would argue that Eliab is the Messiah. The prophet Joel’s name means “the LORD God” and Elihu means “my God Himself.” Eli means “my God.” Ithiel means “God is with me” but nobody argues that he must be God in the flesh. If Jesus’ name “Immanuel” proves his Deity then Elijah, Joel, Eliab, Eli, Elihu and Ithiel are also God Himself. Here, rather, is a place where Jewish practice must be understood. To those of us who love the Lord Jesus, his name is significant and beloved and brings great joy because it communicates to us the wonderful truth that as God’s Son he is the appointed Saviour. Through him God is with us and saves us.

Those who believe that Jesus can only be our Saviour if he is God sometimes appeal to the prophecy from Jeremiah 23: “In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is his name by which he will be called, ‘The LORD our righteousness’” (Jer. 23:6).

Does this not say that the coming saviour will be “the LORD our righteousness,” that is, God Himself? This is easily answered when we note that a few chapters later we have this prophecy in Jeremiah 33: “In those days Judah shall be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she shall be called: the LORD is our righteousness” (v. 16).

Here the city of Jerusalem is given the very same title as the coming redeemer earlier. I have never yet heard anyone argue that the city of Jerusalem must also be God Himself because it bears the same title as Jehovah. Hebrew eyes are needed to avoid confusion. This is why it is fallacious to reason that because Jesus is called the “King of Kings and the Lord of Lords” (Rev. 19:16) he must necessarily therefore be Almighty God Himself. The fact that Artaxerxes is called “king of kings” and that God Himself calls

Nebuchadnezzar “king of kings” does not put these men in the same league as Messiah Jesus, nor mean they have the same nature as him. The designation “king of kings” is obviously a very Hebrew way of speaking that has nothing to do with equivalency of nature. The Hebrews could also speak of a “servant of servants,” which simply means the lowest of the low (Gen. 9:25). In the book of Daniel God addresses Nebuchadnezzar: “You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory” (Dan. 2:37).

In the same Hebrew fashion, when Scripture designates Jesus Christ as “the king of kings, and Lord of Lords” the message conveyed is that God has also given him the Kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory of the Age to Come. Equality of being with the God who gives the Kingdom does not come into the equation, for either Nebuchadnezzar or Jesus. If, as already noted, to share the same nomenclature as God does not prove literal identity with God Himself, the same holds true for a sharing of the same titles. Whilst Jesus may share the title “king of kings and Lord of Lords” with God his Father, there is one title reserved uniquely for the Father God. No other individual, including the Lord Jesus, is ever called by the title “God of gods” (cp. Deut. 10:17). This title, as well as “the Lord God” (e.g. Rev. 1:8), is always reserved for the one true God, who is the Father.

In Zechariah 14 we have a remarkable prophecy that Christians eagerly anticipate. It concerns a day yet future when God Himself will go out and fight against the nations of the world that will be gathered against Israel and the holy city of Jerusalem. This is popularly known as the Battle of Armageddon. On that day, just when the enemies appear ready to strike the knock-out blow God Himself will intervene in the world’s history and “His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south” (Zech. 14:4). The feet that cause this earthquake in the Hebrew Bible are the LORD’s feet. However, Christians believe this to be a reference to Jesus Christ himself returning at the Second Coming to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth. The argument is that since Jesus’ feet are spoken of as God’s feet, then Jesus must be God Himself. In the light of what we have seen so far, this cannot be. If we keep in mind

the principle of Jewish agency, we will have a right understanding that “Jesus’ feet are spoken of as God’s feet in exactly the same way Aaron’s hand is spoken of as the LORD’s hand in Exodus 7:17-19.”⁹⁷

The Philippians Hymn

Most Christians read Philippians 2:5-11 as if it teaches that Jesus Christ always preexisted as God, but out of love humbled himself even to the point of becoming man so that through his Incarnation he could die on the cross to redeem lost humanity. After this astounding mission of self-denial Jesus returned to his Father in the glory of heaven, where he always was before. Few are aware that this traditional church interpretation is like a river that has jumped its banks and long ago left its original course. Over the centuries the channel of tradition has cut deep to the point where the original intent and meaning has long been restricted to the bottom of the Grand Canyon of “orthodoxy.” Only one whose heart and mind is open is prepared to consider other possibilities. Perhaps these words from Karl-Josef Kuschel might help us to explore other sound options in interpretation. Few, says Kuschel, seem to be aware that:

present-day exegetes have drawn the radically opposite conclusion that the Philippians hymn does not speak of the preexistence of Christ at all. Indeed, an increasing number of present-day New Testament scholars with good reason question the premises of exegesis hitherto and cannot see preexistence, let alone Incarnation, in the Philippians hymn.⁹⁸

Evidently we need to take a fresh look at these verses. They read:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, also God highly

⁹⁷ David Burge, in private correspondence, 27-03-2005.

⁹⁸ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 250.

exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5-11).

Before looking at the specifics let's just take a step back and view the setting. Let's get the big picture first. There are essentially two different traditions that will colour our understanding. Once again we are confronted with the fact that we can view this passage through Greek eyes or through Jewish eyes. Traditionally, the "Greek eyes" have it! For since the fourth century the Church has adopted the preexistence Christology of Hellenistic syncretism, which simply stated means that Jesus was a divine being who came to earth to set us free. Some scholars call this the Gnostic Redeemer myth. Historically, however, and long before this Greek view prevailed, the "Jewish eyes" — in the early apostolic church — had it. There is strong evidence to suggest that the apostolic church interpreted the Philippians hymn in the light of Old Testament tradition: Specifically Christ is presented "in good Jewish fashion as a human counterpart to Adam."⁹⁹ Or, as James Dunn in his monumental work says, this passage is best understood as an expression of "the Adam Christology which was widely current in the Christianity of the 40s and 50s."¹⁰⁰ Here is a thought worth further exploration.

There are other New Testament passages that compare and contrast Adam and Christ (e.g. Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45-47). It is possible that Philippians 2:6-11 is "one of the fullest expressions that we still possess" of Adam Christology from this very early church period.¹⁰¹ Though the hymn is of course about Christ, it highlights and defines him against the background of Adam's failure. The passage presupposes Adam's disastrous choice, his attempt to "be like God" and his rebellion. But where Adam grasped and failed, Christ "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped" but surrendered to God's will, even to the point of humiliating crucifixion, and so was glorified by God. So then, let us see if the language of the passage itself supports this idea that

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁰⁰ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 114.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Genesis chapters 1-3 form the background to what is being said. Read in the light of this traditio-historical background we can observe the contrasts and comparisons between Christ and Adam. We will look at the individual words and phrases soon enough, but just for the moment let us paint the big picture first.

The first comparison is that Christ “existed in the form of God” just as Adam also was “in the image of God.” Many scholars point out that the expressions “form [*morphe*] of God” and “image [*eikon*] of God” are “near synonyms.”¹⁰² Or, “*Morphe* and *eikon* are equivalent terms that are used interchangeably in the LXX.”¹⁰³ So the first line of the hymn tells us that Christ shared the image and glory of God just as Adam did before his fall.

The next parallel is a contrast between Adam and Christ. “Form of a slave” is evidently an allusion to Adam’s fate after the fall. When he sinned Adam became a slave to the curse of nature and to death. Christ, however, voluntarily accepted the “form of a slave.” There is another contrasting pair that points in the same direction: “likeness of God” probably alludes to Adam’s temptation when he wanted to be “like God” (Gen. 3:5), and “likeness of men” points in turn to Adam’s state after sinning. Some feel these comparisons that Dunn makes draw too long a bow, but if we continue to follow them through, I think they will be seen to have certain merit.

If we view the Philippians hymn as a comparison in some sense of Adam and Jesus, the passage is a piece of Adam Christology of the same kind found elsewhere in the NT. It:

would be a further example of the widespread two-stage Christology of the earliest Jewish-Christian communities...and thus would not be in the context of mythical [i.e. Hellenistic] tradition, but of Old Testament tradition. So there is no question here of a preexistent heavenly figure. Rather, Christ is the great contrasting figure to Adam. To be specific, was it not Adam who wanted to become even more like God and thus succumbed to...the primal sin? Was it not Adam who then as punishment had to live a kind of slave’s existence? And is not Christ of this hymn precisely the opposite? Did he not give up his being in the image of God voluntarily? Did he

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁰³ *Expository Times*, vol. 70, no. 6, March 1959, pp. 183-184.

not take on the form of a slave, not as a punishment, but voluntarily and obediently, so that he was then appointed by God to his heavenly dignity?¹⁰⁴

So, is this a compelling way of looking at this hymn? We should not be surprised that it draws on solid Jewish pictures. Viewed this way, the great antithesis of the hymn is the contrast between Christ and Adam: Adam the audacious man; Christ the man who humbled himself. Adam the man who was forcibly humbled by God; Christ the man who voluntarily humbled himself before God. Adam the rebellious man finally cursed by God; Christ the obedient man finally exalted by God above all. Adam who wanted to become like God was made into dust again; Christ descended to the dust, even the cross and has become Lord of the world. Thus, the Philippians hymn shows us how Christ is the new Adam who has reversed all the old Adam did. In short:

There is no question of a preexistence of Christ with the scheme of a three-stage Christology: preexistence, humiliation, post-existence. Instead of this, the author celebrates the whole earthly-human life of Christ as a life of voluntary self-surrender to lowliness...to the existence of a slave and a shameful death.¹⁰⁵

By his victory over the sin of pride which brought Adam down, Christ is now exactly as God intended man to be. He is now treated as if he were God! He now enjoys the incorruptibility that Adam was meant to enjoy. And to achieve this he did not use his privilege as God's Messiah and King (v. 5). He claimed no special advantage because he was the Son of God. If we understand the hymn with this Jewish background we see "the original hymn represents an attempt to define the uniqueness of Christ considered precisely as man."¹⁰⁶ It teaches not a preexistent Deity, but an obedient humanity.

The Christ of Phil. 2:6-11 therefore is the man who undid Adam's wrong: confronted with the same choice, he rejected Adam's sin, but nevertheless freely followed Adam's course as fallen man to the bitter end of death; wherefore God bestowed on him the status not simply that

¹⁰⁴ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* pp. 251-252.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

Adam lost, but the status which Adam was intended to come to, God's final prototype, the last Adam.¹⁰⁷

This big-picture interpretation fits the context beautifully. For does not the apostle begin the hymn with this exhortation to "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5)? How can I relate to one who supposedly was Almighty God before his existence as a man and who during his sojourn here was the "God-Man"? That kind of a (Greek) Christ is no model for me. Martyn Lloyd-Jones who trumpets that traditional idea that this hymn presents the "God-Man" to us lifts Jesus right away from us. He writes:

It was not merely the case that it was possible for Him not to sin, but rather, it was not possible for Him to sin. And that is the essential difference between Christ and Adam; ...The first Adam was perfect. He had not sinned, but sin was possible. It was possible for Adam not to sin, but you could not say of him that it was not possible for him to sin, because he did sin. But of the Son of God we say that not only was it possible for Him not to sin...it was also not possible for Him to sin...because He is the God-Man. Not only human but also divine. But still, because human, subject to temptation, and the devil did tempt Him. And so we see the importance of asserting at one and the same time the doctrine of His true humanity and yet also the doctrine of His complete sinlessness...The devil tempted Him with all his might, in a way that nobody else has ever been tempted. It was a real temptation, but He at the same time was entirely free from sin, and it was not possible that He could or should fall. God sent Him to be the Saviour, and because of that there could not be, and there was no failure.¹⁰⁸

Once again, it is hard not to imagine that Lloyd-Jones is bogged down to his theory of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Read his quote again. He says "it was not possible" for Jesus to sin "because He is the God-Man." It was "not possible that Jesus could or should fall." Yet confusingly Jones says Jesus' temptation was "a real temptation." If it "was not possible for him to sin" because he was

¹⁰⁷ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *God the Father, God the Son*, pp. 275-276.

the “God-Man” then Christ was not like Adam at all. The Biblical parallel is smashed. And how can it be “real temptation” if there is no possibility of sin? The Bible, on the other hand, indicates that the possibility for failure was very real indeed. At the climax of his life in Gethsemane, for instance, Jesus is sweating great drops of blood, as he is struggling for the victory. But Douglas Lockhart in *Jesus the Heretic* points out that if we start from a position of later Incarnational “orthodoxy” Jesus’ prayer in the garden is full of doctrinal errors, mistakes in self-interpretation which would have earned him the stake a few hundred years later! He says this biblical Jesus is distinctly unorthodox by our traditional standards. For here in the garden of Gethsemane it is obvious Jesus does not consider himself God. The Messiah he certainly is, the one to offer the supreme sacrifice, but for all that he is tempted flesh and blood. “All things are possible to You,” he prays, implying that all things are not possible to him. And then, “not what I desire, but what You desire,” indicating submission to God, and not the completion of a purpose of his own making. Here is the Son of God submitting to God, not God submitting to God. Jesus Christ then faced the same archetypal choice that confronted Adam.¹⁰⁹

His words on the cross, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” further divorce him from the philosophic creation that he was wholly God, for how could Jesus as God forsake himself? (Martin Luther is said to have struggled with this “cry of dereliction” for days. Luther locked himself up in his study searching for the meaning. At last he jumped up and exclaimed, “God forsaken by God!”) Sound confusing?

I repeat what I said earlier in this chapter: *If Jesus was to satisfy the just requirements of redeeming us, whatever Adam was, Jesus Christ had to be also. This is why Jesus Christ had to be like Adam, a created human being, with just one nature, a fully human one. He must have no unjust advantage of having “two natures.” For this Adam clearly did not have.*

The Form of God

With this big picture in mind we can now turn to some of the problematic words and phrases in this passage. The two key phrases which have been very important to those who teach that Jesus Christ

¹⁰⁹ Lockhart, *Jesus the Heretic*.

was God before his Incarnation are “he existed in the form of God” and “emptied himself” (in order to be “made in the likeness of men”). Let’s take a closer look.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones is representative of the mainstream belief that these verses teach that Jesus always existed as God before he took on human flesh. He says:

Well, take this word *form* — “Who being in the form of God” — what is this? Form is the sum total of the qualities that make a thing what it is. Take, for instance, a piece of metal; that piece of metal can be either a sword or a ploughshare, though it is the same metal. And when I talk about “the form” of a sword I mean the thing that makes that piece of metal a sword rather than a ploughshare. So if I take a sword and smelt it down and turn it into a ploughshare, I have changed its form. That is a most important point.¹¹⁰

Evidently the great preacher expects us to believe that because Jesus existed “in the form of God” he was always God because “form is the sum total of the qualities that make a thing what it is.” However, we may ask: If Paul wanted to tell us that Jesus was God, why did he not just plainly write that Christ “*was God*” instead of “he existed in the form of God”? The verse does *not* say of Jesus Christ, “who, being God,” for the simple reason that Paul is telling the Philippians that Jesus represented God the Father in every possible way.

As can be seen by Lloyd-Jones’ statement the word “form” (*morphe*) is critical to the position of Trinitarians who believe Jesus always was God before becoming man. It is true that the lexicons offer contrasting meanings for this word. *Vine’s Lexicon* tells us that *morphe* refers to an “inner, essential nature.” In his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* Vine quotes with approval Gifford:

Morphe is properly the nature or essence, not in the abstract, but as actually subsisting in the individual, and retained as long as the individual itself exists...Thus in the passage before us *morphe theou* [“form of God”] is the Divine nature actually and inseparably subsisting in the Person of Christ...For the interpretation of “the form of God” it is

¹¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, *God the Father, God the Son*, p. 285.

sufficient to say that (1) it includes the whole nature and essence of Deity...(2) that it does not include in itself anything “accidental” or separable, such as particular modes of manifestation, or conditions of glory and majesty, which may at one time be attached to the “form.”¹¹¹

On the other hand many lexicons disagree with this idea that “form” means the inner, essential nature. They say that “form” means “outward appearance, shape.” Representative of this definition are the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* edited by Gerhard Kittel, the lexicon by Walter Bauer, translated and revised by Arndt and Gingrich, and Robert Thayer’s lexicon. The latter notes that whilst some scholars try to make *morphe* refer to that which is intrinsic and essential, in contrast to that which is outward and accidental, “the distinction is rejected by many.” So it is evident that Greek scholars are in some disagreement as to whether “form” means “inner, essential nature or essence” or whether it simply means the “outward, external appearance or shape.” How may we resolve this difference? It is not as difficult a problem as it may seem. All we need do is turn to the writers of the New Testament period and see how they invariably use the word. For the following five examples I acknowledge my indebtedness to the authors of *One God and One Lord*.¹¹²

From **secular writings** we learn that the Greeks used *morphe* to describe when the gods changed their appearance. Kittel points out that in pagan mythology the gods change their forms, and notes Aphrodite, Demeter and Dionysus as three who did. This is clearly a change of appearance, not nature. Josephus, a contemporary of the apostles, used “form” to describe the shape of statues.

Second, in other places where *morphe* is used in **the Bible** it is clear it means outward appearance. In Mark 16:12 Jesus appears to the two disciples who are on the road to Emmaus “in a different form.” Jesus did not have a different “inner, essential nature” but simply a different outward appearance.

Third, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the **Septuagint** (LXX) was written around 250 BC for Greek-speaking Jews. The Septuagint uses *morphe* several times and without

¹¹¹ W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Virginia: Macdonald Pub. Co., pp. 463-464.

¹¹² Graeser et al, *One God and One Lord*, p. 504ff.

exception refers to the outward appearance. In Job 4:15-16 Job says, “A spirit glided past my face, and the hair on my body stood on end. It stopped, but I could not tell what it was. A form [*morphe*] stood before my eyes.” “Form” here clearly refers to the outward appearance of this spirit. In Isaiah 44 the word *morphe* refers to the outward appearance of man-made idols: “The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form [*morphe*] of man” (v. 13). It would be absurd to suggest that “form” here refers to the inner, essential nature of the idol, for the idol is physically shaped to look like the appearance of a man. In Daniel 3 the lads Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s image and we are told “the form [*morphe*] of his countenance” changed (v. 19). The NASB Bible says, “his facial expression” changed. Nothing in his nature changed, but all who saw him knew his outward appearance had.

Fourth, the inter-testamental writings of the Jews called the **Apocrypha** were written between the last OT book of Malachi and the NT book of Matthew. Roman Catholics have these books in their Bibles today, but they do not appear in Protestant Bibles. These books use *morphe* in exactly the same way that the Septuagint does — that is, to mean “outward appearance.” For instance, in “The Wisdom of Solomon” we have: “Their enemies heard their voices, but did not see their forms” (18:1). The word *morphe* in the Apocrypha shows that it always refers to the outer form, not the inner essence.

Fifth, *morphe* is the root word of some **other New Testament words** and is also used in compound words. These also add weight to the idea that *morphe* refers to outward shape or manifestation. In 2 Timothy 3:5 the Bible speaks of men who have a “form [*morphosis*] of godliness.” Their insides, their inner natures were evil, but they had an outward appearance of being godly. On the Mount of Transfiguration Christ was “transformed” (*metamorphoomai*) before the apostles (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2). They did not see Jesus get a new inner nature, but they did see his outward appearance change profoundly. 2 Corinthians 3 tells us that Christians will be “changed” (*metamorphoomai*) into the image of Christ (v. 18). We will look like Christ and reflect his glory.

Kenneth Wuest notes that in Koine *Greek* *morphe* had come to refer to “a station in life, a position one holds, one’s rank. And that is an approximation of *morphe* in this context of Philippians 2.”¹¹³

What are our conclusions so far? All these ancient uses of the word “form” speak of outward appearance or likeness and not inner, essential essence. To argue that because Jesus “existed in the form of God” he had the inner nature of God is to clutch at a straw to try to prove a pre-conceived point. All Philippians 2 is teaching is that Jesus the Messiah was the true representative of God. When men looked at him they saw what God looks like. As Jesus said, “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Taken this way, we may interpret “the form of God” and “the form of a slave” to mean role or status. Note the equivalence:

Jesus was in the form of God in the sense that he stood in the place of God in much the same way as we saw earlier (in chapter two) that Moses stood before Pharaoh as God (Ex. 4:16; 7:1). Moses stood before Pharaoh “in the form of God,” that is, in the role of God, but this status did not mean he was *actually divine in essence*. Just so, Jesus walked before men “in the form of God” as his Father’s fully authorized agent. Of course Jesus’ position and status as the Messiah is far superior to that which Moses enjoyed. But even so, Jesus did not claim this likeness with God something to be exploited for his own advantage. Whether or not Philippians 2 is drawing an OT parallel with Adam may be a moot point for some. But one thing is absolutely certain. The passage is stressing the enormous status Jesus enjoyed as the man Messiah (as v. 5 introduces him). The lesson is that despite his role as God (agency!) Jesus behaved as a servant. In response to walking in “the form of a servant” God has now elevated him to His right hand of glory as Lord Messiah.¹¹⁴

Before we pass onto the second main problematic expression in this hymn, a brief word is in order about the word “existed” in our phrase, “who *existed* in the form of God,” or as the King James Bible translates it, “who, *being in the form of God*.” Trinitarians have often said that the word here for “existed” or “being” proves that Jesus Christ preexisted as God before he came into this world. It is a simple matter of fact that the verb “was” here frequently

¹¹³ *The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament*, Moody, 1982, p. 84.

¹¹⁴ See Appendix 3: “Divine Agency.”

occurs in the New Testament and by no means carries the sense of “existing in eternity.” It was the philosopher Justin Martyr who for the first time applied the distinctive word “to preexist” to Jesus (Greek *prohyparchein*). But the New Testament never uses this word. It is certainly not the word used here in Philippians 2:6. The following more technical explanation from Kuschel is noteworthy:

The phrase “being like God” (Greek *isa theou*), too, may not simply be translated with terms like “equality to God,” “being like God,” as often happens. That would require the form *isos theos*. What we have in the text is the adverb *isa*, and that merely means “as God,” “like God.” So there is no statement about Christ *being* equal to God, and this in turn tells against an interpretation in terms of preexistence. So, on both traditio-historical and linguistic grounds...there is no justification for interpreting the phrase of the hymn in terms of being of Christ.¹¹⁵

As Kuschel observes elsewhere in his marvellous book:

I have found that the word preexistence is not a biblical expression but a problematical term used in post-biblical reflection...It seeks to systematize what for the New Testament is not a theme of systematic thought. In other words, a Christology today which heedlessly uses the dogmatic theme of “preexistence” and introduces it into the New Testament foists on the New Testament an idea which it does not contain in this form.¹¹⁶

In fact, we may even speak more strongly here of this word for “existing” (*hyparchon*) or “being in the form of God.” Kuschel says that far too little attention is paid to the fact that the verb *hyparchon* contains within it the word *arche*, origin. So, “if we translate this literally as well, we could say, ‘He who has his *origin* in God’s “world.”’ So the disputed ‘in form’ is not a statement about essence but a statement about origin.”¹¹⁷

Emptied Himself

Now to the second phrase in Philippians 2 that causes difficulty. It is the one that says Jesus Christ “did not regard equality with God

¹¹⁵ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 251.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself” (v. 6-7). It is unfortunate that the old King James Version of the Bible translated this verse completely wrong. It reads that Jesus “thought it not robbery to be equal with God” and gives the impression that as the preexistent God Jesus did not think there was anything wrong in being considered equal with God.

It ought to be clear by now that this is the exact opposite of what is meant. The whole context of the passage is about being humble, putting God’s will and glory first, and serving others’ interests above one’s own interests. Although he was in “the form of God” Jesus did not reckon his God-given status as something to be exploited. This meaning contrasts well with the conduct of Adam who unfortunately did consider equality with God a thing to be grasped at. Adam *wanted* to be like God as Genesis 3:5 teaches. Adam tried to grasp at equality with God. But Jesus would not usurp God’s authority for selfish advantage. He said, “I came to serve” (Matt. 20:28), not to snatch! At his arrest in the garden he said, “Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt. 26:53). As the Messiah, God’s appointed King, he had every right to call for divine protection. He “emptied himself” of all such Messianic privileges.

Therefore, it can be categorically stated that Philippians 2:5-11 has nothing to do with Jesus Christ being God in a preexistent state. The import is really very simple and very practical: how are Christians to conduct themselves in this world? Not by imitating the man Adam who forfeited everything by a grab for power and glory, but by imitating Jesus the Messiah (v. 5) who through humility and obedience to God gained it all and more. After all, if Jesus was already God, then verses 9 to 11 are nonsensical. There is no “**Therefore** also God highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth,” for if he was already God he had this before his birth! No. It is clear that God has given him a new position, a new name (authority), a new rank that he did not previously possess. The Greek is very clear here: *dio kai* means (as in Luke 1:35) “for this reason precisely.” Why has God exalted Jesus to His right hand? “Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him the name above every other name because he is back where he was before as

God”? Not at all! He is given this status as a reward for the *precise reason that he humbled himself and died*. His exalted status is a *reward*. If we follow the last Adam’s pattern we too will be exalted by God when Christ returns. It is evident, then, that “this hymn does *not* contain what numerous interpreters seek and find in it: an independent statement about preexistence or even a Christology of preexistence...No preexistence of Christ before the world with an independent significance can be recognized even in Phil. 2.”¹¹⁸

The Colossians Hymn

Insofar as it is used by the “traditionalists” to justify belief in a personally preexistent Christ, the passage in Colossians 1:15-19 ranks right up there with John 1 and Philipians 2. It is easy to see how this conclusion is reached, when the passage is read in the gridlock of “orthodoxy.” Paul wrote:

And he is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that he himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him (Col. 1:15-19).

We must carefully examine both the overall context and the particular phrases before rushing to the conclusion that the apostle is teaching that Jesus the Son of God created the heavens and the earth, and that he is therefore co-equal with God the Father, the second member of the Trinity. Everything we have looked at so far would indicate that Paul has not suddenly done a back-flip from his clearly stated belief that there is “one God, the Father...and one Lord, Jesus the Messiah” (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:5-6, etc.).

The overall context must be clearly borne in mind. The apostle is “giving thanks to the Father” because He “has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light,” which is to say that God the Father has “delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (v. 12-13). Paul

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

is thus speaking of the *new creation* that God has effected through His Son Jesus. He is speaking of things that relate to “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (v. 14) and “the church” (v. 18) and how through the Son the Father God has “reconciled all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross” (v. 20).

As Kuschel says, “The direct context of the Colossians hymn is itself of an eschatological kind and represents the ‘shift of the ages.’”¹¹⁹ In other words, “the New Testament does not merely picture the resurrection of Jesus as the resuscitation of a corpse, but as *the emergence within time and space of a new order of life.*”¹²⁰ When the Father raised Jesus to life again it was not only an isolated historical event. It was more importantly the injection into history of the beginning of “the eschatological resurrection.”¹²¹ Eternal life — the life of the Age to Come — is guaranteed in Christ who is “the first fruits” of all who will follow (1 Cor. 15:23). Jesus is the first of a whole crop of new-lifers to come! A new order of things now exists. A new age in prospect has already begun. If “anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things [have] passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17). To be baptized into Christ is to already in prospect be “in the likeness of his resurrection” (Rom. 6:5). We are already “seated with Christ in the heavenlies” (Eph. 2:6). Because Christ has been raised to the glory of the Father, we are already in promise “glorified” (Rom. 8:30). We have been transferred into “the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13).

It is this tectonic shift in the ages that is the context of this hymn of praise. We are looking at a whole new order of things. The waves of this continental shift from the resurrection of Christ are rolling towards the distant shore-line of the coming Kingdom of God with tsunami-like power. Old authorities and structures have been rattled, for Christ is now the head of God’s new creation. A new dynasty in God’s universe has been inaugurated. This is the cosmological context of the individual phrases we will now examine.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹²⁰ G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974, p. 323, emphasis original.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

Christ the Image of God

Speaking of “His beloved Son” who has brought us “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14), the apostle tells us that “he is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation” (v. 15). An image, as we know, is a visual representation or copy of an original. This word “image” intimates that there is a difference in identity between the copy and the original. When we look in the mirror we understand that we do not see our “real” selves, only an image of ourselves. I know that I am not the person behind the glass, but really the person in front of the glass. This word “image” is a very strong pointer to the fact that Christ the Son is *not* God. For the image cannot be the original, who in this case is God the Father. The first phrase, “he [the Son] is the image of the invisible God” reminds us of Jesus’ own word that “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus is the face and voice of God, so to speak (1 Cor. 4:6). As Kuschel rightly points out, “the expression ‘image’ does not relate to ‘the essence of a thing’ but to ‘Christ’s revelatory function’...Talk of the ‘image’ is a statement about revelation.”¹²²

As the image of God, Christ reveals the Father to us. But what exactly is revealed? Kuschel is quite clear here. In the light of the eschatological resurrection of the Son, God and his image Christ must be thought of as belonging inseparably together. From now on: one can now (after the eschatological shift) no longer speak of God without having to speak of Jesus Christ and *vice versa*. Anyone who speaks of Christ at the same time speaks of God Himself. In relation to creation, this means that one cannot really know the new creation as a work of the Creator except in Christ. So there are two sides: God makes himself known in the image of Christ, and the creation cannot be known as the work of *this* creator without Christ.¹²³

Christ the First-Born of All Creation

The next phrase — the Son is “the first-born of all creation” — has been hotly debated in theological circles. If “first” in the word “first-born” means only precedence in time, and if “creation” means

¹²² Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 333.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

the original creation of Genesis 1, then the case for Christ's personal preexistence is strong. Christ must have abandoned a previous heavenly existence and become a human being. But does the phrase "first-born of all creation" fit this view? This interpretation, as we will now see, does not suit the context when we again keep the Old Testament background in mind.

The word "first-born" comes to the NT with a rich Hebrew heritage. The Hebrews had a custom of conferring special birth-right privileges on their oldest sons. The eldest son of a father would receive the "double portion" of the family's inheritance. The well-known story of Jacob tricking his father Isaac into conferring on him — rather than on the first-born Esau — the family blessings is typical of this culture (Gen. 27:32).

But there is a further nuance of meaning to this word "first-born." The Greek word for "first" can mean either first in time or first in status, regardless of birth position. The "first-born" may designate one who is given the honour of chief rank, that is, first place. This usage can also be found in the Hebrew Bible, as when Jacob summons his sons to bequeath his patriarchal blessings on them, he designates Reuben as "my first-born...**preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power**" (Gen. 49:3). Although Reuben is first-born in time, the prominent idea is his superior status and dignity. This is clearly the meaning in Jeremiah 31:9 where God calls Ephraim his "first-born" even though Ephraim's brother, Manasseh, was the elder of the two. Or when God calls Israel His first-born son in Exodus 4:22 and commands Pharaoh to "Let my son go that he may worship me" (v. 23) the concept has to do with Israel's precedence in importance over Egypt as far as God's plans were concerned. The classic instance of this idea of pre-eminence of rank is in the Messianic Psalm 89 where God, in glowing words, speaks of the coming promised Davidic king, the Lord Messiah:

He will cry to Me, "You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation." I also shall make him My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth. My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall be confirmed to him. So I will establish his descendants forever, and his throne as the days of heaven (Ps. 89:26-29).

In the spirit of prophecy, God announces that this king's superior position is a matter of appointment, not time of birth. Furthermore, God makes His appointed King "the highest [in status

and rank] of the kings of the earth.” Thus, when the apostle applies the term “first-born” to the Son of God in Colossians 1, he is using a well-known OT Messianic description. In fact, the expression is repeated a few verses later, where Paul writes, “He is also head of the body, the church; and he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead” (v. 18). The different qualifier here is noteworthy. Whereas in verse 15 the Son is the “first-born of **all creation**,” here the Son is the “first-born **from the dead**.” If we take into account the Hebrew literary style of parallelism, where the same idea is repeated but in slightly modified form, it is quite reasonable to suggest that the qualifiers “of all creation” and “from the dead” mean the same thing.

The thought, then, is clearly that Jesus the Son of God is the first Man of God’s new creation, because he is the first man ever to be raised to immortality. Christ’s resurrection is the beginning of the eschatological resurrection. His resurrection is the promise and the guarantee that God’s new order of reality has begun. The Church is that new community in prospect. This confirms that the subject matter under discussion is not the Genesis creation of the heavens and the earth, but rather the creation of the Church, the body of believers who constitute God’s new humanity, the New Man(kind). For this reason “he is the beginning” (*arche* which has an ambivalence, and can mean either the ruler or chief, or origin or beginning, v. 18). Either way, Jesus as the first-raised from the dead is the origin of God’s new creation, and he is in consequence of this priority in resurrection also the highest in rank “so that he himself might come to have first place in everything” (v. 18). However, whether we take the term “first-born” to mean first in relation to time or first in relation to rank, this much is at least clear, that “taken in its natural sense, the expression first-born excludes the notion of an uncreated, eternal being. To be born requires a beginning.”¹²⁴ In order to verify our findings so far, we must look at the second part of this phrase that the Son is “the first-born **of all creation**.”

Christ the Head of the New Creation

The various popular English translations are at odds as to whether the Son is “the first-born **over** all creation” (as in the NIV

¹²⁴ Buzzard and Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 104.

and NKJV), thus first in rank, or whether he is “the first-born **of** all creation” (which reflects a literal translation of the genitive case, as in the KJV, RV and NASB), meaning first in time, which would refer to Christ being the first-created being of creation.

We evidently need the wider context to determine which nuance fits best. It is clear that Paul continues his line of thought in the next verse, as he uses the conjunction “for”: “For in him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through him and for him” (v. 16).

Jesus never claimed credit for the original Genesis creation of the heavens and the earth. He was in no doubt that the universe was God’s handiwork (Matt. 19:4; Mark 13:19). Observe here in Colossians 1 that the “all things” created are *not* “the heavens and the earth” as per Genesis 1:1, but rather “all things **in** the heavens and **[up]on** the earth.” These things are defined as “thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.” Evidently, Jesus has been given authority to restructure the arrangements of angels as well as being the agent for the creation of the body of Christ on earth, the Church. This is the thought as we soon shall see in Hebrews 1 where the angels are told to worship the Son. It is also the thought that Peter mentions in 1 Peter 3:21-22 where, after “the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to him,” it is the new Messianic order that God has brought in through Christ the Son that is under discussion. Just before his ascension into heaven at the Father’s right hand of power, Jesus declared that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). His resurrection has brought Jesus a new status, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:21).

All of this is to reiterate that this hymn of praise concerns the *new order* of things that now exists since the resurrection of the Son. An eschatological shift of the ages has begun with Christ’s exaltation to the Father’s right hand. God has “put all things in subjection under his [the resurrected Christ’s] feet” (Eph. 1:22). Paul repeats this thought in the next chapter of Colossians: “and he is the head over [or of] all rule and authority” (Col. 2:10). In the words we looked at in Philippians 2, God has rewarded Jesus’

obedient death on the cross by highly exalting him, and bestowing on him “the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:8-10).

It is highly significant that in verse 18 Jesus attains to a supreme position, meaning that he did not have it already. Thus he cannot have preexisted as God. If he did his final status would be more of a demotion than the promotion described by Paul.

The phrase “first-born of all creation” is “to be understood in terms of a thoroughgoing eschatology...Because God acted like this in the end in Christ, He was already able to create the whole creation in him, through him and for him.”¹²⁵ Kuschel is quite clear that “first-born of all creation” is a statement about the rank of Christ before (over) all that is created.¹²⁶ Christ is the head of a new dynasty, a new Kingdom.

These ascriptions of supreme authority to Christ, under God, suggest that when Christ came to be seated at the right hand of God, he — in turn — set up, or created, a new system of rulership among the angelic beings as well as preparing a place of honour and service within his Father’s household for all his faithful people, both in this age and in the age to come (John 14:2-3). All of this is then part of “the new creation.” It is this *new* creation that I understand to be the subject of Colossians 1:15-17. If this view is correct, the personal preexistence of Christ is not at all the subject of our text, contrary to popular interpretation.¹²⁷

It is worth highlighting at this juncture an important point of (mis)translation that has led to the erroneous idea that Jesus created the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1. The King James Version says in verse 16 that “**by** him all things were created.” This is not what Paul wrote. The correct translation is the one we have given above, namely that it is “**in** him [*en auto*] all things were created.” The difference in intention is huge. The old KJV version would have us believe that Christ was the agent of the Genesis creation of the heavens and the earth, that he was the instrument of creation,

¹²⁵ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 335.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

¹²⁷ William Wachtel, “Colossians 1:15-20 — Preexistence or Preeminence?” a paper presented at the Atlanta Bible College Theological Conference, April 2004, p. 4.

that he was personally present before the world began. Reputable Greek scholars such as J.H. Moulton in *Grammar of New Testament Greek* say that Colossians 1:16 should be rendered “for **because of** him [Jesus].”¹²⁸ The *Expositor’s Greek Commentary* says on this verse: “*en auto*: This does not mean ‘by him.’”¹²⁹ By wisdom, which later “became” Christ Jesus, all things were created. This is simply to say that Jesus is the reason for creation. The end of verse 16 says as much again: “all things have been created through him and for him,” that is, with a view to him. Christ the Son of God, now exalted, is the agent or mediator of the new creation that God is bringing into being.

This is why “he is **before all things**, and in him all things hold together” (v. 17). But what does “before” mean here: “He is **before all things**”? The Greek word *pro* can mean before in the sense of place, meaning “in front of,” or it can mean before in the sense of time, meaning “prior to,” or it can mean before in the sense of “above all,” meaning most important of all. The NASB translation has a marginal note here that would encourage us to believe Christ’s preexistence is alluded to; its margin reads, “Or, *has existed prior to*” all things. But is this correct? This very same phrase “before all things” (Greek *pro panton*) occurs in other places such as in 1 Peter 4:8 where Peter writes, “Above all [*pro panton*], keep fervent in your love for one another.” Here “above all things” has nothing to do with time or place, but everything to do with how Christian love is preeminent above all other virtues. So, before we settle on which meaning best fits “before” here in Colossians 1:17, we should note the present tense of the verb “is.” This must not be rushed over. It does *not* say Christ “*was* before all things”! Personal preexistence is not under discussion here. This is confirmed in the next verse: “He is also head of the body, the church; and he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that he himself might come to have **first place** in everything” (v. 18).

The theme is preeminence of rank in the new creation. Christ *is* before all things in the defined sense of having *first place* in everything. Just so the point is not missed on the reader, Paul doubly emphasizes this new position of power over all by adding

¹²⁸ J.H. Moulton, ed., *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, T & T Clark, 1963.

¹²⁹ Nicoll Robertson, *The Expositor’s Greek Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967.

the personal pronoun to the verb: “so that **he himself** might come to have first place in everything.”

I love the Old Testament story of how Joseph was taken after years of suffering and humiliation and exalted by Pharaoh to the first place in Egypt. The story suggests a beautiful type/parallel with Christ being exalted by his God and Father to being His righthand man in His Kingdom. Pharaoh announces to Joseph:

“You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.” And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand, and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen, and put the gold necklace around his neck. And he had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, “Bow the knee!” And he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt” (Ex. 41:40-44).

What a beautiful picture of the kind of prominence and place of honour God has exalted the Lord Jesus to. This was not a position Christ had by always being God from eternity. Jesus is “the first-born from the dead; **so that** he himself might **come** to have first place in everything.” His is a conferred authority, given to him by the Father as Scripture everywhere attests. “Christ only gained the status as ‘pre-eminent in all things’ as a consequence of his resurrection...When it talks about Christ’s primacy in relation to ‘all things’ we are to think first and foremost of the risen and exalted Christ [not a previously existing Christ before creation in time].”¹³⁰

As the supreme Lord of God’s new creation order, as the “*chief-born*” from the dead, there is a day coming when his voice will awaken the dead and call all of God’s faithful ones to enter the life of the New Age to come. Only in the throne is God his Father greater than the Son. No wonder the author can say “it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him” (v. 19). There is no limit to the measure of the working of God’s Spirit and plan being executed through him. God’s love and wisdom is so totally identified with Jesus, and particularly in the cross through

¹³⁰ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 191.

which God has reconciled all things to Himself (v. 20), that in Christ we actually see the very power and wisdom and love by which God created and by which He sustains the world. Christ represents what God is. He “embodies without remainder the outreaching love of God, reflects as clearly as is possible the character of the one God.”¹³¹ Exalted to the right hand of God’s very throne Christ now exercises the practical functions of the Deity. As Dunn says, this Colossians hymn tells us that “*Christ now reveals the character of the power behind the world...Christ defines what is the wisdom, the creative power of God — he is the fullest and clearest expression of God’s wisdom (we could almost say its archetype).*”¹³² And perhaps even clearer:

Once again then we have found that what at first reads as a straightforward assertion of Christ’s preexistent activity in creation becomes on closer analysis an assertion which is rather more profound — not of Christ as such present with God in the beginning, nor of Christ as identified with a preexistent hypostasis or divine being (Wisdom) beside God, but *of Christ as embodying and expressing (and defining) that power of God which is the manifestation of God in and to his creation.*¹³³

In conclusion, the Colossians hymn is not making a statement about the act of creation in the *past*, but is rather about creation as believers are to see it *now* in the light of Christ’s new status as resurrected Lord. “The hymn is not concerned to make either a statement about preexistence or a statement about the earthly life of the Son, but a statement about the significance of the Son for the community in the present.”¹³⁴

Hebrews Chapter One

One other NT passage is readily appealed to in order to prove that Jesus Christ is Almighty God. It is Hebrews 1. In this chapter, when isolated from its context, individual phrases seem to justify this Trinitarian interpretation. These phrases are: “through whom also He made the world” (v. 2); “And let all the angels of God worship him” (v. 6); “But of the Son He says, ‘Your throne, O God,

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹³⁴ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 356.

is forever and ever”(v. 8); “You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands; they will perish, but you remain...You are the same, and your years will not come to an end” (v. 10, 12). Read in isolation — out of context — these verses seem to say that Jesus is (Jehovah) God. Is this interpretation justified? Many expositors think not. Kuschel is adamant that we do not have to “interpret the Christology of Hebrews in such extremely ontological terms (in the light of Nicea!).”¹³⁵ (Ontology is the study of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being.) Kuschel comments that “the majority of exegetes” do not now assume “an extremely developed Hellenistic-syncretistic Christ-myth as a background to Hebrews, nor are dilemmas foisted on the text. *Material from the Hellenistic Jewish tradition is thought enough to explain the Christology of Hebrews.*”¹³⁶ In other words, we are cautioned not to read back into the text what later traditions have taught us.

Although debate has centred around who the actual author to the Hebrews is, we note that his whole literary skill and theological argumentation is indebted to the world of Old Testament ideas. The reason why the book of Hebrews was first written was to encourage believers who were undergoing fierce persecution to remain loyal to Christ. These believers were Jewish converts to Christ and they must be encouraged to see the superiority of Christ over the old Jewish system of things. Christ is superior to the angels (who had mediated the old covenant); he is superior to Abraham, Moses and Joshua. Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood and Temple rituals and sacrifices. This superiority rests in the fact that Jesus is the resurrected Son of God, not that he is Almighty God. If Jesus is the Almighty in human form, then the author could have saved himself a lot of ink and papyrus. All he needed to do was write that Jesus is superior to all because He is God. End of argument. But the opening verses of Hebrews allow no such interpretation. They run like this: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (v. 1-3).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 355, emphasis added.

Dunn believes Hebrews 1:1-3 is parallel to Colossians 1:15-17, which as we have just seen is written with eschatology in mind, not protology. This contention is justified because it is explicitly stated that the end-time has already dawned; it is “these last days” that are in view. We are again looking at the eschatological shift of the ages with the appearance of Christ. Under the old covenant God spoke in various portions and in various ways to the fathers in the prophets. In contrast, He now speaks through a Son. One of the ways God spoke in those days was also through the mediation of angels (see Heb. 2:2). This means, amongst other things, that God’s message to Israel was not through a preexistent Son who was an angel, as Jehovah’s Witnesses believe (they teach that Jesus was Michael the archangel). Nor can it mean — as many Trinitarians think — that Jesus was the “the angel of the LORD” who appeared on numerous OT occasions. Nor indeed can it mean, according to later Nicene “orthodoxy,” that God spoke to the fathers in Old Testament days through a preexistent Son. For the opening verses of Hebrews testify that before the birth of Jesus there was no Son of God as God’s messenger to men. It is axiomatic that in the Old Testament God did not speak through the Son. Bluntly then: “What emerges from the first two verses of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus was not God’s agent to Israel in Old Testament times.”¹³⁷

The Son — through whom God has in these end-times spoken — has been “**appointed** heir of all things” (v. 2). This language of the delegation of all authority to Jesus as Son reminds us of the many times Jesus said that his authority was given to him (John 5:22, 26-27). And just when was this authority, this appointment given to him? It was given to him after his resurrection as the reward for his obedience (see Acts 2:36; Phil. 2:9-11; Rom. 1:4; Acts 17:31).

Then comes the statement that through this appointed heir of all things God “made the world” (v. 2). The old KJV translation has “through whom He made the worlds.” Again, the way this is translated predisposes our tradition-bound minds to run along a well-worn rut. We tend to immediately think of the Genesis creation at the beginning of the universe. But the word used for “worlds” here is the word for “ages” (it is the word from which we get our English word *eon/s*). The writer is not speaking of the Genesis

¹³⁷ Buzzard and Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 73.

creation of the heavens and the earth. He is speaking about time periods, epochs. In Jewish thinking there were classically two great ages. The first is the present and evil age. The next will be the Messianic age to come. And Hebrews 1:2 is speaking of the world — or more precisely — the Messianic age to come. He goes on to tell us that through Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross a new way has been opened up for us to enter the new earth and the new heavens of the future Messianic Kingdom when it dawns.

This “appointed heir of all things” is the agent, the mediator *through* (*dia*) whom God has — in prospect — brought about the new Messianic age. The eschatological Son “is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (v. 3).

The eschatological context and the present participles used in these statements (literally: he, being reflection and stamp) make it clear that here there can be no question of any protological statement about preexistence or a statement about the earthly life of the Son, but a statement about the significance of the Son for the community in the present.¹³⁸

The Christology of the immediate context...[indicates] *the author is thinking primarily of the exalted Christ*: Christ is the Son who is the eschatological climax (“in these last days”) to all God’s earlier and more fragmentary revelation (v. 1-2a); that climactic revelation focuses on his sacrifice for sins, and exaltation to God’s right hand (v. 3d-e).¹³⁹

In other words, there is not any intimation here in this end-time context that Christ is seen as the preexistent God the Son, second member of the Trinity. True, this Son now “upholds all things by the word of his power” (v. 3b). But it is the new creation — the Messianic age — that is held together by his (authorized and delegated) power. In the Messianic Kingdom everything will be based on Christ’s word and teaching (note that whoever in this present and adulterous generation is “ashamed of me **and my words**” will not share in the glory when Jesus comes as per Mark 8:38). Without Christ and his word of the Kingdom there is no Messianic Age to uphold.

And in that new age even the angels will worship the Son, for he has “**become** as much better than the angels, as he has **inherited**

¹³⁸ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 356.

¹³⁹ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 208, emphasis original.

a more excellent name than they” (v. 4). This is what the Father had decreed through the prophets long ago (v. 5). If there is any doubt that Christ the Son will be worshipped in that glorious new age the author dispels such a question by promising that “when He [God] again brings the first-born into the world, He says, ‘And let all the angels of God worship him’” (v. 6). At the Second Coming the Father’s decree will become history. Every knee, whether in heaven or on earth, will pay homage to the Son (see Ps. 2:12). Jesus will then “sit on the throne of his glory” (Matt. 25:31). This worship of Jesus the Son does not make him Almighty God: Later in Hebrews 2 Jesus is seen leading his “brethren” — the redeemed church — in the (ultimate) worship of God the Father (Heb. 2:12-13). This act of (relative) worship of Jesus by the angels will honour the Father, for it is His will they do this (Phil. 2:9-11). Then the ultimate act of Jesus’ own worship of God the Father will be “when he delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when he has abolished all rule and all authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24). When all things are subjected to Christ, including the angelic hosts, “then the Son himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). “As representing the divine majesty of the Father, the messianic title ‘god’ will be applied to Jesus, as it once was to the judges of Israel who foreshadowed the supreme Judge of Israel, the Messiah (Ps. 82:6).”¹⁴⁰

Jehovah’s designation of His Son as “God” in the quotation from Psalm 45, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (v. 8) “is not speculation about divine nature from preexistence theology, but an interpretation of the statements which relate to the exalted Christ (‘reflection’ and ‘stamp’).”¹⁴¹ In other words, the Christology of Hebrews is not really a preexistence Christology but primarily a Christology of exaltation. The author is not concerned with primal time, but with the status of Christ as regent in the present which ensures our salvation. The foundations of the new Messianic age — the new heavens and the new earth — will be firmly laid on Messiah’s throne:

¹⁴⁰ Anthony Buzzard, *Who Is Jesus? A Plea for a Return to Belief in Jesus, the Messiah*, Restoration Fellowship, p. 24.

¹⁴¹ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 356.

You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands; they will perish, but you remain, and they all will become old as a garment, and as a mantle you will roll them up. As a garment they will also be changed. But you are the same, and your years will not come to an end (v. 10-12).

It has been argued that since these words quoted from Psalm 102 where their original reference is to Jehovah are now applied to the risen Son, then Jesus must be Jehovah. If we are not careful to follow the original intention of the writer it would be easy to see how these verses can be misread to mean that the Lord Messiah is the one who originally created the universe. But if we turn back to Psalm 102, the author's reference point, we will quickly understand that the Psalmist is also speaking about the coming Messianic age of the Kingdom which is to be centred in Jerusalem. This is a prophecy that "will be **written for the generation to come; that a people yet to be created** may praise the LORD" (Ps. 102:18).

The Psalmist anticipates the day when Jerusalem will be restored under Messiah. This will be an age when "the nations will fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth Your glory" (Ps. 102:15). It will be a day "when the peoples are gathered together, and the kingdoms, to serve the LORD" (Ps. 102:22). This Messianic agent through whom God will speak will be the one "to establish [literally, 'plant'] the heavens; to found the earth, and to say to Zion, 'You are my people'" (Is. 51:16). The *Word Bible Commentary* says of these verses:

This makes no sense if it refers to the original (Genesis) creation...In other instances God acts alone using no agent (Isa. 44:24). Here the one he has hidden in his hand is his agent. Heavens and land here refers metaphorically to the totality of order in Palestine. Heaven means the broader overarching structure of the empire, while "land" is the political order in Palestine itself.¹⁴²

All of which is to emphasize again that the series of truths being mentioned in these verses in Hebrews 1 refer to the time when God re-introduces His now glorified Son, His "first-born into the world" (Heb. 1:6). If there is still any doubt that this is the correct interpretation the writer states in Hebrews 2: "For He did not subject

¹⁴² *Word Bible Commentary*.

to angels **the world to come, concerning which we are speaking**" (v. 5).

All of the prophetic announcements of Hebrews 1 relate to the Messianic age to come! His concern is not with the old Genesis creation but with the new world in mind. Hebrews 1 speaks about the Son being the king of Israel, and mentions a throne, a scepter and a Kingdom with no end. He is speaking of "the good things to come...that is to say, **not of this creation**" (Heb. 9:11)! In that Messianic age when the Son sits on his throne, he still has One above him whom he calls his "God": "Therefore God, **your God**, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions" (Heb. 1:9).

Putting it another way, to make Hebrews 1:8-10 mean that Jesus is Jehovah God just because he is called God, is to create massive problems for Trinitarians. The reason is that it specifically states that the Son *has a God* who anointed him. If Jesus is (Almighty) God and has a God above him, then there are two Gods! This is an utter impossibility to the writers of the Scriptures.

Once again, we note that eschatology is the great factor in properly understanding the truths set forth in Hebrews 1. The writer to the Hebrews, and indeed all the writers of the New Testament, understand that by his exaltation, Jesus now stands so close to God that he exercises many of the divine prerogatives. Furthermore, the writer to the Hebrews is able to hold both the present age and the future age together in a present, unresolved tension. Although we do not now see all things subjected to the New Man we do by faith see Jesus as the Lord of that new day (Heb. 2:8-9). We are exhorted to hold this confession firmly to the end (Heb. 4:14). One day, on that Day, we shall enter into his inheritance as co-rulers with him. In the meantime, the tension between imminence and delay in the expectation of the end is characteristic of the entire biblical eschatology. This may not be the thought pattern of the modern scientifically trained mind. But unless we seek to think with the first-century Hebrew mind behind this book, we will do it violence by forcing into it modern analytical categories that miss the point altogether. As Anthony Buzzard challenges us with these words:

The writer must be allowed to provide his own commentary. His concern is with the Messianic Kingdom, not the creation in Genesis. Because we do not share the Messianic vision of the New Testament as we ought, our tendency is to

look back rather than forward. We must attune ourselves to the thoroughly Messianic outlook of the entire Bible.¹⁴³

Mighty God, Everlasting Father

The evidence so far considered — particularly from John 1, Philippians 2, Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 — leads us to state with confidence that the united witness of the New Testament does not justify the traditional belief that Jesus the Messiah existed consciously in heaven as God the Son before his birth in time on earth. What they do show is that the Messiah promised in the Old Testament would be a human being so anointed by the Spirit of God that through him God would usher in a new age of redemption and glory. So radical is this salvation that it is thought of in terms of a new creation affecting the whole sphere of existence on earth and indeed in heaven. The Messiah's coming would be the fulcrum of history, so pivotal that it could be spoken of as a shifting of the ages. This Coming One would combine in his person the offices of prophet, priest and king. He would represent the one God perfectly and fully. The fullness of God's wisdom and power would dwell in him bodily. To have seen him would be to have seen God whose Spirit he possessed in full measure. This, of course, is nothing other than what the prophets had predicted long before.

In this light, two great OT predictions from Isaiah 9 and Micah 5 must now be examined as we bring this chapter to a close. It will become evident that these texts have been traditionally mishandled when used to teach the full Deity of Christ. To do them justice, we must discover the meaning the original authors intended.

The first reads thus: "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on his shoulders; and his name will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

Written about 750 to 800 years before Jesus was born, this prophecy tells of a child to be born and a son to be given. Traditional Christian theology wants us to believe he is the second member of the Godhead because he is called "Mighty God, Eternal Father." A number of difficulties present themselves if this traditional interpretation is to hold. Firstly, the appellation "Mighty God" (Hebrew *el gibbor*) is defined by the leading Hebrew lexicon

¹⁴³ Anthony Buzzard, *Who Is Jesus?* p. 124.

as “divine hero, reflecting the divine majesty.”¹⁴⁴ It refers to “men of might and rank, as well as to angels.” It is instructive to observe that the Jewish translators of the Septuagint (LXX) described the Messiah simply as the “messenger of mighty counsel.” Another recognized Hebrew authority defines *gibbor* as warrior, tyrant, champion, giant, valiant man, mighty man.¹⁴⁵ These authorities tell us that *gibbor* when used in association with God means a regal warrior with the attributes of God. In Ezekiel 31:11 where the NASB translates the word as “a despot” the margin says, “or, *mighty one*.” In Ezekiel 32 the phrase pops up again but the translators of our English Bibles wisely translate it as “the mighty ones” because it refers to men (v. 21). Again in Ezekiel 17 God says He has taken away “the mighty of the land” (v. 13).

The term “Mighty God” is a royal title. The next verse in Isaiah 9 agrees with this definition. Messiah will reign on David’s throne. He will rule with justice and righteousness forever because of the zeal of the LORD of hosts. Isaiah carefully distinguishes between this Messiah and his God, not only in these verses but throughout the rest of his book (e.g. Is. 49:5 where Messiah calls the LORD “my God”). In any case, Isaiah did not write — as many misquote him — that the child to be born, the son to be given would be called **Al**-mighty God! That would have been a different Hebrew word altogether — *el shaddai* — used exclusively of Jehovah.

Isaiah’s next description of the coming Son is “everlasting Father.” If Trinitarians are to be consistent when saying that the term “mighty God” proves Jesus is God, then this appellation “everlasting Father” proves Jesus is God the Father, an argument which proves too much! (Some actually say this. They are called modalists. This simply cannot be for it would mean that Jesus is the father of himself!) But once again, this kind of literalism proves too much and is not in keeping with the Jewish author’s mind or culture. Here is a common idiom in Hebrew thinking, as a little reflection will show. Kings were called fathers of their nation. A few chapters later in Isaiah God calls His servant Eliakim “a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah” (Is. 22:20). God promises to invest Eliakim the king with a royal robe and entrust

¹⁴⁴ Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 42.

¹⁴⁵ *Strong's Hebrew Dictionary*.

him with kingly authority (Is. 22:21). Abraham is called “our father Abraham” (Rom. 4:1, 12, 16) because he is the progenitor of the Hebrew race.

The word “eternal” here does not necessarily mean what it does to us moderns either. “Eternal” to our ears means eternity past, present and future, forever and forever. But to Hebrew minds it may carry the idea of being related to the (future) age. In accordance with its Hebrew usage, Isaiah’s promise is that the future Son will be the progenitor of the coming age of the Kingdom of God. According to the Hebrew Lexicon the word “eternal” in Isaiah 9:6 means “forever (of future time).”¹⁴⁶ According to Strong’s *Dictionary* the word is defined as “duration, in the sense of advance or perpetuity,” and Strong’s *Concordance* gives the primary definition as “perpetuity, for ever, continuing future.”¹⁴⁷ In harmony with these meanings, the Septuagint (in the Alexandrian version) gives Messiah’s title as “father of the age to come.”¹⁴⁸ The Catholic Douay-Rheims Version of the Bible interestingly calls Messiah here “the father of the world to come.”¹⁴⁹ The same word is used in Psalm 37: “The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it **forever**” (v. 29). This cannot mean that the righteous existed from eternity, never having a beginning. The clear intention is that the righteous will never have an end. Clearly, the promised Messiah is the “everlasting father” of the world to come, since both he and the righteous (children) will live forever.

A Ruler from Eternity

The second well-known OT prophecy traditionally used to indicate that Jesus is the eternal God reads: “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you one will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity” (Micah 5:2).

Many Trinitarians allege that this is clear proof that Jesus is the eternal God. Certainly, this is a remarkable prophecy of the coming

¹⁴⁶ Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

¹⁴⁷ *Strong’s Concordance*.

¹⁴⁸ *Codex Alexandrinus*, as translated by Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton and Septuagint translation by Archimandrite Ephrem Lash.

¹⁴⁹ See also *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, p. 326.

birth of Messiah. But does it teach that a personally preexistent Jesus is God Himself because it says “his goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity”? Someone who steps out of “the days of eternity” into history must surely be a member of the Godhead? The phrase “days of eternity” (Heb. *y'may olam*) occurs just a few chapters later in Micah 7. Here God’s people are promised they will “feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old” (v. 14). Nobody would understand the same phrase to mean God’s people used to feed well in eternity. The same expression is found in Deuteronomy 32: “Remember the days of old; consider the years of all generations. Ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you” (Deut. 32:7).

The phrase “remember the days of old” (*y'may olam*) cannot mean remember from eternity, for it is instructing the Israelites to recall days that their fathers and leaders knew. This same meaning is found in Isaiah 45:21; 63:9, 11; Amos 9:11, etc. In none of these instances can it mean “eternity.” Those translations which say that the coming ruler of Israel’s “goings forth are from the days of eternity” are quite unfortunate. The prophet did not suggest that Jesus was going to step out of a personal preexistence from eternity past, but simply that *the promise* of the Messiah’s emergence in Bethlehem is from “the days of old,” that is, it can be traced to remote antiquity — way back to the very beginning of human history in fact, when God promised Eve that her “seed” would crush the tempter’s head (Gen. 3:15).

Conclusion

I remember as a lad of 17 years of age travelling to Hong Kong. I have a beautiful uncle and aunty who generously paid for my mother, my brother and me to travel overseas for the first time. The culture shock in that oriental place blew my young mind away. Of the many images that confronted me, there is one I shall never forget. On a church wall high up on a mountain in the New Territories, near the Chinese border, was painted Jesus the Christ. He was Chinese — with full pig-tail and traditional Chinese dress!

It strikes me that we humans are quite adept at constructing Jesus in our own image. Not only has the historical Jesus of Nazareth been metamorphosed under the influence of Hellenism into the “God-man,” but his own mother Mary has been promoted to the status of “Mother of God” and “co-redemptrix,” and the saints

have become intercessors. But of the greatest consequence has been the invented doctrine of the Incarnation, where the Eternal God Himself is supposed to have taken on flesh and become man. This development has had disastrous consequences for the Biblical testimony to the unity and uniqueness of God. Don Cupitt remarks that once this doctrine of the Incarnation of a preexisting Son of God was created, the cult of the divine Christ actually put the Deity Himself into the background, for when God the Father was affirmed, He was envisaged in anthropomorphic terms. The door to paganism had been unwittingly reopened. However well-intentioned, the focus of worship had been shifted from God to man. This shift would eventually legitimize the cult of humanism. Deity would slide into the background. The “otherness” of God would be lost — or as the theologians call it, the transcendence of God. His “holiness,” His “awesomeness” would become manageable and comfortable. God is now a man!¹⁵⁰

The correct Christology — “the rock” on which his true Church is founded according to Jesus himself — is Peter’s confession that he is the Messiah, the son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). Luke records Peter’s confession with a slight, but powerful, variation; he says that Jesus is “the Christ of God” (Luke 9:20). In the Greek NT there is a definite article before “God.” To be boldly literal, Peter confessed that Jesus is “the Messiah of the [one true] God.”

Does it follow that the failure to maintain the Biblical confession that Jesus is the Lord Messiah — and not the Lord God — has fostered in some kind of an inverted way the rampant secularism of our age? For now the Almighty and Everlasting God has assumed human form and the ultimate mystery and unity of God has collapsed into a concept of agreeable human proportions, namely, our little “self.” In making Jesus fully God, did we make man God? This trend can be observed in the development of art from the fourth century onwards. The Jewish-Christian taboo against depicting God in any shape was forgotten. The result was a focusing of attention on Jesus and away from God’s “otherness.” Our sense of awe in worship, that which should take our breath away so to speak, was severely compromised. Christian art prior to Constantine was hesitant, but after Constantine it became quite elaborate. The Church made Jesus more than he ever was meant to

¹⁵⁰ Don Cupitt, *The Myth of God Incarnate*.

be, and in the process demoted the Father God he came to reveal. Jesus himself would very well ask us today, as he did the young man long ago, “Why do you call me good? There is none good but God” (Luke 18:19). And even now, exalted by his Father’s throne in heaven, Jesus *still* worships the Father as the One who “**alone** is holy” (Rev. 15:4). It is these who so worship the Father through His Son who are the “true worshippers” (John 4:23).

The evidence of both Old and New Testaments, when interpreted with the Hebrew background in mind, does not lend any support to the traditional belief of a personally preexisting (Nicene) Christ, who is “God of very God” or the eternally generated Son. Nor does the evidence lend any support to the Arian Christ who was created by God back somewhere in eternity before the world began. Jesus is the man who was born in time. His origin or genesis was in the virgin Mary’s womb, begotten by special creative act of God the Father. For *this reason precisely*, Jesus is the Son of God (Luke 1:35), the King whom God authorizes. The Hebrew prophets predicted that Messiah would be born of human “seed” or stock and under God’s anointing would bring about a new, redeemed and glorified order. The New Testament announces that the risen and exalted Lord Jesus has inaugurated the promised shift of the ages. In short, these results prove that “a deep hiatus between the biblical evidence and classical dogmatics can no longer be concealed.”¹⁵¹

The Jewish scholar Hugh Schonfield in his book *Those Incredible Christians* summarizes our chapter beautifully. He writes that the doctrine of the Deity of Jesus Christ:

is diametrically opposed to the Jewish concept of God at the time Jesus lived, and no one being a Jew, subscribing to the Hebrew Scriptures, and seeking acceptance by Jews, would be likely to present himself in such a contrary character. Taken with the evidence that the doctrine was agreeable to current heathen notions the obvious inference is that it was an intrusion from Gentile sources and not fundamental...It was alien in its derivation and Jesus himself could not have entertained it. Early Gospel material shows him exercising all the extreme care of the devout Jew in guarding the name

¹⁵¹ Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 39.

of God from profanation and representing Him as the sole Being to be worshipped and described as good.¹⁵²

To object to this conclusion is not just a matter of doctrinal nuance. The witness of history confirms it. As late as the second century the advocates of this view (that Jesus was the human Lord Messiah and not the eternal Son, second member of the Triune Godhead) could still point out that this was the original belief held “by all the first Christians and by the Apostles themselves.”¹⁵³ It was fatal to the doctrine of the Deity of Jesus that his own apostles and the Christian members of his family had held that he was no more than a man uniquely anointed from birth by the Spirit of God, thus being the Messiah. What also counts for so much is the witness of the ecclesiastical historians that these original apostles and elders and relations of Jesus were the spokesmen of the Jewish Christianity with jurisdiction over the whole Church (before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70). “It was not, as its proponents alleged, Jewish Christianity which debased the person of Jesus, but the Church in general which was misled into deifying him.”¹⁵⁴

The authors of *The Jesus Mysteries* support Hugh Schonfield’s conclusion by making the shocking claim that failure to account for this foreign take-over of the Church’s doctrine of Jesus the Christ has left the Church unwittingly in the midst of a pagan mythology. They thoroughly document the many instances of peoples and cultures of antiquity surrounding the Mediterranean who had a plethora of beliefs in supposed god-men who had come to earth to redeem mankind. Every single one of these redeemer-godmen myths predates Christianity. Osiris of Egypt was believed to be of divine origin. “He represented to men the idea of a man who was both God and man.” In fact, “The Egyptian myth of Osiris is the primal myth of the mystery god-man and reaches back to prehistory. His story is so ancient that it can be found in pyramid texts written over 4,500 years ago!”¹⁵⁵ The Greeks also had their god-man in Dionysus, who predates the Christian era by hundreds of years. In one ancient Greek play Dionysus explains that he has veiled his

¹⁵² Hugh Schonfield, *Those Incredible Christians*, New York: Bantam Books, 1968, p. 50.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁵⁵ Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the Original Jesus a Pagan God?* pp. 27, 30.

Godhead in a mortal shape in order to make it manifest to mortal men. He tells his disciples, "That is why I have changed my immortal form and taken the likeness of man."¹⁵⁶ The Persians' god-man was called Mithras. The Babylonians, the Romans, the Syrians and many other ancient peoples all had their own pagan god-man mysteries. As already indicated, these god-man myths were ubiquitous long before Jesus of Nazareth appeared. Christians who are of the opinion that Jesus is the God-man Redeemer who is unique among the faiths are simply ill-informed.

Such history adds great weight to our contention that the Church abandoned its Hebrew foundation and quickly absorbed paganism into its teaching about the nature of Jesus of Nazareth. At the Council of Nicea in 325 AD Christianity adopted its own version of a "God-man" who was modeled on these already existing pagan myths. Now it is time for those wishing to remain faithful to the Bible to drop the use of the term "God-man" and its attendant teaching. The word "God-man" and all that goes with it does not appear in the New Testament. We must insist on the Biblical understanding of Jesus as the uniquely begotten/created man of God who belongs to the same family as Adam and Abraham, Moses and David. This man by his righteousness has been raised to immortality and exalted to God's right hand as the first glorified *man*. This is something totally unique and different from all other beliefs about god-men.

By remaining faithful to the Biblical pattern we have discussed throughout this chapter the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth will be preserved. Here is the wonder of our faith: At God's right hand is a true man, a real man, a man just like you and me! He is the perfect demonstration of all that God the Father can do through a man totally yielded to His will and filled with His Holy Spirit.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.