

Chapter 7

If Only We Had Listened to Gabriel

“The holy spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; for that reason the holy child will be called the Son of God” (Gabriel, Luke 1:35).

“‘For that reason he will be called the Son of God.’ Calling brings to expression what one is, so that it means no less than ‘he will be.’ Interchangeability of the two phrases is seen by comparing Matthew 5:9, ‘they will be *called* sons of God’ and Luke 6:35, ‘you will *be* sons of the Most High.’”¹

“The miraculous genesis of Christ in the virgin and a real preexistence of Christ are of course mutually exclusive.”²

“Some key phrases like ‘Son of God’ continued in use throughout while their meaning was gradually shifting and this helped to disguise the development which was taking place.”³

In John 10:36 Jesus spoke of his own history: “The Father made him holy and sent him into the world.” With this simple account our other gospels agree perfectly. The supernatural coming into existence of the Son of God constituted him a uniquely holy human being and

¹Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 289.

²Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Dover Publications, 1961, 1:105.

³Don Cupitt, *The Debate About Christ*, SCM Press, 1979, 119. Within the New Testament the title Son of God is stable and means the Messiah. After Bible times, from the second century, a gradual shift in meaning led to the loss of Jesus’ identity as Messiah, Son of God.

thus Son of God in a matchless way. As Son of God, God's final agent, he was sent by his Father on the mission of preaching the saving Gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 4:43).

Hebrew prophecy had announced the birth of Messiah in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). God had "raised up" Jesus, that is, put him on the scene of history,⁴ and then sent him as His commissioned agent to deliver the Gospel to Israel (Acts 3:26). This verse should put to rest any suggestion that if God "sent" Jesus it must mean that Jesus was alive and conscious before his conception. Peter says that God first produced the Messiah and then sent him as His authorized representative and prophet. The detail of just how Jesus, God's Son, came to be is the subject also of the united and definitive testimony of Matthew and Luke, who provide by far the longest and most detailed accounts of the origin of the Son of God. Both writers intend to anchor the origin of the Son of God firmly in history. And these writers provide the basic ABCs of Christian theology and are rightly placed at the beginning of our canon.

Neither Matthew nor Luke presents us with a theological problem of vast proportions needing armies of theologians to provide an explanation. The biblical accounts describe the Son of God as the object of age-old Jewish promises — that a biological descendant of the royal house of David would appear as God's instrument for the salvation of Israel and the world. Commentators are so accustomed to thinking of the Son as eternal God Himself that they instinctively imagine that Luke and Matthew agree with them. A writer of a tract on "Who Is Jesus?" tells us that "Luke teaches that the origins of Jesus' *human life* were supernatural." He does not observe that Luke describes the origin of the *person*, the Son of God himself whose life began at conception. There is not the slightest hint that Jesus is other than human originating from his mother. Our writer claims Christ was "to be confessed as Lord and God," but he gives no text from Luke or Acts in support of that amazing statement. He thinks that "Mary's son was called the Son of the Highest by the angel because that is who he was from eternity." But Luke and Gabriel say nothing of the sort. Quite to the contrary, Gabriel links the miracle in Mary expressly to Jesus being and originating as the Son of God. The Son of God is

⁴Not inserted into history from outside of history as an already existing being.

entitled to that designation because God was his father by biological miracle (Luke 1:35). No other reason is supplied, and it is quite unnecessary to imagine any other origin for the Son of God. Luke 1:35 is a complete statement about the basis for Jesus being God's Son. But later theology introduced a fatally complicating element into these innocent accounts.

It is a relief to turn from the many tortuous attempts to make Luke and Gabriel into Trinitarians, to the far more scientific and factual accounts of Jesus found in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. The author approaches his subject from the Old Testament background: "There can be no disputing the link with the OT and Jewish picture of the Messiah. Of the OT Messiah Isaiah says that the spirit of counsel and strength rests upon Him (Isa. 11:2). He calls Him a mighty hero (9:6)."⁵ The dictionary happily corrects the mistranslation of some who attempt to read Trinitarian theology into Isaiah and describe the Messiah as "the Almighty God," thus presenting us with the amazing concept of a second Almighty God! Isaiah was speaking of a descendant of David who was to be *el gibbor*, mighty or divine hero.

The dictionary points also to Micah's prediction of the human Messiah: "Micah compares Him with a shepherd and says that He will tend His flock in the strength of the Lord (5:4)."⁶ Such a portrait prevents any idea that the Messiah will be God. He works in the power of one who is "*his* God" (Mic. 5:4). The same Messianic agent of God is described in the royal Psalm 110:2: "The Lord [Yahweh] will send the rod of your [Messiah's] royal strength out of Zion." Corroboration of this regal picture of the supernaturally endowed Messiah is found in writings half a century before the birth of Jesus. Psalms of Solomon 17:24, 42, 47 read:

And may God gird him to defeat unrighteous rulers, to purify Jerusalem of the heathen who trample it to destruction...God has made him strong in the holy spirit and wise in counsel with power and righteousness. And the good pleasure of the Lord is with him in strength and he will not be weak...Strong is he in his works and mighty in the fear of God.

⁵*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:299. Brown, Driver and Briggs translate this title as "divine hero reflecting the divine majesty" (*Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 42).

⁶*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:299.

The dictionary observes that:

in all these passages the picture of the Messiah is that of the King. The power granted to Him is victorious power to defeat His enemies. It is the power confessed by the king of Israel: "For who is strong save the Lord?...the mighty One who maketh me strong with strength...and maketh me mighty with strength to battle" (2 Sam. 22:32, 33, 40; cf. Ps. 18:32, 39). The king attributes his success in battle to the power which Yahweh has given him. Messiah is thought of as a king like this, endowed with the strength of Yahweh.⁷

Luke is excited by the picture of the Messiah and he reports the prophetic power of Jesus demonstrated in his ministry. The two disciples who walked with the risen Jesus on the way to Emmaus knew Jesus to be "a man, a prophet powerful in deed and in word" (Luke 24:19).⁸ The picture is that of a wonderful "new Moses." Moses was likewise "a man of power in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). What more does Luke tell us?

[Christ] is unique in His existence. His existence is peculiarly determined by the power of God. This is the most important feature in the Lucan infancy story...Luke is here describing the conception of Jesus as the miracle of the Virgin Birth...the divine miracle which causes pregnancy...In the background stands the biblical conception of the God who begets His Son by a verbal act which cannot be rationalised...For this reason the Son has a special name not borne by other men, namely, "Son of God"...At the beginning of His existence a special and unique act of divine power...gives Him the title "Son of God"...the linking of the Messianic title "Son of God" with the miracle of conception and birth.⁹

God has not left Himself without powerful witness both in the text of Scripture and in expert commentary. It must be obvious to any unprejudiced reader how far these sublime accounts are removed from the later paganized view of Jesus as an eternal Son of God, begotten in eternity, and entering the womb of his mother from a fully conscious existence as God, second member of the Trinity.

⁷Ibid.

⁸As the Greek reads literally.

⁹*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2: 300.

The Justification of Later Developments

Theological writings frequently tell us that the right definition of Jesus and his relationship to God was discovered only after centuries of painful intellectual struggle. The Bible however seems much more straightforward. It says nothing about a “mystery of the Trinity.” This came much later. *Post-biblical* writings invite us into a very different world of thought. J.S. Whale, in his *Christian Doctrine*, asks:

How did [the doctrine of the Trinity] come to be formulated, and why? What did it mean? As soon as the Church addressed itself to systematic doctrine it found itself wrestling with its fundamental axioms. I use the word “wrestling” deliberately, because those axioms were, on the face of them, mutually incompatible...The first was monotheism, the deep religious conviction that there is but one God, holy and transcendent, and that to worship anyone or anything else is idolatry. To Israel, and to the New Israel of the Christian Church, idolatry in all its forms was sin at its worst. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut. 6:4). “I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me” (Isa. 45:5). Monotheism was the living heart of the religion of the Old Testament; it was and is the very marrow of Christian divinity...The systematic thought of the Church inevitably involved *a further definition of monotheism*, an elaboration of the unitary conception of the Godhead, not in terms of Tritheism, but of tri-unity...Christian thought, working with the data of the New Testament and *using Greek philosophy as its instrument*, constructed the doctrine of Trinity in Unity...The popular view of the Trinity has often been a veiled Tritheism.¹⁰

This account is typical of the voluminous material published to inform us how the Trinity came into being. Unable to face the awful possibility that the Church distorted the New Testament rather than explaining it accurately, our writer speaks in low-key words of “a further definition of monotheism, an elaboration of the unitary conception of the Godhead.” At least he recognizes that the creed of Jesus was non-Trinitarian, but rather affirmed unitary monotheism.

¹⁰J.S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge University Press, 1952, 112, 115, 116, 118, emphasis added.

But does he deal fairly with the disaster which occurred when Jesus' own creed was tampered with? Why is it admissible to redefine the simple creed of the Bible? God is one. He is not three. One will not become three without a major restructuring of God and thus of the universe. The New Testament contains not a word about any "wrestling" with how many Persons in the universe can be called the supreme God. There are indeed struggles over issues of the Mosaic law and its application in the New Covenant. But no one amongst our apostolic writers ever broached the subject of a brand new definition of God, of monotheism. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New. He is the Creator and the Father of Jesus. No more needs to be said.

But the Gentile pagan mind did not want to submit itself to the Jewish creed of the Jewish founder of the Christian faith. The simplicity found in Jesus needed elaboration in terms of the philosophies of the Greek culture. Hence arose all the conflict over the identity of Jesus in relation to God.

Hence also the Church "wrestled," wrestled itself in fact most unwisely out of the perceived straitjacket of biblical monotheism, the very doctrine which would have spared it so much subsequent agony and division. Not to mention the appalling offense it presented to Jews and Muslims, an offense particularly galling to Jews whose Scriptures the Christians took over and then man-handled to avoid Israel's monotheism, while claiming not to!

Other authorities who comment on our topic are forthright about the facts, particularly if they are historians with less of a theological axe to grind. The 15th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* says: "Neither the word Trinity, nor the explicit doctrine as such, appears in the New Testament, *nor did Jesus and his followers intend to contradict the Shema of the Old Testament: 'The Lord our God is one Lord' (Deut. 6:4).*"¹¹

This fact is fundamentally important in view of the later Church departure from the creed, which Jesus, citing it verbatim in agreement with a Jewish scribe, certainly did not contradict! He affirmed it with all the emphasis he could muster. When the Church in post-biblical times no longer held on to the Shema as its creed, this caused Jews to have "the gravest doubts that with our doctrine of the Trinity we were

¹¹"Trinity," *Encyclopedia Britannica, Micropaedia Ready Reference*, 126.

still speaking of the one God.”¹² Since the Church did not find Jesus’ Shema adequate as a definition of God, it is clear that a different creed was felt necessary. Three however is not one. And no New Testament writer ever hinted that Greek philosophical language was a necessary aid to explaining the biblical creed. Paul alerted the Church to the danger of the pernicious effects of philosophy (Col. 2:8). And Jesus warned repeatedly that his words are the only safe guide to a proper relationship with God and himself.

It was the Gentile desire to develop a religion based not on a Jewish Savior, but, as was supposed, on a more imaginative and captivating universal figure, which led to the disaster by which the Jewish God and His unique human Savior were replaced. The casualty in the wars of words by which the Church tried to define God and Jesus in terms of Greek philosophy was Jesus himself. The “improved version” of the faith no doubt made its appeal to the pagan mind, prepared by concepts of divine cosmogony, but the Messianic figure of the Son of God and of David found in Scripture was obscured. The final result of the “demessianizing” of Jesus in favor of a paganized universal religious figure was the loss of the descendant of David himself, herald of the coming Kingdom of God on earth. As Martin Werner declared decisively it was a descent into darkness “behind which the historical Jesus completely disappeared.”¹³

No departure from the creed of Jesus should have been imagined as valid in any way. Jesus had rooted the Christian faith in the heart of Judaism. The Shema was Israel’s single and central dogma, to be clung to at all costs. Jesus as founder of the Christian religion should be heard and followed on this central theological issue.

Luke Calls Us Back to Messiah Jesus

New Testament Scripture provides its own built-in safeguards against any alteration in the understanding of who God and Jesus are. Laying his firm foundation in the originating facts of the faith, Luke supplies us with exactly what we need as the key to the identity of Jesus in relation to God. He reports Gabriel as announcing to Mary the birth of her unique son, who was also, by a biological miracle effected by the creative spirit of God, to be the *Son of God*.

¹²Paul van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, Harper & Row, 1983, 2:12.

¹³Werner, *Formation of Christian Dogma*, 298.

This simple record of Luke should have put an absolute stop to the idea that *more* than one Person was God. Gabriel's inspired explanation of the term "Son of God" blocks any suggestion that the Son was Son for some *other* reason than the historical miracle of begetting caused by the Father in Mary. Few verses are so explicit, so totally unambiguous. Few verses come packaged with their own built-in interpretation. Few verses are more crammed with clear theological definition. And few verses have suffered more at the hands of hostile commentary, either by being twisted or, more effectively, by simply being ignored.

I am referring to Luke 1:35, a text which has received nothing like the attention which should have been accorded to it. Perhaps there is good reason for this. The words of Gabriel are indeed an embarrassment to the Church's later doctrine of Christ, which nullified the information provided by the angel.

In Luke 1:32 Gabriel makes clear that the son of Mary is to be at the same time the Son of the Most High, that is, the Son of God. The Most High is the Lord God who "will give him [Jesus] the throne of his father David, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever. His Kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:32-33). The promised son is both Son of God and descendant of David, his "father." Mary already knows that her promised son will be "Son of the Most High." But how, since she herself is not yet living with her husband, can she bear a son? And how can he be God's Son?

The answer to her question, when fully taken into account by Bible readers, will change the shape of theology forever. Mary's inquiry is entirely fair and it receives its crystal clear answer: "The spirit of God will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. *For that reason precisely [dio kai]*, the Son to be begotten will be called holy, the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). This is Luke's first reference to Jesus as "Son of God" (those precise words). This is a title which of course pervades the New Testament records, reflected particularly in John with Jesus constantly calling God his Father, more precisely his *own* Father. The point not to be missed is that Luke provides us with an explanation of how, why and when the Son of God will come into existence. The Son is to be begotten, that is, caused to come into existence. The Son of God who is thus miraculously begotten is also the son of Mary and of David. He is caused to exist by virtue of the miracle worked by God in Mary.

According to Gabriel, the constitution of Jesus as God's Son is grounded and rooted in the biological miracle. "For that reason precisely" Jesus is the Son of God (Luke 1:35). Sonship is secured by historical divine intervention.

The angel's announcement harmonizes perfectly with the Hebrew Bible's promise of a son of David whom God would beget and call His own Son (2 Sam. 7:12-14). God promised to make this Messianic Son "My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth" (Ps. 89:27). These grand covenant promises find their fulfillment in Jesus. Absent from the biblical story is any hint of a Son who is *alive before his conception!* That imaginative idea introduces an alien element and a fearful complication into the readily understandable promise to David that his descendant would be the Messiah as well as God's Son.

Luke, we remember, is setting out the facts of the faith into which Theophilus had been catechized (Luke 1:1-4). It is unthinkable to imagine that Luke believed in the Incarnation of a *preexisting* Son, and then made it impossible for his readers to understand such an event. Expressly, Luke, through Gabriel, makes it clear that the Son's one and only origin is based on the miracle performed in Mary. The Son is precisely and deliberately the result of that biological wonder — a physical miracle worked here on earth in historical time. There is not a hint of a Son entering the womb from a previous existence, and thus not a hint of any ingredients for a doctrine of the Incarnation and Trinity. For Luke there is no eternal Son. There is a clear reason for Jesus' right to be the Son of God. It is his origin as Son in Mary. Another "eternal Sonship" would make Gabriel's words untrue. And if there is no eternal Son there can be no Trinity, and Jewish-Christian unitary monotheism remains intact.

James Dunn's comment on the Lukan view of the Son deserves much publicity:

In his birth narrative Luke is more explicit than Matthew in his assertion of Jesus' divine sonship from birth (1:32, 35, note also 2:49 where Jesus recognizes God as his Father). Here it is sufficiently clear that a virginal conception by divine power without the participation of any man is in view (1:34). But here too it is sufficiently clear that it is a begetting, a becoming, which is in view, the *coming into existence of one* who will be called, and will in fact *be* the Son of God, not the transition of a preexisting being to

become the soul of a human baby or the metamorphosis of a divine being into a human fetus.¹⁴

Dunn's words should be carefully weighed as a perfectly accurate reflection of what Luke wrote. Note how significantly Luke here contradicts the later notion that the Son of God was actually a preexisting Person who never came into existence but was eternally existing. Luke would have failed the Nicene test miserably. That council, reacting against Arius, pronounced a damning anathema against any who would dare to say that "there was a time when the Son did not exist." Luke (and Matthew) declared in the plainest terms that the coming into existence (begetting) of the Son of God was by a miracle, some two thousand years ago, in the womb of the virgin Mary.

There is in this Christology of Luke no preexisting Son and no possibility of such a doctrine, which is expressly excluded on the basis that the Sonship of Jesus is grounded in a single reason. The foundation of Jesus' Sonship is the miraculous creation by God's spirit acting in the human biological chain, and thus securing also the essential blood relationship of Jesus to David as promised in the Hebrew Bible's Davidic covenant as the throbbing heart of hope for salvation.

"Luke's intention is clearly to describe the creative process of begetting."¹⁵ The Son of God is thus presented to us in Scripture in this fully clarifying text, as the Son by biological miracle, brought about in comparatively recent history. The Incarnation of a Son who did *not* begin in his mother's womb and thus the later Trinity are expressly excluded from Luke's view.

German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg agrees:

While in Luke the divine Sonship is established by the almighty activity of the divine Spirit upon Mary (Luke 1:35), in Matthew it is apparently thought of even more emphatically in the sense of a supernatural procreation (Matt. 1:18)...Jesus' uniqueness [is] expressed in the mode of his birth...[The virgin birth] explains the divine Sonship literally in such a way that Jesus was creatively begotten by the Spirit of God (Luke 1:35)...

¹⁴*Christology in the Making*, Eerdmans, 1996, 50-51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

Jesus' virgin birth stands in an irreconcilable contradiction to the Christology of the Incarnation of the preexistent Son of God [and thus to the Trinity]...Jesus first *became* God's Son through Mary's conception...[Preexistence] is irreconcilable with this: that the divine Sonship as such was first established in time. Sonship *cannot at the same time consist in preexistence and still have its origin only in the divine procreation of Jesus in Mary.*¹⁶

Unfortunately, having explained the biblical texts with complete accuracy, Pannenberg dismisses the whole event of the virgin birth as a legend. Its acceptance however relieves theology at once of the tortuous problems of Incarnation, by which the Son of God somehow transited through Mary, having existed consciously before his own begetting! Luke and Matthew know absolutely nothing about this, for them, novel idea. They had no knowledge of an eternal Son and therefore struggled with no "problem" of the Trinity. The acceptance of Scripture in this matter of the origin of Jesus — the exact word "origin," *genesis* is used in Matthew 1:18 — would free our thinking and enable us to resonate with these matchless accounts.

The celebrated Roman Catholic commentator, Raymond Brown, author of the most extensive examination of the birth narratives, observes:

In the commentary I shall stress that Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of preexistence; seemingly for them the conception was the becoming (begetting) of God's Son...We are dealing with the begetting of God's Son in the womb of Mary through God's creative spirit.¹⁷

Noting that Luke describes a direct causality between the miraculous begetting and the Sonship of Jesus, Brown observes: "In preexistence Christology 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."¹⁸ This evident discrepancy between Luke and the later "orthodox" view of Jesus as preexistent eternal Son "has embarrassed many orthodox theologians,"¹⁹ and

¹⁶Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, 120, 142, 143.

¹⁷Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 31n, 312.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 291.

rightly so. According to the Trinitarian view of Jesus as God the Son, the virginal begetting does *not* bring the Son into existence. The doctrine of the Trinity therefore flatly contradicts the Christology of Luke whose doctrine of the Son cannot possibly match that of later orthodoxy. Luke was evidently a “heretic” if judged by the later councils.

The embarrassment admitted by Raymond Brown ought indeed to trouble the hearts of churchgoers and Bible readers. The “received” dogma about a Son of God who was Son before being begotten is a contradiction of Luke (and Matthew). According to Gabriel the intervention of God to beget, bring into existence, His Son in history provides us with the Savior Jesus. According to “orthodoxy” this is not the case. Mary simply took into herself, supplying an “impersonal human nature,” a Son who was already God and second member of a Trinity.

So far the embarrassment has not led the Church to abandon its own “received” view of Jesus in favor of the biblical one. When this eventually happens the Bible will have been rescued from the layers of contradictory traditions which have been so heavy-handedly imposed upon it.

Some of the most brilliant and instructive passages of the New Testament are found in Matthew’s and Luke’s descriptions of the origin and birth of Jesus. The proposition that “Jesus is God” cannot possibly fit these accounts. Mary did not conceive God in her womb or bear God as her Son! Mary is not “the mother of God” but “the mother of my lord” (Luke 1:43). Elizabeth so designates Mary, employing the critically significant Messianic title of Psalm 110:1 where the Messiah is indeed “my lord” (*adoni*). To call Mary “mother of God” would make a nonsense of the Bible’s birth narratives. It would also overthrow monotheism. Gabriel’s visit to Mary in Luke 1:26-38 is designed to lay a clear and simple foundation for our understanding of who God is and who Jesus, the Son of God is in relation to the God of Israel. Mary is informed that her son is to be the Son of the Most High, that is, of course the Son of God. Critically important is Gabriel’s revelation as to how the Son of God is to come into existence.

Joseph Fitzmyer comments on Luke 1:35:

[Holy spirit] is understood in the OT sense of God’s creative and active power present to human beings...Later church

tradition made something quite other out of this verse. Justin Martyr wrote, “It is not right, therefore, to understand the Spirit and the power of God as anything else than the Word, who is also the First-begotten of God” (*Apology* 1.33). In this interpretation the two expressions [spirit and power] are being understood of the Second Person of the Trinity. It was, however, scarcely before the fourth century that the “holy Spirit” was understood as the Third Person...*There is no evidence here in the Lucan infancy narrative of Jesus’ preexistence or incarnation.* Luke’s sole concern is to assert that the origin of God’s Messiah is the effect of his creative Spirit on Mary.²⁰

Protestant evangelical commentator Frederic Godet observed:

By the word “therefore” the angel alludes to his preceding words: he will be called the Son of the Highest. We might paraphrase it: “And it is precisely for this reason that I said to you...” We have then here, from the mouth of the angel himself, an authentic explanation of the term Son of God, in the former part of his message. After this explanation Mary could only understand the title in this sense: a human being of whose existence God Himself is the immediate author. It does not convey the idea of preexistence.²¹

Godet admits that “The Trinitarian sense should not be here applied to the term Son of God. The notion of the preexistence of Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God is quite foreign to the context.”²²

Luke therefore was certainly not a believer in the Trinity or God the Son. Justin Martyr and later tradition did, as Fitzmyer said, indeed make “something quite other” out of Luke 1:35. By 150 AD Justin believed that the preexisting Son of God was the power and spirit who overshadowed Mary. This would mean that the Son engineered his own conception in his mother!²³ The story had become hopelessly

²⁰*Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 350-351, emphasis added. Fitzmyer says that the elements of the Trinity but not the doctrine itself are found elsewhere in Luke.

²¹*Commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel*, I.K. Funk & Co., 1881, 58.

²²*Ibid.*, 56.

²³For the evidence of the switch from the biblical view of the origin of the Son to a prehistorical origin, see Ignatius, *Ephesians*, 7, 2; *Smyrneans*, 1, 1;

garbled, and it led eventually to an entrenched dogmatic view that the Son was eternally existing and could thus not truly be David's descendant through Mary, but merely a visitor from outside Mary, passing *through* her, instead of being born, brought into existence "from" her. God the Son of later tradition is not really the promised descendant of David. Once given an a-historical origin, his relationship to David was severed. A prehistorical person cannot also be the direct biological descendant of the historical figure David.

The lengths to which some standard works on the Trinity go, to negate Gabriel's brilliant theological insight, are quite remarkable. Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* proposes the exact opposite of Luke's grounding of Jesus' Sonship in the virginal conception: "It was to bring out the truth that it was not the *Sonship* but His *holiness* from His very birth which was secured by the miraculous conception,"²⁴ that the revisers (of the RV, 1881) were so careful to correct the translation here.

Had the lucidly simple description of the Son of God proposed by Luke been allowed to stand as the official doctrine of the Son of God, the course of the Christian faith and of church history would have been vastly different: "the holy thing begotten in you will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35) was easy enough. But when evangelicals rewrite the biblical story and read into it an eternal Son of God, this is the result. Charles Swindoll, chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary, writes:

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.²⁵

Swindoll goes on to explain:

Magnesians 8, 2; also Aristides, *Apology* 15, 1; Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1, 21 and 33; Melito, *Discourse on Faith*, 4.

²⁴Hastings, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, extra vol., 309.

²⁵*Jesus: When God Became a Man*, W Publishing Group, 1993, 1-2.

John the Baptist came into being at his birth — he had a birthday. *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 words 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...See the baby as John describes him “in the beginning” “with God.” Imagine him in the misty pre-creation 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.²⁶

Dr. Swindoll then quotes Max Lucado who says of Jesus, “He left his home and entered the womb of a teenage girl...Angels watched as Mary changed God's diaper. The universe watched with wonder as the Almighty learned to walk. Children played in the street with him.”²⁷

Dr. Jim Packer is well known for his evangelical writings. In his widely read *Knowing God*, in a chapter on “God Incarnate,” he says of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation:

Here are two mysteries for the price of one — the plurality of the persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus. It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and the most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. “The Word was made flesh” (John 1:14); 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 to talk like any other child.

²⁶Ibid., 3-8, emphasis added.

²⁷Ibid., 10, quoting Max Lucado, *God Came Near*.

And there was no illusion or deception in this: the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. *Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation.* This is the real stumbling block in Christianity. It is here that the Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses...have come to grief...If he was truly God the Son, it is much more startling that he should die than that he should rise again. "Tis mystery all! The immortal dies," wrote [Charles] Wesley...and if the immortal Son of God really did submit to taste death, it is not strange that such a death should have saving significance for a doomed race. Once we grant that Jesus was divine, it becomes unreasonable to find difficulty in any of this; it is all of a piece and hangs together completely. The Incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains.²⁸

With the greatest respect for the sensibilities of our readers, we want to suggest that the above accounts of the pre-history and Incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God are severely mistaken. They are profoundly untrue to the Bible. The situation appears to us and many others in the history of Christianity to be akin to the story of the "Emperor's New Clothes." The fact that the emperor was naked was noticed by one small boy when the majority was tricked into thinking he was not. The mere fact of rehearsing, year after year, a story of "God being born as a baby" and the *immortal God, who thus cannot die*, later *dying* on a cross does not make it true. Far from being a "mystery" it is rather obviously a fairy-tale mystification. This results in a crucifixion of the fundamental Protestant principle that God has graciously *revealed His purposes to us in Scripture and, in order for His revelation to be successful He has spoken to us in language which conforms to the universally accepted meaning of words and of logic itself.* If that principle applies, then God cannot die. He is immortal (1 Tim. 6:16).²⁹

²⁸J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*. Intervarsity Press, 1998, 46, 47, emphasis added.

²⁹It is a remarkable fact that the Koran states that Jesus did not die. Orthodox Christianity despite its claims is committed to the contradiction that the immortal God the Son died. One cannot die if one is immortal! So no Son of God died.

To speak of Jesus as God and God dying is to dissolve the most basic understanding of the nature of Scripture as revelation to man. It is to utter illogical impossibilities. Surely we must plant ourselves on the famous maxim about how to read the Bible:

I hold for a most infallible rule in expositions of the Sacred Scriptures, that where a literal construction will stand, the furthest from the letter is commonly the worst. There is nothing more dangerous than this licentious and deluding art, which changes the meaning of words, as alchemy doth, or would do, the substance of metals, making of anything what it pleases, and bringing in the end all truth to nothing.³⁰

We may say that if God has really intended to make His will known to us humans, it must follow that He has conveyed His truth to us in harmony with the well-known rules of language and meaning. As a nineteenth-century theologian wrote:

If [God's] words were given to be understood, it follows that He must have employed language to convey the sense intended, [in agreement with] the laws...controlling all language...We are primarily to obtain the sense which the words obviously embrace, making due allowance for the existence of figures of speech.³¹

Churchgoers seem to reflect little on the extreme illogicality of a virginal begetting which does *not* bring the person of the Son into existence, because according to “orthodoxy” that same person already exists! James Mackey alerts us to the acute logical problem involved in the whole idea that one can exist before one exists:

It is best to begin with [the problem of preexistence], not only because there are linguistic difficulties here...but because it leads directly into the main difficulties encountered in all incarnational and trinitarian theology...As soon as we recoil from the suggestion that something can pre-exist itself we must wonder what exactly...pre-exists what else, and in what sense it does so...It does not take a systematician of any extraordinary degree of perspicacity to notice how exegetes themselves are often the unconscious victims in the course of

³⁰Richard Hooker (1554-1600), cited in George N.H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord and Savior*, rep. Kregel, 1952, 1:47.

³¹Ibid.

their most professional work of quite dogmatic (that is, uncritical) systematic assumptions.³²

Church creeds deny that the Son of God had a beginning of existence! Luke and Matthew say emphatically that he did. According to Trinitarianism the Son of God was begotten in eternity and as Son of God he had no beginning in time. Such language about “eternal begetting” is totally foreign to the Bible and as baffling to the ordinary reader or churchgoer as to the in-depth student of the meaning of words. To “beget” means in English to bring into existence, to cause to come into existence. The word is used countless times in the Old and New Testaments to describe the begetting of sons by fathers or their birth to mothers. No one should have any difficulty understanding its meaning. They don’t, until they fall under the spell of “churchspeak,” which invented unheard of meanings for ordinary words and erected a whole theological system on those novel definitions which no lexicon will support. The very fact that the Son of God is said to be *begotten* — and “begotten in” Mary as Matthew 1:20 says³³ — should eliminate with one blow any possibility that he is an eternal God the Son without beginning. All that is required is that we let the Bible speak and stop allowing the “church fathers” or creeds to drown out the simple teaching about the origin of the Son of God. The Son was not just “born of the virgin Mary,” he was brought into existence as the Son of God by the direct intervention of his creator, using the human biological chain.

The crowning insult to the text of Scripture occurred when later church councils pronounced an anathema on anyone daring to challenge the notion that the Son of God did not exist literally from eternity! Gabriel, Mary and Luke would have come under that ban. The angel announced the begetting, the *coming into existence* of the Son of God.

It should be obvious that if God is a single Lord (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29), there cannot be another God alongside Him who is coeternally also Lord. It is equally clear that if the Son of God is caused to come

³²*The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*, SCM Press, 1983, 51.

³³The Greek word in Matt. 1:20 is the passive participle of *gennao*, and means here “begotten” in her. The action is that of the father. It was also of course a conception for Mary, but the full force of Matthew’s words is lost when the word is mistranslated as “conceived.” The RV of 1881 noted the literal Greek meaning in its margin.

into existence (begotten) he cannot have always existed! This simple fact destroys the ancient creeds, which were enforced sometimes with threats of punishment or even death, compelling belief that Jesus was the uncreated God the Son, coequal with his Father from eternity. The anathema later appended to the creeds banished from fellowship anyone bold enough to declare that “there was a time when the Son did not exist.” Ironically, Luke and Matthew would have been among the first to have been dismissed from fellowship. And would Jesus have been unfit for church membership?

Gabriel’s concise teaching about who Jesus is appears to be one of the most amazingly neglected sections of Scripture. No wonder. It is a considerable embarrassment to the traditional view of Jesus as God the Son. First we learn that Mary is to have a son who is to inherit the long-promised throne of David. The promise was based on the celebrated and treasured covenant made with David, recorded in 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, and Psalms 2, 72, 89 and 132. In those remarkable passages the God of Israel announced His intention to become, in the future, the father of a biological descendant of King David. That Son was to be God’s “firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth” (Ps. 89:27). It is exactly this promise which Luke and Matthew explain as historically fulfilled in Jesus. God’s Messianic promise became reality some two thousand years ago, as the most astonishingly significant event of the world’s entire history. God became the father of his son *in time, in Israel, and according to promise*.

Upon learning that she is the favored young Jewess who is to be mother of the long-promised Messiah, heir to the throne of David, Mary very reasonably asks the angel, “How can all this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). Her request was for further information about the fulfillment of the divine plan, and Gabriel explained, “Holy spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. For that reason precisely the one being begotten [or possibly, ‘to be begotten’] will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

When this biblical passage is taken seriously it will cause a revision of nearly two thousand years of distorted thinking about what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. Could this portion of Scripture possibly be understood to teach that an eternally existing Son of God was to leave his heavenly status and be introduced into

the womb of Mary, reducing himself in some mysterious way to a fetus and emerging as one who is fully God and fully man?

It would be preposterous to suggest that Gabriel intended any such idea. Rather he states that the power of the One God, the Most High, will cause a biological and creative miracle in Mary. The facts are straightforward. The Most High, working through His own personal creative spirit, will cause the conception of the baby, without the benefit of a human father. The child thus miraculously brought into existence, begotten, will rightly be called God's Son.³⁴ The event will be a repeat, with some differences, of God's initial creation of Adam whom Luke also calls "son of God" (3:38). Since God intervenes in the human biological chain and personally brings about the begetting or conception of Jesus, he is very properly and reasonably the Son of God, God's Son in a unique sense as being the direct creation of the One God. He is God's own Son. But he is not God Himself.

One fact is clear beyond dispute. The Son of God is a creature, one procreated miraculously by a marvelous intervention of God Himself, begetting His Son in Mary. This simple truth requires no more than a handful of well-chosen words, certainly not centuries of disputatious theologizing. "The power of the Most High will overshadow you, Mary, and for that reason precisely the one begotten will be the Son of God." The miracle, then, is the basis for Jesus being the Son of God. This is the explanation of what it means to call Jesus the Son of God. The theological basis for his Sonship is the miracle performed by the One God, his Father. No further explanation is needed. Indeed any speculation about Jesus being Son of God for some *other* reason³⁵ interferes disastrously with the biblical account.

³⁴In desperation some commentators, finding Gabriel disastrously unorthodox, attempt an evasion. They think that to "be called Son of God" does not mean that he is Son only from that moment on. However "to be called" is precisely the same as "to be." Raymond Brown says helpfully, "'Calling' brings to expression what one is, so that it means no less than 'he will be'" (*The Birth of the Messiah*, 289).

³⁵The KJV is misleading with its "therefore *also*..." suggesting that there might be another reason for the Son being the Son of God! It tends to distract the mind from the one and only reason for the coming into existence of the Son. If the miracle in Mary is *also* a reason for his Sonship one might be able cleverly to imagine there was another, prior, reason for his sonship — in

There is one explanation and one reason for Jesus' Sonship: It is the historical miracle executed in the womb of Mary. Very few Bible verses contain their own theological definitions. But Luke 1:35 provides the biblical definition of Jesus as Son of God.

The story-line provided by Luke and Gabriel is the climax of the age-old promises of God given to mankind, to Abraham and David. The story is drastically undermined and altered if suddenly, with no warning, the Son of God, far from being the descendant of David, is actually an already existing Son!

Mary conceived the Son of God. God the Father begat him. There is no visitor from outer space. Such a figure would be an intruder turning the biblical history into mythology.

It will be perfectly obvious that the creation or procreation of the Son poses not the slightest threat to the Jewish unitary monotheism which pervades the New Testament. The Son of God is not a second God arriving from heaven, metamorphosed into a fetus. The Son of God is the miraculous result of God's act of creation and begetting. The Son is a creature, a member of the human race, divinely brought into existence.

This account, if believed, could have saved the Church centuries of pointless and angry dispute about what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God and how we are to think of his relationship with God. There is no abstruse "problem" to be solved here. The account is lucidly simple. The story is about the One God sovereignly choosing to beget a unique Son in human history in a Jewish female. That miraculous progeny would for that reason logically enough be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

Luke wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer. Paul wrote a lot of it, but if we exclude Hebrews, he wrote less than Luke. Luke wrote about Jesus before and after the cross. He is a major witness to Christianity in its pristine days. What did Luke believe about Jesus? "For Luke, Jesus is above all Messiah, Lord, and Son of God, and he is such from the virginal conception onwards."³⁶

eternity! This would however be to destroy Luke's straightforward record. *Dio kai* means "for this reason indeed, or exactly." The KJV also curiously avoids telling us that the Son was "begotten" in Mary (Matt. 1:20). It was certainly also a conception on the part of Mary, but "begotten" points to the activity of the Father in His creative act bringing the Son into existence.

³⁶John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Doubleday, 1994, 2:796.

Simple and clear. “The infancy narratives do not seem to have any contact with traditions of preexistence and incarnation.”³⁷ No hint of any Trinitarian Jesus here. Luke also calls Jesus before his crucifixion “lord,” more than any other writer. This simply proves that for Luke Jesus is the Lord Messiah. How he is Son of God, Messiah and Lord is explained very clearly by Luke 1:35, probably the most bypassed verse in the entire New Testament.

The original New Testament documents do not produce a doctrine of God as Trinity. The best that can be pleaded for Trinitarianism is that it appeals to a few “triadic” statements which coordinate God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But these verses, which do not address the question of creed or confession directly, do not arrive at the conclusion later taught as “orthodoxy” that the three amount to the One God.

The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology reports these facts:

Jesus Christ does not usurp the place of God. His oneness with the Father does not mean absolute identity of being...After the completion of his work on earth he has indeed been raised to the right hand of God and invested with the honour of the heavenly Lord. But he is still not made equal to God. Although completely co-ordinated with God, he remains subordinate to him (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28). This is true also of his position as eternal high priest in the heavenly sanctuary according to Hebrews (cf. Ps. 110:1).³⁸

The same authority notes that texts which are often claimed as references to Christ as “God,” like Romans 9:5, “are disputed.” He says that the “much more probable explanation is that the reference is to the Father” in that verse.³⁹ Titus 2:13 may speak of “the glory of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ,” thus not equating Jesus with God. The text cannot be relied on as a proof of the Deity of Jesus since translations vary because of grammatical ambiguity in the Greek.

The direct evidence for the answer to our question about how many God is, is not decided by a handful of grammatically

³⁷Ibid., 236.

³⁸Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Paternoster Press, 1976, 2:80.

³⁹ Ibid., 80.

ambiguous verses, but by those texts which brilliantly and directly define the creed of Jesus, by which he displays his unchanging Jewishness: God is a single Person, his Father, and Jesus is the supremely elevated human agent of that One God. Thus the creed of the Hebrew Bible and of Jesus is maintained, not assaulted by alien Gentile conceptions of God.

Jesus the Messiah, “Lord, son of David” (Matt. 15:22; 20:31)

“Jesus is God” has become for many the badge of correct understanding about who Jesus is. In the context of the first-century New Testament, however, it would have been heard as “Jesus is the One God of Israel.” Since that one God was known to be not a man, anyone about six feet tall walking around Palestine could not have claimed to be GOD without appearing to have become deranged. The worst they could say of Jesus at his trial was not that he claimed to be the Creator of heaven and earth, but the Son of God (John 19:7). And in those days, unlike ours, no one thought that Son of God = God Himself!

Those trusting blind men who appealed to Jesus to restore their sight knew who the Messiah was. They addressed him not as the Lord God, but as “Lord, son of David” (Matt. 20:31). They knew that God was not a man. They knew that the Messiah was both the descendant of David and their Messianic Lord. Everyone in Israel knew that the One God was in heaven ruling the universe. He was not confined to a Jewish human frame — having abdicated His position in the universe (letting it control itself?). They had never heard about the later doctrine of the Incarnation.

Jesus never once said anything as mad as “I am the one God.” He claimed always to be the Messiah and everyone knew that the Messiah was the promised anointed king of Israel, not God but the Son of God. Happily in our day, the clouds of confusion are rolling back and the sunshine of truth is once again emerging. Not that this truth has not been known before, but it is largely lost in dusty libraries or learned tomes.

At the very famous Fuller Theological Seminary in California the distinguished professor of systematic theology has written, “To be a ‘Son of God’ one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation

for a creature indicating a special relationship with God.”⁴⁰ With that simple statement the world of Bible study is dramatically advanced. Dr. Colin Brown has merely been good enough to show us what we can all check for ourselves, that “Son of God” in the Bible means a creature, either Israel the nation, an angel, Adam, or supremely Jesus, the Son of God and son of David. The Messiah (Christ) is the Son of God and on that rock foundational proposition (certainly not on the proposition that Jesus is God!) the Church of Jesus Christ is to be stably founded (Matt. 16:16-18).

How is Jesus the Son of God? When did he become Son of God? This is an easy question, but it is not answered well by church tradition. Try it out on your friends, for a lively conversation. Luke has answered the question in a way which should silence all objections (though in practice you may find that it may not!).

It was the mission of the mighty angel Gabriel to inform us, through a conversation with the young Jewess Mary, about how Jesus is the Son of God. What a joy and blessing that we can be party to that conversation, recorded, copied and preserved so meticulously over these many years. We can listen in as Gabriel engaged Mary in a brief dialogue, revealing the secrets of the universe.

We must be ready, however, for some real shocks. The theology of Gabriel and of Luke and Matthew about the Son of God is far removed from the later traditional Trinitarian teaching about an “eternal Son” who had no beginning!

The biblical Son of God and of David is the head of the New Creation. He is the firstborn, we are delighted to report, among many brothers and sisters (Rom. 8:29). Thus his vital importance for all of us interested in the pursuit of immortality.

Jesus is the Son of God and son of Mary in this way: “Holy spirit will come over you, Mary, and the power of the Highest One will overshadow you, and that is precisely why he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Is that clear? The *reason* and basis for the title Son of God is the miracle in Mary. It is that creative miracle which, marking the greatest event of human history thus far (besides the Genesis creation itself), brings into existence (that is what “beget” means) the Son of God.

⁴⁰Colin Brown, “Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Ex Auditu* 7, 1991, 88.

Now note what happened three centuries later when church councils (Nicea, 325; Constantinople, 381; Chalcedon, 451), thinking no doubt that they were “doing God a service” (John 16:2), decided formally to anathematize anyone who dared to say “there was a time when the Son did *not* exist.” Gabriel and Mary would have been in dire trouble in those days! They would have been excommunicated for being anti-Christian. The cult label would no doubt have been applied. But did Mary and Gabriel really deserve the cult sticker, or had the Church long lost its pristine understanding of who the real Jesus was and is?

The Son of God was produced without the benefit of a human father. That insight was enough to provide a clear theology of the Son of God, an indispensable Christology. But man being man, and the Devil being subtle, managed to wreck that simple story of God’s wonderful creative act. The notion was cleverly advanced that Jesus had preexisted. Preexisted? You mean, he existed before he existed? He *was* before he was? Explain that, if you can, to your friends, or to your children. The attempt to explain it will probably leave you baffled and hopefully driven back to the biblical drawing board. You cannot come into existence if you are already in existence. You cannot be human and pre-human. So, under the guise of the very misleading term “preexistent Christ,” another *pre-historical* Christ was added to the biblical story, affecting it adversely at its very heart. The *origin* of the Christ, the Son of God, in Mary was thrown into confusion.

Once there was a *pre-existing* and a post-existing Jesus, a “before and after Jesus,” it was impossible for him to have a *beginning* in Mary. But to be *begotten* one must be brought into existence. That is the case with all human beings. That is what begotten means: to be brought into existence.

Thus, ingeniously, the Jesus who was descended from David and brought into existence as God’s Son in Mary according to God’s oathbound promises to Abraham and David (Gen. 12; 13; 15; 17; 2 Sam. 7), was really eliminated. There could be no real lineal descendant of David as the Messiah if that Son of God was *already alive*.

This may take some careful pondering (even Mary “pondered all these things in her heart,” Luke 2:19), but you cannot preexist yourself. You cannot be before you are. A “preexisting” Jesus appears

to be “another Jesus” altogether, one who cannot by definition be the lineal and biological descendant of David (which he must be to qualify as the Messiah). He must of course be the Son of God Himself, and this truth is secured by and rooted in the virginal conception. Thus a denial of the miraculous conception/begetting in Mary also disfigures the identity of the true Jesus. Christology is indeed important and is not some abstruse doctrinal concern for learned and remote theologians! Knowing the Jesus of the Bible is important for the life of the age to come. Jesus said this in John 17:3.

If you preexist your birth, you are not begotten as a human being; you are metamorphosed from one existence to another. Preexistence makes begetting impossible. Or as “prince of church history” Adolf Harnack and others long ago protested, virginal begetting and birth contradict the idea of literal preexistence. Churches have managed to muddle the two contradictory ideas together and seem to hope that you will not think long enough about them to see that they cancel each other out.

A Textual Framework

Here is the biblical scheme for identifying the real Messiah in the considerable confusion which plagues our religious scene today after many years of dispute and disagreement. The backbone of Scripture and its Messianic story-line is provided by the marvelous promise that the God of Israel would one day become the father of a unique son, the last Adam and son of David. The revelation granted to David is unmistakably clear:

2 Samuel 7:12-14: Messiah will be the descendant of David. God will be his father. He will be God’s son. He will have the throne of David forever.

Isaiah 49:5: “And now the LORD says, he who formed me *from the womb* to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him (for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength). . . .”

Luke 1:32, 33, 35: Mary’s supernaturally begotten child will be the Son of God. His father is David. He will have the throne of his father David forever.

Matthew 1:18, 20: The *genesis* of Jesus results in Mary’s baby being “the one begotten in her.”

Romans 1:1-4: The Gospel of God was promised in the prophets. God's Son came into existence (*egeneto*) as a descendant of David. He was declared Son *in power* later by the powerful act of God which brought about his resurrection.

Hebrews 1:5: The Son of God is the one prophesied in **Psalm 2:7** and **2 Samuel 7:14**.

Psalm 2:7: God begat him: "Today I have begotten you."

Psalm 110:3 (LXX): "From the womb before the morning star I begat you."

Psalm 89:26, 27: He will call Me Father. "I will make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth."

Hebrews 1:6: God brought him into the world: "When He brings the firstborn into the world."

Hebrews 7:14: Our Lord is a descendant of Judah.

Revelation 22:16: The Messiah is the offspring and descendant of David.

2 Timothy 2:8: Jesus is the lineal descendant of David according to Paul's gospel.

1 John 5:18: Jesus "was begotten."

Acts 13:33: God raised up, produced, Jesus by begetting him (**Ps. 2:7**), and later raised him *from the dead* (**Acts 13:34**).

Psalms of Solomon 17:23: "O Lord, raise up for them their king, the son of David at the time in which you, O God, see that he may reign over Israel your servant."

How beautifully the plan of God for His Messianic Son unfolds. God is really one, and His Son is the pinnacle of His amazing creation and purpose for us all.

The backbone of the unfolding Divine Plan revealed in Scripture is provided by the marvelous promise that the God of Israel would one day become the father of a unique son. The revelation granted to David is unmistakably clear in 2 Samuel 7:14. Indeed the whole of the divine future, which is the basis of the New Testament also, lies in the promise that it is God's unshakeable intention to rule the world through David and his family:

Behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch of David to spring forth; and he shall execute justice and righteousness on the

earth. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: the LORD is our righteousness. For thus says the LORD, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before Me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to prepare sacrifices continually. The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, Thus says the LORD, If you can break My covenant for the day and My covenant for the night, so that day and night will not be at their appointed time, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant so that he will not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levitical priests, My ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be counted and the sand of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the descendants of David My servant and the Levites who minister to Me (Jer. 33:14-21).

Jeremiah 30:9: “They shall serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.”

From the Dead Sea Scrolls: “When God will have begotten the Messiah among them” (1 QSa. 2:11). The hoped for Davidic Messiah is described in the language of 2 Samuel 7, associated with Psalm 2:7 (4QFlor. 1:10). A mighty king will be hailed as the Son of God and they shall call him Son of the Most High (4QpsDan A; cf. Testament of Levi 4:2).

This simple story is severely complicated and altered if one superimposes upon it the idea that the Son of God was begotten (came into existence) billions of years earlier and was thus not a biological descendant of David, but David’s predecessor in another realm. The Trinitarian concept in fact obliterates the actual descendant of David who is the Messiah supernaturally begotten in history. One cannot be both the ancestor and the descendant of David.

The Church spent centuries trying to construct an intelligible account of the new story of Jesus which they had invented. The attempt was a failure and the Messianic son of David and God was obscured. The Jewish Jesus is the promised descendant of Eve, of Abraham, Judah and of David. He is heir to that permanent throne of David to be restored in a renewed land of Israel. This event is promised for the future when Jesus comes back. It is also a critical element in Jesus’ saving Gospel about the Kingdom.

The simple truth about Jesus' origin, preserved in Luke's account of Gabriel's visit to Mary, is thankfully fully confirmed by the massive *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: "[Christ's] existence is peculiarly determined by the power of God. This is the most important feature in the Lucan infancy story...[Luke] perceives at the beginning of His existence a special and unique act of divine power which gives Him the title *Son of God*."⁴¹

The same individual does not come into existence twice! The begetting of the Son in Mary is defined as the beginning of the Son's existence. His origin is properly within the human biological chain. Otherwise he cannot be from the line of David. He must be this, in order to make good his claim to be the promised Messiah.

This fundamental fact about the New Testament's testimony to the Sonship of Jesus, so drastically obscured by *later* theological argumentation, was stated by the noted Swiss theologian Oscar Cullmann, who wrote: "Matthew and Luke...try by means of the infancy narratives to *explain* Jesus' sonship, and to lift the veil from the question 'how' the Father begets the Son...With their completely philosophical approach the later Christological speculations tried to explain this 'how' in a different way."⁴²

Here we have the good news and the bad news set side by side. Unfortunately scholarship is anemic in its failure to warn us of the dangers of redefining Sonship *later* in "different" terms. That difference was unfortunately not just a pleasing alternative but a rejection of Scripture and in particular of the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke who knew nothing at all of an Incarnation of a previously existing Son. Incarnation later imposed its own narrative by describing not a begetting of the Son but his transformation from one form of existence to another. This contradicts the Bible.

Protesting Voices

Various voices have been raised in protest against what later became the Church's official version of the origins of the Son of God. His beginning was supposed to have been in pre-history. He was presented as an apparent rival to the One God, coequal with Him in every way, even self-existent. Because the language of begetting was

⁴¹2:300.

⁴²*The Christology of the New Testament*, SCM Press, 1963, 294.

biblical it was maintained but emptied of recognizable meaning. Commentator Adam Clarke was one of many who protested about the garbled language attributing a non-biblical Sonship to Jesus:

With all due respect for those who differ, I must say that the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is antisciptural and highly dangerous. This doctrine I reject for the following reasons: I have not been able to find any express declaration in the Scriptures concerning it...To say that the Son was begotten from all eternity is in my opinion absurd. And the phrase "eternal Son" is a positive self-contradiction. "Eternity" is that which has had no beginning, nor stands in any reference to time. "Son" supposes time, generation, and father and time also antecedent to such generation. Therefore the conjunction of these two terms "Son" and "eternity" is absolutely impossible as they imply essentially different and opposite ideas.⁴³

Equally outspoken was the protest of the British poet, politician and theologian John Milton. Reflecting on the "orthodox" creeds of the Church he remarked:

It is wonderful with what futile subtleties, or rather with what juggling artifices, certain individuals have endeavoured to elude or obscure the plain meaning of these passages...They hold that the Son is also co-essential with the Father, and generated from all eternity...It is impossible to find a single text in all Scripture to prove the eternal generation of the Son.⁴⁴

J.O. Buswell, who was formerly Dean of the Graduate School, Covenant College, St. Louis, Missouri, examined the issue of the begetting of the Son in the Bible and concluded with these words. He wrote as a Trinitarian:

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*

⁴³*Commentary*, on Luke 1:35.

⁴⁴John Milton, "On the Son of God and the Holy Spirit," 60, 51.

*nothing whatsoever to say about “begetting” as an eternal relationship between the Father and the Son.*⁴⁵

No less strong was the exclamation of Professor Nathaniel Emmons of Yale (1745-1840) that “eternal generation” is “eternal nonsense.”⁴⁶ Emmons was a keen logician with a terse and lucid theological style. It is doubtful if the critically important Trinitarian phrase “eternal generation” should be ranked as any more intelligible than “hot ice cubes,” “married bachelors” or “square circles.”

Had *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* been consulted, Bible readers would have been warned against the concept underlying the Trinity that the Son was “eternally generated.” “Thus the doctrine of eternal generation as a basis for the preexistence lacks support in the Bible.”⁴⁷ Protestants taking their “sola scriptura” slogan seriously could have safely dropped the idea of eternal generation and returned to belief in the One God and Jesus as the human Messiah.

It is only by reading certain verses in John, and a very few in Paul and Hebrews, *through Trinitarian lenses* that the unitarian creed of Jesus is avoided and obscured. Starting with the Hebrew Bible and taking seriously the New Testament’s own accounts of Jesus’ origin and his own creedal unitarianism will provide the necessary and illuminating corrective.

Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone and the Church of Christ

Of the same mind on this crucial question of the origin of the Son of God was the founder of the denomination the Church of Christ. Barton Stone was outspoken in his denunciation of one of the main pillars of Trinitarianism:

On this doctrine [of the Trinity] many things are said, which are dark, unintelligible, unscriptural and too mysterious for comprehension. Many of these expressions we have rejected; and for this reason we are charged with denying the doctrine itself. I shall...give my reasons why I cannot receive it...I am

⁴⁵*A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Zondervan, 1962, 110.

⁴⁶L.L. Paine, *A Critical History of the Evolution of Trinitarianism*, 104.

⁴⁷12:21. Otto Kirn adds most helpfully, “‘Only begotten’ of John 1:14, 3:16 expresses the close relation between Father and Son in regard to its stability, not its origin; and ‘the firstborn of every creature’ of Col. 1:15 alludes to the preeminence of the author of salvation over creation, not to his origin.”

confident that mystery will be urged as the great argument to refute and cover these difficulties. But shall we cover ourselves in the mantle of mystery, woven by our own hands?...A mystery which destroys the efficacy of his blood...and involves so many absurdities and contradictions? Mystery is one of names of the whore of Babylon, written in large letters on her forehead. Her daughters have the same mark (Rev. 17)...When they so unequivocally express “That there is but one only living and true God without parts,” I thence conclude that they do not believe that *another* real and eternal God was begotten from eternity, and sent down from heaven into the world. If they do, there is a pointed contradiction...

Church of Christ theologian Alexander Campbell wrote:

The names Jesus, Christ, or Messiah, only-begotten Son, Son of God belong to the Founder of the Christian religion, and to none else. They express not a relation existing before the Christian era, but relations which commenced at that time...There was no Jesus, no Messiah, no Christ, no Son of God, no Only-begotten before the reign of Augustus Caesar...I have held the idea for sixteen years that Jesus is called the Son of God, not because of an “eternal generation” (which I conceive to be nonsense), but because he was born as the angel described to Mary.⁴⁸

Dave Hunt and Incarnation

The attempt to remain loyal to what is no more than a post-biblical portrait of Jesus as arriving from outside of history leads some modern commentators to a bizarre concept of the Jesus they so ardently support. Dave Hunt, well known for his fine exposure of some of the obvious paganism of the Roman Catholic faith and the fatalism of the hyper-Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, has this to say about who Jesus is:

Even though Jesus is God and Mary is the mother of Jesus, that does not make her the mother of God as Catholicism teaches. The birth of her *firstborn* Son (Matt. 1:25) in

⁴⁸Greg Demmitt, “The Christologies of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, and their Disagreement Concerning the Preexistence of Christ,” *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, 12:2 (2005).

Bethlehem was not the birth of Christ *as God*, but of his human body, soul and spirit — “a body you have prepared me” (Heb. 10:5). She was the honored mother of the *man* Christ Jesus. But she was not the mother of the eternal Son of God, who created this universe...Mary had the unique honor of being the means by which the Son of God became man — but she was not the mother of the Eternal One...She wasn't the mother of the Son of God. To call Mary the mother of God, as official Catholic doctrine teaches, is the worst blasphemy possible. Although the eternal Son of God through virgin birth became fully man, He remained fully God...Even as a fetus in Mary's womb, He did not cease to be the One who said, “I am the Lord, I change not” (Mal. 3:6).⁴⁹

Dave Hunt's Jesus is a bizarre figure, apparently a bi-person. There is an eternal Son of God (Dave does not explain how since the Father is also the “Eternal One” this does not make two Eternal Ones), and Mary then bears Christ who has “body, soul and spirit.” So Mary's Son is now two persons, a preexisting eternal Son added to a fully human person Jesus. This is not even “orthodox” Christianity. Trinitarians were aware that a single person cannot be two persons at the same time. This heresy called Nestorianism was rejected. Instead the official portrait of Jesus declared him to be fully God as to his essential ego, but “man,” *not* “a man,” relative to his humanity. Mary on this theory bore “human nature,” but not a fully human person. But what happens to the lineal descendant of David who the Messiah must be to qualify as Messiah?

Dave Hunt's loyalty, as he thinks, to the “orthodoxy” of which he is otherwise quite critical, drives him to contradict Luke.⁵⁰ Gabriel explained that Mary's son was to be Son of God precisely because of the divine miracle performed by God in her. She was indeed the “mother of the Son of God.” Dave Hunt, believing in Jesus as eternal Son, says (above) that she was not. “For this reason precisely [the

⁴⁹*Berean Call*, Dec., 2006.

⁵⁰Equally astonishing is this assertion: “When the title ‘Son of God’ is used of Christ, it has nothing to do with His birth to Mary. As the Son of God, He was not born; He was given” (Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, eds., *Understanding Christian Theology*, Thomas Nelson, 2003, 570). It would be hard to imagine a more blatant rejection of the words of Gabriel in Luke 1:35.

miraculous generation in Mary] the holy child will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Because Hunt is burdened with a preexisting personality, the eternal Son of God (he makes no attempt to explain “eternal begetting”), Mary’s son, who is also God’s Son, cannot for him be “the Son of God.” There are two theories in conflict here. Either Gabriel is right or “orthodox” definitions are right. They cannot be harmonized. You cannot come into existence as Son if you are already in existence as the Son.

Underlying this perplexing doctrinal impasse is the need, stated as an unquestionable dogma, for “God to die” as an adequate atonement for human sin. But God “dying” is itself a blasphemous concept. The God who cannot lie expressly states that He cannot die (1 Tim. 6:16). Once that element of God’s constitution is believed and clung to, it becomes obvious that the Son of God is not God. He is the selected sacrifice for sin, the sinless human being, the “lamb crucified [in God’s plan] before the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). When Scripture was abandoned in relation to the immortality of God then the floodgates were opened to the notion of a member of the Godhead dying.

The acute problem remains in need of a radical solution. How can God be one, if one of the Godhead leaves heaven for earth and functions as fully God on earth? How do you distinguish between the God who did *not* become man and the God who did without destroying the precious doctrine of the unity of God? It is a feat which cannot be done and the whole attempt would be much better abandoned. It is by the teaching of Jesus that we are to be judged (John 12:48; 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 John 9). His publicly proclaimed creed provides an indispensable foundation for the Christian faith. Tradition, however long held, cannot be pleaded against the Bible.