

THE MYSTERY OF MONOTHEISM

TOM ROBERTS, PHD

For centuries the people of God fought an uphill battle attempting to defend the concept of one God. The mountain god *El*, in Hebrew traditions, was known as *Elohim*. Until our time, much understanding of the ancient Middle East was unavailable. We could not evaluate some of the statements contained in Scripture about these other gods besides Yahweh, supposedly existing as real beings and supervising other nations: Ashtoreth (1 Kings 11:33); Dagon (Jud. 16:23-24; 1 Sam. 5:7); Chemosh (Jud. 11:24; 1 Kings 11:33); Milcom (1 Kings 11:33); and Nisroch (2 Kings 19:37). Isaiah shows that the One God has no consort, contrary to pagan documents from Elephantine, which asserted the existence of a “Mrs. Yahweh,” violating the first commandment (Deut. 5:7; Ex. 20:3). The Hebraic equivalent of the Elephantine concept is *Sophia*, or Lady Wisdom, who was to convey God’s wisdom to the prophets via the Holy Spirit, *ruach kodesh*.

Deuteronomy 6:4 was the national credo of Israel: “Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our Lord is one Lord.” *Echad* and *yachid* are the Hebrew words for “one.” It is said that *echad*, the numeral one in Hebrew, can include more than one part of a collective unit. However, close grammatical scrutiny will show that where “evening and morning” become the first day, *yom echad* (Gen. 1:5), *echad* still means *one single* day. The word for “one” has not changed its meaning in the slightest. Similarly, the word *echad* may modify a bunch of grapes (Num. 13:23). The imagery still shows many grapes but only one bunch, and both terms, *yachid* and *echad*, describe one single object. In Genesis 2:24 man and wife share part of the total image of God and are glued back together through marriage as one flesh, not “two fleshes,” to form a single entity, thus restoring the total image of God. “Compound one” is in fact a completely faulty description of the word *echad*.

Many scholars are now united in the view that the plurality in the four “us” texts (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8) means that *Elohim* was

addressing His mighty council. It was for a long time mistakenly believed that the royal “us” referred to the other Persons of God in a compound unity. During the address in Genesis 1, the Hebrew grammar changes from singular to plural when Yahweh speaks (1:26: “Let us”). Notice the phrase: “Man has become as one of us” (Gen. 3:22).

Critical commentators such as Keil and Delitzsch and other Semitic scholars freely admit that the term *Elohim* cannot be used to advance a Trinitarian formula.¹ *Elohim* can refer either to the great God Himself or to His subjects, who range from judges in Psalm 82:6 who will “die like men” (v. 7) to the *b’nay elohim*, “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2. Some commentators have thought these “sons of God” were the descendants of Seth called the “mighty men of renown” (Gen. 6:4).² Modern commentary sees them as wicked angels, since the same term *b’nay elohim* always means angels elsewhere.

The same concept pertains to the “mighty men” in David’s army found in 2 Samuel 23:8-39. The mighty council also sings praises to Yahweh (*Elohenu*, “our God”) with divine songs (1 Kings 18:39; 2 Sam. 7:28) whose words are true. All of the exalted patriarchs share in the worship, *shachah*, and praises which were granted to Yahweh in His divine court (Ps. 78). This is not to say that Moses who was called *Elohim* (Ex. 7:1) or the great kings such as David (1 Chron. 29:20) and Solomon were to be “worshipped” (*shachah*) with the final exaltation granted only to Yahweh, but they shared in a type of worship because they represented God to His people. For example, Isaiah 7 applies locally to the king, son of Tabeel, then is widened to include Immanuel which means “God is with us in the great battle” and later is applied to Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, son of Isaiah. The ultimate fulfillment would occur in Isaiah 9:6 with the Messiah as father of eternity, the exalted one, and the mighty counselor, divine hero (*el gibbor*).

The exalted one in Daniel 7:13 is the Son of Man, *bar enash*, who will rule all nations. The divine action originates from Yahweh who speaks to His son *adoni* in Psalm 110, who is given his authority from God and who acts for God. For centuries, commentators misread the distinction between *Adonai*, the Lord God, and *adoni*, the human Messiah, and taught that Christ was *Adonai*, the Lord God. They did not observe the suffix on *adoni* telling us that the Messiah is not God.

¹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Hendrickson, 1996, Vol. 1. See also W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Union for Reform Judaism, 2005, note on *Elohim*.

² See Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *One Volume Old Testament Commentary*, 1930, article on Genesis 6.

In order to protect the use of the divine name and to ensure the Torah was correctly understood because Yahweh the Holy One was also Yahweh of Hosts, the Soferim used “Lord,” *Adonai*, to designate “Lord of Hosts.” Later, in Jewish thought, a debate arose over passages where the divine name was used consecutively in the same sentence. Some even speculated that Israel had either a “Mrs. Yahweh” or a second god who could appear as an angel. Exodus 15 and Psalms 107-113 make the singleness of Yahweh abundantly clear, especially Psalm 113:5 which declares that there is none like Yahweh, our God.³

The Son of Man and the Offspring of God

Peter said that we are the offspring of God (2 Pet. 1:14) and our Lord Jesus Christ in John 10:34 affirmed of the Hebrew judges, “You are gods,” for you are “children of the Most High” (see Ps. 82:6). Present-day research has shown that Jewish and other cultures believed man was directly descended from his Maker in heaven and special rights and priestly blessings were passed through a sacerdotal (divine patriarchal) system. The name *Yahweh* is a proper name probably derived from a causative Hebrew verb translated “He caused to be.” “Sons of God” denote those born either as offspring of God (2 Sam. 7:14, of the Messiah) or created angels (Gen. 6:2), or by the New Covenant system of sonship by rebirth (John 3). Names can indicate a relationship with the Deity. “The name Abijah means ‘YHWH is my father’ (1 Kings 14:11) and Ahijah means ‘YHWH is my brother’ (1 Kings 11:29) — but [YHWH is] not Israel’s primary way of referring to the deity.”⁴

The primary way of establishing Israel’s relationship to Yahweh was through the initiation of blood covenants, which brought the Israelite or the Gentile into a patriarchal and familial relationship with God. A concept of literal offspring was one of general Semitic acceptance. Later in salvation history, the father-to-son patriarchal blessings were broadened to include all the holy people whom God has consecrated for His purposes (Gal. 3:29). Over the centuries this theology has been weakened in the West by modern evangelicals. Paul uses the term “sonship” to show that we are members of God’s spiritual family. This is based on the re-establishment of our citizenship (Phil. 3:20) rather than simply being Gentiles converted into the house of faith. Many

³ See Tom Roberts, *From Sacral Kingship to Sacred Marriage*, Vantage Press, 2003, 110; Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel, A Study of Israel’s Second God*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1992, 30.

⁴ S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., “Bible Translation and the Gender of God,” *Theology Today*, Vol. 46, No. 2, July, 1989, 196-7.

theologians believe that Genesis 5:3 teaches that man lost his original image and sonship, and the only hope of restoration that humankind has is in Christ with his Kingdom Gospel plan of redemption.

The Lifting Up of Our Messiah

The Hebraic concept of the Messiah is “the anointed,” one who is lifted up. The Messiah even said, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). The belief in one God who works through a divine Messiah is found in both testaments. The Apostle James declares, “If you believe in one God, you do well” (James 2:19; see 1 Tim. 2:5). “Though there are so-called gods in the heavens or on earth — and there are plenty of gods and plenty of lords — yet for us there is only one God, the Father” (1 Cor. 8:5-6). In John 17:3, Jesus referred to the Father as the only true God and said that he came in concert to represent the Father to his people (see Luke 1:30-35). No wonder Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” (see also Ps. 45:7; Heb. 1:7-8). The motif in John’s Gospel is that of the Father teaching His Son His trade with phrases like, “I work and my Father works” (John 5:19) for the time is coming “when no man can work” (John 9:4). The Father in Psalm 118 is progressively revealing the High Priest in John 14-16 to the people. So God and Christ are in complete union, without being ontologically equal as in later Trinitarianism.

Concerning John 10:30 (“I and the Father are one”) Dr. James E. Talmage explains: “In the original Greek ‘one’ appears in the neuter gender, and therefore expresses oneness in attributes, power, or purpose, and not a oneness of personality which would have required the masculine form.”⁵ In the high priestly prayer of Jesus, John uses the word “comforter,” *parakletos*, which is a masculine word, in this case the comforting presence of the risen Jesus in spirit. The “spirit” (*pneuma*), which is neuter yet often accompanied by masculine pronouns in our translations, designates the spirit as the personal presence of the Father (Rom. 8:16). The masculine pronouns mislead the reader into thinking of a *third Person*.⁶ Jesus was sired by the Holy Spirit, God’s creative activity, through the virgin Mary.

Christ was the new Adam for he rewrote history by not falling from grace as the first Adam did, but by remaining completely sinless in all he did and all he was (Rom. 5:12-21). “It was by one’s man offense that death came to reign over all, but how much greater will be the reign in

⁵ James Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, Waking Lion Press, 2007, 367.

⁶ Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Zondervan, 1997, 332.

life of those who received the fullness of grace and the gift of saving justice, through the one man, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). He represented the perfect will of the Father. The “reign in life” is in fact in this passage a reference to future co-rulership with Christ in the Kingdom.

The divine-man concept was constantly debated among the rabbis, who wondered if the Messiah would be Daniel’s human being of Daniel 7:13 or whether the Greek concept of savior gods, *theioiandres* (divine men), would describe the Deity’s activity in His Messiah (Esth. 4:17, LXX). According to many New Testament scholars, the concept of divine men as saviors did influence the writers of the gospels in connection with the Messianic figure of Daniel. Daniel 7 is believed by many commentators to show that there are at least two Persons of Deity. However, with close examination, these timeless prophecies do not tell us when the appearing of the great Messiah would become evident.

These themes are amplified in Hebrews 1:8 and Titus 2:13. Notice that the appearing of Jesus is accompanied with the Father’s glory, *doxa*. Some commentators use 1 Timothy 3:16 to prove an Incarnation but the term “God” is not in the majority or oldest manuscripts. The passage is a hymn or liturgical profession of faith, which shows that Christ “appeared in a body [rather, as a human person], was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed in the world, was taken up in glory” (NIV). This verse summarizes the Gospel message. The NIV attempts to make us believe in the Incarnation of a second member of a triune Deity, which is entirely foreign to the New Testament.

***Logos* Theology and the Understanding of Christian Expositors**

From the post-exilic period (586 BC) to the writing of the New Testament, many theological shifts took place during the dispersion of Judah into Babylon and when the other exiles found their way to Egypt during Jeremiah’s ministry. With the cultures overlapping one another, terms like wisdom and *logos* had international repercussions. Philo, a Hebrew in Alexandria, Egypt, taught that the *logos* was divine speech. The ancients had over 80 definitions of this term. The Christian church debates three of them. One suggestion is that John 1:1 is a Stoic hymn in which Jesus replaces the god Zeus.⁷ Another view is that because of the Greek concept of the pre-existence of all things, the *logos* pre-existed

⁷ *Interpreter’s One Volume Bible Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Abingdon Press, 1971, 710.

eternally in the bosom of God's internal image. Then, after his birth, he was the express image of God.⁸

Thirdly, the teaching of Athanasius advocated the personal pre-existent *Logos* as fully God in whom heaven and earth could not be contained. This tradition was to prevail in the West and overcome the position of Origen, on whom the eastern fathers based their *logos* theology. The Son and the Spirit are not independent centers of divine being but unfoldings of the eternal spirit in an emerging purpose. Tertullian then expanded Stoic philosophy by calling the great triad a *trinitas*. The Cappadocian fathers of the East followed this tradition with their interpretations of John's gospel.⁹

But how do we as modern-day Christians evaluate this data after so many of these concepts have been theologized in complex ways? It is difficult to decipher the original meaning. Nineteenth-century expositor Adam Clarke and modern expositors F. F. Bruce, Raymond Brown¹⁰ and James D. G. Dunn¹¹ maintain that the pre-existent Son *logos* was a later Christological development. Dr. R. E. Rubenstein in his book *When Jesus Became God*¹² asserts that the *logos* became fully God after the theological wars took place between the Arians with their "low Christology," the Trinitarians with their "high Christology" and, caught in the middle, the Binitarians, who were considered semi-Arians. The Binitarians tried to compromise and argued for two Persons in the one God while the Holy Spirit remained a neuter force, though it was seen as a feminine force in Eastern Church traditions.¹³

The Origin of the Son of God

The prologue of John's gospel starts with *en arche*, or "in the beginning," when the Great Architect uttered His divine speech. This *logos* was God. Adam Clarke asks, "How can a person be separated from his own speech?" Some maintain that the phrase *pros ton theon*, "with God," indicates a separate entity; therefore, the *logos* is an eternal Person and not just speech or thought or plan. Westcott and Hort argued that the

⁸ J. R. Dummelow, *The One Volume Bible Commentary*, MacMillan, 1970, civ.

⁹ A.E.J. Rawlinson, ed., *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, Longmans, Green and Co., 1928, 258-300.

¹⁰ *Jesus, God and Man*, MacMillan, 1967, 15-18; see also *The Birth of the Messiah*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 432.

¹¹ *Christology in the Making*, Eerdmans, 1996, 150, 163-176.

¹² Harvest Books, 2000.

¹³ See Stanley Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions*, "Odes of Solomon," 172-182.

word *pros* should be rendered “face to face with” God and so proves two Persons, but many modern exegetes have not landed on this side of the issue. Some commentators think that the direct object used in conjunction with the definite article proves that the *logos* was a personification of God’s utterance which was with God. Most satisfactory in view of John’s obviously Jewish background is to understand *logos* as God expressing Himself through His divine speech. God remains then one Person.

Another disputed text is John 1:14: “And the word became [*egeneto*] flesh and dwelt [or tabernacled] among us.” The word *egeneto*, became, has traditionally been interpreted as pointing to a change of state. The *logos* had to be transformed by divine birth into a new physical entity. But transformation is not required by John’s language. He says nothing about “*assuming* flesh.” Other lexicons define this term as “to generate a beginning.” Hans Küng, a renowned 20th-century theologian, has recently reversed his position on “Jesus being God” to “Jesus being God’s Son.” He maintains that post-biblical interpretations which favor developing orthodoxy were not based on exegetical studies but on the decisions of later creeds and councils.

The gospel of John teaches that Jesus’ origin was “from heaven,” pointing to his supernatural Sonship (John 3:13). Therefore, as commentators have pointed out, the pre-existence of the Son of God may have been in the Father’s mind. But one might ask, “Weren’t all things created by Jesus?” (see Col. 1:16). The preposition used here has been problematic for scholars for some time. Bart Ehrman suggests that a Christological tampering with the text in the early Latin period may have taken place and the text may be rendered, “All things were created *because* of Jesus.”¹⁴ Some might exclaim, “Didn’t Jesus say that he was *returning* to the Father, proving that he was there in eternity past?” (see John 13:3; 16:28; 20:17, NIV). The Greek word in these verses is not in fact “return” or “go back” as in the NIV. It is simply “go.” According to Alford, these verses show that the origin of Jesus in the form of *logos* was with his Father.¹⁵

In later Johannine Christology, the New Jerusalem Bible correctly renders 1 John 4:2: “This is the proof of the spirit of God: any spirit which acknowledges Jesus Christ, come in human nature, is from God.” Notice “come in human nature” rather than “come into” (*eis*); this would

¹⁴ Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, Oxford University Press, 1996, note on Colossians 1:16.

¹⁵ Henry Alford, *Alford’s Greek Testament, An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, Guardian Press, 1976, note on John 16:28.

have been the term used had Christ pre-existed and his previous nature been brought into his bodily existence. More accurately John wrote, “He who acknowledges a Jesus who came as human...” He then adds that those who do not acknowledge “*that* [the article is anaphoric] Jesus” are mistaken (v. 3). The point is that the one (true) Jesus is being contrasted with a false Jesus. The real Jesus is fully human.

Come Let Us Worship the King

There are four Greek words which express the English term “worship.” These range from a simple bow to a human dignitary, or divine monarch, to worship of God Himself:

proskuneo: “to show reverence,” Rev. 4:10; Heb. 1:6; John 4:21-24; Matt. 4:10

sebomai, “to revere or to possess a feeling of awe or devotion to God,” Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7; Acts 16:14

latreuo, to “render religious service or religious homage,” Phil. 3:3; Acts 7:42; Heb. 10:2

eusebeo, “to act piously towards or to show piety,” Acts 17:23

As biblical researchers, we need to be careful how we translate these various terms. Jesus is the object of the Church’s “worship” as the Messiah, because he is truly the unique one of Romans 8:29. Therefore, he and God alone are the only objects of our unbridled affection. Nevertheless the verb *latreuo*, to offer religious service to someone, is not used of Jesus in the New Testament.

Discovering the proper relationship between God and Jesus based on New Testament evidence alone, should bring unity to the body of Christ as we seek to understand the concept of God in Sonship. The term *homoousios* developed by the creeds, and attributed to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is not a biblical term. God is not of a “tritheistic” nature but truly is the one God, the Father, the God of true monotheism as taught by Jesus himself in the *Shema* (Mark 12:28-34).

Paul writes, “In him, in bodily form, lives divinity in all its fullness” (Col. 2:9, New Jerusalem Bible) and “God wanted all fullness to be found in him and through him to reconcile all things to him” (Col. 1:19-20).¹⁶ Only Christ can close this great chasm which divides us from the Father as well as separates creation (v. 20). For God was in Christ so that we might be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:19). Most American seminaries held this view at the time of our colonial fathers. As late as 1553, when Michael Servetus met his death at the hands of John Calvin, righteous

¹⁶ Christians are also to be “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).

scholars such as Servetus were still giving their lives for simply offering another, biblical, explanation of God being in Christ.

We should accept our Christian brethren while we all work at recovering a true picture of what it means for God to be one and for divinity to dwell in His unique Son. Our theology defines imperfectly the fullness of God's revelation. Let us praise and thank God for what He has revealed to us in the words of Scripture. May the Church continue to struggle to worship our biblical God by using biblical theology to obtain biblical results. And by the name of His dear Son, may we all grow in the grace and knowledge of His great salvation.