

# **God and Christ**



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Examining the Evidence for  
a Biblical Doctrine

David Barron

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## Abbreviations

AB	The Anchor Bible, 38 Volumes (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.).
ANF	The Ante-Nicene Fathers, 9 Volumes, Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, 10 <sup>th</sup> Volume Edited by Allan Menzies (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.).
BDAG	Walter Bauer, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , Revised by F. W. Danker and F. W. Gingrich, Translated into English by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, Third Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
BibSac	Bibliotheca Sacra
BN	Albert Barnes, et al, <i>Barnes' Notes</i> , Heritage Edition, 14 Volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005. Reprint from London: Blackie & Son, 1847).
CBQ	The Catholic Biblical Quarterly
EGT	Expositor's Greek Testament
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JETS	Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
JTS	The Journal of Theological Studies
KJV	King James Version
NAB	New American Bible
LITV	J.P. Green's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NovT	Novum Testamentum
TMSJ	The Master's Seminary Journal
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary, 52 Volumes, Edited by B.M. Metzger, D.A. Hubbard, G.W. Barker (Dallas, TX: Word, Inc.).

## INTRODUCTION

This work is by no means unique. Many prior have defended the proper identities of Jehovah God and his Son Jesus Christ. Several works have been published in the past decade on the matter, extensively examining the background and development of the Trinity and a number of common “proof texts.” While I disagree with these on the interpretation of several passages, the conclusion that the Father alone is Jehovah and that Jesus Christ is his Son, the Messiah, who preexisted in heaven and was God’s agent in creating the world and delivering salvation, is refreshing.

One might suggest that work on this book began when I was only eleven years old. Though having a belief in God and Jesus for as long as I can remember, only then was I introduced to the diversity of views on God. With my mother and father separately I began attending various churches and religious gatherings, on more than a few occasions finding myself in discussions with church pastors and youth group leaders about the Trinity, a doctrine I rejected even then, for I could not find it articulated in the Scriptures. This work is the product of prayer, research and study since that time.

Before delving into the substance of this book it would be beneficial to consider some definitions. While I maintain a Unitarian outlook, this should not be confused with the views of Unitarian Universalism or those identifying themselves as “Biblical Unitarians” who deny the Messiah’s preexistence. The Unitarian outlook I profess can be summarized as follows:

The Father alone is Almighty God, the Jehovah of the Old Testament (John 17:3; Heb. 1:1-2). Jesus Christ is the Logos, the firstborn of all creation, the Son of God who existed in heaven and came to earth as a perfect man (John 1:1, 14; 17:5; Col. 1:15).

This biblical teaching can be contrasted with the doctrine of the Trinity:

“Trinity means that the one divine nature is a unity of three persons and that God is revealed as three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

Attempting to refute Trinitarianism, many have confused the doctrine with Sabellianism, otherwise known as Modalism. The doctrine of the Trinity suggests that God exists as one being or essence within which there are three distinct persons. While the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all the “one God,” the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Holy Spirit. Sabellianism is quite different:

“An early-third-century Trinitarian heresy named for Sabellius, who taught that the one God revealed himself successively in salvation history first as Father (Creator and Lawgiver), then as Son (redeemer) and finally as Spirit (Sustainer, Giver of Grace). Hence for Sabellius there is only one divine person, not three...”<sup>2</sup>

Though both teachings present Jesus as God, certain points will refute Sabellianism but not Trinitarianism. To demonstrate that Jesus and God preexisted together in heaven (John 17:5) is against Sabellianism, not Trinitarianism. The same is true for pointing to the lack the article before θεός in John 1:1c. In defending the biblical teaching one must be careful to avoid mistakenly arguing against the wrong teaching!

When reading the Bible it is critical to be mindful that the 1<sup>st</sup> century reader did not conceptualize things as our modern, western minds. To them a statement could mean one thing while to us it would mean something entirely different. Such is the case with an important concept known as *agency*. Understanding this concept is essential for understanding the Bible, for it is used throughout. What agency is may be best summarized by Ben Witherington:

“The Jewish concept of agency, which involved a legal relationship as much as anything else, can be summed up in the key phrase: ‘A person’s agent is as himself.’ An agent is a person authorized to perform some specific set of tasks and empowered to speak and act for the one sending the person. The agent was acting for the sender on occasions when the sender could not or chose not to be personally present. This agent was to be treated as the one

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grover, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 104.

sending him or her would have been treated had that one come in person. An affront to the agent was an affront to the sender; a positive response or treatment of the agent was seen as a positive response or treatment of the sender. In many ways this was also how ambassadors or envoys were viewed in the ancient world—they were just other kinds of agents.”<sup>3</sup>

An agent could be viewed as the sender himself and in written record this was often the case. So with a centurion who requested Jesus’ help. Matthew provides a summary of the event, noting how “a centurion came to Him, imploring Him” for help with his sick servant (Mat. 8:5). Jesus promised to “come and heal” his servant and “the centurion answered” him (Mat. 8:8 KJV), displaying humility and faith.

Agency is in Matthew’s account when Luke notes that the centurion never personally came to Jesus, but first sent “some Jewish elders” (Luke 7:3). While Luke does not record the initial request found in Matthew, it is implied when he notes how the elders were “asking Him to come and save the life of his slave” (v. 3). When traveling with the Jewish elders to the centurion’s home we find that the centurion’s second statement in Matthew was made to Jesus, but in Luke’s record it was by his “friends” (v. 6).<sup>4</sup>

Some may mistakenly view the preceding as contradictory, but it is not. As a reflection of agency Matthew was well within his rights to express that the centurion himself had come, for it was *as if* he really had. The Jewish elders and the centurion’s friends had legal authority to speak on his behalf, so when doing so in this manner their words were his own.

Agency is important for the development of a proper christology. Jesus himself spoke of agency regarding the authority he bestowed upon his disciples. “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me” (Mat. 25:45). “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). Jesus was not personally persecuted upon his resurrection, but with his disciples as his agents to persecute them was and is to persecute him. In a similar but more significant way, Jesus is the Father’s agent. As the one “sent” by God (John 3:16), Jesus acted and continues to act on his behalf. Dedicating himself to serving as God’s agent and not himself, ‘he would do nothing on his own,’ for he would only ‘speak things as the Father instructed him’ (John 5:19; 8:28). As God’s agent Jesus even held his name (John

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington, III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Luke records a statement by the elders themselves when they personally “earnestly implored Him,” but this was an expression of their own opinion of the centurion and not a reflection of agency (Luke 7:4-5).

17:11) much as “the angel of Jehovah” in the Old Testament when Jehovah expressed, “My name is in Him” (Ex. 23:21). One might suggest that this was Jehovah because he is so addressed, yet what took place would be consistent with agency were an angel or divine messenger to have appeared in his place.

Important concepts other than agency will be considered in greater detail throughout the following pages. The scriptures will be examined along with a portion of their background to more fully reveal the meaning. This book is not exhaustive by any means. The view expressed, standing in the face of 1700 years of so-called orthodoxy, will undoubtedly be dismissed by many. I ask only that the points be considered prayerfully and with an open mind.

I pray that this work benefits all who read it. As imperfect as I am there can be no guarantee placed upon anything written. I only say that this is a sincere effort through prayer and careful study to understand and express these matters. Each person must necessarily compare the information to what is presented in the Bible and other historically relevant writings to determine what is true and what is not.

## - 1 -

**BIBLICAL MONOTHEISM**

Monotheism has always served as a staple of Judaism and Christianity. With rampant polytheism among early peoples, the biblical teaching identifies only one true God. Deriving a belief from this outlook many have suggested a strict doctrine where the one true God is recognized with all others termed gods thought to be false gods. While this strict definition is appealing, the matter is vastly oversimplified, failing to account for many others who are properly termed gods.

Significant misunderstanding stems from a failure to recognize that the words translated “god(s)” (Hebrew: אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*; Greek: θεός, *theos*) meant much more to the ancient reader than realized by many today. On this Carl Mosser explains: “Moderns are often unaware that θεός had a much broader semantic range than is allowed for G/god in contemporary Western European languages.”<sup>1</sup> Only by recognizing how god can refer to more than the one true God and false gods is the full range of meaning appreciated.

With their own ideas about monotheism some suggest that recognizing any others as gods is incompatible, at best viewing it as henotheism and at worst polytheism.<sup>2</sup> As early Jews and Christians understood themselves to be monotheists, we should carefully consider how they understood monotheism in forming our own belief, not forcing a strict definition into the text that they did not hold. Larry Hurtado has commented:

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalms 82, Jewish Antecedents, and The Origin of Christian Deification”, *JTS* 56 (April, 2005), 22.

<sup>2</sup> So James White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998).

“It is mistaken to assume that we can evaluate ancient Jewish texts and beliefs in terms of whether or how closely they meet our own preconceived idea of ‘pure’ monotheism... If we are to avoid a priori definitions and the imposition of our own theological judgments, we have no choice but to accept as monotheism the religion of those who profess to be monotheists, however much their religion carries and may seem ‘complicated’ with other beings in addition to the one God.”<sup>3</sup>

The monotheistic belief of early Jewish and Christian believers is to be understood by evaluating their writings. Though priority should be given to canonical texts, extra-biblical Jewish texts should not be ignored.

### “God” – Use and Meaning

Biblical times found the words translated "god" applied both to false gods and the Almighty, and it is within these two categories that biblical monotheism is founded. While these two are most common, the term included applications between the extremes, identifying various gods who were neither false nor Almighty. It is this often neglected middle range that demands analysis.

Commenting on the various uses of the word god, the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* relates:

“This term for deity is used in a threefold connotation in the O[ld]T[estament]: (1) In a singular sense of the one true God in a plural of majesty and excellence. It is construed with a singular verb or adjective (Gen. 1:1; 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Pss. 7:10; 57:3; 78:56) but with a plural verb only in certain phrases... (3) Of judges or prophets as ‘to whom the word of God came’ (John 10:35; Ps. 82:6), and whom God consequently dignified with authority to bear His own name (Ex. 21:6, see marg.; 22:8; ‘judges’)...”<sup>4</sup>

Murray Harris similarly remarks:

“For any Jew or Gentile of the first century A.D. who was acquainted with the OT in Greek, the term θεός would have seemed rich in content since it signified the Deity, the Creator of

<sup>3</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 113-114.

<sup>4</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Revised and Updated Edition, Edited by R.K. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 482.

heaven and earth, and also could render the ineffable sacred name, Yahweh, the covenantal God, and yet was capable of extremely diverse application, ranging from the images of pagan deities to the one true God of Israel, from heroic people to angelic beings. Whether one examines the Jewish or the Gentile use of the term θεός up to the end of the first century A.D., there is an occasional application of the term to human beings who perform divine functions or display divine characteristics.”<sup>5</sup>

Several passages exemplify the various uses of “god.” For example, Moses was “a god to Pharaoh” (Ex. 7:1). Jehovah had not exalted his nature to make him something other than a human, but he gave him authority to act in his behalf, allowing Moses to speak for him and carry out his works. In all Moses did to Pharaoh he was ‘performing divine functions and displaying divine characteristics,’ making the identification of him as “a god” appropriate.

The judges of Israel were on several occasions identified as gods: “God... judges in the midst of the gods... I have said, You are gods, And all of you are sons of the Most High” (Psa. 82:1, 6). On this text *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* explains:

“The psalmist envisioned God presiding over an assembly of judges. The word gods (‘ēlōhîm) is used here for authorities in Israel (cf. 45:6; Ex. 21:6; 22:8-9). Some have thought this refers to angels (e.g., the Syriac trans.) in God’s heavenly court. However, the remainder of the psalm clarifies that these are God’s representatives who are in authority on earth.”<sup>6</sup>

Keil and Delitzsch further note:

“Everywhere among men, but here pre-eminently, those in authority are God’s delegates and the bearers of His image, and therefore as His representatives are also themselves called *elohim*, ‘gods’...”<sup>7</sup>

Denying the implications of Psalm 82:6, some argue the passage presents the referenced ones as gods only in sarcasm or irony. This notion is foreign to the text as Keil and Delitzsch note:

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<sup>5</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 270.

<sup>6</sup> J.F. Walvoord and R.B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 2 Volumes (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books), 1:854.

<sup>7</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 Volumes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., repr. 1978), 5:2:402.

“The idea that the appellation *elohim*, which they have given to themselves, is only sarcastically given back to them in Psa[Im] 82:1 (Ewald, Olshausen), is refuted by Psa[Im] 82:6, according to which they are really *elohim* by the grace of God.”<sup>8</sup>

They are gods “by the grace of God” just as it is by this that they are “sons of the most high.” Though they “shall die as men,” this tells only that because of their sin they shall die as common men irrespective of their position. Many commentators have recognized the meaning of such texts while missing the implications for a proper monotheistic doctrine, as John Gill:

“[In Exodus 22:8 the judges are] called *Elohim*, gods, because they were God's vicegerents, and represented him, and acted under his power and authority; and who at this present were Moses, and those that judged the people under him, and afterwards the seventy elders, and all such who in succeeding times were judges in Israel, and bore the office of civil magistrates.”<sup>9</sup>

Angels, too, are given this appellation (Psa. 8:5). Referencing man as “a little lower than אֱלֹהִים (God/gods),”<sup>10</sup> this is not the Almighty who is infinitely greater. The Septuagint translators and the author of Hebrews understood אֱלֹהִים in this context to be angels. The psalmist, speaking of man's creation and the book of Hebrews applying this text to Jesus becoming a man, presents a contrast between the higher nature of angels with the ‘lower’ nature man. In their existence as “spirits” (Heb. 1:7 NET) they are gods.

Early Jewish literature other than the Bible substantiates allowing for others termed gods within monotheistic thought. The story of *Joseph and Aseneth*—a work likely penned between the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C. and A.D.—speaks of an angel who is “the chief of the house of the Lord” (14:8), identifying him as “a god” (17:9). From the Dead Sea Scrolls another example comes with reference to angels:

“And exalt his exaltation to the heights, gods of the august divinities, and the divinity of his glory above all the august heights. For he is the God of the gods ... Sing with joy

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5:2:404.

<sup>9</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the Bible*, [www reference cited Oct. 15, 2005], <http://www.studylight.org/com/geb/>, Psa. 82:6. See also Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament*, (Colorado Springs, CO.: David C. Cook, 2003), 186.

<sup>10</sup> This can be used as either a plural of majesty, reflecting God's exalted position (used for God and others with singular pronouns), or a true plural with reference to more than one god. The translation is my own.

those of you enjoying his knowledge, with rejoicing among the wonderful gods ... Praise him, divine spirits, praising for ever and ever the main vault of the heights ... The spirits of the holy of the holy ones, the living gods, the spirits of everlasting holiness.”<sup>11</sup>

From this sampling there are two apparent applications for the word god outside of the traditional monotheistic contrast between the true God and false gods. The first is principally of men who possess divinely granted authority, having been ordained by God and given special authority to act on his behalf. This authority was extended to the judges and kings of Israel (Psa. 82:6; 45:6). The second applies to beings of a higher order as the angels. So in Psalm 8:5 the angels are “gods” in contrast to the lower nature of man. These spirits are powerful beings, unmatched by any human but not vastly superior as Jehovah.

An important consideration is that those termed gods outside of the strict monotheistic definition were not entitled to divine worship. Worthy of great respect and honor, on occasion having been given homage (cf. Gen. 19:1), such never crossed the line into divine worship that God alone was counted worthy of. They were not rivals to God and those who made themselves into such, in turn, became false gods. In doing this they would have exalted themselves to a higher level, creating expectations with those who might follow them that they were unable to fulfill and perhaps even demanding divine worship of which they were not worthy.

## No Other Gods – Interpreting in Context

With evidence supporting the proper identification of gods other than the true God, some suggest that several passages contradict this notion. Indeed, numerous theologians have argued that certain passages expressly deny the existence of gods in any sense other than the true God.<sup>12</sup> As the scriptures are not contradictory careful examination of these texts is required.

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<sup>11</sup> “4QSongs of the Sabbath,” *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, Second Edition, Edited by Florentino Garcia Martinez, translated by Wilfred G.E. Watson, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 422, 427.

<sup>12</sup> Some limit their opinion to gods “by nature,” borrowing Paul’s language at Galatians 4:8. This qualifier imported into other passages is entirely unjustified and done only out of theological necessity as will be demonstrated. Those appealing to Isaiah in defense of a strict monotheism include White, *Forgotten Trinity*; Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism & Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing, 1998). As will be seen, these texts present only the Father speaking (Heb. 1:1-2) and the limitations on deity and other functions would thus exclude the Son even if the Trinity was a reality and these interpretations were accurate.

A fundamental principle of interpretation is to read in context. One would avoid taking a passage out of context to make blanket application when the context dictates a meaning that is specific. For example, Exodus 20:4 (NET) provides a command to not make “a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth under it, or that is in the water below.” This language at first seems clear and absolute, but there appears to be a contradiction when the Bible later condones its violation. In fact, any non-religious statue or carving would violate the command as here quoted.

Examples of this law’s violation would be in the building of Solomon’s temple. Solomon is said to have “engraved cherubs on the walls” (2Ch. 3:7) and to have carved engravings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers” (1Ki. 6:29 NASB). Similarly, Solomon built for himself a house with images of oxen (1Ki. 7:25). Yet with these both Solomon and the temple remained acceptable to Jehovah (1Ki. 9:3).

How, then, is the command of Exodus 20:4 understood? Verse 3 narrows the command to be against having other gods before Jehovah. Verse 5 further clarifies, instructing that they should not “bow to” or “serve” the carved images. Keil and Delitzsch relate:

“It is not only evident from the context that the allusion is not to the making of images generally, but to the construction of figures of God as objects of religious reverence or worship, but this is expressly stated in ver[se] 5; so that even Calvin observes, that ‘there is no necessity to refute what some have foolishly imagined, that sculpture and painting of every kind are condemned here.’”<sup>13</sup>

Exodus 20 defines the type of carved image prohibited. That Calvin tells of ones who have gone so far as to argue that “sculpture and painting of every kind are condemned here” cannot be overlooked when this is plainly not the case. The context speaks against this, as do other texts. Similarly, the application of passages appealed to for denying the proper identification of others as gods is refuted by these passages’ own context.

Isaiah provides the principle proof texts from which strict, absolute monotheism is derived. Passages have been isolated as some have done with Exodus 20:4, making an absolute statement out of what must be understood contextually. Prominently featured but misapplied in this discussion is Isaiah 43:10. Here God speaks: “Before me there was no God formed; nor shall any be after me.” This verse is often read to be a statement about the non-formation of other gods, but in fact it is a

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<sup>13</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, 1:2:115.

statement about the sovereignty of Jehovah. Note that the text addresses specific times during which no gods have been or will be formed. These times are “before” and “after” Jehovah.

It is necessary to ask when Jehovah has ever not been so that gods might have been formed *before* him. Having existed throughout all eternity there is no time when he did not exist, so there has never been a time that was “before” him nor will there be any “after” him. This does not deny that other gods have been formed, but it expresses Jehovah’s eternal duration where there will never be a time either “before” or “after” him. A credible understanding of why Jehovah expressed himself this way may be presented:

“This is already evident in the contrast between the pantheon of benevolent and dangerous gods and Israel’s God who is the same in his judgments, 42.22ff., and in the salvation which he promises, 431ff. This v. emphasizes the contrast in the sense that Yahweh has no beginning and no end. The epic *Enuma Elish* (ANET, 60ff.) gives a good example of the theogony in Mesopotamia. In the course of history one deity is ousted by another, depending on the political powers of their worshippers. Morgenstern also draws attention to an ancient Semitic concept of three aeons, successively ruled by various deities.”<sup>14</sup>

With Isaiah 43:10 shown as not particularly relevant to the discussion, an examination of its context is worthwhile, for it limits the scope of the verse and more importantly, those that are to come. Early in and throughout the significant texts of Isaiah clarity is given as to the gods in view.<sup>15</sup> Intending to demonstrate the absurdity of accepting these things as gods, the manner in which they derive their existence is explained.

Isaiah 40:19 The craftsman pours out the casted image, the smelter spreads it with gold; and he casts the chains of silver. 20 He too poor for that offering chooses a tree that will not rot; he seeks a skilled artisan for him, to prepare a carved image that will not be shaken.

The preceding continues with God focusing his attention on these idols as man-made creations, not beings properly identified as gods.

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<sup>14</sup> Jan L. Koole, “Isaiah,” Part 3, Volume 1: Isaiah 40:48, *Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. by Corelis Houtman, Willem S. Prinsloo, Wilfred G.E. Watson, Al Wolters (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1997), 310-311. See too *BN*, 6:2:118.

<sup>15</sup> This is not to suggest that there may have been other gods outside of those specified by the context that existed before Jehovah, but only that this context is addressing specific ones and by recognizing this we better understand this passage and others surrounding it.

While God strengthens his people, idols must be strengthened by their makers.

Isaiah 41:7 So the carver strengthens the refiner; and he smoothing with the hammer, him who struck the anvil, saying of the soldering, It is good. And he made it strong with nails; it will not totter.

Those idolaters who come to realize the truth will be ashamed of their former course; they will realize all of the activities that centered on these gods were in vain.

Isaiah 42:17 they are turned back; they are ashamed with shame, those trusting in the carved image, who say to cast images, You are our gods.

Isaiah 44:9-20 continues the argument against the so-called gods with these in view when statements are made denying their existence. Not discussed are those created by Jehovah as highly exalted beings or humans who have been appointed by God to exercise divinely granted authority. It is the idol makers who form their gods out of various materials so that they are not gods at all.

Isaiah 41:29 NASB "Behold, all of them are false; Their works are worthless, Their molten images are wind and emptiness.

The context thus established, it is easy to identify the similarity between these passages and Exodus 20:4. While Exodus 20:4 had specific "carved images" in view, Isaiah had specific "gods" in mind. These gods are discussed in the second passage necessary to review.

Isaiah 44:6 So says Jehovah, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, Jehovah of Hosts: I am the First, and I am the Last; and there is no God except Me.

The denial of any other god is plainly in reference to idols as man's creation. This does not extend to others whom we have considered rightfully identified as gods. The contextual limitation is similarly necessary in Isaiah 43:11 when we are told that there are no saviors other than God himself. This statement is certainly true, but it is true within this context.

On a number of occasions Scripture identifies various individuals as saviors. One is of Ehud. Not a savior of himself or in opposition to God, he is said to have been 'raised up' as a savior by Jehovah (Jdg. 3:15). In other words, Jehovah established Ehud as a savior, and so the title is appropriately applied to him. Were Isaiah 43:11 removed from its

context there would be clear contradiction, but by considering the context this interpretive issue is resolved. Ehud is appropriately termed a savior not only because the context is contrasting God's saving ability and the lack of such with idols, but also because God granted him the position so that Ehud saved by God's own power.

Isaiah establishes within itself a context, providing a specific contrast between the Almighty Jehovah and the idols of the nations as man made gods. The negative statements within these texts do not deny the existence of others who are properly identified as gods, but the existence of the idols and in principle all made into gods by men.

Other passages similar to those in Isaiah include Jeremiah 10:11 where it is stated that "the gods who have not made the heavens and the earth... shall perish." Here, too, the context removes any difficulty potentially.

Jeremiah 10:3 For the ordinances of the people are vanity. For one cuts a tree out of the forest with the axe, the work of the hands of the craftsman. 4 They adorn it with silver and with gold; they make them strong with nails and hammers, so that it will not wobble. 5 They are like a rounded post, and they cannot speak; carrying they must be carried, because they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil nor good; it is not with them.

These words refer to the specific gods made by men with reference to the idols formed directly by human hands. This does not mean that those not made directly by human hands such as emperors, the sun or the moon could be identified as gods. The *principle* behind these texts extends into anything made into a god by man (or a demon), be it by direct formation or mere identification.<sup>16</sup> This sharply contrasts those Jehovah has made into gods by creation or through the bestowal of divine authority.

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<sup>16</sup> Brief comments are necessary on Galatians 4:8 and 1 Corinthians 10:20. Galatians refers to that which "by nature are no gods," referencing the idols formerly worshiped by the Galatians and having nothing to do with those properly termed gods. 1 Corinthians 10:20 speaks of demons, but whether or not this refers to wicked spirits or only to the gods imagined to be behind the idols is questionable with the term possibly referencing either. If we accept the former we must answer Paul's rhetorical inquiry of whether "an idol is anything" negatively, recognizing that as in Isaiah it would make little sense to deny that a mere statue is a god, instead denying the existence of any god represented by an idol. The sacrifices made would not have a god to accept them and with the sacrifices in opposition to god the demons would take them unto themselves. Nothing indicates that the fallen angels were somehow the gods behind the idols. Such would have required these demons to communicate with men, representing themselves as these gods to have the idols formed, but this lacks any supporting evidence.

## The One and Only True God

The New Testament affirms on several occasions the existence of “one God.” By way of context or express identification this one is shown to be the Father (1Cor. 8:6; 1Ti. 2:5).<sup>17</sup> To some readers this proclamation would seem to refute the notion of any other as a god. Nevertheless, just as it is essential to interpret passages in their context, it is also essential to understand the meaning behind certain expressions as they were understood by the Bible's human authors.

A close parallel with the expression “one God” was presented in a dialog between Jesus and the Jews. Within the discussion the Jews respond to an accusation made by Jesus: “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God” (John 8:41). This affirmation did not preclude anyone else from being their father. Two verses prior the Jews identified one other than God was their father, Abraham: “Abraham is our father” (John 8:39). These two statements, though within a single context, did not equate Abraham with God for they were both appropriately termed their father even though God alone was their “one Father.”

This passage is affirming God as their absolute father. He is the ultimate source of their existence, the source of all life and the source of their father Abraham. Similarly, Christ is affirmed as our “one Lord” (1Cor. 8:6) not to deny that the Father is our Lord just as the expression did not prohibit the apostle John from identifying one of the twenty-four elders as his (Rev. 7:14), but it expresses Jesus' direct and absolute rulership over us, with all commands and direction coming from him. Jesus holds this position because God 'gave him authority over all flesh,' having men that 'were God's' but that he 'gave to Jesus out of the world' (John 17:2, 6). This is a position that God has granted Jesus (Acts 2:36).<sup>18</sup>

To identify Jehovah as our “one God” does not deny that others can be called gods, but it demonstrates that he is the one who is *absolute God*. Any other that is appropriately identified as a god is so in a derivative sense, where they have been created by Jehovah as a highly exalted being or they have been granted divine authority to act in his stead.

In harmony with the preceding Jesus identified the Father as “the only

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<sup>17</sup> The following chapter will discuss this in greater detail.

<sup>18</sup> So Jude 4 identifies Jesus as “our only Master and Lord.” Trinitarians must deny these statements (though possibly denying their own denial) because they do not actually believe that Jesus is really “our only Master and Lord” and our “one Lord,” instead identifying all three persons of the Trinity as this. God may be identified as such just as men (cf. 1Ti. 6:1), but only in a sense different than when applied to Jesus. Thus, in the way that Jesus is “our only Master and Lord,” it is even to the exclusion of the Father.

true God,” while the apostle John spoke of him also as “the true God” (John 17:3; 1Jo. 5:20<sup>19</sup>). It is not uncommonly argued from this text that all others that are gods must be false gods, for only one is the “true God,” yet this stems from a misunderstanding of the term translated “true,” ἀληθινός (*alethenos*). On this word *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* observes that “the opposite is not necessarily false.”<sup>20</sup> The truth of this statement is well-attested to by several New Testament texts.

At Hebrews 9:24 the author writes of Jesus entering the holy of holies. Contrasting the holy of holies in the physical temple on earth with the holy holies that Jesus entered, we read:

For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the *true* one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;

The holy of holies in the physical temple building was not considered “true,” but only a “copy” or “type of the true one.”<sup>21</sup> As a type it cannot be said that the holy of holies on earth was somehow false, but neither was it “true.” The meaning must be that the holy of holies in the earthly temple was derived from the heavenly, in some way modeled after it. The one built upon the earth was an image of the heavenly, much as Jesus is the image of God (Col. 1:15).

With another occurrence of ἀληθινός Jesus is said to be “the true Light” (John 1:9). It would not be appropriate to say that if ones are not “the true Light” they are false lights, for Christians are “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14, 16) and yet we are neither false lights nor “the true light.” Rather, we are modeled after Christ with him serving as the archetypal light.<sup>22</sup>

The third century church writer Origen apparently recognized how “true” is used in John 17:3. He noted: “The true God, then, is ‘The God,’ and those who are formed after Him are gods, images, as it were, of Him the prototype.”<sup>23</sup> Vincent remarks extensively on this as well:

“A different word, ἀληθής, also rendered true, occurs at [John] iii. 33; v. 31; vii. 13, and elsewhere. The difference is that ἀληθής signifies true, as contrasted with

<sup>19</sup> On the proper interpretation of 1John 5:20 see chapter 6.

<sup>20</sup> Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 176.

<sup>21</sup> NAB.

<sup>22</sup> It would not be inappropriate to also identify God as “true light.” Christ as “the radiance of his glory” displays light from God, making the expression applicable to both.

<sup>23</sup> Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel of John,” *ANF*, 10:323.

false; while ἀληθινός [the word used to speak of God as "the only true God"] signifies what is real, perfect, and substantial, as contrasted with what is fanciful, shadowy, counterfeit, or merely symbolic. Thus God is ἀληθής (John iii. 33) in that He cannot lie. He is ἀληθινός (1Thess. i. 9), as distinguished from idols. In Heb. viii. 2, the heavenly tabernacle is called ἀληθινός, as distinguished from the Mosaic tabernacle, which was a figure of the heavenly reality (Heb. ix.24). Thus the expression true light denotes the realization of the original divine idea of the Light - the archetypal Light, as contrasted with all imperfect manifestations: 'the Light which fulfilled all that had been promised by the preparatory, partial, even fictitious lights which had existed in the world before.'<sup>m24</sup>

Even idols, though false gods, were based upon the archetypal God Jehovah. They were modeled after him in that their worshipers assigned them power and authority belonging to the true God. It was not that the idols had access to Jehovah's power and authority, for they were not really gods at all, but their worshipers claimed for them that which belongs to Jehovah.

Carefully considering the preceding points it is apparent that biblical monotheism is, as we initially affirmed, the recognition of the unique position of the one true God. This is in contrast to the idols that their worshipers placed on the same level as Jehovah. He was and is the only one who can truly and in a complete way be said to be God. Outside of the standard monotheistic definition the term "god" is also applicable to others in lesser, derivative ways. They are gods by Jehovah's will, either through the delegation of divine authority or inherit in their creation as highly exalted beings. In no way were they before or in opposition to God. Rather, they derived their divine status from Jehovah.

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<sup>24</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 Volumes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 2:44.

## - 2 -

### IDENTIFYING THE TRUE GOD

The New Testament authors and Jesus Christ himself were certainly aware of God's nature. All theological outlooks generally agree that God in the New Testament is the same God found in the Old Testament. On more than one occasion the New Testament alludes to events within the Old Testament involving God and in speaking of these events the authors identified him or distinguished him from others to show both who he was and was not.

God's nature<sup>1</sup> can well be understood through texts that speak to his identity. Many relevant passages are commonly overlooked due to the subtlety of their points, but they are powerful when examined. These passages define the one whom the New Testament authors identified as Jehovah in both specific accounts and throughout the Old Testament generally.

Perhaps the plainest New Testament statement on God's identity is found in the first two verses of Hebrews. Speaking with direct reference to the God of the Old Testament, these implicitly define who God is, and more importantly, who he is not. Beginning with a reference to the "God that spoke to the fathers by the prophets" (Heb. 1:1), this "God" is implicitly understood to be Jehovah for it is he who spoke to the Old Testament prophets. The orthodox Trinitarian will often advance that the "God [who] spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets," Jehovah, is the Trinity, while those who hold to Sabellianism will claim this is Jesus who is also Jehovah. What the author of Hebrews provides sharply contrasts these ideas.

Where verse one speaks of the 'God who spoke by the prophets,' verse two continues, relating how this same one has spoken more

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<sup>1</sup> By nature I mean whether he exists as a Trinity, a single person with multiple modes of existence or simply the Father.

recently “in His Son.” In other words, it is the same God who spoke by the prophets in the Old Testament that has spoken in the New Testament by Jesus. Murray Harris expounds on this:

“Since the author is emphasizing the continuity of the two phases of divine speech (ὁ θεός λαλήσας... ἐλάλησεν), this reference to a Son shows that ὁ θεός was understood to be ‘God the Father.’ Similarly, the differentiation made between ὁ θεός as the one who speaks in both eras and υἱός as his final means of speaking shows that in the author’s mind it was not the Triune God... who spoke to the forefathers by the prophets. *That is to say, for the author of Hebrews (as for all NT writers, one may suggest) ‘the God of our fathers,’ Yahweh, was no other than ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’* (compare Acts 2:30 and 2:33; 3:13 and 3:18; 3:25 and 3:26; note also 5:30).”<sup>2</sup>

As the Old Testament God was speaking by Jesus this one is not Jesus. If the God that did this is not Jesus, Jesus is not the Jehovah of the Old Testament or even a person of the Jehovah of the Old Testament, for it is that one who spoke by the prophets. This being true, the God of the Old Testament is not triune, but as the speaking was done in the New Testament by the Son, God can only be the Father.<sup>3</sup>

As the inspired word recorded in Hebrews defines the preceding as true we have every reason to accept it. Though standing in stark contrast to Trinitarian and Sabellian thought, it was not Jesus who

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<sup>2</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 47. Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Trinitarians often accuse Unitarians of beginning with the assumption that God is only one person, but this is far from the case. What is assumed is only that the Bible is a coherent literary work, consistent in its language. This dictates that if language is used of God so that it defines him as a single person the language should be understood as doing exactly that, just as the language would have been used for any other in such a way. This is not to say that anthropomorphic language is not used of God, but outside of this specific use there is consistency. To say otherwise creates a type of “God language” where the language used for God no longer means what the language naturally means. Such is troubling for it allows an arbitrary application of a “God language” principle where one can make the text to mean anything even if defining exactly the opposite of what is stated within the text. Rather than looking for a “God language” the better solution is to accept that the Bible authors used their own language to define God so that it would be possible for readers to understand the text. This is where Trinitarians accuse others of assuming their doctrine; the reality is that Trinitarians assume Trinitarianism in order to overcome a consistent reading of the text.

spoke “by the prophets.”<sup>4</sup>

In penning his letter to the Romans Paul presented his introduction in a manner markedly similar to the opening words in Hebrews. Beginning in verse one Paul explains that he has been “set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures.” Paul distinguishes between the God who made these promises to whom the prophets belonged and Jesus Christ, noting that the 'promises' were “concerning his Son... Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:1-4).

Again in Hebrews the author moves beyond the generalization of God speaking through the prophets as in 1:1, now identifying a specific Old Testament event where God appeared. He relates: “Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant” (Heb. 3:5). Numbers 12:7 is alluded to when Jehovah came down from heaven, calling for Aaron and Miriam. In the account Jehovah is recorded speaking: “It is not so with My servant Moses! He is faithful in all My house.” Jehovah refers to 'his house' with Moses as the one “faithful in” it. After citing Moses as the one who was faithful in Jehovah's house, Hebrews tells that Jesus was 'faithful over his house' and in doing so he was 'faithful as a son.' For Christ to serve 'as a son over his house,' the house is implicitly his Father's. The reference to “his house” is the same as the one Moses was faithful in. From Numbers we know the house belongs to Jehovah and from Hebrews it is apparent that this can be only the Father.<sup>5</sup>

A similar reference found in Acts 3 is with Peter speaking of God, borrowing a self-identification used by Jehovah to identify himself.

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<sup>4</sup> Brief mention should be given to Acts 28:25 where the Holy Spirit is said to be the one to have spoken by the prophets. There is only issue with this text if one assumes a contrary doctrine, but either way this is addressed by 2 Peter 1:21. If the Holy Spirit is in fact “influence coming from God” (*BN*, 4:2:88.) the text is entirely compatible with Hebrews 1:1. God the Father is the one who spoke by the prophets, and he did so by placing his influence upon them, his Holy Spirit. While the focus of this book is not on the Holy Spirit, it is briefly worth mentioning that while the Holy Spirit is often personified (for a few examples, see Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003], 522.), a number of passages clearly deny such personality. So Hebrews 3:1 when literally translated speaks of “distributions of Holy Spirit,” not gifts of the Spirit as many Bible's incorrectly render it. In support of this is Numbers 11:17, 25 where some “of the Spirit” upon one person was divided among many. To suggest that a person, even with God, is somehow 'distributed' and split up among many is incoherent at best. To say that God placed a portion of his influence upon one person and then took from what he placed upon that one and divided it among many to a lesser extent, can be understood.

<sup>5</sup> Through true that no man has ever seen God (John 1:18), the matter of concern is not how this one is the Father, though I would identify this with divine agency. Relevant here is only who this Jehovah was and the evidence shows him to be the Father.

Quoting Exodus 3:15, Peter identified “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers” (Acts 3:13). He spoke of this one’s promise to Abraham from an account in Genesis 22 (Acts 3:25). With both passages Peter identified Jesus as one other than this God. In 3:13 Peter submitted that the God described in Exodus 3:15 was the one who “has glorified His servant Jesus.” “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers,” was a reference to the Father with Jesus as his servant. Citing Genesis 22, Peter states: “It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED’” (Acts 3:25). The ‘God who appointed to their fathers’ is Jehovah, the one who established the covenant with Abraham. With the next verse the apostle distinguishes this one from Jesus:

Acts 3:26 For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.

The God who spoke to Abraham in Genesis 22 is shown to be the one who raised “his servant” Jesus, a point reiterated in Acts 5:30. These passages present Jesus as one other than the God who appeared in the two Old Testament references alluded to by Peter. The God in view when the recorded events took place was the Father.<sup>6</sup>

Later in Acts the apostle Paul, while speaking at he Areopagus, identified an altar to an unknown God: “Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth...” (Acts 17:23-24). Paul proclaimed the God who was his own, but did he accurately represent him?

Continuing in Acts 17 Paul presented the resurrection to his listeners, providing a key distinction: “Because He [the God spoken of in v. 23-24] has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). This distinction presented was between the God whom he was proclaiming to them, ‘the God who made the world and all things in it,’ and Jesus Christ, whom this God raised and appointed. Paul’s

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<sup>6</sup> While some may rebut that Jesus only became a servant when he became a man and so these texts are addressing Jesus in his humanity, such a response is insufficient because even before he became God’s servant he would not have been the one that he became the servant of. Nothing within the text implies God is polypersonal, but Peter refers to a single individual as the God in these Old Testament passages, so even prior to becoming his servant he still would not have been that one or a person of that one.

language represented this God as only a single person distinct from Jesus Christ. Were “the God” to whom this altar was set up, “the God that made the world and all the things in it,” Jesus, or were Jesus a person of that God, Paul would have at the very least demonstrated a misunderstanding of his God’s nature by drawing this distinction.

Evidence shows that the New Testament writers and the apostles viewed the Jehovah of the Old Testament as the Father alone, for whenever they referred to specific Old Testament events the one identified as God was always the Father. Even Jesus, when speaking of whom the Jews identified as their God, identified this one as his Father: “It is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God’” (John 8:54).

Having considered references to Old Testament events when the New Testament authors either alluded to specific events or referenced God through language he used when proclaiming himself to his people, another use of Old Testament texts must be considered. This other use is found when “the NT writer goes beyond the grammatical-historical sense of the OT passage to assign the passage an additional meaning in connection with its NT context.”<sup>7</sup> When doing this the New Testament writers would take Old Testament texts out of context and apply them to new circumstances because the language was deemed appropriate for them. The Apostle Paul was one who used this method of interpretation a number of occasions, for example quoting Psalm 44:22 in Romans 8:36.

Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT  
TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS  
SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."

The psalm reveals a discussion of God's relationship with the nation of Israel. The psalmist sang of how God had 'cast them off and shamed them' and how he 'did not go forth with their armies' (vs. 9). They had been made 'a disgrace, a scorn and a mockery to those around them' (vs. 13). As “sheep to be slaughtered” the psalmist proclaimed, “Why do you sleep O God? Awake! Do not cast us off forever” (vs. 23).

In stark contrast to the Psalm the Apostle Paul did not view himself and his fellow Christians as 'cast off.' They could not be separated by anything from “the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). Replacing God and Israel as the subjects of the psalm, Paul refers to Jesus Christ and the church with his words. To Paul, Christians were being killed on Jesus' behalf as loyal servants, having

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<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “The New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” *TMSJ* 13/1 (Spring 2002), 79.

acted faithful to the point of death.<sup>8</sup>

In Hebrews a number of Old Testament passages are cited, one from Isaiah 8:18. As with the above this text has been quoted out of its original context and the subjects have been changed. Commenting on this text as quoted in Hebrews 2:13 Thomas explains:

“The Isaiah passage speaks of Isaiah and his two sons. The writer of Hebrews applies the same words to Jesus, the Son of God, and His fellow human beings to show Jesus' human nature and His full identification with the human race (Heb 2:13b). In the NT sense the reference is to Jesus instead of Isaiah and to humanity instead of Isaiah's two sons.”<sup>9</sup>

Not only could references be changed but the way the words were used could be vastly altered. In the above text not only did the subject change from Isaiah to Jesus but the sense of “children” was changed so to no longer reference physical descendants.

That the New Testament authors were able to quote in this way is revealing, especially when one considers a number of Old Testament texts used as supposed Trinitarian proof texts. While we have so far considered specific references where God appeared so to identify who he was, there are a number of times when the Old Testament is quoted where the language is applied to Christ as in Hebrews 2:13 but with God as the original referent. This borrowing of language was vastly different than providing specific reference to Old Testament accounts and identities in relation to what were then modern events.

## **Our Lord and his God and Father, Jehovah**

With the New Testament focus on Jesus Christ it is of little wonder that Old Testament passages are applied to him. Though a number of Old Testament references have been quoted out of context and newly applied to Jesus, many originally referred prophetically to him. One particular psalm of David Jesus identified as Messianic, a claim that even his opposition refused to dispute. The citation was of Psalm 110:1: “A declaration of Jehovah to my Lord: Sit at My right hand, until I place Your enemies as Your footstool.” When Jesus cited this text he asked how David could call the Messiah his Lord when the Messiah was his son. To this they had no response (Mat. 22:43-45).

According to the Apostle Peter the psalm had reference to Jesus' exalted state, a position given him upon his resurrection: “God swore

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, see Ephesians 4:8 and Psalm 68:18.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, 83.

with an oath... to raise the Christ to sit on his throne” (Acts 2:30 LITV). Peter's words are further recorded:

Acts 2:32 LITV This Jesus, God raised up, of which we all are witnesses. 33 Then being exalted to the right of God, and receiving the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, He poured out this which you now see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend into Heaven, but he says, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand 35 until I place those hostile to You as a footstool for Your feet."

Jesus' resurrection was connected to his exaltation and his exaltation to his enthronement at God's right hand. This served as proof that God had “made Him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36), though not to say that Jesus was not these before his death and resurrection. Upon his exaltation he was made these in ways above and beyond anything he had been prior.

Before Jesus' death his disciples already recognized his position as their Lord (John 13:13). They further recognized his position as the Christ (Mat. 16:16). Yet at that time he was not given the complete Lordship that accompanied his exaltation. Though already Lord to a lesser extent, once resurrected he was 'made Lord,' having been placed in a new, more exalted position. Similarly, though anointed, he was only so into his enthronement on God's throne to his right hand upon his exaltation and ascension. With his anointing for this enthronement he was 'made Christ.'

The expansion of Jesus' Lordship is highlighted on more than one occasion by the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the Romans reference to Jesus' death and resurrection accompanied a purpose clause, meaning that 'Christ died and lived again for the purpose of becoming Lord of both the dead and the living' (Rom. 14:9). Charles Hodge thus explains:

“By his death he purchased them for his own, and by his resurrection he attained to that exalted station which he now occupies as Lord over all, and received those gifts which enable him to exercise as Mediator this universal dominion.”<sup>10</sup>

Paul similarly explained in Philippians that upon Jesus' resurrection “God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name” (Phi. 2:8-9). Many have believed this name to be

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: New Edition, Revised and in Great Measure Rewritten* (Edinburgh, 1864), 421.

Jesus because it follows immediately in verse 10, but this was not to him a new name. Philippians refers not to the exalting of his existing name to make it “above every name” but to the giving of a name previously not held. This refers not to a proper name but an office, a meaning well within the semantic range of the Greek word. From the context the “name” would be Lord, for it is that which all will confess Christ to be (Phi. 2:11). So R.P. Martin:

“Hence, for the hymn writer to emphasize that God conferred on Christ ‘the name that is above every name’ is to declare that God not only graciously bestowed (χαρίσατο) on him a designation that distinguished him from all other beings, a title that outranked all other titles, but also that he bestowed on him a nature or an ‘office’ with authority that coincided with that title, giving substance and meaning to it. Or, rather, it may be said that God bestowed on him the right to rule, which is implicit in the title of Lord.”<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing that Christ was ‘made Lord’ in as much as he received “all authority... in heaven and on earth” (Mat. 28:18), holding a position given him by the Father, the nature of that position comes into question. While Christ’s Lordship is typically viewed with reference to the position and status given to him by God, a common Trinitarian interpretation holds to a significantly different view:

“Jesus has just been given the name that is above every name, the name κύριος, “Lord,” the OT name for God (YHWH).”<sup>12</sup>

The use of Lord in place of the divine name Jehovah comes from an early Jewish opinion wherein it was necessary for readers to say something as “Lord” when the divine name would appear in the text. This tradition resulted in Lord becoming equivalent for the name in the written text as well. So Dunn explains:

“Within Jewish and Jewish-influenced circles the significance would correspondingly be greater. κύριος

<sup>11</sup> R.P. Martin, “Philippians,” *WBC*, 43:126.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. If one accepts that Jehovah (YHWH) is the name given to Christ there would be no aid to the Trinitarian position as this would not express his personal identity as the Almighty God Jehovah. The name would be one given, as the context indicates, post-resurrection. If one accepts the Trinitarian incarnation it could not be said that Jesus was not Jehovah while on earth, for a name in this sense refers not to position but identity, thus defeating the point they intend to prove. If the name were the divine name Jehovah it would have been given to Jesus as Jehovah’s agent.

was recognized as at least an acceptable translation of יהוה in diaspora circles (see Fitzmyer, particularly 119–23), as Paul’s own quotations of the scriptures (OT) also make clear; and even if the custom of transcribing יהוה in the Greek text of the OT was more common (Conzelmann, *Outline*, 83–84; Howard, 'Tetragram'), κύριος would almost certainly have been used when the text was *read*.<sup>13</sup>

It would be hasty to conclude that the use of Lord for Jesus even in reference to his exaltation was equivalent to the divine name. “The Lord” was a known expression outside of a substitute for and equivalent to the divine name. For example, the emperor Nero held the title for himself as one work explains:

“For instance, from an ostrakon dated August 4, A.D. 63, we read, 'In the year nine of Nero the Lord ... (*tou kyriou*).' Even before this time, however, in the eastern part of the empire and in Egypt in particular the emperor was being called *kyrios* in a more-than-merely-human sense. Thus, for instance, Oxyrhynchus papyrus 1143, which dates to A.D. 1, speaks of sacrifices and libations 'for the God and Lord Emperor' [Augustus]. Even in 12 B.C. we have an inscription to Augustus as *theos kai kyrios*, 'God and Lord' (*BGU. 1197, I, 15*).<sup>14</sup>

Though Nero was identified as “the Lord,” the appellation was not appropriate as when applied to Jesus. In neither case would “the Lord” have served as an equivalent to the divine name. As David confessed Jesus as his Lord at Psalm 110:1 while distinguishing him from Jehovah, so too did Peter in noting that he was 'made Lord.' The reference was to his position, authority and exalted status.

Some may suggest that while this use of Lord generally holds true, there are specific texts applied to Jesus from the Old Testament where κύριος (*kyrios*) is used in place of the divine name. When these texts in the Septuagint use κύριος as an equivalent to God's name and they are applied to Christ an argument such as the following is made:

“With astonishing frequency—far more often than even many scholar have noticed—Jesus is identified as the

<sup>13</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, “Romans 9-16,” *WBC*, 38B:608.

<sup>14</sup> J. B. Green, S. McKnight and I. H. Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 484.

Lord (that is, YHWH) of the Old Testament (Rom. 10:9-13; 1 Cor. 8:6; Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Peter 3:13-15).<sup>15</sup>

The above example of Romans 10:8-13 quotes from Joel 2:32 with reference to Jehovah in the Old Testament. With the divine name Jehovah in Joel, Paul instead made use of κύριος. This text was similarly quoted in Acts 2:21 with κύριος as an equivalent to the divine name in reference to the Father. This is not evidence to be simply brushed aside.

In Acts it was Peter who spoke of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:16), citing 2:28-32 in reference to the events that had there begun to transpire. Jehovah was pouring out his spirit and in doing so he imparted gifts of "visions," 'prophecy' and "dreams" (Acts 2:17). Peter alluded to this prophecy, citing the beginning of its fulfillment at that time. Here the Father was "the Lord" whose name would be called upon. Because of making specific reference to the full prophecy as then having fulfillment and based upon the fact that the context provides no overriding understanding of "the Lord," it is clear that this was used in place of Jehovah.

Romans allows for finding Jesus as the subject of the quote from Joel 2:32 by identifying him as the Lord. Though some have argued that this is a reference to the Father,<sup>16</sup> it seems best to identify "the Lord" as Jesus. In his letter Paul instructs the Romans to "confess... the Lord Jesus" (Rom. 10:9, literal). By doing this and believing in his resurrection they would be saved. To God and Christ there was "no distinction between Jew and Greek" because "the same Lord is Lord of all" (Rom. 10:12). So "whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13).

Verses 9 and 12 tell of the Lord Jesus and his position as "Lord of all." Here "Lord" is used of Jesus as previously discussed, referencing his office, divine status and authority over all others, not as an equivalent to the divine name. A consistent use within this context would find the same sense in verse 13. Were Lord used differently in 13 than in the preceding verses a substantial basis for assigning this reference to Jesus would be removed for the meaning would change.

Paul took the Old Testament text and changed the reference from God the Father to Christ based upon a different use of Lord.<sup>17</sup> As Paul

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<sup>15</sup> Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 272.

<sup>16</sup> See Edwin Cyril Blackman, "The Letter of Paul to the Romans," *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible: Including the Apocrypha, with General Articles*, Edited by Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 787.

<sup>17</sup> That Lord is here used differently is also evident from 1 Corinthians 1:2 where Paul similarly borrows from Joel 2:32 but here with the compound "Lord Jesus Christ."

and the other New Testament authors were elsewhere able to do this there is no reason to suggest he could not here do the same.<sup>18</sup> As it is impossible to find salvation without recognizing both “the Father and the Son” (1Jo. 2:22) it was necessary for all to “call on the name” of the Son along with the Father.

Another quotation in 1 Peter 2:3 is used differently than the original reference at Psalm 34:8. The psalm’s author, David, invited his readers to ‘taste Jehovah’ while Peter assumes that his readers have already “tasted” Jesus. Peter imported these words into his own context outside of the original, allowing for a change in reference and sense for “the Lord”:

“Although the psalm allusion is direct, Peter has given it his own metaphorical context, with a new application of ὁ κύριος to Jesus Christ (cf. v 4), and of χρηστός to Jesus’ kindness in welcoming those who ‘come to him’ (cf. v 4). The allusion to the psalm allows Peter to take full advantage of the pun on χρηστός and the name or title Χριστός: God in his mercy or kindness is revealed specifically in Jesus Christ (cf. Titus 3:4–6).”<sup>19</sup>

In his commentary Hort acknowledged these points as well:

In the Psalm ὁ κύριος stands for Jehovah, as it often does, the LXX. inserting and omitting the article with κύριος on no apparent principle. On the other hand the next verse shews St Peter to have used ὁ κύριος in its commonest though not universal N.T. sense, of Christ. It would be rash however to conclude that he meant to identify Jehovah with Christ. No such identification can be clearly made out of the N.T. *St Peter is not here making a formal quotation, but merely*

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This use of κύριος is titular and not in place of the divine name, indicating how Paul elsewhere used Lord with reference to Christ when borrowing from Joel 2:32. This point holds true with reference to “the day of the Lord” when applied to Jesus from the Old Testament “day of Jehovah.” Paul identifies this as “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Co. 1:8).

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly Romans 8:16 uses Lord with apparent reference to the Father. Quoting from Isaiah 53:1 Jehovah is not used in the Hebrew but the Lord spoke to in Isaiah 53:1 could only be the Father for his “arm” is spoken of, which is seen in the Messiah. Here Paul did not merely integrate the words in his own text as he did in verse 13 with Joel 2:32, but he formally referenced the Old Testament account as what “Isaiah says.”

<sup>19</sup> J. R. Michaels, “1 Peter,” *WBC*, 49:90.

*borrowing O.T. language, and applying it in his own manner.*<sup>20</sup>

The reapplication of Old Testament texts is further seen almost immediately after in verse 9. Here a reference to the nation of Israel from Exodus 19:5-6 is reapplied to the church. In 3:15 an Old Testament reference to “sanctify Jehovah of hosts himself” (Isa. 8:13) is brought into the New Testament with κύριος in place of the divine name, instructing us to ‘sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts.’ The Trinitarian argument is that we are to ‘sanctify Christ as Jehovah,’ but this is simply unnecessary as Peter was more than able to borrow the Old Testament language and apply it to Jesus with a different use of Lord.

Even as Lord Jesus is not the ultimate authority in the universe. This is not suggested to reduce his glorious position and exalted nature, but only to state the reality. While he holds “all authority” (Mat. 28:18) and all things have been subject to him (1Cor. 15:27), he is not the Almighty. The Father is ‘the God of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 1:7; 15:6; 2Co. 1:3; 11:31; Eph. 1:3, 17; Col. 1:3; 1Pe. 1:3) so that even in his position of Lord, Jesus is not without his God whom he is under (1Co. 11:3).

That Jehovah is the God of Jesus Christ serves as one of the most telling arguments against Trinitarianism and similar teachings, for if it is Jehovah who is his God can Jesus himself be Jehovah? Trinitarians would have us believe that he can be for they claim that any one person of the Triune God or all three collectively can be identified as Jehovah. For them to say that Jehovah is his God is to say that one person of Jehovah is his God. However convenient it might be to arbitrarily pick and choose when Jehovah is a reference to one person and which one it is, or to identify him as all three, this is not unwarranted and extra-biblical.

Prophesying the Messiah's coming, Micah spoke of his birth in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). According to Micah he would come to “stand and feed in the strength of Jehovah, in the majesty of the name of Jehovah *His God*” (Mic. 5:4). From this text we have every reason to believe that Jehovah has been his God “from of old, from ancient times” (Mic. 5:2 NAB), not simply in his humanity. As the text does not otherwise limit the time when Jehovah has been his God, neither should we.

Much as the apostles identified the Father as Jesus' God, Jesus too

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<sup>20</sup> F.J.A. Hort, *The First Epistle of St Peter I.1-II.17: The Greek Text with Introductory Lecture, Commentary, and Additional Notes* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1898), 104. Emphasis added.

spoke of God as his Father (John 20:17). In doing this Jesus identified him as the God and Father of his immediate disciples, who were Jews. The Old Testament proclaims the Jews identified Jehovah as their Father (1Ch. 29:10; Isa. 63:16; 64:8), meaning, to them, Jesus speaking of his Father as their own would be to say that this one who was the God of them both was the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Even in his post-resurrection exaltation Jesus and his disciples continued to recognize that the Father was his God (Heb. 1:9; Rev. 3:12).

Amazingly Trinitarians set these points aside and dismiss them because of a doctrine known as the *Hypostatic Union*. This teaching, based upon a loose reading of Philippians 2:6-7 and a few other related texts, teaches that Jesus Christ exists fully as God and fully as man simultaneously. While existing as God, “the Son of God, a divine person, assumed a perfect human nature, and, nevertheless, remains one person.”<sup>21</sup> According to them it is only as a man that Jesus has a God.

The difficulty Trinitarians face is that the one person of Christ in the hypostatic union cannot be divided by natures. It is *he* who has a God, not his human nature. This being the case, his God is also the God of his divine nature, meaning that in whatever sense he is “God,” one remains his God, qualifying and thus limiting his deity relative to the Almighty.

## One God and One Lord

The overwhelming testimony of Scripture leads one to conclude that none other than the Father is the one true God. The Bible continually demonstrates the Father to be the God who was present in the Old Testament while showing our Lord Jesus Christ to be his son. More than anyone the Apostle Paul highlighted this point by repeatedly identifying the Father as the *one God*.

In 1 Timothy 2:5 Paul identified the “one God” and the “mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” As Jesus is the mediator for the “one God,” this can only be the Father. Elsewhere Paul spoke of the “one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:6) and “one God who will justify circumcision by faith” (Rom. 3:30 LITV). It is this one who sent forth Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:23-24; cf. John 3:16).

With the Father as “one God” it is Jesus Christ who is our “one Lord” (1Co. 8:6). Writing “concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols,”

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Volumes (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, originally published 1872), 2:390.

to Paul 'an idol was nothing' because "there is no God but one" (1Cor. 8:4), this one being the Father, not the Son, Holy Spirit or Trinity. Paul did not neglect to identify the Son's role, but it was not as "one God."

In a manner unprecedented within Judaism Paul placed Christ along side of God as our "one Lord." To say Christ's exaltation is unprecedented should come as little surprise, for though Jewish tradition held numerous individuals to be highly exalted along side of God, none had accomplished anything close to him and none were God's preexistent son (cf. Phi. 2:5-11; Heb. 1:2).<sup>22</sup> Some have understood this exalted position to reference his participation in the divine being of God, so providing an early "binitarian" formula.<sup>23</sup> Rather than binitarian as two persons of the Trinity, the formula espoused by Paul expresses Christ's exalted position along side of God without identifying them as ontologically one.

With the Father as God and the Son as Lord, contrasted were the "so-called gods" and "many gods and many lords" that Paul previously spoke concerning (1Co. 8:5). The "so-called gods" were idols, commonly mistaken to be the "many gods and many lords" in his parenthetical remark. "Just as" (literal translation) there were those "so-called gods," Paul expressed that there "are many gods and many lords." So one commentary explains:

"For even supposing there are (exist) gods so called (2 Thessalonians 2. 4), whether in heaven (as the sun, moon, and stars) or in earth (as deified kings, beasts, etc.), as there be (a recognized fact, Deuteronomy 10.17; Psalm 135.5; 136.2) gods many and lords many.' Angels and men in authority are termed gods in Scripture, as exercising a divinely delegated power under God (compare Exodus 22.9, with v.28; Psalm 82.1, 6; John 10.34,35)."<sup>24</sup>

Contrasting those falsely called gods with those rightfully called gods and lords, there is to a Christian only one who is truly our God,

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<sup>22</sup> For more on exalted individuals in early Jewish tradition see Larry W. Hurtado, *One Lord, One God: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, Second Edition (London • New York: T & T Clark, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 111. Others have noted 1 Corinthians 8:6's basis in Jewish Wisdom literature, to be discussed further in chapter 4. For example, PHEME PERKINS: "We also find Paul himself quoting formulae which indicate that Christ is the mediator of God's creative power (e.g., 1 Cor 8:6)." (PHEME PERKINS, "Jesus: God's Wisdom," *Word & World*, Volume vii, Number 3 [Summer, 1987], 274.)

<sup>24</sup> Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), 277.

the Father, and one who is truly our Lord, Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup> Taking either God or Lord as an equivalent to the divine name removes the sharp contrast between the “many” and the “one.” God is the Almighty, the divine being who is the source of all things, while Jesus Christ is Lord, the one exalted and placed in authority over all creation, through whom it originally came. While a much older work, with these words Barnes correctly explains what Paul meant by calling Christ our one Lord:

“The word 'Lord' here is used in the sense of proprietor, ruler, governor, or king; and the idea is, that Christians acknowledge subjection to Him alone, and not to many sovereigns, as the pagans did. Jesus Christ is the Ruler and Lord of his people... The idea in the passage is, that from God, the Father of all, we derive our existence, and all that we have; and that we acknowledge 'immediate and direct' subjection to the Lord Jesus as our Lawgiver and Sovereign.”<sup>26</sup>

With God the Father identified as the “one God” on a number of occasions, it cannot be overlooked that Jesus is not even once so identified. Indeed, Christ is our “one Lord,” holding the highest position available other than God himself. Deserving the blessing, the honor and the glory (Rev. 5:13), it is the duty of Christians everywhere to provide this. Not only does our hope of salvation come through Jesus (John 3:16-17), our very existence came to be through him, as the following chapter will demonstrate.

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<sup>25</sup> How Christ is identified as our “one Lord” apart from God was discussed in chapter one.

<sup>26</sup> *BN*, 11:1:142.

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## JESUS AND CREATION

For those believing Jesus is Almighty God, he is also the Creator. Unfortunately, some have taken the denial of this so far as to even reject his preexistence.<sup>1</sup> The Bible affirms his involvement in creation (John 1:3; Col. 1:16), necessitating his preexistence, but it is necessary to investigate the nature of his involvement. Is he presented as *the creator* in line with Trinitarianism and Sabellianism, or does the Bible articulate his involvement in a different capacity?

### Difficulty with a Preposition – By or Through Him?

On the Greek preposition *δια* (*dia*) *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* finds the most common meaning to be “through.”<sup>2</sup> With reference to Jesus' role in creation,<sup>3</sup> confusion has mounted from the occasional sense of “the

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<sup>1</sup> Those doing so commonly read any text referring to preexistence to mean that he existed only in an idea, but this is unwarranted. While numerous texts testify to his preexistence one of the most powerful is John 17:5. Jesus here confirms his existence “with” the Father before the world was created. He requests to have the glory returned to him that he then possessed. Suggesting that he was only ‘with God’ in his idea and that he is asking for the glory of the idea to be returned to him is nonsensical. We might simply ask, “If the reference is to the idea of Jesus and the glory held by the idea, would not Jesus in his human existence have possessed equal or greater glory?”

<sup>2</sup> BDAG, 225. Further from Marvin Vincent: “The preposition *δια*, is generally used to denote the working of God through some secondary agency, as *δια τοῦ προφήτου*, *through the prophet* (Matt. i. 22, on which see note).” (Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 Volumes [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers], 2:37).

<sup>3</sup> A second preposition, *ἐν*, is also used on one occasion for Christ's role in creation but plays a less significant role. As the meaning does not imply that he is the source of creation and that it relates heavily to the interpretation of Colossians 1:15-16, this text will be considered in the next chapter.

originator of an action,”<sup>4</sup> with the ensuing translation “by.”

The originating or casual sense of διὰ present in Galatians 1:1 reveals that the Apostle Paul had received a revelation “διὰ Jesus Christ and God the Father.” This does not imply that God and Jesus were intermediaries through whom the revelation was given. At most one could say that God the Father was the source and Jesus was the intermediary, but this particular text perhaps casts them jointly as the revelation’s source, having directly delivered it to Paul by means of the Holy Spirit.

Following BDAG, the causal διὰ is used with reference to God the Father in Romans 11:36.<sup>5</sup> Winer explains that “διὰ but rarely indicates the causa principalis... in other words but rarely seems to be equivalent to ὑπό or παρά... Rom[ans] xi. 36, owing to the prepositions ἐξ and εἰς, admits no other interpretation.”<sup>6</sup> A Trinitarian may view God in Romans 11:36 to include the Father and Son, the Father being the one creation is “out of” and the Son being the one it is “through.” Such a reading assumes a Trinitarian implication unwarranted by grammar, for, as Winer notes, ἐξ (ek, out of, from) indicates a causal διὰ with a single subject performing the action. This is so demonstrated in Hebrews 2:10 where διὰ can only be in reference to the Father as the one who made ‘the author of our faith perfect.’

Any confusion over whether the causal or intermediate sense of διὰ should be understood for Christ is alleviated in Hebrews 1:2. Jesus is the one “through” whom God the Father created the ages. In other words, God the Father acted through Jesus Christ as the intermediary, thereby disallowing the casual interpretation and standing in the face of a surprising assertion by Bowman and Komoszewski:

“Since [Hebrews 1:2 and 2:10] are in relatively close proximity and both contexts are about creation, it seems unlikely that “through whom” had a different meaning in 2:10 than it does in 1:2.”<sup>7</sup>

While the Father acting διὰ the Son allows only for an intermediate sense, Hebrews 2:10 identifies creation as that which is “because of” the Father, indicating originality and allowing for only a casual διὰ with the genitive. This is also defined in 1 Corinthians 8:6 when God, not Jesus, is said to have been the one “out of” (ἐξ) whom creation has come, and

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<sup>4</sup> BDAG, 225.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> George B. Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament* (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1897), 378-9.

<sup>7</sup> Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 190.

coming out of him it has come “*through*” Jesus. Suggesting cause or origin for both the Father and the Son results in nothing short of Sabellianism by identifying the same role and function for both.

Harmonizing with the preceding, *διὰ* may only be understood to show the intermediary in John 1:3 as Dana and Mantey relate:

“Here [in John 1:3] God the Father is thought of as the original cause of creation, and the *λόγος* as the intermediate agent.”<sup>8</sup>

Another work similarly comments on Colossians 1:16:

“The prep[osition] w[ith] the gen[itive] describes Christ as the intermediate instrument of creation (Abbott; Lightfoot).”<sup>9</sup>

## Apart From Christ

Trinitarian apologetics often highlight the negative in John 1:3b to prove not only that Jesus is the creator but that he must also be uncreated: “Apart from him not one thing came into being.” It is thought that by “not one thing” being created “apart from” him, he must be uncreated. Were the verse in a vacuum without context or christological background such an interpretation *might* seem appropriate.

Those looking to respond to such a Trinitarian suggestion could note how John's seemingly absolute language might parallel several other passages, one being Hebrews 2:8. Stated here is that God subjected all things to Jesus and “left nothing that is not subject to him.” This would perhaps demand that God also subjected himself to Jesus, for “nothing” was “not subject to him.” Yet from the entire corpus of New Testament writings it is apparent that this is not the case. In 1 Corinthians 15:27 this thought is repeated but with Paul's explicit exception of the Father. Thus the “nothing” of Hebrews 2:8 excludes one not expressly identified.

The following chapter will submit several passages that testify to Jesus' creation. It will be demonstrated that these passages reveal his

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<sup>8</sup> H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1957.), 162. So commenting on the causal *διὰ*, Winer observes: “Many passages, however, have been erroneously referred to this class: in J[ohn]. i. 3...” (Winer, *Grammar*, 378-9). Origen also remarks: “Thus, if all things were made, as in this passage [John 1:3, which parallels Colossians 1:16] also, through the Logos, then they were not made by the Logos, but by a stronger and greater than He. And who else could this be but the Father?” (Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel of John,” *ANF*, 10:515.)

<sup>9</sup> Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 461.

existence among the created order as a unique creation, having been created by God directly and not through himself. While we might understand John 1:3 as Hebrews 2:8, finding the exception elsewhere defined, perhaps John defined Jesus as the exception in the very next verse.

Verse divisions commonly divide sentences and paragraphs. In implementing the verse divisions those who performed this great task had to determine where to begin and end each verse. The result of this found certain words in one verse and certain words in another verse even if the end of one verse and the beginning of another formed a single sentence. This issue comes to the fore in John 1:3-4 when the final two Greek words of John 1:3 are not connected to the sentence in this verse. Though many translations fail to account for this, these two words actually belong to what follows in verse 4.<sup>10</sup>

Grammar alone allows the final two words of John 1:3 to join with the prior sentence in verse 3 or the one that follows in verse 4, so it is necessary to look beyond this to determine the proper positioning. The early church provides the best available testimony on this matter, allowing us to see how early readers understood the text. In fact, there is near unanimity within the early church of the first three centuries on this issue.<sup>11</sup> Up until the start of the fourth century almost every early church author on record cited the sentence contained within John 1:4 with the two final words of John 1:3 as a part of it. So *The Catholic Answer Bible* tells us: "Connection [of ὃ γέγονεν] with v[erse] 3 reflects fourth-century anti-Arianism."<sup>12</sup> Westcott highlights:

"The last clause of v[erse] 3 may be taken either (1) with the words which precede, as A.V., or (2) with the words which follow. It would be difficult to find a more complete consent of ancient authorities in favour of any reading, than that which support the second punctuation: Without him was not anything made. That which hath been made in Him was life."<sup>13</sup>

Adding weight to this evidence is the poetic structure of John's prologue with the use of staircase parallelism, a parallelism whereby a

<sup>10</sup> Admittedly a number do as well: *NJB*, *NAB*, *NRS*, *NWT*.

<sup>11</sup> Examples include: Theophilus, "Theophilus to Autolytus," *ANF*, 2:103; Clement of Alexandria, "The Instructor," *ANF*, 2:258; "From the Latin Translation of Cassiodorus," 2:574; Tertullian, "Against Hermogenes," *ANF*, 3:489; Origen, "Origen de Principiis," *ANF*, 4:250

<sup>12</sup> *The Catholic Answer Bible: New American Bible* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2002), 1137.

<sup>13</sup> B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980 reprint of two volume 1908 edition), 4.

word prominent in one line is taken up in the next. *Anatomy of the New Testament* explains:

“The rhythmic, poetic character of the prologue can best be perceived in Greek, especially when the text is printed in strophic form... There is, for example, a peculiar chainlike progress in the repetition of key words in verses 1-5 and 9-19... Although the sequence is not perfect, it is too pronounced to be coincidental and unintentional.”<sup>14</sup>

The poetic rhythm is seen in the repetition of ἐγένετο (*egeneto*, came to be) in John 1:3, a form of γίνομαι (*ginomai*). This is 'chained' to what follows with γέγονεν (*gegonen*, has come to be), also a form of γίνομαι. Without placing γέγονεν in verse 4 there is nothing to connect the “chainlike” structure between verses 3 and 4. In verse 4 the chain continues between the two clauses with ζωῆ (*zoe*, life), while verses 4 and 5 are connected with φῶς (*phos*, light), and so on. This structure was also seen in verse 1 where the A and B portions are connected with λόγος and the B and C portions with θεός. With this rhythm we can determine the appropriate wording for the proper translation:

“That which has come to be in him was life and the life was the light of men.”

“The light of men” is identified with the Messiah himself (Isa. 9:2; John 1:9; 8:12), though here in the context of his preexistence the reference may be to his position as the one through whom our original existence came. “The life” is equated with “the light of men” and yet said to have “come to be” in him, suggesting that the life is his own. This could not be limited to his human existence for he did not at any point lack life in becoming a human for it to have “come to be in him.” Continually living in his preexistence and then becoming a human, only his mode of existence changed (cf. Phi. 2:6-7). The point when 'life came to be in him' must then refer to his own creation when he received life. So Jesus could rightfully say with reference to his complete existence, “I live because of the Father,” the one who gave him life (John 6:57).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Robert A. Spivey and D. Moddy Smith Jr., *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning*, Second Edition (New York: Macmillian Publishing Co, 1974.), 433.

<sup>15</sup> That his life is dependent on the Father demonstrates that he is not Almighty God, but only God's son. This could not refer strictly to the incarnation because he remained true God in the hypostatic union. Some may suggest that “life” refers only to the eternal life he grants, but Leon Morris notes: “‘Life’ in John characteristically refers to eternal life (see on 3:15), the gift of God through his Son. Here, however, the term must be taken in its broadest sense. It is only because there is life in the *Logos* that there is life in anything on earth at all. Life does not exist in its own right. It is not even spoken of as made ‘by’ or

Though v. 4 naturally follows 3, the text is not providing the temporal order of events. Not only did the poetic rhythm serve to influence the word order, but it is apparent that by providing the qualification after v. 3 Jesus' unique position is given greater emphasis. The qualification is remarkably similar in structure to one found in Revelation 5:3-5 where the same emphasis is found. Here verses 3-4 relate how "no one" was found worthy to open a scroll, while verse 5 identifies the Lamb, who is Jesus, as the one who could open it. In both texts a qualifier is presented after the absolute use of a negative, so that in contemplating the matter it is the last thing on the reader's mind.

## Maker of Heaven and Earth

With the superiority of Christ to the law covenant in focus, the beginning of Hebrews highlights Jesus' exalted position. As the one 'through whom God made the ages,' to his role in place of the prophets whom God 'spoke by' (Heb. 1:1-2), God has made him "much better than the angels" (1:4). In fact he is "heir of all things" (1:2).

The first chapter of Hebrews forms an *inclusio* with reference to Psalm 110:1 first alluded to it in v. 3 and then quoted in v. 13. Within this are a series of Old Testament passages cited in support of Jesus' exalted position at God's right hand. Here applied are passages having had reference to others, including David at Psalm 2:7 and 22:22 (Heb. 1:5a), Solomon at 2 Samuel 7:14 (1:5b), an unnamed Jewish King at Psalm 45:6-7 (1:8-9), and God at Psalm 102:25-27 (1:10-12).

Specific emphasis is given to Hebrews 1:10 where an Old Testament quotation of God's creative work is applied to Christ. Having already identified his role as intermediary in v. 2, what is here stated would not contradict this to identify him as the source of creation. The Old Testament reference originally of Jehovah, it is suggested that the language must identify Jesus with him as White argues:

"Psalm 102:25-27, however, is about the completely unique character of Jehovah as the eternal, unchanging Creator of all

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through' the Word, but as existing 'in' him." (Leon Morris, "The Gospel According to John, Revised," *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995], 73.) That this refers to eternal life is more difficult if he is God Almighty, for in his preincarnate state he would not have lacked this so to be given it. This would have taken place only in the incarnation, where according to Trinitarians he laid aside his divine prerogatives so that the Father could give this to him. As John had not yet introduced the "incarnation" this could not be John's meaning (1-6 appear as a single unit with reference prior to this). It should be mentioned that in some way Jesus' own life seems to parallel the eternal life he provides, as if what he grants is derived from himself (John 6:57). Therefore it would seem that the life the Son has "in Himself" from the Father is his own life and *also* the spring from which he provides life to others (John 5:26).

things! No one else can be said to have such qualities... quoting a passage about the unique aspects of Jehovah's character and applying it to Jesus does indicate identity with Jehovah."<sup>16</sup>

That the passage is about the "completely unique character of Jehovah" only begs the question, for it assumes Trinitarianism in the case of White, or otherwise Sabellianism. If Jesus is not Jehovah, the Psalm does not use language unique to him. Further, the statement's reference to his eternal existence does not address past eternity but only the future, and in application to Christ this statement only finds application upon his resurrection.

Significantly, the author of Hebrews quoted from the Septuagint where a variation from the Hebrew text directly refutes White's assertion as William Lane notes:

"In the LXX, however, a mistranslation of the unpointed Hebrew text opened the door for the christological appropriation of the passage. The radicals אָנָּן/□ -n-h in v 24 (EV v 23), 'he afflicted,' were translated 'he answered' (ἀπεκρίθη, Vg respondit), with the result that vv 23–28 become the response of Yahweh. Consequently, Ps 102:25–27 must refer to the creative activity of divine Wisdom or of the Messiah, not of God (cf. B. W. Bacon, 'Heb 1, 10–12 and the Septuagint Rendering of Ps 102, 23,' ZNW 3 [1902] 280–85)."<sup>17</sup>

With a variation in the LXX the Psalm spoke not of God, but of God speaking to another. The author of Hebrews, citing the LXX, may have understood this to speak of the Messiah or he may have disregarded any concern over whom it referenced, concerning himself only with the language as something well suited for the Messiah. The latter is suggested by George Buchanan:

"Like other scholars of his time, the author was also capable of taking an Old Testament passage out of context and attributing it to the Messiah. For example in LXX Deut[eronomy] 32:43, in which the object of worship for the sons of God according to the Proto-Massoretic text was Israel, the author of Hebrews applied it to the first-born, namely Jesus (1:6)... By the same logic, since "the Lord" was a title of respect used both for God and for kings, such as Jesus, he may also have made the shift

<sup>16</sup> James White, *A Summary Critique: Jehovah's Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholar's and Critics*, [www reference: <http://www.equip.org/site/c.mul1LaMNJrE/b.2726529/k.B858/DJ065.htm>, Cited 7/15/08].

<sup>17</sup> William L. Lane, "Hebrews 1-8," *WBC*, 47a:30.

here to apply to Jesus the durability of God in contrast to the temporal nature of the angels [for Jesus was immortal upon his resurrection]. If this were the case, then Jesus would also have been thought of as a sort of demiurge through whom God created the heaven and earth as well as the ages (1:2, 10). In either case it does not mean that Jesus was believed to be God or was addressed as God.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, “the writer affirms it is the Son alone through whom God created the universe.”<sup>19</sup> As God's intermediate agent Jesus had a “hand” in the work of creating heaven and earth and all contained in it. This did not show Jesus to be Jehovah, as Jehovah identifies himself as the source of creation, something Jesus was not.

### **One Who is *The Creator***

Trinitarians have appealed to Isaiah 44:24 and Job 9:8 to say that Jesus must be the Jehovah who created. The object is to contradict our assertion that Jesus served as God's intermediate agent, thereby suggesting that only Trinitarian thought can fit the Bible's teaching. The reality is that their argument does no more damage to the biblical teaching than it does to the Trinity, for if their argument were valid it would be equally damaging to both and supporting Sabellianism.

The speaker of Isaiah 44:24 leaves no uncertainty as to his identity, saying expressly that he is Jehovah. Most Trinitarians assume that this Jehovah is the Trinity, consisting of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and from this assumption stems their argument. As discussed in chapter 2 the author of Hebrews spoke of the ‘God who spoke by the prophets’ (Heb. 1:1). This was the same God who spoke through Isaiah, one of “the prophets.” We observed that this God cannot be the Son because the God who spoke by the prophets is the one who later came to speak by Jesus. Because the one speaking through Isaiah cannot be or include Jesus, the speaker cannot be the Trinity. This one is none other than the Father alone.

Within Isaiah 44:24 God speaks regarding creation: “I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, Stretching out the heavens by Myself And spreading out the earth all alone.”<sup>20</sup> This statement is remarkably similar

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<sup>18</sup> George Wesley Buchanan, “To the Hebrews,” *AB*, 36:22. Identifying Jesus “as a sort of demiurge” would not suggest Gnosticism, only that God worked through one under him. How Jesus is understood this way while not confused with Gnostic thought will be considered in the following chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Lane, 30.

<sup>20</sup> NASB.

to Job 9:8, where it is said that Jehovah is the one “stretching out the heavens by Himself.” One could look to these statements and find contradiction with the idea of any intermediate in bringing about creation. The Trinitarian, wanting to view Jehovah as the Trinity, turns to show that Jesus must also be this Jehovah, but the text of Hebrews 1:1-2 does not allow for this.

The Trinitarian finds himself undermining his own position when appealing to Isaiah 44:24 and Job 9:8 in light of Hebrews 1:1-2. These passages are not contrary to the New Testament revelation of Jesus Christ and his role as the intermediate agent in creation. A careful consideration reveals just how this is so.

Job 9 finds that in addition to being the one who is ‘stretching out the heavens’ God is also the one who can ‘walk on the sea.’ Such a statement immediately calls to mind the Gospel account of Jesus walking on the sea (Mat. 14:25) and for the Trinitarian this might seem to support Jesus being Jehovah, but such a connection fails to account for Peter performing the same task (Mat. 14:29). To the apostle Peter Jesus’ works were accomplished by God working through him (Acts 2:22). For Peter to walk on water God similarly had to be working through him in accordance with his faith, for he could not have done this of his own ability. There was a necessary greater power behind his action so that God, through Jesus, granted him this power, allowing Peter to walk on the sea. With both Peter and Jesus it was God who served as the source of the ability, it was not a power that was original to either of them (cf. John 10:24).

If Jesus and Peter both had the ability to walk on water while Job spoke of this as something limited to God,<sup>21</sup> it is only rational that the sense of Job’s statement was of originality. It was not that God ever actually walked upon water for he is not flesh to have done so, but he is the only source behind the ability so that it is original with him alone. Similarly, Job 9 speaks of God as the one who can move mountains (Job 9:5). No man has of himself the capacity to do this, but Jesus related that with enough faith it would be possible for his disciples to (Mat. 17:20). Here again the ability could be limited to God for he was the sole source of the action. He does not somehow require aid from others, but he chooses to accomplish certain things through them.

The preceding, when associated with the first clause of Job 9:8, finds God to be stretching out the heavens alone as the sole power behind the action. This ability originates within him alone. While he accomplish this

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<sup>21</sup> While barely deserving comment, some might suggest that the reference to God walking on water is not qualified with an “alone” or “by myself” as the references to God’s role in creation, yet the context implies this limitation with focus upon God’s ability versus the limitations of man.

task through another, there is no contradiction (similarly, Psa. 72:18 and Dan. 8:24). The close parallel between Job 9:8 and Isaiah 44:24 give indication that causality is in view in the latter.<sup>22</sup>

To see God's use of his own creation to further create is natural. Modern science tells that the earth and other planets were formed from existing matter, brought together by gravitational forces and perhaps other means.<sup>23</sup> In such a way one can today look into space and view stars and perhaps even planets being formed through natural process. This is not to deny that Jehovah is ultimately behind these events, but it expresses the means he has chosen for bringing it about. In such a way it would be entirely appropriate for Jehovah to use his son in bringing about further creation much as he has used and continues to use various physical processes.

Isaiah 44:24 and Job 9:8 fit into the overall theme of God's creative work. He is alone the source of all things, the one alone from which the stretching out the heavens and the laying of the foundations of the earth comes. No other has such an authority or ability within himself, including Jesus. Nevertheless, God did grant Jesus the power and authority to have a 'hand' in these tasks.

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<sup>22</sup> So too consider the discussion on Jehovah and Ehad in chapter 1 (Isa. 43:11; Jdg. 3:15) where both the context and the sense of Jehovah's statement that he alone is Israel's savior is limited so that Ehad could appropriately be deemed a savior.

<sup>23</sup> This is not necessarily to deny creation *ex nihilo*, but to explain how the earth was formed. The matter that the earth was formed of is naturally not eternal and so it would be the matter from which the earth was formed that would have been created *ex nihilo*.

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## WISDOM, JESUS CHRIST AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

From the earliest days of Christianity a connection was made between personified Wisdom in the Old Testament and Jesus Christ. With John's prologue identifying him as the Word, Jesus' own words and the descriptions of his preexistence by the Apostle Paul, Christianity has seen personified Wisdom to be the preexistent Messiah.

After the writing of the New Testament the early church of the first several centuries continued to identify Jesus as Wisdom. Indeed, the "Christian tradition from St Justin onwards sees in the Wisdom of the O.T. the person of Christ himself."<sup>1</sup> In addition to Justin,<sup>2</sup> early writers including Tertullian,<sup>3</sup> Cyprian,<sup>4</sup> Lactantius,<sup>5</sup> and Origen<sup>6</sup> identified Jesus as the Old Testament personified Wisdom. Not only did these expressly call him Wisdom, they identified him as the subject of Old Testament Wisdom texts. Indeed, many modern commentators continue to make this identification, such as J. Vernon McGee, who states, "This [Wisdom] is the Lord Jesus; this is wisdom personified... Wisdom is Jesus Christ."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 943.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," *ANF*, 1:227-8.

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, "Against Praxeas," *ANF*, 3:488.

<sup>4</sup> Cyprian, "The Treatise of Cyprian," *ANF*, 5:515-6.

<sup>5</sup> Lactantius, "The Divine Institutes," *ANF*, 6:105.

<sup>6</sup> Origen, "De Principiis," *ANF*, 4:246.

<sup>7</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5 Volumes (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1988), 3:33.

## Wisdom and Personification

When asked what wisdom is, most would likely identify it as an attribute of God that man can come to possess. To say that Jesus is Wisdom is not to say that he is an attribute but that Wisdom is a person. With Scripture referring both to the attribute of wisdom and to Wisdom as a person it is necessary to distinguish the two.

To understand Jesus' identification as Wisdom it is necessary to be familiar with how a person can personify an attribute. This personification occurs when a person is "the embodiment of" an attribute or quality so to be "the representation of an abstract quality."<sup>8</sup> Thus to say that when a person displays an attribute in all that one does, that one can be identified as the attribute, personifying it. This was the case with some who mistakenly identified the man Simon as "the power of God" (Acts 8:9-10). Jesus, who has "all the treasures of [the attribute] wisdom" within him (Col. 2:3), so fully possesses and displays this to be identified as Wisdom.

In ancient times personification was a common literary device. Far more common than identifying a person with an attribute, impersonal things were spoken of personally. An example of this is found in the early Jewish writing *Joseph and Asenath*, where repentance is personified:

"For Repentance is in the heavens, an exceedingly beautiful and good daughter... she herself entertains the Most High... she herself is the guardian... who loves... and is beseeching the Most High for you... she prepared a place of rest... she will renew all who repent, and wait on them herself" (15:7).

Personification was used of the impersonal in the most vivid of ways, and this ground many have come to view wisdom as only an attribute, having been personified only as a literary device.<sup>9</sup> Because of the supporting examples this argument would prove quite convincing were it not for the express New Testament identification of Jesus as Wisdom, along with the numerous parallels that can only be fully accounted for by recognizing the two as one and the same.

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<sup>8</sup> *The New International Webster's Compact Dictionary of the English Language: International Encyclopedic Edition*, Ed Sidney I. Landau, 1999 Edition, Trident Press International, 541.

<sup>9</sup> Larry Hurtado argues for this, citing the above reference in support of his position (Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, Second Edition [New York: T&T Clark, 1998], 46-47). It is possible that the personification Hurtado argues for was derived from a misunderstanding of Wisdom's personification.

### ***Jesus as Wisdom***

The Gospels grant the earliest connections between Jesus and Wisdom, one occurring in Luke that is only observable by comparison to Matthew's record. First looking to Luke's gospel Jesus speaks of "the Wisdom of God":

Luke 11:49 "For this reason also the wisdom of God said, 'I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute,

Jesus spoke of Wisdom and her words, where she was the one who 'sent prophets and apostles.' Yet Matthew records Jesus speaking these words in the first person, recognizing that he was himself "the Wisdom of God" spoken of (Mat. 23:34). So Cecilia Deutsch explains:

"The substitution of 'I' for 'the Sophia [Wisdom] of God' makes explicit the presentation of Jesus as personified Wisdom."<sup>10</sup>

Earlier Luke also recorded a reference by Jesus to Wisdom: "Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children" (Luke 7:35). The parallel to Jesus' language in 11:49 is noteworthy, but here it is by the context that Jesus is understood to be Wisdom.<sup>11</sup> He had there been accused of being "a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34), resulting in Jesus' response. Early commentator John Gill well explains the meaning:

"Christ, who is the wisdom of God, and who acted the wise part, in behaving in such a free manner with all sorts of men, and even with publicans and sinners, whereby he became useful to their souls, called them to repentance, converted and saved them..."<sup>12</sup>

In this text accusation was made against Jesus based upon those with whom he was associating. Yet, by his "children," which are his accomplishments, he is justified. By his time with such sinners many came into God's service.

Beyond the Gospel record the Apostle Paul provided the most explicit

<sup>10</sup> Cecilia Deutsch, "Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol," *NovT*, XXXII, 1 (New York: 1990), 41.

<sup>11</sup> A number of commentators see this use of Wisdom to somehow be seen in both Jesus and John, noting that they are both justified by their works. While it is true that they are both justified, John is never identified as Wisdom and it does not seem consistent with the New Testament witness to do so. Rather, because John came to prepare "the way of the Lord," which is the work God sent for him to accomplish, if Jesus was justified John was implicitly as well.

<sup>12</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the Bible*, [WWW reference cited Oct. 15, 2005], <http://www.studylight.org/com/geb/>, Luke 7:35.

identification, calling Jesus “the wisdom of God” (1Co. 1:24).<sup>13</sup> Also derived from Wisdom texts is Hebrews 1:3 where Christ is said to be ‘the radiance of God’s glory.’ This reference along with his identification as “the image of the invisible God” in Colossians 1:15 is drawn from an apocryphal text where Wisdom is said to be “a reflection [or “radiance”] of the eternal light, untarnished mirror of God’s active power, and image of his goodness” (Wis. 7:26).

Earlier noted was 1 Corinthians 8:6 with Christ as the one *through* whom all things came, providing a parallel to Wisdom as the one God created “by” (Pro. 3:19<sup>14</sup>). Indeed, references to Christ’s involvement in creation throughout the New Testament can be traced back into Wisdom texts in both the Old Testament and other Jewish literature.

“Paul’s language [and so John’s, who parallels Paul] comes from G[enesis] 1 and the OT Wisdom Literature where wisdom is called the ‘craftsman’ (Pr. 8:30). For Paul that ‘craftsman’ is not a figure of speech, but the personal, heavenly Christ who met him on the Damascus road.”<sup>15</sup>

A number of other links between Wisdom and Jesus exist throughout the New Testament. Throughout these texts the language of Wisdom, some of which could not apply to more than one individual, is taken and applied to Christ. A number of these statements are temporal, related to when Wisdom came to be. The language of this temporal order in both biblical and apocryphal texts is applied by some of the New Testament authors to Christ. Examples of this will be discussed in greater detail when Colossians 1:15-18 and Revelation 3:14 are examined.

When reading of Wisdom in Proverbs it is difficult not to see both a future and historical aspect of the text. While Wisdom at times speaks of her<sup>16</sup> past, there is also a prophetic element fulfilled in the Messiah’s

<sup>13</sup> Some might observe that Christ is also said to be “the power of God,” appealing to Romans 1:20 where God’s power is said to be eternal. The vast difference is that Romans is speaking of his power as an attribute, while Christ is his power as the personification of it. This is perhaps an allusion to Christ as almost the personification of “the arm of Jehovah” (Isa. 53:1), where one’s arm is thought of as their strength or power.

<sup>14</sup> On this text Barnes notes: “This thought, developed in ch. viii., is the first link in the chain which connects this ‘Wisdom’ with the Divine Word, the Logos of St. John’s Gospel.” (BN, 5:19).

<sup>15</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, “Colossians,” *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, Fourth Edition of The New Bible Commentary, Edited by D.A. Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Moyter, G.J. Wenham (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Colossians 1:16.

<sup>16</sup> Wisdom is spoken of in the feminine, which is not of particular issue for the gender of the Hebrew noun is feminine, much as with the Greek elsewhere applied to Christ (1Co. 1:24). The feminine imagery is kept through the context likely intending to add to Wisdom’s appeal. “The use of the device is partly explained by the fact that the noun ‘wisdom’ is feminine, but its development reflects the genius of the author who plays off the notion of desirability, contrasting the sensory appeal of the seductress and the total satisfaction to be

human life. In Proverbs 8 and 9 this is highlighted.

Wisdom, also identified as Understanding, 'speaks' (Pro. 8:1) and 'cries out at the gates' and at "the mouth of the city" (8:3). She calls "to the sons of men" (8:4), speaking "truth" (8:7) and "righteousness" (8:8). Wisdom's words are "plain to the understanding one; and right to those who find knowledge" (8:9). Wisdom's instruction and knowledge should be taken over "silver" and "choice gold."

These opening statements could not more closely parallel Jesus Christ in his ministry. He spoke openly and publicly (John 18:20) and his words were "truth" (John 8:45). They were made known to and understood by his disciples (Mat. 13:11-12), not by those who chose to be ignorant. They were of greater value than anything else, for those who 'keep them will never see death' (John 8:51).

While Wisdom 'dwells with sense,' (Pro. 8:12) this is far from saying that sense or prudence is a person, itself never personified. Wisdom is herself prudent by possessing the attribute. By her "kings reign" and "rulers and nobles rule" (8:15-16), a thought well reflected in Colossians 1:16-17. Those who love Wisdom are loved by her (8:17), reminding us of Jesus words: "He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him" (John 14:21). She 'walks in the path of righteousness' and will 'cause those who love her to inherit wealth' (Pro. 8:20-21). This language reflects Jesus' own righteousness along with his promise of the inheritance he would share with his disciples (Rom. 8:17).

With the discussion of Proverbs 8:22-30 to follow it is appropriate to consider the opening verses of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter. Here Wisdom is said to have "built her house" and "carved out her seven pillars" (9:1). One can hardly miss the parallel between these words and Jesus: "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church" (Mat. 16:18). There are "seven pillars" because of the number's known symbolism, representing "completeness and perfection."<sup>17</sup> Thus his church would have a 'complete and perfect' support structure, a solid foundation from which to grow.

What comes in verse 2 further parallels Wisdom and Jesus. She has "slaughtered her slaughter; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table." This may well refer to Christ's own sacrifice and his institution of eating bread and wine as symbols of his flesh and blood (Luke 22:19-20). Otherwise, the thought may be of the future kingdom, with a noteworthy similarity to Jesus' words: "Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Behold, I have prepared my

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found in choosing to make one's commitment to wisdom instead." (L. Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion* [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1991], 388.) The text addressed the preexistent Christ who was technically not a man or a woman as he was not a human at all.  
<sup>17</sup> BN, 5:32.

dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.”” (Mat. 22:4).

In the final verse of Wisdom's personification “she has sent out her maidens; she cries on the highest places of the city;” (Pro. 9:3). One can hardly miss the proclamation of the gospel with these words, where “her maidens” are Jesus' disciples (Mat. 28:19).<sup>18</sup> Jesus openly proclaimed the gospel, he sent forth his disciples both during his earthly ministry and upon his ascension into heaven to do the same.

### ***A Created Being***

Few passages have been more disputed throughout history than what is contained in Proverbs 8:22-30. Serving as a center of disagreement during the christological disputes of the early church, these words have been the focus of great attention. Perhaps because of this text's powerful testimony and difficulty for the Trinitarian position many today deny its application to Jesus in his preexistence, but even early Trinitarian writers such as Athanasius would not go that far.<sup>19</sup>

Of those who confess this text's proper application to Christ, many have argued a differing sense for certain words, bringing focus to the various ways they might individually be understood. As will be demonstrated there are indeed various ways in which certain words may be understood, but with the variety of words and expressions used we are able to determine without ambiguity the intended meaning.

Beginning in Proverbs 8:22 emphasis is placed upon how truly ancient Wisdom is. She existed “when there were no depths” and when “when there were no springs heavy with water” (Pro. 8:24). She was “before the mountains” and “the hills” (8:25). She was even before “the earth” and she was there “when He prepared the heavens” (8:26-27). It is from this repetition and emphasis upon her prior existence that many have argued for an eternal preexistence, but there is much more to the text than this.

With many translations following the King James tradition, Proverbs 8:22 tells of Wisdom having been “possessed” by God, a thought not in disagreement with the idea of eternal preexistence. “Wisdom is eternal, she has always been with God,” we might be told, but the word here translated “possessed,” קָנָה (*qanah*), is not fully represented by this rendering as C.F. Burney explains:

<sup>18</sup> Here again the feminine imagery is used so the reference to his disciples as “maidens” is not particularly difficult.

<sup>19</sup> Athanasius, “Against the Heathen,” *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Edited by Philip Schaff, Volume 4 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 29.

“In the first place, the fact needs emphasis that the verb *kana* always seems to possess the sense of ‘get, acquire’, never the sense of ‘possess, own’ simply, apart from the idea of possessing something which has been acquired in one way or another.”<sup>20</sup>

So *קָנָה* refers not merely to possession but to acquiring, and it is used in this way throughout Scripture. Two examples stand out with particular relevance to Proverbs 8, both recorded in Genesis. In 14:22 we are told that God “[*קָנָה*] heaven and earth.” However one chooses to here translate the word, the thought of acquisition cannot be missed. God did not eternally hold heaven and earth, he “created” them (Gen. 1:1). Upon giving birth to Cain Eve expressed what had occurred: “I have gotten (*קָנָה*) a man with the help of Jehovah” (Gen. 4:1). The way she had “gotten” or ‘acquired’ Cain was through birth. She “conceived and bore” him and in this way she came to ‘possess him.’ Her means of acquisition was birth.

That *קָנָה* is used of acquisition through both creation and birth is significant when considering the full text of Proverbs 8. Both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint describe Wisdom as “begotten” or “born” only a few verses after v. 22 (v. 24-25 MT, 25 LXX), while the LXX translates *קָנָה* as *ἐκτίσεν* (*ektisen*, “created”) in verse 22. Thoughts of both birth and creation are thus present in the passage.

The LXX’s translators plainly took liberty in translating *קָנָה* as “created,” the word not literally meaning as much. Yet the *Jewish Study Bible* relates a point we have thus noted: “In fact, ‘kanah’ refers to acquisition by means including creation, as here.”<sup>21</sup> The LXX’s translators recognized God’s means of acquisition, as the case in Genesis 14:22, to have been creating.

It is further necessary to account for the use of birth in reference to Wisdom. The Trinitarian position would argue that Christ is begotten of God but not created. To say Jesus was “born” in his preexistent state is in perfect harmony with saying he was created as Kenneth Aitken relates:

“In the Old Testament, birth can happily be described as an act of creation (Ps. 139:13; cf. Deut. 32:6), and an act of creation just as happily as a birth (Ps. 90:2).”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> C.F. Burney, “Christ as the ARXH of Creation,” *JTS*, Volume 27, 160.

<sup>21</sup> *The Jewish Study Bible: Featuring the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh*, Edited by Adele Berlin, Michael Fishbane and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford University Press, 2004), 1461.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth T. Aitken, 2001, “Proverbs,” *The Daily Study Bible Series* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 82. So too the *Theological Wordbook of the Old*

With birth and creation both serving as means of acquisition along with birth serving as a means to 'describe' creation, the implications of Proverbs 8 are unmistakably apparent. When accompanied by ἔκτισέν in the LXX it is difficult if not impossible to allow for any other interpretation. Not only is Wisdom the one "born" or "created" by God, she is the most ancient of all creation.<sup>23</sup>

With these points one can understand the significant role of Wisdom passages in early christological development. Early disputes concerning the nature and identity of Jesus Christ found these texts at the fore. While some parties offered vast reinterpretations, the application to Jesus was never in dispute. How, though, did the New Testament authors make use of Proverbs 8?

## Colossians 1:15-18

Drawing heavily from Proverb's Wisdom texts and intertestamental Jewish literature, the apostle Paul spoke of Jesus' preexistence using the word "firstborn," translated from the Greek πρωτότοκος (*prototokos*). Derived from πρώτος (*protos*), meaning first, and τόκος (*tokos*), meaning born (with the verbal form τίκτω [*tikto*]), the word occurs regularly in the Scriptures and various early Greek texts.

The Septuagint refers to the firstborn of various animals (Gen. 4:4; Ex. 34:19; Num. 18:17; Deut. 15:19) and of men (Ex. 22:29; Num. 3:40; Neh. 10:36). The word carries the plain sense of one who is 'born first.' This same thought is carried over into the New Testament where Jesus is identified as the firstborn of Mary, the first child that she bore (Mat. 1:25; Luke 2:7). Outside of the Bible both Josephus and Clement tell of Abel giving "the firstborn of sheep" as a sacrifice (Ant. 1:53; 1Clem. 4:1). Josephus speaks of the firstborn children that were killed in Egypt (Ant. 2:313), which is universally understood to be the children born first to their parents. Philo also presented the term literally, identifying Cain as the "firstborn" of Adam and Eve, their first child (Che. 1:54). The Apocrypha uses the term literally, referring to a "firstborn son" as an "only child" (Pss. 18:4).

In addition to having temporal priority the firstborn son also came to possess certain rights and privileges as Louw and Nida explain:

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*Testament*: "The Pual is the passive of the Polel, 'to be born' (Job 15:7; Psa 51:5 [H 7]). This idiom may be used to refer to creation or origins on a cosmic scale (Prov 8:24-25)." (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., Bruce K. Waltke [Chicago: Moody Press, 1980], 271.)

<sup>23</sup> So in verse 23 while many translations say Wisdom was "from everlasting" she was not in fact eternal. The language here is best understood as "from ancient times" or as J.N. Young rendered it, "from the age" (The English Young's Translation of the Holy Bible, 1862/1887/1898).

“In Jewish society the rights and responsibilities of being a firstborn son resulted in considerable prestige and status. The firstborn son, for example, received twice as much in inheritance as any other offspring.”<sup>24</sup>

The right of the firstborn was almost always given to the eldest, but in certain cases it could be transferred. When this happened to a person who was not the firstborn, he would come to be so figuratively, yet the one born first remained the literal firstborn but without the associated birthright. An example of this is found in the case of Isaac's sons Esau and Jacob. Esau was the firstborn, the child that was literally 'born first' (Gen. 25:25) and so Jacob's older brother. Later in life Esau requested bread and stew from Jacob and he agreed to provide it, but only in exchange for Esau's right as firstborn. When Esau agreed, the rights and privileges that were bestowed upon Esau as the firstborn were transferred to Jacob (Gen. 25:30-34). Even though this right was transferred to Jacob he was not considered Isaac's literal firstborn as the child born first. Esau acknowledged that he no longer possessed the right of the firstborn (Gen. 27:36; cf. Gen. 25:34), but he continued to recognize that although he had given up his birthright he was the true, literal firstborn (Gen. 27:32).

From this account in Genesis we learn that when one is figuratively the firstborn there remains one who is so literally. The one who is so figuratively has for some reason been given the rights properly due to the one that holds the literal position. The one who literally holds the firstborn position once possessed the rights associated with the position but for one reason or another they were taken or given up.

Examples of the figurative firstborn are in Exodus 4:22 and Jeremiah 31:9, speaking of Israel and Ephraim as God's firstborn, respectively. These contexts dictate that the subjects represent the nation of Israel so that neither is addressing the men that lived individually. Admittedly, there could be a semi-literal interpretation of these texts, for a level of figurativeness is necessary as the reference is not to men but a nation. This would present Israel as the first nation to have received a divine decree by which it came to exist. This understanding would mean that Israel was literally God's firstborn nation. Nevertheless, if it were understood figuratively, the meaning would be that Israel would have an exalted position among the nations as if they were all children and Israel was the firstborn among them. So Israel received the double inheritance from God, making the people especially blessed.

Another figurative text finds God promising to make David firstborn in

<sup>24</sup> J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, Second Edition, 2 Volumes (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:10:43.

Psalms 89:27. Though this text has a clear Messianic undertone that is understood literally as we will shortly consider, in this original application the reference is likely to David's covenant position with God. The parallel to David as firstborn is presented in that he is "the highest of the kings of the earth" (Psa. 89:27 NASB), giving the sense that David has the double portion of authority as if "the kings of the earth" were children in a family and David was the eldest son.

Two figurative texts are found in the Hebrew Scriptures that are not translated by *πρωτότοκος* in the Septuagint. The first is Job 18:13 where we read of a disease that is "the first-born of death." The language is clearly poetic, for death itself is not conscious and it does not bear children. The thought is that a disease is the greatest of those that cause death. Similarly, in Isaiah 14:30 we read of "the first-born of the poor," this passage containing clear poetic imagery (cf. Isa. 14:8, 31). The thought is that of those that are poor the firstborn is the poorest.

While a select few examples of *πρωτότοκος* are figurative, it is most often used literally. Because of this, unless the context presents some overriding factor a literal application of the term should be anticipated. We would not assume a figurative meaning in any given passage, but when the context clearly dictates a figurative meaning we should be open to the possibility.

### ***The Firstborn of All Creation***

The background and historical context of the Colossian hymn must be established to understand the expression "the firstborn of all creation." Derived from Wisdom texts such as Proverbs 8, any understanding of the Colossian hymn is rightly compared to what is said of Wisdom. We would thus anticipate that the appropriate interpretation of this text would also prove compatible and even parallel with the Wisdom texts from which it is derived.<sup>25</sup>

Whether or not one chooses to equate Jesus Christ with Wisdom is not significant to this portion of the discussion, though it has been argued that he is. The point need not be that Jesus Christ is Wisdom but only that the language in this passage is based upon that used for Wisdom. For example, Brown explains that "the closest and most commonly accepted background for the description in [Colossians 1:]15-16a is the OT picture of personified female Wisdom, the image of God's goodness (Wisdom 7:26) who worked with God in establishing all other things (Pro.

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<sup>25</sup> Some of the following information may come across as repetitive, but it is highlighted so that those new to these concepts will not be forced into repeatedly referring back to the preceding pages to more clearly see the connections between Proverbs 8 and Colossians 1.

3:19), that Wisdom was created by God in the beginning (Pro. 8:22; Sirach 24:9).<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, C.F. Burney notes:

“No one can contemplate the rendering which I have, as I hope, substantiated for... “The Lord begat me as the beginning of His way” (i.e. His creative activity) without perceiving that πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως “the first-begotten of all creation” can hardly be other than a direct reference to the O.T. passage [Proverbs 8:22].<sup>27</sup>

But how does one make this connection? Burney continues:

“This conclusion, which at first I supposed to have been unnoticed (it is not found, for example, in Lightfoot’s commentary), I have since discovered to have been anticipated by St Epiphanius (c. Haer. II lxxiii 7). His words are ‘In place of ἀρχή, the Apostle used πρῶτος, in place of γεννᾶ με (i.e. the LXX rendering of אֵתְּלִלְךָ לִי אֵלֵי אֵתְּלִלְךָ לִי אֵלֵי ‘I was brought forth’ in v. 25) the term τόκος, for the whole statement Ἐκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὕδων αὐτοῦ and Γεννᾶ με the expression πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, instead of ἐθεμελίωσέν με (v. 23) the statement Ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα...’<sup>28</sup>

The Septuagint version of Proverbs 8:22 uses ἀρχή (*arche*), translated either “first” or “beginning” with Wisdom being ‘the ἀρχή of God’s ways.’ Here ‘God’s ways’ refer to his creative activities (cf. Job 26:14; 40:19). The thought of “first” parallels Colossians 1:15’s use of πρῶτο-. Similarly, Proverbs 8:24 finds Wisdom to have been “born,” translated from γεννᾶ (*genna*), while the same is of Christ with -τοκος, meaning “born.”

As demonstrated, Wisdom came into existence, “born” as ‘the first of God’s way.’ One might note that the text speaks of birth and not creation, yet we have already observed the idiomatic use of birth to describe God’s creative work. If the thought of Jesus as the firstborn is that he is the first created, many Trinitarians will ask why did Paul not simply use the Greek word πρωτόκτιστος (*protoktistos*, “first-created”)? Three reasons can be presented.

First, one cannot disregard the literary background of the Colossian hymn. Found in Wisdom texts, where Wisdom is said to have been the “first” who was “born.” Using πρωτότοκος, Paul maintained the allusion to

<sup>26</sup> Raymond E. Brown, “An Introduction to the New Testament,” *The Anchor Bible Reference Library* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 803-804.

<sup>27</sup> Burney, 173.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-174.

both the Hebrew and the Greek text of the Old Testament. Admittedly *πρωτόκτιστος* would not have entirely destroyed the allusion in light of the LXX's use of *ἔκτισέν* and the implicit nature of "created" in this particular use of *בְּרִאשִׁית*, but by using *πρωτότοκος* the allusion is more expressly pronounced in both the Greek and Hebrew versions. Second, as was already observed, the firstborn child received certain rights and privileges unique to his position. By identifying Christ as the firstborn rather than the first-created Paul is also associating him with the rights and privileges accompanying the position. Finally, there is good reason to question if Paul would have even contemplated the use of *πρωτόκτιστος* due to the lack of evidence for its use in Paul's day. In fact, the word is unattested to until approximately 100 years after Paul wrote his epistle.

### ***A Member of Creation***

The thought of Christ as a member of the created order is found in more than the use of *πρωτότοκος*. This is of particular interest when one considers the use of this word throughout Scripture. When appearing in the genitive case in the LXX and New Testament<sup>29</sup> (so, "firstborn of...") there are only two ways in which it is used.

The first and most common construction can be generically defined as a genitive of source (cf. Ex. 11:5). With this use the genitive expression defines what the firstborn originates from, generally referring to the parent of the person or animal in view. This use is entirely incompatible with Colossians 1:15 for it would define creation as the source of Jesus Christ.

The alternative partitive genitive defines the subject as the firstborn of the group in view (cf. Ex. 22:29). So in a family of multiple children the one born first would be the firstborn. There would be specific reference to "the firstborn of the children," this individual being the eldest of all the children.<sup>30</sup>

The difficulty this text presents to the Trinitarian position has forced

<sup>29</sup> I am unaware of any exceptions in any contemporary text.

<sup>30</sup> Some have made the assertion that because the genitive "is not modified by a possessive noun or pronoun" the expression is unlikely to be a partitive genitive (Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007], 316). This argument comes across as rather desperate when one considers that "all creation" is implicitly God's, making such a "noun or pronoun" superfluous. In contrast, Revelation 3:14 (discussed in detail below) supplies this to clarify the sense of *ἀρχή* as not to misconstrue the meaning to be "source." This same work notes that in Colossians 1:15 Jesus is said to be the firstborn while in the LXX the use is "always generic" (ibid), yet how this is relevant is never defined. The authors seem to be looking to obfuscate by making arguments for the sake of arguing even if it is irrelevant to the issue.

them redefine firstborn in a manner that does not reflect its use. Arguing for the meaning of “preeminent over,” numerous commentators and apologists have demanded as Weust that Colossians 1:15 refers to Christ’s “priority to all creation and sovereignty over all creation.”<sup>31</sup> Yet the very passages so often appealed to for supporting this view do not give way to their required meaning.

Certainly πρωτότοκος includes the thought of temporal priority, the one being “first.” Yet this does not mean “before,” so to say that when one is the firstborn of a group he is before the group and not the first one of that group. With temporal priority in view the term always speaks of the first member of the group, not one that came before it. What though of the meanings “preeminent over” and “sovereign over?” Can these meanings be justified within Scripture, either in the New Testament or LXX? Do any of the figurative passages parallel what is found in Colossians 1:15?

God spoke of both Israel and Ephraim as his firstborn, but in doing so he spoke of the nation and not individual people. In Exodus 4:22 Moses addressed Pharaoh regarding his people with God identifying them as ‘his firstborn.’ It is difficult to draw a parallel between the term’s use for an entire nation and a single person. If one attempts to force the Trinitarian view of “preeminent over” or “sovereign over” the result is that the people are actually shown to be over God. It effectively becomes as if God called the people ‘his sovereign,’ which is an impossible view to sustain. The most one can argue for is that the text indicates how highly esteemed Israel was in the eyes of God, though as already noted a literal sense may be found, especially in light of the parallel between Israel as God’s firstborn and the reference to Pharaoh’s firstborn. So too in Jeremiah 31:9, with Ephraim as a reference to the nation and not an individual. As with Exodus the sense cannot be of preeminence or sovereignty as they are God’s firstborn and so not over him.

The best defense for the Trinitarian position has come from Psalm 89:27. With David having been made firstborn some have suggested that this is a reference to David relative to his human father Jesse, but the context lacks any support for this. In fact the text may be understood in two different ways.

Many Bible translations have taken the liberty of adding “my” prior to “firstborn,” indicating that David is God’s firstborn.<sup>32</sup> With such an understanding the same issue that besets Exodus 4:22 and Jeremiah 31:9 with the meanings “preeminent over” and “sovereign over” would here apply. With this understanding, the passage continues by defining David as “the highest of the kings of the earth” (Psa. 89:27b NASB),

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth S. Weust, *Weust’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*, 4 Volumes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., prn. 2004), 1:183.

<sup>32</sup> So KJV, NASB, NIV, NJB.

which would be the result of him being held as God's firstborn. Alternatively, the text may be understood to mean that David is firstborn in that he is "the highest of the kings of the earth." Akin to saying that David is πρωτότοκος τῶν βασιλέων (*prototokos ton basileon*, "the firstborn of the kings"), this view is equally difficult, for David still is not "preeminent over" or "sovereign over" the kings of the earth, but he remains one of "the kings of the earth." Within this group he is the most preeminent as the one holding the highest authority. Remaining one of "the kings of the earth" himself, David was not "over" them in the sense necessary for the Trinitarian interpretation of Colossians 1:15.

The firstborn son was "the highest" son, yet this did not mean that he was excluded from the remaining children. Even when this term is used figuratively the firstborn remains a member of the group in view. The most one could argue from the Psalm is that when firstborn was used of Jesus it identified him as the highest of the created order but still a part of it. Indeed, Jesus is the highest of the created order, but this does not exclude temporal priority as the first member of the group to exist.

More difficult for the Trinitarian position is that David was said to have been "made firstborn," an expression making any temporal priority difficult to substantiate. In contrast there is no thought of Christ having been "made firstborn" in Colossians 1:15. In fact, if Christ were not literally "the firstborn of all creation"<sup>33</sup> then another was. Christ would have then been 'made firstborn' for the rights and privileges associated with the position would have been taken from the one who held the position and given to him. Not only does the Bible never articulate such an event but one must necessarily ask who that one was and why he is not exalted with the rights and privileges of that position.

Some such as White have pointed to Romans 8:29 as a text supposedly supporting the Trinitarian view of Colossians 1:15:

"In Romans 8:29, the Lord Christ is described as 'the firstborn among many brethren.' These brethren are the glorified Christians. Here the Lord's superiority and sovereignty over 'the brethren' is acknowledged, as well as His leadership in their salvation..."<sup>34</sup>

White is correct that "these brethren are the glorified Christians," yet it is difficult to explain his leap to conclude that "the Lord's superiority and sovereignty over the brethren" is here defined by "firstborn." The

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<sup>33</sup> This use of firstborn is not completely literal for Christ was not born of a woman. The point is only that "born" is not entirely meaningless but an idiomatic reference to creation. By saying he was literally the firstborn I mean only to say that the meaning includes temporal priority.

<sup>34</sup> James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 112.

highlight of Romans 8:29 is that Christians are “conformed to the image” of the glorified Jesus. Jesus Christ, as an heir of God, was given glory. This glory was extended to Christians (John 17:22). As the first to be in possession of this he is the “firstborn.” Others who come to possess this as sons of God by the model Christ established, he is “among many brethren” (cf. Gal. 4:1-7). He is the most exalted as the firstborn should be, but temporal priority is the emphasis along with the rights so associated.

An argument long ago provided by J.B. Lightfoot cites a Jewish source where Rabbi Bechai identified God as “the firstborn of the world.”<sup>35</sup> The implication Lightfoot sought was that if God is the “firstborn of” something he was not a part of what he was firstborn of, so temporal priority in “birth” is entirely absent. Stafford summarizes the issue and provides a firm refutation:

“Moule notes that ‘R. Bechai appears to be R. Bahya ben Asher, a late writer (died 1340 [CE]), who is scarcely important for the original meaning of our passage.’ The reason for this is not only because Bechai’s work on the Pentateuch is nearly thirteen centuries removed from the first-century use and understanding of ‘firstborn,’ but Bechai’s methods of biblical interpretation are highly questionable, to say the least . . . Apparently it does not seem to matter to Lightfoot, or those who cite him on this point, that Bechai relied on Jewish mysticism and special revelation to help him interpret the Scriptures. Abbott is correct when he says, ‘Rabbi Bechai’s designation of God as ‘firstborn of the world’ is a fanciful interpretation of Ex. xiii. 2.’”<sup>36</sup>

In view of the evidence it is little surprise the confession of one work: “Translated literally (as RSV), it implies that Christ is included in the created universe....”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, we would agree. Yet this work continues by saying that such would be “inconsistent with the context of the whole passage.”<sup>38</sup> Is this accurate? What are the arguments involved and what does the context really indicate?

<sup>35</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Eighth Edition (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1886), 145.

<sup>36</sup> Greg Stafford, *Jehovah's Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics*, Second Edition (Huntington Beach, CA: Elihu Book, 2000), 216-217.

<sup>37</sup> R.G. Bratcher & E.A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1977), 22.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

**“Because All Things were created in Him”**

Historical and grammatical evidence demonstrates that Colossians 1:15 is best understood to show Christ as the first and foremost of God's creation. What little sense it would have made for Paul to state something best understood to include Christ among the created order only to have him immediately deny that inclusion. The Trinitarian argument begins with ὅτι (*hoti*), the first word in verse 16 best translated “because,” providing the basis for his first position among the created order. The meaning of τὰ πάντα (*ta panta*, “all things”) is necessarily considered along with the proper translation of ἐν αὐτῷ (*en auto*, “in him”).

To suggest that the distinction between τὰ πάντα and Jesus in v. 16 excludes him from creation is not by itself unreasonable. Had v. 16 existed in isolation this might well be preferable, but here we are considering the basis for Christ's identification as “the firstborn of all creation,” so any interpretation of verse 16 must correspond to this.

Paul's use of τὰ πάντα is with reference to all things collectively, including the universe, all that is contained within it and even the spirit realm. The most literal translation of the two words is “the all” or just “all,” but in English we say “all things” as a smoother reading. It is clear from 1 Corinthians 15:27 that this expression does not of itself exclude God, with Paul taking the time to cite him as the specific exception in this particular context. Both in 1 Corinthians and Colossians Paul's specific thought did not include God within the “all” in view, even though the term allows for it.

There exist numerous examples where one who might normally be included within “all” of a group is distinguished for reasons defined in the context. This would include when we speak of God as the creator of “all.” He did not create himself, not only because one cannot create one's self but also because God is not created. Therefore we understand references to “all” in such a way to exclude Jehovah. In a similar manner we would understand Jesus to be excluded from the “all” that was created through him. While a Trinitarian or Sabellian might argue that this is because “all” that was created was created through him, this is far from a necessary reading. Rather, we can just as well read that while God is excluded from “all” in reference to what he created due to him being uncreated, when the reference is to what was created “through” Jesus he is the exception to the “all” as he was naturally not created through himself.

The Septuagint version of Genesis 3:20 exemplifies this when Eve is said to be “the mother of all living.” To understand this statement as absolute would require that Eve be the mother of Adam and even herself. While they are members of the class of “all living,” this specific

context excludes them. Because of the obvious contextual exclusion the author saw no issue in penning these words as he did, though in English it might be better to say “all others living.”

Josephus presented τὰ πάντα in a way understood as qualified by the context as well. In his *Antiquities of the Jews* we are told of Antiochus, who is reported to have prohibited the Jews from following their own laws. A Jew named Mattathias had significant influence over the people, so it was thought that if he could be turned to do what was instructed his “fellow citizens” would follow suite. In Mattathias’ response to the effort to turning him he spoke of τὰ πάντα ἔθνη (*ta panta ethne*), which translates literally to “all the nations,” saying that even if these turn he and his people would not. When he spoke of “all the nations,” he was not referring to his own, but to all others than his own. Hence, in translating this text William Whiston has rendered it “all the other nations” (Ant. 12:268-269).<sup>39</sup>

Another example of qualification is in Luke 21:29. Reading of “the fig tree and all the trees,” the text defines the fig tree as a tree and yet it is spoken of relative to “all the trees.” While “all the trees” obviously does not exclude the fig tree, for this specific use they are distinguished. Therefore, the text speaks of what is really “all the other trees.” Luke 13:2 does the same when a select group of Galileans is distinguished from “all the Galileans.”<sup>40</sup> While this group of Galileans would normally be included in the complete group of Galileans, it is for the purpose of what is being stated in this context that they are distinguished.

Colossians 1:15 is best read with Jesus understood to be a part of “all things,” but because of what is next described he is distinguished as well. What is here done well parallels these other examples to the extent that the context provides qualification. The specific context excludes Jesus from the “all” in view though outside of this specific context he serves as a member of it. In context v. 16 refers to “all other things.”

The objection to these points is well anticipated. Ron Rhodes argues that the “Greek interlinear version of the Bible shows that the Greek word *panta* means ‘all things’ and not ‘all other’ things.”<sup>41</sup> This argument fails when the evidence we have here considered is placed against it. The New Testament authors along with early writers generally recognized that “all” could be and regularly was used in a way qualified by the context.

Understanding who and what the “all things” are, we must examine

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<sup>39</sup> Flavius Josephus, “The Antiquities of the Jews,” 12:269, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, New Updated Edition, Translated by William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 325.

<sup>40</sup> Literal translation.

<sup>41</sup> Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Eugene, Or.: Harvest House Publishers, 1993), 77.

how they were created “in him.” Some such as the NASB render this as “by him,” but many can easily misunderstand this reading. Rather than identifying Jesus as the source of creation, as some may be inclined to believe, this rendering is based upon understanding the Greek text as a dative of means. Jesus is thought of as the means God used to create. While possible this is unlikely, for the “through him” that follows becomes nothing more than a restatement of the same idea. As Vincent notes the text is best understood locally:

“*In* is not *instrumental* but *local*; not denying the instrumentality, but putting the fact of creation with reference to its sphere and center.”<sup>42</sup>

The thought of creation occurring “in him” is perhaps unusual without a historical framework to work with. The idea of this event occurring by God in another is not something generally contemplated. For example, how could the earth or the universe be created within Jesus? How could this be true of mankind or the angels? Abbott suggests a historic interpretation addressing this concern:

“The Schoolmen, following, indeed, Origen and Athanasius, interpreted the words of the *causa exemplaris*, viz. that the idea omnium rerum was in Christ. So that He was, as it were, the Archetypal Universe, the summary of finite being as it existed in the Eternal Mind. This view has been adopted by Neander, Schleiermacher, Olshausen, and others. Olshausen says: ‘The Son of God is the intelligible world, the κόσμος νοητός, that is, things in their Idea. In the creation they come forth from Him to an independent existence.’ . . . This would correspond to Philo’s view of the Logos...”<sup>43</sup>

Christ is the center of creation because in him it was all created ideally. Philo expressed a similar view, arguing that God “first of all conceived [the world] in his mind, according to which form he made a world perceptible only by the intellect, and then completed one visible to the external senses, using the first one as a model.”<sup>44</sup> To Philo the model was only in God’s mind but to Paul it was in the preexistent Jesus Christ. Peake further explains:

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<sup>42</sup> Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 Volumes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 3:468.

<sup>43</sup> T.K. Abbott, “The Epistle to the Ephesians and to the Colossians,” *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (Scribner, 1902), 214.

<sup>44</sup> Philo, “On the Creation,” *The Works of Philo: Complete and unabridged*, New Updated Edition, Translated by C.D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 4.

“The schoolmen, followed by some modern theologians, explain that the Son is the archetype of the universe, the κόσμος νοητός, the eternal pattern after which the physical universe has been created.”<sup>45</sup>

Abbott's comment reveals his favor of this understanding, yet both he and Peake are forced to reject it from the notion that these were not merely in him, but *created* in him. If Christ is the model or pattern from which all else comes, the ideas created within him, he cannot himself be eternal. He must be created as the “created” and not eternal pattern.<sup>46</sup>

The preceding allows for understanding how Jesus is “the firstborn of all creation because in him all things were created.”<sup>47</sup> They were created in him in their idea as part of his own creation, the firstborn himself serving as the archetypal model for all further creation. They came to consist in him, not physically, but ideally. This corresponds to 1:16 when it says that this same “all things” were created “through him.” So we can say as Brown that Christ worked in “establishing of all other things.”<sup>48</sup>

As “all things” are contextually relative in verse 16, they are also in 17, itself a noted allusion to Proverbs 8:24-26.<sup>49</sup> Jesus was “before all things,” again causing some to interpret his preexistence as eternal. As a contextually relative statement one would expect him to be before the rest of those defined as “all things,” with him as the first to have been created. In fact the same concept is expressed by the apocryphal book *Sirach*, from which this statement is likely derived, where Wisdom is said to have been “created before all things” (Sir. 1:4 RSV).

### **Again Born First**

Further paralleling Colossians 1:15 is Jesus' identification in verse 18 as “the firstborn from the dead,” providing a literal fulfillment of Psalm 89:27. A footnote in the *New American Bible* explains: “There is a parallelism between *firstborn of all creation* (15) and *firstborn from the*

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<sup>45</sup> A.S. Peake, “The Epistle to the Colossians,” *EGT*, 3:504.

<sup>46</sup> Understanding this it is appropriate to address an objection put forth by a few of the more unscholarly Trinitarian apologists to explain away the partitive genitive of Colossians 1:15. These have argued that Christ is only a member of creation as a human, and so it is only when he “became flesh” (John 1:14) that he became part of the created order. This argument, however, disregards the context, where 16a provides the basis for his position, coming entirely from his existence before he became a man as the one in whom “all things were created.” The holding of this position therefore has nothing to do with his existence as a human.

<sup>47</sup> Literal translation.

<sup>48</sup> Brown, 804.

<sup>49</sup> *Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament*, Greek Text Novum Testamentum Gracece, Edited by B. and K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C.M. Martini, B.M. Metzger, 27th Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 524.

dead (18).”<sup>50</sup> The idea presented in verse 18 is repeated in Revelation 1:5. Paul articulated this idea as well, identifying him as “the first fruits of those who are asleep” (1Cor. 15:20).

Paul and John understood that Christ was the first to be raised from the dead in the resurrection, as did Jesus himself where, in the context of his resurrection, he spoke of himself as “the first” (Rev. 1:17).<sup>51</sup> Before Jesus no one had been raised in “the resurrection,” for no one had been given immortality or the associated spiritual body (1Cor. 15:44-45). It is therefore significant that the notion of temporal priority exists in Colossians 1:18. He is “the firstborn from the dead” as the first to be raised. Through him all others will be resurrected (1Th. 4:16). Further, he is the archetypal model of all others who will be resurrected (Rom. 8:29).

In no way can the meaning of “preeminent over” be intended in verse 18. The preposition ἐξ (out of) is used with the genitive, giving the sense of Christ coming “out of the dead.” This resurrection process is spoken of as birth just as creation, and again Christ is the “first” to have received it. Just as Jesus was resurrected and through him all others will be resurrection, so too he was created with all others created through him.

### ***A Refutation of Heresy***

The apostle Paul penned his letter to the Colossians with definite purpose. It is widely recognized that he was refuting what is generically defined as the *Colossian heresy*. While a great deal of work has been performed to determine the exact nature of the heresy there has yet to be a consensus.

Our purpose in addressing Paul’s refutation is not to determine the nature of it, for such is well beyond the scope of this writing. For example, White argues:

“The position taken by those who deny the deity of Christ falls right into the trap of agreeing with the Gnostics against Paul! In other words, if we interpret this passage as saying Jesus is a part of the creation, and not the Creator himself, we are left with a Jesus who looks very much like the Gnostic ‘aeon’ that Paul is arguing against. The argument presented by deniers of the deity of Christ weakens Paul’s entire argument against the Gnostics, leaving him arguing in circles!”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *The Catholic Study Bible: New American Bible*, Edited by Donald Senior (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1990), 2084.

<sup>51</sup> For more on this text and the interpretation of it, see chapter 7.

<sup>52</sup> White, 115.

Arguments as the one presented by White assume either that we fully understand the nature of the heresy that Paul was refuting or that he did not fully understand what he was writing against unless we follow the position White advances. Yet F.F. Bruce makes an important observation:

"Some scholars suggest that Paul's polemic was not always well informed, that he was prone to misunderstand the positions he attacked. The implication is that those modern scholars who charge him with misunderstanding are better informed than he was about this or that position which he attacks, whether it be the Corinthian disbelief in future resurrection or the Galatian reliance on works of a certain kind as the ground of their justification. On this it can simply be said that even those scholars are dependent on what Paul says about the controverted positions. So if he was misinformed, no more trustworthy source of information is available."<sup>53</sup>

Setting Bruce's comments aside, and for the sake of discussion taking White's position as correct, it is plain that there are vast differences between the Gnostic heresy and what Paul presented in Colossians 1:15-18. For example, a principle of Gnostic teaching is that matter is evil. Barclay explains:

"The Gnostics began with the basic assumption that matter was altogether evil and spirit altogether good.... Now God was spirit and if spirit was altogether good and matter essentially evil, it followed, as the Gnostic saw it, that the true God could not touch matter and, therefore, could not himself be the agent of creation. So the Gnostics believed that God put forth a series of emanations, each a little further away from God until at last there was one so distant from God, that it could handle matter and create the world."<sup>54</sup>

How does Paul's presentation differ from Gnosticism? Barclay further relates:

"As the Gnostics saw it, the creator was not God but someone hostile to him; and the world was not God's

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<sup>53</sup> F.F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 3: The Colossian Heresy," *BibSac* (July-September 1984), 196.

<sup>54</sup> William Barclay, "The letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians," *The Daily Study Bible Series*, Revised Edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000), 97.

world but that of a power hostile to him. That is why Paul insists that God did create the world, and that his agent in creation was no ignorant and hostile emanation but Jesus Christ, his Son (Colossians 1:16).”<sup>55</sup>

It was not necessary for God to somehow be removed from his creation and in no way is material creation evil. Rather, God created his son first and through that son he created all other things, including matter. In other words, there is a single direct creation by God, not a series of aeons, and that one is the agent that this God used to create everything else, including matter.

A question of greater importance is perhaps of how Christ could ever have come to be viewed as a Gnostic aeon, the demiurge down the progression of aeons or one produced by the demiurge if in fact early Gnostic Christians had previously understood him to be a person of the Triune Almighty God? Even if he had been identified as a high ranking aeon, how could this conclusion have been advanced if the church held to a Trinitarian theology? Was the Gnostic view so radical as to be in complete contrast to the Christian faith? If so, how were the Gnostic teachers able to mutate Christian theology so to fit it to their doctrine in a convincing manner? It seems apparent that if the early church did advance a Trinitarian view of God there would have been no room for the necessary mutation of Christian thought to fit Gnostic teaching, especially so early in the church. It is hard to imagine a Trinitarian church departing into such a radically heresy if Jesus was viewed as Almighty God. Yet if the Colossians properly viewed Christ as the first one to have been created and as the agent through whom God worked to bring about the rest of creation those teaching, a Gnostic heresy would have had a clear opportunity to mutate this to fit their theological framework.

### **Revelation 3:14**

One can hardly discuss Proverbs 8:22 and Colossians 1:15 without considering Revelation 3:14. With a reading of the King James Version Jesus is presented as the first creation, calling him “the beginning (ἀρχή) of the creation of God.”<sup>56</sup> This understanding has been fiercely opposed by those who reject the notion of a created Messiah.

The lack of a Trinitarian consensus on the meaning of this text demonstrates it’s difficulty. One view, corresponding to an interpretative footnote in the NASB, suggests that by “the beginning” the meaning is

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>56</sup> Admittedly the KJV translators may not have intended this meaning, but such is the result.

that Jesus is the “Origin or Source”<sup>57</sup> of creation. The alternative provided by the NIV finds Jesus to be instead “the ruler of God's creation.”

While ἀρχή does at times refer to the originator of an action this use is lacking not only in the book of Revelation but in all of the New Testament. Even when God is identified as “the beginning” the context does not categorize him as the origin or source of anything, but he is the first to have existed as the eternal being.

Ruling out the meaning of “origin or source” is the Father's identification as this one apart from the Son. Creation is expressly identified as God the Father's (τοῦ θεοῦ, *tou theou*), showing it to have originated with him. As it is his creation he is the 'originator' of it, coming from him as the “source.” God's position as the “source” of creation is unequivocally defined him as the one “out of whom are all things” (1Cor. 8:6, literal).

Suggesting that Jesus is the origin or source of creation is to contradict passages defining his role in creation. As discussed in chapter 3 he is repeatedly identified as the intermediate agent in creation, while “God the Father is thought of as the original cause.”<sup>58</sup> Contrary to what Trinitarians might like to suggest, the rendering provided by the NASB would imply Sabellianism.

The NIV is correct inasmuch as ἀρχή can be translated “ruler.” This is difficult as the New Testament never uses the singular in such a way. On three occasions the singular is rendered “rule,”<sup>59</sup> though this would not here apply. A search reveals the consistent use of another word, ἀρχὼν (*archon*), for the singular “ruler” in all of the New Testament, including Revelation. So in 1:5 Jesus is identified as the “ruler (ἀρχὼν) of the kings of the earth.”

Significantly, many scholars have recognized that Revelation 3:14 is an allusion to Proverbs 8:22. Bruce brings this to light, noting that the expression “the beginning of God's creation” is probably “an allusion to wisdom's self-introduction as ‘the beginning of His way’ in Prov[erbs] 8:22.”<sup>60</sup> In both texts ἀρχή is used with the same first-in-time meaning. Burney remarks:

"Another New Testament allusion to Prov[erbs] viii 22 in reference to Christ is found in Rev[elation] iii 14 ἡ ἀρχή τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ, a title of the risen Christ which Dr

<sup>57</sup> *New American Standard Bible: Updated Edition* (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1997), 191.

<sup>58</sup> H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1957), 162.

<sup>59</sup> The exceptions being Luke 20:20, 1 Corinthians 15:24 and Ephesians 1:21.

<sup>60</sup> F.F. Bruce, “The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15-20”, *BibSac* (Jan. 1984), 107.

Swete and Dr Charles have not a shadow of authority for limiting in meaning to 'the Source of God's creation'. There is every reason to suppose that ἀρχή is here used with all the fullness of meaning which St Paul extracts from reshith-Beginning, Sum-total, Head, First-fruits."<sup>61</sup>

Some have argued for Revelation 3:14 to be an allusion to Isaiah 65:16-17.<sup>62</sup> While such may well be argued as present within the verse, this is seen only in a portion of the text and does not properly account for the phrase in question.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, the allusion to Proverbs 8:22 can hardly be missed, with no possible interpretation of this passage allowing for the sense of ruler, origin or source.

Examples of the first-in-time use of ἀρχή within the LXX include Genesis 49:3 with "the first (or beginning) of [Jacob's] children," and Jeremiah 2:3 with "the beginning of his harvest" in reference to Israel as the first nation God had set aside for himself. These along with many other texts such as Exodus 12:2 and 34:22 clearly parallel the first-in-time sense present in Revelation 3:14.

The evidence points to Jesus being "the beginning of God's creation," the first created being. In fact the qualifier "of God" provided in the text might be suggested superfluous if not providing the necessary clarity to see that Christ was not defined as the source of creation. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* has argued that "the m[eanin]g. beginning='first created' is linguistically *probable*."<sup>64</sup> When all of the evidence is considered regarding these passages the evidence is unmistakably clear. Jesus Christ is the first and most highly exalted of God's creation.

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<sup>61</sup> Burney, 177.

<sup>62</sup> So Michael J. Svigel, "Christ as the Ἀρχή in Revelation 3:14," *BibSac* (April-June 2004), 215-231. Svigel attempts to get around the evidence by distinguishing between a "protetemporal" and "propartial" use of ἀρχή, yet both have the same basic meaning with only differing application. This proves exceptionally difficult for his argument as the shared meaning is statistically most probable. It is only necessary to determine what use within the shared meaning best suits Revelation 3:14. While a "protetemporal" use is far more common, only "propartial" is applicable.

<sup>63</sup> That more than one Old Testament allusion is here found would account for the mix of active ("Amen", "faithful and true Witnesses") and passive ("beginning of God's creation") titles. While there is nothing that strictly prohibits this use (for example, many translate Hebrews 1:3 with "exact representation" [passive] and "radiance" [active]), that Jesus' words are alluding to at least two Old Testament passages would account for the combination.

<sup>64</sup> BDAG, 138. Emphasis added.

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**I AM**

The expression “I am what I am” undoubtedly calls to mind Jehovah's response to Moses at Exodus 3:14, though here quoted is the apostle Paul in reference to himself (1Cor. 15:10). Some look for significance in every instance of the words “I am” in reference to God or Christ, nevertheless, that others could freely use these words is revealing. This is not to suggest that Paul meant the same thing as God when he uttered these words as translated, only that the words are not intrinsically theological.

A survey of popular Bible translations finds the significant words of Exodus 3:14 translated with “I am” in what is by far the majority. The Hebrew word so translated three times is אֶהְיֶה (*ehyeh*), also appearing in v. 12 but here almost universally rendered “I will be” or similarly. With nothing to indicate a change in meaning between v. 12 and 14 it is difficult to imagine why this word is so often translated in two entirely different ways within the matter of only two verses.

While a few identify this as God's name, more common is the understanding that this is a designation of self-existence. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* argues otherwise:

"This [expression “I am”] has been supposed to mean 'self-existence,' and to represent God as the Absolute. Such an idea, however, would be a metaphysical abstraction, not only impossible to the time at which the name originated, but alien to the Heb[rew] mind at any time. And the imperfect 'ehyeh is more accurately tr[anslated] 'I will be what I will be,' a Sem[etic] idiom meaning, 'I will be all that is necessary as the occasion will arise... The optional reading in the ARV margin *is much to be preferred*: 'I

WILL BE THAT I WILL BE,' indicating His covenant pledge to be with and for Israel in all the ages to follow."<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew expression translated reflected a meaning much more complex than mere self-existence or identification. Presented were insights into God's function and character as Rabbi Jordan Cohen relates:

"Moses perceived that the people would want to know which attribute of God they can expect to encounter; that is, what their experience of God will be, and what is going to happen to them. God's answer, then, leaves things open-ended. Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh is based on the future tense conjugation of the Hebrew verb meaning 'to be.' Often translated as 'I Am Who I Am,' the phrase is more accurately translated as 'I Will Be That Which I Will Be.' The people will come to know God through their unfolding experiences together."<sup>2</sup>

God's self-revelation did not restrict him from providing the proper identification Moses requested in v. 13. Following v. 14 God identified himself as "Jehovah," saying, "This is My name forever" (v. 15). While his proper name did much to reveal him, he first expressed here character with אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, translated well by *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, "I shall be who I shall prove to be."<sup>3</sup> He would become all that was necessary for his people.

The LXX does contain the words "I am," yet differently than in any of the texts we will consider. Whereas אֶהְיֶה in v. 12 was properly rendered with the Greek future ἔσομαι (*esomai*), in Exodus 3:14 it is translated ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν (*ego eimi ho on*, "I am the being"). This translation—certainly based upon a later interpretation of the text—reflects self-existence but does not substantiate a significant meaning for "I am," with ἐγώ serving only as a copula.

Though the translators of the LXX did not articulate the intended

<sup>1</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 4 Volumes, Edited by James Orr (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 2:1254, 1257. Emphasis added. Similarly, Waldemar Janzen remarks: "God's name given to Moses and Yahweh is interpreted as 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh, probably best translated as a sentence in the future tense: *I will be who/what I will be* (3:14 notes)." (Waldemar Janzen, "Exodus," *Believers Church Bible Commentary*, ed. by Elmer A Martens, Willard M. Swartley [Waterloo, Ontario and Scottsdale, PN.: Herald Press, 2000], 77.)

<sup>2</sup> Jordan D. Cohen, [www reference, cited Oct. 19, 2005] [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Weekly\\_Torah\\_Commentary/shemot\\_kolel5762.htm](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Weekly_Torah_Commentary/shemot_kolel5762.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Revised By Walter Baumgartner, Johann Jakob Stamm, 2 Volumes (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 1:244.

meaning of Jehovah's words, other early translations proved successful in this effort. Both Aquila and Theodotion rendered יהוה אֲנִי in agreement with their translation of 3:12, providing in v. 14 ἔσομαι ὁ ἔσομαι, "I will be who I will be."

## Jehovah and I [am] He

On several occasions Isaiah presents Jehovah uttering the words "I am he." Translated from the Hebrew יהוה אֲנִי (*ani hu*), these two pronouns mean "I" and "he," respectively, with the LXX translating them ἐγὼ εἰμί ("I am"). White has taken an extreme view, suggesting that the "use of *ani hu* by Isaiah is a euphemism for the very name of God himself,"<sup>4</sup> while others may suggest this refers to his self-existence. These ideas prove extremely difficult, for here present is language common even today.

The anaphoric (referring back to what was already defined, in contrast with an absolute statement of existence) use of יהוה אֲנִי is immediately apparent, יהוה referring back to what is already defined. For example, if one were to ask, "Who is the author of this book?" I might respond with a simple "I am" or "I am he." Of these responses, the first has the predicate "the author of this book" implied from the question's predicate, the second relies on the anaphora understood between the pronoun and its antecedent in the question.

Beginning in the 41<sup>st</sup> chapter of Isaiah are several "I am he" statements. In v. 2-4 Jehovah asked who had done a series of things, with the implication that he had. Jehovah affirmed that he was the doer of them, saying, "I Jehovah am the first and the last; I am He." The meaning was, "I am the one who has done these things."

What is perhaps the most well known "I am he" statement is Isaiah 43:10 where Jehovah spoke: "You are My witnesses, says Jehovah; and My servant whom I have elected; that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He." Up to this point Jehovah had declared himself to be 'their God, the Holy One of Israel, their Savior' (Isa. 43:3). He identified himself as the one who had cared for his people in the past, delivering them from trouble and putting others in their place for destruction (v. 3b-4). He would gather his people back together from all over the earth (v. 5-6) and he was their creator (v. 7). He commanded for 'the nations to be assembled,' asking, "Who among them can declare this and cause us to hear former things?" (v. 9) Knowing the nations had no one to supply who could, he continued: "Let them give their witnesses, that they may be justified. Or let them hear and say, It is true."

<sup>4</sup> James White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 99.

They were to declare, "It is true," that Jehovah was the one who could do the things he had proclaimed and that their gods were nothing more than worthless idols.

With verse 10 Jehovah identifies Israel as 'his witnesses.' They witnessed how he had done everything proclaimed, so they knew with confidence that he would come to fulfill his future promises. Jehovah says, "I am he," meaning he is the one he claimed to be, having done all that he said as they had witnessed, and that it was he who could 'declare this and cause them to hear the former things.' He subsequently identified himself as God and stated clearly that 'there is no savior besides him' (v. 11-12). With "I am he" (v. 13), he is this one, the one who 'declared, saved and proclaimed.'

In Isaiah 45:22 God stated: "I am God, and there is no other." Everything he had said would come to pass (v. 23). All who recognized Jehovah would know that he was the one they would have to turn to, while all opposed to him would feel ashamed (v. 24). The context, continuing into Isaiah 46, defines why those who opposed Jehovah would feel ashamed: "Bell has bowed; Nebo stoops." These idols were seen as unable to support even themselves, having to be carried upon animals (Isa. 46:1). They proved unable to deliver those who served them (v. 2). Jehovah thus instructs his people to listen to him (v. 2). Finally he says, "Even to old age I am He" (v. 4).

Jehovah had affirmed his position as the only God in contrast to the idols of the nations; he proclaimed how their gods had failed, unable to care for their worshippers. From their birth to old age he is the God of his people and he would care for them, carrying their burden just as the people of the nations would for their idols.

The last "I am he" statement at Isaiah 48:12<sup>5</sup> discusses God as the deliverer of prophecy. In the past he warned his people of coming events, and the warnings had proven correct. With Israel he had done the same but they had not listened. Even so, he affirmed himself as the one who had done these things, identifying himself by Isaiah as 'the God of Israel, Jehovah of Hosts' (v. 2). With "I am he" Jehovah spoke of himself as the doer of these things.

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<sup>5</sup> One passage in the LXX of Isaiah 47 has Babylon personified, saying "I am." She is identified as "the strength of the kingdom," or according to the Hebrew text, "The queen of kingdoms" (Isa. 47:5 NASB). Barnes explains that "the idea is, that Babylon sustained by its power and splendor the relation of mistress, and that all other cities were regarded as servants, or as subordinate" (*BN*, 6:2:177). In verses 8 and 10 Babylon uses "I am" to refer back to the provided appellation, saying: "I am, and there is no one besides me" (NASB). The city is not taking for itself the divine name, as many might claim ἐγὼ εἰμί to denote, or eternal existence, for which others would argue for God. Rather, the city's statement means only that she is the most powerful as "the strength of the kingdom," with 'all other cities regarded as her servants,' thus attempting to even usurp the position of God's kingdom.

As this brief review indicates, there is no reason to find a mystical significance with Jehovah's use of "I am he." These words did not here refer to self-existence or somehow denote the name of God. They served only to identify God in each immediate context as the one he was there claiming to be or as the doer of the works he proclaimed.

## Jesus and I am [He]

Recorded in John 9 is the account of a man healed by Jesus. Blind from birth (v. 1) the man was known to beg for money (v. 8). Having been healed, he found those knowing him to be perplexed at his new found sight, perhaps even doubting who he was. They asked, "Is this not the one who used to sit and beg?" In response the formerly blind man said, "I am" (v. 9, literal).

With the words "I am" the man was not claiming to possess the divine name or eternal existence. The inquiry was into his identity, being asked if he was the blind man who would sit and beg. Though newly granted sight he was this one, so with the words "I am" the man addressed their inquiry. For him to say, "I am," was the same as saying, "I am he who used to sit and beg."

Jesus made similar use of "I am." Speaking of future false messiahs he foretold of ones who would come 'in his name,' saying, "I am" (Mark 13:6). These would claim to hold Jesus' position or perhaps be Jesus himself. This use of ἐγὼ εἰμί would undoubtedly correspond to his own even if a mystical connotation were involved, for they would be claiming to be him! Yet by saying ἐγὼ εἰμί or "I am [he]," the meaning was only "I am the Christ" as Matthew's parallel account reveals (Mat. 24:5). Neither the divine name nor eternal existence were contemplated in the expression.

Mark 13:6 and John 9:9 establish a precedent for the contemporary use of ἐγὼ εἰμι by Jesus and others. Rather than a special theological meaning, the expression was part of common speech. So BDAG explains:

"To establish identity the formula ἐγὼ, εἰμι is off[en] used in the gospels (corresp[onding] to Hebr[ew] ani hu) Dt 32:39; Is 43:10), in such a way that the predicate must be understood fr[om] the context: Mt 14:27; Mk 6:50; 13:6; 14:62; Lk 22:70; J 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28; 13:19."<sup>6</sup>

With Trinitarian emphasis on the Johannine passages we will examine a portion of these to demonstrate a consistent pattern of use. In John 8:24 Jesus provided one of his more significant statements,

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<sup>6</sup> BDAG, 283.

saying, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” Demonstrated in what follows is that his listeners understood an implied predicate, with the Jews subsequently asking, “Who are You?” Examining the context to understand the meaning Marcus Dods remarks:

“What they were required to believe is not explicitly stated... it is ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι 'that I am,' which Westcott supposes has the pregnant meaning 'that I am, that in me is the spring of life and light and strength'; but this scarcely suits the context. Meyer supposes that He means 'that I am the Messiah'. *But surely it must refer directly to what He has just declared Himself to be, 'I am not of this world but of the things above... This belief was necessary because only by attaching themselves to His teaching and person could they be delivered from their identification with this world.'*<sup>7</sup>

While Dods' views are legitimate he may have overlooked a prior verse of significance. In v. 12 Jesus identified himself, saying, “I am the Light of the world.” Vincent notes how tradition held that “Light was one of the names of the Messiah,”<sup>8</sup> making his claim Messianic. The Jews rejected this, accusing him of having given false testimony in 'bearing witness to himself' (v. 13) while likely failing to understand the full significance of his words. Jesus refuted their false accusation (v. 14-18), followed by an exchange where they continued in their lack of understanding. They would 'seek him' and still 'die in their sins' (v. 21) because they would not believe that he was the one whom he claimed to be (v. 24), that one being “the light of the world.”

Jesus continued his exchange, speaking of the Father as the one who sent him, but they continued in their misunderstanding (v. 25-27). Jesus explained that they would come to understand the things they had not: “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me” (v. 28). Upon his death they would know he was the one he had claimed to be.

In John 13:19 Jesus made an “I am” statement that should prove no more difficult to understand than any other. Beginning in verse 13 Jesus confirmed that he was “Teacher and Lord,” as his disciples had identified him. Setting a pattern in humility for them he took to washing their feet (v. 14-15). “A slave is not greater than his master,” so if their Lord would wash their feet how much more should they be willing to wash the feet of

<sup>7</sup> Marcus Dods, “The Gospel of St. John,” *EGT*, 1:775. Emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 Volumes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 2:167

each other (v. 16-17). He explained: "From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He" (v. 19). Jesus was telling what would happen beforehand to confirm their belief in who he was, their "Teacher and Lord."<sup>9</sup>

A physical response has led some Trinitarians into wild speculation on the meaning of Jesus' words at John 18:5-6. There would undoubtedly be little controversy surrounding Jesus' final use of "I am" recorded in John 18:5-6 were it not for this. Accompanying men sent by "the chief priests and the Pharisees" (v. 3) Judas approached, prompting Jesus to ask, "Whom do you seek?" (v. 4) The men responded, "Jesus the Nazarene," to which Jesus said, "I am [he]" (v. 5, literal). The apostle records what next took place: "So when He said to them, 'I am He,' they drew back and fell to the ground." When the men expressed that they were seeking Jesus, his response only articulated that he was the one they sought. He outspokenly confessed he was "Jesus the Nazarene." There was not an extraordinary significance to his words as 'a euphemism for God's name' or a connotation of eternal divine being. The interpretive methods of the Trinitarian looks not to what was said for the meaning, but to an ambiguous physical response. That those with Judas fell back when Jesus said ἐγὼ εἰμι is interpreted to mean that they understood him claiming to be God Almighty. Examining what is said a number of commentators, even Trinitarian, have understood this response. John Henry Bernard has so commented:

"[John's] narrative indicates... that Jesus identified Himself voluntarily... And ἐγὼ εἰμι in v. 5 may mean simply, 'I am He of whom you are in search'... The words which follow, 'they retired and fell to the ground,' then, imply no more than that the men who came to make the arrest... were so overcome by His moral ascendancy that they recoiled in fear."<sup>10</sup>

Barnes offers the same:

"The frank, open, and fearless manner in which Jesus addressed them may have convinced them of his innocence, and deterred them from prosecuting their wicked attempt. His disclosure of

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<sup>9</sup> It might be argued that his disciples already believed that he was their "Teacher and Lord" so to make it unnecessary for him to 'tell them before it comes to pass.' Yet he had already once affirmed to them that he was what they already acknowledged him to be, saying, "for so I am." Confirmation through the fulfillment of a prophecy he delivered would only further strengthen their belief and reaffirm that he was these things. This would be more necessary than ever before because of the coming doubts they would face with his arrest and execution.

<sup>10</sup> John Henry Bernard, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John," 2 Volumes, Edited by A.H. McNeile, *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985) 2:586-7.

himself was sudden and unexpected; and while they perhaps anticipated that he would make an effort to escape, they were amazed at his open and bold profession."<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' "I am" statements corresponded to the common meaning of ἐγὼ εἰμι as used by his contemporaries. There are undeniable similarities with the use by the blind man in John 9 and Jehovah in Isaiah,<sup>12</sup> yet never is the divine name or eternal existence in view.

## Before Abraham came to be, I am

As a man of only 30 years Jesus began his ministry. His young age undoubtedly left the Jews perplexed when he said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Understanding Jesus to mean that he had seen Abraham while he was still alive, they also knew he was "not yet fifty years old" (v. 57). Perhaps feeling they had caught him in a lie they inquired further, to which he responded (v. 58).

The meaning of Jesus' response has been strongly debated with his most well known "I am" statement. While often paralleled with his other such statements, "I am" is here used differently than in the passages already considered. George Beasley-Murray is correct in observing the distinction though understating the extent to which it exists:

"This use of ἐγὼ εἰμί is slightly different from that in vv 24 and 28, where 'I am he' is clearly in mind, whereas no predicate is intended here."<sup>13</sup>

The phrase is here existential, as εἰμί is no longer a copula with an implied predicate. Per the context, focus is upon his existence in relation to his human age. A.T. Robertson has suggested that εἰμί is "really absolute,"<sup>14</sup> agreeing with the standard "I am" translation. His lack of evidence or defense for his interpretation makes it difficult to provide any

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<sup>11</sup> *BN*, 9:2:361.

<sup>12</sup> Some might point to other parallels between the "I am" statements of Jesus and Jehovah. To these we would note Jesus words: "As my Father taught me, these things I speak" (John 8:28 LITV; cf. vs. 26). Jesus claimed that to have seen him is to have seen his Father (John 14:9), with the basis for this in his character. He had been taught by Jehovah what and how to speak, and he imitated his Father perfectly. Depending upon the circumstances Jesus may have called to mind the very language used by his Father and found it applicable to his given situation, bringing him to borrow from it. Regardless, one must always interpret a text based upon its context, so when Jesus says "I am" we must determine his meaning from the provided context and when doing this there is a consistent difference between the expressions of Jesus and those of Jehovah.

<sup>13</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, "John," Second Edition, *WBC*, 36:139.

<sup>14</sup> A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN.: Broadman Press, 1943), 880.

significant interaction with his position, but heading under which he provided the reference is telling, for it may imply his recognition that from grammar alone, and not theology, John 8:58 might best be understood differently.

Robertson's interpretation of John 8:58 was presented at the conclusion of his discussion of what he identified as the *Greek progressive present*, though confessing the name to be poor. He, as Ernest De Witt Burton, better identified this construction as a "Present of Past Action Still in Progress" (PPA), with Burton explaining:

"The Present Indicative, accompanied by an adverbial expression denoting duration and referring to past time, is sometimes used in Greek, as in German, to describe an action which, beginning in past time, is still in progress at the time of speaking."<sup>15</sup>

The present indicative in John 8:58 is εἰμί, while the adverbial expression referring to past time with the accompanied action is πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι (*prin Abraham genesthai*) The action of existing began in the past (or, if eternal, was perpetually ongoing) and continued up until the point he spoke. He did not merely exist in the past so that he would say "I was," or only at the present, but his existence was from a time before Abraham, through Abraham's life and in duration up until the moment he made this statement. Kenneth McKay explains:

"The verb 'to be' is used differently, in what is presumably its basic meaning of 'be in existence', in John 8:58: πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί, which would be most naturally translated 'I have been in existence since before Abraham was born', if it were not for the obsession with the simple words 'I am'. If we take the Greek words in their natural meaning, as we surely should, the claim to have been in existence for so long is in itself a staggering one, quite enough to provoke the crowd's violent reaction."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, repr. 2003.), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Citing John 8:58 specifically, Winer: "Sometimes the Present include also a past tense (Mdv. 108), viz. when the verb expresses a state which commenced at an earlier period but still continues, —a state in its duration; as, Jno... viii. 58..." (G.B. Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament* [Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1897], 267), also Moulton: "The Present which indicates the continuance of an action during the past and up to the moment of speaking is virtually the same as Perfective, the only difference being that the action is conceived as still in progress... Jn... 8:58..." (James Hope Moulton, Wilbert Francis Howard, Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Syntax*, Volume 3 [London, New York: T & T Clark International, 1960], 62).

McKay suggests εἰμί should be translated “have been” based upon the lacking parallel idiom in English, translating the entire expression as a unit and not the individual words in isolation as an interlinear. Done appropriately the result of a PPA is “the English perfect”<sup>17</sup> as J.N. Sanders further relates:

"To describe a state of continuing up to the present, Greek uses the present tense... where English uses the perfect; cf. [John] viii. 58."<sup>18</sup>

Suggested, regardless of the translation, is that the contrast between Abraham as one who “came to be” and Jesus as one who ‘is’ demonstrates eternal preexistence. Vincent unfortunately falls into this error:

“It is important to observe the distinction between the two verbs. Abraham’s life was under the conditions of time, and therefore had a temporal beginning. Hence, Abraham *came into being*, or *was born* (γενέσθαι). Jesus’ life was from and to eternity. Hence the formula for *absolute, timeless* existence, *I am* (ἐγὼ εἰμί).”<sup>19</sup>

Further support for eternal preexistence is presented from the LXX of Psalm 89:2 (90:2 MT). An exact translation is difficult because of the reference to “ages” without clarifying if the thought was of past ages alone or all ages past and future. The preceding verse of the Psalm highlights what God “has been” in reference to past “generations” so the former seems probable. As such, the translation “you have been” is most appropriate. To the psalmist God had been in existence when the earth was formed and throughout all past generations up to that time. If, however, the reference is to all ages past and future the most appropriate rendering would be “you exist.”

Jehovah has been “in all generations” (v. 1), “before the earth and the world were formed, even from age to age” (v. 2). For Jehovah ‘a thousand years is as a day’ (v. 3). There is little doubt that God’s eternal preexistence is here in view, but these statements extend beyond Jesus’ words in John 8:58. Even so Jesus’ contrast between the present indicative with the aorist infinite could indicate eternal preexistence, but this is not expressly articulated. In fact there is equally supportive evidence that this construction does not necessitate eternal

<sup>17</sup> H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey. *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1957.), 183. Variations of the PPA are so translated in the NASB and others at John 14:9 and 15:27. In fact the 1970 edition of the NASB suggested the rendering “I have been” for John 8:58 in a footnote.

<sup>18</sup> J.N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, Edited and Completed by B.A. Mastin (London: A. & C. Black, 1968), 158.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent, 2:181.

preexistence. An early text in the extra-biblical *The Testament of Job* demonstrates as much:

Testament of Job 2:1 “For I have been [ἐγὼ γὰρ εἶμι] Jobab since before the Lord named me Job.”<sup>20</sup>

Though εἶμι is here a copula, the correlation to John 8:58 in that both are a PPA is unaffected. Those maintaining a grammatical argument insisting that Jesus is eternal as one who 'is' in contrast to Abraham who “came to be” must also insist that Job was eternally Jobab as one who 'is Jobab' in contrast to when he was only “named Job.” He may not have eternally preexisted but he at least had the name assigned to him from all eternity. This is an argument that cannot be sustained.

Provided by εἶμι is a differing point of emphasis, not necessarily an absolute contrast. Job was already Jobab, but we are not told that he was always Jobab and never so “named.” Similarly, while John 8:58 does not tell that Jesus “came to be,” this does not indicate that he never did. Jesus' words likely provided a similar differing point of emphasis, pointing to his existence prior to, during and after Abraham. In question was not if or when Jesus came to be, only how he had seen Abraham. To answer how he had been alive from a time before Abraham all the way to the point when he spoke, without interruption, he made use of the PPA.

Jesus' did not claim that he only “was” before Abraham, something he could have easily articulated without a PPA. Neither did he claim only to 'come to be' prior to Abraham, for Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel all could have maintained this though they later died. The PPA shows duration, so while Jesus existed for some time before Abraham, his existence continued through Abraham's life and then up until the time he spoke. While just over 30 years of age in the flesh he had in fact existed continually for thousands of years prior and beyond. Only a PPA would have fully articulated this idea with a simple and direct statement.

Perhaps not surprisingly Trinitarians often point to the Jewish response for identifying Jesus' meaning. One apologetic work argues:

“The reaction of Jesus' critics to his statement—attempting to stone him (John 8:59)—confirms that they thought he was making a divine claim. Had Jesus stated only that he had been

<sup>20</sup> The translation is my own. Some may incline to argue that the sense should be that he “was Jobab” and not that he has been such from the time of being named Job, especially due to the concluding words recorded by one who professes to be Job's brother, stating, “The name of Job was formerly Jobab” (12:17). I do not find this convincing because even though Jobab had already been named Job, he continued to be identified as Jobab and Job almost interchangeably (7:8, 12, 21, comparing 7:24). It should further be noted that the post positive γὰρ between ἐγὼ and εἶμι is there positioned out of grammatical necessity, thereby not impacting the sense of ἐγὼ εἶμι.

alive longer than Abraham, they might have regarded such a claim as crazy (as they apparently did with regard to his earlier comments, vv. 48-57), but not as an offense meriting stoning. Of the offenses for which Jews practiced stoning, the only one that seems to fit the context here is blasphemy. Claiming to be older than Abraham might have been judged crazy, but it would not have been judged as blasphemy."<sup>21</sup>

Whether Jesus claimed only to be "older than Abraham" or eternal his words could have been interpreted as "crazy." Both could have been interpreted as blasphemy. No human can live for the duration Jesus expressed, whether it was from eternity or only a limited time before Abraham. To claim such existence would indeed have been a "divine claim," but not necessarily as the Almighty. The Jews could well have interpreted Jesus' words to be of self-deification, assigning to himself deity as emperors commonly did, but here including the notion of preexistence. It was not necessary for Jesus to be Jehovah, but if he was understood as claiming to be a god in opposition to Jehovah their reaction would have been entirely appropriate. Otherwise his claim may have been interpreted as "a self-claim that was an affront to God's presence,"<sup>22</sup> claiming for himself a divinely granted position and corresponding existence that they did not believe him to possess.

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<sup>21</sup> Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 97.

<sup>22</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge Against Jesus in Mark 14:53-65* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, repr. 2000), 236.

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## JESUS AS THEOS

Though the New Testament generally reserves θεός for the Father we have observed exceptions to this. There are others to whom it is applied, the most notable of such ones being Jesus. BDAG observes that of passages where θεός may be applied to Christ it is used differently than when used for “God in the Israel/Christian monotheistic perspective...”<sup>1</sup> This work further observes:

“Some writings in our lit[erature] use the word θε[ός] w[ith] ref[erence] to Christ (without necessarily equating Christ with the Father, and therefore in harmony w[ith] the Shema of Israel Dt 6:4; cp. Mk 10:18 and 4a below), though the interpretation of some of the passages is in debate. In Mosaic and Gr-Rom. traditions the fundamental semantic component in the understanding of deity is the factor of performance, namely saviorhood or extraordinary contributions to one’s society.”<sup>2</sup>

Depending upon when during Jesus’ existence θεός was applied, the appellative may have carried different senses. For example, in his preexistence it may be understood differently than when applied to him as a man on earth. In his exaltation there may be several layers of meaning.

There is good reason to question whether or not Jesus is called “god” in several passages, while others are plain and the sense need only be ascertained from the context. Several of these passages are worthy of review and the following pages will do as much. In this we will see strive to determine how θεός is applied to Christ, if at all.

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<sup>1</sup> BDAG, 450.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## John 1:1

**“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”**

Nearly sixty years ago question over the appropriate translation of John 1:1 was launched to the fore with the introduction of Jehovah's Witnesses' *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. Their translation of John 1:1, though far from new, was for the first time widely distributed so that reaction was swift.

With most translations reading “the Word was God” the NWT broke from that tradition with “the Word was a god.” So plainly speaking against both the doctrine of the Trinity and Sabellianism, there is little wonder it came under attack. Many opposed initially dismissed it, suggesting as Bruce Metzger that it was “a frightful mistranslation.”<sup>3</sup> How Dr. Metzger blundered so greatly can only be attributed to his theological mindset, for he certainly was not ignorant of Greek grammar. Yet some others have displayed little short of blind ignorance, suggesting the translation to be “incorrect grammar and poor Greek.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***In the Beginning Was...***

With the words “in the beginning” John opened his Gospel with an allusion to the Genesis creation account. Scholars have long recognized this allusion, but in doing so they have also limited the timeframe of John's reference to the events of Genesis. With the Genesis record accounting only for physical creation, overlooked is the creation of the spirit realm and those therein.

While Genesis 1:1 refers to “the heavens,” one should not understand this to be something beyond what is found in the physical universe. Heaven is a common reference to the physical universe (cf. Gen. 22:17; 26:4), while even earth's atmosphere came to be so identified (Gen. 1:6-8). The angels are noted to have been present in the beginning at the earth's creation (Job 38:6-7), yet any reference to their creation is absent in Genesis. These either existed before the beginning or the beginning was initiated before the Genesis account with the creation of the spiritual realm and those therein, so that it is not a moment but a period of time.

We noted in chapter 4 John's allusion to earlier Wisdom texts, as one commentator highlights:

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, “The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ,” *Theology Today* (April, 1953), 75.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 85.

"It is important to observe that the development of the concept of the Word of God in the OT and later Judaism is similarly related to that among Israel's neighbors. This applies to the association of Word and Wisdom. The connection of Wisdom with the creative Word is already assumed in Prov 8:22–31 (note especially vv 27–31). In Wisd 9:1 there is an explicit identification of Wisdom and the Word: 'God of our fathers, and Lord who keepest mercy, who madest all things by thy word, and by thy wisdom formedst man....'"<sup>5</sup>

One striking parallel between John 1:1 and Proverbs 8 is reference to "in the beginning" (Pro. 8:23), but Proverbs instead defines the time of Wisdom's creation. Though Wisdom was created before Genesis (cf. Pro. 8:25-29), she still came to be "in the beginning." Having determined in chapter 4 that this Wisdom is Jesus both according to the New Testament and the early church, we may well find reference to his creation.

Trinitarians giving attention to this text already have a strong objection, but to those who have not it is one that might be surprising. This stems from the simple word "was." This in John 1:1 is translated from the Greek imperfect ἦν (*en*) and taken as a reference to eternity past. James White so explains it:

"The tense of the word expresses *continuous action in the past...* The Word does not come *into* existence at the 'beginning,' but is already *in* existence when the 'beginning' takes places... The Word is eternal. The Word has always existence. The Word is not a creation."<sup>6</sup>

White is correct in his assessment of the imperfect to the extent that the idea of entry into existence is not defined. The imperfect can be used of anyone or anything, the difference being that for these it is taken for granted that they have been created. For the Trinitarian the assumption is that because Jesus 'already was' at the very start of creation he never came to be.

What White and others like him suggest is far from a good argument. For example, if one did not recognize that "the beginning" extended to include Wisdom's creation in Proverbs 8, the account would be inherently limited to the Genesis account and so the creation of the physical universe. One might well say then that Michael the archangel "was in the beginning" with Gabriel. Such would not suggest their eternity, only their existence at the specified time without regard for

<sup>5</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, "John," Second Edition, *WBC*, 36:8.

<sup>6</sup> James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 50-51.

their creation.

More noteworthy are the words of A.T. Robertson, a noted Trinitarian and grammarian who agreed that John 1:1 identified Christ as eternal for theological reasons. Yet his open confession that this viewpoint should not be insisted upon grammatically is revealing.

"The[se] are sometimes called 'aoristic' imperfects... The same root was used for both forms, as only one form exists and it is hard to tell which tense the form is... We see this difficulty in ἦν, ἔφη, ἔλεγον, etc., particularly in verbs of saying, commanding, etc.... Hence we need not insist that ἦν (Jo. 1:1) is strictly durative always (imperfect). It may be sometimes actually aorist also. So as to ἔφη (Mt. 4:7); ἔλεγον (Mk. 4:21, 24, 26, 30, etc.), etc."<sup>7</sup>

That the Word 'was in the beginning' with an aoristic imperfect is much the same as saying he "was in the world" (John 1:10). As the world is a creation Jesus could not have eternally dwelt there, nor could he have been there without first coming to be there. Though John speaks only to the fact that he "was" there, it is implicit that he first came to be there. As the Word "was" in the world once he came to be there, he too "was" in the beginning only once he came to be there. Thus says Wisdom, the preexistent Logos: "He established me *in the beginning*" (ἔθεμελίωσέν με ἐν ἀρχῇ, *ethemeliosen me en arche*, Pro. 8:23 LXX). John relates this notion in his first epistle, saying that the Word is "*from the beginning*" (1Jo. 1:1), expressly identifying this time as his point of origin. Therefore the period known as "the beginning" began with the creation of the Logos/Wisdom as "the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 3:14). Within this period the angels were created followed by the heavens and the earth.

### *Was θεός*

Before examining this text we might first consider a couple of the more recognized arguments. Though relatively uncommon today, what is known as Colwell's Rule was not long ago cited in most discussions of John 1:1c. Introduced in 1933 as *A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament*,<sup>8</sup> what is actually Colwell's first rule stated that "definite predicate nouns that precede the verb usually lack

<sup>7</sup> A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934.), 882-3. Underline added.

<sup>8</sup> E.C. Colwell, "A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament," *JBL*, 52 (1933), 12-21.

the article.”<sup>9</sup>

Colwell’s research had arguably led him to some accurate conclusions, but his rule did nothing to aid in translating or understanding this passage. Instead of providing a means of determining definiteness, we are given insight into nouns that are predetermined to be definite. What came to be used in support of the Trinitarian position was in fact the converse of the rule. Itself no rule at all, this has been used to make the case against an indefinite rendering, suggesting that predicate nominatives preceding the verb and lacking the article are usually definite. By the very nature of ‘usually’ one could not absolutely determine anything about John 1:1c, but this conclusion is also not accurate. No study has suggested this to be the case, and worse, if John 1:1c were definite it would prove contrary to Trinitarianism and support Sabellianism.<sup>10</sup> Daniel Wallace, himself opposed to the indefinite rendering of this text, explains:

“Further, calling θεός in John 1:1c definite is the same as saying that if it had followed the verb it would have had the article. Thus it would be a convertible proposition with λόγος (i.e., ‘the Word’ = ‘God’ and ‘God’ = ‘the Word’). The problem of this argument is that the θεός in 1:1b is the Father. Thus to say that the θεός in 1:1c is the same person is to say that ‘the Word was the Father.’”<sup>11</sup>

Philip Harner observes this same point:

“There is no basis for regarding the predicate *theos* [in John 1:1c] as definite. This would make [θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος] and [ὁ λόγος θεός ἦν] equivalent to [ὁ λόγος ἦν ὁ θεός], and like [ὁ λόγος ἦν ὁ θεός] they would then contradict the preceding clause of 1:1.”<sup>12</sup>

Sabellianism views the converse of Colwell’s Rule as highly attractive: Jesus is the same God as the Father and is the Father, but they are different revelations of God. Nevertheless, this notion is entirely contradicted by John 1:1b. The Word, the Son of God, could not be the

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 20. The predicate nominative finds the predicate noun in the subject case, meaning that the noun in the predicate position is in reference to the subject. In this text that noun comes before the verb and lacks the definite article.

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Sean Kasabuske for pointing out that while generally true this is not completely accurate. It is possible that “the Word was God” in the sense expressed through divine agency.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 268.

<sup>12</sup> Phillip B. Harner, “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1,” *JBL* 92, 85.

one whom he is with, so he could not be the Father.

The Trinitarian does not find John 1:1c speaking to Jesus' identity as "the God," but neither does that one allow him to be "a god" as one lesser than the Almighty. For them it is necessary to articulate that Jesus is God just as the Father is without equating him with the Father.

In his thesis *Revisiting Colwell's Rule in Light of Mass/Count Nouns* Donald Hartley takes up previous work by Philip Harner<sup>13</sup> and Paul Dixon<sup>14</sup> in arguing that θεός in John 1:1c is "purely qualitative."<sup>15</sup> To understand Hartley's conclusion and its error one must understand the mass/count distinction among nouns, of which θεός is the latter.<sup>16</sup>

Mass nouns are largely unbounded in that they refer to a substance or quality without constraining size or amount.<sup>17</sup> Count nouns relate a bounded entity that can be quantified.<sup>18</sup> Count nouns can be semantically plural or indefinite while mass nouns cannot.<sup>19</sup> In (1) are examples of mass nouns while (2) presents countable nouns.

(1) Mass Nouns

- a) We drank **water**.
- b) They are serving **pudding** for desert.

(2) Count Nouns

- a) Do you own **a cat**?
- b) There are still **seats** available.

With (1) the amount of *water* and *pudding* is unspecified for there may have been only a spoonful or a barrel. In view are the substances themselves. Provided in (2) are quantifiable entities, a single cat and multiple seats.

The issue besets confusion for some when *conversion* is introduced. Conversion takes place via an override when the lexical meaning of a

<sup>13</sup> ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Stephen Dixon, *The Significance of the Anarthrous Predicate Nominative in John*, (Dallas Theological Seminary Thesis, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> Donald Hartley, *Revisiting Colwell's Rule in Light of Mass/Count Nouns*, [www reference cited Dec. 21, 2008], [http://www.bible.org/assets/worddocs/hartley\\_colwell.zip](http://www.bible.org/assets/worddocs/hartley_colwell.zip), 11.

<sup>16</sup> The following is not intended as an exhaustive discussion of linguistics in relation to mass and count nouns. Provided is a basic overview of the mass/count distinction and how this relates to our understanding of John 1:1c.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window Into Human Nature*, (New York: The Penguin Group, 2007), 167.

<sup>18</sup> ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, certain mass nouns are plural though without quantification, but this goes beyond the scope of our discussion.

noun is overridden by grammatical structure so that the noun is converted from one type to the other. Laura A. Michaelis explains this:

“If lexical and structural meanings conflict the semantic specifications of the lexical element conform to those of the grammatical structure with which that lexical item is combined.”<sup>20</sup>

This principle is in part highlighted by Talmy:

“Another debounding mechanism available for a noun is to shift the grammatical category of the noun from count to mass. One construction with this mechanism—seen in the well-known example *There is cat all over the driveway*—include the deformation of the original referent.”<sup>21</sup>

Talmy proceeds to note the possibility of such a shift without the above deformation, as in “*There are probably (10) miles of pencil in that stationary store.*”<sup>22</sup> The ability to make conversion as this is the backbone of Hartley’s thesis.

Though Hartley is correct in that a count noun can take the function of a mass noun he errs with another significant point. He suggests that “a mass noun is always qualitative and incapable of being indefinitized.”<sup>23</sup> Just as a count noun can become a mass noun through conversion, so a mass noun can too become countable. Michaelis notes that “the indefinite article *a* can also be combined with a mass specification”<sup>24</sup> and through the use of *pudding* as in 1b explains the result:

“Via [the use of the indefinite article], the noun *pudding* receives the individual construal associated with the class of count nouns.”<sup>25</sup>

When an unbounded mass term is given the English indefinite article the noun takes a count function. It is common to speak of *a water* as in a glass or bottle of water and of *a pudding* as in a cup of pudding. These mass terms become count nouns when the lexical meaning is overridden with a grammatical one.

Hartley places a great deal of emphasis on *σάρξ* (*sarx*, flesh) as a mass term at John 1:14. Noting parallel structure with John 1:1c he argues that they “are more likely to reflect the same rather than different

<sup>20</sup> Laura A. Michaelis, “Word meaning, sentence meaning, and syntactic meaning,” *Cognitive Approaches to Lexical Semantics*, ed. by Hubert Cuyckens, Rene Dirven, John R. Taylor, (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003), 171.

<sup>21</sup> Leonard Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantic*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 1:52.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>23</sup> Hartley, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Michaelis, 172.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

semantic nuances.” While this need not be objected to, Hartley erroneously concludes that as a count noun θεός can convert and σάρξ cannot so that θεός must be the converted noun. The flaw in this suggestion is that σάρξ does not appear until 13 verses after John 1:1. The result of this could well have John 1:1c initially misunderstood so that only upon reading through the following 13 verses would one finally understand John’s intended meaning. Upon reading and understanding the implications of verse 14 the reader would be forced back to 1:1c to correct the initial misunderstanding. This strikes one as highly improbable.

Further difficulty besets Hartley’s position in that nothing suggests conversion as John 1:1c fails to present difficulty with understanding θεός as a count noun. The only difficulty is with his preconceived theology.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, if we accept Hartley’s suggestion that John 1:1c and 1:14 are ‘likely to reflect the same semantic nuance’ it is more reasonable to find σάρξ converted to a count noun.<sup>27</sup>

By converting σάρξ to a count noun we find that John was not addressing only the substance that the Word became. Per Hartley’s suggestion that John 1:1 and 14 present ‘the same semantic nuance,’ John is saying that the Word became a bounded entity consisting of flesh, a concept properly conveyed with a count connotation. When glossing this text BDAG observes both this meaning and apparently the presence of conversion, with σάρξ denoting “a physical being, living being with flesh.”<sup>28</sup>

Even with the preceding one cannot neglect word order. Harner has suggested John’s word order provides a meaning that is “primarily qualitative”<sup>29</sup> and that had an indefinite sense been intended John could have written ὁ λόγος ἦν θεός (*ho logos en theos*).<sup>30</sup> Does the provided word order indicate conversion and in turn demand Hartley’s conclusion? No, as even Harner confesses:

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<sup>26</sup> There are other texts where such conflict is present as in John 4:23 where *spirit* could not be countable both because the sentence would not make sense and the parallelism with the mass term *truth* that immediately follows.

<sup>27</sup> Hartley provides a statistical analysis of count nouns to suggest that John 1:1c is most likely purely qualitative, yet this analysis is entirely subjective. Hartley determined for himself the categorization of each noun and yet the nouns he views as purely qualitative are so often translated indefinitely in most if not all leading translations. That Hartley dedicates so much of his conclusion arguing against an apologetic work and that his theology only allows for a purely qualitative understanding makes his work suspect, appearing more apologetic than scholarly with his conclusions determined before the work even began.

<sup>28</sup> BDAG, 915.

<sup>29</sup> Harner, 85. It is interesting to observe in this regard that Harner’s language is significantly weaker than Hartley’s.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

JESUS AS THEOS

“The word-order... with the anarthrous predicate before the verb, does not preclude the possibility that the noun is indefinite.”<sup>31</sup>

The table below provides a sampling of indefinite preverbal anarthrous predicate nominatives from John’s gospel as in 1:1c

4:19	A prophet
6:70	A devil
8:44	A murderer
8:44	A liar
8:48	A Samaritan
9:17	A prophet
10:1	A thief
10:13	A hired hand
10:33	A man
12:6	A thief
18:37	A king

The following illustrates a parallel indefinite expression with John 1:1c.

Acts 28:4	φονεύς	ἐστίν	ὁ ἄνθρωπος
	a murderer	is	the man
John 1:1	θεός	ἦν	ὁ λόγος
	a god	was	the Word

Chapter 3 discussed John’s use of poetic rhythm in his prologue. Altering his word order as some suggest necessary for an indefinite rendering would have entirely destroyed the rhythm or required a completely different structure. As there is no conflict between John’s

<sup>31</sup> ibid, 80. Harner’s comments specifically reference Mark 15:39 but as both have “the anarthrous predicate before the verb” the principle would also apply to John 1:1.

word order and an indefinite θεός the prologue stands as is in light of the evidence, allowing and even supporting the translation “the Word was a god.”

With a definite reading ruled out and a purely qualitative rendering highly unlikely due to θεός being and here functioning as a count noun, there is clear support for an indefinite θεός. Even so it is good to look at the probable background from which John derived his prologue, for when John spoke of the Logos he did not introduce a concept unfamiliar to his audience.

The notion of a heavenly Logos was established well before John took to penning his Gospel. Thomas Tobin explains that it was “in the works of Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.E – 50 C.E) and his immediate predecessors that *logos* found its full flowering in Hellenistic Jewish literature.”<sup>32</sup> To what extent this preexisting tradition impacted John's Gospel is often disputed, but it is hard to imagine that there was not an influence based upon the evidence. So Tobin explains: “While one cannot argue that the author of the hymn in the Prologue [of John] had read Philo, it is difficult to imagine that the two are not part of the same Hellenistic Jewish tradition of interpretation and speculation.”<sup>33</sup> A sampling of the similarities between both John and Paul (cf. Col. 1:15-17) that Philo shares brings this to the fore:

“Philo calls the Logos the ‘Son of God,’ ‘the eldest son,’ ‘the first-begotten’... He describes the Logos as ‘the image of God, *through* whom the whole world was framed’... ‘the instrument through which the world was built...’”<sup>34</sup>

With only the above there are immediately recognizable similarities between the Logos as spoken of by Philo and then by John. Where they differed fundamentally was in that John equated the Logos with Jesus Christ while it is commonly accepted that Philo viewed the Logos impersonally. Though this be the case, Philo's anthropomorphic language closely paralleled John (and Paul), bringing Tobin to acknowledge that “the similarities [between Philo and John] of both conceptual framework and vocabulary are nevertheless remarkable.”<sup>35</sup> On reviewing the evidence Raymond Brown is forced to a similar conclusion:

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas H. Tobin, “The Prologue of John and Hellenistic Jewish Speculation,” *CBQ*, 52 (1990), 256.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>34</sup> Ezra Abbot, “On the Construction of Romans IX. 5,” *The Authorship of the Fourth Gospel and other Critical Essays* (Boston: Geo. H. Ellis, 1888), 369-70.

<sup>35</sup> Tobin, 262.

“Personally, we believe that the evidence points rather toward a common background shared by both Philo and John.”<sup>36</sup>

If John 1:1c is understood to be indefinite the apostle would likely have presented the Logos as a second god, distinct from Jehovah. It is this very language that Philo used to describe the Logos, calling him a “second god” (QG 2:62). With numerous parallels between the language of Philo and that found in the New Testament for Christ, it is not difficult to imagine John identifying the Logos as a “second god” by saying that “the Word was a god.” Contrary to the objections of many this confession fit firmly within the Jewish concept of monotheism where others could properly be called gods, as were even the angels (Psa. 8:5).<sup>37</sup>

## John 20:28

**“Thomas answered and said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”**

Trinitarians could not feel more comfortable identifying Jesus as their Lord and God, but some holding have so ingrained within themselves a separation of the two as to produce a level of discomfort with doing the same. Perhaps it is this discomfort and haste to provide a response to the Trinitarian abuse of this passage that has led some to errantly attempt a refutation of the Trinitarian interpretation.

A survey of leading Bible translations reveals Thomas’ expression to be punctuated with an exclamation point.<sup>38</sup> Looking to Thomas’ words as an exclamation some mistakenly view his words as only a statement of shock or excitement akin to “Oh my God.” Such an interpretation is without parallel and unfounded. Possible is that this exclamation is one of recognition and faith. It is said that Thomas was not defining Jesus’ identity but “answering” his command to be “believing” (John 20:27). The response was only to demonstrate his belief through an expression of faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Significantly, the early church other than Novatian who attributed this text to “Christ’s divinity”<sup>39</sup> is largely silent on the meaning of Thomas’ words, making it difficult to determine just how far back this or any other interpretation goes. Had Thomas’ words been as unambiguous as some

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond Brown, “The Gospel According to John I-XIII: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,” *AB*, lvii.

<sup>37</sup> For more on this one need only reference back to chapter 1.

<sup>38</sup> *New American Standard Bible, New International Version, New Jerusalem Bible, New Revised Standard Version.*

<sup>39</sup> Novatian, “A Treatise of Novatian Concerning the Trinity,” *ANF*, 5:622.

Trinitarians today suggest, it is somewhat surprising that they were not more often appealed to in the early writings. One of the oldest records we have of this text with commentary comes from Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428). He for one found this to be a confession of belief in the Father in response to Jesus' command:

"Thomas, indeed, when thus he had believed, says, 'My Lord and my God.' [Thomas] is not saying [Jesus] himself is Lord and God, for knowledge of the resurrection was not also teaching that God was he who rose again, but, as it were, he praises God greatly for the miracle performed."<sup>40</sup>

While impossible to know whether Theodore's understanding was one inherited or developed by him out of theological necessity,<sup>41</sup> it should not be quickly dismissed. Examining Thomas' words from a grammatical perspective Winer suggests a similar interpretation:

"On the other hand, [John 20:]28, though directed at Jesus (εἶπεν αὐτῷ), is rather an exclamation than an address; and, in the Greek authors, such a Nom[inative] has early and strong prominence."<sup>42</sup>

Though Winer failed to explicitly parallel Thomas' words with any statement "in the Greek authors," he may well have included Mark 3:34 among such texts. Recorded here, ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί μου (*ide he meter mou kai hoi adelphoi mou*, "Behold My mother and My brothers!") closely resembles ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου, (*ho kurios mou kai ho theos mou*) at John 20:28.

Admittedly, most scholars have come to reject the opinions of Theodore and Winer, though we cannot dismiss the fact that many may do so due to their own theological disposition. As the basis of rejection is not absolute, one cannot be dogmatic on the meaning of this passage. Nevertheless, Robertson comments that the text is "not exclamation, but [an] address, the vocative case though the form of the nominative, a very common thing in the *Koiné*."<sup>43</sup>

The principle difficulty in understanding Thomas' confession to be of one other than Jesus is the fact that it is directed *to* Jesus. The closest parallel to this passage is one of address, where the one spoken to is

<sup>40</sup> *Patrologie, Patrologie Graecae*, Thomus LXVI, Synesius Episc, Theodoros Mopsuestenus (Paris: 1864), 783-4. Cited from the unpublished work of David Schuman.

<sup>41</sup> While Theodore's theology necessitated that Thomas' exclamation not be in reference to Jesus, it is impossible to determine whether or not this understanding was new or inherited from others in the church.

<sup>42</sup> G.B. Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament* (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1897), 183.

<sup>43</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Electronic Version found within BibleWorks 6 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), John 20:28.

also spoken about, giving weight to this notion. Psalm 34:23 in the LXX (35:23 MT) addresses Jehovah while almost perfectly paralleling Thomas expression in John 20:28. The Psalmist identified Jehovah, saying, “ὁ θεός μου καὶ ὁ κύριός μου” (*ho theos mou kai ho kurios mou*), which translates, “My God and my Lord.”

This Psalm finds that Jehovah had not directed his attention to David, so it is as if he has been asleep through inactivity. David is prompted to ask him to ‘awaken’ and return to activity. David further asks Jehovah to ‘attend to his judgment’ by bringing an end to his enemies. Finally, he confesses Jehovah as ‘his God and his Lord.’ Thomas and the early disciples may have attributed a Messianic application to the psalmist’s language. The term translated “awake” (ἐκγεῖρω, *ekegeiro*) is found within the New Testament in connection with Jesus’ resurrection (1Co. 6:14), providing possible grounds for a Messianic fulfillment.<sup>44</sup> As the one that God will judge through (cf. Acts 17:31), Jesus would have rightly been identified by Thomas as the deliverer of judgment against his enemies. This being so, it was entirely proper for Thomas to address Jesus in such a manner as God’s principle agent in this activity. Otherwise Thomas may have felt that “my Lord and my God” was a proper address to the Messiah through his exaltation regardless of whether or not he had this text in mind.

The presence of the article before θεός is not necessarily theologically significant. One must observe that the article is used for reasons of grammar so that text could not have been written without it. Moule explains:

“In John xx. 28 ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου, it is to be noted that a substantive in the Nominative case used in a vocative sense and followed by a possessive could not be anarthrous (see Hoskyns and Davey, Commentary, in loc.); the article before θεός may, therefore, not be significant.”<sup>45</sup>

Accepting Thomas’ identification of Jesus as his Lord and God brings out objections such as that of James White:

“No created being could ever allow such words to be addressed to him personally. No angel, no prophet, no sane human being, could ever allow himself to be addressed as ‘Lord and God.’”<sup>46</sup>

White’s assessment is inaccurate unless he intends to stretch the matter so to say that the two titles could be addressed to Jesus

<sup>44</sup> This would not deny the text’s original application to the Father, as we have already noted in chapter 2, but the language could have also carried a Messianic expectation.

<sup>45</sup> C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 116.

<sup>46</sup> White, 70.

separately but not when paired. This appellation is no more difficult than when we find Old Testament passages applied to Melchizedek in 11Q13Melchizedek, where, for example, Psalm 82:1 speaks of “God” and this is interpreted to be Melchizedek without equating him with Jehovah. Thomas likewise could have identified Jesus as his Lord and God in a sense distinct from Jehovah. Indeed, for one to argue that Thomas intended to equate Jesus with the Old Testament Jehovah would demand that he maintained a Trinitarian or Sabellian view, and as we have seen from the New Testament this was not a position established by the earliest Christians. The burden of proof rests squarely upon those who claim that Thomas had Trinitarian ideas in mind.

That the apostle John recorded events in a way for these titles to be otherwise understood in a secondary sense is not insignificant, be they applied due to agency or otherwise. Shortly prior to recording the incident with Thomas, John related an event where Jesus spoke what provides us with the necessary qualification to Thomas’ confession. Recorded in John 20:17, Jesus referred to his own God, showing that in whatever sense Jesus was “God” it was in a sense relative to this one. This, unless one assumes Trinitarianism, qualifies John 20:28 so that it refers to Jesus as God in a sense lesser than Jehovah,<sup>47</sup> placing him in view as a divine agent, possessing titles that have been bestowed upon him representationally or in reference to his exalted position.

Demonstrating how John 20:17 would serve to qualify 20:28 is the forty-fifth Psalm. Here a Jewish king is identified as “God” but in a sense secondary to the Almighty (Psa. 45:6).<sup>48</sup> This did not define a sinful, human king as Almighty God. The psalmist carefully qualified the appellation “God” for the human king so not to cause confusion, identifying Jehovah as *his God*. Thus Harris observes:

“[The palmist] forestalls misunderstanding by indicating that the king is not אלהים without qualification. Yahweh is the king’s ‘God.’”<sup>49</sup>

John’s recording of Jesus’ words so closely prior to Thomas’ confession is no mere coincidence. The context and the structure provided was entirely purposeful (John 20:31). While the separation between John 20:17 and 28 is certainly greater than that in Psalm 45, it

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<sup>47</sup> Such does not require one assume a Unitarian view, only that the Bible is consistent in how titles are applied and language is used. This will now be demonstrated in that the Bible provides such qualification for others.

<sup>48</sup> This passage will be discussed in greater detail below with an examination of Hebrews 1:8.

<sup>49</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 201.

is sufficiently close for the reader to have retained Jesus' expression in mind when reading Thomas' words.

Christians should feel comfortable identifying Christ as their God/god, but the appellation should always be properly understood. The first century Christians would have had no problem with this and they would have understood it well within their biblical view of monotheism.<sup>50</sup>

## Acts 20:28

**“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”**

When we imagine God we do not think of him as a man of flesh and blood. He is a spirit (John 4:24). Many Trinitarians find difficulty speaking of ‘God’s blood,’ for though the doctrine of the hypostatic union has two natures bound together in a single person, it is the human nature of Christ that has blood, not the God nature. Unfortunately many have errantly concluded that this difficulty is what has led to dispute over the proper translation of the verse:

Although most contemporary English versions render the last part of the verse in the same way as the NASB... many scholars and commentators in recent decades have preferred the rendering found in the NRSV... There is no doubt as the reason for this preference: *those who dispute the conventional translation find the language, which expresses the idea of God's having 'blood,' difficult if not impossible to entertain.*<sup>51</sup>

‘God’s own blood’ is a difficult expression, but this is hardly the sole reason for disputing this as a reference to Jesus. There are two significant reasons to doubt the conventional translation in the King James tradition: The contextual identification of God and the consistent application of “the church of God” in reference to the Father.

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<sup>50</sup> While not discussed in this book it is well possible that 2 Peter 1:1 identifies Jesus as “our God and Savior.” This confession is not difficult and is understood well in harmony with John 20:28. Titus 2:13 is doubtful. If Jesus is in view before *καὶ* he is identified as “the glory of the great God” and not the “the great God” himself, a confession that is entirely Pauline (1Cor. 11:7). That *ὁὄζα* is attributive is doubtful (cf. Titus 2:11 where he is also “the grace of God”). On the other hand “the glory of the great God” reminds one of Jesus’ reference to the appearance of God’s glory along with Christ’s at the second advent (Luke 9:26).

<sup>51</sup> Bowman and Komoszewski, 145. Emphasis added.

Paul's words leave little doubt that in this context God was a reference only to the Father. He spoke to all "about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21). His ministry was "received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace" (v. 24). He again speaks of "God" and "the word of his grace" (v. 32), recalling the distinction in verse 24. Finally he speaks of "the Lord Jesus," not directly distinguishing him from God but staying consistent with his distinction between Christ as Lord and the Father as God.

Paul's reference to "the church of God" is not an expression unique to this passage. Interestingly, every instance of this New Testament expression is understood to be in reference to the Father. Other than the text in question the first instance of it is at 1 Corinthians 1:2. Paul expresses his calling to be "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God" (1Cor. 1:1). He writes "to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have sanctified in Jesus Christ.... who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 2). The distinction between Jesus as Lord and the Father as God continues in 1:3, 4 and 9.

The next passage at 1 Corinthians 10:32 does not find an immediate distinction in this chapter, but as the second to last verse we can look early into chapter eleven to find this, also relating to following passages at 1 Corinthians 11:16, 22. Here we are reminded that "God is the head of Christ" (1Cor. 11:3) and that Jesus "is the image and glory of God" (v. 7). Here, too, little ambiguity is present.

Paul twice speaks to the persecution of "the church of God" (1Cor. 1:9; Gal. 1:13), but also of how "we have testified against God that He raised Christ" (1Cor. 15:15). In Galatians Paul leaves no doubt as to his distinction between God and Jesus Christ with an open confession of it (Gal. 1:1, 3). He further testifies of how "God... was pleased to reveal His Son in me" (v. 15-16).

Perhaps the most ambiguous is 1 Timothy 3:5, 15. Only here does the immediate context fail to provide a direct distinction between God and Christ.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, this should not be taken to mean that Paul did not maintain this distinction throughout his epistle. From the very first verse Paul continues to maintain the distinction between "God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus." "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1Ti. 2:5). Paul even gave Timothy a charge "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus" (1Ti. 5:21) and urged him "in the presence of God... and of Christ Jesus" (1Ti.

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<sup>52</sup> That this is not immediately present is not troubling because it was not Paul's focus. He did not write to continually distinguish Christ from God, but he often did it nonetheless.

6:13).<sup>53</sup>

Paul's language makes it difficult if not impossible to imagine Christ as God in Acts 20:28. The immediate context dictates that God be only the Father, while Jesus Christ is our Lord and his son. Further, Paul's consistent reference to "the church of God" as a reference exclusively to the Father makes any other interpretation difficult and inconsistent.

Grammatical considerations must not be overlooked either, there being a certain level of ambiguity. The use of τοῦ ἰδίου (*tu idiou*) after τοῦ αἵματος (*tu haimatos*) may be understood attributively ("his own blood," cf. Acts 1:25) or substantively ("the blood of his own," cf. John 1:11). There is no feasible grammatical means to conclusively decide which is correct, though it is worthy of note that the two other references to "his own blood" involving the use of ἰδίου both read the unambiguous τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος (Heb, 9:12; 13:12). Acts 20:28 could have read this way so to lack this ambiguity and this is a variant reading, but it is not original.

When factoring in contextual considerations it is difficult not to imagine τοῦ ἰδίου substantively. Some have suggested that this may be "a title that early Christians gave to Jesus,"<sup>54</sup> but even this is unnecessary. The reference may be only to one belonging to God, his son. With the context considered this is certainly the best solution as F.F. Bruce concludes:

Gk. διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ ἰδίου, for which the Byzantine text reads διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος. The Byzantine reading could mean only 'with his own blood,' but the reading here adopted is best rendered 'with the blood of his own one.' The sense of ὁ ἴδιος is well attested in the vernacular papyri, where it is 'used thus as a term of endearment to near relations, e.g. ὁ δεῖνα τῷ ἰδίῳ χαίρειν ['So-and-so to his own (friend), greeting']' (J.H. Moulton, MHT I, p. 90). As used here ἴδιος is equivalent to the Heb. [*yahid*] ('only'), elsewhere represented by Gk. ἀγαπητός ('beloved'), ἐκλεκτός ('choice'), and μονογενής ('only-begotten'). In view of this, it is unnecessary to conjecture, with F.J.A. Hort, that υἱοῦ ('son') may have dropped out of the text after ἰδίου (it may be supplied for the purpose of translation).<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Also 1 Thessalonians 2:14, but that the expression is "the churches of God in Christ Jesus," there is distinction in the text so that a discussion is unnecessary. Similarly, 2 Thessalonians 1:4, but the distinction is throughout (1:1, 2, 6-7, 8, 12).

<sup>54</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971), 426.

<sup>55</sup> Frederick Fyvie Bruce, "The Book of Acts," Revised Edition, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Edited by Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 391.

## Hebrews 1:8

**“But of the Son He says, ‘YOUR THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM.’”**

The book of Hebrews has been discussed already in a number of respects, having observed its frequent use of quotations from the Old Testament. Discussing John 20:28 we saw how Hebrews 1:8-9 related to the original source text at Psalm 45 where the application was to the Jewish king.

For any text to be fully understood the proper translation must be ascertained. As the Psalm found application to a human king some have found difficulty with the translation “God.” This stems largely from the perceived difficulty of identifying others as θεός/יהוה while maintaining a biblical monotheism. Discussing the translation A.T. Robertson relates:

“It is not certain whether *ho theos* is here the vocative (address with the nominative form as in John 20:28 with the Messiah termed *theos* as is possible, John 1:18) or *ho theos* is nominative (subject or predicate) with *estin* (is) understood: ‘God is thy throne’ or ‘Thy throne is God.’ Either makes good sense.”<sup>56</sup>

If θεός, here a nominative, serves as a vocative, the subject is in some way θεός. On the other hand if ὁ θεός is a nominative the sense would seem to be that God Almighty is the basis of the subject’s throne or authority. The answer is perhaps found in Psalm 45:5 (45:6 LXX) where the text of the Septuagint reads τὰ βέλη σου ἠκονημένα δυνατέ (*ta bele sou ekonemena dunate*, “Your weapons are sharpened, O Mighty One”). The vocative δυνατέ parallels ὁ θεός giving weight to the notion that this is also vocative.

With the vocative Trinitarians and Sabellians are quick to point out the identification of Christ as God, but this identification is not in itself theologically significant. Far more difficult for them are the comments of Trinitarians on the application of θεός to the king: For example Murray Harris relates:

“[The king] was ‘Yahweh’s anointed,’ in the sense that he served as Yahweh’s deputy on earth, exercising a delegated yet sovereign authority. And as anointed leader of God’s chosen people, the king was, by the gracious divine will, God’s adopted son (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7; 89:27-28 [Engl. w. 26-27]). Yet, in

<sup>56</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Hebrews 1:8

accounting for this unique application of the title to a king, one must reckon with more than simply the king's divine election and his unique role in standing in loco dei. The king may exceptionally be addressed as 'God' also because, endowed with the Spirit of Yahweh, he exhibits certain divine characteristics."<sup>57</sup>

Keil and Delitzsch provide similar remarks:

"He [the Psalmist] gives him [the king] this name [God], because in the transparent exterior of his fair humanity he sees the glory and holiness of God as having attained a salutary of merciful conspicuousness among men. At the same time, however, he guards this calling of the king by the name Elohim against being misapprehended by immediately distinguishing the God, who stands above him, from the divine king by the words 'Elohim, thy God,' which, in the Korahitic Psalms, and in the Elohimic Psalms in general, is equivalent to Jahve, thy God'..."<sup>58</sup>

The Jewish king was properly identified as "God," but not so without qualification. He was God only relative to his God, the Almighty. His identification as θεός/אלהים was in reference to his kingship as God's representative and the authority associated with this position. With the king possibly typifying the Messiah Jesus would have been greater, yet this does nothing to suggest that θεός somehow designates Jesus as the Almighty. The author of Hebrews maintained the same qualifier that the psalmist supplied for limiting his position. Unfortunately the Trinitarians who recognize the Psalm's qualification ignore the same in Hebrews. They must, for any qualification with reference to Christ as God would refute the teaching they insist upon.

## 1 John 5:20

**"And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life."**

Speaking to his Father in prayer Jesus undoubtedly knew his words would later be revealed by the Holy Spirit. Though preparing for his own death he focused heavily on his disciples and their needs, so he chose

<sup>57</sup> Harris, 200.

<sup>58</sup> F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 Volumes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., repr. 1978), 5:2:83-4.

his words carefully. At the same time he did not censor himself as he had often done in public. Where he would regularly instruct others to keep silent about what he had done and who he was, he now spoke openly.

Identifying “the only true God” (John 17:3) Jesus could well have named himself as this one. He could have said, “That they may know the only true God, both you and the one whom you sent.” Or perhaps, “That they may know you and the only true God whom you sent forth.” The Father already knew himself to be “the only true God,” but Jesus deliberately chose to identify him as this while distinguishing himself as the one “sent.”

Looking to include Jesus in “the only true God” some appeal to 1 John 5:20. “This,” translated from οὗτος (*houtos*), may refer to the nearest antecedent as in 1 John 5:6, so identifying Jesus as “the true God.” Even so, John’s epistles more often find the nearest not to be correct (1Jo. 2:22; 2Jo. 7, 9). In light of this nothing can be determined grammatically.

The best case for Jesus here being identified as “the true God” is based upon the identification of “eternal life.” Jesus is said to be this in 1:2, so it would be fitting for John to conclude with the same, yet this suggestion rests squarely on the notion that the Father should not be identified in the same way.

Jesus is everlasting life because the Father “gave to the Son also to have life in Himself” (John 5:26). While the Father has this in him inherently, he gave it to the Son to have as well. This is the ability to give everlasting life, which Christ did through his sacrifice, though we have not yet seen it fully realized. As the ultimate source of this life we can say that “God has given us eternal life” (1Jo. 5:11), so that the Father too is properly identified as “eternal life.”

As the Father is “the only true God,” he is naturally here “the true God.” This has become so apparent that even Trinitarian apologetics have begun to confess as much.<sup>59</sup> Many scholars and commentators have been leaning in this direction for some time as well, such as with Robertson:

“It is a bit tautological to refer it to God, but that is probably correct, God in Christ, at any rate. God is eternal life (John 5:26) and he gives it to us through Christ.”<sup>60</sup>

William Loader provides a similar thought:

<sup>59</sup> So even Bowman and Komoszewski list this in reference to the Father (Bowman and Komoszewski, 284).

<sup>60</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 1 John 5:20.

“The Greek of [1 John] 5:20 has only the true (one) and reads literally: we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding 'so that we know the true (one) and we are in the true (one)', in his Son Jesus Christ. 'This (one) is the true God and eternal life.' It is clear from this that 'the true (one)' is God [the Father] throughout. Christ is his Son. In the final sentence this (one) most naturally refers still to God, not to Christ, as some have suggested.”<sup>61</sup>

## God in Messianic Names

Professed Christians of all theological backgrounds have traditionally agreed upon a standard reading of Isaiah 9:6. This has been interpreted to assign the Messiah a series of titles describing his character and identity. Trinitarians and Sabellians have latched onto this notion especially, for in the text he is understood to be called “Mighty God.”

Jesus may well be so identified without theological difficulty for true Unitarianism. This may well mean that he serves as God’s principle agent upon the earth (cf. Psalms 82:1, 6). His identification as “everlasting Father” could correlate to his identity as the last Adam, giving life to all who put faith in him (1 Corinthians 15:45). As the “prince of peace” he rules on David’s throne (Jeremiah 33:17). So *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* states:

“Over this reestablished Davidic kingdom there will rule an ideal king, who is acclaimed as a ‘wonder of a counselor,’ one whose counsel will be effective for his people’s wellbeing; a ‘divine [i.e. hero] warrior’; ‘father [of his people] from of old’ (or perhaps ‘father of plunder,’ who by his conquests brings benefits to them); and a ‘prince who brings prosperity.’”<sup>62</sup>

While each of these titles may have a direct fulfillment in the Messiah personally, another understanding may be more consistent with the context. Isaiah refers to a single “name” that would be given the Messiah, not a series of them. How this relates may best be understood by looking to other names in the preceding chapters of Isaiah and elsewhere.

Within Isaiah 7 and 8 three prophetic names are written on five occasions. Once is the name Shear-jashub, meaning, “The Remnant

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<sup>61</sup> William Loader, “The Johannine Epistles,” *Epworth Commentaries* (London: Epworth, 1992), 79.

<sup>62</sup> Peter R. Ackroyd, “The Book of Isaiah,” *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, Edited by Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 338. Brackets Original.

Shall Return” (Isa. 7:3). Twice the name Immanuel is used, meaning, “With Us is God” (Isa. 7:14; 8:8), and the name Maher-shalal-hash-baz is also used on two occasions, meaning, “Swift is the Booty, Speedy is the Prey” (Isa. 8:1, 3). With each name the child was only a symbol of something greater. These did not describe the child but spoke of God or prophetically of what was to come. On the name Shear-jashub, Gill explains:

“[The] name signifies ‘the remnant shall return’, and who was taken with the prophet, to suggest either that the remnant that were left of the former devastations by those two kings ought to return to the Lord by repentance; or that though the people of Judah should hereafter be carried captive by the Assyrians, yet a remnant should return again.”<sup>63</sup>

The name Maher-shalal-hash-baz was also not descriptive of Isaiah's son so that the child was himself swift booty or speedy prey. He was given this name as a divine symbol. Barnes states:

“The idea is, that the Assyrian would hasten to his plunder - that it would be accomplished with speed. This name was to be given to a child of Isaiah; and this child was to be a sign of the event which was signified by the name...”<sup>64</sup>

The name Immanuel proves more interesting, for Isaiah 7:14 has a prophetic fulfillment outside of a child contemporary to Isaiah (Mat. 1:23). Commonly thought is that because the name means “With us is God,” Jesus was the God that was with his people in the incarnation. This interpretation, as even Harris observes, goes above and beyond the intended meaning:

“There are therefore strong reasons for believing that in Matthew 1:23 μεθ’ ἡμῶν ὁ θεός signifies that in Jesus God is present to bring salvation to his people rather than that Jesus, as ὁ θεός, is personally present with his people. Matthew is not saying, ‘Someone who is ‘God’ is now physically with us,’ but ‘God is acting on our behalf in the person of Jesus.’”<sup>65</sup>

Luke tells of an angel who insisted that God was with Mary before she had even conceived Jesus (Luke 1:28). To say that God was with her or the Jewish people then did not require his physical presence. Explaining the meaning of the name as applied to Isaiah’s son, Barnes appropriately

<sup>63</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the Bible*, [www reference cited Nov. 02, 2006], <http://www.studylight.org/com/geb/>, Isaiah 7:3.

<sup>64</sup> *BN*, 6:1:174.

<sup>65</sup> Harris, 258.

interprets the meaning of the name as also applied to the Messiah,<sup>66</sup> though inconsistently he provides another interpretation when applied to him, exposing his theological bias. He relates:

“The name is designed to denote that God would be with the nation as its protector, and the birth of this child would be a sign or pledge of it. The mere circumstance that this name is given, however, does not imply anything in regard to the nature or rank of the child, for nothing was more common among the Jews than to incorporate the name, or a part of the name, of the Deity with the names which they gave to their children.”<sup>67</sup>

It is hardly plausible that the name, as given to the Messiah, was intended to denote that the Messiah was this God. So Barnes goes on to highlight:

“Thus, ‘Isaiah’ denotes the salvation of Yahweh; ‘Jeremiah,’ the exaltation or grandeur of Yahweh, each compounded of two words, in which the name Yahweh constitutes a part. Thus, also in ‘Elijah,’ the two names of God are combined, and it means literally, ‘God the Yahweh.’ Thus, also ‘Eliab,’ God my father; ‘Eliada,’ knowledge of God; ‘Eliakim,’ the resurrection of God; ‘Elihu,’ he is my God; ‘Elisha,’ salvation of God. In none of these instances is the fact, that the name of God is incorporated with the proper name of the individual, any argument in respect to his rank or character.”<sup>68</sup>

The name Immanuel, both as it was originally applied and in the case of the Messiah, served to show that God was with his people. He was not physically present, but he was watching over them and directing events as necessary. Here the name revealed something, but it did not describe the child personally.

Names are elsewhere used similarly. For example, Jeremiah 33:16 finds Jerusalem called “Jehovah our righteousness,” a “name” also given to the king (Jer. 23:6). The meaning was not that the king or the city was Jehovah or the source of righteousness, but that Jehovah was the source of the righteousness that would be seen in them. Other examples include “Jehovah sees” (Gen. 22:14) for the location of Abraham’s sacrifice in place of Isaac. The meaning was that Jehovah saw Abraham’s need for a sacrifice in place of his son and provided it.

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<sup>66</sup> The Messiah certainly had a greater fulfillment of this text for the way in which God was then with his people in providing salvation exceeded anything he had previously accomplished. Nevertheless, such a greater fulfillment in no way demands that Jesus be God with them.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, 159.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, 6:1:159-160.

The name spoke nothing of the location itself, but of what the location represented to Abraham. Similarly, "Jehovah is my banner" (Ex. 17:15), the altar Moses made after the defeat of the Amalekites, symbolizing Jehovah as the one that they would rally around for support.

Reflecting on the above examples it is apparent that a child or location could be given a name that told nothing of the individual ontologically. These would symbolize what had taken place, what would occur and specifically, what Jehovah would do. Reflecting upon these, two serious questions become apparent. First, on what grounds can we argue that Isaiah 9:6 is a description of the child when the text explicitly states that it is his name? Second, as his name, can we justify taking the use within this one text as a description when five other texts closely related present prophetic names that are not considered descriptions? It is difficult to justify doing so. In fact, it seems appropriate to apply the words of Albert Barnes to the name provided in Isaiah 9:6 as well, for we can reasonably say that it "does not imply anything in regard to the nature or rank of the child."

The child apparently represents the one described by his name. He is not the Mighty God, but he represents him (Isa. 10:21). He will not himself be the "Wonderful Counselor," but from that one he will receive "the spirit of counsel and strength" (Isa. 11:2). Jehovah is all that is spoken of in the child's name and he will reveal himself through that one. In accordance with this *The Jewish Publication Society's* 1917 Edition translates Isaiah 9:6 with a single compound name:

Isaiah 9:6 For a child is born unto us, a son is given unto us; and the government is upon his shoulder; and his name is called Pele-joez-el-gibbor-Abi-ad-sar-shalom;

Further, *The Jewish Study Bible* comments in line with the observations we have herein noted, stating:

"The Mighty God...ruler': This long sentence is the throne name of the royal child. Semitic names often consist of sentences that describe God; thus the name Isaiah in Hebrew means 'The LORD saves'; Hezekiah, 'The LORD strengthens'; in Akkadian, the name of the Babylonian king Merodach-baladan (Is 39:1) means 'the god Marduk has provided a heir.' These names do not describe that person who holds them but the god whom the parents worship. Similarly, the name given to the child in this v. does not describe that child or attribute divinity to him, contrary to classical Christian readings of this messianic verse."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *The Jewish Study Bible: Featuring the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation*, Edited by Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 802.

- 7 -

## SIGNIFICANT JOHANNINE PASSAGES

In addition to passages claimed to expressly identify Jesus as God, a number in John's Gospel are suggested to imply and even demand his deity.

### John 5:18

**“For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.”**

A sick man had been cured and the Jews were adamant that the deed was wicked. The curing having taken place on the Sabbath, the law had been broken and the Jews demanded to know who was responsible. When the healed man discovered who had done this work he informed them. Seeking Jesus out, they accused him of sin (John 5:5-16). As typical, he was prepared to answer them.

John 5:17 But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."

Claiming that God was his Father Jesus undoubtedly meant more than that God was his creator, for even the Jews found no difficulty with this confession (John 8:41). Whatever he meant they felt it was a claim he lacked the authority to make, so they sought "to kill him."

Jesus' identification of God as "His *own* Father" emphasized his unique position as God's son. This specific emphasis apparently caught the Jews' attention, but we must ascertain what it implied. Many maintain as Leon Morris, "He was claiming that he partook of the same

nature as his Father,"<sup>1</sup> yet there is no indication that the Jews would have understood his words this way. They wanted to stone him, but did they conceptualize the claim to be God's son as one of ontological equality?

Throughout Scripture there are various references to sons of God. The angels are established as his sons (Job 2:1), but so are humans such as the judges of Israel (Psa. 82:6). Even more probable is that the Jews would have called to mind the sonship bestowed upon the Davidic kings culminating in the Messiah (2Sa. 7:14; 1Ch. 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Psa. 2:7). This unique sonship was reserved for the king so that the first-century Jew in light of then current events would have viewed the claim as Messianic. Therefore, when asking Jesus if he claimed to be "the Son of God" he answered in the affirmative (Luke 22:70), this promoted them to accuse him before Pilate of "saying that He Himself is Christ, a King" (Luke 23:2).

Evidence is lacking to support the claim of God's son being ontologically equal in Jewish thought.<sup>2</sup> Judaism did not identify God as a Trinity of co-equal persons with the Son as one equal to the Father. A study of early Jewish literature is revealing in this regard. Commenting on this within the Dead Sea Scrolls, Adela Yarbro Collins relates:

"The Community of Qumran conceived of the messiah of Israel as the 'Son of God' and apparently used this epithet or title in speaking of him. Horbury, however, goes too far in suggesting that the idea of the messiah as the Son of God in this period was mythical and associated with preexistence. The evidence is lacking for such a conclusion. Rather, it seems likely that the ancient mythical language was used in the Dead Sea Scrolls in a way similar to its force in the prototypical passages, namely, to express the ideas that God will choose the messiah, *appoint him as God's agent, and endow him with divine powers.*"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, "The Gospel According to John, Revised," *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 275.

<sup>2</sup> Hellenistic thought would have been more accommodating to this, yet Adela Yarbro Collins notes that even this is not sufficient: "Even if, for the sake of argument, one accepts Hurtado's translation [of Philippians 2:6], the ancient notion of being 'equal to the gods' should not be taken in a binitarian sense. When Roman senators voted Octavian 'should be inscribed, on a par with the gods, in the hymns'...presumably they did not think that the living Octavian was equal, for example, to Zeus in any strong sense. Their intention apparently was that he should be honored in the same way as the gods are honored because of his beneficial accomplishments. Furthermore, according to E. Badian, ancient people distinguished between *isotheoi timai* and deification." (Adela Yarbro Collins, *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007], 63).

<sup>3</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *HTR* 92:4 (October, 1994), 408. Emphasis added.

This point extends generally to the early Jewish use of “Son of God,” as Ermine Huntress explains:

“The traditional approach to the meaning of ‘Son of God’ in early Christian usage is the inquiry into its use as a Messianic title in Judaism. We can be sure at any rate that it was used of the Davidic king; beyond this the evidence is ambiguous.”<sup>4</sup>

John’s commentary in v. 18 has been understood by some to reflect his own opinion of Jesus’ words and deeds, while others have understood this to relate the opinion of the Jewish opposition. John’s language appears to present the facts as they occurred. Even so, it is not improperly objected that Jesus could not have broken the Sabbath so that it was only in the opinion of the Jews that he did this. That Jesus “answered” the Jews in v. 19 also supports John providing the Jew’s misunderstanding. Jesus may be conceived as rejecting the notion of equality with God inasmuch as the Son is limited by what the Father shows him. Indeed, ‘the Father shows Him all things that He Himself is doing’ (v. 20a), for whereas the Father can act independently the Son cannot (v. 20b).

Perhaps we cannot be completely certain what John intended when he penned his commentary. Interestingly, one could go so far as to say that John intended to reflect both his own opinion and the opinion of the Jews, but from two very different perspectives. A consideration of this relates how either interpretation validly reflects the reality of the situation.

According to popular Jewish understanding of the Law Jesus perhaps technically broke the Sabbath, but not when the spirit in which it was written is considered (cf. Mat. 12:5, 12). John may have articulated the Jew’s misunderstanding of the spirit of the Law while reflecting that Jesus broke it in letter. In neither case did he sin, but from both perspectives it was broken.

Regarding the claim that Jesus was “making Himself equal with God,” the expression may have even been understood as something of a double entendre, allowing for two entirely different meanings from the one expression. The phrase, beyond the obvious, literal meaning, may have been used idiomatically to express “arrogant independence”<sup>5</sup> from God. If this understanding is correct, rather than actual equality with God, the objection was an idiomatic way to express an attempted usurpation of divine functions or power. Hugo Odeberg explains:

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<sup>4</sup> Ermine Huntress, “‘Son of God’ in Jewish Writings Prior to the Christian Era,” *JBL* 52, No. 2, 119.

<sup>5</sup> J.F. Walvoord, R.B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 2 Volumes (Wheaton, IL.: Victor Books, 1985), 2:290.

“With regard to the continuity of thought between vss. 17, 18 and the inceptive argument of the discourse, it is important to note that the consecutive force of the argument is best explained from the background of current Rabbinic modes of thought. Thus the formula Ἰσοῦ ποιεῖ ἐχούτων τῷ θεῷ corresponds exactly to the Rabbinic expression מִשׁוּחַ אֵת עֲצֻמּוֹ לֵאלֹהִים which to a Rabbinic ear is equivalent to 'makes himself independent of God', i.e. by usurping for himself the Divine power and authority; the expression, in the Rabbinic sense, implies some degree of 'rebellion' against the Divine government.”<sup>6</sup>

The matter of concern among the Jews was his *calling himself* God's son and thereby “making” himself into something that to them he was not. George Beasley-Murray expounds further:

“It is perhaps not irrelevant to note that the Jews were ready, when they wished, to recognize that in certain conditions men could be spoken of as God. For example they viewed Ps 82:6, “I said you are gods, sons of the Most High all of you,” as relating to the people of Israel. And they gloried in the fact that in Exod 7:1 God states that he has made Moses as God to Pharaoh, whereas since Pharaoh made himself as God he had to learn that he was nothing (Tanḥ. B § 12 in Str-B 2:462–64). It would seem that in their eyes God could exalt a man to be as God, but whoever made himself as God called down divine retribution on himself. They saw Jesus in the latter category.”<sup>7</sup>

The Jew's misunderstanding was answered by Jesus to the extent that he did not act independently of God. His dependence on the Father would not have allowed it (v. 19). On the other hand there was 'equality' associated with Jesus' position as expressed by John's commentary, though Jesus' own words implied that this was entirely functional. He was working as his father worked (John 5:17). The Son, as the Father, “gives life to whom He wishes” (v. 21). “He has given all judgment to the Son” (v. 22) so that the Father's judgment is relayed through him. These were functional equalities granted to the Messiah, but they were not his by nature and they were not divine prerogatives he independently usurped. Jesus presented “the Father's appointment of the Son to perform on his behalf works that God alone has the right and power to execute (vv. 19-20, 21, 22, 26-27, 30).”<sup>8</sup> These tasks were shown and

<sup>6</sup> Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel: Interpreted in its Relation to Contemporaneous Religious Currents In Palestine and the Hellenistic-Oriental World* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri-A.-B., 1929), 203.

<sup>7</sup> George Beasley-Murray, “John,” Second Edition, *WBC*, 36:75.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

given to him (cf. John 5:26; Acts 17:31) and to the extent that he performed these he was “equal to God.”<sup>9</sup>

## John 10:30

“The Father and I are one.”

Within the christological controversies of the early church it was not uncommon to find John 10:30 mentioned. That Jesus and God are “one” has been understood to indicate that they are of same essence and even that they are the same person. Yet as one commentator highlights, “it is evident that the conclusions drawn from the statement by many of the early Fathers were far from the mind of the Evangelist.”<sup>10</sup>

The context of Jesus’ remarks is a discussion of ‘the works that he does in his Father’s name’ (John 10:25). He will give his sheep eternal life, and they will never perish (v. 28), Just as ‘no one will snatch them out of his hand,’ so ‘no one is able to snatch them out of his Father’s hand’ (v. 28-29).

While some may attribute Jesus’ work in giving life and holding onto his disciples as the work of deity within himself, his words leave no doubt that the source of his ability rests entirely with his Father. This is not an outer display of an inner deity, but a display of God working through him. What he spoke of was accomplished in his Father’s name (v. 25), for the life that Jesus gives was given to him by his Father (John 5:26). The meaning is appropriately defined in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*:

“The Greek word ‘one’ (en *hen*) is neuter, not masculine, so that Jesus is not saying that he and God are one person, nor even of one nature or essence. Rather, he is saying that he and God are *united* in the work they do.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Hellenistic thought could accommodate one counted as equal to the gods without being true deity, correlating to the notion of the Messiah being equal to God without being God: “Throughout Greek history, alongside moral warnings against hybriistic, more-than-moral aspirations, we also find the quasi-metaphorical definition of rare individuals as, in some sense, *theoi*, divine, at least in the speaker’s estimate: a god *to him*, *isotheos*, the gods’ equal, whether in attributes or achievements. Much confusion has been caused by scholars who, having seen that certain humans were given honors that gods also received, drew the conclusion (by a famous logical fallacy) that these kings must have been deified, rather than simply sharing, as a high compliment, some of the gods’ divine prerogatives.” (Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 402).

<sup>10</sup> Beasley-Murray, 174.

<sup>11</sup> Gail R. O’day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 12 Volumes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9:667.

It is often well said that Scripture should interpret Scripture and here the case is no different. A consideration of other texts where two or more are said to be one finds a common sense of unity, not ontological oneness. Perhaps the best known example of a plurality in one comes from Jesus himself in the Gospel of John. From the seventeenth chapter he asks his Father that his disciples “may be one even as We are” (John 17:11). William Barclay comments on the significance of this to John 10:30:

“If we go to the Bible itself for the interpretation [of John 10:30], we find that it is in fact so simple that the simplest mind can grasp it. Let us turn to the seventeenth chapter of John’s gospel, which tells of the prayer of Jesus for his followers before he went to his death: ‘Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, *that they may be one, even as we are one*’ (John 17:11). Jesus conceived of the unity of Christian with Christian as the same as his unity with God.”<sup>12</sup>

We should not imagine Jesus to have meant that his disciples be one in every single task as he and his Father are one, but neither was that the meaning in John 10:30. Both texts refer to a general unity of purpose and work, so that just as Jesus and God work together for a single purpose so Christians should do the same. At the same time, since this expression did not suggest an ontological oneness for Christians neither should the parallel at John 10:30, especially since Christians are to be one ‘as they are.’

Jesus’ claim of unity with the Father prompted the Jews to seek to kill him (John 10:31). Though he claimed to work from God, to them he was taking for himself a position of authority and a unity with God that he did not possess. As “a self-claim that was an affront to God’s presence,”<sup>13</sup> this was blasphemy. The customary translation of the Jewish accusation reads something as, “You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God” (John 10:33). While some hold their thought to have been of him making himself the Almighty, the Jews did think of God as polypersonal and instead identified the Father as their God (John 8:54). As Jesus expressly subordinated himself to the Father there is nothing to suggest that they thought him to have been claiming to be the Father or ontologically equal with him. Rather, they identified him as “God” through unity, much as Moses was “God to Pharaoh” (Ex. 7:1, literal. Or, “a god”) and the Jewish king was “God” (Psa. 45:6). Here, however, the

<sup>12</sup> William Barclay, “The Gospel of John,” Volume 2, *The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 75. See also 1 Corinthians 3:6-8 where Paul as the one who “planted” and Apollos as the one who “watered” are “one.”

<sup>13</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge Against Jesus in Mark 14:53-65*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, repr. 2000), 236.

better translation is “a god.”

When Jesus responded to the Jews’ accusation he did so by appealing to the Old Testament. Citing Psalm 82:6, he remarked:

John 10:34-36 Jesus answered them, "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I SAID, YOU ARE GODS' ? 35 "If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), 36 do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"

Men identified as ‘sons of God’ (Psa. 82:6) could rightly be called “gods” because of their divine appointment and purported unity with God in the work of judging. Similarly, Jesus’ divine appointment to work with God resulted in an appointed sonship much as the judges possessed, making him appropriately deemed “a god.” Jesus was both God’s son and “a god” in ways far surpassing the judges, but if they could be so termed he could also as demonstrated by his works (John 10:37-38).

One objection presented by Robert Bowman deserves brief consideration. He writes:

“In John 10:28-29, Jesus is focusing strictly on his divine power to give life, and so John quotes him using the Greek word *harpazein*, “to snatch.” Thus, a close analysis of the two texts makes it clear that John 10:28-29 uses the wording of Deuteronomy 32:39 to express the claim that Jesus does what God does in preserving those whom he gives eternal life... A standard strategy used by anti-Trinitarians to escape the force of passages like this one is to claim that it indicates merely that God is able to delegate responsibilities to his trusted, created agent. However, the allusion to Deuteronomy 32:39 precludes this explanation. The whole point of Deuteronomy 32:39 is that YHWH alone is able to kill and give life as he chooses; it is he alone from whose hand no one is able to snatch or deliver.”<sup>14</sup>

The context of Bowman’s cited text has nothing to do with an agent of God working by his power and authority, which is what Jesus expressly did.<sup>15</sup> In Deuteronomy 32:39 God is contrasting himself with the false gods of the nations (cf. 21, 37-38), highlighting that while he can do

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Bowman, *In What Sense Are Jesus and the Father One? Part II: One in Power?*, (www reference cited January 9, 2008) <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2008/02/in-what-sense-are-jesus-and-the-father-one-part-ii-one-in-power/>

<sup>15</sup> It would seem that Bowman simply does not understand the early concept of agency. The one performing the action does so in the authority of the sender so that the action is ultimately attributable to the sender. See also this book’s Introduction.

these things they cannot. Nothing in Deuteronomy 32:39 “precludes” God’s ability “to delegate responsibilities” there spoken of because when Jehovah’s agent does something it is ultimately Jehovah who is performing the task.

## John 12:38-41

**"This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: 'LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?' For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, 'HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM.' These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him."**

The twelfth chapter of John references two passages from the book of Isaiah, one from the fifty-third chapter and the other from the sixth. Many have seized upon this text noting the latter quotation and appealing to it in light of John’s commentary.

The prophet Isaiah had viewed Jehovah as recorded in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter. That the LXX provides specific reference to Isaiah seeing Jehovah’s “glory” has been thought to be significant. If one recognizes only these points the Trinitarian case appears strong. The glory that Isaiah saw was Jehovah’s glory and Jehovah’s glory was Jesus’ glory, so Jesus is Jehovah or more specifically, a person of Jehovah. Yet this text might easily be dismissed with the comments of *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*.

“This involves that the Theophanies of the O[ld] T[estament] were mediated by the pre-existent Logos.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus may have mediated this event as an agent, appearing as Jehovah in representation of him so that Isaiah did see Jesus, though it was as if he were seeing Jehovah and so recorded as though he did (cf. John 12:45; Heb. 3:1-6; Num. 12:5-8; John 1:18).<sup>17</sup> Since Jesus is ‘the radiance of God’s glory’ (Heb. 1:3) and the “glory of the great God” (Titus 2:13), this is not difficult to imagine. Yet a careful examination of John’s

<sup>16</sup> Marcus Dods, "The Gospel of St. John," *EGT*, 1:812.

<sup>17</sup> He likely did, but as seen in chapter 2 appearances of God in the OT were understood to be the Father regardless of who mediated them.

words reveals something more.

Some copyists of the New Testament appear to have recognized the difficulty with John's passage so that they altered it. Where 12:41 says, "these things Isaiah said *because* he saw His glory, and he spoke about him," some changed this text to read "*when* he saw His glory and he spoke about Him." John provides not when Isaiah said what he said, but the basis for it. In other words, beholding this glory and speaking about Jesus prompted Isaiah to speak these words. The problem for Trinitarians is that nothing in Isaiah 6 indicates that beholding God's glory prompted the quoted words.

Isaiah 6 begins with Isaiah seeing "the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. And His train filled the temple" (v. 1). He described the scene with Seraphs in God's presence, providing the words that they spoke to each other: "Holy, holy, holy is Jehovah of Hosts; all the earth is full of His glort" (v. 3). Isaiah became fearful of death having seen Jehovah, but one of the seraphs touched his lips with a coal, resulting in forgiveness of his sins. His life was spared.

What Isaiah heard next brings us to the significant passage. Jehovah asked, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Isaiah responded, "Behold me. Send me!" (v. 8) Jehovah then commanded Isaiah what to do, saying, "Go and say to this people..." (v. 9). He instructed Isaiah to say what John quotes at 12:40. It was this command to speak that prompted Isaiah to say what he said; it was not "*because* he saw His glory and he spoke about Him."

Perhaps the difficulty associated with John 12 is a failure in part to recognize that glory does not always refer to a physical manifestation as Isaiah beheld in the sixth chapter. W. Robert Cook brings out that while the term glory can be used in a way so that "the emphasis seems to be on God's presence," yet in John 12:41 "the emphasis here is on [Jesus'] action."<sup>18</sup> Could seeing what Christ would do be the glory that Isaiah beheld?

Isaiah 53:1 is the other source John quoted from, referencing the suffering servant who would 'bear our iniquities' (v. 11). Beginning in Isaiah 52:13 Isaiah spoke of this one, continuing through the fifty-third chapter. Isaiah asked, "O Lord, who has believed our report?"<sup>19</sup> He then related a point of significance:

Isaiah 53:2 LXX "We brought a report as of a child before him, he is as a root in a thirsty land: he has no form nor comeliness; and we saw him, but he had no form nor beauty."

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<sup>18</sup> W. Robert Cook, "The 'Glory' Motif In the Johannine Corpus," *JETS* 27/3 (September 1984), 293.

<sup>19</sup> Since John quoted the LXX the following verses from Isaiah 53 will be quoted from Brenton's translation.

The “report” Isaiah brought ‘spoke about him,’ speaking of ‘his glory.’ He would “bear our sins” \*(v. 4) and be “wounded on account of our sins” (v. 5). “Therefore he shall inherit many, and he shall divide the spoils of the mighty; because his soul was delivered to death: and he was number among the transgressors; and he bore the sins of many, and was delivered because of their iniquities” (v. 12). These actions and this work were “his glory.” So *The New Bible Commentary*:

“In view of the *because* in this verse, it would seem that John saw a direct connection between Isaiah’s message and the mission of Christ. John probably has in mind the Suffering Servant of Isaiah as pointing to Christ himself. What he saw was the glory of the one who was to come. If, on the other hand, Isaiah actually foresaw the glory of God in Jesus, it would presuppose that Jesus had an active role in the message of the OT prophets. But the former explanation is to be preferred.”<sup>20</sup>

Glory is used similarly in reference to work as in John’s account of Lazarus’ resurrection only one chapter prior. Recorded in John 11, Martha approached Jesus and inquired of why he wanted the stone rolled away from the tomb. Jesus responded saying that she would see “the glory of God” (John 11:39-40). This glory was not a physical manifestation of God similar to what Stephen saw immediately prior to his death (Acts 7:55) - it was the work of resurrecting Lazarus through Jesus. So Robertson explains:

“Jesus means the glory of God as shown in the resurrection of Lazarus as he had already said to the disciples (John 11:4) and as he meant Martha to understand (John 11:25) and may in fact have said to her.”<sup>21</sup>

Isaiah 53 was a Messianic prophecy but Isaiah 6 was not. John quoted from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter only to explain why they were unable to believe, not to point to the specific fulfillment of a Messianic prophecy as with 53:1. John could have naturally had 53:1 as his primary focus with his comments in 41 even though he quoted from the sixth chapter in 40.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Guthrie, “John,” *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, Fourth Edition of The New Bible Commentary, Edited by D.A. Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Moyter, G.J. Wenham (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), John 12:37-50. From another work: “As John points out, Isaiah himself had a basic understanding of this astounding unfaith. Isaiah experienced unbelieving rejection in his own ministry, but even more he saw Jesus’ glory [death/resurrection] and spoke about him.” (Beauford H. Bryant, Mark S. Krause, “John,” *The College Press NIV Commentary* [Joplin, MO.: College Press Publishing Co., 1998], John 12:39). The bracketed comments are original to the reference, showing the sense of the “glory” Isaiah saw. His “death/resurrection” is the central theme of his works, with the results of these emphasized by Isaiah.)

<sup>21</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Electronic Version found within BibleWorks 6 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), John 11:40.

What comes in 40 was essentially supplemental information.

While many find it theologically attractive for Jesus' glory in John 12 to be Jehovah's glory in Isaiah 6, that the text quoted by John was said "because" of what Isaiah saw and spoke of, this is untenable. The words from Isaiah 6 were God's command, not something prompted by Isaiah seeing or speaking about him.

## **"The Alpha and Omega" - "The First and the Last"**

The Scriptures present a number of titles shared by Jehovah and Jesus as his agent. This book has focused heavily on the use of God and Lord for both, but others have caused not a small amount of controversy.<sup>22</sup> One of the most significant is the identification of Jesus Christ as "the First and the Last," an allusion in Revelation to Isaiah where Jehovah is thusly identified. Not only this, Revelation also identifies "the Alpha and the Omega" who is "Almighty" (Rev. 1:8).

### ***Revelation 1:8***

Only Revelation contains references to "the Alpha and the Omega" and this on only three occasions (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).<sup>23</sup> As the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet the title is likely drawn from Isaiah where Jehovah is said to be "the first and the last" (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). The meaning is best understood as Barnes suggested:

"The sense is, that God existed before all things, and will exist forever."<sup>24</sup>

With this passage "the Alpha and the Omega" is also "the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8). The theological ramifications of this are potentially significant if the subject is Jesus Christ, so we must carefully determine the subject.<sup>25</sup>

John, writing to seven 'churches in Asia,' sent a message of "grace" and "peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come... and

<sup>22</sup> In brief a couple of these should be commented upon. Judge: While the eschatological anticipation is to be judged by God the New Testament affirms that Christ will judge us. This is not contradictory and it does not equate the two, for affirmed is that God will judge through Christ (John 5:22; Acts 17:31). Savior: As with judge God is saving us through Jesus Christ (John 3:16-17; Heb. 7:25). This is not contradictory and does not equate the two, but God is defined as the ultimate source of all salvation while Christ brings that salvation to fruition.

<sup>23</sup> Some have this at Revelation 1:11, but this is a later, spurious addition.

<sup>24</sup> *BN*, 6:2:131.

<sup>25</sup> I say "potentially" because depending upon the specific use one might identify his speech with divine agency so that he was only representing the Almighty.

from Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:4-5). John so distinguishes "Him who is and who was and who is to come" from Jesus Christ so to leave no doubt that the two are distinct. The significance of this is demonstrated in 1:8 where the speaker here is said to be him "who is and who was and who is to come." As in 4-5 this is one other than Jesus, in this reference it is certainly not him either. Hort makes this observation:

"This verse must stand alone. The speaker cannot be our Lord, when we consider Apoc. 1:4, which makes ὁ ὢν &c. *distinctive* of the Father; and all Scriptural analogy is against the attribution of κύριος ὁ θεός with or without παντοκράτωρ, to Christ. The verse is thus the utterance of the great fundamental voice of the Supreme God, preceding all separate revelations concerning or through His Son."<sup>26</sup>

The speaker of Revelation 21:6 is also identified as "the Alpha and the Omega," a title not yet bestowed upon Jesus. This promise extends to Christians the one made by God respecting the Davidic kings that was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Drawing from texts as 2 Samuel 7:14 he promises, "I will be his God and he will be My son" (Rev. 21:7). Here extending the promise concerning the Messiah to all Christians, the speaker can only be the Father. As Jesus is the Son of God, Christians too are counted as sons of God. Paul reflects this, noting that "we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17).

### **Revelation 1:17-18**

While God the Father is "the Alpha and the Omega" in 1:8, Jesus is certainly "the first and the last" in 1:17. The speaker describes himself as the one who "was dead" and is now "alive forevermore" (v. 18). At this point Jesus had been the only person to have been raised to life "forevermore," so the reference can be to none other.

Commentators are nearly unanimous in their agreement that this identification parallels that of 1:8 and Jehovah in Isaiah. The opinion is generally that the same meaning is shared through each of the passages here considered. Thus, if the meaning was eternal existence for Jehovah it is the same for Jesus. That a clearly observable parallel is present is indisputable, but what Jesus further relates may provide greater insight into the meaning.

Both Revelation 1:17 and 2:8 clearly identify Jesus as "the first and the last," but when providing this self-identification Jesus continued to expound on his identity. He further claimed to be the resurrected one,

<sup>26</sup> F.J.A. Hort, *The Apocalypse of Saint John I-III : The Greek Text with Introduction, Commentary, and Additional Notes* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1908), 13.

“who was dead, and has come to life” (Rev. 2:8). With both texts Jesus closely aligns his resurrection with his identification as “the first and the last,” indicating the title’s relation to this. Jan Fekkes observes this point:

“Not only is [the title of “the first and the last”] associated with the resurrection explicitly in two of its three uses (1.17-18; 2.8), but John relates Christ’s ‘firstness’ specifically to the resurrection when in 1.5 he calls him the ‘firstborn from the dead’... It appears then that the [view of the title being “associated with the resurrection”] best accords with the immediate context and John’s overall perspective.”<sup>27</sup>

Had the appellation only been connected within 1:17 one might dismiss the connection, but that it appears in both 1:17 and 2:8 emphasizes the correlation. So Fekkes further states:

“It is surely significant that John here does not merely take over the first and last designation from 1.17, but retains its connection with the resurrection.”<sup>28</sup>

The connection between “the first and the last” and Jesus as “firstborn” (Rev. 1:5) is apparently quite dated. Codex Alexandrinus, dating from the fifth century, identifies Christ instead as “the Firstborn and the Last” in both 1:17 and 2:8. This appellation’s link with Christ’s resurrection is thereby more apparent, especially when the import of firstborn is traced back to v. 5.<sup>29</sup>

With the “the first and the last” clearly derived from Isaiah the meaning must somehow correlate, only here in association with his resurrection. If the meaning in Isaiah (and so in 1:8) is Jehovah’s eternal preexistence as “the first” and his immortality and eternal future existence as “the last,” the language must similarly apply to Jesus in the resurrection.

Jesus is “the firstborn of the dead” (Rev. 1:5) as “the first to rise from the dead” (Acts 26:23 NAB, NIV). Prior to him no one else had experience the resurrection to immortality that he received and that Christians hope to receive. With this he is appropriately deemed “the first.” As Jehovah is “the last” because of his immortality and eternal being, Jesus now possesses eternal existence in his resurrection to immortality. Therefore, where Jehovah is “the first and the last” in absolute being, Jesus is this respecting the resurrection.

<sup>27</sup> Jan Fekkes III, “Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Developments,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 93, (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994) 125-126.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> I do not contend for “firstborn” to have been the original reading, only that the copyist identified the ‘firstness’ of 1:17 with “firstborn” in 1:5, indicative of reference to the resurrection in the former.

**Revelation 22:12-13**

The final instance of these appellations is certainly the most complex. A threefold identification finds the speaker calling himself as “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13). Lacking an explicit identifier great difficulty has resulted,<sup>30</sup> but a careful reading will provide several insights.

We should not completely reject the possibility that the speaker of Revelation 22:13 is Jesus Christ. He may be as the one “coming quickly” (v. 12; cf. v. 20). If so there is little difficulty. While Jesus does not here explicitly connect these titles to the resurrection, the parallel expression give us a precedent by which to understand this verse. He is this in the resurrection, having with him “the keys of death and hades” (Rev. 1:18) to provide ‘his reward’ (22:12).

Yet there is good reason to suggest that the Father is the speaker. Beginning in v. 5 we find that of those given life, “the Lord God will illumine them.” This one is the Father as “the glory of God has illumed [the city],” while “its lamp is the Lamb” (21:23). The light will shine from God the Father’s glory that is present in Jesus. From v. 6 is reference to “the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets.” He sent “His *angel to show His bond-servants the things which must soon take place.*” This quotation comes directly from Revelation 1:1 where God gave Jesus the Revelation “*to show His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place.*” Jesus is the angel, or better “the messenger,” God sent for this task (cf. Mal. 3:1), and Jesus accomplished this with his own angel (Rev. 22:16).<sup>31</sup>

With the angel speaking with reference to God the Father through 22:6, v. 7 provides an unexpected change. While the speaker may be the angel, he says, “I am coming quickly!” On this expression David Aune presents a relevant observation:

“Though the phrase ἔρχομαι ταχύ, ‘I will come soon,’ occurs five times in Revelation (3:11; 22:7; 12, 20; cf. 16:15), two different kinds of ‘coming’ are meant.” In Rev 22:7, 12, 20 (cf. 16:15), the verb ἔρχεσθαι ‘to come,’ clearly refers to the Parousia, while Rev 2:16; 3:11 must be interpreted as ‘comings’ in judgment preceding the final and decisive coming of Jesus (G. R. Beasley-Murray, ‘The Eschatology of the Fourth Gospel,’ *EvQ* 18 [1946] 97–108;

<sup>30</sup> This has not stopped most from concluding that Jesus is the referent. While it will be suggested that this is possible, the evidence points toward the Father.

<sup>31</sup> Some will be inclined to suggest instead that Jesus is “the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets” who sent his angel, however the purpose specified in 22:6 parallels what is said of God giving the Revelation to Jesus in 1:1, not Jesus to the angel. From 22:16 it is apparent that Jesus, as God’s messenger, used his own angel to deliver this.

id., 'The Relation of the Fourth Gospel to the Apocalypse,' *EvQ* [1946] 173–86).<sup>32</sup>

That there are two distinct meanings of the phrase is highly significant. Apparently the parousia is thought in view at 22:7, 12 because Jesus is identified as the subject in the context of this event. Yet a new speaker is not introduced and the language is possible but unlikely for the angel. As the Father is the subject spoken of by the angel in 5-6, that he is the speaker in 7 is highly appropriate.

The Father "coming" to judgment parallels Christ's coming. The eschatological 'coming' of the Father is clearly defined in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Dan. 7:13, 22). Significant to this is Revelation 22:12, an allusion to Isaiah 40:10.<sup>33</sup> Jehovah "comes with strength... His reward is with Him, and His wage is before Him." The judgment of God would become manifest, yet White mistakenly argues that "the fact that it is the Lord who comes and His reward is with Him to render to every man (Revelation 22:12) only proves that Jesus is again being identified as Yahweh..."<sup>34</sup>

From Isaiah 40:10, Jehovah's "arm rules for Him." His "arm" is all but personified so to be identified with the Messiah. Catrin Williams relates the meaning:

"An interdependent of these three Isaianic passages (40:5-11; 52:7-10; 52:13-53:1), based upon their shared motif of 'the arm of the Lord,' leads to the following interpretation: the glorified Servant, through his humiliation and exaltation, is the one in whom God's salvation and glory will be revealed in the sight of all the nations."<sup>35</sup>

If "the arm of Jehovah" is seen present in the Messiah at Isaiah 40:10, he is distinct from the Jehovah who will "come." The Messiah will accompany him, ruling by Jehovah's strength in him. Therefore Jesus cannot be identified with Jehovah in this passage. He is even distinguished from him.

At this point three lines of evidence support the Father speaking in Revelation 22:12-13. (1) Other than the angel present with John only the Father is in view through the immediate preceding context. (2) The

<sup>32</sup> David E. Aune, "Revelation 1-5," *WBC*, 52a:188.

<sup>33</sup> *Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament*, Greek Text Novum Testamentum Gracece, Edited by B. and K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C.M. Martini, B.M. Metzger, 27th Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 679.

<sup>34</sup> James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 208.

<sup>35</sup> Catrin H. Williams, "The Testimony of Isaiah and Johannine Christology," 'As Those Who are Taught': The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL, Edited by Claire Mathews McGinnes and Patricia K. Tull (Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 122.

notion of “coming” suits the execution of God’s judgment through Jesus at his own coming. (3) With allusion to the Father’s coming in Isaiah 40:10 the text seems to indicate that he is the subject. A fourth point may be submitted as well.

There is close parallelism between the words of God in Revelation 21:6-8 and 22:12-15 so to indicate a single speaker. For both the speaker is “the Alpha and the Omega.” His ‘reward is with him’ (22:12) in that he will “give to the one who thirsts... the water of life” (21:6). “He who overcomes will inherit these things” (21:7), for they will “have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates of the city” (22:14). As for “the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars,” they will receive “the second death” (21:8), paralleling how those “the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars” (22:15).<sup>36</sup> J. Massyngberde Ford explains:

“If one follows Gaechter’s order, the concluding words of Revelation (22:10-13) are spoken by the One who sits upon the Throne, rather than by the interpreting angel; cf. 22:8-10... It echoes Isa 40:10; Pss 28:4; 62:12; Jer 17:10, all of which refer to God as the One who brings recompense for the good or bad. Such reattribution could be seen in the fall of the Holy City. Vs. 13 proves that the preceding statements do come from the mouth of God.”<sup>37</sup>

Revelation 22:16 may be appealed to for supporting Jesus as the speaker of 22:12-15. Yet here the personal pronoun + proper name is used as elsewhere in Revelation. Significantly, in both instances where it is present outside of this reference, the combination is used by him as an introduction to his own comments, signaling a speaker change (Rev. 1:9; 22:8). Had the Father been speaking in 22:12-15 so that Jesus now wanted to indicate that the words were his, we would expect the same convention.

Certainly then these passage are christologically significant, but they provide nothing in the way of evidence for Trinitarianism or Sabellianism. The evidence indicates that the New Testament authors did not hold such doctrines, for they never articulated any such ideas. Had they considered any such radical departure from their Jewish theology a full explanation would have been necessary. Their silence is deafening.

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<sup>36</sup> One might suggest that Jesus and God are merely using similar language as they elsewhere do, but both the close proximity of these statements and that for both the subject is identified as “the Alpha and the Omega” indicate otherwise.

<sup>37</sup> J. Massyngberde Ford, “Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary Introduction, Translation and Commentary,” *AB*, 38:368-369.



