

Focus on the Kingdom

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The Scale of the Scam: The Danger of Mindless “Group-Think”

It hardly needs to be said (but it *has* to be!) that anyone claiming to be a Christian must be totally committed to the teaching of Christ. That being so, we need to know for sure: Where does Jesus begin with his teaching? How does Jesus define the God whom he promotes as the God of the Bible and the Christian faith?

The answer to this fundamental question (which needs to be asked everywhere, though it is not!) is not hard. It is found in the very clear passage in Mark 12:29, where Jesus is asked about the non-negotiable creed revealed to Israel by God in Deuteronomy 6:4. Remember that Jews were willing to die for the right definition of God. Failure to worship the right God was viewed by the Hebrew Bible as the ultimate insult to God, a spiritual crime, the crime of idolatry. Israel had a constant tendency to fail on this major point, and they had always suffered the consequences of their failure to heed the famous Shema (“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord,” Deut. 6:4). Jesus was of course a Jew, as were his mother and Joseph; he was circumcised on the eighth day, trained from childhood in the synagogue, unarguably Jewish to the core in his beliefs. A fellow Jewish scholar in Mark 12:28 wanted to be reassured (and he was!) that Jesus was fully instructed on the Great Commandment, the first command of all. How about you?

Churchgoers of all types seem often to be victims of massive, uncritical “group-think,” when they regularly *never* ask any questions about what Jesus, whom they claim as Savior, said about the “first and great commandment.” To promote some good thinking, here is what one of the leading world experts has to say about what Jesus believed about God. Dr. James Dunn has pondered this question and written about it for half a century. Can anyone disagree with the following?

“For Jesus **the Shema** was fundamental and fundamentally determinative of the **whole orientation of life**...It is not the case that Jesus’ ethic can be boiled down to love your neighbor. The conclusion is strong then that the Shema continued to be of **central importance for Jesus during his mission and the teaching he both gave and lived out**, which also means that the conviction that God was one continued to be a basic axiom for Jesus, a core principle from which he drew his inspiration and instruction. To that extent, at

least, in other words, we have to answer the question ‘Was Jesus a monotheist?’ of our title with a clear affirmative.

“The clear implication of Mark’s account (10:18) is that Jesus declined the epithet ‘good’ because properly speaking **only God is good**... Its theological rationale is obvious: **God alone** is worthy of such devotion because **God alone** is the source and definition of all goodness...the God-foundation of his whole mission.”¹

Another of the world’s leading experts who spent his career thinking about Jesus and his teaching has this to say. He is fully aware of the embarrassment caused by the **early post-biblical church, when it decided not to follow Jesus carefully** in the matter of creed, defining God. Martin Werner, DD, Professor of Theology at Bern, wrote: “The Church found itself in a dilemma as soon as it tried to harmonize the doctrine of the Deity of Jesus and the Deity of the Father with **monotheism**. For according to the NT witnesses, in the teaching of Jesus relative to the monotheism of the OT and Judaism, there had been **no element of change whatsoever. Mark 12:29ff recorded the confirmation by Jesus himself, without any reservation, of the supreme monotheistic confession of faith of Israelite religion in its complete form**...The means by which the Church sought to demonstrate the agreement of its dogma of the Deity of both Father and Son with monotheism, remained **seriously uncertain and contradictory**.”²

This is an amazing insight worthy of our urgent attention. Not less shocking is the admission that churches seem quite willing to believe about Jesus things which Jesus obviously did not believe about himself! How irrational is that?!

Church of England Archbishop Ramsay stated: “Jesus did not claim Deity [did not think he was God].”³

Another expert biblical writer cut to the heart of the problem when he tried to warn us that asking whether Jesus believed in the Trinity is about like asking what sort of software Paul had on his computer!

“It must be admitted by everyone who has the rudiments of an historical sense that the doctrine of the Trinity formed no part of the original message [Jesus had not heard of it]. St. Paul did not know it, and would have been unable to understand the meaning of the terms

¹ *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* p. 96-98.

² *Formation of Christian Dogma*, 1957, p. 241.

³ *Jesus and the Living Past*, p. 39.

used in the theological formula on which the Church ultimately agreed.”⁴

How much have such experts been heard and understood? Here is another frank admission:

“The Trinity is a contradiction, indeed, and not merely a verbal contradiction, but an incompatibility in the human ideas conveyed. We can scarcely make a nearer approach to an exact enunciation of the Trinity, than of saying that **one thing is two things**.”⁵

Another lifetime writer on who Jesus and God are said this: “The evolution of the Trinity: No responsible NT scholar would claim that the **doctrine of the Trinity was taught by Jesus** or preached by the earliest Christians or consciously held **by any writer of the NT**. It was in fact slowly worked out in the course of the first few centuries in an attempt to give an intelligible doctrine of God.”⁶

One key reason why Jesus and the NT church did not believe in the Trinity was that Psalm 110:1, massively cited in the NT, defined God as a single Lord and the Messiah as *not* God! The verse in question speaks of the second lord as non-Deity, **adoni**, mistranslated often as “Lord” when it should be “lord” (*adoni*, my lord, in Hebrew, which in all 195 occurrences never means God).

“The Apostles did not identify Jesus with Yahweh. There were passages which made this impossible, for example **Ps. 110:1**, Mal. 3:1...‘It would be rash to conclude that St. Peter identified Jehovah with Christ’” (citing Prof. Hort).⁷

More evidence: “The word Trinity is not found in the Bible...It did not find a place formally in the theology of the church until the fourth century.”⁸

Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics has this to say about how Jews defined God: “Abraham, Moses and Elijah were all equally zealous monotheists, and in none of their successors was there any retrogression from the highest and **purest form of unitarian belief**.”

Again, another expert: “Mark’s point in Mark 12:28ff was to emphasize **the essential orthodoxy of Jesus and his faithfulness to the law**...Mark’s emphasis on the **strict monotheism** of Christianity was particularly necessary.”⁹

When the Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford, Leonard Hodgson, DD, dedicated a series of lectures on the Trinity, he reported correctly: “The monotheism of the Jews was then, as it is still, **unitarian**.”¹⁰

The Jewish Encyclopedia, 1906: “Judaism has always been rigorously **unitarian**.”

Emil Brunner: “Judaism [is] **Unitarian**.”¹¹

Richard E. Rubenstein: “The monolithic God worshipped by the Jews [is worshiped] by... **unitarians**.”¹²

Bishop Beveridge: “The Jews... to this day... still assert that God is only **one in person**, as well as nature.”¹³

“There was no real doubt as the great commandment, **the Shema**, was repeated daily by the Jews. It was the foundation text of their **monotheism**, which was not a speculative theory but a practical conviction.”¹⁴

Bishop Tom Wright: “The answer Jesus gave [in Mark 12:29] was thoroughly noncontroversial, quoting the most famous of **Jewish** prayers. ‘Hear O Israel, YHVH our God is one.’ The prayer, **the Shema** which begins with these lines, was as central to Judaism **then as it is now**...Jesus was a first-century Jewish monotheist.”¹⁵

Hugh Anderson: “We must suppose that the Markan form goes back to oral tradition passed on by a Church that **did not any longer recite the Shema [What was the church doing giving up on Jesus, leaving him behind, departing company with him?!]**. But here at least in his statement of the first commandment **Jesus stands foursquare within the orbit of Jewish piety**.”¹⁶

Why do we not follow him on the great command? No one would think of discarding the Lord’s Prayer or the Lord’s Supper, but what about the Lord’s creed in Mark 12:29?

“The Unitarians were originally nothing less than the **whole body of Christians**, and the Trinitarians were the innovators; appearing at first modest and candid, as was natural, while they were a **small minority**.”¹⁷

Then this: “It is difficult to understand how and why Jesus’ affirmation of the Shema (Mark 12:29), which is

⁴ Dr. Matthews, D.D., D. Litt., *God in Christian Experience*, p. 180.

⁵ Sadler’s *Gloria Patri*, p. 39, quoting A. H. Newman.

⁶ Dr. A.T. Hanson, *The Image of the Invisible God*, 1982.

⁷ Charles Bigg, D.D., Regius Prof. of Ecclesiastical History, University of Oxford, *International Critical Commentary on 1 Peter*, 1910, pp. 99, 127.

⁸ *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Intervarsity, 1980, pt. 3, p. 1.

⁹ Dr. D. Nineham, *Pelican Commentary on Mark*, p. 323.

¹⁰ *Christian Faith and Practice*, 1952, p. 74.

¹¹ *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, p. 205.

¹² *When Jesus Became God*, 1999, p. 209.

¹³ *Private Thoughts on Religion*, 1829, p. 66.

¹⁴ Arthur Samuel Peake, *A Commentary on the Bible*, 1920, p. 696.

¹⁵ *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 305, 652.

¹⁶ *New Century Bible Commentary on Mark*, p. 280.

¹⁷ Joseph Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, p. 334.

neither remarkable nor specifically Christian, would have been created by an early Christian prophet.”¹⁸

So the teaching of Jesus about God is not Christian! This seems to us the ultimate irony! It is admitted that the teaching of Jesus turned out eventually not to be Christian! How is that possible, unless the church, as it developed after the apostles died, decided to embrace a God other than the one approved and insisted on by Jesus himself in Mark 12:29? Amazingly, this replacement of Jesus’ own creed is exactly what so-called “church fathers” admitted that they had done, and apparently with no sense of embarrassment.

Maurice Wiles, a leading professor at Oxford, wrote: “The church has not always in practice, whatever it may have claimed to be doing in theory, based its Christology exclusively on the witness of the New Testament. Leonard Hodgson points out that in the debates of the 17th and 18th centuries, ‘The Unitarians as well as their opponents accepted the Bible as containing revelation given in the form of propositions...On the basis of argument which both sides held in common, the Unitarians had the better case.’

“And yet for all that it was not the Unitarians who won the day. Christological doctrine has never in practice been derived simply by way of logical inference from the statements of Scripture. At times the appeal to a broader basis for incarnational belief has been pushed to such extreme lengths as to exclude the need for any form of historical appeal at all...Anselm, more generally famed for his attempts in the ontological argument to demonstrate belief in God without the need for appeal to any empirical premise, understood the even bolder task of justifying belief in the incarnation, while ‘leaving out Christ as if he had never been heard of.’”¹⁹

A leading professor of Church History at Harvard, Harold Wolfson, wrote: “The church fathers’ conception of the Trinity was a combination of Jewish monotheism and pagan polytheism, except that to them this combination was a good combination. In fact, it was to them an ideal combination of what is best in Jewish monotheism and of what is best in pagan polytheism, and consequently they gloried in it and pointed to it as evidence of their belief. We have on this the testimony of Gregory of Nyssa, one of the great figures in the history of the philosophic formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. His words are repeated by John of Damascus — the last of the church fathers. The Christian conception of God, argues Gregory of Nyssa, is neither the polytheism of the Greeks nor the monotheism of the Jews, and consequently it must be true. ‘For the truth passes in the mean [middle] between these two

conceptions, destroying each heresy, and yet accepting what is useful to it from each. The Jewish dogma is destroyed by the acceptance of the Word and by belief in the Spirit, while the polytheistic error of the Greek school is made to vanish by the unity of the nature abrogating this imagination of plurality.”²⁰

Show your friends these amazing admissions about how the church is not based on the teaching of Jesus, while it claims to be Christian.

Dr. James Kennedy: “Many people today think that the essence of Christianity is Jesus’ teachings, but that is not so. If you read the apostle Paul’s letters which make up most of the New Testament, you will see that there is almost nothing said about the teachings of Jesus. Throughout the rest of the New Testament there is little reference to the teachings of Jesus, and in the Apostles’ Creed, the most universally held Christian creed, there is no reference to Jesus’ teachings. There is also no reference to the example of Jesus. Only two days in the life of Jesus are mentioned — the day of his birth and the day of his death. Christianity centers not in the teachings of Jesus, but in the person of Jesus as Incarnate God, who came into the world to take on himself our guilt and die in our place.”²¹

Dr. Harold O.J. Brown: “Christianity takes its name from its founder, or rather from what he was called, the Christ. Buddhism is also named for its founder. And non-Muslims often call Islam Mohammedanism. But while Buddhism and Islam are based primarily on the teaching of the Buddha and Mohammed, respectively, Christianity is based primarily on the person of Christ. The Christian faith is not belief in his teaching, but in what is taught about him. The appeal of Protestant liberals to ‘believe as Jesus believed’ rather than to believe in Jesus, is a dramatic transformation of the fundamental nature of Christianity.”²² ✧

Gabriel Was Not a Trinitarian: Recovering the Biblical Son of God

If churchmen desire a common meeting point for differing denominations, why should they not consider with all seriousness the classic words of Gabriel delivered to Mary? When angels speak they are concise and logical. Each of their words must be carefully weighed and every ounce of information extracted. Replying to Mary’s very reasonable objection that she was as yet unmarried, Gabriel declared, “holy spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and *for that reason indeed (dio kai)* the holy child to be begotten will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

²⁰ *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, pp. 361-363.

²¹ Truth Notes, “How I know Jesus is God,” Nov. 17, 1989.

²² *Heresies*, 1984, p. 13.

¹⁸ Craig Evans, *Commentary on Mark 8-16*, 2001, p. 261.

¹⁹ *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, p. 55.

I suggest that this Christological statement from the angel Gabriel be taken as the basis for identifying who Jesus is. It should be understood as a clarion call for unity, a rallying point for divided Christendom. What better way of calling Christians back to their first-century roots?

The message is simple and clear. The Son of God of Gabriel's announcement is none other than a divinely created Son of God, coming into existence — begotten — as Son in his mother's womb. All other claimants to divine Sonship and Messiahship may safely be discounted. A "Son of God" who is the *natural* son of Joseph could not, on the evidence of Gabriel, be the Messiah. Such a person would not answer to the Son who is son on the basis of a unique divine intervention in the biological chain. Equally false to Gabriel's definition of the Son of God would be a son who *preexisted* his conception. Such a son could not possibly correspond to the Messiah presented by Gabriel, one whose existence is predicated on a creative act in history on the part of the Father.

Gabriel does not present a Son of God in transition from one state of existence to another. He announces the miraculous origin and beginning of the Messiah (cp. Matt. 1:18, 20: "the origin [Gk. *genesis*] of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High God"). The *later* concept of the Incarnation of a preexisting "eternal Son" cannot possibly be forced into the mold revealed by Gabriel. A *preexistent* Person who decides to *become* a man reduces himself, shrinks himself, in order to adopt the form of a human embryo. But such a Person is not conceived or begotten in the womb of a woman. He merely passes through that womb, adopting a new form of existence.

Conception and begetting mark the point at which an individual *begins* to exist, an individual who did *not* exist before! It is this non-preexisting individual whom Gabriel presents in the sacred documents for our reception. This Son of God, of Scripture as opposed to later church tradition, is a Son of God with a history in time only, not in eternity.

Following his marvelous promise that the Messiah would be the seed of Eve (Gen. 3:15), a prophet like Moses arising in Israel (Deut. 18:15-19) and the descendant by bloodline of David (2 Sam. 7:14), God, in a precious moment of history, initiated the history of His unique Son. This was a Son through whom God expressly did *not* speak in previous times (Heb. 1:2). Naturally enough, since that prophesied Son was not then alive!

Only a few pages later Luke traces the lineage of Jesus, Son of God, back to Adam who likewise is called Son of God (Luke 3:38). The parallel is striking and immensely informative. Just as God by divine fiat created Adam from the dust as Son of God, so in due

time He creates within the womb of a human female the one who is the supernaturally begotten Son of God. It is surely destructive of straightforward information and revelation to argue that the Son of God did *not* have his origin in Mary but as an eternal Spirit. This is to dehumanize the Son — to make him essentially non-human, merely a divine visitor disguised as a man.

Luke presents Jesus as Son of God related to God in a parallel fashion to Adam (Luke 3:38). The attentive reader of Scripture will hear echoes of Israel as Son of God (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1) and Davidic kings (Ps. 2). Like Israel before him, Jesus, the Son of God, goes through water to begin his spiritual journey (Luke 3:21; cp. Exod. 14, 15). In the wilderness and under trial Jesus proves himself to be the obedient Son unlike Israel who failed in the wilderness (Exod. 14-17; 32-34; Num. 11).

The whole story is ruined if another dimension is added to the story, namely that the Son of God was already a preexisting member of an eternal Trinity. Gabriel has carefully defined the nature of Jesus' Sonship and his words exclude any origin other than a supernatural origin in Mary.

Gabriel's Jesus, Son of God — the biblical Son — originates in Mary. He is conceived and begotten by miracle. In preexistence Christology, the main plank of Trinitarianism, a conception/begetting in Mary's womb does *not* bring about the existence of God's Son. According to Gabriel it *does*. Neither Gabriel nor Luke could possibly have been Trinitarians.

No need for centuries of complex wrangling over words. All that is required is belief of the angelic communication: "*For this reason precisely (dio kai)* — the creative miracle of God through His divine power — the child will be Son of God." For no other reason, for this reason only. (Note the very watered-down rendering of the NIV: "so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.")

Jesus as Son of God is "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32; 8:28). Christians are also given this title, "sons of the Most High" (Luke 6:35; cp. Ps. 82:6). Jesus' royal Sonship is established by his miraculous begetting. That of the Christians originates with their rebirth or regeneration.

As the center of a new ecumenism the simple truth about the identity and nature of Christianity's central figure has the backing of those many scholars who know well that neither Luke nor Matthew show any sign of believing in a *pre-human eternal Son of God* of the post-biblical creeds. Raymond Brown's magisterial treatment of the birth narratives in his *Birth of the Messiah* makes a major point of the fact that neither Matthew nor Luke believed in the Incarnation of a pre-human, prehistoric Son.

Commenting on Luke 1:35, "therefore," Raymond Brown says, "of the nine times *dio kai* occurs in the

New Testament, three are in Luke/Acts. It involves a certain causality, and Lyonnet (*L'Annonciation*, 61.6) points out that this has embarrassed many orthodox theologians, since in preexistence Christology a conception by the holy spirit in Mary's womb does not bring about the existence of God's son. Luke is seemingly unaware of such a Christology; conception is causally related to divine Sonship for him...And so I cannot follow those theologians who try to avoid the causal connotation in the 'therefore' which begins this line, by arguing that for Luke the conception of the child does not bring the Son of God into being." Raymond Brown insists that according to Luke, "We are dealing with the begetting of God's Son in the womb of Mary through God's creative spirit."²³

"Orthodoxy" derived from later church councils has to turn a blind eye to Gabriel's definition of the Son of God. It contradicted Gabriel by denying that the conception of Jesus brought about his existence as Son of God.

This is a very serious issue. Is the Jesus of the creeds, the Jesus under whose umbrella churches gather, really the created Son authorized by Scripture in Luke 1:35 and Matthew 1:18, 20?

Again, the exhaustive work of Brown on the birth narratives brings us the important fact that the Jesus of the Gospels is quite unlike the "eternally begotten" Son of the later creeds: "Matthew and Luke press [the question of Jesus' identity] back to Jesus' conception. In the commentary **I shall stress** that Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of preexistence; seemingly for them the conception was the **becoming (begetting) of God's Son**" (p. 31).

"The fact that Matthew can speak of Jesus as 'begotten' (passive of *gennan*) suggests that for him the conception through the agency of the holy spirit is the **becoming of God's Son**. [In Matthew's and Luke's 'conception Christology'] God's creative action in the conception of Jesus begets Jesus as God's Son...There is **no suggestion of an Incarnation** whereby a figure who was previously with God takes on flesh. For preexistence Christology [Incarnation], the conception of Jesus is the beginning of an earthly career but **not the begetting of God's Son**. [Later] the virginal conception was no longer seen as the begetting of God's Son, but as the incarnation of God's Son, and that became orthodox Christian doctrine. This thought process is probably already at work **at the beginning of the second century**" (pp. 140-142).

Do we really believe the words of the Bible or has our tradition made it difficult to hear the text of Scripture without the interfering voices of later tradition? There is the constant danger for us believers

that the words of the Bible can be drowned out by the clamorous and sometimes threatening words of ecclesiastical teaching, which mostly goes unexamined. At stake here is the whole nature of the Savior. Is he really a human being, or did he have the benefit of billions of years of conscious existence before deciding to become a man? Is this latter picture anything more than a legendary addition to Apostolic faith?

The Son of God, Messiah and Savior, is defined in precise theological terms by Gabriel, laying the foundation of the whole New Testament and fulfilling the promises of the Old. Christians should unite around that clear portrait of Jesus presented by Gabriel. Jesus is the Son of God on one basis only, his miraculous coming into existence in Mary's womb. This was God's creative act, initiating His new creation and providing the model of Christian Sonship for us all. Though obviously we are not, like Jesus, brought into existence supernaturally, nevertheless we, like him, are to receive a supernatural birth from spirit by being born again under the influence of the Gospel (Gal. 3:2; Eph. 1:13-14; Rom. 10:17; Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:11-12; 1 Pet. 1:23-25; James 1:18).

The "divine" nature of Jesus has no other foundation than the stupendous miracle granted to Mary and to humanity. A Jesus who claims to be Son of God for any other reason should be rejected. A natural son of Joseph cannot qualify as the Messiah, nor can a person whose existence did not originate in his mother's womb by a divine creative miracle.

The constitution of Jesus as the unique Son of God is given its basis by the superb words of Gabriel in Luke 1:35. This definition of the Messiah, Son of God, should be allowed to stand. It was *later*, post-biblical tradition which interfered with the definitive, revealing statement of Gabriel. Once Jesus was turned into a preexisting Son of God who gave up one conscious existence for another, Christology immediately became problematic (as witnessed by the centuries of disputes, excommunications, and fierce dogmatic decisions of church councils). A Son of God who is *already* Son of God before his conception in his mother is a personage essentially non-human. Under that revised scheme what came into existence in Mary was not the Son of God at all, but a created *human nature* added to an already existing Person. But Gabriel describes the creation of the Son of God himself, not the creation of a human nature added to an already existing Son. The two models are quite different.

Some may object that John 1:1ff ("in the beginning was the word...") present us with a second Personage who is alive before his conception. If that is to be argued, let it be clear that John would then be in contradiction of Luke and Matthew. Matthew's and Luke's Jesus comes into existence as the Son of God,

²³ *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 291, 312.

not in eternity, but some six months later than his cousin John the Baptist.

John cannot have contradicted Luke and Matthew. The solution is to harmonize John with Luke, taking our stand with Luke. John did not write, "In the beginning was *the Son of God*." What he wrote was "In the beginning was *the word*" (not "Word," but "word"). *Logos* in Greek does not describe a person before the birth of the Son. The *logos* is the self-expressive intelligence and mind of the One God. *Logos* often carries the sense of "plan" or "promise." That *promise* of a Son was indeed in the beginning. The Son, however, was still the object of promise in 2 Samuel 7:14. David did not imagine that the promised Son of God ("My Son"), David's descendant, was already in existence! That Son was in fact begotten in due time. He was "raised up" — that is, made to appear on the scene of human history — when Mary conceived him. Acts 13:33 applies "this day I have begotten you" (Ps. 2:7) to the origin of the Son in his mother.

F.F. Bruce agrees with us. God "raised up" Jesus "in the sense in which he *raised up* David (Acts 13:22; cp. 3:22; 7:37). The promise of Acts 13:23, the fulfillment of which is here described [v. 33], has to do with the sending of Messiah, not his resurrection which is described in verse 34."²⁴

The word, plan and promise which existed from the beginning was "with God." In the wisdom literature of the Bible things are said to be "with God" when they exist as decrees and promises in His divine plan (Job 10:13; 23:14; 27:13). Wisdom was also "with God" (Prov. 8:22, 30) in the beginning but she was not a person. Neither was the *logos* a person, but rather a promise and plan. So closely identified with God was His word that John can say "the word was God." The word was the creative purpose of God, in promise and later in actuality. That creative presence of God eventually emerged in history as the Son of God begotten in Mary, the unique Son (*monogenes*).

A number of unfortunate attempts have been made to force John not only into contradiction with the clear Christology of Matthew and Luke but into agreement with the much later decisions of church councils. There is no capital on "word" in John 1:1, a, b, and c. And there is no justification for reading "All things were made through **Him**." That rendering improperly leads us to think of the word as a second divine Person, rather than the mind and promise of God. Eight English translations from the Greek before the KJV did not read "All things were made by **Him**." They read "All things were made by **it**," a much more natural way of referring to the word of God. Thus, for example, the Geneva

Bible of 1602: "All things were made by **it** and without **it** was made nothing that was made." No one reading those words would imagine that there was a Son in heaven before his birth. And no one would find in John a view of the Son different from the portrait presented by Gabriel in Luke.

Christian tradition from the second century embarked on an amazing embellishment of the biblical story which obscured Jesus' Messianic Sonship and humanity. Once the Son was given a pre-history as coequal and coessential with his Father, the unity of God was threatened and monotheism was compromised, though every effort was made to conceal this with the protest that God was still one, albeit no longer one *Person*, the Father, but one "*Essence*," comprising more than one Person. But this was a dangerous shift into Greek philosophical categories alien to the New Testament's Hebrew theology and creeds (cp. John 17:3; 5:44; Mark 12:28ff).

Several other "adjustments" became necessary under the revised doctrine of God. John was made to say in certain other verses what he did not say. This trend is well illustrated by the New International Version in John 13:3, 16:28 and 20:17. In none of these passages does the original say that Jesus was going *back* to God. In the first two Jesus spoke of his intention to "go to the Father" and in the last of his "ascending" to his Father. The NIV embellishes the story by telling us that Jesus was going *back* or returning to God. A Son whose existence is traced to his mother's womb cannot go *back* to the Father, since he has never before been with the Father.

In John 17:5 Jesus spoke of the glory which he "had" before the foundation of the world. But in the same context (vv. 22 and 24) that same glory has already "*been given*" (past tense) to disciples not yet born at the time when Jesus spoke. It is clear then that the glory which both Jesus and the disciples "had" is a glory in promise and prospect. Jesus thus prays to have conferred on him at his ascension the glory which God had undertaken to give him from the foundation of the world. John speaks in Jewish fashion of a preexisting Purpose, not a preexisting second Person. Our point was well expressed by a distinguished Lutheran New Testament professor, H.H. Wendt:

"It is clear that John 8:58 ['Before Abraham was I am'] and 17:5 do not speak of a real preexistence of Christ. We must not treat these verses in isolation, but understand them in their context. The saying in John 8:58, 'Before Abraham came to be, I am' was prompted by the fact that Jesus' opponents had countered his remark in v. 51 by saying that Jesus was not greater than Abraham or the prophets (v. 52). As the Messiah commissioned by God Jesus is conscious of being in fact superior to Abraham and the prophets. For this reason he

²⁴ *Acts of the Apostles, Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, p. 269.

replies (according to the intervening words, v. 54ff) that Abraham had ‘seen his day,’ i.e., the entrance of Jesus on his historical ministry, and ‘had rejoiced to see’ that day. And Jesus strengthens his argument by adding the statement, which sounded strange to the Jews, that he had even been ‘before Abraham’ (v. 58). This last saying must be understood in connection with v. 56. Jesus speaks in vv. 55, 56 and 58 as if his present ministry on earth stretches back to the time of Abraham and even before. His sayings were perceived by the Jews in this sense and rejected as nonsense. But Jesus obviously did not (in v. 56) mean that Abraham had actually experienced Jesus’ appearance on earth and seen it literally. Jesus was referring to Abraham’s *spiritual vision* of his appearance on earth, by which Abraham, at the birth of Isaac, had foreseen at the same time the promised Messiah, and had rejoiced at the future prospect of the greater one (the Messiah) who would be Israel’s descendant. Jesus’ reference to his existence before Abraham’s birth must be understood in the same sense. There is no sudden heavenly preexistence of the Messiah here: the reference is again obviously to his earthly existence. And this earthly existence is precisely the existence of the Messiah. As such, it was not only present in Abraham’s mind, but even before his time, as the subject of God’s foreordination and foresight. The sort of preexistence Jesus has in mind is ‘ideal’ [in the world of ideas and plans]. In accordance with this consciousness of being the Messiah preordained from the beginning, Jesus can indeed make the claim to be greater than Abraham and the prophets.

“In John 17:5 Jesus asks the Father to give him now the heavenly glory which he had with the Father before the world was. The conclusion that because Jesus possessed a preexistent glory in heaven he must also have preexisted personally in heaven is taken too hastily. This is proven by Matt. 6:20 (‘Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven’), 25:34 (‘Come, you blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom **prepared for you** from the foundation of the world’), Col. 1:5 (‘the hope which is **laid up for you in heaven** about which you heard in the word of Truth, the Gospel’), and 1 Pet. 1:4 (‘an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, which does not fade away, **reserved in heaven** for you’). Thus a *reward* can also be thought of as preexistent in heaven. Such a reward is destined for human beings and already *held in store*, to be awarded to them at the end of their life. So it is with heavenly glory which Jesus requests. He is not asking for a *return* to an earlier heavenly condition. Rather he asks God to give him now, at the end of his work as Messiah on earth (v. 4), the heavenly reward which God had appointed from eternity for him, as Messiah. As the Messiah and Son he knows he has been loved and

foreordained by the Father from eternity (v. 24). Both John 8:58 and 17:5 are concerned with God’s predetermination of the Messiah.”²⁵

Things which are held in store as divine plans for the future are said to be “with God.” Thus in Job 10:13 Job says to God, “These things you have concealed in your heart: I know that this is **with You**” (see KJV). “He performs what is **appointed for me**, and many such decrees are **with Him**” (Job 23:14). Thus the glory which Jesus had “with God” was the glory which God had **planned for him** as the decreed reward for his Messianic work now completed. The promise of glory “preexisted,” not Jesus himself. Note that this same glory which Jesus asked for has already been given to you (see John 17:22, 24). It was given to you and Jesus whom God loved before the foundation of the world (v. 24; cp. Eph. 1:4). You may therefore say that you now “have” that glory although it is glory in promise and prospect, to be gained at the Second Coming. Jesus had that same glory in prospect before the foundation of the world (John 17:5).

Paul can say that we now “have” a new body with God in heaven (2 Cor. 5:1) — i.e., we have the **promise** of it, not in actuality. That body will be ours at our resurrection at the return of Christ. We now “have” it in anticipation and promise only. (“We **have** a building of God,” 2 Cor. 5:1). We do not in fact have it yet. This is the very Jewish language of promises decreed by God. They are absolutely certain to be fulfilled. ✧

Comments

“I am enjoying Bible study so much more now that I can see the Bible as a coherent whole. I rejoice to now understand the whole gospel of salvation. I see Jesus’ death and resurrection as the how. The Kingdom of God is the why. There is no point in having one without the other. I always wondered with some dismay why God had his people destroy the heathens in the Promised Land. Now I understand. He was foreshadowing the time when another set of his human representatives, Jesus and his saints, will rule the nations with a rod of iron. From start to finish God is both merciful and just. His perfect plans will never be thwarted.” — *Washington*

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²⁵ *The System of Christian Teaching*, 1907.