

# Focus on the Kingdom

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## Aionios — The Word to Unlock the Future

Two things struck me recently as evidence that the Bible is not holding its own against the winds of theological confusion which are blowing so violently. Firstly, an article in the *Brethren Life Magazine* in which only one of ten writers grappling with the issue of homosexuality felt able actually to include in his assessment of the problem the fact that the Bible condemns homosexuality as a sin serious enough to keep you out of the Kingdom (salvation) (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Secondly, an article which presented statistics to show that the “born again” camp in America does not behave markedly better in terms of divorce and other problems than the group which claims no rebirth experience.

If believers really understood what was at stake in being a Christian, I am sure they would find the resources to be radically different from the world. The trouble is, I think, that many do not grasp the awesome nature of their destiny as co-regents with Christ in the coming Kingdom of God. They cannot thrill to Paul’s challenge that we should behave in a manner worthy of the staggering invitation we have been given to the Kingdom of God (1 Thess. 2:12).

Until the Kingdom comes into focus in people’s spiritual vision, the situation is likely to remain unchanged. In this brief study I suggest that **the foggy translation** of a key Greek word keeps Bible readers in the dark about their future and the future of the world.

In 1855 Charles Kingsley (clergyman and author of *The Water Babies* and *Hereward the Wake*) helped to dispel the darkness with which Platonism and its philosophy had shrouded the truth of Scripture in regard to the future. He declared, “The word ‘AION’ [age] is never used in Scripture or anywhere else in the sense of endlessness (vulgarly called eternity). It always meant, both in Scripture and out, a period of time...**aionios** (the adjective from **aion**) therefore means, and must mean, *belonging to an epoch, or the epoch; aionios kolasis* [appearing as “eternal punishment” in our versions, Matt. 25:46; cp. 2 Thess. 1:9] *is the punishment allotted to that epoch.*”

It is false, he maintained, to translate that phrase as “everlasting punishment,” introducing into the New

Testament the concept found in the Quran that God is going to torture the wicked forever.

Tradition rose to oppose this idea when Dr. Pusey preached a sermon at Oxford to maintain that *aionios* (“ay-ohn-ios”) in classical Greek does mean endlessness. But classical Greek is a poor measure of the Hebrew oriented New Testament language. Samuel Cox (editor of *The Expositor*) replied by pointing out that “the word AION is saturated through and through with the thought and element of *time*. The adjective *aionios* must take the whole of its meaning from the noun AION from which it is derived. In the NT the word is used in connection with the Jewish doctrine of the **two aeons**. Instead of affirming that time shall be no more when men pass out of this present order and age, the NT speaks of ‘ages to come’ as well as ‘ages that are past.’” The Bible recognizes the patriarchal age, the Mosaic age and in the future, “the age to come” of the Messiah. No wonder then that Paul spoke of God’s “purpose for the ages.” *Aionios* refers to the great age to come and God’s great purpose for “that age” (Luke 20:35). The age to come is the age of the manifested Kingdom of God on earth (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10). Jesus will introduce it at his return to this earth.

In 1877 Cannon Farrar added the weight of his scholarship to the emerging light of truth by asserting that “it has been so ably proved by so many writers that there is no authority whatever for rendering *aionios* as ‘everlasting.’” Nevertheless the public continued to read in their standard translations that God is going to usher the wicked into “*everlasting punishment*” (Matt. 25:46), and that the same wicked would suffer “*eternal punishment*.” In this way the fog of Platonism continued to interfere with the inspired word. The public was getting poisoned food instead of the pure wheat of the word. The Bible could not be heard clearly while the confusion of Greek philosophical concepts jammed the pure Hebrew signals of God’s Scripture. The truth for which Paul struggled so valiantly continued to be smothered by popular “religion,” which preferred what it had always believed to the challenge of discovery and enlightenment. And as long as the doctrine of eternal punishment was promoted God was presented as some kind of cosmic fiend.

### In This Issue

Imagine Meeting a Man Whose Father Is God.....	4
Comments .....	7

### Derivation of the Word AIONIOS

Moulton and Milligan contend that the Sanskrit *aye*, to which *aionios* is related, contains the idea of life and long life. In the Septuagint (LXX), **AION** (age) translates no less than nine different Hebrew expressions, of which the one most familiar to Jews is the famous word **OLAM = age**. Interestingly, in the vocabulary of Plato the word **AION** applies to things belonging to the world of eternal ideas — the core of Plato's philosophy of the world. It is that *pagan* meaning which has been foisted on our translations, as though Platonic metaphysics are the basis of what the prophets and Jesus said about the future! Little wonder, then, that people expect souls to enter at death an eternal, timeless heavenly realm. But nobody would have received that impression from the Bible, if *aionios* had been allowed to retain its Hebraic association with God's plan of the ages. What the Bible promises believers is never "heaven" as a place for disembodied souls at death, but the "life of the age to come" consequent upon resurrection into the Kingdom to be established on earth when Jesus comes back (see 1 Cor. 15:23; Rev. 5:10).

Platonically-minded Bible writers and thinkers, then, will use *aionios* in the transcendent and timeless sense in which Plato used it. But the word deserves to be heard in its Hebraic environment. In Bible times we shall naturally find the pagan, Platonic meaning current in Alexandria, that great home of Platonizing philosophy, and also in the writings of the philosophically-minded first-century Jew, Philo. The *pagan* meaning invaded the biblical view and overcame it when Platonically-minded church leaders, notably Augustine, brought about a grand fusion of the Bible with pagan philosophy — a form of spiritual drug which continues to make Bible reading difficult for church members who, unwillingly, have fallen under the spell of that dangerous mixture of the Bible and Plato. Paul did say, "Beware of philosophy and empty deceit" (Col. 2:8). It is not clear to us that church members are even aware of Paul's solemn warning. They do not seem exercised about the possible baneful effects of a counterfeit Greek philosophical theology which is utterly foreign to the Hebrew mind of the Jew and Master Rabbi Jesus.

### Use of the Word AIONIOS

#### "Belonging to the Future Age of the Kingdom"

In the LXX (Greek version of the Old Testament) *aionios* occurs over 160 times. One of these texts is of paramount interest to us: Daniel 12:2, where *aionios* describes the resurrection life of those who, after the tribulation, emerge from their sleep of death in the

dust of the ground. Here *aionios* modifies *zoe* ("zoh-ee," life) and it is this famous phrase which was so often on Jesus' lips and appears 40 times in the New Testament, along with other phrases endorsed by Jesus and drawn from Daniel, i.e., Son of Man and Kingdom of Heaven, etc. Daniel provided Jesus with a storehouse of phrases and ideas, all of which have been distorted or ignored by Platonically oriented theology.

The phrases "eternal life" and "everlasting life" appear in our standard translations. They reflect the Platonizing influence at work on translators and indeed on Christianity in general. The real meaning of these phrases is "the life of the age to come" or "life in the age to come." Life in the age to come is synonymous with life in the future Kingdom of God on the earth. The "life of the age to come" gives the right sense for Daniel's "**life of the age**" (Dan. 12:2). This is the Christian hope and the heart of the Gospel of the Kingdom. It is the Life of the Age *following the resurrection* of the dead from the sleep of death (1 Cor. 15:23). It is thus properly "the Life of the *future* Age." That life can be tasted even now in anticipation — thanks to the presence of the spirit of God in our lives. The Life of the Age to Come is equivalent to immortality, and it will be experienced in full only at the inauguration of the Kingdom of God on earth consequent upon the Second Coming of Jesus. The concept is in direct contradiction of the popular idea that "immortal souls" are currently enjoying "bliss" in a far-off heaven. "**Heaven in fact is never used in the Bible for the destination of the dying**" (Prof. J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End God*, p. 104).

In Daniel *aionios* refers to the Kingdom to be set up at the return of Jesus. In 7:14 we are told of the "dominion of the age [to come]." In 7:27 we read of the "kingdom of the age to come," and in 9:24 of the "righteousness of the ages to come," to be introduced at the end of the "seventy sevens." Daniel 12:2 reveals that in that Kingdom the resurrected saints will obtain "the life of the age to come." The contrasted fate of the wicked is to be "the shame of the age to come," that is, the punishment which excludes a person from enjoying the life of the age to come, the Kingdom of God. It is that wonderful phrase *chayé olam* (Dan. 12:2), "the life of the age," which comes across into our New Testament. It should be rendered always as "the life of the future Kingdom age." It is indeed immortality, but it is much more specific. *Aionios* tells us that we are going to enjoy life forever in the Kingdom of God which belongs to the coming age. The translation "eternal, everlasting" loses information and obscures the Christian destiny. It is like the difference between

“Tomorrow at nine I am going to take you to the airport to catch your plane to Tokyo,” and “Sometime in the future you are going to take a trip.” Christians need to be informed about what their hope is. Hope is the basis of faith and love according to Paul in Colossians 1:4, 5.

*Aionios* is the word which describes those precious facts of the Christian future. Those wonderful events associated with the future coming of Jesus can be tasted now through the spirit which grants a downpayment guaranteeing the fullness of the spirit at the return of Jesus. The holy spirit gives us a taste of the “powers of the age to come [the future **aiōn**]” (Heb. 6:5). That future age will see the newborn world of the Kingdom of God, a reorganized political theocracy (Matt. 19:28), and the restoration of all that the prophets foresaw (Acts 3:21; cp. Acts 1:6). The tribes of Israel will be regathered in the land and the resurrected Apostles will administer them in association with Jesus as the Davidic Messiah (Luke 22:28-30).

Things described as *aionios* are things which “pertain to the coming age of the Kingdom of God on earth.” Try now substituting that translation of *aionios* wherever it appears (as “everlasting” or “eternal”). You will see how prominent the future Kingdom age is in the New Testament. The Bible is indeed a forward-looking book, brimming over with hope for a better world to come on this planet. What Christians are to seek as the supreme reward of faithfulness is the Life of the Age to Come in the Kingdom. Christians are called not only to be *in* the Kingdom but to *be* the Kingdom, the royal family of priests and kings to assist Jesus in the reordering of our disordered earth (Rev. 1:6; 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:1-6; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Isa. 32:1; Dan. 7:14, 18, 22, 27). The Gospel of the Kingdom is rightly called “the Gospel *about the Age to Come*” (Rev. 14:6), inadequately translated as “everlasting Gospel.” Nigel Turner, celebrated author of *Christian Words* and of Moulton, Milligan and Turner’s *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, says: “Christians do not suppose that the Gospel lasts forever. Rather it is the Gospel of or concerning the Kingdom age (Rev. 14:6)” (*Christian Words*, p 456).

Now try applying this meaning of *aionios* to the book of Hebrews. In 5:9 we have the salvation which pertains to **the coming age**, in 6:2 the judgment or administration of that coming age. 9:12 speaks of the redemption **of the coming age** and 9:14 designates the (holy) spirit as the spirit of the **age to come**. Most appropriately, 9:15 speaks of the inheritance (of the

Kingdom) **of the future age**, and 13:20 tells us that the New Covenant has to do with the age to come. Jesus himself spoke of the covenant of the Kingdom and kingship which conferred the right to rule on himself and the Apostles. We find this in Luke 22:28-30: “Just as my Father has covenanted to me a Kingdom so I covenant with you a Kingdom.” This Jesuanic covenant — “God has *covenanted* a Kingdom to me” — is the climax of the earlier Abrahamic covenant — the promise of land and descendants (Gen. 12:1-4), and the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17) — the promise of a perpetual royal family. The Bible is principally about the Land and the King of that Land, the Messiah Jesus.

Finally *aionios*, properly translated, will dispel the monstrous idea that God is intending to torture human beings forever and ever. The punishment to be inflicted on the incorrigibly wicked is “**aionian fire**” (Matt. 25:41). It would be quite wrong to think of this as everlasting fire. The very same expression is found in Jude 7, where we learn that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the penalty of “**eternal fire**” (so the KJV, etc.). But was that fire literally everlasting? Of course not. It has long since ceased to burn. It was in fact “the fire of the age to come,” “aionian fire,” “supernatural fire,” which will likewise burn up the wicked, consume them as smoke (Ps. 37:20) and reduce them to ashes (Mal. 4:3). The ruin of Sodom is the model for the future ruin of the present wicked world. This judgment will happen when Jesus comes back (2 Thess. 2:7-9). “Everlasting (*aionios*) destruction” really means “the destruction to be brought about when the age to come arrives.” There is no support for popular ideas about “eternal punishment” here. In Revelation the word “torture” carries a meaning slightly different from our meaning. The city of Babylon is to undergo “torment” (Rev. 18:7) which is equivalent to being “burned up with fire” (v. 8). It connotes sudden and permanent destruction (vv. 9, 10).

Christians should take time to show their friends and neighbors these keys to understanding God’s wonderful plans for the future. A proper understanding of *aionios* sheds a brilliant light on God’s revelation. This information is readily available to truth seekers. As early as 1889 the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* stated: “**The adjective *aionios* (‘everlasting’) does not in itself mean ‘unending’**” (*Matthew*, p. 196). This applies to the same adjective *aionios* in Daniel 12:2 where the future life of Christians is the life of the age to come. *Aionios* also describes the fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah thousands of years ago. The fire was not “everlasting” (Jude 7).

The world famous scholar of New Testament Greek, the late Nigel Turner, Ph.D, says: “It would be imprecise to translate *aionios* as ‘eternal.’ It means ‘belonging to the future age or dispensation’” (*Christian Words*, T & T Clark, 1980, pp. 452, 455, 456). He was right. Often these gems of understanding go no further than learned books. They belong in preaching and teaching. The public needs to be informed of basic facts of faith.

Translations of the Bible may sometimes reflect not the truth of the inspired original but merely a prejudice in favor of established traditional doctrine. One of the tasks of the Bible scholar is to expose such misinformation. The Bible must be rescued from the corrupting influence of paganism which hit the church from the second century onwards. That paganism has affected Christianity in all of its central doctrines, including the doctrine of God — but that is another story.

Of crucial importance is a clear understanding of the Message of the New Testament. It might just be that potential believers are hindered from an encounter with Christ, precisely because current presentations of the faith offer a meaningless disembodied existence in a vague “heaven,” or an unending conscious existence in a tormenting fire for the wicked. Jesus spoke clearly and Hebraically when, quoting the fascinating Psalm 37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34, he offered the faithful an invitation to “have the earth as their inheritance” (Matt. 5:5; cp. Rev. 5:10). The same Psalm tells us that the wicked will “vanish away like smoke” (v. 20). ☩

## Imagine Meeting a Man Whose Father Is God

We often ask friends and acquaintances about their parents. “What did your father or mother do? Is he or she still living?” Sometimes we learn of a distinguished father or mother who has brought honor to their family. Imagine now that on meeting Jesus (say at the wedding in Cana where he had just transformed 120 gallons of water into wine for celebration) you inquire, “Who was your father? What did he do? Was he well known in town?”

“In fact,” comes the reply, “my father is God.”

Quite a conversation stopper. One can imagine the questioner trying to process that information and assess the one who provided it. “God?” “Yes, my Father was and is God.” Not, of course, that Jesus said “I am God.” What he *did* affirm was that his Father was God. There is a huge difference.

Jesus as *Son of God* — that is what the New Testament documents record over and over again as the facts about Jesus’ family history. His passport would presumably have read rather differently from that of the average citizen. Next of kin? God, the Creator.

The concepts may seem bizarre, but we intend to show that we Christians are to claim a similar parentage, modeled after that of our older and uniquely begotten Brother. Strictly speaking, of course, Jesus could well also have referred to his father — his legal father — as Joseph. The New Testament records do not hesitate to refer to Jesus’ human father. Jesus is known as the son of Joseph.

Very strikingly, only in Mark 6:3, we read “Is not this the carpenter, **the son of Mary**, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him.” This reference to Jesus as the **Son of Mary** is unique in the New Testament. It was certainly not customary to refer to a man as the son of his mother, rather than of his father. Luke’s and Matthew’s genealogical tables consistently list children as the sons of their father, with an occasional addition of the mother’s name. Luke notes that “When he began his ministry, Jesus himself was about thirty years of age, being, *as was supposed*, the son of Joseph, the son of Eli...” (Luke 3:23).

Have you pondered the stupendous fact that there walked in Palestine a human person of whom it can be stated in all seriousness that he was the Son of *God*; that God was his Father; that his mother conceived him by sheer, unheard-of miracle?

This is the uniqueness of the Christian faith and of Jesus. In two matchlessly simple passages of the New Testament (Matt. 1 and Luke 1) we are presented with an unparalleled historical occurrence — one that is apparently glossed over even by believers. What makes the challenge of Jesus so compelling is that he was the “miracle man” par excellence, the amazing “genius” — the only human being ever to have stepped the earth of whom it may be truthfully claimed and asserted that his father was the God of Heaven and Earth, the Maker of all things.

The miracle of the “begetting” of Jesus by the Father through His operational presence, the holy spirit, deserves careful meditation. Those innocent accounts of the origin of the Son of God have been at the same time the object of much sincere piety and the happy hunting ground of skeptics and critics who dismiss out of hand the notion that a man can be conceived and born without a human father. They have also suffered severely at the hands of speculative Greek theologians who invented a pre-history for Jesus which actually

destroys the truth that he *came into existence* — i.e., was begotten supernaturally in history in Israel.

But why all the debate and doubt? The Genesis creation proposes that God created from primordial matter the world as the “theater” for man. Included in that creation was the fashioning of man from the dust of the ground and the animation of that extraordinary creature by the life-imparting breath of God. The first man Adam was from the dust of the ground, the pinnacle of the Genesis creation.

That miracle — the existence of thinking, speaking, human beings — confronts us daily, but we take it almost entirely for granted. We have forgotten about the appearance of the *first* man. We have been misinformed by “scientific” stories about the millions of years that man is supposed to have been on earth and, worse still, we have been told that he developed by accident from the slime. The whole process was so interminably long and uneventful that it ceases to have meaning. We are here simply because man has, more or less, always been here.

But not if we take Scripture seriously. Man according to the Bible is the ultimate masterpiece of the Divine Creative Hand. God saw that all was good. Sometimes watching a breath-taking display of ballet, gymnastics or ice-skating, we marvel at what this phenomenal creature, man, can do! Sometimes when we are exposed to the astonishing capacity of the well-trained human voice we are stopped in our tracks in wonder at what God has made possible. Sometimes, watching film of Auschwitz or visiting the Holocaust Museum we marvel at the sickening cruelty of which this masterpiece of creation is capable when left to his own wickedness.

But what fact of history can measure up to the appearance in Palestine some 2000 years ago of a member of the human race who claimed that his Father was no mortal, but God Himself? That event should get our attention. Something quite extraordinary has occurred. A second Adam, the beginning of a brand new race of human beings, has made his appearance, distinguished by the unique miracle that his begetting — coming into existence — was the direct result of a divine intervention in the human biological chain. No other religion makes that claim. Christianity does. Certainly pagan saviors have arisen in earlier times saying that their mothers bore them without benefit of a human father. But these crude legends about the sexual cohabitation of women and serpents or gods are totally unlike the story of how the Son of God began to exist.

The biblical account and the meaning of the virginal conception/begetting of Jesus has also not escaped the ravages of human imagination by which it has been turned into something which departs from the original story as penned by Matthew and Luke.

By speaking of the so-called *Incarnation* of the Son, church members actually contradict the biblical account of the genesis of the Son of God.

Matthew opens his gospel with an account of “the book of the **genesis**, or origin, or family history of Jesus Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). The alert reader will hear in these words an echo of Genesis 2:4: “This is the **genesis** or origin or family history of the heaven and the earth when they came into existence, on the day when God made the heaven and the earth.”

What Matthew describes is the beginning of a new creation, and the celebrated, promised descendant of David and Abraham is the star of this great new world event. God had announced to David news of the Messiah to come: “I *will be* Father to him and he *will be* Son to Me” (2 Sam. 7:14, quoted of Jesus in Heb. 1:5). In addition, the famous Messianic Psalm 2 had spoken of a prophetic decree by which the Father could say of the Son who was to come “You are my Son. Today I have begotten you — become your Father” (Ps. 2:7, quoted of the coming into existence of the Son by Paul in Acts 13:33<sup>1</sup> and Heb. 1:5).

After listing the family tree of Jesus from Abraham onwards through the kings of Judah, Matthew arrives at the climax of human history: “Jacob begat (became the father of) Joseph, the husband of Mary, from who was begotten [i.e., by God]<sup>2</sup> Jesus, the one whose title is Christ” (Matt. 1:16).

Matthew notes that three groups of 14 names complete the list from Abraham to Jesus. Fourteen is the numerical value of David in Hebrew, marking the whole history as thoroughly in keeping with the great Davidic promise of 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17.

I can imagine Matthew lowering his voice for extra effect when he comes to verse 18. “Now the **genesis**, origin, creation of Jesus Christ was as follows: When his mother was engaged to be married to Joseph, before they came together, she was discovered to be pregnant

<sup>1</sup> Acts 13:33 refers to **the beginning of the Son** and v. 34 by contrast describes the *resurrection* of the Messiah. The KJV is misleading here since it adds to the Greek the word “again” in verse 33. But it is verse 34, in contrast to verse 33, which speaks of the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>2</sup> Known to commentators as the divine passive, i.e., it was God who begat Jesus.

from holy spirit [divine creative energy, just as the holy spirit had hovered over the waters in Gen. 1 and God had said ‘Let there be light’].” The story continues: “Now Joseph, her husband [i.e., to be, by modern customs], since he was an upright man and did not want to expose her to disgrace, planned to divorce her secretly. As he was thinking about these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and announced: ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Because what has been **generated**, brought into existence [by God] in her is from the holy spirit.’”

Matthew 1:18 in the best Greek manuscripts describes not just the “birth” of Jesus but more precisely the “origin” or creation or generation of Jesus — his coming into existence. There are two words in Greek which are very much alike: “**genesis**” and “**genesis**.” The difference is only of one letter, double n versus single n. The latter word is in the best manuscripts and this means that we are witnessing here the creation, the **origin**, of the Son of God, by miracle. The parallel with the first book of the Bible, Genesis, is clear.

If we turn to the corroborating account in Luke we have a concise message from Gabriel as to how Mary will bear a Son while as yet unmarried to Joseph. The announcement to Mary begins with the promise of the future restored Kingdom to Mary’s son, in line with the whole thrust of Old Testament prophecy: “Don’t be alarmed, Mary,” Gabriel says, “you have found favor in God’s sight. You are going to conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will call him Jesus. He will be a greatly distinguished person and will be called the Son of the Highest One, and the Lord God will give him the royal throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over the House of Jacob during the ages, and of his Kingdom there will be no end.” Mary then said to the angel, “How is this going to happen since I do not know any man?” The angel replied: “Holy spirit will come upon you and power from the Highest One will overshadow you and for that reason precisely the one being begotten will be called holy, the Son of God” (Luke 1:30-35).

The detail of this extraordinary visitation merits careful attention. God is the Most High. God is to be the Father of the promised Messiah, descended of course from David through his mother. The child will thus be Davidic royalty and his father will be none other than God Himself. What we are seeing here is a divine procreation (totally unlike the pagan sexual unions promoted by counterfeit mystery religions).

The phrase at the end of Gabriel’s brief conversation is particularly to be noted:

“*For this reason* precisely<sup>3</sup> (*dio kai*) the child will be called [or the child will *be* — that is the sense] the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). For what reason? What is the basis for the Sonship of Jesus? On what foundation does the doctrine of Jesus’ Sonship rest? Precisely because God is about to become his Father, *not because of any mysterious preexistence of the Son*. Simply because he is the new creation by holy spirit effected in history in the womb of a Jewish maiden. This truly is the New Adam, the start of a new type of human being, a model for others as well as their Savior. Adam was also the son of God (Luke 3:38).

The comments of the leading commentary on the birth narratives are highly instructive. Raymond Brown refers to Matthew’s description of the origin of the Son: “God’s creative action in the conception of Jesus (attested negatively by the absence of human fatherhood) **begets Jesus as God’s Son**. Clearly here in this divine Sonship there is no suggestion of an Incarnation whereby a figure who was previously with God takes on flesh.” Then Brown says of *later* Christian theology, “the conception of Jesus is the beginning of an *earthly career*, but *not the begetting of God’s Son*. 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 doctrine*” (*The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 141).

We trust that the reader will not miss the enormous implications of this comment. Brown first of all describes what is obvious to every reader of Matthew and Luke that the Son of God was a created person, coming into existence by miracle without a human father. In a dramatic development “later theology” suppressed this sublime story and replaced it by a different one, namely that the Son of God did *not* begin in the womb *but was already in existence prior to his conception*. Later theology thus obscured the information provided for us in the Bible as the explanation for and basis of the doctrine of Jesus as Son of God. The teaching of Gabriel was overridden and replaced by a *new* and different idea of how Jesus was the Son of God. It was not because he was begotten in the womb, but because he had in fact *always been* the Son of God. He had been the Son from eternity and had no beginning. This latter concept became “orthodox,” the so-called right view, and all other views were ruled

<sup>3</sup> Not as in the KJV, “for this reason *also*...” as if there might be TWO reasons for his being Son!

out of court on pain of heresy. The Bible, in other words, was assaulted.

I do not think that churchgoers have pondered these amazing accounts of the beginning and creation of the Son of God. Do they see the marvel that God wrought when He decided to repeat His activity in creating Adam — the second time producing His own Son, not from the dust, but within the human biological chain and in the family of David?

Many have not sat down to think what a confusing contradiction is forced on Scripture when the “later” theology of an *uncreated Son of God with no beginning was substituted for the historically created Son of God*. It would seem that this “later” Jesus was radically different from the one presented by Gabriel, the one whom Mary recognized as her son and the Son of God. The “later” Jesus was Son of God in eternity, consciously active in Old Testament times and then decided one day to reduce himself to a fetus and pass into the world through Mary — instead of *originating* in and from Mary by divine creation.

The Son of God of these foundational accounts of the faith in Matthew and Luke takes us back behind the very complex speculations of “later theology” to the pristine view of the New Testament community. Their Jesus was veritably a member of the human race. He had no “super-history” in ages past. His “divinity” was ascribed to and explained by the amazing miracle that God had wrought in history in Mary. “For this reason indeed he will be the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). God was his father. Thus there was no suggestion at all that he was actually God. That would make no sense, since as Son he had been procreated at conception and God cannot come into existence. Jesus, the Son of God, did. God cannot be born. Jesus was begotten and born. Furthermore the Jews knew that there was only One God. All else would amount to polytheism and was to be avoided as a threat to the command against idolatry.

It would appear that a kind of sleight of hand operates when the public is invited to believe in both the virginal conception/begetting/beginning of Jesus and *at the same time* in his Incarnation into an earthly existence, from an endless prehistoric preexistence. Can one really *come into existence* as the Son of God if one is *already* existing as the Son? This would appear to be something close to nonsense, an abuse of language.

It is not without reason that the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg states: “Sonship cannot at the same time consist in preexistence and still have its origin only in the divine procreation of Jesus in Mary”

(*Jesus, God and Man*, p. 143). He further maintains that “virgin birth” stands in irreconcilable contradiction to the Christology of the Incarnation.

Try reading the Bible with the belief that Jesus was a human being whose fundamental superiority to the rest of us lay in his miraculous beginning from Mary. That Jesus presented himself as the head of a new race of men. That is why we, who can boast no such supernatural origin, must nevertheless acquire one by being “born again.” The miracle for us as human beings invited to the new creation happens when we are *born again* by accepting the Gospel of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus and the Apostles. That Gospel of the Kingdom provides the divine “seed” (Luke 8:11; Matt. 13:19), the essential spark of the new life which will end in immortality. In John’s epistle he not only speaks of this miraculously potent “seed” residing in the believer (1 John 3:9), he speaks of Christians having been “born of God.” He is referring of course to the Christian’s rebirth. But in 1 John 5:18 he draws a parallel between the believer’s rebirth and the begetting of the Messiah, Son of God: “We know that no one who *has been born* from God continues in sin, but the one who *was born* from God preserves him and the evil one cannot touch him.”

With extreme precision the rebirth of the Christian is described as an event of the past with present consequences. The begetting/birth of Jesus is described in the aorist tense pointing to a once and for all event. We have learned when that miraculous coming-into-existence of the Son occurred: in history and in time, celebrating the inauguration of a new race of men and women destined, by divine “seed,” for immortality. In coming to understand Jesus you are becoming acquainted with the One who could say uniquely, “my Father is God.” ☩

## Comments

“Just a note to say the May issue of Focus on the Kingdom is outstanding. I really appreciate all that you do and how God has blessed you with the gift to teach so clearly from His word. I know you have put in many hours of study. Thank you for sharing so freely on the Internet, too!” — *Texas*

“I appreciate your newsletter very much. It has made such a difference in the way I see the Scriptures. Please continue in your work.”—*Canada*