

# ***Jesus: God the Son or Son of God?***

## **Does the Bible Teach the Trinity?**

### **Jesus is Unique**

THERE is no doubt at all that the New Testament presents Jesus Christ as an outstanding personality. He gives striking evidence of extraordinary powers in the miracles he performs; he makes the most penetrating observations about human life, and faith, and the true worship of God; and his claims concerning himself, as the only source of life to come, are such as no one else would dare to make. His apostles speak of him, after his ascension, as exalted to all power and authority at God's right hand. And his own estimate of the vital significance of his person is summed up thus:

"This is life eternal, that (mankind) might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." (John 17:3)

Clearly, if we are to have any hope of life to come, we need to know the truth about the person and the significance of Jesus Christ.

### **The popular view**

Now the majority of those who have any ideas at all about Jesus, think of him as part of the Godhead: as God the Son, existing in heaven from the beginning of time with God the Father, equal in power and authority to Him, but coming down to earth to be born, as a human babe, of the Israelite maiden known as the Virgin Mary; then dying on the Cross as a sign of God's love for mankind, before returning to heaven to resume his former exalted position. As the Holy Ghost (now more commonly called the Holy Spirit) is also regarded as part of the Godhead, this is the "Triune God" (or One in Three), as described in the Doctrine of the Trinity. The relationship between the three Persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost – is understood in a very subtle way by the learned theologians who defend this doctrine, and in a much more elementary way by the majority of those who somewhat vaguely accept it.

The view that "Jesus is God" is held in a rather emotional way by many sincerely religious people. Anyone who does not unhesitatingly accept this formula is immediately regarded as a "heretic" and as "unChristian". This short work is a plea for a friendly and sincere examination of this most important subject. The author and all those who share his opinions, would stress with all the earnestness they can command, that they really do believe that Jesus was, and is, literally the Son of God. They are not Unitarians, who think of Jesus as just a very superior man; nor are they "adoptionists", holding that God "adopted" Jesus as His spiritual Son. They believe that Jesus was God's "only begotten Son" in the way the scriptures describe.

### **Not in the Bible**

Now it is a remarkable fact that the ideas contained in the Doctrine of the Trinity are not found in the Bible. This is not a new discovery. It has been known for a long time, right back in the 4th century of our era. More recent theologians have said so clearly. For example, the Anglican theologian J. H. Newman, who joined the Church of Rome in 1845, wrote:

"... the doctrines (that is, concerning Father, Son and Holy Spirit) have never been learned merely from Scripture." (The Arians of the 4th Century, page 50) [1]

Dr. W. R. Matthews, for many years Dean of St. Paul's, London, was more emphatic:

"... the doctrine of the Trinity ... formed no part of the original message. St. Paul knew it not, and would have been unable to understand the meaning of the terms used in the theological formula on which the Church ultimately agreed." (God in Christian Thought and Experience, page 180) [1]

Many sincere admirers of Christ may well feel disturbed at this plain assertion that his great Apostle Paul knew nothing of the Doctrine of the Trinity!

## **How then did it arise?**

To answer this question we need to know when it arose. The answer is: not till 300-400 years after the days of Jesus and his apostles. It is a striking fact that the "early Church Fathers" – the theologians who wrote in the period AD 100-300 – knew nothing of it, and frequently uttered opinions which contradict it. For the majority of them there was no question of Jesus' being "co-equal and co-eternal with the Father". He was subordinate to God his Father, and was regarded as a "created Being". The teachings which now make up the Doctrine of the Trinity were the decisions of a number of general Church Councils. These are the most significant:

AD 325 First General Council at Nicea, declared that the Son was from the beginning of the same nature as the Father.

AD 381 Second General Council at Constantinople, declared that the Holy Spirit was to be worshipped with the Father and the Son.

AD 431 Third General Council at Ephesus, decreed that Jesus had two natures, a human and a divine; also that Mary was the "mother of God", in opposition to those who maintained that she was the "mother of Christ".

AD 451 Fifth General Council at Chalcedon, decreed that the two natures in Christ constituted only one Person and one will.

The progressive formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity over a considerable period of time, is clearly shown when the major creeds of the Church are compared:

The Apostles' Creed, certainly an early Creed though its exact date is unknown, expresses the relationship between Christ and God thus:

"... God the Father Almighty ... Jesus Christ His only Son ... conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary ..." After his resurrection Christ "ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead ..."

This is in complete agreement with what the Bible says. But later creeds show many additions and a different view.

The Nicene Creed, AD 325, declares that Jesus Christ is –

"the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds ... God of God, Very God of Very God, being of one substance with the Father ... The Holy Ghost with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified ..."

The Athanasian Creed, of unknown date but certainly in existence soon after AD 500, is even more emphatic:

"We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity ... there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate ..." All are declared to be eternal, "yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal". The Creed concludes with the ominous statement: "He that will be saved must think thus of the Trinity."

The new teaching about the Godhead aroused much opposition from those who claimed to be holding the original beliefs. The result was bitter controversy for over a century between the Church leaders. The decisions of the Church Councils in the 4th and 5th centuries were the actions of the Church authorities determined to suppress all "rebels". So the official Doctrine of the Trinity was elaborated and proclaimed, and its acceptance declared to be obligatory.

## **What does the Bible say?**

Before Jesus Christ appeared, the writings of the Old Testament had for centuries been revered by the nation of Israel (the Jews) as the revelation of their God who had delivered them from Egypt at the Exodus. What impression had they gained about the nature of God? The answer is clear from the following quotation:

"Having affirmed the existence of God, Judaism really lays down only one basic idea about Him which is a recognised dogma – the Unity of God. 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.' This is immediately a negation of the polytheism of the ancient world with its numerous deities. It is a repudiation of the idea that there are two gods or two creative sources of existence, one of good and the other of evil. It is also a clear denial of the idea of a trinity – three gods in One which is the established doctrine of Christianity. For Judaism there can be absolutely no compromise at all in this fundamental concept of the Only One God who is the ultimate creative source of all life and death, the elements of nature and history and the power behind all forces, physical and spiritual." (C. Pearl and R. Brookes, A Guide to Jewish Knowledge, pages 96,97)

To this day the orthodox Doctrine of the Trinity remains a great obstacle for any Jew inquiring into the Christian religion.

In these days of hazy ideas we need to remind ourselves that the Old Testament we possess is the same collection of writings revered in Jesus' day as the word of God. Jesus himself described them as "the law, the psalms and the prophets" and said that in them were prophecies of himself. In Psalm 2 we read:

"Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession." (verses 7,8)

Certain clear conclusions arise: God has anointed one who is to rule for Him ("my King", verse 6) over all the nations of the earth. But he is God's Son, because he has been "begotten". The ruler is not God; he is the Son of God; and he began to exist on the day he was "begotten". Like all sons, he is preceded by his Father. The whole of this general teaching is summed up in the first verse of the New Testament:

"The book of the generation (or birth) of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." (Matthew 1:1)

Now when this "Son" first appeared among men, how does he regard himself? There can be no doubt about the answer: Jesus always speaks of himself as subordinate to the Father, as dependent upon Him for all his teaching and all his works. These are some of his own sayings:

"The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do ..." (John 5:19)

"My teaching is not mine, but his that sent me." (7:16, RV)

"My Father is greater than I ..." (14:28)

When he is accused by the Jews of "making himself God", he denies the charge and says, "I am the Son of God" (John 10:34-36). He even declines to allow himself to be called "good". When he is addressed as "Good Master", he replies:

"Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God." (Mark 10:18)

In his great prophecy uttered shortly before he was crucified, Jesus speaks of his own coming back to the earth to reign:

"Then shall they see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory ... But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." (Mark 13:26,32, RV)

When he has risen from the tomb, this is his message for the disciples:

"Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." (John 20:17)

There can be no doubt about the view held by Jesus himself: in everything the Father was superior; the Son was dependent upon Him.

## **Objection**

Now it is sometimes objected that the passages we have quoted all refer to Jesus "in the days of his flesh", as a man, and cannot be applied to him in his exalted state. Let us investigate what scripture says. The time came when Jesus was raised from the dead; his mortal nature was changed to immortality; and he ascended to heaven, there to sit in the place of honour at the Father's right hand:

"He humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death ... Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:8-11, RV)

The exaltation of Jesus to a place of honour in heaven was the work of the Father. It is He who is to be glorified. All the decisive events in the life of Jesus are ascribed to God the Father. It is God who has made Jesus "both Lord and Christ", and who has appointed him "to be the Judge of quick and dead" (Acts 2:36; 10:42).

Many times the apostles refer to God and Jesus in their present relationship in heaven. This is how they do it:

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:7)

This precise wording is repeated in a number of the epistles. In Ephesians it is:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... the God of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1:3,17)

Whenever the allusion is to God and Jesus in heaven, they are always presented as two separate Persons, and the priority is always given to the Father.

Of special interest is the Book of Revelation, given through the Apostle John, and almost certainly to be dated about AD 90 or a bit later. In it are instances of the risen and exalted Lord himself referring directly to his own relationship with God the Father. Notice how this revelation commences:

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass ..." (Revelation 1:1)

In the early chapters Jesus addresses directly "the seven churches which are in Asia" (verse 4) and refers on a number of occasions to God his Father:

"He that overcometh ... I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels." (3:5; see also verses 12,21)

These are the words of Jesus himself; they were uttered about 60 years after he had ascended to heaven and taken his place of honour at the right hand of God. They describe therefore his relationship to God in his present glorified state. Their general sense is clear: it is God the Father who has supreme authority; it is He who gives the revelation to His Son; it is His throne that the Son shares; and it is He whom the Son acknowledges as "my God". There is no suggestion of "co-equality" in these very significant pronouncements.

But the most striking comment on the relative authority of God the Father and His Son is found in the Apostle Paul's description of the reign of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:

"Then cometh the end, when he (Christ) shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father ... And when all things have been subjected unto him (Christ), then shall the Son also himself be subjected to him (God), who did subject all things unto him (Christ), that God may be all in all." (verses 24-28, RV)

The right understanding of the relative authority of the Father and the Son could not be put more clearly. In the climax of the Father's purpose with the nations of the earth, the Son will hand back supreme authority to the Father. Now let us soberly assess what this means. Jesus has at present been in heaven for nearly 2,000 years. He is to come back and reign on the earth for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4). When at the end of this reign he hands over the kingdom to the Father, the Son will have been glorified in immortality for about 3,000 years! Yet he is then to hand over the kingdom to the Father! The subordination of the glorified Son to God the Father could not be more clearly expressed. For it is God the Father who is, in the end, to be "all in all".

## The origin of the Son

How Jesus came to exist is explained in simple terms in the Gospel of Luke. To Mary, a God-fearing virgin in Israel, herself a descendant of David the King, there appeared an angel with a very remarkable message:

"Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee ... Thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus (Saviour). He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David ... and of his kingdom there shall be no end." (Luke 1:28-33)

Let us pause for a moment to appreciate the shock of surprise and then exhilaration that these words would provoke in her. She knew quite well the promise made to David over 900 years before. A descendant (son) of David would be the means of restoring the glory of the kingdom of Israel, and of reconciling Israel to God. This was the long expected Messiah, and she was actually to be his mother. Her child was to reign on David's throne!

But then – perplexity. Although Mary was betrothed to a God-fearing Israelite named Joseph, they were not yet married, and there could be no question of a child being born until they were. How then, Mary asks the angel, can this promise come to pass? The angel is quite explicit in his reply:

"The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." (verse 35)

To complete the picture, Matthew's Gospel gives us the matter as it appeared to Joseph, her future husband. Before they were married, Mary "was found with child of the Holy Spirit". Joseph would have been fully justified in repudiating his undertaking to marry her. But an angel had a message for him from God:

"Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for it is he that shall save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20,21, RV)

From this Joseph would understand that this child was to be the Messiah. The whole episode is concluded by Matthew's statement:

"All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying (he quotes Isaiah's prophecy uttered 700 years before): Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." (verses 22,23)

These divine statements to Mary and Joseph contained the most momentous news. A child with a great destiny was to be born, for he would not only reign on David's throne for ever, but he would also "save his people from their sins". But the child's origin is clearly stressed. Mary is to be the mother, but Joseph is not to be the father. The child will be conceived because "the power of the Highest", "the Holy Spirit", will operate upon Mary to bring the marvel to pass. And so "a virgin shall conceive" and her son shall be called "the Son of God". This is the clear Bible teaching of the Virgin Birth of Christ.

## Jesus, Son of Man

There is reluctance sometimes to accept the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, was fully a member of the human race. Some feel that to think of him as sharing our nature with all its weakness is to degrade him, and to throw doubt on his sinlessness.

Here again we must turn to the evidence of the Bible. We have seen already the clear record of his origin and his birth: Son of God, but also son of Mary. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians, puts it thus:

“When the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” (4:4, RV)

“Born under the Law” means that he was a male Israelite, living under the Law of Moses. Paul tells us why: “that he might redeem them which were under the law” (verse 5). The Jews lived under a law that condemned them because they could not keep it without sinning. Jesus was born one of them, so that he could fully represent them in his work of redemption.

The Epistle to the Hebrews describes how Jesus had to be made “perfect through sufferings”, so that he might be “the author of salvation” for those who are to be sons (and daughters) of God. For this reason “he that sanctifieth (Jesus) and they that are sanctified (the faithful) are all of one”; that is, are of the same nature. This is what he next declares, referring to the sons and daughters this time as “the children”:

“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same ...” (Hebrews 2:10-14)

This is an explicit declaration that the nature of Jesus was exactly like that of his fellows, “flesh and blood”. The writer goes on to tell us why this had to be:

“Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.” (verses 17,18)

In short, Jesus, in order to carry out his great work of sacrifice for sin, had to be of the same nature as those he came to save; and in order to be a merciful high priest, he had to have experience of all their temptations. The point is put equally clearly in chapter 4, verse 15:

“For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” (RV)

There is, however, a great reluctance to accept the idea that Jesus literally suffered all the temptations that we do. Some feel that to think of him as literally feeling temptation – that is, the urge to commit sin – is to defile him and to make him less than sinless. This, however, is a great mistake. There is a tremendous truth embodied in the living experience and the death of Jesus, and to this we must now turn.

## Why was the Son of God born thus?

What was God’s purpose in bringing His Son into the world in this way? The following statements will make it clear:

“Thou shalt call his name Jesus (Saviour): for he shall save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21)

“Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29)

“God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us ... For if, when we were enemies (that is, of God), we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:8-10)

The clear message emerging from these sayings is that the work of Jesus, under the good hand of God his Father, was to be a sacrifice so that sin could be put away, men and women could be saved and reconciled to God. This is the great work of redemption in Christ. We need redemption; we need “saving”, as the Bible puts it. For otherwise our situation is just as the Apostle Paul told those Ephesians theirs had been, when they did not yet know the Gospel:

“At that time you were without Christ ... having no hope, and without God in the world.” (2:12)

What a devastating verdict! Yet that is our case too – “having no hope”, apart from the work of God in Christ. That is why the Gospel of Christ is not a pleasant “optional extra”, but vitally necessary if we are to escape the fate of eternal death.

## **The vital work of Christ**

So we come to “the problem” (if we may call it that) which needed to be solved. Mankind cannot save itself from the consequences of sin, that is death. Yet God is “not willing that any should perish”: in fact He desires “that all men should be saved” (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4). Yet He cannot overlook sin, for that would be to abdicate His righteous authority in the world. So sin must be recognized, condemned, and conquered in such a way that men and women of earnest, sincere hearts can see the lesson, and acknowledge its truth for themselves. Men and women need a Redeemer who can achieve in himself, and on their behalf, what they in their weakness are unable to do.

So God manifests His only Son, begotten by the power of His Holy Spirit, yet fully a member of the human race. That Son experiences all the temptations of humanity, but firmly rejects them, and chooses to do, not his own will, but the will of the Father. It is vital for us to understand that Jesus made this decision entirely of his own will. He was not forced into it by God, or inevitably predisposed towards it by some pre-existent consciousness in heaven. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it:

“Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.” (1:9)

So, representing the human race, Christ conquered sin in that very nature, flesh and blood, where before it had triumphed: he reversed the original failure which led to the Fall, and, being himself sinless, was able to be offered as a sacrifice for sin. His death upon the Cross was the atonement for human sin. So God, having upheld His righteousness in condemning sin, could now in the abundance of His love and grace, extend forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with Himself to all those who will acknowledge His work in Christ.



If Jesus had, as part of the Godhead, already existed in heaven, it is inevitable that he would have been deeply influenced by that knowledge during his life as "Jesus of Nazareth". He would have known that his glorious resurrection and exaltation were certainties. He would not have needed, nor would he have been able, deliberately of his own will to choose to obey God in the face of the greatest natural pressures to please himself. His great conquest of sin, as a representative member of the human race, would not have been possible and the necessary atonement for sin would not have been achieved.

Understanding the truth about the nature and the experience of Jesus "in the days of his flesh" is absolutely essential if we are to understand God's work of redemption in him.

## **The Holy Spirit**

The doctrine of "God the Holy Ghost" came very late into the Trinitarian theology of the 4th and 5th centuries. It was the last, after the Father and the Son, to be declared to be "God". The Apostles' Creed knows nothing of it; and its appearance in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds has, according to some authorities, the appearance of being "an afterthought".

The Bible's presentation of the Holy Spirit is very different. It is the power and influence by which God achieves His ends. In the beginning "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" and as a result the various acts of Creation came to pass. All living things, man and animals, says the Psalmist, depend upon God:

"Thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth." (Psalm 104:29,30)

*For a fuller treatment, see separate booklet, The Holy Spirit.*

## **By His Spirit He sustains them all in life.**

The prophets of old spoke their messages from God, not out of the inventions of their own minds, but because they were "holy men of God, moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Jesus himself performed his great signs and spoke his words of life, because "God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38).

Nowhere do the descriptions of the activities of the Holy Spirit suggest that it is to be regarded as a person.

## **SOME BIBLE PASSAGES REVIEWED**

But do not some passages in the New Testament suggest that Jesus pre-existed in heaven, and that he came down from heaven, as the Doctrine of the Trinity affirms?

There are a few passages, it is true, which are commonly used by those who hold such views. The astonishing thing is that they are so few – hardly more than half a dozen of any substance. In a short work like this no more than a brief treatment of some of them can be attempted, but enough to suggest how they may be understood in harmony with the rest of scripture.

## **1. "God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ..." (Genesis 1:26)**

This is one of the rare passages from the Old Testament which are sometimes put forward in support of the Doctrine of the Trinity. It is a striking fact, however, that the Jews, who received the writings of the Old Testament in their own language, Hebrew, never derived any Trinitarian ideas from them, but in fact precisely the opposite – they believed firmly in One God. The Doctrine of the Trinity has always been a tremendous obstacle to any Jew examining the doctrines of the Church.

"God" in the above quotation is *elohim*, a word plural in form, but capable of either a singular or plural sense. Most commonly it is used of God Himself, but sometimes for those who act for Him with His authority. So it is used of the judges of Israel, because they were appointed to pronounce judgement in His name: "Thou shalt not revile the judges" (Exodus 22:28, RV margin). In Psalm 82 the rulers of the nation are called *elohim* (verses 1,6), yet because they have "judged unjustly" (verse 2), they shall "die like men" (verse 7). In Psalm 8, man is said to be made "a little lower than the angels (*elohim*)" (verse 5; quoted in Hebrews 2:7).

In harmony with this usage the Genesis quotation above is best understood of the angels. There is of course no clear reference to the Trinity in any case. Although parts of the verse are quoted in the New Testament, it is never given a Trinitarian sense, nor was this passage commonly used in the debates about the subject in the early centuries.

## **2. "In the beginning was the Word ..." (John 1:1 ff.)**

Here it is vitally important to understand in what sense the Apostle John is using the Greek term *logos* (word). It is generally agreed nowadays that the explanation must not be sought in the ideas of the Greek philosophers of the time, but in the Hebrew thought of the Old Testament scriptures.

In Jewish religious thinking and writing Word and Wisdom had come to be applied to God Himself. In Proverbs chapter 8 there is a remarkable passage about "wisdom":

"I, wisdom, dwell with prudence ... I am understanding ... The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was ... When he prepared the heavens, I was there ..." (verses 12,14,22,23,27)

Add to that, this declaration:

"By the word of the Lord were the heavens made ..." (Psalm 33:6)

In the Greek (Septuagint) version of this Psalm, "word" is *logos*. In the Aramaic commentaries of the time *Memra* (word) came to be used as a name for God.

Since *logos* was in current use in the Greek philosophy of his day, John needed to give it the true sense of the Biblical revelation. So *logos*, first a thought conceived in the mind, then demonstrated in action, stands for the wisdom of God expressed in His purpose. The Word represents therefore the mind of God. That is why "the Word was God", or as the New English Bible puts it: "what God was the Word was" – the true significance of God is His mind and His will.

So "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14) and Jesus, the Son of God, was born. This is not the "incarnate Son", but the "incarnate Word". It is quite illogical to assume the pre-existence of "God the Son" first, and then to interpret John's "Word" in that sense. As we have sought to show, the Biblical teaching gives no support to any such doctrine.

**3. "I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38)**

In what sense did Jesus "come down from heaven"? The narrative of his birth tells us that he came into existence because the "Holy Spirit (the power of the Most High) came upon" Mary his mother. He was born as a result of the direct intervention of God's Holy Spirit. In a unique way he alone among the human race could say he "came from heaven".

The result of this heavenly intervention was that he could point to the great difference between himself and the Jews who were rejecting his claim. The Apostle James gives us a valuable clue, when he declares that there are two wisdoms: one belonging to the earth, sensual and devilish; the other "from above", peaceable, pure and righteous (3:14-18). The first is the natural thinking of the human mind, fulfilling its own desires; the second is the mind and thinking of God. Jesus explicitly says that he came "not to do mine own will" (to follow his own natural desires) but "the will of him that sent me" (the wisdom from above). So he can say to the Jews:

"Ye are from beneath; I am from above ..." (John 8:23)

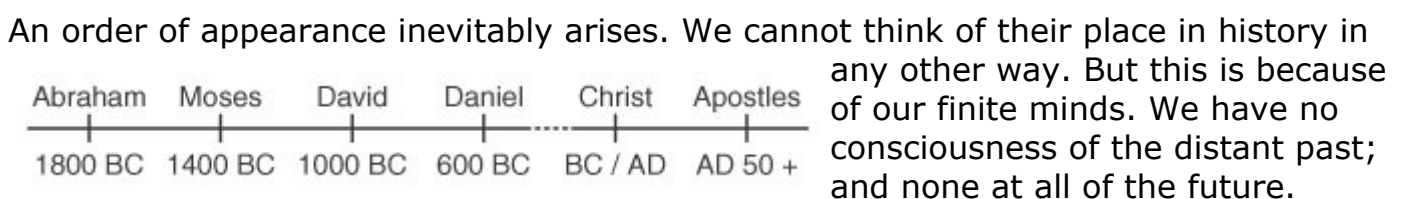
"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." (14:9)

Not that Jesus and God were the same person; but that the Son perfectly reflected the mind and wisdom of the Father.

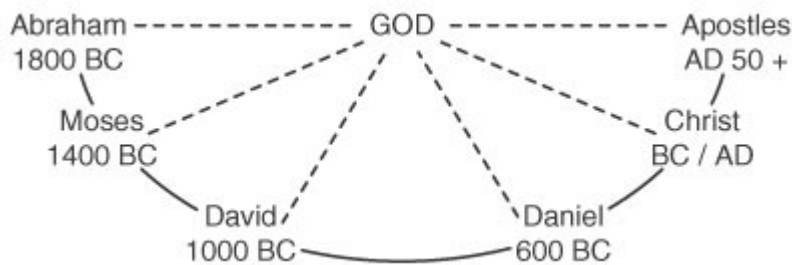
**4. "Now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was ... thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:5,24)**

Here our difficulty is to understand how Jesus could have been honoured and loved by the Father before he actually existed as an independent person. The problem really arises from our limited view of time.

To us the passage of time is like a line. Separate events are distinct points on that line. So if we were to indicate the relative places in time of Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, Christ and the apostles, we should get something like this illustration:



But the mind of God is not subject to these limitations. His mind is infinite in power. He is just as capable of being conscious of past situations, or of future ones, as He is of the present. So we cannot represent the Divine experience of time by a line. It must be more like the following diagram.



Now we know that Moses did not exist before Abraham, and that David lived about four centuries before Daniel. But in our diagram God is the centre of the arc; He is the same distance from them all. Our "distance" represents God's infinite consciousness. He was just

as "conscious" of the sort of person they would each be, long before they were born. He could visualise them, and speak prophetically of them. So the Father knew what sort of person the Son would be before he was actually born and began to exist as a separate person. He could plan what He would eventually accomplish through him. He could "glorify" and "love" in advance His own Son, "the only-begotten of the Father".

As the Apostle Peter put it:

"Christ was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world, but was manifested at the end of the times for your sake." (1 Peter 1:20, RV) (The AV uses "foreordain" here, but elsewhere translates the same word by "foreknow".)

So too the saying of Jesus to the Jews:

"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad ... Before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:56-58)

Abraham, having received the promises, looked forward to the coming of the One in whom "all families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Jesus knew that he was that One, having priority even over Abraham in God's purpose.

**5. "(Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him were all things created ... all things have been created through him, and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church (or community of believers) ... the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence" (Colossians 1:15-18, RV)**

The principle of God's foreknowledge outlined in the last section is a great help to an understanding of this one. Here the Apostle Paul is strongly emphasising the pre-eminent position of Christ in God's purpose for the world.

In what sense was Jesus "the image of God"? Paul's words to the Corinthians explain:

"Christ ... is the image of God ... God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:4-6)

So Christ is "the image of God" because he provided "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" in his face, that is in his character. Now the glory of God here is not some bright light or miraculous power, but the very character of God Himself in His holiness, His truth and His mercy. This character Jesus reflected perfectly, as John says:

"We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Jesus was the image of God, then, not as a physical replica, but as the reflection of his Father's Spirit, in grace and truth.

He is called here "the firstborn of all creation". The title "firstborn" is applied to him twice in the New Testament because he was the first member of the human race to rise from the dead to immortality:

"Jesus Christ ... the firstborn of the dead." (Revelation 1:5, RV)

"Christ ... should be the first that should rise from the dead ..." (Acts 26:23)

"... the firstborn among many brethren." (Romans 8:29)

Jesus has become the first of the new creation of immortal beings; the present believers in Christ are "heirs" with him of the same promise (Romans 8:17).

**6. "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, counted it not a prize (margin: Greek, a thing to be grasped) to be on an equality with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5-8, RV)**

About the Apostle Paul's general intention in this passage there can be no doubt: the followers of Christ must show the same humility of mind as did their Master. Paul then comments upon some features of Christ's experience, but his observations have been given various interpretations.

"In the form of God" presents a problem: in what sense was the apostle using "form"? It cannot be in a purely 'physical' sense, for Jesus did not appear among men as an immortal being. Paul uses the word again in the next verse: "taking the form of a servant." As Jesus knelt before the disciples to wash their feet, he adopted the position, and undertook the duties of, a servant. He came "to minister" (to serve), he said. So in his ministry, Jesus adopted the position of God towards his fellows, speaking with God's authority and in His name. He was Immanuel, "God with us".

He "counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God" means he "counted it not a thing to be grasped". The New English Bible has "did not think to snatch at equality with God". That "equality" must be the final reward of Jesus' faithful service; as Paul says:

"God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord ..." (verses 9-11, RV)

The equality Paul must have had in mind was a sharing in God's own dominion. But that is not an equality in absolute terms, for Paul concludes:

"... to the glory of God the Father."

Jesus did not attempt, says Paul, to "grasp at" this supreme authority by his own will. Although there seems to be no linguistic link, the parallel in the Garden of Eden is remarkable. Eve believed the serpent who told her that if she took of the forbidden fruit, she would not die, but would "be as God (RV), knowing good and evil". She would be equal with God. So she "grasped" the prize in her own way, fulfilling her

own will. And Adam followed her. Such was not Jesus' way. "Not my will, but thine be done" was not only his final prayer in Gethsemane, but the tenor of all his life.

So Jesus "emptied himself" (AV, "made himself of no reputation"), which is explained by the phrase which follows, "taking the form of a servant" (or slave). He moved among the people not as a Prince entitled to worship, nor as God's anointed ruler of the world, but as "the Servant of the Lord" prophesied by Isaiah. Paul expressed it thus:

"Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9, RV)

He was "made in the likeness of men". The word "likeness" cannot possibly mean "similar, but not the same", for the emphatic testimony of the New Testament, as we have already seen, is that "in all things he was made like unto his brethren", sharing "flesh and blood" with them, and experiencing all their temptations (Hebrews 2:14,17; 4:15). This likeness is identity: "being found in fashion as a man."

This rather complicated passage is found, then, to be entirely consistent with the teaching of the rest of the New Testament. Jesus is Son of God, yet he is fully man. He puts aside all his own desires for self-fulfilment and all pride in his unique position; by his humility he achieves redemption for others, and becomes the example to all true believers.

## **7. "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28)**

These words of Thomas, convinced of the reality of Jesus' resurrection by the sight of the holes in his hands and his side, are often quoted as a proof that "Jesus is God". But how are we to understand his saying? The key is to be found in the Bible teaching about "the name" of God. God declared His name to Israel through Moses in these terms:

"The Lord, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth; keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin: and that will by no means clear the guilty ..." (Exodus 34:6,7, RV)

From this it is clear that God's name is a description of Himself as a moral Being; this is what God is like in character. But this "name" can be given to another. Study the following statement of God to Israel in the wilderness:

"Behold, I send an angel before thee, to keep thee by the way ... Take ye heed of him, and hearken unto his voice; provoke him not (be not rebellious against him): for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him." (Exodus 23:20,21, RV)

In this remarkable passage the angel was to be for Israel in the place of God; he was to speak God's words, and judge them. In fact the angel expressed God's name; he was God for them. Now if this was true of an angel of the Lord, how much more of the Son of God himself? Hence these sayings:

"This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent ... I (Jesus) have manifested thy name unto (the disciples) ... Holy Father, keep in thy name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." (John 17:3,6,11)

"I and my Father are one ..." (John 10:30)

Jesus, then, enjoyed a unity of mind and Spirit with the Father, so that he could say, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). For the disciples Jesus was in the place of God; he spoke God's words, proclaimed God's truth, and pronounced His judgements. In short, in that situation he was God. So Thomas' saying, "My Lord and my God", is consistent with the Lord's own teaching. Thomas must have heard it before and only then had he come to understand it.

**8. "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ..." (Matthew 28:19, RV)**

It is convenient to treat this case next, since again it is a question of "the name". This is no "Trinitarian formula", as is sometimes asserted. It is the declaration of the redemptive purpose of God in its three phases. The name of the Father is that already described (in Exodus 34), in His holiness, truth and mercy. That name was manifested in the Son, who lived in the righteousness of the Father and by his sacrifice became the means of salvation for all who would hear, believe and be baptized. That Son manifested the Spirit of the Father, the Holy Spirit, first in his mighty works, then in his reflection of "the mind of the Spirit" (that is, of God). So there are not here, then, three names; there is only one name, since all is the manifestation of the One God. This is consistent with what the rest of the New Testament teaches.

**9. "But of the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever; and the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows" (Hebrews 1:8,9, RV)**

It is important to keep in mind the purpose of the apostle in this opening chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. In the past God had spoken through prophets; now He has spoken through His Son, whom He has exalted to sit at His right hand. The Son is greater than the angels; they are servants of God, but the Son is God's "firstborn", the appointed King of the age to come. A prophecy in Psalm 89 is helpful here:

"I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." (verse 27, RV)

This kingdom of the Son is referred to in the Hebrews quotation above. Notice the testimony to the character of the Son: he had "loved righteousness and hated iniquity". This was why God had exalted him.

That the term "God" (elohim) can be addressed to the Son, the reader should refer to the observations upon the varied usages of elohim, set out in point (1) above. If the word could be used of the judges of Israel and of the angels, there is nothing surprising in its application to the Son.

What, however, is very significant is the way the apostle's quotation goes on: because the Son has loved righteousness and hated iniquity, "therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee ..." So Jesus may be called God in scriptural language, but there is an even greater One who is his God, no less than "God the Father" (Philippians 2:11).

**10. "Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: they shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment ... but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail" (Hebrews 1:10-12)**

This quotation comes from Psalm 102, which should be read as a whole to see its context. The psalmist laments his sufferings, but finds comfort that "Thou, O Lord, shalt endure for ever ... Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion ... So the nations shall fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth thy glory" (verses 12-15). So we have again the thought of the dominion of God over the nations, "when the peoples are gathered together, and the kingdoms, to serve the Lord" (verse 22).

The psalmist then speaks of his afflictions as a faithful servant of God, but finds comfort in the thought that God is the Eternal Creator of all things:

"I said, O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days: thy years are throughout all generations. Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the work of thy hands." (verses 24,25)

The psalmist's general thought is clear: there is to come a new age when all the kings of the earth shall glorify God's name and when "the children of (God's) servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee" (verse 28).

In the Hebrews passage the apostle has taken the general thought of the everlasting nature and supremacy of God over the earth and the nations, and applied it to the kingdom of the Son, God's "firstborn ... ruler of the kings of the earth". When God created the world, says Paul in Colossians, He did it with the Son in view: see point (4) and point (5) above. It is through the Son that the new heavens and earth of righteous rule will be established. Since the Son is now immortal, his rule will last for ever. His "years will not fail".

This passage illustrates the urgent need to understand particular scripture in harmony with the teaching of the whole. The whole theme of Hebrews chapter 1 is the superiority of the Son, the Heir of all things, over the angels, God's servants. The section in verses 10-12 must therefore be understood in this sense. What God did in the creation of the heavens and the earth, the Son will do under God, "when he shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him ... then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory" (Matthew 25:31).

## **CONCLUSION**

In a few pages we have been considering the greatest work ever carried out on earth: the purpose of the God of heaven through His only Son to redeem from a human race swayed by sin and destined to death, those men and women who desire to become "a people for His name". The main features of that purpose are clearly set out in the Bible. God foresaw from the beginning the need for a Redeemer, no less than His only begotten Son.

"Christ the Wisdom of God ..."

That Son had to be fully a member of the human race, in order to be, not their substitute, but their total representative. Putting aside his natural desires, he chose to do the will of his Father. Thus sin was conquered in its own domain, human nature, and Jesus died as the vital atonement, "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of



the world". Ever since, believing men and women have found in him forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.

The marvel is that this great work is still going on. We are far away in space and in time from the days of Jesus and the scenes of his witness. Yet in the great mercy of God we can still know and understand what he and his apostles had to say to those who were willing to listen. But only in the pages of the Bible, and nowhere else. These precious pages demand our earnest and sincere attention in reverence and humility, for where else shall we go? Like Jesus of old, they have "the words of eternal life".

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