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## Gabriel Was Not a Trinitarian:

### Recovering the Biblical Son of God

Churchmen of all stripes frequently complain about disunity among Christians. The current ecumenical movement attempts to neutralize contemporary denominational divisions and contentions by promoting elements of faith on which all believers in Christ can agree. The question is, Does such a version of faith, an irreducible minimum which everyone approves, reflect the “faith once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), which Jude saw slipping away even in the first century?

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).

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 (II 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 (in his

*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." [1]

"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 it 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, *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 II 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” (*Acts of the Apostles, Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, p. 269).

The word, plan and promise which existed from the beginning was also “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 27:13; 10:13; 23:14). 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 (*The System of Christian Teaching*, 1907):

“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 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 I 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” (cp. *Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 453-460).

Note: 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 (II 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...” II

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.<sup>2</sup>

[1] *The Birth of the Messiah*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, pp. 291, 312.