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John 1:1 *Caveat Lector* (Reader Beware)

"In the beginning was the word" does *not* mean "In the beginning was the *Son*"

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his *purpose*. For those God *foreknew*[1] he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the *firstborn* among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, *he also glorified* [i.e. he gave them glory in intention, not yet in reality] (Rom. 8:28-30; cf. Eph. 1:3-10).

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenlies with every spiritual blessing in Christ. *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world* to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, *in accordance with his pleasure and will* — to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he *made known to us the mystery of his will [the mystery of the Kingdom]* according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together in Christ (Eph. 1:3-10).

But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to ransom those who are under the Law in order that we might receive the full status of sons. To show that you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, an heir also, by God's own act (Gal. 4:4-7, Translators' Translation).

God has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to *his own purpose and grace which was granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,* but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:9, 10).

In the hope of the life of the age to come *which God who cannot lie promised* before aionion times but at the proper time manifested, namely his word in the proclamation with which I was entrusted (Titus 1:2, 3a).

John and the Preexistent Purpose of God

One day a theological storm is likely to erupt over the translation of John's prologue in our standard versions. At present the public is offered a wide range of renderings, from the purely literal to the freely paraphrased. But do these translations represent John's intention? Or are they traditional, based on what "everyone accepts"? Have they sometimes served as a weapon in the hands of Christian orthodoxy to enforce the decisions of post-biblical creeds and councils? The seeker after Truth of the Berean style (Acts 17:11) should investigate all things carefully.

According to the findings of a recent monumental study of the origin of Christ in the Bible, Bible

readers instinctively hear the text of John 1:1 as follows: “In the beginning was *Jesus* and Jesus was with God and Jesus was God,” or “In the beginning was the Son and the Son was with the Father…”[2]

This reading of the passage provides vital support for the traditional doctrine of the Godhead, shared equally by Father and Son from eternity. Paraphrased versions sometimes go far beyond the Greek original. The Contemporary English Version interprets John to mean that two beings were present at the beginning. “The Word was *the One who* was with God.” No doubt, according to that translation, the Word would be equivalent to an eternal Son. It would certainly be understood in that sense by those schooled on the post-biblical creeds.

But why, Kuschel asks, do readers leap from “word” to “Son”? The text simply reads, “In the beginning was the *word*,” not “In the beginning was *the Son*.” The substitution of “Son” for “word,” which for millions of readers appears to be an automatic reflex, has had dramatic consequences. It has exercised a powerful, even mesmerizing influence on Bible readers. But the text does not warrant the switch. Again, John wrote: “In the beginning was *the word*.” He did not say, “In the beginning was the Son of God.” There is, in fact, no direct mention of the *Son of God* until we come to verse 14, where “the word [not the Son] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of a *unique Son*, full of grace and truth.” Until verse 14 there is no mention of a Son. The Son is what the word *became*, but what is the word?

Imagine I told my child, “Our car was once in the head of its designer, and now here it is in our garage.” The child might respond: “How could that car fit into the head of the designer? It would be too big.” Fair point, but based on a large misunderstanding. The application to our problem in John 1:1 is simply this: The fact that the word *became* the man Jesus, the Son of God, does not necessarily or automatically imply that *Jesus, the Son of God* is one-to-one equivalent to the word *before Jesus’ birth*. What if the word, the self-expression of God, became embodied in, was manifested in, the *man Jesus*? That makes very good sense of John 1:14. It also avoids the fearful, never-resolved complexities of Trinitarianism by which there are two or three who are fully and equally God. If our theory is right, John will have been speaking about a preexisting *divine Purpose,* not a second divine person.

It is commonly known to Bible readers that in Proverbs 8 wisdom was “with [Hebrew, *etzel*; LXX, *para*] God.” That is to say, God’s wisdom is personified. It is treated *as if it were a person*, not that Lady Wisdom was really a female personage alongside God. We accept this sort of language, usually without any confusion. We do not suppose that Prudence, who is said to be dwelling with Wisdom (Prov. 8:12), was herself literally a person. When the famous St. Louis Arch was finally completed after several years of construction a documentary film announced that “the plan had become flesh.” The plan, in other words, was now in physical form. But the arch is not one-to-one equivalent with the plans on the drawing board. The arch is made of concrete; the plans were drawn on paper.

The Misleading Capital on “Word”

Here is a very remarkable and informative fact: If one had a copy of an English Bible in any of the eight English versions available prior to 1582, one would gain a very different sense from the opening verses of John: “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word

was God. All things came into being through *it*, and without *it* nothing was made that was made."

"All things came into being through *it* [the word]," not "through *him*." And so those English versions did not rush to the conclusion, as does the King James Version of 1611 (influenced by the Roman Catholic Rheims version, 1582) and its followers, that the word was a *person, the Son,* before the birth of Jesus. If all things were made through "the word," as an "it," a quite different meaning emerges. The "word" would not be *a second person* existing alongside God the Father from eternity. The result: one of the main planks of traditional systems about members in the Godhead would be removed.

There is more to be said about that innocent sentence: "In the beginning was the word." There is no justification in the original Greek for placing a capital "W" on "word," and thus inviting readers to think of a *person*. That is an interpretation imposed on the text, added to what John wrote. But was that what he intended? The question is, what would John and his readers understand by "word"? Quite obviously there are echoes of Genesis 1:1ff here: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and God said [using His word], 'Let there be light.' " "God said" means "God uttered His word," the medium of His creative activity, His powerful utterance. Psalm 33:6 had provided commentary on Genesis: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made." And so in John 1:1 God expressed His intention, His word, His self-revealing, creative utterance. But absolutely nothing in the text, apart from the intrusive capital letter on "word" in our versions, turning word into a proper noun, would make us think that God was in company with another *person or Son*. The word which God spoke was in fact just "the word of God," the expression of Himself. And one's word is not another *person*, obviously.

The Meaning of "Word"

Sensible Bible study would require that we attempt to understand what "word" would mean in the background of John's thinking. Commentators have long recognized that John is thoroughly Hebrew in his approach to theology. He is steeped in the Hebrew Bible. "Word" had appeared some 1,450 times (plus the verb "to speak" 1,140 times) in the Hebrew Bible known so well to John and Jesus. *The standard meaning of "word" is utterance, promise, command*, etc. It never meant a personal being — never "the Son of God." Never did it mean a spokesman. Rather, word generally signified the index of the mind — an expression, a word. There is a wide range of meanings for "word" according to a standard source. "Person," however, is not among these meanings.

The noun *davar* [word] occurs some 1455 times...In legal contexts it means dispute (Ex. 18:16, 19; 24:14), accusation, verdict, claim, transfer and provision...[otherwise] request, decree, conversation, report, text of a letter, lyrics of a song, *promise*, annals, event, commandment, plan (Gen. 41:37; II Sam. 17:14; II Chron. 10:4; Esther 2:2; Ps. 64:5, 6; Isa. 8:10), language...Dan. 9:25: decree of a king; [also:] thing, matter or event. Of particular theological significance is the phrase "the word of the Lord/God came to..."...In Jud. 3:19-21 Ehud delivers a secret message (i.e. a sword to kill him)...Yahweh commands the universe into existence. Yahweh tells the truth so everyone can rely on Him. The word of the Lord has power because it is an extension of Yahweh's knowledge, character and ability. Yahweh knows the course of human events. Similarly human words reflect human nature ("the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart/mind")...Words are used for good or evil purposes (Prov. 12:6)...Words can cheer, correct

and calm.[3]

We might add that "As a man thinks in his heart [and speaks] so *is* he" (Prov. 23:7). A person "is" his word. "In the beginning there was the word," that is, the word of God. Clearly John did not say that the word was a spokes*person*. Word had never meant that. Of course the word can *become* a spokesperson, and it did when God expressed Himself in a Son by bringing Jesus onto the scene of history. So then Hebrews 1:2 says: "God, *after* He had spoken long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, at the end of these days has spoken in a Son." The implication is that God did not *earlier* speak through His unique Son, but later He did. There is an important chronological distinction between the time *before the Son* and the time after the Son. There was a time when the Son was not yet.

It would be a serious mistake of interpretation to discard the massively attested meaning of "word" in the Hebrew matrix from which John wrote and attach to it a meaning it never had — a "person," second member of a divine Trinity. No lexicon of the Hebrew Bible ever listed *davar* (Hebrew for "word") as a person, God, angel or man.

The Word "With God"

John's prologue continues: "And the word was with God." So read our versions. And so the Greek might be rendered, *if* one has already decided, against all the evidence, that by "word" John meant a person, the Son of God, alive before his birth.

Allowance must be made for Hebrew idiom. Without a feel for the Hebrew background, as so often in the New Testament, we are deprived of a vital key to understanding. We might ask of an English speaker, "When was your word last 'with you'?" The plain fact is that in English, which is not the language of the Bible, a "word" is never "with" you. A person can be "with you," certainly, but not a word.

But in the wisdom literature of the Bible a "word" certainly can be "with" a person. And the meaning is that a plan or purpose — a word — is kept in one's heart ready for execution. For example Job says to God (10:13): "Yet these things you have concealed in your heart; I know that this is *with you*." The NASV gives a more intelligible sense in English by reading, " I know that this is *within* you." The NIV reads "in your mind." But the Hebrew literally reads "with you." Again in Job 23:13, 14 it is said of God, "What his soul desires, that he does, for he performs what is appointed for me, and many such *decrees* are *with him*," meaning, of course, that God's plans are stored up in His mind. God's word is His intention, held in His heart as plans to be carried out in the world He has created. Sometimes what God has "with Him" is the decree He has planned. With this we may compare similar thoughts: "This is the portion of a wicked man *with God* and the inheritance which tyrants receive from Him" (Job 27:13). "I will instruct you in the power of God; what is *with* the Almighty I will not conceal" (Job 27:11).

We should also consider the related concept of "Wisdom." In Job we find this: "The deep says 'It [Wisdom] is not *in* me.' And the sea says, 'It is not *with* me' " (Job 28:14). To have wisdom or word "with" one is to have them in one's mind and heart. "*With* him is wisdom and strength. To him *belong* counsel and understanding" (Job 12:13). And of course Wisdom, that is Lady Wisdom, was with (Hebrew, *etzel*; LXX, *para*) God at the beginning (Prov. 8:22, 30).

In Genesis 40:14 we read “Keep me in mind when it goes well with you,” and the text reads literally “Remember me *with yourself*...” From all these examples it is clear that if something is “with” a person, it is lodged in the mind, often as a decreed purpose or plan. Paul remarked in Galatians 2:5 that the Gospel might continue “with [*pros*] them,” in their thinking. John in his Gospel elsewhere uses *para*, not *pros* to express the proximity of one *person* to another (John 1:39; 4:40; 8:38; 14:17, 23, 25; 19:25; cp. 14:23. Note also *meta* in John 3:22, 25ff, etc. See *New Int. Dict. of NT Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 1205).

Thus also in John 1:1, “In the beginning God had a plan and that plan was within God’s heart and was itself ‘God’ ” — that is, God in His self-revelation. The plan was the very expression of God’s will. It was a divine Plan, reflective of His inner being, close to the heart of God. John is fond of the word “is.” But it is not always an “is” of strict identity. Jesus “is” the resurrection (“I am the resurrection”). God “is” spirit. God “is” love and light (cp. “All flesh is grass”). In fact, God is not actually one-to-one identical with light and love, and Jesus is not literally the resurrection. “The word *was* God” means that the word was fully expressive of God’s mind. A person “is” his mind, metaphorically speaking. Jesus is the one who can bring about our resurrection. God communicates through His spirit (John 4:24). The word is the index of God’s intention and purpose. It was in His heart, expressive of His very being. As the Translators’ Translation senses the meaning, “the Word was with God *and shared his nature*,” “the Word was divine.”[4] The word, then, is the divine expression, the divine Plan, the very self of God revealed. The Greek phrase “*theos een o logos*”[5] (“the word was God”) can be rendered in different ways. The subject is “word” (*logos*) but the emphasis falls on what the word was: “God” (*theos*, with no definite article), which stands at the head of the sentence. “God” here is the predicate. It has a slightly adjectival sense which is very hard to put exactly into English. John can say that God is love or light. This is not an exact equivalence. God is full of light and love, characterized by light and love. The word is similarly a perfect expression of God and His mind. The word, we might say, is the mind and heart of God Himself. John therefore wrote: “In the beginning God expressed Himself.” Not “In the beginning God begat a Son.” That imposition of later creeds on the text has been responsible for all sorts of confusion and even mischief — when some actually killed others over the issue of the so-called “eternal Son.”

A Disturbance of Monotheism

The great difficulty which faces those who say that there was a “God the Father” in heaven while “God the Son” was on earth is that this implies two Gods! There was, on that theory, a God who did *not* become the Son and a God who became the Son. This dissolves the unity of God. It undermines and compromises the first commandment: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is *One Lord* ” (Mark 12:29). It also flies in the face of the great statement of Isaiah that God was unaccompanied as the Creator. “Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: ‘I am the Lord, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone, who spread out the earth — Who was with me?’ ” (Isa. 44:24).

Of course, if one has taken a first false step by assuming that the “word” in the beginning was “the *Son*,” then the phrase “the word was God” can only confirm the impression that there are *two* members of the Godhead, both of whom are somehow One God. However problematic and illogical this leap into a duality in God may be, Bible readers have been conditioned to make that leap painlessly. They have made that leap despite the impossibility of understanding John 1:1c to

mean “and the Son was the Father.” No Trinitarian believes that, but to avoid it he must assign a different meaning to the word God in John 1:1c than he has given it in 1b, where he instinctively hears “and the Son was with God [= the Father].” But the whole idea of a duality of persons in John’s prologue contradicts Isaiah’s statement that no one was with the Lord in the beginning.[6] That fact in itself should have prevented translators from thinking that “word” was another person alongside the Lord God. Moreover, any introduction of a second divine being into John’s prologue is at the cost of contradicting what Jesus later said. Jesus elsewhere proves himself to be a staunch believer in the *unitary* monotheism (God is one person) of the great Jewish heritage. Addressing the Father, Jesus says unequivocally, “You, Father, are *the only one who is truly God*,” “the only true God,” “the one who alone is truly God” (John 17:3).

J.A.T. Robinson writes, “John is as undeviating a witness as any in the New Testament to the fundamental tenet of Judaism, of unitary monotheism (cp. Rom. 3:30; James 2:19). There is one true and only God (John 5:44; 17:3). Everything else is idols (1 John 5:20)...Jesus refuses the claim to *be* God (John 10:33).”

Unitary Monotheism is Not Abandoned by John or Jesus

We really do not need an army of experts to help us understand that simple sentence. Jesus refers again to the Father as “the one who alone is God” (John 5:44). These are echoes of the pure, strict monotheism of the Hebrew Bible and thus of the Jews for centuries. God remains in the New Testament “the God and Father *of our Lord* Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3; Rev. 1:6). Jesus had, and has, a God, and Jesus’ God is the Father, the one and only God of John 17:3. How exactly like the Old Testament: “Have we not all One Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:5). “You are great. You alone are God” (Ps. 86:10). “You alone whose name is the Lord are the Most High over all the earth” (Ps. 83:18). How beautifully this harmonizes with Paul’s great creedal declaration: “For us Christians there is one God, *the Father*, and none other than he” (see 1 Cor. 8:4, 6). That too is an unambiguous statement about how many persons there are in the Godhead: only one.

Jesus is Lord

Theology has tragically tried to disturb this simple Truth. It has been argued that Jesus in 1 Corinthians 8:6 is called “one Lord.” Certainly he is, but if the Father is “the only one who is truly God” (John17:3),[7] logically it is impossible for Jesus also to be that one God. Jesus is indeed the unique lord, but in what sense? “Lord” in what sense? This is where the celebrated Psalm 110:1 comes in to reveal precious truth to us. That verse wins the prize for being the most frequently mentioned Old Testament verse in the New Testament. It is referred to some 23 times and by implication many times more. In that Psalm the one God, Yahweh, speaks to David’s lord, in the Hebrew “*adonee*.” Now “*adonee*” appears 195 times in the Old Testament and never refers to the one God. The custodians of the text carefully distinguish between the “God-Lord” and all other superiors. The Lord *God* is called *adonai* 449 times (all of its occurrences) while human (and very occasionally angelic) superiors are called lord (*adonee*). Once again the translators took liberties and put a capital letter in English for “lord” in Psalm 110:1 — and *only*

in that verse did they capitalize “lord” when translated from *adonee*. The RV, RSV, NRSV, NAB corrected the mistake and wrote correctly “lord.” Jesus is the one Lord Messiah (Luke 2:11). To give him his full title he is “the Lord Jesus Messiah,” “the Lord Messiah, Jesus.” But he is not the Lord God since there is only one in that category (John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4-6). How fearfully complex and illogical it is to have one God the Father in heaven while supposedly another, who is equally the one God, walks on earth. Would that not be two Gods? How impossibly difficult it would be to imagine that the Lord Messiah who expressly said that he did not know certain things was actually at the same moment the Almighty, omniscient, omnipresent God of the Universe. On that amazing theory, the speechless baby in the manger was also *at the same time* upholding the universe with his unlimited powers. To that sort of imaginative fantasy the church has been committed for too long.

John 1:1, 14 — The Wisdom and Word of God Expressed

We propose that John’s meaning is as follows:

In the beginning there was a divine word and it was stored in God’s heart and was his own creative self-expression. All things came into being through that divine word and without it nothing was made that was made...And the word/plan became flesh — was realized in a human person and dwelt among us.

That living expression of God’s intimate purpose for mankind was Jesus Christ, the human person supernaturally conceived as the Son of God. Jesus is thus the expression, as Paul said, of the wisdom of God, “that hidden wisdom which God ordained before the world to our glory” (1 Cor. 2:7). Jesus thought of his own activity as the expression of wisdom, with which he equates himself: “I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes...” (Matt. 23:34). The same saying is reported by Luke: “For this reason the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and Apostles...’” (Luke 11:49). Jesus is indeed the expression of “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 2:24).

This understanding of John 1 reflects exactly the Jewish background to the New Testament. At Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls), Jews wrote, “By God's knowledge everything has been brought into being. And everything that is God established by His purpose, and apart from Him nothing is done” (1 QS XI.11). Jews and the Jewish Christian, John, equated knowledge, wisdom and word, meaning God's grand scheme for the universe and the salvation of mankind. Professor C.B. Caird of Oxford University wrote, “The Jews had believed only in the preexistence of a personification. Wisdom was a personification, either of a divine attribute, or of a divine purpose, but never a person. Neither the fourth Gospel nor Hebrews speaks of the eternal Word or Wisdom of God in terms which compel us to regard it as a person.” God’s plan and intention was realized in the human being Jesus who was supernaturally begotten, coming into existence as the Son of God.

The Views of Modern Scholars

Contemporary scholars are coming to the same conclusion about John’s opening words. Here are some renderings of John 1:1, 14 and comments which do not require the word to be a person

before the birth of Jesus.

In the beginning there was the divine word and wisdom. The divine wisdom and word was there with God and it was what God was. (*The Complete Gospels*)[8]

In the beginning there was the Message. The Message was with God and the Message was deity. He was with God in the beginning. (*Simple English Bible*)

At the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God and was God, and he existed with God from the beginning. (*Phillips New Testament in Plain English*)[9]

In the beginning was the Word (the *Logos*, the expressed concept, here personified). (*The Authentic New Testament*)[10]

In the beginning was God's purpose, and this purpose was revealed in a historical encounter.[11]

"The Word," said John, "became flesh." We could put it in another way — "the Mind of God became a person."[12]

C.C. Torrey translates John 1:1c, "the word was god."[13] The professor aims with this rendering to tell us that the word has the quality of God but is not identical with God. His sensitivity to the nuances of the Greek is shared by James Denny who discussed the clause "The word was God":

As for your remark that you missed an unequivocal statement that Jesus is God, I feel inclined to say that such a statement seems unattractive to me just because it is impossible to make it unequivocal. It is not the true way to say a true thing...The NT says that *theos een o logos* [the word was God], but it does not say *o logos een o theos* [the word was the one God], and it is this last which is really suggested to the English mind by "Jesus is God"...Probably the aversion I have to such an expression as Jesus is God is linguistic as much as theological. We are so thoroughly monotheistic now that the word God, to put it pedantically, has ceased to be an appellative and has become a proper noun: it *identifies* the being to whom it is applied so that it can stand as the subject of a sentence. In Greek, in the first century, it was quite different. You could say then "Jesus is *Theos.*" But the English equivalent of that is not "Jesus is God" (with a capital G), but, I say it as a believer in his true deity, Jesus is god (with a small g) — not *a* god, but a being in whom is the nature of the One God...Jesus is God is the same thing as Jesus=God. Jesus is a man as well as God, in some ways therefore both less and more than God; and consequently a form of proposition which in our idiom suggests inevitably the precise equivalence of Jesus and God does some injustice to the truth.[14]

A most enlightening comment comes from Dr. Norman Kraus. Dr. Kraus commends the translation of J.B. Phillips in John 1:1 and deplores the rendering of the Living Bible which gives the impression that Jesus himself was alive before his birth.[15] He says,

The Word expressed in Jesus is the self-expression of God. Thus John tells us that from the beginning God is a self-expressive God, not transcendent and aloof as in the Greek Neo-Platonic philosophical thought which greatly influenced the orthodoxy of the fourth and fifth centuries. God is not hidden, revealing His will only in written form as in Islam's Koran. Neither is He the silent reality which can be discovered only in the discipline of meditation beyond all human rationality as in the practice of *zazen* [in Buddhism]. How different the whole meaning of John's

Gospel would be if the first verse read: In the beginning was *satori* (enlightenment).[16]

It is interesting that a translation was made as early as 1795, by Gilbert Wakefield, which rendered John 1:3, 4: "All things were made by *it* and without *it* was nothing made." The same translation rendered the first verse of John 1: "In the beginning was *Wisdom*." There is no doubt that from the point of view of Jewish background, Wisdom and Word carried similar meanings.

A distinguished member of the team of scholars who produced the Revised Version of the Bible (1881) noted that "word" means "Divine Thought manifested in a human form in Jesus Christ." He rendered verse 3: "In *it* was the life and the light of men."[17]

A leading British expert on the texts of the Bible, Dr. Hort, admitted that even in John's Gospel there is no clear statement that *the Son of God* existed before his historical birth in Bethlehem: "An antecedent [i.e., preexistent] Fatherhood and Sonship within the Godhead, as distinguished from the manifested Sonship in the Incarnation is nowhere enunciated by John in express words." [18]

These examples from the pens of leading Christian analysts of the Bible show that it is entirely legitimate to think of "word" as God's utterance, *not His Son* at that stage of history. The Son is in fact what the word *became*. Thus the Son is the visible human expression of God's pre-planned purpose. *There was no Son of God until the Messiah was conceived in history*. Before that God had His Design and Plan "with Him," in His heart.

When Did the Son of God Begin to Exist?

Luke had no doubt about *the reason and basis* for Jesus being entitled to be called the "Son of God." It was *as a consequence of* the supernatural miracle wrought in the womb of Mary that Jesus is truly "the Son of God." "For that reason indeed [*dio kai*] he will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Luke/Gabriel did not believe in an eternal or preexisting Son. The Son was supernaturally conceived in history when Mary became pregnant. Matthew was careful to note that what occurred in the womb of Mary was the creation, the coming into existence, the *begetting* of the Son of God. He was not begotten before that miraculous moment. Matthew 1:20 states that "what is begotten [i.e., describing the Father's procreative act, wrongly rendered "conceived" in many versions] in her is from the holy spirit." At that moment, and not before, God became the Father of the unique Son, Jesus.

Luke 1:35 informs us that this creative act of God brought into existence the Son of God. There was therefore no Son of God until the miracle which God performed in Mary. The Son of God was begotten by the Father when Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, was six months pregnant. Professor Caird comments correctly: "What Luke is here concerned to tell us is that Jesus entered upon the status of Sonship at his birth by a new creative act of that same Holy Spirit which at the beginning had brooded over the waters of chaos. It is this new creation which is the real miracle of Jesus' birth and the real theme of Gabriel's annunciation and Mary's wondering awe."

Other New Testament writers proclaim the same truth about how God finally spoke in a Son in New Testament times. Jesus is the fulfillment of the greatest of all God's promises: Paul wrote to Titus (1:2) about "the knowledge of the truth...in the hope of eternal life which God who cannot lie *promised long ages ago*, but at the proper time manifested, namely his word in the proclamation [Gospel]." Salvation comes to us "according to His own *purpose which was*

granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed, by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:9).

Luke and Paul are in perfect agreement about the origin of the Son of God. He is a supernaturally created human being originating in time in the womb of Mary. Thus Paul carefully writes in Galatians 4:4 of the Son, that he "came into existence (*genomenos*)" of a woman. Paul chooses not to use the normal word for "born" (*gennao*). He stresses the fact that the Son came into existence at his birth. In the 50s AD Paul was already fending off any notion that the Son did not have his beginning in the womb of his mother. After all, a person who is pre-human is non-human. One is what one is, according to one's origin. The whole point about the Messiah, Son of God, is that he is a member of the human race. As God created Adam, son of God, from the dust (Luke 3:38), Jesus was created in his mother's womb by miracle.

F.F. Bruce and Professor Don Cupitt

The noted Bible scholar F.F. Bruce questions the traditional translation of John 1:1 with these words: "On the preexistence question, one can at least accept the preexistence of the eternal Word or Wisdom of God, *which* (who?) became incarnate in Jesus."[19]

Professor Cupitt of Cambridge writes:

John's words ought to be retranslated: "The Word was with God the Father and the Word was the Father's own Word," to stress that the Word is not an *independent* divine being, but is the only God's own self-expression. If all this is correct, then even John's language about Jesus still falls within the scope of the King-ambassador model.[20]

The considered views of these leading Christian thinkers show that it is sufficient to think of "word" as God's utterance, *not His Son prior to the begetting of the Son in Mary*. On this model, the Son is in fact what the word *became*.[21] The Son does not preexist as Son. The Son is the visible human expression of God's pre-ordained purpose. *There was no Son of God until the Messiah was conceived in history*. Before that God had His Design and Plan "with Him," as the basis of His whole intention for creation and for mankind. On this understanding the Messiah is truly a human being, a status which cannot be claimed for him if he has been alive since before Genesis!

Is John's Unity With or Opposed to the Rest of the New Testament?

If we read John and his introduction in this fashion, we find him proclaiming, unitedly with the other Gospel writers and the rest of the New Testament, the supremely important fact that Jesus *is the Messiah*, *Son of God*. On that great truth the church is to be founded (Matt. 16:15-18) and united, and for that single purpose — to demonstrate and urge belief in Jesus as *the Messiah* — John wrote his whole gospel (John 20:31). But notice carefully that the Messiah is the *human* lord of David (Ps. 110:1), the Son of God, and that there is only one God. Remember too the wise words of a leading contemporary scholar:

Indeed to be a "Son of God" one has to be a being who is *not* God!...It is a common but patent misreading of the opening of John's Gospel to read it as if it said: "In the beginning was the *Son*, and the *Son* was with God and the *Son* was God." What has happened here is the substitution *Son* for *Word* (Greek *logos*), and thereby the Son is made a member of the Godhead which existed

from the beginning.[22]

On that fatal shift the whole Trinitarian “problem” was constructed. The resolution of that problem will come only when we return to the unitary monotheism of John, of Jesus and of the whole Bible.

The celebrated Church historian, Adolf Harnack, put his finger on the root of the problem displayed in traditional views of the Godhead:

The Greeks, as a result of their cosmological interest, embraced this thought [of a literal preexistence of the Son] as a fundamental proposition. The complete Greek Christology then is expressed as follows. “Christ who saved us, being first spirit and the beginning of all creation, became flesh and thus called us.”[23] *That is the fundamental, theological and philosophical creed on which the whole Trinitarian and Christological speculations of the Church of the succeeding centuries are built, and it is thus the root of the orthodox system of dogmatics*; for the notion that Christ was the beginning of all creation necessarily led in some measure to the conception of Christ as the Logos. For the Logos had long been regarded by cultured men as the beginning and principle of the creation.[24]

Another distinguished historian of Christian dogma, Loofs, stated that "polytheism entered the church camouflaged" when John's *logos* was turned into the preexisting second member of the Trinity.

A Gnostic Twist of John’s Words

John 1:1 suffered at the hands of its Gnostic expositors early, even we think in the New Testament period. Whether or not 1 John 1:1-2 was written earlier or later than the Gospel of John, it provides just the commentary we need to clarify John 1:1. With utmost emphasis the Apostle tries to ensure that we think of the word as “it” not “he.” There are no less than five *neuter* pronouns in 1 John 1:1-3. “*That which* was from the beginning...concerning the word of life...and we announce to you the life of the age to come which was with [*pros*] the Father and was manifested to us.” It was the promise of the Life to Come, the promise of the Kingdom which was “with the Father.” That promise was manifested in the flesh at the conception of the Messiah. The Messiah embodied all the promises of God. God was and is in him reconciling the world to Himself. But to turn the promise into the actual person of Messiah, consciously in existence before his birth, is to destroy the promise and its fulfillment. God did not speak in a Son in the past ages but He did in these last days (Heb. 1:1-2).

The Jewish writer Philo, a contemporary of Paul, recognized Moses as an expression of God’s plan. He describes Moses as the “empsychosis” of God’s divine thought, i.e. as the personalization of the Divine Plan (*Life of Moses*, I, 28). Thus John says that while the law came through Moses, Jesus was the personalization of the character of God expressed as grace and truth (John 1:17). Jesus, if you like, is “Mr. Grace and Truth,” the expression of God in a miraculously begotten Son. But before that time there was no Son of God, except as a promise in the Divine Plan from the beginning.

In all probability John has been “turned on his head.” What he intended was to stave off all attempts to introduce a *duality* into the Godhead. For John the word was the one God Himself,

not a second person. The later, post-biblical shift from "word" as divine *promise* from the beginning, the Gospel lodged in the mind and purpose of the one God, to an actual *second divine "person,"* the Son, alive before his birth, introduced a principle of confusion and chaos from which the church has never freed itself. This shift was the corrupting seed of later Trinitarianism. God became two and later, with the addition of the holy spirit, three. It remains for believers today to return to belief in Jesus as the human Messiah and in the One God of Israel, his Father, as the "one who alone is truly God" (John 17:3). God is one person not three.

[1] Jesus himself was foreknown (1 Pet. 1:20).

[2] Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Born Before All Time: The Debate about the Origin of Christ*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992, 381.

[3] *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 1, 912, emphasis added.

[4] British and Foreign Bible Society, 1973, emphasis added.

[5] The transliteration reflects modern Greek pronunciation.

[6] Lord (YHWH) is the personal name for the Father. Trinitarianism includes two others in the title and thus has the Son of God communicating in OT times, contrary to the plain statement of Hebrews 1:1-2.

[7] Note that Jesus said "You, Father, are the only one who is truly God." He did not say "your Godhead is the only Godhead." In other words the One God is a single *person*, not an abstract Godhead or essence.

[8] Ed Miller, Annotated Scholars Version, revised, Harper, 1994.

[9] These two versions equivocate by insisting on the personal pronoun "he" for Message and expression.

[10] Hugh Schonfield.

[11] R.M. Grant, D.D., *The Early Christian Doctrine of God*, Macmillan, 1950. Dr. Grant is Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, Divinity School, University of Chicago.

[12] William Barclay, *Gospel of John*, Saint Andrews Press, 1957, Vol. 1, 14.

[13] *The Four Gospels, A New Translation*, New York: Harper, 1947.

[14] *Letters of Principal James Denny to W. Robertson Nicoll, 1893 – 1917*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1920, 121-125. While Denny retains his belief in the Trinity for reasons of his own, his testimony stands as evidence against a tradition of translation which has promoted belief in the Trinity on the part of many others. Such evidence has often been ignored by Trinitarians who are less cautious in their approach to translation.

[15] "Before anything else existed, there was Christ with God. He has always been alive and is himself God. He created everything there is — nothing exists that he didn't make." This is an

obvious contradiction of Isaiah 44:24 and fifty other texts ascribing creation to the Lord alone.

[16] *Jesus Christ Our Lord,* Herald Press, 1987, 105.

[17] Dr. G. Vance Smith*, The Bible and Popular Theology*, 159. Dr. Smith was a non-Trinitarian member of the RV translating committee.

[18] *Dissertation*, 1876, 16.

[19] From correspondence with the author, June 13, 1981, emphasis added.

[20] *The Debate About Christ*, SCM Press, 92.

[21] Cp. Leonhard Goppelt, *The Theology of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 1992, Vol. 2, 297: "The *logos* of the prologue became Jesus; Jesus was the *logos* become flesh not the *logos* as such." This comment of Goppelt was cited by James Dunn with approval in *Christology in the Making*, SCM Press, 1989, fn. 120, 349.

[22] Colin Brown, D.D., *Ex Auditu*, 7, 1991, 88, 89.

[23] II Clement 9:5.

[24] Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. 1, 328, emphasis added.