

1 Timothy 3.16–Who Was Manifested?

August 13th, 2008 by [Sean](#)

Recently, I received this email from a friend who wanted some clarification on 1 Timothy 3:16. In some versions it says, “God was manifested in the flesh,” while in others, “he who was manifested in the flesh.” Below is the note I received:



Howdy Sean,

I did not see a good spot to put this in the blog, but am in a conversation with a friend at work about the Unitarian view vs. the Oneness view, not to mention preexistence discussion. I could not see anything about 1 Timothy 3, specifically verse 16. The point I think he is trying to make is that God made himself flesh. I do not specifically read that nor do I see how this fits into the rest of 1 Timothy. In addition, that verse is indented in the Bibles I have been reading which suggests a quote, but I cannot find it. Finally, I see Theos in the greek, though some translations have he. Not sure what to believe there.

Any information you can provide I would appreciate.

Thanks,

Before we examine the manuscript differences that give rise to this controversy, it would be helpful to look at some major translations and see how they render this verse:

NASB

By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: **He who was revealed in the flesh**, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory.

NAB

Undeniably great is the mystery of devotion, **Who was manifested in the flesh**, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed to the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.

NET

And we all agree, our religion contains amazing revelation: **He was revealed in the flesh**, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

KJV

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: **God was manifest in the flesh**, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

NKJV

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: **God was manifested in the flesh**, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.

So, most of the translations speak of “he who” or “who” or “he” rather than “God.” This is a significant difference. For if the text says, “God was manifested in the flesh,” the Trinitarian doctrine of the incarnation—the notion that God became a human being in Jesus—would have sure footing and we would do well to believe this. However, if this is not the case—if it really just says “he” or “who” rather than “God”—then the text is merely confirming the teaching found in many other places that Jesus came as a real flesh-and-blood human being. I found the following note from the NAB (a standard Catholic translation) to be helpful in explaining the issues behind this text:

NAB note on 1 Timothy 3.16

Who: the reference is to Christ, who is himself “the mystery of our devotion.” Some predominantly Western manuscripts read “which,” harmonizing the gender of the pronoun with that of the Greek word for mystery; many later (eighth/ninth century on), predominantly Byzantine manuscripts read “God,” possibly for theological reasons.

So, this issue is not a matter of translating the Greek into English, but an issue of variation in the manuscripts themselves. Today in museums around the world there are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. These manuscripts differ from each other in slight ways which rarely affect the meaning of text (like different spellings or omission of the definite article). However, there are a few notable occurrences when a variant will greatly change the meaning of a particular

passage. I believe that 1 Timothy 3.16 is one of these cases where a great deal is at stake.

In this verse there are three different manuscript traditions:

1. ος = who
2. ο = which
3. θεος = God

Scholars who work on the manuscripts and compare them to one another in order to determine which reading best reflects the autograph (the original document) are known as textual critics. Foremost among textual critical scholars is the late Dr. Bruce Metzger who wrote *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (TCGNT). In this nearly 700 page book are short discussions of the most significant manuscript differences. In this book is the reading that the committee believed to be the best followed by a rating (A, B, C, or D), which indicates the certainty with which they chose that particular reading. “A” means that they were certain that the reading they picked was the original whereas “D” means that the committee had great difficulty at arriving at a decision.

A wide variety of factors determine how the science of textual criticism is employed to determine the best reading. Chief among these factors is the antiquity of the manuscripts that contain a particular reading. For example, if one reading is contained in the oldest manuscripts and then suddenly, say in the 8th century, a new reading appears, and then after it one finds a lot of manuscripts reflecting this new reading, it is obvious which reading is correct.

Another principle that textual critics use to determine which reading is more authentic is to figure out in what order the change would likely be made. Often times one reading could give rise to another more easily than the other way around. For example, in our case, it is likely a scribe would change ος (who) into ο (which) because the antecedent (the mystery) is neuter not masculine. Otherwise, there is no antecedent and one has to interject a new person (i.e. Jesus). Thus, one can easily see why a scribe would want to “smooth out” the text from ος to ο, but to go in the other direction would be awkward and unmotivated.

A third principle (there are many more) that bears on our text is when two words look alike the scribe can sometimes write the wrong word. I do this all the time with the words “form” and “from,” especially since my spell checker doesn’t catch this type of mistake. It turns out that in oldest manuscripts all letters were written as capitals with no spaces between words. Furthermore, the word θεος was regularly abbreviated to θς which looked very similar to ος, especially in capital letters where ΘC = God and OC = who. Notice the difference is only in the little line that runs through the middle of the Θ!

It may be helpful at this point to quote from the experts themselves now. Here is the entry from the TCGNT which refers to 1 Timothy 3.16:

3.16 ὅς (A)

The reading which, on the basis of external evidence and transcriptional probability, best explains the rise of the others is ὅς. It is supported by the earliest and best uncials (Ⲛ* A^{vid} C* G^{pt}) as well as by 33 365 442 2127 syr^{h^mg}, pal goth eth^{pp} Origen^{lat} Epiphanius Jerome Theodore Eutharius^{acc. to Theodoret} Cyril Cyril^{acc. to Ps-Oecumenius} Liberatus. Furthermore, since the neuter relative pronoun ὅ must have arisen as a scribal correction of ὅς (to bring the relative into concord with μυστήριον), the witnesses that read ὅ (D* it^d, g, 8¹, 8⁸ vg Ambrosiaster Marius Victorinus Hilary Pelagius Augustine) also indirectly presuppose ὅς as the earlier reading. The Textus Receptus reads θεός, with Ⲛ^e (this corrector is of the twelfth century) A² C² D^c K L P Ψ 81 330 614 1739 Byz Lect Gregory-Nyssa Didymus Chrysostom Theodoret Euthalius and later Fathers. Thus, no uncial (in the first hand) earlier than the eighth or ninth century (Ψ) supports θεός; all ancient versions presuppose ὅς or ο^s; and no patristic writer prior to the last third of the fourth century testifies to the reading θεός. The reading θεός arose either (a) accidentally, through the misreading of ος as ὁ ὅ, or (b) deliberately, either to supply a substantive for the following six verbs, or, with less probability, to provide greater dogmatic precision.

Notice that Dr. Metzger and the committee gave the reading ος (who) an A rating. They give two reasons why ος would be

changed to θεός. (1) Because of an honest mistake in copying which could readily be understood considering the similarity of how these two words look. (2) Intentional theological bias: perhaps some scribes wanted to make explicit what they believed to be implicitly true and in so doing they manufactured a proof-text for the Trinity. Thus, we have good reason for accepting the reading that we find in nearly all modern translations:

NAB

Undeniably great is the mystery of devotion, Who (ος) was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed to the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.

Our Lord Jesus was manifested in the flesh—he came as a flesh and blood human being. There is no implicit or explicit indication that Jesus is deity in this verse once we recover the original wording. However, many of you may be curious, as my friend was above as to why the passage is usually indented like poetry. I found the following note from the [NET Bible](#) helpful in explaining how scholars determine whether a particular paragraph is poetic in form.

NET sn #24 on 1 Timothy 3.16

This passage has been typeset as poetry because many scholars regard this passage as poetic or hymnic. These terms are used broadly to refer to the genre of writing, not to the content. There are two broad criteria for determining if a passage is poetic or hymnic: “(a) stylistic: a certain rhythmical lilt when the passages are read aloud, the presence of parallelismus membrorum (i.e., an arrangement into couplets), the semblance of some metre, and the presence of rhetorical devices such as alliteration, chiasmus, and antithesis; and (b) linguistic: an unusual vocabulary, particularly the presence of theological terms, which is different from the surrounding context” (P. T. O’Brien, *Philippians* [NIGTC], 188–89). Classifying a passage as hymnic or poetic is important because understanding this genre can provide keys to interpretation. However, not all scholars agree that the above criteria are present in this passage, so the decision to typeset it as poetry should be viewed as a tentative decision about its genre.

In other words, the scholars are pretty sure this is an ancient (first century) poem or hymn but probably wouldn’t bet their houses on that conclusion. Even so, it is a beautiful paragraph which deserves contemplation and admiration. No doubt, as we all agree, our faith contains an amazing revelation:

NET

He was revealed in the flesh,
vindicated by the spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among Gentiles,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory