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# Who Is Jesus?

*A Plea for a Return to Belief in Jesus, the Messiah*

A study booklet to further the restoration of biblical faith

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The suggestion that Jesus is not, according to the Bible, “very God of very God” is likely to prove startling to those accustomed to the widely held views of the major denominations. It is not generally known that many students of the Bible throughout the ages, including a considerable number of contemporary scholars, have not concluded that Scripture describes Jesus as “God” with a capital “G.”

A difference of opinion on such a fundamental issue should challenge all of us to an examination of the important question of Jesus’ identity. If our worship is to be, as the Bible demands, “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24), it is clear that we will want to understand what the Bible discloses about Jesus and his relationship to his Father. Scripture warns us that it is possible to fall into the trap of believing in “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4)—a “Jesus” other than the one revealed in the Bible as God’s Son, the Messiah promised by the prophets of the Old Testament.

It is a striking fact that Jesus never referred to himself as “God.” Equally remarkable is the New Testament’s use of the word “God”—in Greek *ho theos*—to refer to the *Father* alone, some 1325 times. In sharp contrast, Jesus is called “god” in a handful of texts only—perhaps no more than two.<sup>[i]</sup> Why this impressive difference in New Testament usage, when so many seem to think that Jesus is no less “God” than his Father?

## Old Testament Monotheism Confirmed by Jesus and Paul

Readers of Scripture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century may not easily appreciate the strength of the monotheism—belief in one God—which was the first principle of all Old Testament teaching about God. The Jews were prepared to die for their conviction that the true God was a single Person. Any idea of plurality in the Godhead was rejected as dangerous idolatry. The Law and the Prophets had repeatedly insisted that *only one* was truly God, and no one could have envisaged “distinctions” within the Godhead once he had committed to memory texts like the following (quoted from the New American Standard Bible):

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God is one LORD!” (Deut. 6:4).

“Do we not all have one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10).

“Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me” (Isa. 43:10).

“I am God, and there is no other” (Isa. 45:22). “I am God, and there is no one like Me” (Isa.

46:9).

Examples of strictly monotheistic statements can be multiplied from the Old Testament. The important fact to observe is that Jesus, as founder of Christianity, confirmed and reinforced the Old Testament insistence that God is one. According to the records of his teaching compiled by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus said nothing at all to disturb belief in the absolute oneness of God. When a scribe (a theologian) quoted the famous words, “God is one, and there is none else besides him,” Jesus commended him because he had “spoken intelligently” and was “not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:29-34).

In John’s account of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus equally confirmed the unrestricted monotheism of his Jewish heritage in words which cannot be misunderstood. He spoke of God, his Father, as “the one who alone is God” (John 5:44) and “the only true God” (John 17:3). Throughout his recorded discourses he referred the word “God” to the Father only. Not once did he ever say that he was God, a notion which would have sounded both absurd and blasphemous. Jesus’ unitary monotheistic phrases in John 5:44 and 17:3 are echoes of the Old Testament view of God as one unique Person. We can easily discern the Jewish and Old Testament orthodoxy of Paul who spoke of his Christian belief in “one God, the Father” (1 Cor. 8:6) and the “one God” as distinct from the “one mediator between God and man, Messiah Jesus, himself *man*” (1 Tim. 2:5). For both Jesus and Paul, God was a single uncreated Being, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Even after Jesus had been exalted to the right hand of the Father, the Father is still, in Jesus’ own words, his God (Rev. 3:12).

We may summarize our discussion so far by quoting the words of L.L. Paine, at one time Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Bangor Theological Seminary:

“The Old Testament is strictly monotheistic. God is a single personal being. The idea that a Trinity is to be found there or even in any way shadowed forth, is an assumption that has long held sway in theology, but is utterly without foundation. The Jews, as a people, under its teachings became stern opponents of all polytheistic tendencies and they have remained unflinching monotheists to this day. On this point there is no break between the Old Testament and the New. The monotheistic tradition is continued. Jesus was a Jew, trained by Jewish parents in the Old Testament Scriptures. His teaching was Jewish to the core; a new Gospel indeed, but not a new theology. He declared that He came ‘not to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill’ them, and He accepted as His own belief the great text of Jewish monotheism: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God.’ His proclamation concerning Himself was in line with Old Testament prophecy. He was the ‘Messiah’ of the promised Kingdom, the ‘Son of Man’ of Jewish hope...If He sometimes asked ‘Who do men say that I the Son of Man am?’ He gave no answer beyond the implied assertion of Messiahship” (*A Critical History of the Evolution of Trinitarianism*, 1900, pp. 4, 5).

The strength of Jewish feeling about monotheism is well illustrated by the following quotations:

“The belief that God is made up of several personalities such as the Christian belief in the Trinity is a departure from the pure conception of the unity of God. Israel has throughout the ages rejected everything that marred or obscured the conception of pure monotheism it has given the world, and rather than admit any weakening of it, Jews are prepared to wander, to suffer, to die” (Rabbi J.H. Hertz).

Ezra D. Gifford, in *The True God, the True Christ, and the True Holy Spirit*, says: “The Jews themselves sincerely resent the implication that their Scriptures contain any proof, or any intimation of the doctrine of the orthodox Trinity, and Jesus and the Jews never differed on this subject, both maintaining that God is One only, and that this is the greatest truth revealed to man.”

If we examine the recorded teachings of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, remembering that these documents represent the understanding of the apostolic church in the 60s-80s AD, we will find not a hint that Jesus believed himself to be an uncreated being who had existed from eternity. Matthew and Luke trace the origin of Jesus to a special act of creation by God when the Messiah’s conception took place in the womb of Mary. It was this miraculous event which marked the beginning—the *genesis*, or origin—of Jesus of Nazareth (Matt. 1:18, 20). Nothing at all is said of an “eternal Sonship,”<sup>[ii]</sup> implying that Jesus had been alive as a Son *before* his conception. That idea was introduced into Christian circles after the New Testament documents had been completed. It does not belong to the thought world of the biblical writers.

## Whoever Said the Messiah Was God?

Most readers of Scripture approach the divine records with a well-established set of assumptions. They are unaware of the fact that much of what they understand about Jesus is derived from theological systems devised by writers outside the Bible. In this way they readily accept a large dose of tradition, while claiming and believing that the Bible is their sole authority.<sup>[iii]</sup>

The crucial question we must answer is this: On what basis did Jesus and the early church claim that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah? The answer is plain. It was by contending that he perfectly fulfilled the role which the Old Testament had predicted of him. It had to be demonstrated that he fit the “specifications” laid out for the Messiah in Hebrew prophecy. Matthew, particularly, delights in quoting the Old Testament as it was fulfilled in the facts of Jesus’ life and experience (Matt. 1:23; 2:6, 15, etc). But Mark, Luke, and John and Peter (in the early chapters of Acts) equally insist that Jesus exactly fits the Old Testament description of the Messiah. Paul spent much of his ministry demonstrating from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus was the promised Christ (Acts 28:23). Unless Jesus’ identity could be matched with the Old Testament description of him, there would be no good reason to believe that his claim to Messiahship was true!

It is essential to ask, therefore, whether the Old Testament anywhere suggests that the Messiah was to be “coequal God,” a second *uncreated* being who abandons an eternal existence in heaven in order to become man. If it does not say anything like this (and remembering that the Old Testament is concerned even with minute details about the coming Messiah) we will have to treat as suspicious the claims of anyone saying that Jesus is both Messiah *and* an uncreated, second eternal Person of the Godhead, claiming the title “God” in the full sense.

What portrait of the Messiah is drawn by the Hebrew Scriptures? When the New Testament Christians seek to substantiate Jesus’ claim to Messiahship they are fond of quoting Deuteronomy 18:18:

“I will raise up a Prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put my words into his

mouth, and he will speak to them all that I command him.” Both Peter (Acts 3:22) and Stephen (Acts 7:37) used this primary text to show that Jesus was “that promised prophet” (John 6:14), whose origin would be in an Israelite family and whose function would be similar to that of Moses. In Jesus, God had raised up the Messiah, the long-promised divine spokesman, the Savior of Israel and the world. In Peter’s words, “God raised up his servant and sent him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:26).

Other classic Messianic texts promised that “a son will be born to Israel” (Isa. 9:6), the “seed of a woman” (Gen. 3:15), a descendant of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), and a descendant of David’s royal house (2 Sam. 7:14-16; Isa. 11:1). He would be a ruler born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:6; Micah 5:2). Of his several titles one would be “mighty god” and another, “everlasting father” (Isa. 9:6). It is this single text in Isaiah 9:6 which might appear to put the Messiah into a category of uncreated beings, though this would of course provoke a crisis for monotheism. However, the sensitive reader of Scripture will be aware that a single text should not be allowed to overthrow the Old Testament’s insistence that only one Person is truly God. It should not be forgotten that the sacred oracles were committed to the Jews, none of whom thought that a divine title given to the Messianic King meant that he was a member of an eternal Godhead, now composed suddenly and mysteriously of *two* Persons, in contradiction of all that the heritage of Israel had stood for. The “mighty god” of Isaiah 9:6 is defined by the leading Hebrew lexicon as “divine hero, reflecting the divine majesty.” The same authority records that the word “god” used by Isaiah is applied elsewhere in Scripture to “men of might and rank,” as well as to angels. As for “eternal father,” this title was understood by the Jews as “father of the coming age.”<sup>[iv]</sup> It was widely recognized that a human figure could be “father to the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem” (Isa. 22:21).

In Psalm 45 the “ideal” Messianic King is addressed as “god,” but there is no need whatever to assume that Jewish monotheism has therefore been compromised. The word (in this case *elohim*) was applied not only to the one God but “to divine representatives at sacred places or as reflecting divine majesty and power” (*Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Brown, Driver, and Briggs, pp. 42, 43). The Psalmist, and the writer to the Hebrews who quoted him (Heb. 1:8) were conscious of their specialized use of the word “god” to describe the Messianic King and quickly added that the Messiah’s *God* had granted him his royal privileges (Ps. 45:7).

Even the frequently quoted text in Micah 5:2 about the origins of Messiah does not necessitate any kind of literal, eternal preexistence. In the same book a similar expression dates the promises made to Jacob from “days of old” (Micah 7:20).<sup>[v]</sup> Certainly the promises of Messiah had been given at an early moment in the history of man (Gen. 3:15; cp. Gen. 49:10; Num. 24:17-19).

Approaching the question of Jesus’ Messiahship as he and the apostles do, we find nothing at all in the Old Testament predictions about the Christ which suggests that an eternal immortal being was to become human as the promised King of Israel. That King was to be born in Israel, a descendant of David, and conceived by a virgin (2 Sam. 7:13-16; Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). And so, during the reign of Emperor Augustus, the Messiah arrived on the scene.

## The Son of God

The source of much longstanding confusion about Jesus' identity is the assumption drawn from years of traditional thinking that the title "Son of God" must mean in the Scriptures an uncreated being, the member of an eternal Godhead. That notion cannot possibly be traced to the Scriptures. It is a testimony to the power of theological indoctrination that this idea persists so stubbornly. In the Bible "Son of God" is an alternative and virtually synonymous title for the Messiah. Thus John dedicates his whole gospel to one dominant theme, that we believe and understand "that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God" (John 20:31). The basis for equating these titles is found in a favorite Old Testament passage in Psalm 2:

"The rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against His *Messiah*" whom He has installed as King in Jerusalem (v. 6), and of whom He says: "Thou art *My Son*, today I have begotten thee. Ask of Me and I will give you the nations as your inheritance" (vv. 7, 8). Jesus does not hesitate to apply the whole Psalm to himself, and sees in it a prediction of his and his followers' future rulership over the nations (Rev. 2:26, 27).[\[vi\]](#)

Peter makes the same equation of Messiah and Son of God, when by divine revelation he affirms his belief in Jesus:

"Thou art the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

The high priest asks Jesus:

"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the blessed One?" (Mark 14:61).

Nathaniel understands that the Son of God is none other than the King of Israel (John 1:49), the Messiah (v. 41), "him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote" (v. 45; cp. Deut. 18:15-18).

The title "Son of God" is applied also in Scripture to angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Gen. 6:2, 4; Ps. 29:1; 89:6; Dan. 3:25), to Adam (Luke 3:38), to the nation of Israel (Exod. 4:22), to kings of Israel as representing God, and in the New Testament to Christians (John 1:12). We would search in vain to find any application of this title to an uncreated being, a member of the eternal Godhead. This idea is simply absent from the biblical idea of divine Sonship.

Luke knows very well that Jesus' divine Sonship is derived from his conception in the womb of a virgin; he knows nothing at all of any eternal origin: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; *for that reason* the holy thing which is begotten will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The Psalmist had ascribed the Messiah's Sonship to a definite moment of time—"today" (Ps. 2:7). The Messiah was begotten around 3 BC (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35). His begetting is thus related to his appearance in history (Acts 13:33, not KJV), when God became his Father (Heb. 1:5; 1 John 5:18, not KJV).

Here, clearly presented by the Scriptures which Jesus recognized as God's Word, are the biblical ideas of Jesus' Sonship. It is to be dated from Jesus' conception, his resurrection, or from his appointment to kingship. Luke's view of Sonship agrees exactly with the hope for the birth of the Messiah from the woman, a descendant of Adam, Abraham, and David (Matt. 1:1; Luke 3:38). The texts we have examined contain no information about a personal preexistence for the Son in eternity.

# The Son of Man, the Lord at God's Right Hand

The title "Son of Man" was frequently used by Jesus to refer to himself. Like "Son of God" it is closely associated with Messiahship; so much so that when Jesus solemnly affirms that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, he adds in the same breath that the high priest will see "the *Son of Man* sitting at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61, 62). The title "Son of Man" is most fully described in Daniel 7:13, 14, where a human figure (a "Son of Man") receives the right to world dominion from the Father. The parallel with Psalm 2 is obvious, as well as the close connection with Psalm 110, where David refers to his "lord" (the Messiah) who is to sit at the Lord's (the Father's) right hand until he takes up his office as world governor and "rules in the midst of his enemies" (Ps. 110:2; cp. Matt. 22:42-45). The Son of Man has an equally clear Messianic connection in Psalm 80:17: "Let your hand be upon your right-hand man, upon the Son of Man whom you made strong for yourself."

It is significant that the New Testament writers lay the greatest stress on Psalm 110, citing it some 23 times and applying it to Jesus, who had been by that time exalted as Messianic Lord to immortality at the right hand of the Father just as the Psalmist had foreseen. Once again we must recognize that *eternal* Sonship is alien to all the descriptive titles of the Messiah. This startling fact should lead Bible students everywhere to compare what they have been taught about Jesus with the Jesus presented by Scripture. It would appear that an eternal Son will not match the Bible's account of the Messiah. In opting for a Jesus who is an eternal being passing through a temporary life on earth, many seem, so to speak, to have "got the wrong man."

## Jesus Claimed NOT to Be God

In the Gospel of John the identity of Jesus is a principal theme. John wrote, as he tells us, with one primary purpose: to convince his readers that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God" (20:31). According to John, Jesus carefully distinguished himself from the Father who is "the only true God" (17:3; cp. 5:44; 6:27). If we are to find in John's record a proof that Jesus is "coequal" God, in the Trinitarian sense, we would be discovering something which John did not intend and, in view of his Jewish heritage, would not have understood! Alternatively, we would have to admit that John introduces a brand new picture of Messiahship which contradicts the Old Testament and overthrows John's (and Jesus') own insistence that only the Father is truly God (John 5:44; 17:3). Such a glaring self-contradiction is hardly probable. [\[vii\]](#)

It is high time that we allow Jesus to set the record straight. In Matthew's, Mark's, and Luke's accounts we are told that Jesus explicitly subscribed to the strict monotheism of the Old Testament (Mark 12:28-34). Did he therefore, according to John, confuse the issue by claiming after all to be God? The answer is given plainly in John 10:34-36 where Jesus defined his status in terms of the *human* representatives of God in the Old Testament. Jesus gave this account of himself in explanation of what it means to be "one with the Father" (10:30). It is a oneness of *function* by which the Son perfectly represents the Father. That is exactly the Old Testament ideal of sonship, which had been imperfectly realized in the rulers of Israel, but would find perfect fulfillment in the Messiah, God's chosen King.

The argument in John 10:29-38 is as follows: Jesus began by claiming that he and the Father were “one.” It was a oneness of fellowship and function which on another occasion he desired also for his disciples’ relationship with him and the Father (John 17:11, 22). The Jews understood him to be claiming equality with God. This gave Jesus an opportunity to explain himself. What he was actually claiming, so he says, was to be “Son of God” (v. 36), a recognized synonym for Messiah. The claim to sonship was not unreasonable, Jesus argued, in view of the well-known fact that even imperfect representatives of God had been addressed by Him in the Old Testament as “gods” (Ps. 82:6). Far from establishing any claim to eternal Sonship, he compared his office and function to that of the judges. He considered himself God’s representative *par excellence* since he was uniquely God’s Son, the one and only Messiah, supernaturally conceived, and the object of all Old Testament prophecy. There is absolutely nothing, however, in Jesus’ account of himself which interferes with Old Testament monotheism or requires a rewriting of the sacred text in Deuteronomy 6:4. Jesus’ self-understanding is strictly within the limits laid down by God’s authoritative revelation in Scripture. Otherwise his claim to be the Messiah would have been invalid. The Scriptures would have been broken.

## John’s Jewish Language

Since Jesus expressly denied that he was God in John 10:34-36, it will be most unwise to think that he contradicted himself elsewhere. John’s Gospel should be examined with certain axiomatic principles firmly in mind. Jesus is distinct from “the only true God” (John 17:3). The Father alone is God (5:44). John wishes his readers to understand that all that he writes contributes to the one great truth that Jesus is the *Messiah*, the Son of God (20:31). Jesus himself says, as we have seen, that the term “god” can be used of a human being representing God, but certainly does not imply “coequal Godship.” Jesus’ own self-designation is plainly “Son of God” (John 10:36). In John 10:24, 25 Jesus told them “plainly” that he was the Messiah, but they did not believe him.

Jesus states often that he has been “sent by God.” What the average reader hears in that phrase is not at all what John implies. John the Baptist was also “sent from God,” which does not mean that he preexisted his birth (John 1:6). Prophets in general are “sent” from God (Judges 6:8; Micah 6:4), and the disciples themselves are to be “sent” as Jesus was “sent” (John 17:18). “Coming down from heaven” need not mean descent from a previous life any more than Jesus’ “flesh, which is the bread which came down from heaven,” literally descended from the sky (John 6:50, 51). Nicodemus recognized that Jesus had “come from God” (John 3:2), but did not think of him as preexistent. Nor did the Jewish people, when they spoke of the prophet “who was to come into the world” (John 6:14; cp. Deut 18:15-18), mean that he was alive before his birth. James can say that “every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from *above, coming down* from the Father” (James 1:17). “Coming down from heaven” is Jesus’ and the Jews’ graphic way of describing divine origin, which certainly belonged to Jesus through the virgin birth.

The “preexistence” statements in John (John 3:13[viii]; 6:62) are connected with the *Son of Man*, which means human being. The most that could be proved from these verses is that Jesus was *a human being* alive in heaven before he was born on earth! This sort of explanation is unnecessary, however, once it is noted that Daniel had 600 years earlier seen the Son of Man *in vision* seated at the right hand of the Father, a position which the New Testament says Jesus

gained by resurrection and ascension. As Messiah, Jesus saw himself in the role of the one who was later to be exalted to heaven, since this, according to Daniel's inspired vision, was the destiny of the Messiah prior to his *second* coming in glory. Jesus does indeed "preexist" his future return to the earth. All this had been seen in advance by Daniel before the birth of the Messiah. Thus Jesus expected to ascend to the right hand of the Father where he had been seen before in vision *as an exalted human being*—Son of Man (John 6:62). To say that Jesus was actually at the Father's throne in heaven as a human being before his birth in Bethlehem is to misunderstand both John and Daniel. Jesus had to be born before anything predicted of him in the Old Testament could take place!

## Glory Before Abraham

Jesus found his own history written in the Hebrew Scriptures (Luke 24:27). The role of the Messiah was clearly outlined there. Nothing in the divine record had suggested that Old Testament monotheism would be radically disturbed by the appearance of the Messiah. A mass of evidence will support the proposition that the apostles never for one moment questioned the absolute oneness of God, or that the appearance of Jesus created any theoretical problem about monotheism. It is therefore destructive of the unity of the Bible to suggest that in one or two texts in John, Jesus overturned his own credal statement that the Father was "the only true God" (17:3), or that he took himself far outside the category of human being by speaking of a conscious existence from eternity. Certainly his prayer for the glory which he had had before the world began (17:5) can be easily understood as the desire for the glory which had been prepared for him in the Father's plan. The glory which Jesus intended for the disciples had also been "given" (John 17:22), but they had *not yet* received it.[\[ix\]](#)

It was typical of Jewish thinking that anything of supreme importance in God's purpose—Moses, the Law, repentance, the Kingdom of God and the Messiah—had "existed" with God from eternity. In this vein John can speak of the crucifixion having "happened" before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8, KJV). Peter, writing late in the first century, still knows of Jesus' "preexistence" only as an existence in the *foreknowledge* of God (1 Peter 1:20). His sermons in the early chapters of Acts reflect exactly the same view.

But what of the favorite proof text in John 8:58 that Jesus existed before Abraham? Does Jesus after all confuse everything by saying on the one hand that the Father alone is the "only true God" (17:3, 5:44)—and that he himself is *not* God, but the Son of God (John 10:36)—and on the other hand that he, Jesus, is also an uncreated being? Does he define his status within the recognizable categories of the Old Testament (John 10:36; Ps. 82:6; 2:7) only to pose an insoluble riddle by saying that he had been alive before the birth of Abraham? Is the Trinitarian problem, which has never been satisfactorily resolved, to be raised because of a single text in John? Would it not be wiser to read John 8:58 in the light of Jesus' later statement in 10:36, and the rest of Scripture?

In the thoroughly Jewish atmosphere which pervades the Gospel of John it is most natural to think that Jesus spoke in terms that were current amongst those trained in the rabbinical tradition. In a Jewish context, asserting "preexistence" does not mean that one is claiming to be an uncreated being! It does, however, imply that one has absolute significance in the divine plan. Jesus is certainly the central reason for creation. But the one God's creative activity and his plan for salvation were not manifested in a unique created being, the Son, until Jesus' birth. The



person of Jesus originated when God's self-expression took form in a human being (John 1:14).  
[\[x\]](#)

It is a well-recognized fact that the conversations between Jesus and the Jews were often at cross purposes. In John 8:57 Jesus had not in fact said, as the Jews seemed to think, that he had seen Abraham, but that Abraham had rejoiced to see Messiah's day (v. 56). The patriarch was expecting to arise in the resurrection at the last day (John 11:24; Matt. 8:11) and take part in the Messianic Kingdom. Jesus was claiming superiority to Abraham, but in what sense?

As the "Lamb of God" he had been "crucified before the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8, KJV; 1 Pet. 1:20)—not, of course, literally, but in God's plan. In this way also Jesus "was" before Abraham. Thus Abraham could look forward to the coming of the Messiah and his Kingdom. The Messiah and the Kingdom therefore "preexisted" in the sense that they were "seen" by Abraham through the eyes of faith.[\[xi\]](#)

The expression "I am" in John 8:58 positively does not mean "I am God." It is *not*, as so often alleged, the divine name of Exodus 3:14, where Yahweh declared: "I am *the self-existent One*" (*ego eimi o ohn*). Jesus nowhere claimed that title. The proper translation of *ego eimi* in John 8:58 is "I am he," i.e., the promised Christ (cp. the same expression in John 4:26, "I who speak to you am he [the Christ]").[\[xii\]](#) Before Abraham was born Jesus had been "foreknown" (cp. 1 Pet. 1:20). Jesus here makes the stupendous claim to absolute significance in God's purpose.

## The Logos in John 1:1

There is no reason, other than force of habit, to understand the "word" in John 1:1 to mean a second divine person, *before the birth of Jesus*.[\[xiii\]](#) A similar personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8:22, 30 and Luke 11:49 does not mean that "she" is a second person. There is no possible way of accommodating a "second divine Person" in the revealed Godhead as John and Jesus understood it. The Father remains, as He always has been, "the only true God" (17:3), "the one who alone is God" (5:44). Reading the term *logos* ("word") from an Old Testament perspective we will understand it to be God's activity in creation, His powerful life-giving command by which all things came into existence (Ps. 33:6-12). God's word is the power by which His purposes are furthered (Isa. 55:11). If we borrow from elsewhere in the New Testament we will equate the word with the creative salvation message, the gospel. This is the meaning throughout the New Testament (Matt. 13:19; Gal. 6:6, etc.).

It is this complex of ideas which go to make up the significance of *logos*, the "word." "Through *it* all things were made and nothing was made without *it*" (John 1:3). In John 1:14 the word materializes in a real human being having a divine origin in his supernatural conception.[\[xiv\]](#) From this moment, in "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4), the one God expresses Himself in a new creation, the counterpart of the original creation in Adam. Jesus' conception and birth mark a new unprecedented phase of God's purpose in history. As the second Adam, Jesus sets the scene for the whole program of salvation. He pioneers the way to immortality. In him God's purpose is finally revealed in a human being (Heb. 1:1).

All this does not mean, however, that Jesus gave up one life for another. That would seriously disturb the parallel with Adam who was also "Son of God" by direct creation (Luke 3:38). It would also interfere with the pure monotheism revealed throughout the Scriptures which "cannot

be broken” (John 10:35). Rather, God begins to speak to us in the first century AD in a new Son, His last word to the world (Heb. 1:1). It is the notion of an eternally existing Son which so violently disrupts the biblical scheme, challenging monotheism and threatening the real humanity of Jesus (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7).

This understanding of Jesus in John’s Gospel will bring John into harmony with his fellow apostles and the monotheism of the Old Testament will be preserved intact. The facts of church history show that the unrestricted monotheism of the Hebrew Scriptures was soon after New Testament times abandoned under the influence of alien Greek ideas. At the same time the predetermined framework for Messiahhood was forgotten, and with it the reality of the future Messianic Kingdom. The result was years of conflict, still unresolved, over how an already existing second divine Person could be combined with a fully human being in a single individual. The concept of literal preexistence for the Messiah is the intruding idea, the part of the Christological puzzle which will not fit. Without it a clear picture of Jesus emerges within the terms of the Hebrew revelation and the teachings of the apostles. God, the Father, remains indeed the only true God, the one who alone is God (John 17:3; 5:44) and the oneness of Jesus with his Father is found in a unity of *function* performed by one who is truly the Son, as the Bible everywhere else understands that term (John 10:36). If Christianity is to be revived and unified it will have to be on the basis of belief in Jesus, the Messiah of the Bible, unspoiled by the misleading speculations of the Greeks who displayed very little sympathy for the Hebrew world into which Christianity was born.

## The “Divinity” of Jesus

To say that Jesus is not God is not to deny that he is uniquely invested with the divine nature. Divinity is, so to speak, “built in” to him by virtue of his unique conception under the influence of the Holy Spirit, as well as by the Spirit which dwelt in him in full measure (John 3:34). Paul recognizes that the “fullness of the Godhead dwells in him” (Col. 1:19; 2:9). In seeing the man Jesus we see the glory of his Father (John 1:14). We perceive that God Himself was “in the Messiah reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). The Son of God is therefore the pinnacle of God’s creation, the full expression of the divine character in a human being. Though the glory of the Father had been manifested, to a much less degree, in Adam (Ps. 8:5; cp. Gen. 1:26), in Jesus the Father’s will is fully explained (John 1:18, NASB).

None of what Paul says about Jesus takes him out of the category of human being. The presence of God which dwelt in the temple did not turn the temple into God! It is seldom observed that a high degree of “divinity” is ascribed by Paul also to the Christian<sup>[xv]</sup> who has the spirit of Messiah dwelling in him (Eph. 3:19). As “God was in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19), so Christ was “in Paul” (Gal. 2:20), and he prays that the Christians may be “filled up to all the fullness of God” (Eph. 1:23; 3:19). Peter speaks of the faithful having the “divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). What is true of the Christian is true to a much higher degree of Jesus who is “the pioneer” leading others through the process of salvation after successfully “completing the course” himself (Heb. 2:10).

## In the Form of God

Despite the massive evidence from the New Testament showing that the apostles always

distinguished Jesus from the “one God, the Father” (1 Cor. 8:6), many confidently find the traditional view of Jesus as a second uncreated being, fully God, in Philippians 2:5-11. It is something of a paradox that the writer on Christology in the *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* can say that “Paul never gives to Christ the name or description of ‘God,’” but nevertheless finds in Philippians 2 a description of Christ’s eternal “pre-life” in heaven.[\[xvi\]](#)

A recent and widely acclaimed study of the biblical view of Jesus—*Christology in the Making*, by James Dunn—alerts us to the danger of reading into Paul’s words the conclusions of a later generation of theologians, the “fathers” of the Greek church in the centuries following the completion of the New Testament writings. The tendency to find in Scripture what we already believe is natural, since none of us can easily face the threatening possibility that our “received” understanding does not coincide with the Bible. (The problem is even more acute if we are involved in teaching or preaching the Bible.)

However, are we not demanding of Paul more than he could possibly give by asking him to present us, in a few brief phrases, with an eternal being other than the Father? This would so obviously threaten the strict monotheism which he everywhere else expresses so clearly (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:5). It would also raise the whole Trinitarian problem of which Paul, brilliant theologian as he was, is quite unaware.

Looking afresh at Philippians 2, we must ask the question whether Paul in these verses has really made what would be his only allusion to Jesus having been alive before his birth. The context of his remarks shows him urging the saints to be humble. It has often been asked whether it is in any way probable that he would enforce this lesson by asking his readers to adopt the frame of mind of one who, having been eternally God, made the decision to become man. It might also be strange for Paul to refer to the preexistent Jesus as Jesus the Messiah, thus reading back into eternity the name and office he received at birth.

Paul can be readily understood in Philippians 2 in terms of a favorite theme: Adam Christology. It was Adam who was in the image of God as God’s son (Gen. 1:26; Luke 3:38), while Jesus, the second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) was also in the form of God (the two words “image” and “form” can be interchanged).[\[xvii\]](#) However, whereas Adam, under the influence of Satan, grasped at equality with God (“You will be as God,” Gen. 3:5), Jesus did not. Though he had every right to divine office since he was the Messiah reflecting the divine Presence, he did not consider equality with God something to be “clutched at.” Instead he gave up all privileges, refusing Satan’s offer of power over the world’s kingdoms (Matt 4:8-10), and behaved throughout his life as a servant, even to the point of going to a criminal’s death on the cross.

In response to this life of humility God has now exalted Jesus to the status of Messianic Lord at the right hand of the Father, as Psalm 110 predicted. Paul does not say that Jesus was regaining a position which he had temporarily given up. He appears rather to have gained his exalted office for the first time following his resurrection. Though he had all his life been the Messiah, his position was publicly confirmed when he was “made both Lord and Messiah” by being raised from the dead (Acts 2:36; Rom. 1:4). If we read Paul’s account of Jesus’ life in this way as a description of the Lord’s continuous self-denial a close parallel will be seen with another of his commentaries on Jesus’ career. “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9). While Adam had fallen, Jesus voluntarily “stepped down.”

The traditional reading of the Philippians 2 passage depends almost entirely on understanding Jesus' condition "in the form of God" as a reference to a preexistent life in heaven. Translations have done much to bolster this view. The verb "was" in the phrase "was in the form of God" occurs frequently in the New Testament and by no means carries the sense of "existing in eternity," though some versions try to force that meaning into it. In 1 Corinthians 11:7, Paul says that a man ought not to cover his head since he *is* in the image and glory of God. The verb here is no different from the "was" describing Jesus as in the form of God. If ordinary man is in God's glory and image, how much more Jesus, who is the perfect human representative of God in whom all the attributes of the divine nature dwelt (Col. 2:9). Paul's intention in Philippians 2 is not to introduce the vast subject of an eternal divine being who became man, but to teach a simple lesson in humility. We are to have the same attitude as Jesus, to think as he did. We are not being asked to imagine ourselves as eternal divine beings about to surrender Godhood in order to come to the earth as men.

It is not widely known that many have had serious reservations about reading Philippians 2 as a statement about preexistence. A former Regius Professor of Divinity wrote in 1923: "Paul is begging the Philippians to cease from dissensions, and to act with humility towards each other. In 2 Corinthians 8:9 he is exhorting his readers to be liberal in almsgiving. It is asked whether it would be quite natural for him to enforce these two simple moral lessons by incidental references (and the only reference that he ever makes) to the vast problem of the mode of the incarnation. And it is thought by many that his homely appeals would have more effect if he pointed to the inspiring example of Christ's humility and self-sacrifice in his human life, as in 2 Corinthians 10:1: 'I exhort you by the meekness and forbearance of Christ.'" The author of these comments, A.H. McNeile, suggests the following paraphrase: "Though Jesus was throughout the whole of his life divine, yet he did not think it a privilege to be maintained at all costs to be treated as on an equality with God but of his own accord emptied himself (of all self-assertion or divine honor) by adopting the nature of a slave."[\[xviii\]](#)

Paul is pointing to the fact that Jesus appeared on the human scene as any other man ("in the likeness of men"). His life, looked at as a whole, was a continuous process of self-humbling, culminating in his death on the cross. The second Adam, unlike the first, submits himself entirely to the will of God and in consequence receives the highest exaltation.

## Head of the New Creation

The parallel between Adam and Jesus forms the basis of Paul's thinking about the Messiah. Christ bears the same relationship to the new creation, the church, as Adam did to the creation begun in Genesis. Beginning with Jesus, humanity makes a new start. In Jesus as representative man, the new Adam, society begins all over again. This correspondence is seriously disturbed if Jesus after all did not originate as a man. As Adam is created a "Son of God" (Luke 3:38), so Jesus' conception constitutes him "Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Certainly Adam is of the earth (1 Cor. 15:47) while Jesus is the "man from heaven," not, according to Paul, coming from heaven *at his birth*, but *at his second coming* to raise the faithful dead (1 Cor. 15:45). At this point we see the flaw in the traditional ideas about preexistence. The movement of Christ from heaven to earth centers in Paul's mind on the *Parousia* (second coming). In later thinking the center of interest was transferred to his birth. Thus, curiously, the traditional scheme looks backwards into history,

while the Bible orients us primarily towards the Messiah's future coming in glory.

It is as head of the new creation and the center of God's cosmic purpose that Paul describes Jesus in Colossians 1. His intention is to show the supreme position which Jesus has won through resurrection and his preeminence in the new order, as against the claims of rival systems of religion by which the Colossians were being threatened. All authorities were created "in Christ" (Col. 1:16). So Jesus had claimed also: "All power in heaven and earth is mine" (Matt. 28:18). "All things" here means for Paul the intelligent, animate creation consisting of "thrones, dominion, rulers or authorities," which were created "in Christ," "through Christ" (not "by") and "for Christ." It is his *Kingdom* which Paul has in mind (Col. 1:13). Jesus is the firstborn of every creature as well as the firstborn from the dead (vv. 15, 18).<sup>[xix]</sup> The term "firstborn" designates him the leading member of the new created order as well as its source, a position which he attained by being the first to receive immortality through resurrection. John, in Revelation 3:14, similarly calls Jesus "the beginning of the creation of God," which most naturally means that he himself was part of the creation. That "firstborn" designates in the Bible the one who holds the supreme office can be shown from Psalm 89:27 where the "firstborn," the Messiah, is the "highest of the kings of the earth," one chosen like David *from the people* and exalted (Ps. 89:19). Again Paul has developed the Messianic concepts already well established by the Hebrew Scriptures.

In none of Paul's statements are we compelled to find a "second, eternal divine being." He presents us rather with the glorified second Adam, now raised to the divine office for which man was originally created (Gen. 1:26; Ps. 8). Jesus now represents the human race as the Head of the new order of humanity. He intercedes for us as supreme High Priest in the heavenly temple (Heb. 8:1). In ascribing such elevated titles to the risen Lord, there is no reason to think that Paul has infringed his own clear monotheism expressed in 1 Corinthians 8:6: "To us Christians, there is *one God the Father*, and one Lord Jesus Christ." Nothing in Colossians 1 forces us to believe that Paul, without warning, has parted company with Matthew, Mark, Luke, Peter, and John, and deviated from the absolute monotheism which he states so carefully and clearly elsewhere (1 Tim. 2:5; Eph 4:6), and which was deeply embedded in his whole theological background.

## **"The Inhabited Earth to Come of Which We Speak"**

The writer to the Hebrews lays particular emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. He was tempted in all points as we are and yet was without sin (Heb. 4:15). God originally made the ages *through* (not "by") the Son, with his destiny as Messiah in view (Heb. 1:2). After communicating with us in different ways and at different times through spokesmen in the past, God has now finally spoken to us in one who is truly Son (Heb. 1:2). The writer does not mean to tell us (what Jesus did not know, Mark 10:6) that Jesus had been the active agent in the Genesis creation. It was God who had rested on the seventh day, after completing his work (Heb. 4:4, 10).<sup>[xx]</sup> It is God, also, who will yet introduce the Son into the "inhabitable earth of the future": "When He again brings the Son into the world" (Heb. 1:6, NASB).<sup>[xxi]</sup>

When the Messiah is reintroduced into the earth, a number of important statements about him will become history. Firstly, Messiah's throne will be established (Heb. 1:8). (Compare, "When

the Son of Man comes in his glory, then he will sit on his throne of glory,” Matt. 25:31).[\[xxii\]](#) As representing the divine majesty of the Father, the Messianic title “god” will be applied to Jesus, as it once was to the judges of Israel who foreshadowed the supreme Judge of Israel, the Messiah (Ps. 82:6). Another prophecy from Psalm 102:25 will also be realized in the coming kingdom of Messiah. The foundations of a new earth and a new heaven will be laid as Isaiah 51:16 and 65:17 foresee. Hebrews 1:10 can easily be misread to mean that the Lord Messiah was responsible for the creation in Genesis. However, this overlooks the author’s quotation from the LXX of the thoroughly Messianic Psalm 102. Moreover, he specifically states that his series of truths about the Son refers to the time when he is “brought again” into the earth (Heb. 1:6). And in Hebrews 2:5 he tells us once again that it is the “inhabited earth *of the future*” of which he is speaking in chapter one. The writer must be allowed to provide his own commentary. His concern is with the Messianic Kingdom, not the creation in Genesis. Because we do not share the Messianic vision of the New Testament as we ought, our tendency is to look back rather than forward. We must attune ourselves to the thoroughly Messianic outlook of the entire Bible.[\[xxiii\]](#)

## The Hebrew Background to the New Testament

It will be useful by way of summary and to orient ourselves to the thought world of the authors of the New Testament to lay out the principal passages of the Hebrew Scriptures from which they derived their unified understanding of the person of Christ. Nowhere can it be shown that the Messiah was to be an uncreated being, a fact which should cause us to look outside the Bible for the source of such a revolutionary concept.

The original purpose for man, made in the image and glory of God, was to exercise dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26; Ps. 8). That ideal is never lost beyond our recovery for the Psalmist speaks of the “glory” with which man has been (potentially) crowned so that “all things are to be subjected under his feet” (Ps. 8:5, 6). As the divine plan unfolds it becomes clear that the promised “seed of the woman” who is to reverse the disaster caused by Satan (Gen. 3:15) will be a descendant of David (2 Sam. 7:13-16). He will call God his Father (2 Sam. 7:14) and be appointed as God’s Son, the Messiah, to whom God entrusts rulership of the earth (Ps. 2). Prior to taking up his royal office, however, the Messiah is to sit at the right hand of the Father and bear the title “Lord” (Ps. 110:1).[\[xxiv\]](#) As Son of Man, representative man, he will take his place in heaven prior to receiving from God authority to administer a universal empire (Dan. 2:44; 7:14; Acts 3:20, 21). Having at his first coming suffered for the sins of the people (Isa. 53; Ps. 22), he is to come again as God’s firstborn, the ruler of the kings of the earth (Ps. 89:27), foreshadowed by David who was also chosen from the people (Ps. 89:19, 20).

As the second Moses, the Messiah was to arise in Israel (Deut. 18:18), deriving his divine Sonship from a supernatural birth from a virgin (Isa. 7:14; Luke 1:35), and being confirmed as God’s Son through his resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4). As High Priest, the Messiah now serves his people from heaven (Heb. 8:1) and awaits the time of the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21), when he is destined to be reintroduced into the earth as King of Kings, the divine figure of Psalm 45 (Heb. 1:6-8). At that time, in the new age of the Kingdom, he will rule with his disciples (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 20:4). As Adam heads the original creation of human beings on earth, so Jesus is the created Head of the New

Order of humanity, in whom the ideals of the human race will be fulfilled (Heb. 2:7).

Within this Messianic framework the person and work of Jesus can be explained in terms understood by the apostles. Their purpose even when presenting the most “advanced” Christology is to proclaim belief in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (John 20:31), who is the center of God’s whole purpose in history (John 1:14). Though Jesus is obviously coordinated in a most intimate way with his Father, the latter remains the “only true God” of biblical monotheism (John 17:3). Jesus thus represents the presence of the one God, his Father. In the man Jesus, Immanuel, the one God is present with us (John 14:9).[\[xxv\]](#)

## **From Son of God to God the Son**

We have searched out the Jesus of the Bible by assembling the various strands of the data revealed in the inspired records. The picture that emerges is different from the picture presented by traditional Christianity in that the person of Christ we have described does not complicate the first principle of biblical faith, namely belief in one who alone is truly and absolutely God (John 17:3; 5:44).

It is easy to see how the biblical Messiah became “God the Son” of the post-biblical theologians. It was possible only when the essential Messianism of the Bible was gradually suppressed. The term “Son of God,” which in Scripture is a purely Messianic title describing the glory of man in intimate fellowship with the Father, was from the second century misunderstood and reapplied to the divine nature of a God/Man. At the same time the designation “Son of Man,” no less a title of the Messiah as representative man, was made to refer to his human nature. In this way both titles, Son of God and Son of Man, were emptied of their original Messianic significance and their biblical meaning was lost. While the evidence of the Old Testament was largely rejected—as well as the evidence of the synoptic Gospels, Acts, Peter, James, and John in the book of Revelation—a series of verses in John’s Gospel and two or three in Paul’s epistles were reinterpreted to accommodate the new idea that Jesus was the second member of an eternal Trinity, coequally and coessentially God. That Jesus, however, is scarcely the Jesus of the biblical documents. He is another Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4).

## **The Man and the Message Obscured**

With the loss of the biblical meaning of Messiah went a parallel loss of the meaning of the Messianic Kingdom which is the center of all Jesus’ teaching and the heart of the gospel (Luke 4:43; Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31). The hope for the establishment of the Messiah’s kingdom in a renewed earth, the theme of all Old Testament prophecy which Jesus came to confirm (Rom. 15:8), was replaced by the hope of “heaven when you die”; and a massive piece of propaganda convinced (and continues to convince) an uninstructed public that Jesus never believed in anything so “earthly,” political, or “unspiritual” as the Kingdom of God on earth.

The result of the radical changes which gradually overcame the outlook of the church (beginning as early as the second century) has been a loss of the central message of Jesus—the gospel about the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43; Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31)—as well as a misunderstanding about who he was. Churches are left in some embarrassment explaining how on the one hand Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, while he is supposed to have

rejected the Old Testament promises that the Messiah is coming to rule on the earth! The theory usually advanced is that Jesus upheld the Old Testament as far as it taught an ethical ideal of love, but rejected the prophets' vision of a catastrophic divine intervention in history leading to a renewal of society on earth under the Kingdom of God.[\[xxvi\]](#) In short, Jesus is supposed to have claimed to be the Messiah, but at the same time to have eliminated all hope for the restoration of the theocracy for which his contemporaries longed.

There is no doubt at all that the faithful in Israel were indeed looking forward to the arrival of Messiah to rule on earth, but Jesus, so it has long been maintained, parted company with such "crude" expectations.[\[xxvii\]](#) The question as to why the Jews expected a concrete Messianic empire on earth is silently bypassed. If it were asked, the answer would obviously have to be that the Old Testament Scriptures had predicted it in every detail.

Churches will have to come to the realization that they are not playing fair with the Bible by allowing only the first act of the divine drama—the part which concerns the suffering and dying Messiah—while dismissing the second act, the future arrival of the Messiah as triumphant King, God's envoy for creating an effective and lasting peace on earth. Jesus' resurrection and ascension and his present session at the right hand of the Father are only part of the triumph of God's Son, as the New Testament understands it.

A serious and fundamental misconception underlies the traditional ways of thinking about Jesus' role in history. It has to do with the Messiah's political-theocratic function which is the principal ingredient of Messiahship. Until now, every effort has been made to sustain the belief, contrary to the most straightforward statements of Scripture, that Jesus' promises to the church that it is to rule with him in the future Messianic Kingdom (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:28-30) are to be applied to the *present* era. What continues to be overlooked is that it is "when Jesus comes in his glory" at the end of the present age (Matt 25:31), "in the new age when he takes up his office as King" (Matt 19:28), that the church is to rule with him. Lest there should be the slightest doubt, the chorus of divine beings sings of the church, drawn from every nation, whom God has constituted a line of kings and priests destined to "reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:10). The pure Messianism of Psalm 2 remains as strong as ever in Revelation 2:26 and 3:21, and these are Jesus' very own words to the church (Rev. 1:1; 22:16). The Jesus of the Scriptures is none other than the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic literature.

There is an urgent need for churchgoers to involve themselves in a personal investigation of the Scriptures unshackled by this or that creed at present so willingly accepted "on faith." We will have to be honest enough to admit that majority opinions are not automatically the correct ones and that tradition, uncritically accepted, may have gone far in burying the original faith as Jesus and the apostles taught it. It may be that we should take seriously the observation of Canon H.L. Goudge when he wrote of the disaster which occurred "when the Greek and Roman rather than the Hebrew mind came to dominate the church." It was "a disaster in doctrine and practice," according to Canon Goudge, "from which the Church has never recovered."[\[xxviii\]](#) Recovery can only begin when due notice is taken of John's solemn warning that "there is no falsehood so great as the denial of the Messiahship of Jesus" (1 John 2:22).[\[xxix\]](#) Jesus must be proclaimed as Messiah, with all that that highly colored term means in its biblical setting.

## What the Scholars Admit



In an article on “Preaching Christ” (*Dictionary of Christ and the Apostles*, Vol. II, p. 394), James Denny says: “It is idle to say that Jesus is the Christ, if we do not know who or what Jesus is. It has no meaning to say that an unknown person is at God’s right hand, exalted and sovereign; the more ardently men believed that God had given them a Prince and Savior in this exaltation, the more eager would they be to know all that could possibly be known about him.”

This fine statement is followed by another valuable observation that “there is no preaching of Christ that does not rest on the basis on which the apostles’ preaching rested.” What then did Jesus and the apostles preach? “One of the ways in which Jesus represented his absolute significance for true religion was this: he regarded himself as the Messiah. The Messianic role was one which could be filled by only one person, and he himself was the person in question; he and no other was the Christ.” All this is excellent, but the thoughts which follow begin to reveal an uneasiness about the Messiahship of Christ, despite protestations to the contrary. “But is the Christ a conception which we in another age can make use of for some purpose? Only, it must be answered, if we employ the term with much latitude.” James Denny does not seem to be aware that he is about to undermine the biblical Messiahship of Jesus, and, since Jesus cannot be separated from his Messianic office, to obscure the identity of Jesus. He goes on: “It is certain that for those who first came to believe in Jesus as the Christ the name was much more definite than it is for us; it had a shape and color which it has no longer.” But this must imply that we have lost sight of what it means to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Denny gives the impression that we are now at liberty to make up our own idea of Messiahship, disregarding the biblical definition of it.

It was, however, precisely this tendency which brought disaster to the church soon after the death of the apostles. The church began to create its own conception of the Messiah, and in so doing lost touch with the Jesus of the Bible. Denny says that the term *Messiah* “had expectations connected with it which for us have lost the vitality which they once possessed.” Exactly; but why have they lost their meaning, if not because we have ceased to believe what the Bible tells us about the Messiah? “In particular,” says Denny, “the eschatological[xxx] associations of the term Messiah have not for us the importance which they had for the first believers. In the teaching of Jesus these associations cluster round the title Son of Man...which is used as synonymous with the Christ...Nothing was more characteristic of primitive Christianity than the second coming of Jesus in the character of Christ. It was the very essence of what the early church meant by hope...our outlook on the future is different from theirs.”

On what authority is it different? Surely one cannot lay aside one of the most characteristic features of the Christianity of the Bible and continue to call what remains the same faith.[xxxi] It is this subtle departure from the characteristic hope of the early church which should signal for us the perilous difference between what we call Christianity and what the apostles understand by that name. It makes no sense to say that we are Christians if we have abandoned the essential characteristic of the New Testament conception of the Messiah in whom we claim to believe.

Denny is rightly suspicious of a tendency amongst scholars to “assume tacitly that it is a mistake to believe in Christ as those who first preached him believed. Such criticism makes it its business to make Jesus’ personality *exactly like our own* and his consciousness *exactly what our own may be*” (emphasis mine).

This is precisely our problem, but it is also Denny’s, who admits that “our outlook on the future

is different from the apostles’.” But their outlook on the future was based upon their central understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, the ruler of the future Kingdom of God whose power was manifested in advance in Jesus’ ministry. By what possible logic can we give up the hope which was “the essential characteristic of apostolic Christianity” and still claim to be Christians? In this self-contradiction lies the great failure of churches to remain faithful to Jesus as Messiah. We have preferred our own outlook and our own view of Messiahship; and we have felt it appropriate to attach to our own idea the name of Jesus. Have we not thus created “another Jesus” after the image of our Gentile hearts?

A perusal of standard works on Christology reveals some remarkable admissions which may encourage the reader to conduct a personal quest for the Truth about Jesus. In an article on the Son of God, William Sanday, once professor of divinity at Oxford, asks the question whether there are any texts in the four Gospels which might lead us to the idea of Jesus as the “preexistent Son of God.” He concludes that *all* the statements about Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke refer to the life of Christ on earth. There is not a single reference to his having been the Son of God before his birth. If we examine John’s Gospel “we have to look about somewhat for expressions that are free from ambiguity. *Perhaps there are not any*” (*Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. IV, p. 576, emphasis mine).

Here, then, is the statement of a leading expert to the effect that there may not be a single reference in all four Gospels to Jesus being the Son of God before his birth. Yet it remains a fact that the churches teach the eternal Sonship of Jesus as a basic and indispensable tenet of the faith.

Professor Sanday is left guessing why Matthew, Mark, and Luke know nothing about Jesus’ preexistence: “It is probable that the writers had not reflected upon the subject at all, and did not reproduce a portion of our Lord’s teaching upon it” (*Ibid.*, p. 577). When he comes to the epistles Sanday can only conjecture that there *might* be a reference to a preexistent Son in Hebrews 1:1-3, but by no means necessarily. On Colossians 1:15 he says that “the leading idea in ‘firstborn’ is that of the legal rights of the firstborn, his precedence over all who are born after him.” He adds that “it *seems* wrong to exclude the idea of priority [in time] as well.” He concludes his remarks by quoting a German theologian as saying that “from the Old Testament and Rabbinism there is no road to the doctrine of the divinity of Christ” (i.e. that he is God). Professor Wernle maintained that “the title Son of God is strictly Jewish and that the further step from Son of God to God the Son was taken upon Gentile ground through lax ideas brought in by the converts from paganism” (*Ibid.*, p. 577).

Statements of this kind show on what shaky ground the whole edifice of “preexistent Sonship” is built. The possibility must be squarely faced that the dogmatic statements about Jesus which date from postbiblical times rely on their own authority rather than that of the apostles. The wisest course is to take our stand upon the dogmatic statements of the Scripture itself and to recognize with Jesus that “eternal life consists in this: that we may come to know the Father as *the only true God* and Jesus, the Messiah whom He sent” (John 17:3).

## Jesus, the Man and Mediator

The Jesus presented by the apostles is not “God the Son.” This title appears nowhere in the Bible. Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, whose origin is to be traced to his miraculous conception

(Luke 1:35). The one God of the Scriptures remains in the New Testament the one Person revealed in the Old Testament as the Creator God of Israel. Jesus, “*himself man*” (1 Tim. 2:5), mediates between the one God, the Father, and mankind. This Jesus can save “to the uttermost” (Heb. 7:25). Any other Jesus must be avoided as a deceptive counterfeit—and it is all too easy to be “taken in” (2 Cor. 11:4).

## The Church’s Confession

The church which Jesus founded is based upon the central confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (Matt. 16:16). This confession is seriously distorted when a new unbiblical meaning is attached to the term “Son of God.” That such a distortion has occurred should be evident to students of the history of theology. Its effects are with us to this day. What is urgently needed is a return to the rock-confession of Peter, who, in the presence of Jesus (Matt. 16:16), the Jews (Acts 2; 3), and at the end of his ministry declared that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world, *foreknown* in the counsels of God but manifested in these last times (1 Peter 1:20). The stupendous fact of Jesus’ Messiahship is understood only by divine revelation (Matt. 16:17).

Christianity’s founding figure must be presented within the Hebrew-biblical framework. It is there that we discover the real, historical Jesus who is also the Jesus of faith. Outside that framework we invent “another Jesus” because his biblical descriptive titles have lost their original meanings (cp. 2 Cor. 11:4).

When Jesus’ titles are invested with a new unscriptural meaning, it is clear that they no longer convey his identity truthfully. When this happens the Christian faith is imperiled. Our task, therefore, must be to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah of the prophets’ vision, and we must mean by Messiah and Son of God what Jesus and the New Testament mean by these terms. The church can claim to be the custodian of authentic Christianity only when it speaks in harmony with the apostles and tells the world who Jesus is.

## APPENDIX

One of the most striking facts predicted of the Messiah is that he is definitely *not* God, but the Son of God. Psalm 110:1 is the NT’s master Christological proof-text, alluded to some 23 times. The relationship between God and the Messiah is precisely indicated by the title given to the Messiah—*adoni* (Ps. 110:1). This form of the word “lord” invariably (all 195 occurrences) designates non-Deity figures in the OT. *Adoni* is to be carefully distinguished from *adonai*. *Adonai* in all of its 449 occurrences means the Deity. *Adonai* is *not* the word which appears in Psalm 110:1. This important distinction between God and man is a vital part of the sacred text, and is confirmed by Jesus himself in Matthew 22:41ff. It places the Messiah in the category of man, however elevated. Psalm 110:1 appears throughout the NT as a key text describing the status of the Messiah in relation to the One God (see Acts 2:34-36).

### *Adonai* and *Adoni* (Ps. 110:1)

# The NT's Favorite Old Testament Proof-text

Why is the Messiah called *adoni* (my lord) and never *adonai*? (Lord God)

“*Adonai* and *adoni* are variations of Masoretic pointing to distinguish divine reference from human. *Adonai* is referred to God but *Adoni* to human superiors.

*Adoni*—ref. to men: my lord, my master [see Ps. 110:1]

*Adonai*—ref. to God...Lord” (Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, under *adon* [= lord], pp. 10, 11).

“The form *ADONI* (‘my lord’), a royal title (I Sam. 29:8), is to be carefully distinguished from the divine title *ADONAI* (‘my Lord’) used of Yahweh.” “*ADONAI*—the special plural form [the divine title] distinguishes it from *adonai* [with short vowel] = my lords [found in Gen. 19:2]” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, “Lord,” p. 157).

“Lord in the OT is used to translate *ADONAI* when applied to the Divine Being. The [Hebrew] word...has a suffix [with special pointing] presumably for the sake of distinction. Sometimes it is uncertain whether it is a divine or human appellative...The Masoretic Text sometimes decides this by a note distinguishing between the word when ‘holy’ or only ‘excellent,’ sometimes by a variation in the [vowel] pointing—*adoni*, *adonai* [short vowel] and *adonai* [long vowel]” (*Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, “Lord,” Vol. 3, p. 137).

“Hebrew *Adonai* exclusively denotes the God of Israel. It is attested about 450 times in the OT...*Adoni* [is] addressed to human beings (Gen. 44:7, Num. 32:25, II Kings 2:19 [etc.]). We have to assume that the word *adonai* received its special form to distinguish it from the secular use of *adon* [i.e., *adoni*]. The reason why [God is addressed] as *adonai*, [with long vowel] instead of the normal *adon*, *adoni* or *adonai* [with short vowel] may have been to distinguish Yahweh from other gods and from human lords” (*Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, p. 531).

“The lengthening of the ā on *Adonai* [the Lord God] may be traced to the concern of the Masoretes to mark the word as sacred by a small external sign” (*Theological Dictionary of the OT*, “*Adon*,” p. 63 and *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, III, 1060ff, n. 109).

“The form ‘to my lord,’ *l’adoni*, is never used in the OT as a divine reference...the generally accepted fact [is] that the Masoretic pointing distinguishes divine references (*adonai*) from human references (*adoni*) (Wigram, *The Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the OT*, p. 22)” (Herbert Bateman, “Ps 110:1 and the NT,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct.-Dec., 1992, p. 438).

Professor Larry Hurtado of the University of Edinburgh, celebrated author of a modern classic on Christology: “There is no question but that the terms *Adonai* and *adoni* function differently: the one a reverent way of avoiding pronouncing the word YHVH and the other the use of the same word for *non-divine figures*” (from correspondence, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2000).

## How Jesus Was Turned into God

The NT presents Jesus as the Christ, the Messianic Son of God. He functions as the agent and representative of Yahweh, his Father, the God of Israel. Jesus founded his church on the revelation that he is “the Messiah, Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:16). As Son of God he was supernaturally created or begotten (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35; Acts 13:33, not KJV; I John 5:18) in the womb of his mother. This constitutes him as uniquely the Son of God, the “only begotten,” or “uniquely begotten Son of God” (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) and the Lord *Messiah* (Luke 2:11), *not* the Lord God. Because he was begotten—brought into existence—he cannot by definition be eternal. Therefore the term “eternal Son” is an obvious non-sense expression. “Eternal” means you have no beginning. To be begotten means you have a beginning. All sons are begotten and so “God the Son” is a misleading title for Jesus, the Messiah. You cannot be the eternal God and the *Son* of God at the same time! The church fathers of the second century onwards, beginning probably with Justin Martyr, began to shift the history of the Son of God back into pre-history, thus distorting and eclipsing his true identity. They removed him from his status as the Head of the new human creation, the Second Adam. They minimized his real history and invented a cosmic pre-history for him. This destroyed his identity as the “*man* Messiah Jesus.” Later Origen invented a new meaning for the word “begotten” or “generated.” He called Jesus the “eternally generated” Son—a concept without meaning which contradicted the NT account of the actual “generation” or “begetting” of the Son around 2 BC.

This fundamental paradigm shift which gave rise to the awful “problem of the Trinity” is rightly traced by “restorationists” to those ante-Nicene Church Fathers who, using a middle-Platonic model, began to project the historical Jesus, the Messianic Son of God, back into pre-historical, ante-mundane times. They produced a *metaphysical Son* who replaced the Messianic Son/King described in the Bible—the Messianic Son whose existence was still future when he was predicted as the promised King by the covenant made with David (II Sam. 7:14, “he *will be* My [God’s] Son”). Hebrews 1:1-2 expressly says that God did *not* speak through a Son in OT times. That is because there was as yet no Messianic Son of God.

Professor Loofs described the process of the early corruption of biblical Christianity:

“The Apologists [‘church fathers’ like Justin Martyr, mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century] laid the foundation for the perversion/corruption (*Verkehrung*) of Christianity into a revealed [philosophical] teaching. Specifically, their Christology affected the later development disastrously. By taking for granted the transfer of the concept of Son of God onto the preexisting Christ, they were the cause of the Christological problem of the fourth century. They caused a shift in the point of departure of Christological thinking—*away from the historical Christ* and onto the issue of preexistence. They thus shifted attention away from the historical life of Jesus, putting it into the shadow and promoting instead the Incarnation [i.e., of a preexistent Son]. They tied Christology to cosmology and could not tie it to soteriology. The Logos teaching is not a ‘higher’ Christology than the customary one. It lags in fact far behind the genuine appreciation of Christ. According to their teaching it is no longer God who reveals Himself in Christ, but the Logos, the inferior God, a God who as God is subordinated to the Highest God (inferiorism or subordinationism).

“In addition, the suppression of economic-trinitarian ideas by metaphysical-pluralistic concepts of the divine triad (*trias*) can be traced to the Apologists” (Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium des Dogmengeschichte* [*Manual for the Study of the History of Dogma*], 1890, part 1 ch. 2, section 18: “Christianity as a Revealed Philosophy. The Greek Apologists,” Niemeyer Verlag,

1951, p. 97, translation mine).

Those who are dedicated to restoring the identity of the biblical Jesus, Son of God, may take heart from the incisive words of a leading systematic theologian of our times. He restores the biblical meaning of the crucial title “Son of God,” rescuing it from the millennia-long obscurity it has suffered from Platonically-minded church fathers and theologians.

Professor Colin Brown, general editor of the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, writes, “The crux of the matter lies in how we understand the term Son of God...The title Son of God is not in itself an expression of personal Deity or the expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead. Indeed, to be a ‘Son of God’ one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God’s representative, God’s vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God’s Son...In my view the term ‘Son of God’ ultimately converges on the term ‘image of God’ which is to be understood as God’s representative, the one in whom God’s spirit dwells, and who is given stewardship and authority to act on God’s behalf...It seems to me to be a fundamental mistake to treat statements in the Fourth Gospel about the Son and his relationship with the Father as expressions of inner-Trinitarian relationships. But this kind of systematic misreading of the Fourth Gospel seems to underlie much of social Trinitarian thinking...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’ (John 1:1). What has happened here is the substitution of *Son* for Word (Gk. *logos*) and thereby the Son is made a member of the Godhead which existed from the beginning” (“Trinity and Incarnation: Towards a Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Ex Auditu*, 7, 1991, pp. 87-89).

## ENDNOTES

[i] Bultmann, for example, in *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, p. 276, claims that John 20:28 is the only sure instance in the New Testament of the title “god” being applied to Jesus. Most would agree that Hebrews 1:8 is a second clear instance. Note the careful translation of the New American Bible: “Your throne, O god, stands forever.”

[ii] The phrase “eternal generation of the Son,” which is the linchpin of orthodox Trinitarianism, has no meaning, since to generate means to bring into existence, while eternity lies outside time. Cp. the protest of Dr. Adam Clarke: “I trust I may be permitted to say, with all due respect for those who differ from me, that the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is, in my opinion, antisciptural and highly dangerous...To say that he was begotten from all eternity is, in my opinion, absurd; and the phrase ‘eternal Son’ is a positive self-contradiction. ‘Eternity’ is that which has had no beginning, nor stands in any reference to time. ‘Son’ supposes time, generation, and father, and time also antecedent to such generation. Therefore the conjunction of these two terms, ‘Son’ and ‘eternity,’ is absolutely impossible, as they imply essentially different and opposite ideas” (*Commentary on Luke 1:35*). Dr. J.O. Buswell writes, “We can say with confidence that the Bible has nothing whatsoever to say about ‘begetting’ as an eternal relationship between the Father and the Son” (*A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Zondervan, 1962, p. 111).

[iii] I am indebted to F.F. Bruce for the following keen observation: “People who adhere to *sola scriptura* (as they believe) often adhere in fact to a traditional school of interpretation of *sola scriptura*. Evangelical Protestants can be as much servants of tradition as Roman Catholics or Greek Orthodox Christians; only they don’t realize that it is ‘tradition’” (from correspondence).

[iv] So the Jews rendered the Hebrew expression when they translated their Scriptures into Greek.

[v] Cp. the remark of E. Kautzsch: “The reference in Micah 5:2 is to remote antiquity...Deut. 32:7 shows that *this* is the meaning of ‘days of old’ (not ‘days of eternity,’ as if what were spoken of were the eternal pre-existence of the Messiah)” (*Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, extra vol., p. 696).

[vi] A weakness of most theological systems is the refusal to see in the statements attributed to Jesus in Revelation the very words of the Master. When the Christology of the Revelation is set aside, the claims of Jesus in the book (1:1) are denied and a distorted Christology results.

[vii] “It should be noted that 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 the one, true and only God (John 5:44; 17:3)” (J.A.T. Robinson, *Twelve More New Testament Studies*, SCM Press, 1984, p. 175). Jesus referred to the Father as “the only one who is truly God” (John 17:3). Such statements should end all argument.

[viii] Alternatively Jesus’ “ascension” may be a reference to his knowledge of divine secrets (cp. Prov. 30:3, 4).

[ix] “In some Jewish writings preexistence is attributed to the expected Messiah, but only in common with other venerable things and persons, such as the Tabernacle, the Law, the city of Jerusalem, the lawgiver Moses himself, the people of Israel” (Ottley, *Doctrine of Incarnation*, p. 59).

[x] Compare G.B. Caird, *The Development of the Doctrine of Christ in the New Testament*, p. 79: “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 ever speaks of the eternal Word or Wisdom of God in terms which compel us to regard it as a person.”

[xi] H.H. Wendt, D.D., commenting on John 8:58, says: “Jesus’ earthly life was predetermined and foreseen by God before the time of Abraham” (*The Teaching of Jesus*, Vol. II, p. 176).

[xii] Edwin Freed in *JTS*, 33, 1982, p. 163: “In John 8:24 ‘ego eimi’ is to be understood as a reference to Jesus’ Messiahship... ‘If you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins.’”

[xiii] See note 10.

[xiv] Compare James Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, p. 243, discussing John 1:1-14: “The conclusion which seems to emerge from our analysis is that it is only with v. 14 that we can begin to speak of the *personal* Logos...The point is obscured by the fact that we have to translate the masculine logos as ‘he’...But if we translated logos as ‘God’s utterance’ instead, it would

become clearer that the poem did not necessarily intend the Logos in verses 1-13 to be thought of as a personal divine being.”

[xv] Supposing him to be properly baptized, fully instructed, and active according to the Truth of Scripture. The reader should be aware that contemporary ideas of what it is to be a Christian may not correspond to a biblical definition. Matthew 7:21 provides the New Testament’s most uncomfortable warning.

[xvi] Vol. I, p. 194.

[xvii] See particularly C.H. Talbert, “The Problem of Preexistence in Philippians 2:6-11,” *JBL* 86 (1967), pp. 141-53. Also G. Howard, “Philippians 2:6-11 and the Human Christ,” *CBQ* 40 (1978), pp. 368-87.

[xviii] *New Testament Teaching in the Light of St Paul’s*, pp. 65, 66.

[xix] At Colossians 1:17, many translators are less cautious than the NASB which wisely relegates to the margin the implication that Jesus “existed prior to” all things. It is sufficient to say, with Paul, that he is “before” all things, meaning that he is supreme in the created world, not that he is literally the first in time to be created, or existed eternally. In John 1:15, 30 a similar enthusiasm for preexistence is shown by those translations which do not allow us to see that the verse may very well be rendered: “He who comes after me has taken up a position in front of me, because he had absolute priority over me” (see commentaries by Raymond Brown in the Anchor Bible series, and by Westcott). The NIV is misleading when it describes Jesus as “returning” or “going back” to the Father. He was “going” or “ascending” (see John 13:3; 16:28; 20:17).

[xx] The New Testament is quite clear about God the Father being the creator in Gen. 1:1; Acts 7:50; 14:15; 17:24, Rev. 4:11; 10:6; 14:7; Mark 10:6; 13:19.

[xxi] Compare *Tyndale Commentary on Hebrews* by Thomas Hewitt (1960), p. 56: “The translation is therefore, ‘And when he again bringeth the firstborn into the world.’”

[xxii] See also Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; and Rev. 2:26, 3:21, and 5:10, which with many other texts foresee the establishment on earth of the Messianic Kingdom when Jesus returns.

[xxiii] For further information on how the writer to the Hebrews uses Psalm 102 in Hebrews 1:10, see F.F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 21-23.

[xxiv] The Hebrew word “lord” (*adoni*) is never, in all of its 195 occurrences, the title of Deity. The Lord God, by contrast, is *Adonai* 449 times. This critical text proves that no writer of the Bible thought the Messiah was God Himself. See appendix.

[xxv] John 20:28 describes an address to Jesus as “my Lord and my God.” Both titles are ascribed to the Messiah in the Old Testament (Ps. 45:6, 11; 110:1). John’s whole purpose is to present Jesus as the Messiah (John 20:31).

[xxvi] Jesus never denied that the predicted theocracy would one day be established by him as Messiah. Theology’s loss of the Truth of the future Messianic Kingdom involved also the loss of the future co-rule of Jesus and the faithful church. Thus Christianity’s objective disappeared.



[\[xxvii\]](#) Found as much in the Psalms of Solomon as in the Old Testament, Psalm 2, etc.

[\[xxviii\]](#) *The Calling of the Jews*, in the collected essays on Judaism and Christianity.

[\[xxix\]](#) *New Testament Letters* paraphrased by J.W.C. Wand, D.D.

[\[xxx\]](#) I.e., having to do with events to occur at the end of the age.

[\[xxxi\]](#) In the same way that Christian doctrines of God and man and salvation are “utterly untenable without the existence of Satan” (Michael Green, *I Believe in the Downfall of Satan*, Eerdmans, 1981, p. 20).