The Beginning of the Son by Begetting

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Synopsis

This presentation challenges both Trinitarian and Arian-unitarian theories of a literally preexistent, pre-human Son by examining John 1 alongside the other Gospels. The focus is on the textual, translational, grammatical, and interpretive issues surrounding John’s prologue. The central question is whether the New Testament teaches that the Son literally preexisted and then either became human or assumed humanity as Jesus of Nazareth.

Introduction

For nearly two millennia, the writings of John—beginning with his Gospel—have been widely misused to promote both Trinitarian and Arian, or other preexistence-unitarian, theories of the Son's literal personal preexistence. Despite their differences, both systems begin with essentially the same assumption: that the Son was already a conscious personal being before his human conception—whether as a so-called "pre-human" or "preincarnate" Son, or as the *Logos*, the Word of God, who literally came down from heaven and either became a human being in some Arian-type views or entered the womb of Mary to assume human nature in the traditional Trinitarian view. But the Gospels simply do not bear this out.

Matthew uses the Greek word *genesis*, "origin" or "beginning," in Matthew 1:1 and 1:18 to introduce the origin of Jesus Messiah. Matthew then explains that what had been begotten—that is, procreated in Mary—was from holy spirit (Matt. 1:20). The picture is not of an already preexisting person entering Mary or changing identity, but of a human Son being brought into existence by a biological miracle.

The Gospel of Luke is even more explicit. The angel Gabriel explains to Mary that this will take place through God's holy spirit—that is, the power of the Most High—and "for that reason" (*dio kai*) the holy child begotten—that is, procreated, not merely conceived or born— will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

The following sections examine the translational, textual, grammatical, and contextual issues that bear on this reading of John's prologue.

John 1:1 and the Word of God

Most Christians approach John 1 already assuming that the *Logos*—the "word"—is a literal, preexistent person. Following are several reasons why that assumption should not simply be read into the text.

1. The Curse of the Capital

Modern English translations normally capitalize Word. But ancient Greek manuscripts did not use capitalization in the way modern English does to distinguish common nouns from personal names or titles. Capitalizing Word is therefore an interpretive and stylistic decision made by modern-day translators, not something original to John himself. Once readers see Word capitalized, they naturally assume a proper name for a person. The question, then, is what the writer meant by that word.

2. Personal Pronouns

As a result of translators capitalizing Word, they often follow this by using personal pronouns, calling the word "he" or "him." While that can be grammatically appropriate in Greek, since *logos* is a masculine noun, grammatical gender by itself does not establish that the word of God refers to a literal person.

Furthermore, several major English translations before the 1611 King James Version—for example, Tyndale and the Geneva Bible—used "it," "this," or "the same" when referring to the *logos*. These versions do not establish that the translators themselves rejected literal preexistence.

For more, see: focusonthekingdom.org/translations.htm

Only when we reach John 1:14—"the word became flesh"—does the *logos* become unmistakably identified with a historical, not prehistorical, person: the human Son of God. So the opening of John's Gospel should not simply be read as meaning, "In the beginning was the Son," nor does John say, "The Son became flesh," much less, "God the Son assumed or took on flesh" or transformed into a human person.

3. Personification

The Greek phrase translated "with God" (*pros ton theon*) is often assumed to represent one person being with another person. But in the Bible, impersonal qualities associated with God can also be spoken of as being "with Him."

The clearest parallel is Proverbs 8–9, where God's Wisdom is portrayed as a woman, *Sophia*. She is shown as being "beside Him," that is, God (Prov. 8:30). She speaks, builds a house, prepares a meal, sends out servants, and invites people to eat.

Sophia—God's wisdom—is presented as though she were a person; the imagery need not imply a literal preexisting woman "with God."

Note how John himself, in his first letter, speaks of "the eternal life" which "was with the Father" and then "was manifested to us" (1 John 1:1–3). The wording here demonstrates that John can speak about life as something that was "with the Father" and later manifested.

Paul likewise uses the same Greek phrase translated as "with God" to describe other realities such as peace, faith, and confidence (Rom. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:8; 2 Cor. 3:4).

4. The Word of the LORD

The OT repeatedly speaks about God's word as His powerful speech, command, promise, wisdom, and self-expression.

- Psalm 33:6, 9 says that by His word the heavens were made.
- Psalm 107:20 shows God sending His word to heal.
- Psalm 147:15, 18 shows God's word running swiftly.
- Isaiah 55:10–11 says that the word goes out from Him and accomplishes the purpose for which He sends the word.

As a matter of fact, there is not one clear example in the Greek translations of the canonical Hebrew Scriptures where *logos*, "the Word of the LORD"—that is, Yahweh—is explicitly referred to as "he" or "him."

Hence, no OT writer presents "the word of the LORD" as a separate, literal divine person "with God."

This is precisely the Jewish and biblical background against which John's *logos* should first be understood.

Addendum: Revelation 19:13

Some may ask: What about Revelation 19:13, where the resurrected Messiah is called "the Word of God"?

A title can identify what someone embodies, expresses, or uniquely represents.

The Son is God's supreme spokesman and agent. God's message, wisdom, purpose, promise, and saving word about His coming Kingdom have reached their definitive human expression in His own Son.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus himself repeatedly insists that the words he speaks are not independently his own but come from the Father who sent him (John 7:16; 8:28; 12:49–50; 14:10, 24; 17:8).

As Anthony Buzzard explains in his commentary on John 1:14:

> *"The announcement that personification (word) has become a person for the first time, the incarnation of grace and truth (v. 17). Similarly Jews thought of Moses as the incarnation of the law (Philo, Life of Moses I, 162). … The NT is thus perfectly harmonious in presenting the Son as the miraculously generated second Adam."*

John 1:13: The Singular Reading

Most modern translations read John 1:12–13 as referring to the spiritual rebirth of believers, following the plural reading supported by the surviving Greek manuscript tradition. But an ancient alternative reading, preserved mainly in Latin and patristic witnesses, applies verse 13 to Jesus. Instead of the plural, "who were born," this variant reads in the singular, "who was born," making the verse a statement about his miraculous birth.

The noted textual critic Bruce Metzger lists the Old Latin tradition along with Irenaeus, Tertullian, Latin evidence associated with Origen, Ambrose, Augustine, and others. Yet Metzger also notes that a considerable list of modern scholars has argued that the singular could be original. The 1966 *Jerusalem Bible* adopted the singular reading, making the passage refer to the one who "was born" of God. Later editions, such as the *New Jerusalem Bible*, returned to the plural reading. Tertullian even discusses the textual dispute directly and accuses a so-called Gnostic Christian group known as the Valentinians of changing the text in order to make the passage apply to Christians rather than Christ.

Furthermore, possible allusions to the singular reading have also been discussed in connection with Justin Martyr and a document called the *Epistula Apostolorum*. Both of these witnesses likewise predate our earliest surviving manuscripts of the passage.

John 1:13 also harmonizes remarkably well with 1 John 5:18, where believers who have been "born of God" are distinguished, on a common reading of the second half of the verse, from the singular "one who was born of God"—understood by many translations as the Son.

On the singular reading, "not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man" contrasts the Son's origin from God with ordinary human procreation. If original, the singular reading would place John alongside Matthew 1:20 and Luke 1:35 in describing Jesus'

miraculous origin. Its antiquity establishes that this interpretation arose early; it does not by itself establish the reading's originality.

John 1:18 Only-Begotten God

Many manuscripts read "the only Son," but several early Greek manuscripts read *monogenēs theos*, variously translated "only God," "unique God," or "only-begotten God." This explains why modern critical editions generally print *monogenēs theos*.

Nonetheless, the "only Son" reading dominates the later manuscript tradition and agrees with John's familiar terminology elsewhere (John 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). There are also scholars who have argued that "Son" is original, even while themselves holding to the literal preexistence of the Son.

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (vol. 4, p. 740, n. 14) calls an interpretation of the *monogenēs theos* reading "an exegetical invention" and further argues that this reading probably arose under Gnostic influence and is therefore a corruption of the text.

The earlier attestation of *monogenēs theos* deserves consideration, but manuscript age alone does not settle the textual question or establish literal personal preexistence.

Yet even if this reading is granted, we still have to determine what John intends by that most unusual expression in light of the rest of his Gospel—including the Son himself identifying the Father as "the only true God" (John 17:3) and the Gospel's stated purpose that readers believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God (John 20:31), not "the only God."

Why All This Matters

The miraculous birth fulfilled OT promises of a future child, the Son of God (Isa. 7:14; 9:6), and of divine begetting (Psalm 2:7). These OT Scriptures are later applied to Jesus in Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5.

Paul likewise says that God's Son "came into existence from a woman" (Gal. 4:4) and was a descendant of David according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3)—that is, by way of Mary, not just Joseph. Paul uses *ginomai*, "to come to be," in these passages rather than *gennaō*, "to beget." I understand this wording as consistent with the virginal procreation described by Matthew and Luke.

Compare also Genesis 2:7, concerning the creation of Adam, with passages describing Jesus' human origin. For Paul, the Son is the second man and last Adam, who will begin a new race of "born again" human beings. Both Adam and Jesus have unique origins directly involving God, not literal personal preexistence—a fact that gives force to Paul's Adam-Christ parallel.

- In Romans 5:12–19, he repeatedly contrasts the one man Adam with the one man Jesus Messiah.
- In 1 Corinthians 15:45, he explicitly calls Jesus "the last Adam." See likewise 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 47–49.

The NT writers consistently insist on his genuine humanity. See also Acts 2:22; 17:31; Romans 5:15–19; 1 Corinthians 15:21; Hebrews 2:14–17. And Paul summarizes the whole Christian

confession with careful simplicity when he explains that God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth": namely, that there is one God and one mediator between that one God and humanity, Messiah Jesus, who is himself human. He gave himself as a ransom for all, a testimony at the appointed time. To this Paul was appointed a herald and apostle—a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth (1 Tim. 2:4–7).

The Choice

Nowadays, we must ask similar questions when it comes to what it means to be male or female. For example: What does it mean to be a trans woman and not a woman biologically? In other words, in what other context could you be someone and not be someone at the exact same time? Can a person exist before his human origin and still be genuinely human?

This is the question I put to Christians who hold to literal personal preexistence.

This whole issue reminds me of the choice God put before Israel in Deuteronomy 30:19a: "I have set before you life and death." But unfortunately, many English Bible translations sometimes restrict you from seeing that real Jesus clearly.

The translation of *genesis* in Matthew 1:1, 18 deserves particular attention. Commonly rendered "genealogy" or "birth," the word can also convey "origin" or "beginning."

Note: Of the almost 100 occurrences of gennaō in the New Testament, Matthew 1:20 is the only place where many translators render it as "conceived."

The theological choice, then, concerns whether the Son personally existed before his human conception and subsequently became human or assumed humanity, or whether his personal existence began when God miraculously procreated him in Mary.

The angelic birth announcements should be considered alongside the apostolic testimony to Jesus as the man appointed by God to be Savior, mediator, Lord, Messiah, and coming King (Acts 2:22, 36; 10:38; 17:31; 1 Tim. 2:5).

The letter to the Hebrews opens by saying: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, has in these last days spoken to us in a Son" (Heb. 1:1–2).

The writer then goes on to warn:

> *"Therefore we ought to pay closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the Law spoken through angels proved firm, and every violation of it and act of disobedience received its just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? This salvation had its beginning when spoken through the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard him" (Heb. 2:1–3).*

I pray you have been paying close attention to what Scripture and the angels sent from God have to say about His unique, miraculously procreated human Son, so that on the day of his *parousia* —his coming—he may say to you: "Well done, good and faithful servant!"