

## THE DEITY AND DIVINE GLORY OF THE SON

Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ,  
γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί...

*Light of Light, very God of very God,  
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father...*

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*The Nicene wording “Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father” affirms the deity and glory of the Son. Echoing the language of John’s prologue (John 1:1–18), which this article examines, this portion of the creed declares that the Incarnate Christ is truly God, uncreated, coequal with the Father in glory. The creed conclusively indicates that Arius’ teachings regarding Jesus are heresy, in that they directly contradict the doctrine of Scripture. It is this emphatic declaration of the Son’s glory and essence that showcases the influence of Nicaea, even to the church today.*

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Every Christmas, millions of people sing the hymn “O Come, All Ye Faithful” in celebration of the incarnation of Jesus. Yet, probably few associate this song with the Nicene Creed (AD 325). The words in the second stanza “God of God, Light of Light eternal ... very God, begotten, not created” correspond closely with the expression in the Nicene Creed: “Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father” (Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the sermon preached at Grace Community Church on December 10, 2023, titled “The Miracle of Christmas, Part 3” (see: <https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/21862>).

ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί).<sup>2</sup> This expression, as formulated in the Nicene Creed, became a foundational theological tenet throughout church history.<sup>3</sup> However, the weight of this statement derives not from its historical acceptance or its appearance in the creed, but from the fact that it precisely and accurately articulates the doctrine of Scripture. This expression from Nicaea can be supported exegetically from the Word of God, specifically, from John’s prologue (John 1:1–18).

As John describes the revelation of the *logos* (λόγος) in the prologue to his Gospel, he declares the divinity of the Son. He achieves this by presenting the Son in three ways: 1) by referring to Him as Light, 2) by affirming the Son’s glory, and 3) by declaring the uncreatedness of the Son. Seeking to affirm the Son’s deity, the Nicene Creed also employs these depictions of Christ. Moreover, as the creed endeavors to deliver an unequivocal assertion that the Son is equal with the Father, the creed includes the declaration that the Son is “consubstantial” with the Father, introducing the term *homoousion* (ὁμοούσιον). With a view to show that the Nicene Creed relied on Scripture for this affirmation of the deity of Christ, this article will demonstrate how each of these descriptions of Christ depend on John’s prologue.

### Light Imagery and the Son

While the exact phrase “Light of Light” (φῶς ἐκ φωτός) does not appear in John 1:1–18, nor in the rest of Scripture, the metaphor of light is prominent in John’s Prologue and points to the divinity of Christ. John brings out the essence of the Son particularly in John 1:9–10, as he states: “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens everyone.”<sup>4</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.” In asserting this statement, John shows that Jesus is God by attributing to the Son language (i.e., “true”) and function (i.e., as Creator of the world) attributed elsewhere specifically to God.

### The True Light of Life

By referring to the Son specifically as “the *true* Light” (τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν; emphasis added; 1:9), John describes Jesus with the same adjective ἀληθινόν (“true, very”), used elsewhere to describe God. In 7:28, John writes, “Then Jesus cried out

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<sup>2</sup> The words of the hymn are commonly attributed to John Francis Wade, as quoted in Philip Webb, ed., *Hymns of Grace* (Los Angeles, CA: The Master’s Seminary Press, 2015), Hymn #231.

<sup>3</sup> As other articles in this issue demonstrate, the Nicene Creed was a direct response to the Arian controversy surrounding the nature of the Son. This particular section of the creed, Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί (“Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father”), is entirely “anti-Arian” in its formulation. J. N. D. Kelly writes that in the phrase ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί (“consubstantial with the Father”), “the full weight of the orthodox reply to Arianism was concentrated.” See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Continuum, 1972), 238.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander V. Gurtaev explains the meaning of 1:9 as follows: “The true light came into the world of men—humanity in rebellion and the world apart from God—to bring the light of revelation that exposes the darkness of the world. This interpretation corresponds with the meaning of φωτίζει as external illumination that exposes darkness.” Alexander V. Gurtaev, “The Context and Meaning of John 1:9” (Th.M. Thesis, The Master’s Seminary: Los Angeles, 2010), 133–34.

in the temple, teaching and saying, ‘You both know Me and know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is *true* [ἀληθινός], whom you do not know’” (emphasis added). In 17:3, Jesus prays to God the Father, saying, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only *true* [ἀληθινόν] God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (emphasis added). For John, therefore, the adjective “true, very” (ἀληθινός) is a descriptor of God Himself, and in applying this term to Jesus, John declares that Jesus is God (see also 1 John 5:20; Rev 6:10).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, John records Jesus using this adjective to describe Himself also during His earthly ministry. In 6:32–35, John writes, “Jesus then said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, Moses has not given you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the *true* [ἀληθινόν] bread from heaven.... I am the bread of life’” (emphasis added). Jesus refers to Himself as bread and emphasizes this metaphor by describing Himself with the adjective “true” (ἀληθινόν). Similarly, in 15:1, Jesus declares, “I am the *true* [ἀληθινῇ] vine, and My Father is the vine-grower” (emphasis added). So, the only *true* God has sent His only Son, the *true* Light (1:9), the *true* bread of life (6:32), and the *true* vine (15:1). Therefore, when John connects this adjective *true* (ἀληθινός) to the Son directly, he affirms the divinity of the Son. John, therefore, distinguishes the Son as the one who is true (ἀληθινός; cf. also 1 John 5:20). Underscoring this depiction of Christ most emphatically, John uses the same term to give Christ the title “Faithful and *True*” (πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός) in his vision of Jesus in the book of Revelation (Rev 19:11). Christ is, as the words of the Nicene Creed state, “very God of very God” or, more literally, “true God of true God” (Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ).

In addition to designating the Son as the true Light, John also depicts the Son—that is, “the true Light”—as the Creator of the world, a function attributed to God in Genesis 1:1. Again, John writes in 1:10, “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens everyone. He was in the world, *and the world was made through Him...*” (emphasis added). In Genesis 1:1, Moses writes, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Therefore, when John states that “the world was made through Him [the true Light],” John is unequivocally declaring that the true Light, or the Son, is the Creator of the World, that is, that He is God Himself (cf. Col 1:16–17; Heb 1:2).

Depicting the Light as the Creator in fact builds upon John’s earlier description of the Word—that is, the Son—as the Creator as well (1:3). In 1:1–3, John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” John declares that, as all things were made

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<sup>5</sup> Although the phrase “light from light” may have been accepted by the Arians, this was only possible by equivocating on important definitions, particularly as they occur in surrounding phrases. Eusebius included this wording in his letter to the Emperor, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 159. However, as Grillmeier explains, the phrase ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ could not have been argued away by semantics. Rather, this phrase effectively ruled out the Arian position because of its ties to John 17:3 (τὸν μόνον ἀληθινὸν θεόν). See Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans John Bowden (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 268.

through the Word (1:3), so also all things were made through the Light.<sup>6</sup> In effect, by depicting the Son as the *true* Light and as the Creator of the world, John equates Christ with God and thereby establishes the deity of Christ.

### Light Imagery in the Old Testament

Beyond the immediate context of John, this light imagery in John draws upon Old Testament messianic theology, in which the coming King and Servant is expressed by light imagery and is equated with Yahweh. Though the nation of Israel was in bondage to sin and under the chastening of God, Isaiah provides hope, prophesying of a coming dawn of light that will bring victory and joy. Isaiah writes,

But there will be no *more* gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make *it* glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in the land of the shadow of death, the light will shine on them. (Isa 9:1–2; cf. vv. 3–7)

Thus Isaiah describes that God will provide light that will shine upon those walking in darkness, in order to deliver them from gloom and anguish (cf. Isa 60:1–3).

As the New Testament picks up on this theme of light, it applies it to the life and Person of Jesus. Simeon utilizes Isaiah’s imagery to introduce the child Jesus as providing the light, calling Him “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32; cf. Isa 42:6; 49:6). Matthew alludes to Isaiah’s prophecy and describes Jesus’ coming in the regions of Galilee as the fulfillment of the promised light (Matt 4:16; cf. Isa 9:2). Paul further beckons the sinner to come to the light and encourages the one who is in Christ to walk in the light (Eph 5:7–9; cf. Isa 60:1–5). All these references build upon the image that light has shone upon the people in Jesus Christ who has come to this dark world.

Moreover, Old Testament light imagery indicates that this light is divine, of the same essence as Yahweh. In Isaiah 9:1–5, Isaiah encourages the northern regions of Israel with the glorious coming of light that will provide them deliverance. This coming dawn would dramatically reverse the frequent military defeat in this geographical region.<sup>7</sup> Such victory resulting from the coming of the light, however, was associated specifically with the power of Yahweh (see esp. vv. 1, 3, 4). David writes in Psalm 27:1, “*Yahweh is my light and my salvation*; whom shall I fear?” (emphasis added). David understood that triumph over his enemies ultimately will come through Yahweh, whom David perceived to be the light. Similarly, Micah writes, “Do not be glad over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I inhabit the darkness, *Yahweh is a light for me*” (7:8; emphasis added). Micah’s hope was that while his enemy saw temporary victory, Micah (and

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<sup>6</sup> Compare πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο (1:3) with ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο (1:10). The verb and preposition choices are identical between each reference, the only difference being the subject πάντα and ὁ κόσμος (given that ἐγένετο is a middle/passive verb).

<sup>7</sup> Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2007), 238.

all Israel by implication) would see ultimate triumph—specifically through Yahweh who is the light.

This association is furthered by the description of the coming king through whom God will bring the light and who is in fact presented as God.<sup>8</sup> In Isaiah 9:2, God promises to bring “a great light,” and then in Isaiah 9:6, God promises a child who will rule as king and who will be divine. Isaiah writes, “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). In other words, the light to come (9:1–2) is the king who is Mighty God (9:6).<sup>9</sup>

Later, Isaiah uses the same metaphor to describe the servant who would be a light for the nations and who would be divine. In Isaiah 49:6, Isaiah records God the Father saying to the Servant of the Lord: “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to cause the preserved ones of Israel to return; *I will also give You as a light of the nations* so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (emphasis added; cf. 42:6). The means by which the Servant will accomplish the deliverance of Israel and the nations is then recorded prophetically in Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

The Servant’s divinity is confirmed by His status as being “high and lifted up,” a collocation that refers specifically to Yahweh (e.g., 6:1; 57:15).<sup>10</sup> In Isaiah 52:13, Isaiah records Yahweh declaring of the Servant, “Behold, My Servant will prosper; *He will be high and lifted up* and greatly exalted” (emphasis added). This expression is reserved specifically for Yahweh. In Isaiah 6:1, Isaiah writes of God, “In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, *high and lifted up...*” (emphasis added). Similarly, in Isaiah 57:15, he declares of Yahweh, “For thus says the One *high and lifted up* who dwells forever, whose name is Holy...” (emphasis added; cf. 33:10).<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, in Isaiah 2:12–13, Isaiah condemns anyone who seeks this status which belongs solely to Yahweh. Isaiah writes, “For Yahweh of hosts will have a day *of reckoning* against everyone who is proud and high and against everyone who is lifted up, that he may be made low. And *it will be* against all the cedars of Lebanon that are *high and lifted up...*” (emphasis added). However, in Isaiah 52:13, the Servant is ascribed this honorable status by Yahweh Himself, who says, “Behold, My Servant will prosper; He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.” Therefore, this Servant will bear the deity of Yahweh Himself.

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<sup>8</sup> Though some have sought to reject this title as divine, Motyer and Oswalt note that the title “Mighty God” (אֱלֹהִים) elsewhere refers to Yahweh Himself (10:21). Therefore, the Davidic King of Isaiah 9:6 is no ordinary man. He must be divine, the God-Man. See John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 247; Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 102.

<sup>9</sup> Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 243.

<sup>10</sup> Jaap Dekker, “The High and Lofty One Dwelling in the Heights and with His Servants: Intertextual Connections of Theological Significance between Isaiah 6, 53, and 57,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 4 (2017): 475–91.

<sup>11</sup> Abner Chou, *I Saw the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Vision* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 73–75, 80.

In considering these Isaianic references to the King and to the Servant together, it becomes clear that these two images ultimately refer to one and the same Person. The divine Servant will be a light to the nations (42:6; 49:6), and the divine King will bring light to the ones dwelling in darkness (9:1–6). The divine Servant therefore is the divine King.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, this figure is realized in Jesus, the Suffering Servant and the Davidic King who is God Himself.

As the Nicene Creed describes the Son to be “Light of Light, very God of very God,” it affirms that the Son of God who fulfills these prophecies bears the divinity of Yahweh Himself.

### The Glory of Christ in the Deity of Christ

John also connects the divinity of the Son with His manifestation of divine glory, implied in the Nicene Creed in the phrase “very God of very God” (Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ). John writes that “the Word was God” (John 1:1) and that at a certain point in history, two thousand years ago, “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His *glory*, *glory* as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (emphasis added; v. 14). Because Christ is God, when He appeared in human flesh, we saw the glory of God—“glory as of the only begotten from the Father” (v. 14; cf. v. 18).

The Apostle Paul also links the deity of Christ with the glory of God in the Person of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul explains that “the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of *the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*” (emphasis added; cf. Col 1:15, 19; 2:9). Being the image of God, Christ revealed the glory of God when He came in human flesh.

Moreover, the author of Hebrews also states that Christ is “the radiance of His [God the Father’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb 1:3). When we see the glory of Christ, we see the glory of God the Father. Because Christ is God, John says that, though “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*” (John 1:18). The Son, being God, manifested Himself in His own glory and also revealed to us the glory of the Father.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Jesus said to Philip: “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (14:9).

In light of this biblical connection between the deity and glory of Christ, the creed’s statement that the Son is the “very God of very God” or, more literally, “true God of true God” (Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ), inherently includes the glory of the Son and of the Father. Being the only “begotten God,” the Son alone displays the glory of the invisible God.

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<sup>12</sup> Other connections between the two include: 1) accomplishing one’s ministry in the power of the Spirit (11:2; 42:1); 2) listening to Yahweh (11:3; 50:4–5); 3) judging with righteousness for both Israel and the nations (9:7; 11:5; 49:5–6), and bringing encouragement for those who have become faint (9:6; 50:4). See Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Murray Harris, *John*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament, eds. Andreas J. Köstenberger, Robert W. Yarbrough (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 20.

## The Glory of the Word and the Glory of God

Being God while taking on human flesh, the Son, whom John refers to as “the Word,” manifested the glory of God upon the earth.<sup>14</sup> In John 1:14, John underscores the importance of the glory of the Son, mentioning “glory” twice in the same verse: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His *glory, glory* as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (emphasis added). John indicates that the Son could display the glory of God to this world precisely because the Son Himself is God.

Prior to the incarnation of the Son, the glory of God had been veiled before humanity. Moses had asked to see God’s glory in Exodus 33:18, and God said, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Exod 33:20). Instead, God placed Moses in the cleft of the rock and covered him with His hand. As God passed by Moses, He declared:

Yahweh, Yahweh God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations. (Exod 34:6–7)

While God revealed His glory through His character as He described to Moses who He is, Moses was able to see only the back of God, but not the glory of His face (33:23).<sup>15</sup>

Other instances in the Old Testament affirm that God had veiled His glory when He appeared to the Israelites in His glory. Exodus 16 records the story of the Israelites grumbling against Moses due to a lack of meat to eat in the wilderness. In response, God promises to provide meat and manna, and in that moment, “they looked toward the wilderness, and behold the glory of the LORD appeared *in the cloud*” (emphasis added; 16:10). Subsequently, after the giving of the Law, the glory of the Lord appeared as a consuming fire on the mountain peak of Sinai (24:15–17). Later, God’s glory would fill the tabernacle (40:34–35), and then the temple (1 Kgs 8; 2 Chr 5:11–14; 7:1–3). However, on account of Israel’s sin, God’s glory departed from the temple and ultimately from Israel in Ezekiel 10 and 11. Yet God graciously promised that His glory would return in the millennial kingdom (Ezek 43:1–6; Isa 35:2; 40:5; 60). But throughout these texts, the description of God’s glory through fire, cloud, tabernacle, and temple shows that no one can directly see the full glory of God. As God had said to Moses, “No man can see Me and live!” (Exod 33:20).

But in John 1:14, a greater manifestation of the glory of God is made visible in the Person of Christ as the Word who assumed human flesh. Yet, MacArthur explains

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<sup>14</sup> As various commentators have noted, John 1:14 creates an *inclusio* with John 1:1 (καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος ... καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο). John 1:14 defines the manner in which the light (1:9) entered the world—as human flesh. Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 106–107.

<sup>15</sup> Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*, 50.

that even though the glory of God was revealed in the incarnation of Christ in a previously unseen way, the glory of God was still veiled to a great extent. He writes,

Though Jesus manifested God's divine **glory** during His earthly life with a clarity never before seen, it was still veiled by His human flesh. Peter, James, and John saw a physical manifestation of Jesus' heavenly glory at the transfiguration, when "His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light" (Matt. 17:2; cf. 2 Peter 1:16–18). That was a preview of the unveiled glory to be seen at His return (Matt. 24:29–30; 25:31; Rev. 19:11–16) and the fullness of His heavenly glory as the only Light of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:23). But the disciples saw Jesus manifest God's holy nature primarily by displaying divine attributes, such as truth, wisdom, love, grace, knowledge, power, and holiness.<sup>16</sup>

MacArthur then underscores that, "Jesus manifested the same essential **glory** as **the Father**, because as God they possess the same nature (10:30)."<sup>17</sup> Thus John writes, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, *and we beheld His glory*, glory as of the only begotten from the Father" (emphasis added). Whereas God had previously veiled His glory, He revealed it in His Son Jesus Christ in a way it had not been revealed before. And the sole reason the Son could display the glory of God is because the Son bears the same essence as God.

Furthermore, the glory of God in the Old Testament is often connected with the concept of light, further exhibiting the equality between God and the Son inasmuch as the Son is depicted as Light in the Gospel of John. In Isaiah 60:1–3, Isaiah describes the coming glory in terms of light, saying, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of Yahweh has risen upon you ... but Yahweh will rise upon you, and His glory will appear upon you. Nations will come to your light" (60:1–3). Isaiah, in effect, connects the image of light to the presence of Yahweh. Therefore, as John uses light imagery as well as God's glory to describe the Son, he continues the two images that had already been brought together in biblical theology within the Old Testament.<sup>18</sup> In applying these images to the Son, John demonstrates that they both convey that reality that the Son is of the same essence as the Father.

### The Triadic Presentation of the Glory of God in the Person of Christ

What then is the glory one sees in the Person of Jesus Christ? First, John presents the glory of Christ in the grace of Christ. Christ brought grace and fulfilled the law, thus achieving salvation for sinners. John initially brings out the glory of the grace of Christ by linking it to the character of God in the Old Testament. When John declares that Jesus is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14b), he uses similar language God had used in Exodus 34:6 to describe Himself when He revealed His glory to

<sup>16</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *John 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 41.

<sup>17</sup> MacArthur, *John 1–11*, 41–42.

<sup>18</sup> C. H. Dodd makes this point and expands it to John's quotation of Isaiah 6 when Isaiah beholds the glory of Yahweh. See C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 206–208.



Moses, saying that His glory is “abounding in lovingkindness and truth.”<sup>19</sup> John appeals to this text to convey that this glory of God is revealed in Jesus Christ, in that He is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14b).<sup>20</sup> Paul, moreover, identifies Jesus as the embodiment of grace in Titus 2:11, saying, “for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.”

But John proceeds to unfold the glory of this grace by showing that the grace of Christ provides the solution to the problem of sin that is exposed by the Law (1:17). Yet while the Law exposed sin, it was powerless to save (Heb 8:6–7; 10:1, 4), even though it was a tutor that led sinners to Christ, teaching that all humanity needs a Savior. Christ, on the other hand, demonstrated glory in His grace in that He fulfilled the law on our behalf and brought salvation that is by grace through faith (Eph 2:8–9). Thus Paul says, “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4).

Second, John presents the glory of the incarnate Son by depicting the crucifixion as an event that brings glory to God and Christ. John refers to glory forty-two times in his Gospel, and of these forty-two appearances, more than half occur in chapters 12–17, where John focuses on the exaltation of God and Jesus through the death of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> In John 12:23–24, Jesus declares of his death and glory, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Notably, Jesus declares this statement in the context of Greeks coming to see Him, signifying that all ethnicities will be drawn to Jesus through the cross.<sup>22</sup>

Leaning on the book of Isaiah (see John 12:38, 40), John arguably adopted this understanding of glory through suffering from Isaiah 52:13–53:12. In Isaiah 52:13, Isaiah describes the ultimate glory following the Servant’s suffering, and says, “Behold, My Servant will prosper; He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.” But having declared the Servant’s ultimate glory, Isaiah proceeds to detail the excruciating suffering of the Servant in 52:14 and all of Isaiah 53. But as a result of His humiliating death, Isaiah remarks that the Messiah would be greatly exalted. Affirming this in 53:12, Isaiah cites God the Father declaring, “Therefore, I will divide for Him a portion with the many, and He will divide the spoil with the strong; because He poured out His soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors.” As John considers the cross of Jesus, he views the death of Jesus as exaltation through humiliation (cf. Phil 2:8–9; Luke 24:26). For John, the glory of Jesus cannot be separated from His crucifixion (cf. Luke 24:26; Phil 2:8–9).

Third, John’s presentation of glory moves beyond the character and cross of Jesus Christ, to the eternal glory in Christ’s return to the Father’s side. Even before the cross, Jesus is anticipating His return to the Father and to the glory He had shared within the Trinity from eternity past and which He will share into eternity future. Thus Jesus prays in John 17:5: “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with

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<sup>19</sup> Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> See J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 83 nn. 36–37, for a fuller discussion on the translation of Exodus 34:6 into Greek in both the LXX and the New Testament.

<sup>21</sup> Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> For the necessity of faith to behold this glory in the Gospel of John, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1991), 130.

the glory which I had with You before the world was.” As John demonstrated the divine glory of Christ in His incarnation, he showed also that Christ looked ahead to His future glory with the Father.

This is John’s triadic presentation of the glory of God in the Person of Christ: in His character, in the cross, and in His return to the Father.

### Uniqueness of the Son’s Proclamation

Furthermore, John’s prologue articulates that the Son *alone* proclaims the glory of the Father. There is no other being able to carry out this role because the Son alone is of the same essence as the Father. Because the glory of the Son is full of grace and truth, just as the glory of the Father (cf. Exod 34:6), and because the glory of the Son is the glory of the Triune God, the Son is able to make known the Father to the world (John 1:18).

Demonstrating the uniqueness of the Son, John first underscores the invisibility of the Father and therefore the impossibility of seeing Him, unless He is revealed by the Son. John declares that “no one has seen God at any time” (1:18). The structure of this statement is emphatic, fronting the object Θεόν, so that the text literally reads: “God, no one has seen, at any time!” This declaration likely alludes to God’s refusal to show Moses His glory, when God said, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Exod 33:20; cf. John 5:37; 6:46; 1 John 4:12).<sup>23</sup> While certain individuals had encounters with a manifestation of God in the Old Testament (e.g., Num 12:6–8), none of these theophanies consisted of the incarnation of the Son in which God took on human flesh and revealed His glory to man in a way never experienced by man before.<sup>24</sup>

Upon establishing this truth that no one has seen God, John then accentuates the uniqueness of the Son who *has* seen God and who is therefore able to make Him known because He Himself *is* God. At the focal point of 1:18, John exclaims that Jesus is “the only begotten God” (μονογενὴς θεός). Being “the only begotten God,” Jesus is the sole representative of the Father, the only One who brings grace and truth (cf. Exod 34:6), and the only One who can make Him known.<sup>25</sup> He alone fully and truly reflects the glory of God.

John further shows that the Son is the only One who can represent God because the Son has been in active communion with the Father from eternity past. John explains that the Son “is in the bosom of the Father,” pointing to the distinct unity between the Father and the Son (v. 18). This expression sets the stage for Jesus’ own statements about His unity with the Father, when He declares, for example, “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me” (John 14:11; see 14:10, 20;

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<sup>23</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 73; Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 91.

<sup>24</sup> Klink, *John*, 117.

<sup>25</sup> This reading does have variants that might downplay the statement of the Son’s divinity in the text (notably μονογενὴς υἱός or μονογενὴς υἱὸς θεοῦ). However, recent textual evidence leans in favor of μονογενὴς θεός being the original reading of the text. As Metzger notes, “the reading μονογενὴς υἱός, which undoubtedly is easier than μονογενὴς θεός, [appears] to be the result of scribal assimilation to Jn. 3.16, 18; 1 Jn 4.9.” See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 169.

17:21).<sup>26</sup> John shows that the Son is co-existent with the Father and thus co-equal in glory. Therefore, as the Son takes on human flesh, the glory of God is displayed through Him. Considering this incarnation of God, the Apostle Paul expressed wonder about its mystery in 1 Timothy 3:16, saying, “Great is the mystery of godliness: He who was manifested in the flesh.” Mark Jones also marvels at the miracle of the incarnation, saying that it is “God’s greatest wonder, one that no creature could have imagined.”<sup>27</sup> The wonder is that, while God could never be seen, at the coming of the Son, “He [the Son] has explained *Him*” (John 1:18).

John shows that the Son alone is qualified to represent the glory of God because no one has had the same intimate relationship with the Father and no one has the same essence as the Father other than the Son who resides in the bosom of the Father (1:18).

### The Un-Created Son

Beyond using light imagery and describing the uniqueness of the Son in radiating God’s glory, John’s prologue also emphasizes the un-createdness of the Son, thus showing His eternality equal with the Father. This point is affirmed in Nicaea’s words “begotten, not created” (γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα), standing in contradistinction to the Arian definition of “begotten” which assumed a physical generation of the Son.<sup>28</sup> The Nicene Creed certainly emphasizes the “begotten-ness” of the Son. Three times, in short succession, the creed uses a word translated with a form of “begotten” (γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ ... γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα “*begotten* of the Father, the *only-begotten* ... *begotten*, not created”). But in the Nicene Creed, the eternal generation of the Son suggests the reality of consubstantiation (*homoousia*)—equality with the Father. The Nicene Creed affirmed that because the Son is eternally begotten, He is therefore of the same essence as the Father. In accordance with Scripture, the language of the creed (i.e., “not created”) denies the begottenness of the Son as a created being.

### Begotten Is Not Created

To underscore the fact that “begotten” does not refer to any manner of creation, the Nicene Creed specified that the Son was “not made” (οὐ ποιηθέντα). This bold declaration intended to counter Arius’ view that the Son was a created being. Arguing his position, Arius wrote to Alexander,

And God, being the cause of all things, is Unbegun and altogether Sole, but the Son being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Hengel, “The Prologue of the Gospel of John as the Gateway to Christological Truth,” in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, eds. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 288.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 25.

<sup>28</sup> See Athanasius, “Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 4:458.

founded before ages, was not before His generation, but being begotten apart from time before all things, alone was made to subsist by the Father.<sup>29</sup>

Instead of understanding the Son's begottenness from the Father as eternal generation, Arius explained it as the creation of the Son. Evidently, Arius and his followers took no issue with the language of γεννηθέντα ("begotten") or even μονογενής ("only-begotten") that appears in the Nicene Creed; however, they redefined "begottenness" as being created.<sup>30</sup>

One of the key texts Arius used to defend his view was Colossians 1:15, which, speaking of Christ, says, "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn [πρωτότοκος] of all creation."<sup>31</sup> Arius interpreted "firstborn" to mean that the Son was created and of a different substance than the Father. However, as Helyer explains, the semantic range of πρωτότοκος ("firstborn") and the function of the genitive construction in πάσης κτίσεως ("of all creation") in this verse refute Arius' view.<sup>32</sup>

First, the semantic range of the term "firstborn" includes both chronological order and status of prominence, but the context of Colossians, and all of Scripture (e.g., John 8:58; 17:5), requires that the term "firstborn" in Colossians 1:15 refer to the Son's status.<sup>33</sup> Explaining the need to discern the meaning of "firstborn" in Scripture, MacArthur cites a series of examples in which the necessary sense is status as opposed to chronology:

Israel was called God's firstborn in Exodus 4:22 and Jeremiah 31:9. Though not the first people born, they held first place in God's sight among all the nations. In Psalm 89:27, God says of the Messiah, "I also shall make him My first-born," then defines what He means—"the highest of the kings of the earth." In Revelation 1:5, Jesus is called "the first-born of the dead," even though He was not the first person to be resurrected chronologically. Of all ever raised, He is the preeminent One. Romans 8:29 refers to Him as the firstborn in relation to the church. In all the above cases, firstborn clearly means highest in rank, not first created.<sup>34</sup>

Being that the Son is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15a) and that "in Him all things were created" (1:16a), context would necessitate that "the firstborn" in Colossians 1:15 refers to the Son's status, not the order of creation.

Second, the genitive construction of πάσης κτίσεως ("of all creation") could syntactically signify that a subject is either *part* of the creation as a created being, or

<sup>29</sup> See Athanasius, "Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia," in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 4:458.

<sup>30</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 235.

<sup>31</sup> Larry Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31, no. 1 (March 1988): 59. Helyer notes that Proverbs 8:22 was also a key text in this discussion.

<sup>32</sup> Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," 63; David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 95.

<sup>33</sup> Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 95.

<sup>34</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Colossians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 46. See also Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 95.

that the subject is *above* all creation in priority as an un-created being.<sup>35</sup> However, the context of Colossians, and of all of Scripture, requires that this genitive construction in reference to Christ be understood to signify the Son's primacy over all creation. As noted above, v. 16 declares that the Son is the Creator of everything that is created: "For in Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him." The verb κτίζω ("to create"), with the same root as the noun κτίσεως ("creation"), is used twice in Colossians 1:16 to denote Christ's creation of all things, thereby making a distinction between Christ who creates and the universe that is created (by Christ). Christ cannot be the Creator of *everything*, and yet Himself be *part* of the creation.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Paul's statement that the Son is πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως ("the firstborn of all creation") must necessarily be understood to mean that Christ is *over* all creation rather than *part* of the created order.<sup>37</sup>

Seeking to make this clear, the Nicene Creed included the qualification that the Son was οὐ ποιηθέντα "not made."

#### Pre-existent, Not Created

John shows throughout his Gospel that rather than being created, the Son was pre-existent as the divine Logos. John begins his declaration of the Son's preexistence in the first verse of his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The wording Ἐν ἀρχῇ ("In the beginning") alludes to the first words of Genesis, in that the Word existed at the creation of all things.<sup>38</sup> The Word was not merely alongside of God, but, as John makes explicit, the Word was and is in fact God Himself: "and the Word was God." Therefore, the Son in His divine glory preexisted His earthly ministry.

John further accentuates the preexistence of Christ when he records John the Baptist declaring, "After me comes a man who has been ahead of me, for He existed before me" (1:30; see v. 15).<sup>39</sup> By including this exclamation, John affirms that the Son's rank and preeminence is in part due to His preexistence with the Father, possessing a glory that is distinct from all creation.

Additionally, John demonstrates the preexistence of Christ in Jesus' exchange with the Jews in John 8, which culminates in Jesus' unequivocal self-attestation of His pre-existence. In John 8:58, Jesus states, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (ἐγὼ εἰμὶ; cf. Exod 3:14). For Jesus, this is nothing less than the claim of deity and equality with Yahweh of the Old Testament, as the Jews'

<sup>35</sup> Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," 63.

<sup>36</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 90; Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 95; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1982), 44; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 104.

<sup>38</sup> Carson notes that Ἐν ἀρχῇ also has implications for the period "before the beginning of the entire universe," as demonstrated by the imperfect ἦν three times in the text, which must have preceded the beginning of all things. See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 113–14.

<sup>39</sup> See Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 861.

response indicates (John 8:59). As the divine Son, He existed prior to the birth of Abraham.

Finally, Jesus alludes to His preexistence in His prayer to the Father in John 17:5, saying, “Now, Father, glorify me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.”<sup>40</sup> For Jesus to request to return to the Father’s glory is perfectly fitting with John’s teaching about the Son and with Jesus’ statements about Himself in the Gospel of John (e.g., John 6:41, 46, 51, 62; 8:58; 10:30; 17:22).

When these texts are brought together, John’s doctrine of the Son is seen clearly: the Son was preexistent, possessing the same glory as Yahweh, because He is of the same essence as the Father. He is truly, and fully God. This is what Nicaea expressed when it declared that He is “begotten, not created.”

### *Homoousia* at Nicaea

The entire pursuit of this article to show that the Nicene Creed endeavored to demonstrate the deity of the Son on account of Scripture—by depicting the Son as Light, displaying His glory, and declaring Him to be uncreated—brings this discussion to a most significant declaration in the Nicene Creed: that the Son is “consubstantial with the Father” (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ). This declaration affirms the equality between the Father and the Son. Commenting on the impact of this statement on the early church, Grillmeier writes that *homoousia* “was to disturb the whole of the fourth-century church ... the expression of the identity of the substance of the Son and the Father.”<sup>41</sup> To refute Arius’ claims that the Son was a created being and therefore of different substance than the Father, the Nicene Creed asserted that the Son is “consubstantial with the Father” (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ).<sup>42</sup>

Arius and his followers argued that the Son was a created being with a definite beginning, separate from and subordinate to God.<sup>43</sup> Allison explains,

This idea meant for Arius that there was a time when the Son did not exist: “The Son being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and founded before ages, did not exist before his generation.” Accordingly, the Son is “not eternal or co-eternal or co-unoriginate with the Father.” Another implication for Arius was that the Son was a different nature than the Father; that is, the Son is *heteroousios*—of a different substance—not *homoousios*—of the same substance—as the Father.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> See Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 861.

<sup>41</sup> Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 268. Hanson writes, “To say that the Son was of the substance (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας) of the Father, and that he was ‘consubstantial’ with him were certainly startling innovations. Nothing comparable to this had been said in any creed or profession of faith before.” See Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 166–67. While the discussion on *homoousia* represents biblical doctrine, the term *homoousia* itself is not found in the Scriptures.

<sup>42</sup> Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 270.

<sup>43</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 232–34.

<sup>44</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 369.

As Arius argued these points, he added to the theological confusion by citing Scripture yet redefining biblical terminology to accommodate his false teaching. Thus, to defend his claims that the Son was inferior to the Father, Arius would reference passages such as Colossians 1:15, Mark 13:32, and John 14:28.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, while he employed biblical terms such as “Son of God” and “begotten” in support of his heresy, the “begotten Son of God” to Arius was quite different than the “begotten Son of God” to those, such as Athanasius, who adhered to orthodoxy that derived from the holistic and contextual interpretation of the biblical text.<sup>46</sup>

To refute Arius and affirm the biblical teaching that the Son is equal with the Father, the Nicene Creed employed the term *homoousia* (“consubstantiation”), a concept that Arius denied in reference to the Son.<sup>47</sup> Grillmeier quotes Arius writing to Athanasius, and saying, “He (the Son) has no characteristic of God in his individual subsistence, for he is not like him, nor indeed is he ὁμοούσιος.”<sup>48</sup> In the context of the Arian heresy, *homoousia* was the exact word that bore the precise meaning in order to repudiate Arius’ claims, while also signifying the full deity of the Son (cf. Col 1:19).

Explaining the sense of *homoousia* further, Grillmeier writes,

Athanasius defines the significance of the *homoousios* in contrast to the “godless talk” of the Arians: (a) summing up what Scripture says about the Son, it is meant to express the fact that the Son is not only “similar” to the Father but, as one who has come forth from the Father is quite equal to him ... (b) it says that the Son is not separate from the substance, a point over which Athanasius refers particularly to the nature of the Son as “Logos” of the Father.<sup>49</sup>

Athanasius makes two claims in this statement, both of which he locates in the word *homoousia*: 1) the Son is equal to the Father, and 2) the Son is of the same substance as the Father. These two claims about the Son, serving as core tenets of a biblical and orthodox Christology, are affirmed in the Nicene Creed. Significantly, these two claims are foundational not simply because they appear in the Nicene Creed but because they convey the precise teaching regarding the Son in John 1:1–18.

### Conclusion

The authors of Nicaea were successful, not because they penned a creed that would survive through church history, but because their creed was faithful to the teaching of God’s Word. John’s prologue and Gospel as a whole make it clear that Jesus is indeed “Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made,

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<sup>45</sup> Allison, *Historical Theology*, 369.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Grillmeier writes, “The Arians could only conceive of ‘*creatio extra deum*’ as the sole way of the Son’s proceeding from the Father. For them a ‘begetting’ had necessarily to be understood in corporeal terms.” See Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 270; Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 234.

<sup>47</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 239; Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 167.

<sup>48</sup> Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 269.

<sup>49</sup> Grillmeier, 271.

consubstantial with the Father.” Therefore, 1700 years following Nicaea, the church stands indebted to those who took a stand for the truth of the Son’s divinity and glory. Jesus radiates the Father’s glory and essence, such that He shows us the Father (John 14:9). So Christians ought to devote themselves to making much of Christ, to the praise and glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.