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EDITORIAL: SEVENTEEN HUNDRED YEARS AFTER NICAEA

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Seventeen hundred years after Nicaea, a major question in the field of biblical and theological studies concerns the matter of theological method—how to connect the text of Scripture with its theology. The expositor wrestles with this question for the message every Sunday. He may know the background, context, and grammar of the text, but how does that yield the universal truth God revealed in His Word? Higher criticism has exacerbated the issue as its anti-supernatural approach has reduced the Bible to merely a human book concerned only with issues of its day, bound principally to matters of politics and cultic practice, and having little to no transcendent theological and philosophical sophistication.

Higher criticism, with its emphasis on comparative religion as well as the forms, *Sitz im Leben*, and sources of the text, inherently cannot produce consistent and coherent theology because it has presuppositionally and methodologically ruled it out. Those who use such a method, yet desire theological richness from the Scripture, run into a quandary. If, as higher criticism insists, Scripture itself cannot provide its theology, something else must, so the issue becomes: What is that alternative source of theology? Various approaches have been proposed, including the theological interpretation of Scripture, the great tradition, *lectio divina*, the adoption of creeds, speech-act theory, canonical theology, existentialism, or some combination of these theoretical propositions.[1]

[1] Daniel J. Treier, "What Is Theological Interpretation? An Ecclesiological Reduction," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (April 2010): 144–161; Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999); Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wong, 1975); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

Over the years, scholars have written various books on the matter, all in a quest to bridge the gap between text and theology.[2] On a hermeneutical level, one can consider whether a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic is sufficient to connect text and theology. That inquiry, though, begets a more fundamental matter, namely, whether and how the scriptural authors expressed theological truth in all that they wrote. For, a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic can draw out only what is intended in a text. If theology is not present or is undetectable in the biblical text, then some other source and method must supply it.

The question of the connection between text and theology is actually an ancient one. Certain modern approaches involve using creeds and the writings of the early church as a heuristic to supply or support the theology of the text. But church history is not merely used in the answer to such a question; the question of text and theology has been asked throughout church history. For example, the disagreement between Alexandria and Antioch was a hermeneutical one, which particularly dealt with the way one handled God's Word to bring forth its rich truths. Alexandria appealed to a metaphysic of allegory, whereas Antioch had their own framework of *theoria*. So, on the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea, it is particularly fitting to go back to Nicaea and see why they did what they did. If people are going to appeal to Nicaea, it is good for them to know what the Nicene authors accomplished.

A fascinating characteristic of the Nicene Creed is that it is rigorously exegetical. The following table can illustrate that the confession draws heavily from Scripture:[3]

Nicene Creed	**Scriptural Parallel**
Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητήν We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.	1 Cor 8:6: εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ Rev 1:8: Παντοκράτωρ Col 1:16: τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα 1 Cor 8:6: one God, the Father Rev 1:8: Almighty Col 1:16: visible and invisible
ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ, τουτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ, And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-	1 Cor 8:6: εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς 1 John 3:8: ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ 1 John 5:18: ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ John 1:18; 3:18: μονογενὴς θεὸς 1 Cor 8:6: one Lord, Jesus Christ 1 John 3:8: the Son of God

[2] Gary T. Meadors and Walter C. Kaiser, *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Counterpoints: Bible & Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). See also discussion in D. A. Carson, "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 1–62.

[3] See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2, *The Greek and Latin Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 60.

begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,	1 John 5:18: He who was begotten of God John 1:18, 3:18: only begotten of God
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;	Heb 1:3: ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης 1 John 5:20: οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεὸς 1 John 5:18: ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ Heb 1:3: radiance of His glory 1 John 5:20: This is the true God 1 John 5:18: He who was begotten of God
δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο, [τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ,] By whom all things were made [both the things in heaven and the things on earth];	1 Cor 8:6: δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα Col 1:16: ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς 1 Cor 8:6: by whom are all things Col 1:16: In him all things were created *both* in the heavens and on earth
τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα, Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;	Eph 4:10: ὁ καταβὰς John 1:14: Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, Phil 2:7: ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος Eph 4:10: He who descended John 1:14: And the Word became flesh Phil 2:7: by being made in the likeness of men
παθόντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανούς, He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;	Heb 5:8: ἔπαθεν 1 Cor 15:4: ἐγήγερται τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ Acts 2:34: οὐ γὰρ Δαυὶδ ἀνέβη εἰς τοὺς οὐρανούς Heb 5:8: He suffered 1 Cor 15:4: He was raised on the third day Acts 2:34: For David did not ascend into the heavens

ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς. he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.	Rev 1:7: Ἰδοὺ ἔρχεται μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν 2 Tim 4:1: τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ μέλλοντος κρίνειν ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς Rev 1:7: BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS 2 Tim 4:1: of God and of Jesus Christ, who is to judge the living and the dead
Καὶ εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα. and in the Holy Spirit	2 Cor 13:14: τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος 2 Cor 13:14: of the Holy Spirit

Such overlap demonstrates that Nicaea was not dependent or derivative of some extra-biblical philosophical tradition. The overlap of Nicaea and Scripture also shows that Nicaea did not use a creed to produce their creed. Rather, the deliberate phrasing, careful selection of texts, and exactness of scriptural wording serve as evidence that Nicaea drew everything from Scripture itself and did so with exquisite exegetical precision. Nicaea was truly *sola Scriptura* before its time. They believed that Scripture is sufficient to establish its own doctrine, that theological terms are defined by Scripture, and that what must be confessed is Scripture itself. Such conviction drives the theology of Nicaea, and that is why we affirm the theology of this confession. We do not affirm a creed because of the creed itself, but we affirm it for the reason that those at Nicaea affirmed it. They, and we with them, believe that the Nicene Creed is the outflow of the theology of the New Testament which upholds and builds upon the theology of the Old Testament. Nicaea superbly illustrates the reality that the most sophisticated theology was always in the biblical author's intent under the inspiration of the Spirit, and that because of this, such deep truth is brought out by careful attention to the grammar of the text and the facts of history.

On the 1700th anniversary, this volume seeks to honor Nicaea for its convictional defense of Christ, conclusions about His nature, and careful approach in handling God's Word. All those who love the Lord Jesus and long for His coming (cf. 2 Tim 4:8) will proclaim the truth of Christ and His Word (2 Tim 4:1–3), earnestly contending for the faith (Jude 3), confronting error (Col 2:8), and calling God's people to the preeminence of Christ and loyalty to Him (Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:1–14; 13:13). We honor Nicaea for the crucial and bold stand its authors made in defending who the Lord Jesus is, and we join in that charge.

To that end, this edition of the journal is to be a sort of amicus brief filed in support of Nicaea, expounding upon what its authors did, showing that they indeed handled Scripture exceptionally well, and demonstrating that the weight of all Scripture is behind their assertions. In contemplating Nicaea's exact analysis of God's Word, it is a reminder that we honor Christ not only in the conclusions of who He is but also in the method He prescribed for us to handle His Word.

In the first article, Nathan Busenitz highlights the pre-Reformation affirmation of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, the tenet that undergirded the Nicene Creed ("The Ground and Pillar of the Faith: The Witness of the Pre-Reformation History to the Doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*). Then, Abner Chou defends the Christian belief in monotheism that runs throughout the Scriptures ("One God in Nicaea, 1 Corinthians, and Deuteronomy: The Hermeneutic of the Biblical Writers and the Early Church"). Next, Mike Riccardi discusses the importance of the eternal generation of the Son in relation to the Nicene Creed ("The Eternal Generation of the Son: The Backbone of the Nicene Creed"). Mark Zhakevich follows this with an exegetical study of the prologue of John, spotlighting the reality of *homoousia*, the deity of Christ ("The Deity and Divine Glory of the Son").

After this, Peter Goeman proceeds in showcasing the uncreated-ness of the Son ("'Through Whom All Things Were Made': Scriptural Foundations for the Son's Uncreated-ness"). Jesse Johnson returns to the importance of the Incarnation in the Person and work of Christ ("'For Us and for Our Salvation': The Plan of Salvation Seen in the Incarnation"). Kevin Hall builds upon Johnson's article by giving attention to the saving work of the Son ("The Nicene Creed: The Saving Work of the Son"). Then a re-publication by John MacArthur brings clarity on the Second Coming of the Son ("The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats and Addendum: An Overview of Future Judgments"). Finally, Kevin Zuber shows the deity of the Holy Spirit from Scripture while also surveying early church leaders' teaching on the Spirit ("From Nicaea 325 to Constantinople 381: Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa on τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα").

The purpose of this issue is to uphold the authority of Scripture, while also demonstrating the derived authority in a church creed that affirms the doctrine that Scripture unveils. We rejoice in the biblical affirmations made at Nicaea that have stood for these past 1700 years and that will continue to stand because their foundation is the Word of God.

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THE GROUND AND THE PILLAR OF THE FAITH: THE WITNESS OF THE PRE-REFORMATION HISTORY TO THE DOCTRINE OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

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* * * * *

The foundation of any church creed must be its doctrine of Scripture—the view of God's Word that dictates the creed's composition. The Nicene Creed is only authoritative insofar as it reflects the doctrinal positions found in the Bible. No church council possesses theological authority in and of itself. God's Word is the authority above every earthly authority. Therefore, what the authors of a church creed believe about God's Word will inevitably shape the creed they formulate. In the case of Nicaea, the church fathers held a high view of God's Word, such that the unspoken foundation of the creed is the doctrine of sola Scriptura. Based on evidence from the writings of the church fathers, the early church held the strong conviction that God's Word is inspired and without error, and that it is the highest authority and final court of appeal for the establishment of sound doctrine. This article will explore that conviction as it appears in early church writings.

* * * * *

Introduction

A high view of Scripture, both in terms of its inerrancy and authority, lay at the heart of the Protestant Reformation.[1] For the Reformers, Scripture alone established

[1] This article has been adapted from a chapter titled, "The Ground and Pillar of the Faith," in *The Inerrant Word*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 115–33. Republished with permission. In preparing this material, I am particularly indebted to the work of three evangelical authors. The first is William Webster, *Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith*, vol. 2 (Battle Ground, WA: Christian Resources, 2001). It is perhaps the most extensive study on this important topic from an evangelical perspective. Those seeking a more thorough treatment of this subject would do well to engage

the doctrines of the church, and any competing authority had to be rejected. In this regard, the Geneva Confession of 1536 is representative:

> We affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as [the] rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other thing which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord.[2]

Although the Reformers sought affirmation for their views from the writings of the church fathers (i.e., Christian leaders and theologians from the early centuries of church history), they looked to Scripture alone as the foundation and final authority for their theological claims. As Martin Luther explained in 1519 to Johann Eck:

> I have learned to ascribe the honor of infallibility only to those books that are accepted as canonical. I am profoundly convinced that none of these writers has erred. All other writers, however they may have distinguished themselves in holiness or in doctrine, I read in this way: I evaluate what they say, not on the basis that they themselves believe that a thing is true, but only insofar as they are able to convince me by the authority of the canonical books or by clear reason.[3]

For the Reformers, the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* encompassed both the purity and the authority of the Bible. They recognized that because Scripture consists of the perfect words of God, it not only reflects His holy character, it also comes with His absolute authority. In recognizing that Christ alone is the Head of His church, they further asserted that His Word alone is the supreme authority for determining the doctrines of the church. Consequently, they concluded that all other would-be authorities (including popes, councils, and church traditions) must be subjected to Christ and His Word.

But were the Reformers the first in church history to embrace such a view regarding the absolute authority of Scripture? Or can a distinct witness affirming this theological conviction be perceived in the writings of earlier Christian leaders? In order to answer those questions from a historical perspective, it is necessary to consider what the church fathers said in this regard.

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with Webster's comprehensive survey. The second is James White, "*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church," in *Sola Scriptura*, ed. Don Kistler (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009), 17–37. This chapter long survey is a helpful and concise treatment of this subject. The third is Gregg Allison's summary treatment in his *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), which has been a useful resource on this topic just as it is on many other areas related to the history of Christian doctrine.

[2] "Geneva Confession of 1536," 1, in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 120.

[3] Martin Luther, *Contra malignum lohannis Ecci iudicium super aliquot articulis a fratribus quibusdam ei suppositis Martini Lutheri defensio*, *WA*, 2.626, in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 84.

Though not authoritative as only Scripture is, the witness of pre-Reformation church history provides valuable insight into the early church's perspective on the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. Believers today can benefit greatly from such a study, because it enables them to see how evangelical convictions were articulated and defended by early generations of Christians. In this article, we will survey the writings of the church fathers under two headings: the inerrancy of Scripture and the authority of Scripture.

The Church Fathers and the Inerrancy of Scripture

Even a cursory reading of patristic literature demonstrates that early Christians considered the Scriptures to contain the very words of God. Because they understood that God is perfect, they recognized that His Word is also perfect. Because God cannot lie, His Word is necessarily without error or falsehood.

That commitment is expressed throughout patristic literature in several ways. First, the church fathers understood that because Scripture comes from the Holy Spirit, it cannot contain error.[4] For example, Clement of Rome (d. ca. 100) makes this connection when he tells the Corinthians, "You have searched the holy scriptures, which are true, which were given by the Holy Spirit; you know that nothing unrighteous or counterfeit is written in them."[5] Irenaeus (ca. 130–202) echoes that conclusion in his treatise *Against Heresies*: "The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit."[6] Second, because Scripture is without error, early church fathers (such as Justin Martyr [d. 165] and Irenaeus) affirmed that it does not contradict itself. Their belief that all Scripture is true led them to conclude that every portion of Scripture harmonizes perfectly with every other part. To cite Irenaeus again:

> All Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found by us perfectly consistent: and the parables [i.e., the less-clear passages] shall harmonize with those passages which are perfectly plain; and those statements the meaning of which is clear, shall serve to explain the parables.[7]

To those who might claim there are contradictions in Scripture, Justin offers this reply: "Since I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another, I shall admit rather that I do not understand what is recorded, and shall strive to persuade those who imagine that the Scriptures are contradictory, to be rather of the same opinion as myself."[8] Athanasius (296–373) similarly asserts: "It is the opinion of

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[4] For additional examples from patristic literature on this point, see Carl R. Trueman, "The Power of the Word in the Present: Inerrancy and the Reformation," in *The Inerrant Word*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 134–46.

[5] Clement, *First Clement*, 45.2–3, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 105.

[6] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.28.2, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1:399. Hereafter, *ANF*.

[7] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.28.3, in *ANF*, 1:400.

[8] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 65, in *ANF*, 1:230.

some, that the Scriptures do not agree together, or that God, who gave the commandment, is false. But there is no disagreement whatever, far from it, neither can the Father, who is truth, lie; 'for it is impossible that God should lie.'"[9] Early Christian leaders were resolute in their conviction that God's Word is absolutely true. Tertullian (ca. 160–220) states, "The statements of holy Scripture will never be discordant with truth."[10] Athanasius offers a similar assertion: "The sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth."[11] In his exposition of John 17:17, John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) explains, "'Your word is truth,' that is, 'there is no falsehood in it, and all that is said in it must happen.'"[12] Augustine (354–430) is especially clear in this regard, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

> I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it…. Concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error.[13]

> The Scriptures are holy, they are truthful, they are blameless…. So we have no grounds at all for blaming Scripture if we happen to deviate in any way, because we haven't understood it. When we do understand it, we are right. But when we are wrong because we haven't understood it, we leave it in the right. We have gone wrong, we don't make our Scripture to be wrong, but it continues to stand up straight and right, so that we may return to it for correction.[14]

> It seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say, that the men by whom the Scripture has been given to us, and committed to writing, did put down in these books anything false…. For if you once admit into such a high sanctuary of authority one false statement as made in the way of duty, there will not be left a single sentence of those books which, if appearing to anyone difficult in practice or hard to believe, may not by the same fatal rule be explained away, as a statement in which … the author declared what was not true.[15]

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[9] Athanasius, *Easter Letter*, 19.3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 4:546. Hereafter, *NPNF²*.

[10] Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, 21, in *ANF*, 3:202.

[11] Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, 1.3, in *NPNF²*, 4:4.

[12] John Chrysostom, *Homily on John 17:17*, in *John 11–21*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 252.

[13] Augustine, *Letters*, 82.3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:350. Hereafter, *NPNF¹*.

[14] Augustine, *Sermons*, 23.3, in *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Peter Gorday (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 269.

[15] Augustine, *Letters*, 28.3, in *NPNF¹*, 1:251–52.

Seven centuries later, Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109) expresses the same conviction with these words: "For I am sure that if I say anything which is undoubtedly contradictory to holy Scripture, it is wrong; and if I become aware of such a contradiction, I do not wish to hold that opinion."[16]

Because these church fathers recognized God's Word to be wholly true, they took seriously the warnings in Scripture directed at anyone who would subtract from it or add to it. Athanasius illustrates this principle in his *Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter*. After listing the canonical books of Scripture, he explains: "These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these."[17]

Basil of Caesarea (330–379) likewise asserts, "To delete anything that is written down or to interpolate anything not written amounts to open defection from the faith and makes the offender liable to a charge of contempt."[18] In a similar vein, Augustine emphasizes the fact that, because God's Word is perfect, it must not be altered in any way. He writes:

> If anyone preaches either concerning Christ or concerning His church or concerning any other matter which pertains to our faith and life; I will not say, if we, but what Paul adds, if an angel from heaven should preach to you anything besides what you have received in the Scriptures of the Law and of the Gospels, let him be anathema.[19]

As this brief survey demonstrates, evidence from prominent church fathers shows that they regarded Scripture as the very revelation of God given through the Holy Spirit, such that it reflects His perfect character. They taught that it contains no error, that it is absolutely true, and that anyone who adds to it or subtracts from it will be judged accordingly by God. In this way, they clearly affirmed their belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.

The Church Fathers and the Authority of Scripture

Just as these early Christian leaders recognized that Scripture reflects the perfect character of God, they also recognized that Scripture comes with God's own authority. As Justin Martyr explains:

> [Scripture ought to] be believed for its own nobility, and for the confidence due to Him who sends it. Now the word of truth is sent from God…. For being sent with authority, it is not necessary that it should be required to

[16] Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1.18, in Allison, *Historical Theology*, 83.

[17] Athanasius, *Easter Letter*, 39.6, in *NPNF*^{2}, 4:550.

[18] Basil of Caesarea, "Concerning Faith," in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works, Fathers of the Church*, vol. 9, trans. M. Monica Wagner (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 59.

[19] Augustine, *Against Petilian, the Donatist*, 3.6, in White, "*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church," 25. Cf. *NPNF*^{1}, 4:599.

> produce proof of what is said; since neither is there any proof beyond itself, which is God.[20]

Because there is no higher authority than God, there can be no higher authority than the Word that He has revealed.

Augustine connects inerrancy with authority by explaining that when someone attacks the truthfulness of God's Word, he simultaneously attempts to undermine God's authority. Augustine writes: "For, truly, when he [i.e., a false teacher] pronounces anything [in Scripture] to be untrue, he demands that he be believed in preference, and endeavors to shake our confidence in the authority of the divine Scriptures."[21] Elsewhere, Augustine reiterates the truth that Scripture has the highest authority because it is God's Word:

> This Mediator, having spoken what He judged sufficient first by the prophets, then by His own lips, and afterwards by the apostles, has besides produced the Scripture which is called canonical, which has paramount authority, and to which we yield assent in all matters of which we ought not to be ignorant.[22]

The commitment of early Christians to the paramount authority of Scripture is evidenced in at least three ways: in their reverence for Scripture within the church, in their reliance on Scripture to expose false teaching, and in their regard for Scripture over every other alleged source of authority.

The Patristic Reverence for Scripture in the Church

The high regard that early Christians had for the authority of God's Word is evidenced first in the fact that the Scriptures occupied a central and authoritative place in the life of the early church. In his *First Apology*, written around 150, Justin provides one of the earliest extrabiblical descriptions of a church service. He writes:

> And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president [the pastor] verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.[23]

As Justin's description demonstrates, the early church regarded Old Testament texts ("the writings of the prophets") and New Testament texts ("the memoirs of the apostles") as authoritative, such that they were read and preached during the

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[20] Justin Martyr, *Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection*, 1, in *ANF*, 1.294 (English rendered clearer).

[21] Augustine, *Letters*, 28.4, in *NPNF*[1], 1:252.

[22] Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.3, in *NPNF*[1], 2.206 (emphasis added).

[23] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67, in *ANF*, 1:186.

corporate gathering. Believers attending the weekly worship service were admonished and urged to obey the good things revealed in Scripture.

This attitude toward God's Word is made explicit by Irenaeus. Speaking of the apostles, he writes:

> We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.[24]

In response to the heretical teachings of the Gnostics, Irenaeus appealed to Scripture as his final authority—as the "ground and pillar" of the faith of the church.[25] Commenting on Irenaeus's view of Scripture, William Webster observes:

> It is clear that Irenaeus taught that Scripture is the pillar and ground of the faith…. To Irenaeus, then, Scripture is the full and final revelation given by God to man through the apostles. It is inspired and authoritative and a source of proof for discerning truth and error. It is Scripture that has final and sufficient authority and is the ground and pillar of the Church's faith. The Scriptures are both materially and formally sufficient.[26]

As Irenaeus's words illustrate, the Scriptures occupied a central place in the weekly worship of the early church because they provided the authoritative basis for what Christians believed and what the church taught.

The Patristic Reliance on Scripture in Condemning Heresy

An early Christian commitment to the authority of Scripture is seen, second, in the fathers' repeated appeal to Scripture in defense of sound doctrine, especially in the face of heretical attack. Historian J. N. D. Kelly sums up this characteristic of patristic theology with these words:

> The clearest token of the prestige enjoyed by [Scripture] is the fact that almost the entire theological effort of the fathers, whether their aims were polemical or constructive, was expended upon what amounted to the exposition of the Bible. Further, it was everywhere taken for granted that, for any doctrine to win acceptance, it had first to establish its Scriptural basis.[27]

Numerous examples could be produced to demonstrate the veracity of that statement. For example, Irenaeus condemned his Gnostic opponents by appealing to Scripture.

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[24] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, in *ANF*, 1:414.

[25] Webster points out: "The phrase 'handed down' is the verb form of the word 'tradition.' ... The Bible is the means by which the *traditio* (tradition), or teaching of the apostles is transmitted from generation to generation and by which true apostolic teaching can be verified and error refuted." *Holy Scripture*, 2.24–25.

[26] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2.24, 26.

[27] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (repr., New York: Continuum, 2006), 46.

He wrote: "Such, then, is their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures."[28] For Irenaeus, the fact that the Gnostics based their teachings on something other than God's Word was sufficient evidence, in and of itself, to prove that their system was false.

Tertullian makes a similar point in his treatise on the resurrection. He writes, "Take away, indeed, from the heretics the wisdom which they share with the heathen, and let them support their inquiries from the Scriptures alone: they will then be unable to keep their ground."[29] Tertullian did not hesitate to label the false teachers as heretics because they could not support their teachings from God's Word.

Like Tertullian, Hippolytus (ca. 170–236) responds to heretics by comparing their teachings with Scripture:

> Let us turn to the exhibition of the truth itself, that we may establish the truth, against which all these mighty heresies have arisen without being able to state anything to the purpose. There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source…. All of us who wish to practice piety will be unable to learn its practice from any other quarter than the oracles of God. Whatever things, then, the Holy Scriptures declare, at these let us look; and whatsoever things they teach, these let us learn.[30]

In confronting the falsehood of Arianism, Athanasius writes:

> Which of the two theologies sets forth our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Son of the Father, this which you vomited forth [i.e., Arianism], or that which we have spoken and maintain from the Scriptures [i.e., Trinitarianism]? … Nor does Scripture afford them [the Arian heretics] any pretext; for it has been often shown, and it shall be shown now, that their doctrine is alien to the divine oracles.[31]

Likewise, in his controversy with the Donatists, Augustine appeals to Scripture as the only adequate standard for discerning truth from error:

> Let us not bring in deceitful balances, to which we may hang what weights we will and how we will, saying to suit ourselves, "This is heavy and this is light;" but let us bring forward the sacred balance out of holy Scripture, as out of the Lord's treasure-house, and let us weigh them by it, to see which is the heavier; or rather, let us not weigh them for ourselves, but read the weights as declared by the Lord.[32]

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[28] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1, in *ANF*, 1:326.
[29] Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 3, in *ANF*, 3:547.
[30] Hippolytus, *Against the Heresy of Noetus*, 8–9, in *ANF*, 5:227.
[31] Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 1.3.10, in *NPNF*^{2}, 4:311–12.
[32] Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, 2.6 (9), in *NPNF*^{1}, 4:429.

Such examples demonstrate a standard patristic approach: sound doctrine was defended and false teaching denounced on the basis of biblical authority. These early Christian leaders rested their case in the Scriptures, because there was no higher authority to which they could appeal.

The Patristic Regard for Scripture above Every Other Authority

A commitment to biblical authority in the early church is seen, third, in the fathers' elevation of Scripture above other potential sources of authority. From a survey of patristic literature, a compelling case can be made that the early church viewed Scripture as its highest authority in the determination of sound doctrine. This commitment to the ultimate authority of God's Word (what the Protestant Reformers would later call *sola Scriptura*) can be demonstrated along the following lines.

First, patristic theologians such as Origen and Augustine insisted that noncanonical books—though they might be edifying and beneficial for believers—do not have an authority equal to Scripture. As Origen (ca. 182–254) explains: "No man ought, for the confirmation of doctrines, to use books which are not canonized Scriptures."[33] Elsewhere, he expands on this conviction: "In the two testaments every word that pertains to God may be required and discussed, and all knowledge of things may be understood out of them. But if anything yet remains which the Holy Scripture does not determine, no other third Scripture ought to be received for authorizing any knowledge or doctrine."[34] Augustine makes a similar comment about any book written after the closing of the New Testament canon. He writes:

> There is a distinct boundary line separating all productions subsequent to apostolic times from the authoritative canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The authority of these books has come down to us from the apostles … and, from a position of lofty supremacy, claims the submission of every faithful and pious mind…. In the innumerable books that have been written afterwards we may sometimes find the same truth as in Scripture, but there is not the same authority. Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself.[35]

Elsewhere, Augustine reiterates this principle:

> Let those things be removed from our midst which we quote against each other not from divine canonical books but from elsewhere. Someone may perhaps ask: Why do you want to remove these things from the midst? Because I do not want the holy church proved by human documents but by divine oracles.[36]

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[33] Origen, *Tractates in Matthew*, 26, in *Charles Elliott, Delineation of Roman Catholicism* (New York: George Lane, 1841), 1:120.

[34] Origen, *Homily on Leviticus*, 5, in *Charles Elliott, Delineation of Roman Catholicism*, 1:119 (English rendered clearer).

[35] Augustine, *Reply to Faustus*, 11.5, in *NPNF*[1], 4:180. In this same context, Augustine further asserts, "In consequence of the distinctive peculiarity of the sacred writings, we are bound to receive as true whatever the canon shows to have been said by even one prophet, or apostle, or evangelist."

[36] Augustine, *The Unity of the Church*, 3, in White, "*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church," 25.

Second, Christian leaders such as Ambrose (ca. 337–397) regarded Scripture (in which the wisdom of God is revealed) as more authoritative than any form of human wisdom. Ambrose expressed that principle with these words:

> Do not follow the traditions of philosophy or those who gather the semblance of truth in the "vain deceit" of the arts of persuasion. Rather, accept, in accordance with the rule of truth, what is set forth in the inspired words of God and is poured into the hearts of the faithful by the contemplation of such sublimity.[37]

In his treatise *The Unity of the Church*, Augustine similarly writes: "Let us not hear: This I say, this you say; but thus says the Lord. Surely it is the books of the Lord on whose authority we both agree and which we both believe. There let us seek the church, there let us discuss our case."[38] The context of that statement is notable, because Augustine is appealing to Scripture as his ultimate authority even in matters pertaining to the church.

Third, a number of church fathers expressly state that they regarded the Scriptures as more authoritative than their own opinions and teachings. Rather than elevating their interpretations to a level of equal authority with Scripture, they elevated Scripture above their own perspectives. Consider the following examples:

> **Dionysius of Alexandria (ca. 265):** We did not evade objections, but we endeavored as far as possible to hold to and confirm the things which lay before us, and if the reason given satisfied us, we were not ashamed to change our opinions and agree with others; but on the contrary, conscientiously and sincerely, and with hearts laid open before God, we accepted whatever was established by the proofs and teachings of the Holy Scriptures.[39]

> **Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–386):** For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell you these things, do not give absolute credence, unless you receive the proof of the things which I announce from the divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration from the Holy Scriptures.[40]

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[37] Ambrose, *Six Days of Creation*, 2.1.3, in *Psalms 51–150*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Quentin F. Wesselschmidt (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 318.

[38] Augustine, *The Unity of the Church*, 3, in White, "*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church," 25.

[39] Dionysius of Alexandria, cited from Eusebius, *Church History*, 7.24:7–9, in *NPNF*^{2}, 1:309 (English rendered clearer).

[40] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.17, in *NPNF*^{2}, 7.23 (English rendered clearer).

> **Basil of Caesarea:** Those hearers who are instructed in the Scriptures should examine what is said by the teachers, receiving what is in conformity with the Scriptures and rejecting what is opposed to them; and that those who persist in teaching such doctrines should be strictly avoided.[41]
>
> **John Chrysostom, noting that all arguments must be supported from Scripture:** These then are the reasons; but it is necessary to establish them all from the Scriptures, and to show with exactness that all that has been said on this subject is not an invention of human reasoning, but the very sentence of the Scriptures. For thus will what we say be at once more deserving of credit, and sink the deeper into your minds.[42]
>
> **Augustine:** For the reasonings of any men whatsoever, even though they be [true Christians], and of high reputation, are not to be treated by us in the same way as the canonical Scriptures are treated. We are at liberty, without doing any violence to the respect which these men deserve, to condemn and reject anything in their writings, if perchance we shall find that they have entertained opinions differing from that which others or we ourselves have, by the divine help, discovered to be the truth. I deal thus with the writings of others, and I wish my intelligent readers to deal thus with mine.[43]

As Augustine suggests, intelligent readers are those who evaluate patristic writings against the standard of biblical truth, not vice versa.

Along those same lines, Augustine elsewhere asserts that Scripture is more authoritative than the writings of earlier church fathers. He writes:

> Who can fail to be aware that the sacred canon of Scripture, both of the Old and New Testament, is confined within its own limits, and that it stands so absolutely in a superior position to all later letters of the bishops, that about it we can hold no manner of doubt or disputation whether what is confessedly contained in it is right and true; but that all the letters of bishops which have been written, or are being written, since the closing of the canon, are liable to be refuted if there be anything contained in them which strays from the truth.[44]

When Augustine (writing in the fifth century) disagreed with Cyprian (a third-century father), he did not hesitate to assert that Cyprian's writings must be evaluated in light of Scripture. Thus, Augustine explains:

> We do no injustice to Cyprian when we make a distinction between his epistles and the canonical Scriptures; we may freely pass judgment on the writings of believers and unbelievers alike…. For that reason Cyprian's

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[41] Basil of Caesarea, *The Morals,* Rule 72, in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, 185–86.
[42] John Chrysostom, *Concerning the Statutes*, Homily 1.14, in *NPNF*[1], 9:336–37.
[43] Augustine, *Letters*, 148.4.15, in *NPNF*[1], 1:502.
[44] Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, 2.2–3, in *NPNF*[1], 4:427.

> epistles, which have no canonical authority, must be judged according to their agreement with the authority of the divine writings. Thus we can accept from Cyprian only what agrees, and safely reject what does not agree, with Scripture.[45]

As Augustine's example illustrates, it is no slight to early generations of Christians (including those who lived in the second and third centuries) to subject their writings to the authoritative guide of biblical truth.

Fourth, there is evidence that early Christians also viewed Scripture as more authoritative than church councils. Even after the Council of Nicaea took place in 325, Athanasius, the renowned defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy, still regarded the authority of Scripture as superior to it. The council was authoritative only insofar as it accurately reflected the teachings of God's Word. Speaking of Arian theologians, Athanasius wrote:

> Vainly then do they run about with the pretext that they have demanded Councils for the faith's sake; for divine Scripture is sufficient above all things; but if a Council be needed on the point, there are the proceedings of the Fathers, for the Nicene Bishops did not neglect this matter, but stated the doctrine so exactly, that persons reading their words honestly, cannot but be reminded by them of the religion towards Christ announced in divine Scripture.[46]

Notice that Athanasius argues that "Scripture is sufficient above all things," including councils. Furthermore, he defends the orthodoxy of the Council of Nicaea on the grounds that its determinations reflected the truth "announced in divine Scripture." Arianism was not in error because it violated the findings of a council, but rather because it distorted and rejected the clear teaching of God's Word.

Augustine similarly notes that the councils of the church are not the Christian's ultimate authority. In debating an Arian heretic named Maximinus, Augustine openly states: "I must not press the authority of Nicaea against you, nor you that of Ariminum against me; I do not acknowledge the one, as you do not the other; but let us come to ground that is common to both, the testimony of the Holy Scriptures."[47] In other words, where the authority of councils fails, the authority of God's Word continues to reign supreme.

Fifth, in doctrinal matters, evidence from the fathers demonstrates that they generally regarded Scripture as more authoritative than church tradition. Though some of the fathers occasionally cite oral tradition to support certain ecclesiastical practices, on the whole, they look to Scripture as the final authority in matters of doctrine.[48] Basil provides an example in this regard. In places, he references

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[45] Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, 2.39–40, in A. D. R. Polman, *The Word of God according to St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 65. Cf. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:76.

[46] Athanasius, *De Synodis: Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, 1.6, in *NPNF*^{2}, 4.453.

[47] Augustine, *Against Maximinus the Arian*, 2.14, in George Salmon, *The Infallibility of the Church* (London: John Murray, 1888), 288.

[48] For a thorough examination, from an evangelical perspective, of the church fathers' use of tradition, see Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:22–238.

unwritten customs such as triple immersion in baptism and facing east to pray.[49] But in the determination of sound doctrine, he looks solely to Scripture as his authoritative guide.[50]

Consider, for example, how Basil responds to the proponents of Arianism:

> Their complaint is that their custom [i.e., tradition] does not accept this and that Scripture does not agree. What is my reply? I do not consider it fair that the custom which obtains among them should be regarded as a law and rule of orthodoxy. If custom is to be taken in proof of what is right, then it is certainly competent for me to put forward on my side the custom which obtains here. If they reject this, we are clearly not bound to follow them. Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth.[51]

In denouncing the errors of Arian theology, Basil's ultimate appeal was not to tradition or to church councils, but to the Word of God. From his perspective, the definitive reason Arianism was wrong was not that it violated Trinitarian custom, but that it departed from biblical truth.

Elsewhere, Basil reiterates this point:

> What our fathers said, the same say we, that the glory of the Father and of the Son is common; wherefore we offer the doxology to the Father with the Son. But we do not rest only on the fact that such is the tradition of the Fathers; for they too followed the sense of Scripture, and started from the evidence which, a few sentences back, I deduced from Scripture and laid before you.[52]

As Basil's statement demonstrates, his case for the deity of Christ did not ultimately rest on the teachings of earlier Christian leaders, but on an even greater authority: the Word of God.

In summary, abundant examples from early Christian writings can be produced to show that, in matters of doctrine, the early church elevated the Scriptures above (1) noncanonical writings, (2) human wisdom, (3) their own teaching (and the teaching of earlier church fathers), (4) the findings of church councils, and (5) the traditions of the church. On this basis, then, a strong case can be made to show that a chorus of patristic voices anticipated the Reformation doctrine of s*ola Scriptura*, that Scripture is perfectly true and that it stands alone as the ultimate authority for determining what the church is to believe and to teach.

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[49] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.66, in *NPNF*[2], 8:40–42.
[50] Cf. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:73.
[51] Basil of Caesarea, *Letters*, 189.3, in *NPNF*[2], 8.229 (emphasis added).
[52] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 7.16, in *NPNF*[2], 8:10.

A Note about Tradition

But what about those places where the church fathers do speak of "tradition"? How should such references be understood in light of the fathers' clear affirmation of the inerrancy and authority of Scripture?

The Roman Catholic Church insists that certain Christian doctrines were preserved not only through the *writings of inspired Scripture*, but also through *the transmission of extrabiblical oral tradition*. Such oral tradition supposedly explains the origination of distinctly Catholic doctrines such as the infallibility of the pope and the immaculate conception and assumption of Mary.

In responding to such claims, it is helpful to recognize that the church fathers used the term *tradition* in a variety of ways, none of which ultimately substantiates modern Catholic claims. For example, Irenaeus defines tradition not in terms of extrabiblical doctrines, but in terms of the essentials of the Christian faith, all of which are expressly taught in Scripture. Irenaeus explains that the "ancient tradition" of the apostles consists of the following:

> Believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; who, because of His surpassing love towards His creation, condescended to be born of the virgin, He Himself uniting man through Himself to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rising again, and having been received up in splendor, shall come in glory, the Savior of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and sending into eternal fire those who transform the truth, and despise His Father and His advent.[53]

For Irenaeus, "tradition" includes (1) belief in one God, (2) belief that he created all things through Christ, (3) belief in the incarnation, (4) belief in the deity and humanity of Christ, (5) belief in Christ's passion, (6) belief in his resurrection, (7) belief in the ascension, and (8) belief in the second coming. That list articulates the fundamentals of the Christian faith and corresponds to doctrinal truths that are clearly taught in Scripture.[54]

Importantly, Irenaeus was using the term tradition as a direct refutation of Gnostic heretics who claimed that they possessed a secret tradition that had been orally passed down from the apostles but was different from Scripture. In response, Irenaeus explains that the traditions of the apostles are contained in the teachings of Scripture. Thus, the Gnostics were wrong because they elevated unbiblical, secret tradition above Scripture, whereas true believers had no other authoritative tradition besides God's Word.

To be sure, the church fathers sometimes appealed to prior generations of Christian leaders to show that, unlike the heretics, their teachings were not novelties. However, this appeal to earlier church history was never regarded as being an authority above or equal to Scripture. As Gregg Allison explains:

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[53] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.4.2, in *ANF*, 1:417.

[54] Cf. White's discussion of this quotation in "*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church," 20–22.

> This practice of appealing to church authority, especially to the writings of [earlier| church fathers, was never intended to deprive Scripture of its rightful place of authority. In battles against heresy, the point of appeal was to provide support for true doctrines because they were the doctrines the church had always embraced; they were not the novel ideas of the false teachers. And of course, whatever the church believed had to be traced back to Scripture itself, because that was the ultimate authority in all matters.[55]

Admittedly, there were also times when some church fathers (such as Basil of Caesarea) used the word tradition to speak about church practices of secondary importance, such as triple immersion in baptism and facing east to pray.[56] Importantly, modern Catholic doctrines such as the infallibility of the pope and the assumption of Mary are not included in the traditions of which Basil speaks. Furthermore, in the early church, even secondary practices were subject to evaluation on the basis of Scripture. Thus, Basil himself can explain that "every word and deed should be ratified by the testimony of the Holy Scripture to confirm the good and cause shame to the wicked."[57]

A century before Basil, Cyprian (ca. 200–258) provides a helpful example of this kind of biblical evaluation of tradition. Cyprian was addressing the question of whether or not heretical Novatianists who returned to the orthodox church should be rebaptized. Our goal in this chapter is not to address that particular issue, but instead to look at the authority to which Cyprian appealed in order to answer the question he posed. Significantly, he wished to follow a traditional practice only if it came from the Bible. Thus, he writes:

> Where is that tradition from? Does it come from the authority of the Lord and of the Gospel, or does it come from the commands and the epistles of the apostles? For God bears witness to the fact that those things which are written must be done.... If, therefore, it is either prescribed in the Gospel, or contained in the epistles or Acts of the Apostles, ... [then] let this divine and holy tradition be observed."[58]

In sum, when the church fathers spoke of tradition in a doctrinal sense, or in the sense of the "rule of faith," they were generally referring to truths that are expressly taught in Scripture, as the example from Irenaeus demonstrates. At the same time, some patristic writers (such as Basil in the fourth century) occasionally spoke of unwritten, extrabiblical "traditions" that pertained to certain ecclesiastical practices and customs. Even so, the evidence suggests that most of the church fathers would have gladly agreed with the principle that everything—whether doctrinal or practical—is ultimately subject to the Word of God. Consequently, their use of the word tradition does not contradict their commitment to the final authority of Scripture.

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[55] Allison, *Historical Theology*, 81.

[56] Cf. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:142–48. It should be noted that many of the secondary practices mentioned by Basil are not practiced by the Roman Catholic Church today.

[57] Basil of Caesarea: *The Morals*, Rule 26, in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, 106.

[58] Cyprian, *Letters*, 73.2, in *ANF*, 5:386–87 (English rendered clearer).

Conclusion

Based on evidence from the writings of the church fathers, a strong case can be made to demonstrate that the early church affirmed the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*—namely, the conviction that Scripture is without error and that it alone is the highest authority and the final court of appeal for the establishment of sound doctrine. It is the rule by which all things must be measured.

Scripture is God's Word. Therefore, it reflects His perfect character and comes with His absolute authority. The early church understood that to submit to Scripture is to submit to the lordship of its divine Author. Thus, in the writings of the church fathers, we find statements such as the following:

> We make the Holy Scriptures the rule and the measure of every tenet; we necessarily fix our eyes upon that, and approve that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention of those writings.[59]

> For among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith and the manner of life.[60]

> What more shall I teach you than what we read in the apostle? For holy Scripture fixes the rule of our doctrine, lest we be wiser than we ought…. Therefore, I should not teach you anything else except to expound to you the words of the Teacher.[61]

In light of such evidence, contemporary evangelicals can have great confidence that their commitment to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture has a rich history that spans the last two millennia. The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* was not a sixteenth-century invention. Though it may not always have been articulated as clearly or directly in the pre-Reformation period as it was during the sixteenth century, it has nonetheless been the cherished conviction of believers throughout the entire history of the church.

Along those lines, Webster writes:

> The opinion of the fathers and theologians throughout the history of the Church and up to the Reformation was overwhelmingly in favor of the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* and antithetical to the position of the Council of Trent. Contrary to claims by Roman Catholic apologists, the principle of *sola Scriptura* is not only biblical, it is historical.[62]

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[59] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, citing his sister Macrina, in *NPNF*^{2}, 5:439.

[60] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.9, in *NPNF*^{1}, 2:539.

[61] Augustine, *On the Good of Widowhood*, 2, in White, "*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church," 24–25. Cf. *NPNF*^{1}, 3.442.

[62] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:92.

Armed with the confidence that this doctrine is established in Scripture and affirmed in church history, believers can go forth boldly in the knowledge that there is no higher authority than the Word of God, because there is no authority greater than God Himself.

OUR SUPREME LORD AND SUFFICIENT SAVIOR

Few chapters in the New Testament display the supremacy of Christ as prominently as Colossians 1. In *Christ Over All*, the reader will glimpse the glory of the Christian's Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul's exaltation of Christ was the perfect antidote to the Colossian heresy, as the saints in Colossae were reminded of the preeminence of the Son. And this same reminder is of necessity to the follower of Christ today, such that he would behold his supreme Lord and sufficient Savior and be further transformed into His image.

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ONE GOD IN NICAEA, 1 CORINTHIANS, AND DEUTERONOMY: THE HERMENEUTIC OF THE BIBLICAL WRITERS AND THE EARLY CHURCH

ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα,
πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητήν…

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of all things visible and invisible…

Abner Chou
Ph.D., The Master's Seminary
President and John F. MacArthur Endowed Fellow
The Master's University and Seminary

* * * * *

On the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea, there are some who celebrate this historic creed and others who critique it, claiming that this was a product of an ancient time and a new understanding of the data is warranted. The question of whether Nicaea is accurate is a hermeneutical one, an issue which, ironically, Nicaea itself was originally desiring to address. The strength of Nicaea, reflected by its inter-textuality, is its biblical and precise hermeneutic. This is evident in even the first phrase of the creed, which echoes 1 Corinthians 8:6 which in turn is an exposition of the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4. In tracing this line of texts, it becomes clear that the way Nicaea read Paul is the way Paul wrote, and the way he read the Shema is the way Moses wrote it. Exegetical analysis of this chain of passages demonstrates that the notions of essence, personhood, divine simplicity, and the distinction between Christ and the Father from creation are not later formulations based upon Greek philosophy and metaphysics. Though articulated in their own way, these concepts were present in the way Moses spoke of "one Yahweh" in the Shema and the way Paul spoke of "one God" and "one Lord" in contrast with the idols who are merely called gods and lords. Therefore, Christians confess Nicaea not because of the creed itself but for the very reasons that Nicaea did what it did: its careful exposition of Scripture. The hermeneutic of Moses is the hermeneutic of Paul which is the hermeneutic of Nicaea and the Christian.

* * * * *

Introduction

On the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea, we have much to commemorate. Believers everywhere can celebrate the diligent and unflinching defense of the nature and honor of Christ by those who have gone before us. We can value the careful articulation of biblical truth that has withstood the test of time, reflecting the rigorous and thoughtful work of those early on in church history. We can also appreciate that the Nicene Creed not only has endured but also been remarkably effective, shaping confessions and defining crucial lines of orthodoxy and heresy. Seventeen hundred years gives witness to the way the Lord has used the faithfulness of some of the earliest Christians.

While some celebrate this milestone of seventeen hundred years, others raise critique. Certain people allege that the doctrine of the deity of Christ did not arise until AD 325.[1] They argue that Nicaea was not a council that confirmed biblical teaching but one that coerced the notion of the Trinity upon the church.[2] From scholars to cults, people have been skeptical of Nicaea and all that it attests.

As the anniversary of Nicaea approaches, scholarly articles have raised the question whether the technical language used to describe the Trinity—essence, simplicity, persons—is truly biblical or is just in line with historic creeds and counsels.[3] Some contend that essence and persons are an artificial distinction. They note that Scripture uses the phrase "God and Father" (cf. Rom 15:6), seemingly equating the two as absolutely and exclusively identical.[4] Making these observations, skeptics often take a modalistic view, arguing that God revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which are at best just anthropomorphic descriptions of God's manifestations.[5] Such scholarship further claims that based upon New Testament data, "God" (θεος) merely is a coordinator for His modes of revelation as Father, Son, and Spirit.[6]

Such critics of Nicaea appeal to their exegetical data and argue that their supposition is ultimately hermeneutically justified:

> Just as it should not be our priority to try and understand the OT in light of the NT (instead of vice versa), so it should not be our focus to understand the NT (and for that matter the entire Bible) in light of the Creeds, Statements of Faith and Councils. The NT should rather be understood in light of the OT and in light of the NT itself, being self-revelatory. The question, however, could be posed: But what about the Councils then? The

[1] Dennis A. Beard, *The Errors of the Trinity: The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Indianapolis: 1st Book Library, 2003), 28; Robert Spears, *The Unitarian Handbook of Scriptural Illustrations & Expositions* (London: British and Foreign Unitarian Association, 2012), 96.

[2] Spears, *Unitarian Handbook*, 96.

[3] Willem H. Oliver and Erna Oliver, "Θεός, Father and the 'Holy Trinity' in the New Testament," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45, no. 1 (December 31, 2024): 3; Thomas Gaston and Andrew Perry, "Christological Monotheism: 1 Cor 8.6 and the Shema," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39, no. 2 (December 31, 2017): 176–96; Willem H. Oliver and Erna Oliver, "God as One, with Reference to Barth and the Perichoresis Doctrine," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no. 1 (December 31, 2023): 1–9.

[4] Oliver and Oliver, "Θεός," 5.

[5] Oliver and Oliver, 5.

[6] Oliver and Oliver, 8.

> Councils can be regarded as an interpretation of the Bible, especially the NT – for its time. However, that time has already passed long ago. Instead of looking at the Bible from an Early Church perspective, the time is ripe for the people of God to convene a new (world) Ecumenical Council and interpret the Bible anew from a 21st-century perspective, also with reference to the Holy Trinity.[7]

The argument proposed here is a mix of two major assertions. The authors of the quote assert hermeneutical consistency where the New Testament does not reinterpret the Old nor do the church councils reinterpret the Scripture. At the same time, the authors also advocate for interpretative relativism where any interpretation is just the product of its time such that the councils might be an ancient way to read the Bible but the modern day must have its own interpretation. The above quote is a combination of objectivity in method yet relativity in practice, and the combination is telling. On the one hand, the notion of hermeneutical consistency is arguably correct.[8] On the other hand, the above quote also illustrates that the notion of hermeneutical consistency can often be a cover for relativism and undermining theological truth. The quote also raises the consequence of being inconsistent with hermeneutical consistency: if later documents can reinterpret earlier ones (New Testament over Old Testament, creeds and councils overlay Scripture), then why should people not override councils, creeds, and Scripture with their own later interpretative traditions?

The way to combat the above suppositions is to demonstrate the true nature and ramifications of hermeneutical consistency. I have contended elsewhere that the prophetic hermeneutic is the apostolic hermeneutic.[9] The way the Old Testament prophets read and wrote the Bible with exegetical rigor and theological sophistication is the way the New Testament apostles read and wrote the Bible. Because of the biblical writers' exacting hermeneutical consistency under inspiration, the entire canon is filled with exegetical detail and theological depth. My contention in this article is to emphasize that the hermeneutic of the biblical writers is the hermeneutic of Nicaea. Just as the prophets and apostles upheld the meaning of earlier revelation even while they expounded its significance or inherent implications, so Nicaea upheld the meaning of revelation while expounding upon its inherent implications. While Nicaea of course is not revelatory, it follows the hermeneutical pattern of Scripture of how one reads what has been revealed. Thus, Nicaea is resiliently true because it is faithful to Scripture even to the most fundamental hermeneutical level.

This article will demonstrate such methodological fidelity by examining the opening phrase of the Nicene Creed, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;" (Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων). A significant portion of the language is taken from 1 Corinthians 8:6 ("yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him,"

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[7] Oliver and Oliver, "Θεός," 8.

[8] See Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning Interpretation from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018).

[9] Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 22–23.

ἀλλ᾽ ἡμῖν εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν), which itself is taken from the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 ("Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one," שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד). Such inter-textuality gives the opportunity to prove that the way Nicaea used Scripture is the way that Paul used Deuteronomy and the way that Moses himself intended Deuteronomy. The prophetic hermeneutic is the apostolic hermeneutic, which is Nicaea's hermeneutic.

With that, contra the previous criticism of Nicaea, hermeneutical consistency does not lead to interpretative relativism. Instead, hermeneutical consistency leads to the reality that there is an objective interpretation found in the Old Testament and the New Testament, to even the early church and Nicaea. That is because what Moses meant is what Paul meant and what Nicaea meant. They all used the same hermeneutic, their reading is the same, their meaning is the same, and thus Nicaea matches the substance of Scripture. Thus, the time is *not* ripe "for the people of God to convene a new (world) Ecumenical Council and interpret the Bible anew from a 21st-century perspective." The 1700th anniversary of Nicaea should not lead to criticism and revision but celebration and commemoration, because Nicaea is not a product of the issues of their time but a reproduction of what is in holy writ, not only in assertion but even in hermeneutic.

Hermeneutics of Nicaea

To prove that Nicaea matched the biblical writers in message and even methodological mentality, one must first understand what Nicaea did. Blaising has some crucial insights into this issue.[10] Setting the scene historically, Blaising notes the testimony of Athanasius who recounted that the bishops at Nicaea desired to construct a creed "from the acknowledged words of Scripture."[11] Such background indicates that any linguistic associations between Nicaea and Scripture were intentional. Moreover, Blaising notes:

> The council deliberation recalled by Athanasius clearly reads as a hermeneutical discussion—that is, a discussion about the language of the biblical text—not as an analysis of philosophical ideas in and of themselves. The introduction of *ousia* language is presented in this very light—as summing up or expressing more or less adequately the sense perceived in a set of biblical texts rather than as language to be evaluated on the basis of its intrinsic rationality or its setting within one of the systems of ancient philosophy.[12]

Kannengiesser further contends that the Nicene debate was an "Alexandrian crisis of biblical interpretation."[13] These assertions have merit in the evidence. For example,

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[10] Craig A. Blaising, "Creedal Formation as Hermeneutical Development: A Reexamination of Nicaea," *Pro Ecclesia* 19, no. 4 (December 31, 2010): 371–88.

[11] Blaising, "Creedal Formation," 377.

[12] Blaising, 377.

[13] Charles Kannengiesser, *Holy Scripture and Hellenistic Hermeneutics in Alexandrian Christology: The Arian Crisis* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1982), 1.

some of the debate revolved around the meaning of verbs describing lady wisdom in Proverbs 8:25.[14] The historical background of Nicaea anchors the creed as intentionally inter-textual and hermeneutical in nature.

In light of this, it is no surprise that Nicaea seems to reference 1 Corinthians 8:6. The opening words of Nicaea, "ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα," are nearly verbatim of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians, "εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ." The only other times in the entire New Testament where "εἷς θεὸς" is used are in Ephesians 4:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5, and neither of those instances uses the exact language of "one God, the Father."[15] This makes Nicaea's words quite distinctive to a single passage in the New Testament. Furthermore, the next line in Nicaea (καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν) also has the exact wording of the rest of 1 Corinthians 8:6 (καὶ εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς). Later on in the creed, it also states "through Whom all things came to be" (δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο), which matches 1 Corinthians 8:6b (δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα). With such linguistically distinct verbiage, the connection between Nicaea and 1 Corinthians 8 is not in dispute.[16]

Historical correspondence helps to bring forth the precise way Nicaea used 1 Corinthians 8 in the creed. Eusebius of Nicomedia had brought forth a proposal which contended that the phrase "all these things are from God" (2 Cor 5:18) included both the work of Christ as well as Christ Himself.[17] Such language though was Arian, suggesting that Christ was part of the entire created order. First Corinthians 8 was incorporated into the creed to combat such false ideas. Based upon this, we can make the following observations about the use of the passage at Nicaea:

1. The creed incorporated the parallelism of "one God, the Father … one Lord Jesus Christ" from 1 Corinthians 8:6. In the structure of the Nicene Creed, the parallel lines, with their unique descriptions, show the distinction between the Father and Son. The conjunction και separating the two lines demonstrates that they are true parallel lines as opposed to synonymity or apposition. Relative to personhood, the Father is not the Son.
2. The parallel lines also indicate that Nicaea did not subordinate the Son to the Father. One line is not nested within the other. Instead, the lines are truly co-equal, both even beginning with the same preposition (εἰς) showing two parallel objects of faith and thereby presenting two equal persons.
3. The parallel lines also show that while the Father and Son are distinct, something unifies them. There must be a reason that they can be held in parallel as the object of faith (Πιστεύομεν).
4. The repeated term "one," also brought from 1 Corinthians 8:6 explains the nature of the unity. Though the Father and Son are different persons, that must be held in tension with the notion of their oneness. The

[14] Blaising, "Creedal Formation," 377.

[15] Ephesians 4:6 is close with its language of "one God and Father" (εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ) but adds a conjunction and removes the article from "Father."

[16] Blaising, "Creedal Formation," 384.

[17] Blaising, 378.

cardinal number one, as opposed to notions of first, only, or unique, numbers God's essence. Part of the entire point of Nicaea was to prove that Jesus is not merely a person with a similar essence to God or even a person who is a parallel God but a person who is the very essence of the Father.[18] As the creed says, the light of Jesus is not a parallel, subservient, or even reflective light but "light of light" (Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός). Nicaea argued that the Father and Son are absolutely one, and the repetition and parallelism of the term "one" presented that the Father and Son were not merely unique in and of themselves but were completely united in the same absolute oneness of essence. What is called the doctrine of simplicity—that God is God, without parts and therefore does not give His glory to any other (Isa 42:8)—undergirds Nicene contention about the Trinity.[19] Jesus cannot be a parallel or derivative divine being as God's oneness precludes it. If Christ is one Lord, as Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 8:6, then He must be the very same God as the Father.

5. This oneness in essence is brought forth by how "all things" (τὰ πάντα) is used. To counter the notion that Christ was part of "all things," as was being suggested at the time of Nicaea, the creed quotes from 1 Corinthians 8 that "through Christ are all things." This makes Christ distinct from "all things" similar to what is seen in John 1:2 and Colossians 1:16.[20]

Nicaea used 1 Corinthians 8:6 to argue for unique persons, equality, oneness, uncreatedness, and simplicity of the godhead. Blaising notes how formative this Scripture was to Nicaea:

> Kinzig and Vinzent have suggested that the Nicene Creed developed by means of a building-block model employing a principle of *antilogie* against Arian formulas and a principle of tradition in its positive statements. What I have attempted to show is that there was a blueprint for this building block model, the New Testament confession of 1 Cor 8:6. The choice of this blueprint for the first declaratory creed puts it in a direct line with the Shema as interpreted by the New Testament. Secondly, the "tradition blocks" used to build onto the framework consisted of biblical material and language chosen by means of a process of hermeneutical convergence within a thick collection of texts. This material added onto the 1 Cor 8:6 framework may also be shown to be a further interpretation and clarification (or exposition) of the framework, so that even the antilogic is hermeneutically driven (for example, the replacement of *ex hou ta panta* from 1 Cor 8:6a with *pantôn*

[18] Nathan Busenitz, "Did Constantine Invent the Trinity?: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Writings of the Early Church Fathers," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 24, no. 2 (December 31, 2013): 225–27.

[19] Busenitz, "Did Constantine Invent the Trinity?," 223–24.

[20] Blaising, "Creedal Formation," 387.

> … *poiëtën* to eliminate the Eusebian ambiguity between the Son and everything else being "from God").[21]

In so utilizing 1 Corinthians 8:6 (even as it incorporated so many other scriptural texts), Blaising rightly contends that Nicaea was more a hermeneutical and exegetical exercise than a philosophical one:

> This use of 1 Cor 8:6 is obviously intentional, and it reveals to us the ultimate origin of the Nicene Creed. Its origins lie in the New Testament restatement/interpretation of the Shema.[22]

Relative to the formula of the prophetic hermeneutic is the apostolic hermeneutic, which is Nicaea's hermeneutic. Blaising's observations demonstrate Nicaea definitely had a hermeneutic. They believed that 1 Corinthians 8:6 was a rich statement of theological truth about Christ and that they were following what Paul said and how he interpreted the *Shema* so that this is the one true faith revealed by God about Himself from the beginning.

Hermeneutics of Paul

The question becomes whether what Nicaea believed comes even close to what Paul intended in 1 Corinthians 8. Certain scholars, including Bauckham, Hurtado, and Wright, would at least advocate that the passage asserts a high Christology as Paul reworked the *Shema* to show that Jesus is divine.[23] These scholars maintain that Paul (re)conceptualized Jewish monotheism to make clear that it included God the Son.[24] From a historical perspective, Hurtado observes that assigning worship to Christ and paralleling Him with God (as 1 Cor 8:6 does) makes Him out to be equal to God. Observant Jews (and Christians) would never have worshipped anyone other than God nor held anyone on par with God unless that One is God.[25] Consistently, Wright contends that given Jewish insistence on monotheism at the time, the original audience would be highly sensitive to the *Shema* and Paul's rephrasing of it. As a result,

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[21] Blaising, "Creedal Formation," 388.

[22] Blaising, 384.

[23] See, e.g., Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), and Richard J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). See Chris Tilling, "Paul, the Trinity, and Contemporary Trinitarian Debates," *The Pacific Journal of Theological Research* 11, no. 1 (December 31, 2016): 20.

[24] Geoffrey Turner, "Paul and the Old Testament: His Legacy and Ours," *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1032 (December 31, 2010): 140. See also Larry W. Hurtado, "'Ancient Jewish Monotheism' in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 4, no. 3 (December 31, 2013): 379–400; N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

[25] Larry W. Hurtado, "First-Century Jewish Monotheism," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21, no. 71 (December 31, 1999): 3–26.

> There can be no mistake: Paul has placed Jesus within an explicit statement, drawn from the Old Testament's best known monotheistic text, of the doctrine that Israel's God is the one and only God, the creator of the world. The Shema was already, at this stage of Judaism, in widespread use as the Jewish daily prayer. Paul has redefined it Christologically, producing what we can only call a sort of Christological monotheism.[26]

Such a view (even with certain modifications) is widely accepted in evangelical scholarship.

However, other scholars have heavily contested such findings. Some outright reject that Paul alluded to the *Shema*.[27] Still others believe that while Paul did use the *Shema* and while his view may be one of the canon of Scripture, it is based upon suspect hermeneutical ground as Paul's reading stretches the limits of the nature of the *Shema*.[28] Yet others contend that 1 Corinthians 8 simply demonstrates that there is one God, the Father, and Jesus is a parallel lord or master to God Himself.[29] In other words, Paul's use of the *Shema* does not put Jesus within the "oneness" of God but alongside of it. This touches on the grander scholastic issue of whether the biblical writers had a high Christology. Concerning that issue, views range from that the biblical writers had a high Christology to that they did not have a high Christology but it evolved rapidly and early on in a Jewish context (in the days of Paul), to that it was a later development in a Jewish context, to that it came later in a Gentile context as the Jews would never be able to conceive of Jesus as God.[30] One's view of a high Christology in the New Testament determines the way one perceives what Paul asserted in 1 Corinthians 8. So, people have objected to the claim that Paul incorporated Christ into the *Shema* on a variety of grounds.

Background of 1 Corinthians

Because the interpretation is far from assumed, it is necessary to trace a thorough exegetical case for the normative evangelical view. The epistle of 1 Corinthians itself was written in a grouping of Pauline epistles sometimes known

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[26] N. T. Wright, "One God, One Lord, One People: Incarnational Christology for a Church in a Pagan Environment," *Ex Auditu* 7 (December 31, 1991): 48. See also Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 121; Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 97–98; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 100–101; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 180; N. T. Wright, "Jesus and the Identity of God," *Ex Auditu* 14 (December 31, 1998): 51; James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2006), 189.

[27] See discussion in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 374. A Hellenistic background may root this phrase in a different light. See also Thomas Gaston and Andrew Perry, "Christological Monotheism: 1 Cor 8.6 and the Shema," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39, no. 2 (December 31, 2017): 178.

[28] Turner, "Paul and the Old Testament," 141.

[29] Gaston and Perry, "Christological Monotheism," 177, 185–86.

[30] Andrew Chester, "High Christology - Whence, When and Why?," *Early Christianity* 2, no. 1 (December 31, 2011): 31.

as the "doctrinal epistles."[31] Situated around AD 55–56, epistles like Romans (and some would add Galatians) as well as 1 and 2 Corinthians, all revolve around theological matters which are at the heart of Paul's work.[32] Romans regards the gospel in God's plan whereas Galatians deals with the gospel in the life of believers in sanctification. The Corinthian epistles discuss a doctrine of Christian ethics (1 Corinthians) and the nature of ministry and leadership (2 Corinthians).[33] Because life and ministry are seen so much as practice, it may seem foreign to have a doctrine of Christian ethics and ministry. Nevertheless, this is absolutely necessary. Such doctrine establishes what is right and wrong in life and ministry, how they should be conducted, their purpose, and their mentality in decisions and discernment. The Corinthians particularly required this, as their pagan background left them decoupled from any biblical rationale of the ramifications of theological truths upon life.[34] They used spiritual gifts to show off (1 Cor 12:14–31), gathered knowledge to puff themselves up (1 Cor 8:1–3), and employed Christian liberty to offend their brothers (1 Cor 8:11–13). Such practices may seem laughably off the mark given the reality of the nature of true Christian love, humility, and service. However, that very framework is established from 1 Corinthians itself (cf. 1 Cor 13), illustrating why a doctrine of life and ministry is necessary. The church needed to know theologically the way God ordained His promises, gifts, and truth to be applied among His people, and 1 Corinthians establishes such a theology.

Within this, 1 Corinthians begins by tackling the immediate issue of factitiousness among the Corinthians, which exposes their lack of understanding of the true nature of the gospel. The gospel is not a message that produces pride but humility, as the gospel is foolishness before the world and yet the power of God (1 Cor 1:11–17). Having tackled this issue, which deals with the way one views the message (1 Cor 1:18–25), conversion (1:26–31), preaching (2:1–5), wisdom (2:6–16), ministry (3:1–23), one's self (4:1–5), and others (4:6–21), Paul proceeded to address specific questions the Corinthians had raised. Using the phrase περὶ δὲ, Paul worked through topics including marriage (7:1), Christian liberty (8:1), and spiritual gifts (12:1). These issues of life in the church go back to a theological mindset revolving around the New Covenant, including living as one was called (1 Cor 7:17) and the nature of biblical love (1 Cor 13:1–7). Per the purpose of the book, Paul was inculcating into his readers how life in the church worked based upon the way the New Covenant is and operates.

A key part of Paul's discussions in 1 Corinthians, which is pertinent to the discussion on 1 Corinthians 8:6, is Paul's emphasis on trinitarian theology in the epistle. For example, the way Paul spoke of the church presumes trinitarian realities. He called the church, the "church/churches of God" (1 Cor 1:2; 10:32; 11:16, 22) even while also labeling it the "body of Christ" (1 Cor 10:16; 12:27) and the "temple of the Spirit" (3:16–17; 6:19). The church is put in direct relation with the three

[31] Hans Dieter Betz, "Paul," in *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 197.

[32] Betz, "Paul," 197.

[33] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 17.

[34] Fee, 2.

members of the Godhead showing their divinity and unity.[35] Likewise, in reminding the Corinthians of their status, Paul declared they were justified and sanctified (by God) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God (1 Cor 6:11).[36] In discussing spiritual gifts, Paul outlined that gifts come from the same Spirit, Lord, and God (1 Cor 12:4–6).[37] For Paul, understanding one's relationship with the Triune God was crucial in understanding the way the Corinthians should deal with each other as the Triune God empowers, models, and grounds holiness, unity, and love.[38]

Immediate Context of 1 Corinthians 8:6

The context of 1 Corinthians 8:6 should factor in Paul's discussion of ethical doctrine and a latent trinitarian theology. The passage falls into the section dealing with Christian liberty (8:1) in the case study of meat sacrificed to idols. First Corinthians 8:6 itself is part of Paul setting a theological foundation about idolatry (8:4–6) before giving the doctrine of how those weak and strong in this truth should interact with each other (8:7–13).[39] So 1 Corinthians 8:6 is not merely just the position of the "strong" in the situation of Corinth but presented as accurate theological truth.[40]

In the context of meat sacrificed to idols, the theological claims about God in 1 Corinthians 8:6 are set in contrast with idolatry. Given that Paul consistently referred to the Trinity in this epistle, it should be no surprise that his discussion of idolatry versus the true God would involve such truth. Paul wrote in the verses leading up to verse 6, "We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no God but one" (1 Cor 8:4). The assertion that an idol is nothing (οὐδὲν) is not about its physicality as the Corinthians knew idols were physical objects. Paul also did not mean that an idol had no supernatural or spiritual association (cf. 1 Cor 10:10).[41] Rather, an idol (εἴδωλον) is nothing in that it is not what it claims to be: divine.[42] An idol may be made of impressive material or even represent a demon (cf. 1 Cor 10:20). But neither its own essence nor the being it represents is divine.[43]

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[35] Michael J. Gorman, "Traces of the Trinity in 1 Corinthians," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 15, no. 2 (December 31, 2021): 294.

[36] Gorman, "Traces of the Trinity in 1 Corinthians," 299.

[37] Gorman, 302.

[38] Gorman, 292.

[39] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 631; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 368; Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 379. See also, David G. Horrell, "Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics in 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20, no. 67 (December 31, 1998): 91; B Wynand De Wet, "Knowledge and Love in 1 Corinthians 8," *Neotestamentica* 43, no. 2 (December 31, 2009): 317.

[40] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 373; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 375.

[41] Joel Marcus, "Idolatry in the New Testament," *Interpretation* 60, no. 2 (December 31, 2006): 161.

[42] BDAG accurately defines idols as "cultic image/representation of an alleged transcendent being." BDAG, 280. By saying that an idol is nothing, Paul asserted that such a definition of an idol is empty.

[43] Charles Homer Giblin, "Three Monotheistic Texts in Paul," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (December 31, 1975): 531. As Giblin states, "Another admissible translation would be: 'An idol is a non-entity (meaningless thing) in the world.'"

Relative to its claim of exuding divine presence, it is nothing "in the world" (ἐν κόσμῳ). In the real world (as opposed to the world of fantasy or myths), an idol does not exert divine power or bearing. [44] Any impression to the contrary is simply one's imagination.

Paul supplied a complementary truth to show why an idol has no divine essence in any fashion: "there is no God but one" (οὐδεὶς θεὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς). The reason that idols and that which they represent are not divine is because none of them are God (οὐδεὶς θεὸς). In the next verse, the apostle will acknowledge that many are called gods and that many entities have a sort of power and authority as gods and lords (1 Cor 8:5). Nevertheless, 1 Corinthians 8:4 makes it clear that none of them are actually God. Based upon Paul's argument, the term θεὸς is not merely a title, because as verse 5 makes clear, many may be called "gods" (λεγόμενοι θεοὶ). Rather, the anarthrous term θεὸς focuses upon His essence, the quality of what it means to be divine.[45] That complements the grammar of the phrases which are all predicative. In other words, Paul was not speaking about what idols or gods *do* (ποιέω) but what they *are* or *are not*. That is the language of being as opposed to praxis. In saying, that "no one is God except One," Paul declared that even if something might be called a "god," it *is* not the one true God because an idol or that which it represents is not what God *is*.

That the anarthrous θεὸς emphasizes divine essence helps to define the term "one" (εἷς) in verse 4. Paul was not saying that there is only One who possesses the title "God" because he acknowledged many are called gods. The apostle was also not merely saying that only One occupies the position of God (i.e., "no one is God except Him alone"). That is true, but there is an underlying reason why that is the case. The reason why God is God is the same reason why Paul earlier said that idols are nothing. God has divine essence whereas idols do not.[46] While the number "one" in context establishes God's exclusivity, it does so with a view to His singularity and indivisibility of His essence. With the number "one," Paul asserted that one being has the essence of God (θεὸς) and no one else does because such divine essence is wholly His and thereby cannot be not shared with any other. The divine essence itself then is a singular, integral, and indivisible whole. That truth drives an emphatic and categorical monotheism.[47]

Thus, while the pagans might identify many gods, and the title of "gods" and "lords" is even applied to human beings (Exod 22:8–9; Ps 82:6), Paul states what true Christians believe: "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist*

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[44] The anarthrous construction (ἐν κόσμῳ) in Pauline literature may have the emphasis of the entire created order as opposed to just the physical world (cf. Rom 5:13; 1 Cor 14:10; 1 Tim 3:16). See the arthrous constructions that are definitely speaking of the physical environment (ἀνεστράφημεν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, 2 Cor 1:12 and ἄθεοι ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, Eph 2:12).

[45] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 244 (sec. 9.e.2.a).

[46] See Giblin, "Three Monotheistic Texts in Paul," 530. Giblin's analysis is helpful: "The second of the paired assertions in vs. 4bc, 'No one is God but One,' or 'No God exists but One,' is unambiguously monotheistic. But it admits nuanced emphases: either 'no one deserves the appellation "God" but One' — which would stress God's uniqueness in a qualitative sense by insisting that there is no one like him; or 'no god (divine being) exists except One'—which would underscore the point that other gods simply do not exist, and that only one God enjoys the prerogative of existence."

[47] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 360.

through Him" (1 Cor 8:6). In contrast to the ideology of the pagans, Paul affirmed the *Shema*. Though some are skeptical of this allusion, most scholars accept it for good reason.[48] The language of "one God" or "one Lord" linguistically goes back to Deuteronomy 6:4, not only in the New Testament (Mark 12:29) but even in the Old (cf. Eccl 12:11; Ezek 34:23; Mal 2:10).[49] It is linguistically distinct. From a historical perspective, Jewish insistence on monotheism amplified sensitivities of this phrasing.[50] In addition, Jesus explicitly quoted the *Shema* in Mark 12:29 as well as other verses in its context (cf. Mark 12:32).[51] From a historical, linguistic, and even ecclesiastical perspective, the church was familiar with Deuteronomy 6 and a statement of "one God" would only go to the text of the *Shema*.[52]

Though most acknowledge the allusion to Deuteronomy 6:4, some contend that the apostle merely made the first part (One God, the Father…) an adaptation of Deuteronomy 6:4 and the rest (One Lord, Jesus Christ…) is just a parallel addition.[53] However, that is unlikely. The *Shema* in Greek reads, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστιν, involving both θεὸς and κύριος. So technically, the phrase "one Lord" is part of the actual quote from the *Shema*. To view "one Lord" as an interpolation would be the opposite of what is linguistically taking place. So, both lines of "One God, the Father" and "One Lord, Jesus Christ" are interconnected with Deuteronomy 6:4.

Paul's Use of the *Shema* in 1 Corinthians 8:6

Initially, Paul used the *Shema* as a framework to elaborate on monotheism. In contrast to unbelievers who had many gods and even lords, Paul declared that there was "one God" (εἷς θεὸς). He further specified that this singular divine being and essence is the Father (ὁ πατὴρ), a title for God found throughout Scripture (Isa 63:16; 64:8; Matt 6:9). The title emphasizes headship, possession, generation, and care of His people.[54] That is Paul's very focus as he wrote about the Father, "from whom are all things" (ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα). The ἐκ preposition presents the Father as the source of everything, which implies His responsibility for them.[55] All things (τὰ πάντα) shows that the Father is the source of creation exhaustively; there is nothing that can claim any other ultimate origin. The phrase "all things" also reinforces that the Father is distinguished from His creation. There is the Father, and then there is everything else.

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[48] Joshua W. Jipp, "Paul and the Early Jewish Encounter with Deuteronomy," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21, no. 4 (December 31, 2011): 567–68; Kim Huat Tan, "The Shema and Early Christianity," *Tyndale Bulletin* 59, no. 2 (December 31, 2008): 188; Jon Laansma, "'Some Have No Knowledge of God': The Resurrection and the Knowledge of God in 1 Corinthians," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (December 31, 2024): 100–108.

[49] Kyle C. Dunham, "Intertextual Links between Deuteronomy and Ecclesiastes as a Pointer to Qohelet's Positive Message," *Journal for the Evangelical Study of the Old Testament* 6, no. 1 (December 31, 2020): 55.

[50] Hurtado, "First-Century Jewish Monotheism," 3–10.

[51] Tan, "The Shema and Early Christianity," 188.

[52] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 375.

[53] Gaston and Perry, "Christological Monotheism," 177.

[54] Gary Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 692; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 612. Paul at times has this same focus in using the title for God (Eph 3:14–15). See David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 186.

[55] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 375; Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 383.

God is truly one because there is no one else like Him. Paul also stated that "we exist for Him" (ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν), demonstrating that the Father is not merely the source of creation but its purpose, the beginning and the end of all things. In specifying that "we" (ἡμεῖς) are for Him, Paul stressed God's particular purpose of redemption and that all true Christians confess one God, the Father, a fitting assertion given that this is an expansion of the confession of the *Shema*.[56] The pronoun "we" also reminds believers that God defines their existence, which is crucial as Paul was about to exhort them to unity in using their Christian liberty.[57] Overall, in affirming the confession of the *Shema* of "one God," Paul reinforced God's exclusivity and singularity in position ("Father") from beginning ("from whom") to end ("unto whom").

While any Jewish contemporary of Paul might have been comfortable with the first part of 1 Corinthians 8:6, the second half of the statement would have surprised them. The apostle completed the formula of the *Shema* by incorporating Jesus Christ into its framework. Against any of those who oppose such an assertion,[58] the grammar in 1 Corinthians 8:6 yields at least four counters to any who argue against Christ's incorporation into the *Shema*:

1. Fundamentally, the lines are aligned as synonymous parallelism. Each begin with the cardinal number "one," followed by a title of deity, a title of a person, and then two prepositional phrases, each having "all things" and "we" (τὰ πάντα … ἡμεῖς). As synonymous parallelism, the lines are not to be read as separate or subordinate but two parallel expressions of the same reality. God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are one.
2. As noted above, the use of Lord (κύριος) completes the formula of the *Shema*. The Greek of the *Shema* reads Ἄκουε, Ἰσραήλ, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστιν, which was even used by Christ as such (Mark 12:29). The first part of the *Shema* includes ὁ θεὸς and the latter half includes κύριος. Paul has the same structure in 1 Corinthians 8:6 discussing the Father with "God" and Jesus with "Lord." Given this framework of the *Shema*, it would be odd for Paul to use the same language that parallels the *Shema* but not intend the inter-textuality. If that was what he desired, he would have used language that would preclude the allusion. Furthermore, in the verse before, Paul went out of his way to broaden the discussion from "gods" (λεγόμενοι θεοὶ) to "gods and lords" (θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοί). Paul intentionally expanded the discussion in verse 5 to set up viewing verse 6 as a single unit and not as one part belonging to the *Shema* and the next part separate.[59]

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[56] Andrey Romanov, "Εις Κύριος and Ήμείς in 1 Corinthians 8:6: An Investigation of the First Person Plural in Light of the Lordship of Jesus Christ," *Neotestamentica* 49, no. 1 (December 31, 2015): 47–74.

[57] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 374.

[58] Gaston and Perry, "Christological Monotheism," 177.

[59] Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 382. "While some have suggested that Paul has a distinction in mind between *gods* and *lords*, it seems more likely that Paul is simply setting up the interpretation he wants to provide of Deuteronomy 6:4, so that the *one Lord* and *one God* are contrasted with the *many gods and many lords* of the pagan world."

3. In speaking of "gods and lords" in verse 5, Paul used those titles to refer to the same class of individuals (Exod 22:8–9; Deut 10:17; Ps 82:5–8).[60] Just as the titles "gods and lords" are not two different categories but refer to the same group, so "one God … one Lord" do not have to refer to two different beings but the same entity. Paul intended to generate such union between "God and Lord" in verse 6 because he already established such synonymity in verse 5.
4. That Jesus is incorporated into the *Shema* and is seen as the single essence of the one God is further supported by the fact that "God" and "Lord" in verse 5 are not purely titles but descriptions of God's essence. Several reasons support this assertion. First, as noted, verse 4 already defined "God" (anarthrous θεὸς) and "one" (εἷς) in relation to God's divine essence, an essence that is indivisible, that cannot be shared with another, and that thereby makes every idol "nothing." Second, the emphasis of essence is consistent with the way the terms "gods" and "lords" are used in verse 5. Though the terms "gods" and "lords" in that verse are titles, the reason those titles are used is because those who hold those titles possess certain qualities. In contrasting the "one God … one Lord" with these many "gods … lords," Paul makes the point that the Father and the Son stand out because they possess those qualities exceptionally and exclusively, a uniqueness that can only be justified by their divine essence.[61] Third, that the emphasis of "Lord" deals with divine essence and not just mere title or position accords with the very way the Lord Jesus used the Old Testament. The Greek of the *Shema* in Mark 12:29 translates "Hear O Israel, the Lord God is one Lord." The translation does not merely bring out monotheism ("there is one Lord" or "the Lord God is only one"). It also stresses that God is "one Lord," emphasizing the oneness of God's lordship or nature. That is a oneness of essence. Likewise, Christ quoted Psalm 110 saying, "The Lord said to my Lord" (Matt 22:44). In Greek, the Hebrew words יְהוָה and אָדוֹן are all translated as "Lord" (κύριος), equating the title "Lord" with the name and essence of Yahweh.[62] Thus, Christ defined the term "Lord" not merely as a title of authority but the very essence of Yahweh.[63] Fourth, Paul's usage of κύριος outside of Corinthians also evidences that he maintained what the Lord Jesus established. The term κύριος in Pauline literature refers to God's unique essence (cf. Rom 10:13; 11:34; Phil 2:11; 2 Tim 1:16). All these observations evidence that the terms "God" and "Lord" are not merely titles but refer to God's essence or

[60] Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 382.

[61] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 374; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 372–73; Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 382. Garland rightly observes that the distinction of possession is between ones who are *believed* to possess deity versus the One who actually does (Father and Son).

[62] Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 566.

[63] This further refutes any notion that Paul distinguished "god" and "lord" as two different essences or beings. Paul's usage of "Lord" refers to Yahweh who is clearly God in both OT and NT. See point 3 above.

nature. In saying that Jesus is "one Lord," it presents Him as having not just a title or authority but having the very essence of Yahweh, the same divine essence of the Father, who is "one God."

5. That Paul viewed Jesus as part of the divine essence accords with the prepositional phrases used of the Father and the Son in 1 Corinthians 8:6. Paul spoke of the Father as the source (ἐξ) and purpose (εἰς) of all things and spoke of the Son as the instrument (δι'). In assigning these prepositions, there is a single act from the Father through the Son back to the Father. Christ is part of this single divine act, which makes Him one with God. This is also known as inseparable operations.[64] Likewise, in the same phrases, Paul distinguished both the Father and the Son from "all things" (τὰ πάντα) made from and through them. Neither the Father nor the Son is part of creation, but, being distinct from creation, is co-equal with the other as uncreated. The prepositional phrases that describe the Father and the Son further interlock them together, showing their inseparableness and consubstantiality.

Overall, grammar, inter-textuality, context, and lexicography argue that Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:6 incorporated the Lord Jesus into the *Shema* and into the singular essence of the one true God.

But the parallel of the Father and the Son raises a problem with the emphatic term "one." Paul was insistent that there is only one God yet equally speaks about two: the Father and the Son. It appears that Paul has a numerical dilemma unless the number "one" refers to something different than the two persons he discussed. And that is exactly what is happening in 1 Corinthians 8:6. As discussed above, Paul used the terms "one," "God," and "Lord" to discuss divine essence. By contrast, as he did throughout his epistles, Paul used the language of "the Father" and "Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:7; 15:6; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:3; 5:20; 1 Thess 1:3) to distinguish between two distinct yet simultaneously existing persons/relations (cf. Rom 1:7, 8; 3:22; 5:1; 7:25; 16:27; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 13:14; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:17; Phil 1:11). The apostle had no problem whatsoever with speaking of what may seem like an outright contradiction within the very same verse because he could make the distinction between essence and person.

Such distinctions are absolutely necessary for Paul's argument in context. As Wright and Hurtado point out, the apostle established a clear line between an idol and the one true God. An idol is nothing because it does not have the divine essence. God alone possesses such essence because He is God. So in this discussion, Paul sets up two categories: the one true God and idols. If Paul was not thinking about divine essence in speaking of the oneness of the Father and Christ, then by the apostle's own definition, Christ would be an idol. If Paul did not include Jesus into the *Shema*, he would be claiming that those who follow Christ would be going against a key tenet of God's revealed truth. Such ideas are the very opposite of what Paul asserted

[64] Matthew Barrett and Scott R. Swain, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 291; Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the Gospel of John (1–40)*, ed. Allan D Fitzgerald (New York: New City, 2009), 7:137; Joel Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 895.

(cf. Acts 23:1; 1 Cor 12:2; Col 3:5; 1 Thess 1:9). By Paul's definition in context, the only way Jesus is not an idol is if He does not merely have a similar or even parallel nature to God but *is* the one essence of God. To put this in the terms of the *Shema*, Jesus must be the "one Lord" that the "Lord God is." And that is exactly what Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 8:6.

Returning to the discussion of Nicaea, the church fathers incorporated 1 Corinthians 8:6 claiming that the Father and Son are distinct yet co-equal persons absolutely unified in a singular essence and thereby distinct from creation. This is Paul's exact intention. The unique titles of "Father" and "Jesus Christ" distinguish the divine persons. The parallelism demonstrates they are co-equal. The incorporation of Jesus into the *Shema*, the terms "one," "Lord," and "God," and the complementary prepositional phrases anchor this equality in the singular divine essence. Paul's use of "all things" distinguishes the Father and Son from anything created. These observations are squarely part of Paul's intention as Paul, dealing with meat sacrificed to idols, sought to define the nature of idolatry and used the *Shema* to distinguish between pagan idolatry and the truth about the Father and the Son that all Christians believe.[65] In Nicaea's own battle against false theology, they used the same text to do the same. Their logic follows the exact logic and purpose of Paul.

Hermeneutics of Moses

The early church read Corinthians the way Paul wrote Corinthians, and the early church understood the *Shema* the way Paul read the *Shema*. The final question is whether all of this is consistent with the way Moses wrote the *Shema* (and even whether the Old Testament read it that way). Such a question demands exegetical analysis of the text.

In thinking about the context of Deuteronomy as a whole, some contend that the book is a covenant renewal whereas others observe that it is a sermon.[66] Understanding Deuteronomy as an expositional sermon accounts for both sets of observations.[67] Moses gave a final exhortation to his people as he sequentially expounded upon each aspect of the covenant, elucidating the nature and ramifications of what God had revealed. Viewing Deuteronomy as an expositional sermon on the covenant provides the structure and nature of the book.

Moses began his sermon by explaining the first part of Israel's covenant: the nation's covenant history (Deut 1–4).[68] Having made observations on certain salient points of their past, Moses then proceeded to explain the general stipulations of the

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[65] See above discussion on the pronouns used in 1 Cor 8:6. Romanov, "Εις Κύριος and Ήμείς in 1 Corinthians 8," 47–74.

[66] Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 30; S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner's, 1902), lxxxv; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 34–36.

[67] Ronald M. Hals, "Is There a Genre of Preached Law," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (January 1, 1973): 1–12.

[68] Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 57.

law, which revolve around the Ten Commandments.[69] In discussing these foundational principles, Moses explained the very heart of the law's theology and commands. In Deuteronomy 6:1, the very context of the *Shema*, Moses declared, "Now this is the commandment" (וְזֹאת הַמִּצְוָה). As opposed to the many commands God gave Israel (cf. Deut 12:1), there is one command that drives them all. That singular command is the very center of the general precepts of the law and thereby the ruling reality of the entire law itself. There is a reason that the *Shema* has so much import from the prophets (Eccl 12:11; Zech 14:9), to the nation of Israel (John 10:30–31), and to Paul (1 Cor 8:6; 1 Tim 2:5). There is a reason that the Lord Jesus regarded it as part of the greatest commandment (cf. Mark 12:28–30). Moses, under inspiration, declared that the *Shema* is that seminal statement.

Two intertwined exegetical issues surround this foundational declaration. First, how should the phrase be translated? Second, what does the phrase exactly mean? Concerning the question of translation, Block and Fuhrmann provide a summary of options including:

1. Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one;
2. Yahweh our God is one Yahweh;
3. Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is one;
4. Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone;
5. Our God is one Yahweh;
6. Our one God is Yahweh, Yahweh;
7. Yahweh, Yahweh our God is unique.[70]

Fuhrman observes that the first four options are most legitimate.[71]

The various translations bring forth four major interpretative emphases of the text:

1. The *Shema* could stress the uniqueness of God. As opposed to the many deities of the ANE, He is "the one" in that He stands above the rest. In other passages, "one" often stands in contrast with "many." There are many shepherds but one good Shepherd (Zech 14:9), many lords but one Lord, many gods but one God (1 Cor 8:6).[72] With the distinctive term "one," all of these examples are actually echoes of the *Shema*. Based upon this, those who advocate the uniqueness view argue that the way Scripture views the oneness of God does not necessarily emphasize monotheism (though that can be true). Rather, they contend that Scripture views "one" as God's distinctiveness. In the same way that

[69] Stephen A. Kaufman, *The Structure of the Deuteronomic Law* (Santa Monica, CA: Western Academic, 1979).

[70] Justin Fuhrmann, "Deuteronomy 6–8 and the History of Interpretation: An Exposition on the First Two Commandments," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 51; Daniel I. Block, "How Many Is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 196.

[71] Fuhrmann, "Deuteronomy 6–8 and the History of Interpretation," 51.

[72] Dunham, "Intertextual Links between Deuteronomy and Ecclesiastes as a Pointer to Qohelet's Positive Message," 53–55.

God is a unique shepherd, lord, and God, so He is "one" in the *Shema*.[73] This may allow henotheism but does not demand it. In this view, the notion of "one" simply emphasizes the exceptional character of God.

2. The *Shema* might stress the exclusivity of God relative to Israel's affection and worship. This view is also known as monolatry. This viewpoint states that the term "one" stresses that Yahweh alone is Israel's God. Given the context of Deuteronomy and the call for Israel's loyalty to Yahweh (see even Deut 6:5), Block contends that God must be the one in Israel's affections.[74] Janzen also notes that God's oneness might refer to His oneness of thought and action for Israel (cf. Job 23:13).[75] The idea would be that since God is so singularly for Israel, Israel should reciprocate that back to Him.[76] To further illustrate this point, Block cites Zechariah 14:9 which speaks of "On that day Yahweh will be one," an allusion back to the *Shema*. According to Block, the issue in Zechariah 14:9 is not God's essence (since He is always one) but rather "expanding the boundaries of those who claim only Yahweh as their God to the ends of the earth."[77] Thus, like the uniqueness view, this view of monolatry does not preclude monotheism but places emphasis not on His exclusive existence but His exclusive relationship.
3. The *Shema* could assert monotheism, that Yahweh is the one and only God that exists. In contrast with monolatry, the *Shema* asserts that God is not merely the only God for Israel but only One at all.[78] This view emphasizes God's oneness relative to that which is outside of Him. He is the only one because outside of Him there is no other. Already in context, Moses made emphatic statements that Yahweh is not merely a God but *the* God of heaven and earth and there is no other (יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת אֵין עֽוֹד; cf. Deut 4:39). In addition, the term אֶחָד can have the sense of "only" (cf. Josh 22:20).[79] Brichto also observed that a person is "one" whole (whether human or otherwise) is self-evident and so describing him as "one" is not really that controversial as much as if the emphasis is upon the exclusivity of existence.[80] The view accords with Ecclesiastes 4:8 which states, "there was one man and not a second" (יֵ֣שׁ אֶחָ֣ד וְאֵ֥ין שֵׁנִ֑י). The term "one" contrasts a "second" individual and thereby emphasizes exclusivity.

[73] Gaston and Perry, "Christological Monotheism," 187.

[74] Daniel I. Block, "How Many Is God?: An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 2 (December 31, 2004): 193–212; Jeffrey. H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 76.

[75] J. Gerald Janzen, "The Claim of the Shema," *Encounter* 59, no. 1–2 (December 31, 1998): 254.

[76] Janzen, "The Claim of the Shema," 254.

[77] Block, "How Many Is God?," 209.

[78] Gerhard Langer, "'Hear, O Israel: The Lord Our God, the Lord is One' (Deut 6:4)," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1, no. 2 (December 31, 2010): 220–22.

[79] Block, "How Many Is God?," 199.

[80] Block, 200; Herbert Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 232–33.

The reading of monotheism has been a longstanding tradition within Jewish interpretation and even in the second temple period.[81]

4. The *Shema* could declare that God is one internal to Himself. While the third option uses "one" to define a "unit" (God is one single entity as opposed to any other), this option emphasizes the "unity" within God. His nature and essence are a unified and unique totality, singular and indivisible.

The key to resolving the question of emphasis is to first resolve the question of translation, and the first step in resolving this question concerns the phrase "Yahweh our God." Throughout Deuteronomy the phrase has been a title for Israel's God. It never is translated predicatively ("Yahweh is our God"). Thus, the first part of the *Shema* should be translated, "Yahweh our God," the main covenant title for God and the subject of the entire phrase. As a title, "Yahweh our God" personally distinguishes the God of Israel ("Yahweh") from anyone else, identifies Him as the One who has total supremacy ("God"), and establishes that Israel has an exclusive relationship with Him ("our"). With that, "Yahweh our God" as a title already subsumes a lot of the nuances mentioned above, including uniqueness and monolatry. Furthermore, in context, Moses already used the title to declare that "Yahweh our God is God in heaven above and on earth beneath and there is no other" (Deut 4:39). Thus, the emphasis of monotheism has already been associated with this title as well. Three of the four options are already expressed in the first half of the *Shema*. For the sake of argument, it would be tautological to have the latter half say the same idea as the first half. In that way, this observation already suggests that the latter half should be the fourth option concerning divine essence.

Nevertheless, such an argument must be proven. Accordingly, the next issue is to understand how the next phrase "Yahweh is one" should be translated and how that connects back with the title "Yahweh our God." When examining the usage of the term "one" (אֶחָד) with other nouns in the Pentateuch, a pattern emerges. Fundamentally, אֶחָד is a cardinal or counting number. The number "one" with the article is usually used to count an entity in a series.[82] However, when the word is singular and anarthrous following a noun that is also in the singular (like it is here), the number "one" is essentially always attributive.[83] The translation of the latter phrase of the *Shema* should be "one Yahweh." The anarthrous construction shows that Moses' intent is not to count Yahweh as one of many (or the only one) but rather to speak of His unity or wholeness.[84]

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[81] Hurtado, "First-Century Jewish Monotheism," 3–10; Wright, "One God, One Lord, One People," 45–48.

[82] Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §15.2.1b, 274.

[83] Out of the approximate 180x this occurs in the Pentateuch, only Gen 41:25–26 and Exod 26:6; 36:13 are predicative. However, in those cases, other syntactical factors create the predicative situation. Gen 41:25–26 contains the pronoun הוּא which often signals predicative constructions. See Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §16.3.3, 297–298. Cf. Exod 26:6; 36:13 as both contain the verb הָיָה.

[84] Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §15.2.1c, 274. *IBHS* labels this as "integer" as in a "whole" number. YHWH's oneness refers to such integrity or wholeness; indivisibility or unitedness.

Parallel constructions help to reinforce the consistency of this pattern and its nature. The Pentateuch speaks of one day (Gen 1:5), one place (Gen 1:9), one flesh (Gen 2:24), one people (Gen 11:6), one bull (Exod 29:1), one basket (Exod 29:3), one ram (Exod 29:15), one house (Exod 36:13), or one voice (Exod 24:3). The attributive construction is not rare or unfamiliar in the Pentateuch. The notion of "one" does not inherently demand exclusivity or even uniqueness. Saying "one ram" or "one bull" certainly does not mean they were the only ram or bull in Israel and equally does not mean that they were necessarily unique among all the animals in the nation. That said, the construction does not preclude the implications of exclusivity or uniqueness either. In Genesis 1:5, the waters are gathered to "one place" as opposed to another. The term "one" also does not preclude multiple entities becoming unified. Multiple components unite in one house in Exodus 36:13, multiple people join together with one voice in Exod 24:3, and two become one flesh in Genesis 2:24. Thus, the description of "one" neither deals fundamentally with exclusivity or uniqueness nor excludes the notion of a complex unity.

Instead, the term "one" simply identifies a singular whole and within that, can be used to emphasize the unity within that unit. That the people have "one voice" (Gen 24:3) was not merely commenting that they had a singular sound but expressing the unanimity of their confession and volition.[85] That those at the Tower of Babel were "one people" (Gen 11:6) does not merely express that they are a people group but also that they were absolutely united. This is why God declared in the same verse, "So now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them." That two become "one flesh" does not merely express that husband and wife are a married unit or even exclusive with each other, even though that is all true. "One flesh" in context (cf. Gen 2:23) speaks of the deepest kinship and merging together as if they were one new person.[86] Such a unique unity and inseparable bond are why husband and wife are a unit and exclusive.

These last few examples help to elucidate the nature of the *Shema*, especially since they are the closest grammatical parallels to the confession.[87] Just as the Hebrew phrases are translated "they shall become one flesh" (וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד; Gen 2:24) or "they are one people" (הֶן עַם אֶחָד; Gen 11:6), so the best translation of the *Shema* is "Yahweh our God is one Yahweh" (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד). It conveys that "Yahweh our God," the distinctive God that Israel alone worships, is "one Yahweh," unified and indivisible in His nature as Yahweh. Just as the two becoming one flesh in marriage points to the absolute, intimate unity in marriage, so Yahweh being one Yahweh declares the absolute united whole of His essence.

So God as "one Yahweh" is the very doctrine of divine simplicity. As "Yahweh," God is "I am who I am" (cf. Exod 3:14), an essence that can only be ultimately defined by who He is. And as "one" Yahweh, God's essence as Yahweh is a singular unified whole, without parts and undistributable. The *Shema* summons God's people

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[85] Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 423.

[86] Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 23. "'One flesh' echoes the language of v. 23, which speaks of the woman's source in the man; here it depicts the consequence of their bonding, which results in one new person."

[87] The examples of voice, people, and marriage all have the attributive use of "one" in the larger context of a predicative sentence.

to think on God in a certain way. Man is prone to view God as a creature which can be put together by using certain parts or to distribute who He is to other entities or parties (polytheism or pantheism). But that wickedly distorts and demotes God. One cannot derive God by putting together a list of characteristics or abilities. He is not the sum of powers or parts. Rather God is God, "I am who I am." And His Godness is singular and whole, indivisible and inseparable, pristine and distinct, which means He and His essence cannot be split apart, divided up, spread out, or shared. God does not fit into human categories and classifications, and the call of the *Shema* is to view God as God on His terms and by His own self-definition. And by focusing upon God's singularity, the *Shema* calls Israel to focus upon God alone for since He possesses this unique essence so wholly, no one else does.

All the interpretative options mentioned above about the *Shema* are legitimate implications. He is unique; He is the only true God; and He is the only God for Israel. But all of that is because of the very essence of who God is. He is one Yahweh, indivisible and whole, which means no one else has that nature, there are no other gods, and there is no other god for God's people. Put simply, just as "two becoming one flesh" demands a unique, exclusive, and monogamous relationship, so Yahweh being one Yahweh dictates that He is unique, exclusive, and monotheistic. There can be no other god, and idols are nothing because the divine nature is indivisible and one, and Yahweh alone possesses it. All the implications mentioned above are driven by the most fundamental reality, the very nature of God Himself.

Such singular unity of divine essence does not preclude multiple persons or the notion of the Trinity. After all, in the other parallel constructions, "two become one flesh" (וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד; Gen 2:24) and "they are one people" (הֵן עַם אֶחָד; Gen 11:6), the number "one" does not rule out a complex unity but actually embraces it. Because the number "one" sets up for an absolute unity without precluding complexity, the *Shema* is the perfect base to discuss the tri-unity of God, which is a reality that Moses himself expressed throughout the Pentateuch (cf. Gen 1:26; 11:7; 19:24; Exod 13:19; 14:19, 24; Deut 4:35, 39).[88] Moses intended the *Shema* to describe the singular essence of the God that he himself recounted as multiple persons, which perfectly sets up for Paul's discussion. Paul read Moses the way Moses intended; and in fact, the apostle depended upon Moses' concept of divine simplicity in the *Shema* to make Paul's point. Jesus cannot be truly all that God the Father is unless God's essence is truly one and indivisible and the Son possesses that one essence just as the Father does. That is Paul's point as he speaks of "one God" and "one Lord," and that proves the way Nicaea read the *Shema* is the way Paul read the *Shema* which is the way Moses wrote the *Shema*.

[88] Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 163; Paul Niskanen, "The Poetics of Adam: The Creation of אדם in the Image of אלהים," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 417–36; T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 268; Bill T. Arnold, *The Book of Deuteronomy, Chapters 1–11*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Chicago: Eerdmans, 2022), 281.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the Trinity was not due to Greek thought or a cultural metaphysic but rather because of what the biblical writers intended. Concepts, like simplicity, essence, or persons, were not just present in the unconscious logic of the prophets and apostles but in their very writing and wording. After all, in writing the *Shema*, Moses did not use the terminology for first (רֹאשׁ), only (יַחַד), alone (אֵין עֹוד מִלְבַדֹּו), or unique (הָאֱלֹהִים), but used the word "one" (אֶחָד) in reference to Yahweh. As opposed to any other possibility, this integer brings out the integrity of God's essence, and parallel usages in Moses' own style confirm that this was his emphasis. Thus, the notion of divine simplicity is present in Moses himself, established by a singular word choice. Later biblical writers paid attention to this detail, maintaining its theological ramification (Eccl 12:11; Isa 42:8; 45:5; Zech 14:9; 1 Cor 8:6), and Nicaea in turn picked up on it as well. The same is true of inseparable operations (cf. that all things are from [ἐκ] God and through [διά] Christ) and the notion of consubstantiality (cf. that Christ and God are distinguished from all things [τὰ πάντα]). While there are different ways to express these notions, the concepts themselves were present in Scripture, and later discussions only more explicitly articulated all that was intentionally part of holy writ. Put simply, contrary to skeptics, ideas like the Trinity, simplicity, and essence were not inventions of Nicaea but the very intention of Scripture.

The hermeneutical precision of Nicaea provides insight into the modern-day question of how one is to use the historic creeds. At present, people wrestle with whether the creeds are the source of doctrine or should be read back into the meaning of Scripture.[89] Before coming to such methodological conclusions, one should know what Nicaea actually did. Nicaea did not believe that an external metaphysic or philosophy was required to understand the Bible or articulate its assertions. They did not believe that their creed was the source of doctrine. Instead, they believed that the biblical writers carefully articulated doctrine by the precise wording they chose under inspiration. Discerning the exact meaning of the prophets and apostles, they set forth the conclusions they read out from Scripture, incorporating and appealing to the very words of the oracles of God. Their method was opposite of what is being proposed. If one wants to support Nicaea, he should not only believe what they believed but do what they did. They did not go back to the creeds to base their theology but back to the text. That is what every believer should do, analyzing Scripture carefully and discerning all its theological ramifications with exegetical precision. That is why the saints align with Nicaea, because the prophetic hermeneutic is the apostolic hermeneutic, which is Nicaea's hermeneutic and the Christian's hermeneutic.

[89] See discussion in D. A. Carson, "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 1–62; D. A. Carson, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But," in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 187–207; Bernard M. Levinson, "You Must Not Add Anything to What I Command You: Paradoxes of Canon and Authorship in Ancient Israel," *Numen* 50, no. 1 (2003): 1–51; Robert Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 316; Daniel J. Treier, "What Is Theological Interpretation? An Ecclesiological Reduction," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (April 2010): 144–61; Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

Christians regard Nicaea as a historic norm not just because it is a creed but because it so aligned with Scripture, which is what Nicaea intended all along.

After all these years, why has Nicaea withstood the test of time? It is not merely because of its correct conclusions, precise wording, or philosophical nuance. Its strength lies fundamentally in its level of scripturality. Nicaea is not merely biblical in its assertions but even in its hermeneutical approach. Those at Nicaea did not merely agree with the ideas of Scripture or even use proof texts. Rather, they deployed carefully chosen passages and drew attention to details of those passages, all of which were anchored with a consistent hermeneutic that flows from Old to New. The opening statement, "Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων·," is case in point. Nicaea's statement about "one God, the Father" appeals to the way the apostle Paul read the *Shema*—even the term "one," which is the way that Moses intended the *Shema*. Nicaea read Scripture precisely, paying attention to individual words and sweeping contexts, the very way the biblical authors read and wrote Scripture. What makes Nicaea so resilient is that it made its opponents not just wrestle with theological ideas but the very words of Scripture even while showing that the reading of Nicaea was the way the Scripture was intended, and there is no other reading. Nicaea drew upon Scripture with such exegetical precision and pushes its readers back, not to the creed, but to Scripture. Its hermeneutical approach is truly *sola Scriptura*. That is what makes the creed so resilient, because it draws on that which is most resilient and true—the very Word of God. Nicaea is effective because it is biblically precise even to the most fundamental hermeneutical level, and on this 1700th anniversary of Nicaea, believers everywhere should celebrate and be supportive of the creed because of its faithfulness to Christ and Scripture.

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S STORY THROUGH NARRATIVE

Joseph, Judah, and Plot examines the Joseph-Judah narrative in Genesis 37–50, with an eye toward narrative unity. Rather than accepting this story as a fragmented compilation of episodes or tales, this analysis steps into the narrative world of the plot, accepting the terms given by the author in reading his story. As the reader enters this world and closes its door behind him, he may grasp its coherence, logic, and be ready to appropriate its message. Old Testament scholars interested in plot and intent in Hebrew narrative will benefit from this treatment of the life of Joseph and Judah, and how this story impresses itself upon its reader.

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THE ETERNAL GENERATION OF THE SON: THE BACKBONE OF THE NICENE CREED

ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ, τοὐτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ…

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God…

Michael Riccardi
Ph.D., The Master's Seminary
Assistant Professor of Theology

* * * * *

The 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea affords an opportunity for contemporary believers to reflect on Trinitarianism as among the foundations of our theological identity. While not inspired or infallible, the Nicene Creed faithfully represents biblical teaching on the Trinity and the person of Christ. Subordinate to and expository of Scripture, the Nicene Creed is a legitimate doctrinal norm for Christians. The backbone of the creed is the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son; it is the justification for how the Son can be consubstantial with the Father and, at the same time, distinct from the Father. This article undertakes a biblical and theological defense of eternal generation, namely, the eternal communication of the undivided divine essence from the Father to the Son. It shows that eternal generation is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith, and that it is derived from the sound exegesis of several texts from both Testaments, including Psalm 2, Proverbs 8, John 5, and others, including a lexical analysis of the Johannine monogenēs.

* * * * *

Introduction: Praising God for the Nicene Creed

The year 2025 brings us to the 1700th anniversary of a truly momentous event in church history. It was in May of AD 325 that 318 pastors throughout the Roman Empire were summoned by the Emperor Constantine and met in the Bithynian city of Nicaea (now the town of Iznik, Turkey) to discuss the Christological claims of

Arius of Alexandria and Eusebius of Nicomedia.[1] Only twelve years earlier, in 313, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which established religious freedom for Christians in the Roman Empire.[2] Christians had been persecuted in the Empire for nearly three centuries, but it only took twelve years of freedom for such sharp disagreement to develop as to present the need of an ecumenical council to settle the dispute.

And this disagreement centered on a doctrine no less foundational to Christianity than the person of Christ Himself. Who *was* this Jesus that had become the empire's object of worship? How could Christians confess that Jesus is *Lord* (Rom 10:9)—that He is "my Lord and my God," as Thomas said (John 20:28)—while at the same time confessing faith in only one God (Deut 6:4; 1 Cor 8:4–6)? Further, if Jesus is God in precisely the same way that the Father is God, has God changed into a man? Jesus slept in the boat (Matt 8:24); but God neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps 121:4). Jesus didn't know the day or hour of His return (Mark 13:32); but God is omniscient (1 John 3:20). Jesus suffered and died (Luke 22:39–23:46); but God is immutable and impassible (Mal 3:6; Acts 14:15; Rom 11:34–36). Since these things are true, can it really be said that the Son is God in precisely the same way the Father is God?

Arius of Alexandria and Eusebius of Nicomedia were two pastors in the ancient world that began challenging the idea that the Father and the Son were equally God. They both would have affirmed that Jesus was God, but not in precisely the same way the Father was God. He was ὁμοιούσιος—of a *similar* substance to the Father—not ὁμοούσιος—the *same* substance, consubstantial with the Father.[3] They accepted Scripture's title: He was the only-begotten Son of the Father (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:19). But Arius taught that when Scripture said the Son was "only-begotten" and "firstborn" (Col 1:15), that implied that the Son was created.[4] If He was begotten, He must have had a beginning. If He was firstborn, then there must have been a time before He was born, and so a time when He did not exist.

Hence the famous Arian claim, "There was when the Son was not."[5] That is, there was a time, or a state of affairs, or a condition, in which the Father was, but the Son was not. The Son was not coexistent with the Father, according to Arius. There was an orthodox dictum, "God always, Son always." Arius outright rejected that: "There was when the Son was not." In fact, in a hymn Arius wrote, he said, "There is a Triad, *not in equal glories*.… As far as their glories, one infinitely more glorious than the other. Father in his essence is foreign to the Son, because he exists without beginning."[6] It becomes plain, then, that this dispute was not theological hair-splitting. It concerned whether the Son was to be worshiped as equal in glory with the Father and thus whether the Son was equal to the Father in His deity.

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[1] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, Vol. 1, *The Age of the Early Church Fathers* (Ross-Shire, UK), 219–23.

[2] Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:167.

[3] Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 369.

[4] E. A. Cerny, "Firstborn of Every Creature (Col 1:15)," (Ph.D. Dissertation; St. Mary's University, 1938), 52–68; Larry R. Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," *JETS* 31/1 (March 1988): 63n18.

[5] Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 126.

[6] Arius of Alexandria, "Thalia," https://www.fourthcentury.com/arius-thalia-intro/.

As Arius' and Eusebius' teachings spread, Constantine desired unity in his newly-Christianized empire, and so he convened the Council of Nicaea, where bishops throughout the Empire could investigate the matter and settle it once and for all. The result was The Creed of Nicaea of 325, whose anniversary we celebrate this year. It reads:

> We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.
>
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
> by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth;
> who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;
> He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;
> and he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
>
> And in the Holy Ghost.
>
> But those who say: "There was a time when he was not;" and "He was not before he was made;" and "He was made out of nothing," or "He is of another substance" or "essence," or "The Son of God is created," or "changeable," or "alterable"—they are condemned by the catholic [or universal] and apostolic Church.[7]

One immediately recognizes the Trinitarian structure of the Creed: "the Father Almighty," "the Lord Jesus Christ," and "the Holy Ghost" introduce the first three sentences. One also observes the disproportionate emphasis on the Son. There are three phrases on the Father, just one phrase on the Spirit, and the rest of the creed has reference to Christ. This makes sense given that the occasion for the council was a polemic on Christology. Further, one also notes the *anathema* at the end. The council concluded overwhelmingly against Arianism, basically listing many Arian catch-phrases and slogans and declaring them to be heretical. If anyone confesses any of these, they are considered eternally condemned by the apostolic church. If one says, "There was when He was not," or that He was ἑτέροούσιος (or "ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι")—of a different nature than the Father—rather than ὁμοούσιος, consubstantial with and of the same nature as the Father—then, by definition, that person is not a Christian.

Interestingly, despite the clarity of the condemnation, Arianism did not die out shortly after 325. While Arius himself was condemned by the Council, certain of his followers and diluted forms of his teaching persisted over the next half-century.[8] This

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[7] Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1877), 1:28–29. For a comparison of the English and Greek texts of the Creed of Nicaea, please see the appendix of this article.

[8] Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:224.

resulted in the convention of a second ecumenical council, this time in the city of Constantinople, in the year 381. That council produced a slightly revised version of the Creed of Nicaea of 325—a document commonly called "The Nicene Creed," but which technically is the Niceano-Constantinopolitan Creed.[9]

The result is what Chad VanDixhoorn calls "the most closely held and widely confessed statement about our triune God in the Christian church."[10] Historically speaking, to be a Christian is to confess not less than the truths stated in the Nicene Creed.

That is not to say that the Nicene Creed is inspired, or that it holds some sort of magisterial authority on par with Scripture. Scripture alone is breathed out by God, and so the Bible is the sole infallible authority for all matters of Christian doctrine. However, that is not to say that Scripture is the sole *authority* for the Christian. The Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is that Scripture is the sole *infallible* authority.[11] It stands opposed to the Romanist doctrine that says Scripture and tradition are equally ultimate infallible authorities (what historian Heiko Oberman calls "Tradition II").[12] But *sola Scriptura* also stands opposed to the Anabaptist rejection of all other subordinate norms and authorities in the Christian life (what Oberman calls "Tradition 0").[13] Scripture alone is the norming norm which is not normed,[14] but the Nicene Creed is *a* norm for the Christian faith. To be sure, it is a subordinate norm that itself must be normed by Scripture; but precisely because the Nicene Creed is biblical—because it is a faithful summary of biblical teaching on the Trinity and the person of Christ—it is a subordinate authority for Christians. It is neither inspired nor infallible, but it *is* free from error—something 1,700 years of Christian reflection and biblical examination have demonstrated to be true.[15]

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[9] For the English and Greek text of the Niceano-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, see the appendix of this article.

[10] Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader's Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 15.

[11] See Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, *Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 399–400.

[12] See the discussion in Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001), 151–57. Oberman cast the Reformed doctrine of *sola Scriptura* as "Tradition I," which recognized that extrabiblical tradition was not an equally ultimate authority alongside Scripture (Tradition II), but neither was it altogether non-authoritative and negligible (Tradition 0). There are legitimate extrabiblical norms for the Christian life (like the Nicene Creed), but those extrabiblical norms are subordinate to Scripture and must themselves be normed by Scripture.

[13] Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 151–57.

[14] The Latin phrase *norma normans non normata* ("the norming norm not normed") is often attributed to Luther, Calvin, and the Reformers, and is expositive of their view of *sola Scriptura*. For example, see A. N. Williams, "Tradition," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, eds. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 363.

[15] Some question whether Reformed Evangelicals can confess the entirety of the Nicene Creed due to its affirmation of "one baptism for the remission of sins" (ἓν βάπτισμα εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν). Such would seem to be a confession of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. However, the Creed is intentionally alluding to Acts 2:38: καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν … εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν ("and be baptized … for the forgiveness of your sins"). Those raising this objection are not likely to suspect the Apostle Peter of teaching baptismal regeneration in Acts 2:38. In this way they acknowledge that there is a way to interpret such language as not teaching baptismal regeneration. We ought to extend the same courtesy to the Nicene Creed. From another angle, we agree that we must confess the truth of Acts 2:38.

Such virtually universal consensus—while, again, conferring no status of inspiration or infallibility—does mean that the Nicene Creed is therefore owed a greater reverence than just another sermon from one's pastor or commentary by a most esteemed scholar. The Nicene Creed is a legitimate, subordinate norm for Christian doctrine, such that to transgress the boundaries it sets is to reject the Bible's teaching on the Trinity and the person of Christ. Because of this, the Nicene Creed is a reason for praise to God and is a worthy object of the church's study.

Eternal Generation: The Backbone of the Nicene Creed

There are a few differences between the Creed of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed. The latter significantly elaborates on the church's confession of the deity of the Holy Spirit and His equality with the Father and the Son; the Holy Spirit is to be worshiped as God alongside the other two persons of the Trinity. Such a claim was increasingly disputed in discussions between the First and Second Ecumenical Councils.[16] Most significant for the topic of this article, the Nicene Creed of AD 381 adds the phrase "before all worlds," or "ages" in its section on Christ. We believe "in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all ages*." This makes explicit something the orthodox universally taught from the beginning: the Son's generation from the Father was an *eternal* generation; the only-begotten Son is the eternally-begotten Son.

This is one key concept which vexed Arius. It was agreed that the Son was begotten; the notion of an unbegotten son is a contradiction in terms. But Arius believed that being begotten implied a beginning—being created. Significantly, the Nicene Council refuted Arianism on this not by trying to downplay the doctrine of the generation of the Son. (They did not pursue a line of argumentation that claimed, for example, that μονογενὴς does not mean "only begotten" but only "unique.") Instead, the Council pressed *into* the biblical reality that the Son was begotten, while also insisting that His generation was an *eternal* generation: the Son was "begotten of the Father before all worlds," and was "begotten, not created." The doctrine of eternal generation is so misunderstood today that many evangelicals think that that it has subordinationist leanings—that it was some sort of concession to Arianism. In reality, the Nicene Council leveraged the doctrine of eternal generation precisely in order to refute Arianism and to remove all vestiges of subordinationism from orthodox Christology.

Further still, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son forms the backbone of the Nicene Creed. It is striking how many times the word "begotten" appears in the Creed: "…the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." It is true that the central conclusion of the Nicene Creed was that the Son was ὁμοούσιος (i.e., consubstantial, of the same substance) with the Father.

Since the Creed intentionally alludes to Acts 2:38, it is legitimate to interpret the Creed to mean what Peter means in Acts 2:38. For more on this, see a helpful response from R. Scott Clark, "Does the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed Require Baptismal Regeneration?," https://heidelblog.net/2017/03/does-the-nicene-constantinopolitan-creed-require-baptismal-regeneration (accessed May 2025).

[16] Allison, *Historical Theology*, 435.

But the justification for *how* the Son could be consubstantial with the Father and, at the same time, not *be* the Father in just some other manifestation (as the Sabellians taught), lies with the doctrine of eternal generation. Eternal generation was the Nicene Council's killshot against Arianism, and the linchpin for Trinitarian monotheism. Because so much of the substance of the Creed consists in the eternal generation of the Son, this article is devoted to providing a biblical defense of this foundational Christian doctrine.

Essential to the Christian Faith

The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is as essential to biblical Christianity as it is unfamiliar to contemporary Christians. The great 18th-century commentator, John Gill, summarizing theological history, wrote, "All the sound and orthodox writers have unanimously declared for the eternal generation and Sonship of Christ in all ages, and that those only of an unsound mind and judgment, and corrupt in other things as well as this, and many of them men of impure lives and vile principles, have declared against it."[17] Elsewhere Gill says,

> [Eternal generation] is the distinguishing criterion of the Christian religion.… Without this the doctrine of the Trinity can never be supported; of this the adversaries of it are so sensible, as the Socinians, that they have always set themselves against it with all their might and main; well knowing, that if they can demolish this, it is all over with the doctrine of the Trinity; for without this, the distinction of Persons in the Trinity can never be maintained; and, indeed, without this, there is none at all; take away this, and all distinction ceases.[18]

Why did one of the most respected Bible commentators of church history regard eternal generation to be so important? The answer is: because it is the Nicene Creed's (following Scripture) explanation for how three things remain true at the same time: (1) there is one God, (2) the Son has the identical divine essence as the Father, and (3) the Son remains personally distinct from the Father.[19] Eternal generation is precisely how the persons of the Father and the Son can both be fully God while also being distinct from one another. Both the Father and the Son fully subsist in the identical divine essence; they are both truly and fully God. But though the Father is God and the Son is God, the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. Everything that the Father is, the Son is; but the Father is not *who* the Son is. They are the same *What*, but distinct *Whos*.

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[17] John Gill, *Dissertation Concerning Eternal Sonship*, in *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts: In Two Volumes* (London: George Keith, 1773), 2:564.

[18] John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, https://ccel.org/ccel/gill/doctrinal/doctrinal.ii.xxviii.html (accessed May 2025).

[19] As Keith Johnson puts it, "eternal generation is a central feature of pro-Nicene theology (both Latin and Greek)." Keith Johnson, "Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Submission of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective," *Themelios* 36, no. 1 (2011): 11; cf. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 236.

Relations of Origin Derived from the Personal Names

And so, if the Father is God, and the Son is God, but there is only one God, why is the Father not the Son? The importance of the answer to that question is impossible to overestimate. You may *say* that the Father, Son, and Spirit must be meaningfully distinguished from one another without dividing the divine essence. But if you cannot *account* for why the Father is not the Son—if you cannot give a coherent justification for that distinction without losing genuine consubstantiality—then your conception of God is functionally sub-Trinitarian. Much is at stake here.

On what basis, then, can the Son be distinguished from the Father? Well, on the basis that Scripture calls the Father "Father," and calls the Son "Son," and "only begotten." John Owen reminds us that "a divine person is nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner."[20] The Father's manner of subsistence is paternity (Lat. *pater*, "father"); He eternally begets the Son. That is simply what it means to be Father. The Son's manner of subsistence is filiation (Lat. *filius*, "son"); He is eternally begotten by the Father. That is simply what it means to be Son. The Spirit's manner of subsistence is spiration (Lat. *spiritus*, "spirit"); He eternally proceeds from (or is breathed forth by) both the Father and the Son. That is simply what it means to be Spirit. The fourth-century Cappadocian Father, Gregory of Nazianzus, put it this way:

> The very facts of not being begotten, of being begotten, and of proceeding, give them whatever names are applied to them—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, respectively. The aim is to safeguard the distinctness of the three hypostases within the single nature and quality of the Godhead. The Son is not Father [i.e., not *who* the Father is]; there is one Father, yet he is *what*ever the Father is. The Spirit is not Son [merely] because he is from God; there is one Only-begotten. Yet *what*ever the Son is, he is. The three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole is three in persons.[21]

Similarly, the 19th-century Presbyterian theologian, W. G. T. Shedd, articulates this point in a uniquely helpful way:

> Some trinitarians have attempted to hold the doctrine of the Trinity while denying eternal generation, spiration, and procession…. But this is inconsistent. These trinal names Father, Son, and Spirit, given to God in Scripture, force upon the theologian the ideas of paternity, filiation, spiration, and procession.… He cannot say with Scripture that the first person is the Father and then deny or doubt that he 'fathers.' He cannot say that the second person is the Son and then deny or doubt that he is 'begotten.' He cannot say that the third person is the Spirit and then deny or doubt that he 'proceeds' by 'spiration' (Spirit because spirated) from the Father and Son. Whoever accepts the nouns Father, Son, and

[20] John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968), 2:407.

[21] Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, Popular Patristics (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 31.9, emphases added.

> Spirit as conveying absolute truth must accept also the corresponding adjectives and predicates—beget and begotten, spirate and proceed—as conveying absolute truth.[22]

Thus, Scripture calls the Father "Father" because He fathers the Son, and it calls the Son "Son" because He is "sonned" or "sired" by the Father. ("Fathered" is a more accurate English equivalent, but it loses the lexical parallel with sonship.) In other words, the Father begets, and the Son is begotten. The truths of the eternal relations of origin are rooted directly in the names Scripture explicitly applies to the divine persons. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, regards this as self-evident: "If the Father did not beget at all, why is he called Father? And if the Son was not begotten from the Father, how is he really the Son? The names themselves demand such an interpretation."[23] Augustine agrees, stating, "When we say begotten we mean the same as when we say 'son.' Being son is a consequence of being begotten, and being begotten is implied by being son."[24] In sum, without the eternal generation of the Son by the Father, we have neither the Father nor the Son. Without eternal generation, we lose the Trinity.

Consubstantiality and Fromness

But what does it mean for the Son to be begotten from the Father? Well, Scripture calls the Father "Father" and the Son "Son" because a son has the *same nature* as his father (e.g., Gen 5:3), but the son has that nature *from* his father (e.g., Luke 3:38). We call sameness of nature by the name "consubstantiality," that is, being of the same substance. "Fromness" describes the notion of proceeding from another. Perhaps it is a bit foreign when put in those terms, but we understand this in principle. My son is human like I am human; we are the same sort of being, and so we are consubstantial. But my son has his human nature from me as his father. Sonship denotes consubstantiality and fromness. Gregory of Nazianzus said the same: "Just as with us these names indicate kindred and affinity, so here too they designate sameness of stock…. He is called 'Son' because he is … *identical in substance* with the Father, [and also] stems *from* him."[25]

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[22] W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan Gomes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 245.

[23] Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John, Volume 1*, Ancient Christian Texts, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, trans. David R. Maxwell (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 10 (1.2.26).

[24] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 1.15.16.

[25] Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, 29.16; 30.20 (emphasis added). John MacArthur writes, "There is another, more vital, significance to the idea of 'begetting' than merely the origin of one's offspring. In the design of God, each creature begets offspring 'after his kind' (Gen. 1:11–12; 21–25). The offspring bear the exact likeness of the parent. The fact that a son is generated by the father guarantees that the son shares the same essence as the father. I believe this is the sense Scripture aims to convey when it speaks of the begetting of Christ by the Father. Christ is not a created being (John 1:1–3). He had no beginning but is as timeless as God Himself. Therefore, the 'begetting' mentioned in Psalm 2 and its cross-references has … everything to do with the fact that He is of the same essence as the Father. Expressions like 'eternal generation,' 'only begotten Son,' and others pertaining to the filiation of Christ must all be understood in this sense: Scripture employs them to underscore the absolute oneness of essence between Father and Son." John MacArthur, "Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6, no. 1 (2001): 21–23.

Thus, by calling the Father the Father of the Son, and the Son the begotten of the Father, Scripture means to teach, first, that the Son has the identical divine nature as the Father. He is ὁμοούσιος: "*God* of very God," as the Creed says. Second, Scripture means to teach that the Son has that identical divine nature *from* the Father. He is "God *of* very God." In other words, when the Creed says that the Son is "God *of* God" and "Light *of* Light," that is not meant as a superlative—like "holy of holies" meant "the holiest place."[26] It means that the Son is *from* the Father: God from God, Light from Light.

An Eternal Communication of Essence

This is all to say, then, that the Father eternally communicates the undivided divine essence to the Son. Francis Turretin, one of the most able defenders of Reformed Orthodoxy in history, captures this well. He writes, "As all generation indicates a communication of essence on the part of the begetter to the begotten (by which the begotten becomes like the begetter and partakes of the same nature with him), so this wonderful generation is rightly expressed as a communication of essence from the Father (by which the Son possesses indivisibly the same essence with him and is made perfectly like him)."[27] Or, as John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue put it, "'Eternal generation' describes the eternal, necessary, and self-differentiating act of God the Father by which he generates the personal subsistence of the Son and thereby communicates to the Son the entire divine essence."[28]

It is readily acknowledged that the language of generation—of the communication of the divine essence—quickly raises concerns. If the Father eternally communicates the divine essence to the Son, does that mean the Father has brought the Son into existence? The answer to that question is, "Absolutely not." This is why the Creed says that the Son is "begotten, [but] not made." "Father" is not merely a role the first person of the Trinity plays; the first person of the Trinity *is* Father from all eternity. And therefore, the Father cannot exist before or without His Son. This is what it means to confess all three persons of the Trinity as coexistent and coeternal. A communication of essence from the Father to the Son, therefore, cannot mean that the Father preexisted the Son or brought the Son into existence.

Further, while perhaps unfamiliar, the concept of a communication of essence is standard historic Trinitarianism. Until the late seventeenth-century, the Christian tradition was virtually uniform in speaking of eternal generation this way. In addition to Turretin and MacArthur and Mayhue above, consider these excerpts from both patristic and Reformed teachers:

- Gregory of Nazianzus: "But because the Son is 'Son' in a more elevated sense…, and since we have no other term to express his consubstantial

[26] Kevin DeYoung, *The Nicene Creed: What You Need to Know about the Most Important Creed Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025), 39.

[27] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennis, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 1:292–93.

[28] John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 207.

> derivation from God, it does not follow that we ought to … transfer wholesale to the divine sphere the earthly names of human family ties."[29]

- Hilary of Poitiers: "God the Son confesses God as His Father, because He was born of Him; but also, because He was born, He inherits the whole nature of God."[30]

- Augustine: "He did not mean that the Father gave life to the Son already existing without life, but that he begot him timelessly in such a way that the life which the Father gave the Son by begetting him is co-eternal with the life of the Father who gave it."[31]

- John Owen: "…the Father is the original and fountain of the whole Trinity as to subsistence, … the Son, … [has] the divine nature communicated unto him by eternal generation, … And thus he becomes 'the brightness of his Father's glory, and the express image of his person,' namely, by the receiving his glorious nature from him, the whole and all of it."[32]

- Petrus van Mastricht: "The Reformed state that for the eternal generation of the Son of God is required communication of essence with the image or likeness of the one communicating it."[33]

Thus, though some who are unfamiliar with the language (and intended meaning) of an eternal communication of essence fear it could lead to some form of subordinationism, this brief survey demonstrates that the most *anti*-subordinationist, *anti*-Arian defenders of orthodoxy found no inconsistency in using this conceptual framework.

Divine vs. Creaturely Begetting

But how can the Son "receive" the divine essence if He always had it? How can we speak of the generation of an eternal, uncreated Word? The answer is: we must speak of *eternal* generation. MacArthur and Mayhue acknowledge,

> At first glance, *eternal generation* seems oxymoronic. In normal human discourse, the words *generate* and *beget* speak of bringing someone or

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[29] Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, 31.7. "Consubstantial derivation" speaks of the derivation or communication of the identical divine nature.

[30] Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 11.12, *NPNF*[2], 9:207. There is an inheritance, or a reception, of the divine nature by the Son from the Father.

[31] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.47.

[32] John Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Works*, 19:99.

[33] Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 2: Faith in the Triune God*, ed., Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2021), 556. Elsewhere, van Mastricht states, "…the Son, because he subsists from the Father and has his essence communicated to him from the Father, is the second" (van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:539).

> something into existence. In the human realm, begetting occurs only once, at a definite point in time. To pair the idea with the adjective *eternal* is to change it in the most radical way. And it is absolutely vital to understand and affirm the difference between the begetting of a human child and the eternal generation of the Son of God.[34]

In other words, God the Father does not generate God the Son in a manner that is one-to-one identical with human generation. Human generation has a beginning; it happens at a single point in time; it requires that a father exist before his son exists; and it also requires a mother. In human generation, there is either a division of nature—where a father passes down something of his essence to his son—or a multiplication of nature—where generation results in another being, separate from father and mother.

But none of those things is true of the eternal generation of God the Son. This is an incomprehensible, eternal communication of the divine essence, internal to life of the Triune God. It has no beginning; there is no single point in time when it takes place. The Father did not exist before the Son; there was never a time that the Father was not the Father, and so there was never a time that the Son was not the Son. He is from the Father, but not after the Father. There is no multiplication or division of nature, no priority or posteriority, no passion or change. Turretin says, "While whatever of perfection occurs in finite generation is attributed to it (as that the begetter begets a thing similar to himself by communication of essence), whatever denotes any imperfection must be carefully removed from it."[35] He goes on to speak of eternal generation being (1) without time, so the Son is not after the Father; (2) without place, so that the Son is not begotten external to the Father, but internal to Him; and (3) without passion or change, so that nothing about the Father or the Son indicates divine mutability.[36]

So, if generation entails consubstantiality and fromness, then *eternal* generation entails *eternal* consubstantiality and *eternal* fromness. Precisely because this communication of the full, undivided divine essence is eternal, the Son cannot be "less than" the Father in any way. So far from eternal generation entailing the creation, subjection, or subordination of the Son, eternal generation is the orthodox refutation of each of these ideas, the safeguard of the Son's genuine equality with and distinction from the Father.

Generation Language in Scripture

It is often objected that if the language of generation has to be so heavily qualified and differentiated from its use in the human realm, it is not a good candidate to describe this great mystery of the relations of the persons of the Trinity. The answer to this, however, is that the language of generation is the language Scripture uses to describe this mystery. Several biblical passages bear this out.

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[34] MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 206.
[35] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:302.
[36] Turretin, 1:302.

Psalm 2:7

Psalm 2 is something of a *locus classicus* in this discussion. It is a text that is cited throughout the centuries as a defense of Trinitarianism, and it figured very prominently in the pro-Nicene case for the eternal generation of the Son. The context is that the nations rage against Yahweh and His Anointed, but Yahweh laughs and declares He has installed His King upon Zion.

Then, in verse 7, the installed King, who we learn is Yahweh's Son, speaks of His generation from the Father. He says the Father said to Him, "You are My Son, today I have begotten [יָלַד; LXX: γεννάω] You." The term means to generate, to beget, or to bring forth as in childbearing. Undoubtedly, there is a sense in which this passage has reference to David, Yahweh's king. But there can be no question that someone greater than David is in view here. Verses 11 and 12 speak of a universal kingdom, where the King's wrath is kindled unto the destruction of nations, but where all who worship Him and take refuge in Him will be blessed. Such a figure sounds suspiciously divine.

More than that, the New Testament unmistakably cites Psalm 2:7 several times as referring to the Messiah. Acts 4:25–28 quotes Psalm 2:1–2 and says, "Your holy servant Jesus" was the referent of "His Anointed" in Psalm 2:2. Acts 13:33 says that God fulfilled the promise of Psalm 2:7 "in that He raised up Jesus." Hebrews 1:4 says that Christ is superior to the angels, and then Hebrews 1:5 cites Psalm 2:7 as proof: "For to which of the angels did [God] ever say, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You'?" If this generation is the ground of the Son's superiority to the angels, then it cannot be something that can be predicated of a mere creature, even if that creature is David. Thus, the Holy Spirit reveals that the begotten Son of Psalm 2:7 is unmistakably the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 5:5).

Some object that Psalm 2:7 has reference, not to the eternal generation of the Son, but to the resurrection of Christ, because when the text is quoted in Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5, it speaks clearly of Jesus' resurrection. But that objection fails, because it makes Jesus' divine sonship consist in His resurrection, an impossibility. The Son was Son well before His resurrection. The Father testifies at Jesus' baptism as well as the Transfiguration: "This is My beloved Son" (Matt 3:17; 17:5). The Word who was with God in the beginning (John 1:1) is the only begotten from the Father (John 1:14). That is to say, the Son was God the Son from eternity. It could not be otherwise without the Father ceasing to be God the Father from eternity.

Why, then, the focus on the resurrection in these New Testament passages that quote Psalm 2:7? Acts 13 and Hebrews 1 cite a text expounding eternal generation as proof for the resurrection, because the resurrection declares or manifests Christ to be the Son of God that He was from eternity. This is Paul's point in Romans 1:4, where he says Jesus "was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead." Christ was *declared* to be Son in the resurrection; He was not *begotten* as Son in the resurrection. The resurrection decisively proved that He was the divine Son of God from all eternity. As Turretin said, "Because, therefore, the resurrection was an irrefragable proof of his divinity and eternal filiation, the Holy

Spirit, with the psalmist, could join both together and refer as much to the eternal generation as to its manifestation … made in the resurrection."[37]

The "today" of Psalm 2:7, then, is not a literal indicator of one day above another, but rather a poetic way of expressing the eternal "today" of deity—that with God there is no succession of moments, no yesterday or tomorrow; but that all things are an eternal present with Him.[38]

Proverbs 8:22–30

Another classic text that figured very prominently in the pro-Nicene tradition was Proverbs 8:22–30. Though there is much contemporary disagreement over whether "Wisdom" of Proverbs 8 should be identified with the person of Christ (whom 1 Corinthians 1:24 calls "the wisdom of God"),[39] there was virtually no such disagreement in the early church. Even the Arians believed this text referred to the Son.[40] While it would take an entire journal article to make a case one way or another, I am sympathetic to the reasons the pro-Nicenes saw support for eternal generation here.

Wisdom says, "Yahweh possessed (קָנָה) me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting (מֵעוֹלָם) I was established (נָסַךְ; cf. Ps 2:6), from the beginning (LXX: ἐν ἀρχῇ; cf. John 1:1), from the earliest times of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth (חוּל); when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills I was brought forth (חוּל; LXX: γεννάω; cf. Ps 2:7); while He had not yet made the earth and the *fields*, nor the first dust of the world" (Prov 8:22–26).

The verb קָנָה (translated "possessed" in verse 22) indeed can mean "to possess," but it can also mean "to get" or "receive," in the sense of receiving a child from the

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[37] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:294. He goes on, "And Paul properly says that the oracle was fulfilled when its truth was exhibited, since by the resurrection the Father has most fully declared that he is really (*ontos*) and peculiarly (*idios*) his own Son" (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:294). Steven Duby puts it this way: "The Father's eternal begetting of the Son accounts for the Son's unique fitness for his incarnate work, and that eternal begetting is what the Father ultimately expresses and underscores in his economic declaration of the Son's supremacy over all creatures." Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 61.

[38] Turretin says, "And so with regard to the word 'today' (*hodie*), which is added not to point out a certain time in which that generation began; but that we may understand that all things are present with God, and that that generation is not successive, but permanent in eternity…. As, therefore, with God there is no yesterday or tomorrow, but always today, so this filiation being eternal can properly be designated by the today of eternity." *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:295.

When John MacArthur retracted his denial of eternal sonship, he commented on this point: "It is now my conviction that the begetting spoken of in Psalm 2 and Hebrews 1 is not an event that takes place in time. Even though at first glance Scripture seems to employ terminology with temporal overtones ('*this day* have I begotten thee'), the context of Psalm 2:7 seems clearly to be a reference to the eternal decree of God. It is reasonable to conclude that the begetting spoken of there is also something that pertains to eternity rather than a point in time. The temporal language should therefore be understood as figurative, not literal." John MacArthur, "Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ," 21–23.

[39] E.g., Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon*, trans. M. G. Easton, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:183. See also Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 108.

[40] See the discussion in Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, in *NPNF*^{2}, 2:306ff.

Lord in birth. In fact, this word appears in Genesis 4:1, when Eve conceives and gives birth to Cain, and says, "I have gotten (קָנָה) a manchild with the help of Yahweh." The pro-Nicenes observed this and concluded that Scripture says Yahweh "got" Wisdom the way Eve had "gotten" Cain: as a son. And, of course, to speak of "the beginning of Yahweh's way," "from everlasting" (מֵעוֹלָם), is to speak of eternity. Several lines of evidence, then, suggest that an eternal begetting is in view here.

Further, the term נָסַךְ, which speaks of the "establishment," of the Son-King in verse 23, also appears in Psalm 2:6, where Yahweh says, "I have installed (נָסַךְ) My King upon Zion." Thus, Yahweh established Wisdom in the same way He installed His King, who is His eternally begotten Son. He has done this "from the beginning," which the Septuagint translates as "ἐν ἀρχῇ"—the same two words with which the Apostle John begins His Gospel, where "the Word" of God's Wisdom "was (i.e., was existing) in the beginning (i.e., from eternity) with God."

Still further, in Proverbs 8:24–25, we learn that Wisdom was "brought forth" (חוּל). In Isaiah 45:10, this term occurs in parallelism with יָלַד ("begetting"; cf. Ps 2:7) and is itself translated as "giving birth": "Woe to him who says to a father, 'What are you begetting (יָלַד)?' Or to a woman, 'To what are you giving birth (חוּל)?'" Thus, Yahweh brought forth wisdom in the same way a woman brings forth a child that a father begets. There is much exegetical warrant to see the eternal generation of the Son in this text.

Besides this, if wisdom here refers only to the divine attribute of wisdom, what is the relationship between God and His wisdom? Because God is a simple being, all of God's attributes are essential to Him and identical to His essence.[41] What would it mean for Him to "bring forth" one of His own attributes, if not generating the divine essence, which is an impossibility? Apart from the generation of a personal subsistence—that is, the eternal communication of the divine essence constituting a divine person—it would seem there is no way to conceive of this relationship except God bringing His wisdom (and thus His essence) into being. This would either undermine divine simplicity or make God the creator of Himself,[42] neither of which is possible.

Micah 5:2

In Micah 5:2, we read, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth (יָצָא) for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth (מוֹצָאָה) are from long ago, from the days of eternity (עוֹלָם)."

[41] For an excellent defense of divine simplicity, see James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017).

[42] As Emerson notes, "If the Wisdom referenced in Proverbs 8 is not Christ but one of God's attributes, does this mean that wisdom as an attribute did not exist in God from eternity? This introduces complexity into the nature of God and diminishes his wisdom." Matthew Y. Emerson, "The Role of Proverbs 8: Eternal Generation and Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern," in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, eds. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017), 60.

Matthew 2:4–6 identifies Jesus as the referent of this ruler.[43] The language of "fromness" inherent in the term יָצָא—often used in contexts of childbirth (e.g., Gen 25:25–26), even translated as "gives birth" in Exodus 21:22—signals that the concept of generation is in view. And to predicate such goings forth as having their origin "from the days of eternity" is to furnish the necessary ingredients for the doctrine of eternal generation.

The Johannine μονογενὴς

Coming to the New Testament, the Apostle John arguably draws upon the preceding Old Testament background as He introduces his readers to the eternal divine Word, distinct from the Father and yet God Himself. In John 1:14, he writes, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the *only begotten* from the Father, full of grace and truth."

That Jesus is "the only begotten from the Father," or that He is "the only begotten God," verse 18, or that He is the "only begotten Son" (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9), is not a reference to His incarnation. Many mistakenly believe "only begotten" refers to the fact that Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary. But John tells us he beheld the glory of the incarnate Son, and that glory was "as of the only begotten from the Father." Put simply, the glory of the only begotten is a divine glory. It is the fulfillment of the shekinah glory of God, tabernacling with His people in the wilderness, now dwelling among men (John 1:14; cf. Exod 40:34–38). It is the glory that Peter and John beheld in the transfiguration (Matt 17:2; 2 Pet 1:16–18), in which Christ's divine nature is expressed through visible means. The glory John speaks of in 1:14 is not a glory that Jesus has by virtue of His incarnation but by virtue of His being the eternal Word—the radiance of the divine glory and the exact representation of the Father (Heb 1:3)—the eternal Son of the Father. Therefore, as it is not a human glory, it is not a human begetting that is in view here. When John speaks of Jesus as "the only begotten from the Father," he is referring to a divine begetting.

The term that translates to "only begotten" in John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; and 1 John 4:9 is μονογενὴς: from the terms μόνος, "only," and γεννάω, "to beget." This is also much disputed. Some argue that μονογενὴς is better translated as "unique" or "one of a kind," because they believe μονογενὴς comes from μόνος, "only," and γένος, "kind." However, that lexical argument seems to rest almost exclusively on the research of a single article by Dale Moody in 1953 (and Westcott before him).[44] Trinitarian scholar Kevin Giles claims, "Virtually every evangelical who questions this doctrine appeals to this article."[45]

However, the view that μονογενὴς comes from μόνος and γένος has recently been ably challenged. In several publications, most notably his chapter in the 2017

[43] Turretin notes, "The things predicated prove it because he is called ruler in Israel by way of eminence…; to him is ascribed the calling of the nations, a pastoral kingdom, the strength of Jehovah, the extension of glory and peace unto all the ends of the earth (Mic. 5:4, 5)." *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:297.

[44] Dale Moody, "The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 213–19.

[45] Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 64.

volume *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, Lee Irons demonstrates that μονογενὴς comes from μόνος and γεννάω.[46] He shows that the majority of Greek words with the -γενὴς ending refer to being "born of," or "produced by," and only little more than ten percent (12 out of 145 lexemes) are unambiguous in speaking of "a kind," or "of the same genus."[47]

For example, in 2 Timothy 1:15, Paul speaks of "Phygelus and Hermogenes," who turned away from him in Asia. It is self-evident that Ἑρμογένης does not mean "unique Hermes," or "a kind of Hermes"; it means "*born* of Hermes." A νεογένης was a "newborn," not a new kind, and so on. It is not that μονογενὴς always and only means "only-begotten" and never means "one of a kind"; there are times where "uniqueness" seems to be intended. But context is king in every interpretive endeavor, and when the parent-child relationship or childbirth is in the context, the concept of "begottenness" is inherent in the term. Well, every time μονογενὴς appears in the New Testament, there is mention of a father, or a son, or a daughter. In other words, the context requires that we understand this biological sense of μονογενὴς as μόνος and γεννάω.[48]

The one exception is Hebrews 11:17, where Isaac is said to be τὸν μονογενῆ, even though Abraham had begotten other children. Irons explains that this is a "nonliteral extension" of the term in which an heir functions *as if* he is the only begotten son: "If a father or mother has only one child, then the loss of that child would be especially tragic since it would mean losing one's heir. This, then, is why Isaac can be called 'only begotten' (*monogenēs*) even though he is not literally the sole offspring of Abraham."[49] He gives the example that Agamemnon is called μονογενὴς τέκνον πατρὶ even though his brother Menelaus was also a son of their father Atreus: "this phrase … metaphorically describes him as one on whom depends the whole safety of the house and/or the city."[50] Thus, Isaac can be described as μονογενὴς because he is the only heir, who receives the inheritance as if he were the only begotten child.

Besides this, it is reasonable to think that native speakers of ancient Greek understand the language better than twentieth-century non-native linguists. If so, it is significant that the authors of the Nicene Creed follow a confession of Christ as "τὸν μονογενῆ" with the clarification, "γεννηθέντα [from γεννάω] οὐ ποιηθέντα" ("begotten, not made"). This shows, first, that they understood the -γενὴς ending in μονογενὴς to derive from γεννάω. It is also significant that they felt the need to explain how the Son could be begotten but not made, something that presents no problem if μονογενὴς meant "unique" or "one of a kind." In other words, "unique but not made" is an unnecessary contrast. Further, the Vulgate and earlier Latin translations going all the way back to Tertullian rendered μονογενὴς as "*unigenitus*" ("only begotten") rather than "*unicus*" ("unique"). And in the Latin translation of the

[46] Charles Lee Irons, "A Lexical Defense of the Johannine 'Only Begotten,'" in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, 98–116.

[47] Irons, "Lexical Defense," 104.

[48] Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 187–88, 198.

[49] Irons, "Lexical Defense," 108.

[50] Irons, 109.

Nicene Creed, "begotten not made" is translated "*gentium, non factum*." *Genitum* corresponds with *unigenitus* and shows that begetting is in view.

All this is to say that the Johannine occurrences of μονογενὴς should be translated as "only begotten," rather than "one and only." This means—though of course it is not uncontested (what important doctrine throughout church history *is* uncontested?)—Psalm 2, Proverbs 8, Micah 5, and the Gospel and First Epistle of John show us that eternal generation is explicitly scriptural language.

John 5

However, Scripture does not merely use the *words* for "generation." It also teaches the *concepts* of consubstantiality and fromness, even when not using the words. The passage where this is the clearest is John chapter 5. There, the Jews are angry with Jesus for healing a man on the Sabbath. In verse 17, Jesus responds by saying, in effect, "I work on the Sabbath because My Father works on the Sabbath." This enrages them all the more, because they understood what He was saying: He "was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (5:18).

Observe, then, that (1) "calling God His own Father" is to say that He is God's own Son, and that (2) identifying Himself as God's Son in this way, is "making Himself *equal* with God." This is not to be missed. Sonship, according to John 5:18, implies equality with God. And to be equal with God is to *be* God, to subsist in the divine nature. That is to say, it is to be consubstantial with God. Sonship implies consubstantiality.

Then He says, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for *whatever* the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner" (5:19). The significance of this statement is virtually impossible to overstate. Here, Jesus grounds His equality with the Father from verse 18 in the fact that He and the Father work inseparably. In other words, the Son is God just as the Father is God because the Father's acts *are* His acts. "Whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does." He is saying, "I and the Father act from the same principle of action." And the principle of any action is the nature by which that action is performed.[51] So, for Jesus to say, "I and the Father act from the same principle of action," is for Him to say, "I and the Father share the same nature. We are ὁμοούσιος, i.e., consubstantial."

But to say, "The Son can do nothing *of Himself*" (5:19a), is to say that, while His acts are identical to the Father's acts (since they act by virtue of the identical nature), nevertheless, He does not act ἀφ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ, "from Himself." To say that the Son does not act from Himself but does only what He sees the Father doing is the equivalent of saying that the Son acts from the Father. Well, if the identity between the Son's

[51] Richard Muller writes of the phrase *agere sequitur esse*: "operation follows existence (or essence); sometimes also, more expansively, *modus operandi sequitur modum essendi*; an axiom of traditional metaphysics and physics, indicating the basic truth that a thing must exist in order to engage in its proper operations or activities and also, by extension, indicating that the being of a thing determines how it operates or acts. The essence … of a thing is the foundation, or *principium*…, of its operations. The point is true both ontologically and logically." Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*: *Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 19–20.

acts and the Father's acts shows that the Son has the identical *nature* as the Father, then the Son's acting *from* the Father implies that He has His nature (i.e., His principle of action) *from* the Father. Here is both consubstantiality and fromness, once again, in the context of sonship.

Jesus goes on to speak of raising the dead (5:21), judging all people (5:22), and receiving worship just as the Father does (5:23). These remarkable claims all reinforce that the Son does whatever the Father does, and that such inseparable operation is proof of His divinity.

Then, as He speaks about the final resurrection, Jesus makes this astounding statement in verse 26: "For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself." For the Father to have "life in Himself" means that He has the attribute of self-existence, or aseity. This was already established in John 1:4, where John says of the eternal Word, "In Him was life." In the Word, life was existing eternally, which testifies to the Word's deity.[52] Steven Duby observes that the life spoken of in John 5:26

> is a life by which the Son can raise the dead by his mere speech. It is thus a divine life, not a life or power that pertains merely to Jesus' human nature or economic office, and not a life reducible to the eternal life that all believers receive (cf. 1:4; 11:25–26). Indeed, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus has already ruled out the idea that humanity in its weakness ('flesh') might have the life by which one could grant spiritual life to others (3:5–6).[53]

So, the Father has this attribute of self-existence, and Jesus says that He too has this identical attribute of self-existence. But the Son has it in a different manner than the Father has it. The Father has life-in-Himself that has been given to Him by no one. The Son has this same life-in-Himself that was *given* to Him by the Father.

Given that God is a simple being, not made up of parts (e.g., Exod 3:14), therefore, each divine attribute is identical to the divine essence (John 4:24; 1 John 1:5; 4:8). That means that the Father's "giving" to the Son the attribute of aseity is nothing less than the Father's communication of the entire divine essence to the Son. Jesus is speaking of eternal generation in this passage. He does the same works as the Father because He is consubstantial with Him, and He works not from Himself but from the Father because He has the divine nature from the Father. That is, the Father eternally gave to the Son to have the simple, undivided divine essence in Himself. Duby's conclusion is correct: "The Son receives from the Father the fullness of the divine life, a life that pertains to what God is as God. The Son's reception of

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[52] Carson says, "Like God he has life-in-himself. God is self-existent; he is always the 'living God.' Mere human beings are derived creatures … but to the Son, and to the Son alone, God has imparted life-in-himself. This cannot mean that the Son gained this prerogative only after the incarnation. The prologue has already asserted of the pre-incarnate Word, 'In Him was life' (1:4). The impartation of life-in-himself-to the Son must be an act belonging to eternity.… Many systematicians have tied this teaching to what they call 'the eternal generation of the Son.' This is unobjectionable." D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 256–57.

[53] Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 55.

this life assumes, then, an eternal going forth or procession on the Son's part, … fittingly called "generation" or "filiation."[54]

The Son has all that the Father has: the whole divine essence. He is thus fully and truly God. But the Son has the identical divine nature in a manner distinct from the way the Father has it.[55] Though He is as equally God as the Father, He is not the same person as the Father. The distinction is not in their nature—the one somehow more or less God than the other. The distinction is in the manner of subsistence *in* that nature. The Father has the divine nature from Himself; He is begotten of no one. That is just what it means to be God the Father. The Son has the divine nature from the Father, because He is eternally begotten of the Father. That is just what it means to be God the Son.

The Aseity of the Son

But how can one have life-in-Himself that was "given to Him"? Self-existence is either "in Himself" or "from another," right? Well, apparently not, because Jesus thinks it no contradiction to speak of life-in-Himself that was given to Him by the Father. The aseity of the Son is not at odds with the eternal communication of the divine essence from the Father to the Son, or else Jesus misspoke in John 5:26. To be God is to be *a se* (*autotheos*). Thus, though some believe otherwise, eternal generation is not a denial of the aseity of the Son.

Failing to recognize this, some grant that the Father eternally generates the personal subsistence of the Son, but they deny that the Father eternally communicates to the Son the divine essence. In my judgment, this is an absurd statement; it is to say that the Son is eternally generated but not eternally generated. What it means to eternally generate the personal subsistence of the Son is for the Father to eternally communicate the divine essence to Him. If we empty eternal generation of an eternal communication of essence, we have emptied eternal generation of its meaning. Indeed, what would it mean, exactly, to generate the personal subsistence of the Son if not to communicate to Him the divine essence?[56]

In my view, those making this objection see a contradiction where Jesus does not. The argument is, "The Son cannot be *a se* if He has His aseity *from* the Father." But it seems to me one would have to make the same charge against Jesus in John 5:26: "The Son can't have life *in Himself* if He has that life *from* someone else." Thus, insofar as the Son is God, He fully subsists in the divine essence and thus possesses (along with the Father and the Spirit) essential aseity. He is *autotheos* with respect to His deity. However, as van Maastricht observes, "The Reformed distinguish between essential and personal aseity: indeed they affirm essential aseity, in which the deity communicated to the Son and the Holy Spirit is *a se*, from itself; however, they deny personal aseity, insofar as the deity which the Son and the Holy

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[54] Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 55.

[55] Augustine says, "The Father remains life, the Son also remains life; the Father, life in himself, not from the Son; the Son, life in himself, but from the Father. [The Son was] begotten by the Father to be life in himself, but the Father [is] life in himself, unbegotten." *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 19.13.

[56] This is not to confess the eternal generation of the divine essence. The essence is not generated; only the subsistence of the Son is generated. But the generation of the subsistence of the Son just is the communication of the essence.

Spirit possess, they do not possess from themselves but from the Father."[57] Owen explains further, "The Father is of none, is *autautos*. The Son is begotten of the Father, having the glory of the only-begotten Son of God, and so is *autotheos* in respect of his nature, essence, and being, not in respect of his personality [i.e., personhood, subsistence], which he hath of the Father. The Spirit is of the Father and the Son."[58] Understanding this, we may (must) confess both the aseity of the Son and the eternal communication of the divine essence from the Father to the Son.

Radiance, Image, Word

Scripture communicates this same truth of consubstantiality and fromness also by the use of different figures. The first we will consider is "radiance." The author of Hebrews begins his epistle by saying that in these last days God has (1) spoken to us in His (2) Son, through whom also He (3) made the world. In this context of sonship, speaking, and creation, he says, "And He [the Son] is the radiance of [the Father's] glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb 1:3). "Exact representation" translates χαρακτὴρ, which refers to the imprint of a seal or a stamp. When one dips a stamp in ink and presses it on a page, that stamp produces the exact representation of its design on the paper. Hebrews says the Son is the perfect imprint of the Father's nature, a figure that communicates consubstantiality with remarkable clarity.

But the passage also says the Son is the radiance (ἀπαύγασμα) of the Father's glory, which speaks to fromness. Both the Father and the Son shine in glory, but the Son's shining somehow proceeds from the Father's shining. The term ἀπαύγασμα is itself prefixed with the preposition ἀπὸ ("from"), and so it has overtones of procession. Scott Swain describes it this way: "Just as light naturally radiates its brightness, so too God naturally radiates his Son."[59] In other words, the concepts of Sonship and "exact-representation-and-radiance" present in Hebrews 1 both denote consubstantiality and fromness. These truths are the foundation for the Nicene Creed's confession of faith in Christ as "begotten [sonship] of the Father before all worlds, God [exact representation] *of* God, Light *of* Light [radiance], very God *of* very God."

Paul points to the same truths of consubstantiality and fromness in Colossians 1. Also in a context in which He speaks of Christ as Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos (1:16–17), he calls Christ "the *image* [εἰκών] of the invisible God" (1:15). Genesis 5

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[57] Petrus van Maastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:561–62. John Webster summarizes it similarly, "In the terminology of post-Reformation divinity, the Son is still *autotheos*. He is this, not in respect of his person (which he has from the Father), but in respect of the common aseity which he has as a sharer in the one divine essence. The Father is a se in his person (as the principium of the triune life); the Son a se only in his divine essence. 'The Son is God from himself although not the Son from himself." John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology: Volume 1: God and the Works of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2018), 37.

[58] John Owen, *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated*, in *The Works of John Owen*, 12:392. Van Maastricht makes the same observation: "Accordingly, although the Son and the Holy Spirit are *autotheos*, God from himself, even so they are not *autoprosopa*, persons from themselves.… Nor does it lead to Sabellianism, for, although the essential deity is made common, even so personal aseity remains proper to the Father." *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:561–62.

[59] Scott R. Swain, "The Radiance of the Father's Glory: Eternal Generation, the Divine Names, and Biblical Interpretation," in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, 41.

gives insight to the interplay between sonship/begottenness and image-bearing. According to Genesis 5:3, a son is begotten in his father's image: "Adam … *begat* (יָלַד; LXX: γεννάω) a son in his own likeness, according to his *image* [LXX: εἰκών]." What does this mean? Well, Seth was of the same substance or nature as his father; he was human like Adam was human, and thus consubstantial. But Seth was not the same person as his father; he proceeded *from* him. The same is true with Christ, the divine Son. The Son is not the Father, but He is the perfect reproduction of Him: His image, begotten in the likeness of His Father, just as Genesis 5 says of Seth. Just as the image reflected back to you in a mirror is not modified or altered in any way, so also all that the Father is, the Son is (consubstantiality). But just as an image is distinct from and derivative of the archetype it represents, the Son is what He is by virtue of what He receives from the Father (fromness)—i.e., the eternal communication of the divine essence.

In fact, the Apostle John begins his Gospel similar to the letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews says in these last days God has spoken (that is, spoken His Word) to us in His Son (Heb 1:3), and John says there was an eternal Word (John 1:1) who is the only begotten Son (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). Hebrews says through this Son God made the world (Heb 1:2), and John says without Him was not anything made that has been made (John 1:3). Thus, in this similar conceptual context, it is not unreasonable to conclude that when John calls Jesus "the Word," he intends to communicate these same truths of consubstantiality and fromness.

As to consubstantiality, it is worth observing that, according to Scripture, God's Word is as God Himself. In the first place, we recognize this to be true of men. You can identify a man with his word. The way you treat my words is the way you treat me. If you ignore the words I speak to you, you are ignoring me. If you heed my words, you are listening to me. Inasmuch as my word is conceived in my mind before it is uttered from my lips, my words are as my thoughts—the products of my own mind. And my mind is a faculty of my soul; my mind is *me*, in that sense. Thus, a man's word is as the man himself.

But Scripture also testifies to the truth that God's Word is as God Himself. This is why 1 Samuel 3:21 says, "Yahweh appeared … at Shiloh … *by the word* of Yahweh." Yahweh appears by His Word. In other words, if Yahweh's Word is there, Yahweh Himself is there. God's Word is as God Himself. Further, God's Word is as His own name—i.e., His own character, or nature. Psalm 138:2 says of God, "You have magnified Your *word* above all Your *name*." In Revelation 3:8, Jesus says to the church of Philadelphia, "You have a little power, and have kept My *word*, and have not denied My *name*." To keep Jesus' Word is to not deny His name, because these are synonymous concepts. God's Word is as God Himself. Thus, for John to call the Son "the Word" of God is to identify the Son *as* God, fully consubstantial with the Father.

"Word" also communicates fromness, or procession. A man's word proceeds forth from him, whether in thought or in actual utterance. Isaiah 55:11 says this about God's Word, when God speaks of "My Word which *goes forth* from My mouth." God's Word is as God Himself (consubstantiality), and God's Word is *from* God (fromness). Here again are the essential markers of the doctrine of eternal generation. The great Bible commentator Matthew Henry puts it this way: "There is the word *conceived*, that is, *thought*, which is the first and only immediate *product* and

conception of the soul…, and it is *one* with the soul. And thus the second person in the Trinity is fitly called *the Word*; for he is the *first-begotten of the Father*, that eternal essential Wisdom which the [Father] possessed, as the soul does its thought."[60] John Gill agrees, writing that the Son is "called [Word] from his nature, being begotten of the Father; for as the word, whether silent or expressed, is the birth of the mind, the image of it, equal to it, and distinct from it; so Christ is the only begotten of the Father, the express image of his person, in all things equal to him, and a distinct person from him."[61]

Therefore, from before there was a beginning, the Father eternally communicated the fullness of the whole divine essence to the Son, in this incomprehensible, inexpressible act, internal to the life of the Triune God Himself, which we call the mystery of eternal generation. Eternal generation is what it means for the second person of the Trinity to be the image of God, the perfect representation of the Father. Eternal generation is what it means for Him to be the radiance of the Father's glory, eternally shining forth from the Father. Eternal generation is what it means for Him to be the Word, eternally uttered by the Father. Eternal generation is what it means for the second person of the Trinity to be the Son, eternally begotten of the Father.

Conclusion

How can we summarize? The key question that all Trinitarians must answer is: How can (a) the Son be God just as the Father is, (b) there be only one God, and (c) the Son not be the Father? How can we account for the fact that the Son is equal to the Father and yet a distinct person from the Father? What makes the Son the Son? The answer that Scripture gives, and the answer that the most ancient ecumenical council gives, is eternal generation: consubstantiality and fromness; the eternal communication of the divine essence from the Father to the Son. This is what makes the Son the Son. This is how the architects of the formal doctrine of the Trinity defended that doctrine against its earliest enemies. Without it, there is no consistent Trinitarianism.

And then, as a word of application, having considered these truths, lay hold of the weight and gravity of what the Apostle John says in John 1:14 that it was the *eternal Son* who became flesh: "and we beheld *His* glory, glory as of the *only begotten* of the Father." This glory that the Apostles beheld in this Word become flesh was not a pillar of cloud or pillar of fire, nor the shekinah glory that went out from the temple of Solomon over the Mount of Olives. No, "Something greater than the temple is here" (Matt 12:6). The only begotten Son is here. The eternal radiance of the Father's glory is here. The very image of the invisible God is here. The One to whom the Father has given to have life-in-Himself is here. John says, "We beheld the glory of the eternally generated Son." Because that is so, we can sing, at

[60] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible Volume 5: Matthew to John*, electronic version, John 1, https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/john/1.html (accessed May 2025).

[61] John Gill, *Exposition of the Whole Bible*, electronic version, John 1, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/john/1.htm (accessed May 2025).

Christmastime, and every day of the year, "God of God, / Light of Light eternal, / Lo, He abhors not the virgin's womb! / Very God, begotten, not created! / O come, let us adore Him."

It was this One, "who, for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man. *He* suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven." If man is to be reconciled to God, we need a mediator—one who can "lay his hand upon" both God and man (Job 9:33). The only way He could be fit to make us *adopted* sons of God by His work of mediation, is if He was the *eternal* Son of God by His very nature. The only way in which the Son "gives life to whom He wishes" (John 5:21) is if the Father, who has life in Himself, "gave to the Son also to have life in Himself" (John 5:26) from eternity. As one man put it, "If he is not eternally generated, what hope do we have that we will be regenerated? Unless he is born from the Father from all eternity, we have little confidence we will be born again and enter the kingdom of the Son."[62]

[62] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 210.

The Creed of Nicaea – 325

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;

by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth;

who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;

and he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

But those who say: “There was a time when he was not;” and “He was not before he was made;” and “He was made out of nothing,” or “He is of another substance” or “essence,” or “The Son of God is created,” or “changeable,” or “alterable”—they are condemned by the catholic and apostolic Church.

The Creed of Nicaea – 325

Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητήν·

καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ, τουτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ, Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί,

δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο, τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς·

τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα,

παθόντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανούς,

καὶ ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς.

Καὶ εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα.

Τοὺς δὲ λέγοντας, ὅτι ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, καὶ πρὶν γεννηθῆναι οὐκ ἦν, καὶ ὅτι ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων εγένετο, ἢ ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι, ἢ κτιστόν, ἢ τρεπτόν, ἢ ἀλλοιωτὸν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, τούτους ἀναθεματίζει ἡ καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴ ἐκκλησία.

The Nicene Creed
(Constantinople I) – 381

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;

was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;

and he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father *[and the Son],* who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Nicene Creed
(Constantinople I) – 381

Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς, ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων.

Καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ, τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων, φῶς ἐκ φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί·

δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο·

τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα,

σταυρωθέντα τε ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου, καὶ παθόντα καὶ ταφέντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ κατὰ τὰς γραφάς, καὶ ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανούς, καὶ καθεζόμενον ἐκ δεξιῶν τοῦ Πατρός,

καὶ πάλιν ἐρχόμενον μετὰ
δόξης κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς· οὗ τῆς βασιλείας οὐκ ἔσται τέλος.

Καὶ εἰς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον, τὸ Κύριον, τὸ ζῳοποιόν, τὸ ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς [*filioque*] ἐκπορευόμενον, τὸ σὺν Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ συμπροσκυνούμενον καὶ συνδοξαζόμενον, τὸ λαλῆσαν διὰ τῶν προφητῶν.

Εἰς μίαν, ἁγίαν, καθολικὴν καὶ ἀποστολικὴν Ἐκκλησίαν· ὁμολογοῦμεν ἓν βάπτισμα εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν· προσδοκοῦμεν ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν, καὶ ζωὴν τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος. Ἀμήν.

The Creed of Nicaea – 325	**The Nicene Creed (Constantinople I) – 381**
We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth;	by whom all things were made;
who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;	who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;
He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;	was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;
and he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.	and he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.
And in the Holy Ghost.	And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father *[and the Son],* who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.
But those who say: "There was a time when he was not;" and "He was not before he was made;" and "He was made out of nothing," or "He is of another substance" or "essence," or "The Son of God is created," or "changeable," or "alterable"—they are condemned by the catholic and apostolic Church.	In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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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[1]

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

[1] 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).[2] This expression, as formulated in the Nicene Creed, became a foundational theological tenet throughout church history.[3] 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.[4] 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 ἀληθινὸν ("true, very"), used elsewhere to describe God. In 7:28, John writes, "Then Jesus cried out

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[2] 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.

[3] 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*, 3rd ed. (London: Continuum, 1972), 238.

[4] 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* [ἀληθινὸς], 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* [ἀληθινὸν] 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).[5]

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* [ἀληθινὴ] 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

[5] 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 θεὸν). See Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, 2nd ed., trans John Bowden (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 268.

through the Word (1:3), so also all things were made through the Light.[6] 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.[7] 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

[6] 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).

[7] 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.[8] 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).[9]

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).[10] 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).[11]

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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[8] Though some have sought to reject this title as divine, Motyer and Oswalt note that the title "Mighty God" (אֵל גִּבּוֹר) 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.

[9] Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 243.

[10] 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.

[11] 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.[12] 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.[13] 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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[12] 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.

[13] 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.[14] 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).[15]

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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[14] 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.

[15] 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.[16]

MacArthur then underscores that, "Jesus manifested the same essential **glory** as **the Father,** because as God they possess the same nature (10:30)."[17] 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.[18] 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

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[16] John F. MacArthur Jr., *John 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 41.

[17] MacArthur, *John 1–11*, 41–42.

[18] 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."[19] 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).[20] 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.[21] 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.[22]

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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[19] Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*, 52.

[20] 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.

[21] Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*, 46.

[22] 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 Θεὸν, 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).[23] 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.[24]

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 θεὸς). 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.[25] 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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[23] Colin G. Kruse, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 73; Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 91.

[24] Klink, *John*, 117.

[25] 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 θεὸς being the original reading of the text. As Metzger notes, "the reading μονογενὴς υἱός, which undoubtedly is easier than μονογενὴς θεὸς, [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*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 169.

17:21).[26] 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."[27] 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.[28] 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

[26] 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.

[27] Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 25.

[28] 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.[29]

Instead of understanding the Son's begotteness 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 μονογενὴς ("only-begotten") that appears in the Nicene Creed; however, they redefined "begottenness" as being created.[30]

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."[31] 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.[32]

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.[33] 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.[34]

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

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[29] See Athanasius, "Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia," in *NPNF*[2], 4:458.

[30] Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 235.

[31] 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.

[32] 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.

[33] Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 95.

[34] 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.[35] 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.[36] 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.[37]

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.[38] 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).[39] 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 εἰμί; 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'

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[35] Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," 63.

[36] MacArthur, *Colossians*, 47.

[37] 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.

[38] 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.

[39] 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."[40] 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 Πατρί). 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."[41] 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 Πατρί).[42]

Arius and his followers argued that the Son was a created being with a definite beginning, separate from and subordinate to God.[43] 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.[44]

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[40] See Michaels, *The Gospel of John,* 861.

[41] 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.

[42] Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 270.

[43] Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 232–34.

[44] 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.[45] 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.[46]

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.[47] 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."[48] 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.[49]

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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[45] Allison, *Historical Theology*, 369.

[46] 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.

[47] Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 239; Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 167.

[48] Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 269.

[49] 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.

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"THROUGH WHOM ALL THINGS WERE MADE": SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE SON'S UNCREATEDNESS

δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο,
τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ…

By whom all things were made,
both the things in heaven and the things on earth…

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This study explores John's Prologue (1:1–3) as the primary exegetical foundation for the Nicene clause "through whom all things were made" (δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο) by showing that the Logos—identified as the preexistent, divine Person of Jesus Christ—is both distinct from the Father and yet fully God. After surveying potential Greek philosophical and Jewish backgrounds (including the Aramaic Targums' Memra and Old Testament parallels), this article argues that John deliberately uses the "Word" category to emphasize the unique role of the Son as the Creator. John places the Word "in the beginning," and affirms "all things came into being through Him," insisting that "apart from Him nothing came into being," thereby excluding the Word from the created order. In so doing, John's Prologue agrees with Paul's affirmation in Colossians 1:15–17, that the Son is the uncreated God. These exegetical underpinnings vindicate the Nicene Creed's confession of Christ as the Creator and uncreated equal with God.

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As we mark the seventeenth centennial of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), the church global continues to reaffirm the foundational Christological truths enshrined in the Nicene Creed. Among its most pivotal affirmations is the clause δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα

ἐγένετο—"through whom all things were made."[1] This succinct phrase, drawn almost verbatim from John 1:3,[2] not only honors the Son's creative activity, but it also intimates His essential uncreatedness, setting Him irrevocably apart from the created order.

Yet the enduring power of any creedal formulation rests upon its fidelity to Scripture. A confession may ring with theological resonance, but its ultimate strength or weakness is measured by the exegetical ground on which it stands. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate from Scripture that the Son is the Creator of all things and is Himself uncreated. We will begin by exploring John 1:1–3 in depth, demonstrating how this text provides the backdrop for the Nicene Creed. As part of the discussion of John 1:1–3, we will examine John's use of the "Word" motif and what this might contribute to our understanding of Christ's role as Word and Creator. We will then follow up on this discussion with a brief examination of Colossians 1:15–17, showing how Paul's view corroborates and harmonizes with John's view of Jesus as the Creator. In so doing, we will see how the biblical portrait of the Son as Creator also compellingly attests to His eternal equality with the Father and His uncreatedness.

The Divine Word in John 1:1–3

The creedal phrase "through whom all things were made" (δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο) is a variation of the wording of John 1:3, "All things came into being through Him" (πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο).[3] Within the context of John's Prologue, this phrase serves to highlight the specialness of the Word and helps readers connect John's message with theological threads they were likely already familiar with.

Who Is the Divine Word?

John 1:1 opens the book by provocatively stating, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The immediate question for the modern reader is: Who (or What) is the Word?

John identifies this Word (*Logos* in Greek) as a person who, although His personhood is distinct from God the Father, is nonetheless God.[4] Not only is He explicitly labeled as divine by John (1:1), but He is said to exist with God prior to creation (1:2). The Word is further described as the agent through whom all of creation is accomplished (1:3). Although the identity of this individual is mysterious initially, John goes on to overtly identify the Word as Jesus Christ (1:14–17).

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[1] The AD 325 Nicene Creed follows this phrase with "things in heaven and things on earth" (τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ). This phrase is removed from the Constantinople version of the Creed in 381 (sometimes referred to as the "Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed"). For our purposes, we will refrain from extended comment on this phrase but will make brief mention in the section on Colossians 1:15–17, the likely foundation for this phrase.

[2] John 1:3a reads, πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο.

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all English Bible quotations are from the *Legacy Standard Bible* (La Habra, CA: Three Sixteen, 2022).

[4] This idea will be discussed more fully later.

Although John leaves no doubt as to the identity of the Word, what is often overlooked by modern readers is that first-century Jews were immersed in a culture where the Logos/Word concept had significant implications. We now turn to consider the thematic backdrop to the Word theme.

Understanding the Background of the Personified Word

Greek Background

Scholars have long debated the background of John's usage of the Logos/Word theme.[5] Some scholars have proposed that Greek philosophy provides the appropriate foundation for understanding John's use of Logos/Word terminology.[6] A sixth-century philosopher by the name of Heraclitus spoke of "Thought" that governed and ordered the universe.[7] According to Keener, "Six of the surviving 130 fragments of his work refer to the Logos, four in the technical sense of being eternal, omnipresent, the divine cause, and so forth."[8] Although initially thriving only in the theories of Stoicism, the concept of the ruling Logos became pervasive in Greek thought. In Gnosticism, the Logos becomes an intermediary between the divine and humanity.[9] Since the gnostic texts were composed after John composed his Gospel, it is not likely that full-fledged Gnosticism was the driving influence of John's Prologue.[10]

Nevertheless, John and his fellow Jews lived within (and were at times responding to) the culture of their day. Thus, some scholars have looked to this Greek philosophical background to try to understand the reasoning of John's appeal to Christ as the Word.[11] Although this is certainly possible—and it may be a partial explanation for describing Jesus as the Word—many scholars have recognized that a greater influence on John is his Jewish identity and the Hebrew Scriptures. It seems self-evident that, given the ample explanation within the Old Testament and Jewish

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[5] For a detailed survey of the options, see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:338–63.

[6] For a good survey of how early Christians used Greek philosophy regarding the Logos idea, see Ronald E. Heine, *Classical Christian Doctrine: Introducing the Essentials of the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 34–45.

[7] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:341. Keener points to Diogenes Laertius 9.1.1, who provides the sources on Heraclitus (LCL 2:409–25).

[8] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:341.

[9] Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 255.

[10] For a detailed analysis of Gnosticism, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

[11] An oft-cited example of this is Philo. Philo uses the Greek term λόγος over 1400 times. In his writings the Logos is an intermediary between God and the world. Scholars have noted that Philo mixes his Jewish monotheism with a middle road between the Platonic and Stoic views of the Logos ideal. According to Schreiner, Philo describes the Logos as God's firstborn and His Son, and God creates through the agency of this Logos. For a full discussion, see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 256–57; Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:343–47.

culture itself, this would be the preferred backdrop for the Logos theme.[12] In the words of Keener:

> That John wrote in Greek very few have disputed; that some potential readers in the late first century might have construed his language in terms of popular philosophy is also reasonable. But, as we contend below, the semantic range of Logos easily encompassed the Jewish senses in a Jewish milieu, and it is the message which John directs to his intended audience (the "implied audience" of his text) that we seek to ascertain. A reading of the prologue merely on the terms of Hellenistic philosophy would be a reading counter to John's purpose, expressed in the allusions and development of his text.[13]

Jewish Background

If we agree with the rather unobtrusive proposition that "John most likely wrote with Diaspora Jews and proselytes in mind,"[14] then we can expect that John is writing with the knowledge that his audience is familiar with Jewish, and specifically Old Testament, traditions. Examining the Jewish evidence reveals that the Word of God held a special place in one's understanding of God's activity.

For example, some of the Aramaic Targums (2nd c. BC to AD 12th c.)[15] contain evidence that the Jews sometimes viewed the Word of Yahweh as a substitute for Yahweh Himself. *Targum Neofiti* (put into writing approximately AD 2nd–3rd c. but preserving beliefs from earlier times)[16] refers to the ממרא דיי (the Word of the Lord") in place of the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים ("God") in Genesis 1 (vv. 3, 4, 5, etc.). Although most scholars believe *Targum Neofiti* was likely written after the Gospel of John, it offers a perspective of the Word of the Lord that ultimately entered the targumic text and which doubtless existed much earlier in Jewish thought. Jobes notes that the ממרא דיי ("the Word of the Lord") was likely a "circumlocution to avoid referring to God directly, for a person's word is the ultimate personal expression of that person."[17] However, we should be cautious not to assume that the targumic use of "the Word of the Lord" is merely a periphrasis for the divine name. Evans notes three pertinent

[12] "The term 'Word' appears to have been used by the evangelist at least in part in order to contextualize the gospel message among his Hellenistic audience. Yet John's theology of the 'Word' is steeped in the OT depiction of the word of God" (Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 338).

[13] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:343.

[14] Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 84.

[15] For dates of the various Targums, see Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction*, Studies in Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), esp. pp. 81–82 for the Palestinian Targums and *Targum Neofiti*; and Martin McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible 1A (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 43.

[16] Flesher and Chilton, *The Targums*, 81–82; McNamara, *Targum Neofiti*, 44.

[17] Karen H. Jobes, *John Through Old Testament Eyes: A Background and Application Commentary*, Through Old Testament Eyes New Testament Commentaries, ed. Andrew T. Le Peau (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 32.

observations concerning the references to the Word of the Lord in the Targums that shed light on possible conceptual resonances with John.[18]

First, the Aramaic word *memra* (ממרא) sometimes functions as an independent agent in the Targums, mirroring how John appears to utilize the Logos theme.[19] Second, John's usage of the Word in John 1 need not precisely match the Targums to have a relationship. As Evans notes, "The simple fact that 'Word' appears as a periphrasis or name for God in Genesis 1–2 and elsewhere in reference to creation and to God's Shekinah dwelling among his people means that it could easily have been adopted by the Fourth Evangelist for his own use."[20] Thirdly, the way John constructs his Apocalypse may demonstrate awareness of the reasoning that may have preceded and undergirded the written form of the targumic text, which would bolster the idea that John's Gospel could have echoed similar thought.[21] Thus, while writing under the Spirit's guidance and producing a fully inspired and inerrant text, John may have employed familiar Jewish ideas to help his readers identify the significance of Christ.

All things considered, the conspicuous substitute of "the Word of the Lord" for God in *Targum Neofiti* seems to be evidence of a belief among the Aramaic-speaking Jewish population that the Word of Yahweh could be discussed in contexts of equality with God. Furthermore, although the Word as Creator is a notable theme in the Targums, it is not the only connection we find of the Word's personification or potential divinity.[22] Howell summarizes:

> Indeed, the Targums present the *Memra* as more than just a "word" or "decree." *Neofiti* Genesis 1–2 attributes the creation of the universe to the *Memra*. *Neofiti* Exodus 14:30 says that the *Memra* redeemed Israel from Egypt. Likewise, the *Memra* fought Israel's battles as they entered the promised land in *Targum Joshua* 10:14. In the Abrahamic narrative, *Onqelos* Genesis 15 suggests that the *Memra* was God's agent to communicate the covenant to Abraham and to mediate the covenant sign. In each of these cases, the *Memra* carries out a role beyond verbal speech or declaration from God. In fact, the *Memra* functions as God's agent in the Targums by doing the work that the Hebrew Bible ascribes to God.[23]

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[18] Craig A. Evans, *Word and Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John's Prologue*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 89 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 127–29.

[19] As examples of this, Evans notes *Targ. Hab.* 1.12; *Targ. Amos* 4.11; *Targ. Isa.* 65.1.

[20] Evans, *Word and Glory*, 128.

[21] Evans points to Revelation 1:4, "the one who is and who was and who is coming," which matches the Word's self-identification in *Targ. Ps.-J.* Deuteronomy 32:39, "I am he who is and who was and I am he who will be." Evans also points to Revelation 19:13, where Christ is portrayed in His wrath as "the Word of God." These kinds of evidences may show that John echoed the theology or ideas which undergirded some of the Jewish interpretation in the Targums.

[22] See the excellent presentation by Evans, *Word and Glory*, 114–24.

[23] Adam Joseph Howell, "Finding Christ in the Old Testament Through the Aramaic MEMRA, SHEKINAH, and YEQARA of the Targums" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 39–40.

Howell notes that the *memra* (Word) in *Neofiti* Genesis 1 is linked with creation 19 times, 17 of which *memra* is the subject of the verb, showing an essential involvement in the process of creation. Interestingly, Howell also notes that, in *Neofiti*, the *Yaqara* (איקר), which is translatable as "glory" or "honor," is personified as the Creator in Genesis 1:17.[24] The *Yaqara* also blesses the sacred day in Genesis 2:3 as the culmination and conclusion of creation. The emphasis on glory as a personification of Yahweh could be an additional connection to John's Prologue, where in the context of his creation parallels, John notes, "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" (John 1:14, emphasis added).

The evidence from the Targums is quite compelling; however, some scholars are hesitant to view the Targums as evidence of Jewish thought in the first century AD.[25] Although there is solid evidence from Qumran for the existence of some written Targums prior to the first century,[26] scholars debate the dates for the Targums.[27] McNamara notes there is "strong evidence from rabbinic sources" that the written Targums of the Pentateuch existed at least in the late third or fourth century AD.[28] However, some have argued that *Targum Neofiti* specifically was in circulation hundreds of years prior, in the second century BC.[29] Regardless of the exact dating of the Targums generally, or *Neofiti* specifically, it is reasonable to conclude that *Targum Neofiti* at least gives voice to how some Jews likely interpreted the Old Testament and personified the Word of God.[30]

The evidence of *Neofiti* seems all the stronger when we compare its use of "the Word of Yahweh" with some of the Second Temple literature and Scripture itself.[31] Keener notes that the personification of the Word might be evidenced in extra-biblical

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[24] Howell, "Finding Christ in the Old Testament Through the Aramaic MEMRA, SHEKINAH, and YEQARA of the Targums," 48–49.

[25] See, for example, Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:350. "Despite protestations that the Memra must be an early component of Aramaic targumic tradition, all our extant targumic evidence is too late to allow us to be certain that Memra was used in a particular manner in the first century."

[26] McNamara, *Targum Neofiti*, 43. McNamara notes that 11QtargJob, a Targum found at Qumran, may date to as early as 200 BC. This demonstrates there were likely at least some Targums in existence during the time of John's writing. There was also a Targum fragment of Leviticus 16 found in Qumran (4QtgLev).

[27] For a concise (but helpful) survey of the dating of Targums, see Michael B. Shepherd, "Targums, The New Testament and Biblical Theology of the Messiah," *JETS* 51.1 (2008): 46–48.

[28] McNamara, *Targum Neofiti*, 44.

[29] Paul Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1960), 207. See also, Gabriele Boccaccini, "Targum Neofiti as a Proto-Rabbinic Document: A Systemic Analysis," in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context*, ed. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 166 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 259. Boccaccini sees *Neofiti* as evidence of second century AD thought.

[30] In the words of Shepherd, "Thus, even though most of the known Targums in their final forms are later than the first century AD, many of them have something to say about the exegesis and Aramaic of pre-Christian times" (Shepherd, "Targums, The New Testament and Biblical Theology of the Messiah," 48). For a similar kind of discussion concerning the Targums and the messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15, see Iosif J. Zhakevich, "Genesis 3:15 in the Pentateuchal Targums and in the New Testament: Enmity as a Spiritual Conflict," *JBTS* 7.1 (2022): 119–34.

[31] For the purposes of this article, Second Temple literature refers to sources dated or composed to around the time period of the second temple (ca. 516 BC–AD 70).

literature as early as the second century BC in the work of *1 Enoch*.[32] Another similar Second Temple source is Sirach 24, which features the personification of Wisdom, drawing striking parallels with the actions of the Word in John 1.[33] In Evans' robust study of the issue, he lists a multitude of parallels between the LXX and Pseudepigrapha and John's Prologue.[34]

One pertinent example of these parallels is a text like Wisdom of Solomon 9:1, which says, "O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy, who hast made all things by thy word" (Θεὲ πατέρων καὶ κύριε τοῦ ἐλέους ὁ ποιήσας τὰ πάντα ἐν λόγῳ σου).[35] Parallels like these demonstrate at least two realities: (1) the Word of Yahweh was often attributed creative power, and (2) the Word of Yahweh could be personified to fill in the role of Yahweh.

The personification of the Word of Yahweh appears to have been taken for granted by the mid-second century AD. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr argued adamantly that the Word was a real person and not an inanimate thing.[36] According to Justin's record of the discussion, the Jews agreed with his statements on personification.[37] If what Justin says is true, the Jewish populace was already familiar with (and accepting of) the idea of a personified Word, which would match with the evidence alluded to earlier. This is not surprising since the Old Testament itself seems to provide a theological foundation for this idea.

Old Testament Background

Scholars have noted multiple connections between John's Prologue and the Jewish Scriptures. For example, Köstenberger notes the following four major connections:[38]

> 1. The evangelist's deliberate effort to echo the opening words of the Hebrew Scriptures by the phrase "in the beginning."
> 2. The reappearance of several significant terms from Genesis 1 in John 1 ("light," "darkness," "life").
> 3. The introductory OT allusions to Israel's wilderness wanderings (John 1:14: "pitched his tent") and to the giving of the law (1:17–18).

[32] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:351. Keener refers to 1 Enoch 14:24, but notes that 1 Enoch 15:1 "may suggest that the author merely represents God's word, like his voice, as a part of him."

[33] For a full discussion and listing of the parallels, see Evans, *Word and Glory*, 83–86.

[34] Evans, *Word and Glory*, 83–94.

[35] English translation is from *The Revised Standard Version* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1971). The Greek text is from *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1996).

[36] Justin Martyr, "Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 264, §128; hereafter abbreviated *ANF*. Justin notes, "They call Him the Word, because He carries tidings from the Father to men."

[37] Martyr, "Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew," 1:264, §130.

[38] Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 338.

> 4. Perhaps most decisively, the evangelist's adaptation of Isa 55:9–11 for his basic Christological framework.[39]

Similarly, when discussing the connections between John's Prologue and the theological concepts in the Hebrew Bible, Jobes notes:

> "The Word" in Hebrew thought referred to the Lord's revelation of himself through the prophets (cf. "The word of the LORD came to…" that introduces prophetic statements). The allusions and references throughout the Prologue to Old Testament concepts and people, such as the covenant (1:17), the Lamb of God (1:29, 36), the Messiah (1:25, 41), Elijah (1:24), the tabernacle (1:14), the law and Moses (1:17), root John's presentation of Jesus squarely in Jewish history, not in Greek philosophy.[40]

Perhaps the most obvious connection between John's Logos theme and the Old Testament is Genesis 1–2 itself. Evans notes, "Even a casual reader of Scripture cannot help but hear the echo of Genesis 1–2 in the opening verses of the Johannine Prologue."[41] Evans helpfully parallels the LXX of Genesis 1–2 and John 1 as follows.[42]

LXX Genesis 1–2	**John 1**
"In the beginning (ἐν ἀρχῇ)" (v. 1a)	"In the beginning (ἐν ἀρχῇ)" (v. 1a; cf. v. 2)
"God (θεός) created the heaven and the earth" (v. 1b)	"and the Word was God (θεός) … all things came into being (ἐγένετο) through him" (vv. 1c, 3)
	"and the world came into being (ἐγένετο) through him" (v. 10).
"and darkness (σκότος) was upon the abyss … and God said, 'Let there be light (φῶς), and light (φῶς) came into being (ἐγένετο)'" (vv. 2–3)	"And the light (φῶς) shines (φαίνειν) in darkness (σκοτία), and the darkness (σκοτία) did not overcome it" (v. 5; cf. vv. 7–8)
"and let [the stars] be lights … to shine (φαίνειν) upon the earth" (v. 15)	
"And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living (ζᾶν) life'" (v. 24)	"In him was life (ζωή)" (v. 4a) / "concerning the Word of life (ζωή)" (1 John 1:1)

[39] Köstenberger cites Benedict T. Viviano, "The Structure of the Prologue of John (1:1–18): A Note," *RB* 105 (1998): 182: "this passage of Isaiah [Isa. 55:10–11] almost certainly had *the* decisive effect on John 1:1–18" (emphasis in original).

[40] Jobes, *John Through Old Testament Eyes*, 31.

[41] Evans, *Word and Glory*, 77. Evans also goes on to draw comparisons with Exodus 33–34. These connections are less obvious, but are intriguing nonetheless.

[42] Chart adapted from Evans, *Word and Glory*, 78.

"And God said, 'Let us make a human (ἄνθρωπος) according to our image and likeness'" (v. 26)	"And the life (ζωή) was the light (φῶς) of humans (ἄνθρωποι)" (v. 4b)
"And God made the human (ἄνθρωπος), according to the image of God (κατ' εἰκόνα θεοῦ) he made them" (v. 27)	"He was the true light (φῶς), which enlightens every human (ἄνθρωπος), coming into the world" (v. 9)
"And God formed the human (ἄνθρωπος) from the dust of the earth and breathed into his face the breath of life (ζωή), and the human (ἄνθρωπος) became (ἐγένετο) a living (ζᾶν) soul" (2:7)	

In addition to the above parallels in Genesis 1–2, Psalm 33 is another significant passage that has conceptual overlap.[43] The psalmist refers to the word of Yahweh multiple times in this psalm (33:4, 6, 9, 11), either directly (vv. 4, 6) or through inference (vv. 9, 11). Psalm 33:6 clearly depicts the word of Yahweh as the creative agent of the world, "By the word of Yahweh the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host." Jacobson notes:

> *The word of the* LORD is both a nearly tangible expression of the divine purpose and at the same time the very agent that ensures that the divine purpose (God's *every deed*, *kol maʿaśēhû*) is achieved. This is what the psalm means when it says the word is upright (*yāšār*)—that it does what it is intended to do, just as the morally upright are those who do what God has commanded.[44]

Intriguingly, the creative word of Yahweh is also linked closely to wisdom in the Old Testament and Jewish literature.[45] For example, in the extra-biblical Wisdom of Solomon 9:1–2 (RSV), we read:

> O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy,
> who hast made all things by thy word,
> and by thy wisdom hast formed man,
> to have dominion over the creatures thou hast made.

Here, the word of the Lord and His wisdom are paralleled in the work of creation. Proverbs 8:22–31 is also an oft-cited text in this discussion:

> Yahweh possessed me at the beginning of His way,
> Before His deeds of old.

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[43] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 255; Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:251; Evans, *Word and Glory*, 87.

[44] Rolf A. Jacobson, "Book One of the Psalter: Psalms 1–41," in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. Edward J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 314.

[45] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 256.

From everlasting I was installed,
From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
When there were no springs heavy with water.
Before the mountains were settled,
Before the hills I was brought forth;
While He had not yet made the earth and the *fields* outside,
Nor the first dust of the world.
When He established the heavens, I was there,
When He marked out a circle on the face of the deep,
When He made firm the skies above,
When the springs of the deep became strong,
When He set for the sea its boundary
So that the water would not pass over His command,
When He marked out the foundations of the earth;
Then I was beside Him, as a master workman;
And I was a daily delight,
Rejoicing always before Him,
Rejoicing in the world, His earth,
My delight is in the sons of men.

Reading Proverbs 8 (and other texts like it), Keener, among other commentators, has noted that “virtually everything John says about the Logos—apart from its incarnation as a particular historical person—Jewish literature said about divine Wisdom.”[46] Working from the LXX, Evans provides the following list that shows this close comparison:[47]

1. Sophia was “in the beginning” (Jn 1:1a; see §4 [Sir. 24:9], §19 [Prov. 8:23]).
2. Sophia “was with” God (Jn 1:1b; see §1 [Sir. 24:4], §20 [Prov. 8:27, 30], §42 [*1 En.* 42.1–3]). Similarly, God’s *logos* abides in heaven (see §20 [Ps. 118(119):89], §21 [Wis. 18:15]).
3. The world was created “by Sophia” (Jn 1:3; see §22 [Prov. 8:30; Wis. 9:9]). Similarly, the world was created by God’s *logos* (see §22 [Wis. 7:22; 9:2]).
4. In Sophia was “life” (Jn 1:4a; see §24 [Prov. 8:35; Wis. 8:13], §25 [Ps 35(36):10). Likewise, God’s *logos* makes alive (see §24 [Ps 118(119):25, 107]).
5. Sophia gave “light” to the world (Jn 1:4b–5a; see §25 [Bar. 4:2]). Similarly, God’s *logos* is light (see §25 [Ps. 118(119):105]), and His Torah enlightens humankind (see §27 [*T. Levi* 14.4; Job 33:30b]).

[46] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:352.
[47] Evans, *Word and Glory*, 93.

6. Sophia prevailed against darkness and evil (Jn 1:5b; see §26 [Wis. 7:29–30]). Similarly, God's spoken word at the time of creation brought light into being (see Gen. 1:2–3).[48]

Concluding Thoughts on the Identity of the Word

It seems quite clear from the evidence that the Old Testament has the needed theological categories to understand what John is doing in labeling Jesus as the Word of God. Although we should not dismiss the possibility that Greek thinking is at play as cultural context, the Jewish background should carry primary weight.[49] In the words of Carson, "Whether this heritage was mediated to John by the Greek version of the Old Testament that many early Christians used, or even by an Aramaic paraphrase (called a 'Targum'), the ultimate fountain for this choice of language cannot be in serious doubt."[50]

Why would John refer to Jesus as the Word? Arguably, it was the optimum picture to help people understand the depth of the revelation of God in the flesh.[51] Carson provides an apt summary of the beauty of John's choice of wording:

> God's "Word" in the Old Testament is his powerful self-expression in creation, revelation and salvation, and the personification of that "Word" makes it suitable for John to apply it as a title to God's ultimate self-disclosure, the person of his own Son. But if the expression would prove richest for Jewish readers, it would also resonate in the minds of some readers with entirely pagan backgrounds. In their case, however, they would soon discover that whatever they had understood the term to mean in the past, the author whose work they were then reading was forcing them into fresh thought.[52]

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[48] With all of these connections between Wisdom and the descriptions of the Word in John 1, why wouldn't John have opted for use of Wisdom (σοφία) instead of Logos? Keener proposes that John likely wanted to utilize a masculine noun (Wisdom is feminine) to fit with the incarnation of the man, Jesus (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:354). That may be a factor, or it may also be for a variety of other reasons. However, both concepts do provide a helpful template for understanding the significance of the incarnation of Christ.

[49] Jobes, *John Through Old Testament Eyes*, 31–32; Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 257.

[50] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 115.

[51] Keener agrees and notes, "John's choice of the Logos (embracing also Wisdom and Torah) to articulate his Christology was brilliant: no concept better articulated an entity that was both divine yet distinct from the Father. By this term, some Diaspora Jewish writers had already connected Jewish conceptions of Wisdom and Torah with Hellenistic conceptions of a divine and universal power. Finally, by using this term John could present Jesus as the epitome of what his community's opponents claimed to value: God's word revealed through Moses. Jesus was thus the supreme revelation of God; the Torah had gone forth from Zion" (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:363).

[52] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 116.

Looking at John's Argument in John 1:1–3

Having a firm grip on the plausible background to John's choice of using the Word theme in John 1, we should remember that John's purposes become fairly evident by his own argument in John 1:1–3.

As already noted earlier, John begins his record with the phrase, "In the beginning" (Ἐν ἀρχῇ), an intentional allusion to how Genesis 1:1 starts the record of world history and God's creative work.[53] In John's argument, this temporal phrase situates the timing of the Word's existence, "In the beginning was the Word." The beginning referred to both in John 1:1 and Genesis 1:1 is absolute—the beginning of everything.[54] Thus, the Word (i.e., Jesus Christ) already existed prior to creation.[55]

We read that the Word was "with God," noting that He is to be differentiated from the Father, and yet that He in fact *is* God ("and the Word was God").[56] Although the definite article is missing in John 1:1 (the Word is not labeled as *the* God), this is the preferred way to emphasize Jesus's divine nature.[57] However, we need to stress, with Borchert, that "The meaning of John 1:1 is not merely that the Word has divine characteristics but that the Word participates in the reality called God. That Word was *true deity*, and John wanted there to be *no doubt* about it."[58]

The significance of the opening of John's Gospel cannot be overstated. It functions as a lens through which we are to read the entire book. In the words of Barrett, "John intends that the whole of his gospel shall be read in the light of this verse. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God; if this be not true the book is blasphemous."[59]

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[53] "The statement recalls the first word of the Hebrew Bible, בראשׁית (berešiṯ), rendered in the LXX, as in the Gospel, ἐν ἀρχῇ. The association was the more evident to the Jews, since they referred to books of the Bible by their opening words, and so 'In the beginning' was the Jewish name for 'Genesis'" (George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary 36 [Dallas: Word, 1999], 7).

[54] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 113–14.

[55] It seems intentional that John 1:1 and 1:2 use "was" (ἦν) instead of "came to be" (ἐγένετο, cf. John 1:3). The use of ἐγένετο implies coming into being in many contexts. But the Word never experienced a time when He came into being, thus He simply "was" in the beginning of creation.

[56] The transition from John 1:1 to more personal terms, "He" or "this one" emphasizes the personal identity of the Logos. In the words of Schreiner, "The Logos for John is not merely a personification but a person, not merely one who existed with God for all eternity but one who has entered history as a human being" (Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 257–58).

[57] See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 266–69. Wallace argues that the Greek phrase, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος is most likely to be understood as qualitative. He writes, "There is a balance between the Word's deity, which was already present in the beginning (Ἐν ἀρχῇ … θεὸς ἦν [1:1]), and his humanity, which was added later (σὰρξ ἐγένετο [1:14]). The grammatical structure of these two statements mirrors each other; both emphasize the nature of the Word, rather than his identity. But θεός was his nature from eternity (hence, εἰμί is used), while σάρξ was added at the incarnation (hence, γίνομαι is used).… The *idea* of a qualitative θεός here is that the Word had all the attributes and qualities that 'the God' of (1:1b) had" (269). Similarly, Greg Lanier, *Is Jesus Truly God? How the Bible Teaches the Divinity of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 113. Lanier notes that a more "clunky" translation would be, "The Word was that which *theos* was."

[58] Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, New American Commentary 25A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 104 (emphasis original).

[59] C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 156.

The Word's presence with God existed in the beginning (1:2). Knowing that Jesus is the Word (1:14–17), it is intriguing to hear Jesus's prayer later in John's Gospel, "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (John 17:5, cf. 17:24). This prayer carries many of the same themes as John 1:1–2. Jesus asks to receive what is already rightfully His—what was His before creation—the glory that naturally belongs to Him as part of who God is.[60] In this way, the beginning and ending of John's Gospel stress the eternality and preexistence of Jesus.

The preexistence of Jesus as the Word is well established in John's writings through a variety of means.[61] But one of the most intriguing statements John makes is found in 1:3, "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." As noted earlier, this phrase, "All things came into being through Him" (πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο), forms the basis for the Nicene statement, "through whom all things were made" (δι᾽ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο). In John 1:3, its core purpose is to deepen the association between the creation story in Genesis and the Word's creative activity.[62]

John presents the Word's relationship to creation in two perspectives: one negative and one positive. On the positive side, "all things came into being through Him." The Greek word for "came into being" (ἐγένετο) carries significant theological weight when understood in light of Genesis 1. As Klink observes:

> It is important to note that the verb "made" (ἐγένετο) is consistently used to describe creation in the LXX of Genesis 1, where it serves as a foundational term that expresses the creation power and activity of God. The use of this term in the prologue is employing a significant intentionality. It is also clear that the eleven occurrences of the verb (or a related term) in the prologue (see vv. 3, 6, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18) in its variously translated forms, "made/came/became" (γίνομαι), is intentionally deploying the same functional meaning initiated by the use of the term in its twenty-three occurrences in Genesis 1 (see Gen 1:3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 23, 24, 30, 31). This term's grounding in Genesis will be carefully established in the prologue and utilized throughout the Gospel to take on a "creation" emphasis in order to declare the transformative power and work of Jesus Christ.[63]

John says all things without exception are created "through Him" (δι᾽ αὐτοῦ). In Greek, διά + the genitive typically describes intermediate agency.[64] During the great debates about the divinity and preexistence of Christ that prompted the Council of Nicaea in 325, this preposition was appealed to as an argument by the Arians to prove

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[60] Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 715.

[61] For a discussion of the issue, see John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 236–37.

[62] Jobes, *John Through Old Testament Eyes*, 32; Lanier, *Is Jesus Truly God?*, 124.

[63] Klink III, *John*, 93–94.

[64] For a full discussion on the passive verbs and agency communicated through prepositions, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 431–39.

that the Word is inferior to God and simply a mediator of God’s ultimate creative work.[65]

Although I would agree that διά + the genitive does indicate the mediating role of the Word in the context of John 1:3,[66] it by no means suggests inferiority of the Word with relation to God, inasmuch as verse 1 declares without equivocation that the Word *is* God. It is indeed a biblical pattern to point to the Father’s ultimate role in creation with prepositions like ἐκ, and the Son’s mediatorial actions with διά (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Heb 1:2). But biblical authors also address the Father’s role with the preposition διά (cf. Rom 11:36) and unequivocally affirm the Son’s ultimate role in creation (cf. Col 1:16).[67] In essence, the prepositions emphasize functional relationships rather than indicating hierarchical status. Lanier has helpfully shown the interchangeability of prepositions as they apply to creation language for the Father and the Son.[68]

Creation is …	**“from/by” (Gk. ἐκ/ἐν)**	**“through” (Gk. διά)**	**“unto” (Gk. εἰς)**
John 1:3	-	Son	-
Rom 11:36	God/Father	God/Father	God/Father
1 Cor 8:6	God/Father	Son	God/Father
Col 1:16	Son	Son	Son
Heb 1:2	-	Son	-

[65] Athanasius describes their view this way: “However, they say concerning Him, that ‘God willing to create originate nature, when He saw that it could not endure the untempered hand of the Father, and to be created by Him, makes and creates first and alone one only, and calls Him Son and Word, that, through Him as a medium, all things might thereupon be brought to be.’ This they not only have said, but they have dared to put it into writing, namely, Eusebius, Arius, and Asterius who sacrificed” (Athanasius of Alexandria, “Four Discourses against the Arians,” in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. John Henry Newman and Archibald T. Robertson, vol. 4 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series [New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892], 361); hereafter abbreviated *NPNF*^{2}.

[66] Note, however, another possibility. Some scholars have argued that it may be possible that διά with the genitive can represent sole agency. See, for example, Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 70. Harris argues, “Sometimes, however, διά with the genitive expresses not the efficient means but the ultimate cause, not instrumentality but sole agency, as in Ro 11:36, where God the Father is designated the source (ἐκ), sole cause (διά), and goal (εἰς) of all things. Similarly, ὁ θεός, δι’ οὗ ἐκλήθητε (1 Cor 1:9); κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ (Gal 4:7); ἔπρεπεν γὰρ αὐτῷ … δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα (Heb 2:10). It follows, as Zerwick observes, that when the role of Christ as creator (e.g., Jn 1:3, 10) or redeemer (e.g., Ro 5:9) is expressed by διά, the idea of his mediation may not be prominent.”

[67] Although the ἐκ preposition is not used in Colossians 1:16, the creative work of Jesus is described with three prepositional phrases: ἐν αὐτῷ (“in Him”), δι’ αὐτοῦ (“through Him”), and εἰς αὐτὸν (“for Him”). I think Pao is correct when he says we should view the first prepositional phrase, ἐν αὐτῷ (“in Him”), “as a wider category that denotes a certain organic association, one that contains locative reference and possibly causal relationship as well” (David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 96). Taken together, these three prepositional phrases describing the creative work of Christ have to be viewed in the ultimate sense.

[68] Lanier, *Is Jesus Truly God?*, 68.

Therefore, it is best to acknowledge that although the mediatorial role of the Word is at play in John 1:3, it by no means and in no way suggests the Word's inferiority to God the Father, as will become clear in the following discussion.

Not only does John state the positive pronouncement, "All things came into being through Him," which in itself is a marvelous claim to the uniqueness and divinity of the Word, but he also stresses the negative, "and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (1:3b). The phrase "apart from Him" (χωρὶς αὐτοῦ) clarifies any confusion one might have about how absolute the role of the Word was in the creation process.[69] John already stressed that "all things" (πάντα) came into being through the Word's creative power, but now we are told, in no uncertain terms, that "apart from Him" nothing was created.[70] This second clause functions emphatically to stress the "inability of anything to come into existence without the Word."[71] Therefore, it is evident that if nothing was created apart from the Word's creative power, then He cannot have been created. John 1:3 is a strong affirmation of the Word's uncreatedness and equality with God.

Early Church Interpretation and Application of John 1:3

We can see why John 1:3 became such a utilized text in light of the Arian controversy. If the Word creates all things and nothing that was created was created without the Word, then the Word could not himself have been created. Athanasius states the case plainly as follows:

> And by Him, as John says, "all things were made," and "without Him was made not one thing." And this Word is Christ; for "there is One God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we for Him; and One Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through Him." And if all things are through Him, He Himself is not to be reckoned with that "all." For he who dares to call Him, through whom are things, one of that "all," surely will have like speculations concerning God, from whom are all.[72]

A similar argument is made by "the Athanasius of the West," Hilary of Poitiers, in the fourth century:

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[69] Borchert, *John 1–11*, 107.

[70] There are two related technical issues here at the end of verse 3 that require comment. First is the question of whether verse 3 should end with the οὐδὲ ἕν or with ὃ γέγονεν. Beasley-Murray notes, "The majority of early writers, both orthodox and Gnostic, adopted the former alternative; but the use of the statement by the Arians and Macedonians to prove on that basis that the Holy Spirit was a created being led the orthodox to favor the second way of reading the sentence. Most moderns consider the former to be intended, on the grounds of rhythmical balance of the clauses; the 'staircase parallelism,' characteristic of vv 1–5, is then preserved" (Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2). It does seem that ὃ γέγονεν most naturally goes with verse 3.

The second issue is why John moves from using the aorist tense (πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο … καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν) to the perfect tense (ὃ γέγονεν). Carson explains, "The change in tense from *were made* to *has been made* is then the change in reference from the act of creation to the state of creation" (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 118). In other words, John might be understood as saying, "Nothing that is currently in the status of having been created was created apart from the Word."

[71] Klink III, *John*, 94.

[72] Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," *NPNF²,* 4:317.

> Since by the faith of the Apostles and Evangelists these statements are referred in their meaning to the Son, through Whom all things were made, how shall He be made equal to the very works of His hands and be in the same category of nature as all other things? In the first place our human intelligence repudiates this statement that the Creator is a creature; since creation comes to exist by means of the Creator. But if He is a creature, He is both subject to corruption and exposed to the suspense of waiting, and is subjected to bondage.[73]

This same kind of argumentation was also used by Augustine:

> Now some unbelieving Arian may come forth and say that "the Word of God was made." How can it be that the Word of God was made, when God by the Word made all things? If the Word of God was itself also made, by what other Word was *it* made?[74]

> After saying, "And the Word was God," it is said also, "The same was in the beginning with God: all things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made." Not simply "all things"; but only all things that were *made*, that is, the whole creature. From which it appears clearly, that He Himself was not made, by whom all things were made. And if He was not made, then He is not a creature; but if He is not a creature, then He is of the same substance with the Father. For all substance that is not God is creature; and all that is not creature is God.[75]

> For if some things were made by the Father, and some by the Son, then all things were not made by the Father, nor all things by the Son; but if all things were made by the Father, and all things by the Son, then the same things were made by the Father and by the Son. The Son, therefore, is equal with the Father, and the working of the Father and the Son is indivisible. Because if the Father made even the Son, whom certainly the Son Himself did not make, then all things were not made by the Son; but all things *were* made by the Son: therefore He Himself was not made, that with the Father He might make all things that were made.[76]

As these early church sources indicate, John 1:1–3 has long been a passage used to defend the equality of the Son with the Father, demonstrating the uncreatedness and preexistence of the Son. This makes good sense because John's argument is that the Word, God's agent of creation, is truly God Himself. Indeed, "God the Creator

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[73] Hilary of Poitiers, "On the Trinity," *NPNF*[2], 9:219.

[74] Augustine of Hippo, "Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John," in *St. Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, vol. 7 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 10; hereafter abbreviated *NPNF*[1].

[75] Augustine, "On the Trinity," *NPNF*[1], 3:21.

[76] Augustine, 3:23.

and the Word through which (or whom) he created are inseparable, and according to John they share the same identity while at the same time being distinct."[77]

The Contribution of Colossians 1:15–17

Although John 1:1–3 is the primary text to draw on in our discussion of the exegetical basis for the Nicene Creed, several other pieces of evidence should be considered, which solidify the theological belief that the Son was preexistent and uncreated. However, due to space limitations, we will restrict our discussion to Colossians 1:15–17.

Colossians 1:15–17 is a passage that has significant implications for the role of Jesus as the uncreated Creator. This text is likely the backdrop to the Nicene clarifying statement about the Son being the Creator of all things, "things in heaven and things on earth" (τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ).[78] The related phrase is found in 1:16, "For in Him all things were created, *both in the heavens and on earth*" (ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς).

Although space limits us from a complete examination of Colossians 1:15–17, there is one particular issue that requires our attention here, around which we can formulate the entirety of our discussion. The issue is Paul's declaration of Christ as the "firstborn of all creation" (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως).

Unsurprisingly, the phrase "firstborn of all creation" was one of the two prominent texts that Arians relied upon to argue that the Son was created.[79] Logically, if the Son was created, then He could not be equal with God because He was a part of creation—and creature and Creator are not equal. How are we to understand this phrase?[80]

Although it is possible to understand "firstborn" as a temporal descriptor (cf. Luke 2:7; Heb 11:28), it also naturally came to be a metaphorical description of rank or supremacy.[81] This is easily understood, given the primacy of the firstborn son, who was granted rulership and authority in matters both internal and external to the family. We see this metaphorical use in pertinent Old Testament texts, such as Psalm 89:27, "I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." The Greek translation of Psalm 89:27 [88:28 LXX] uses the same word as Colossians 1:15 (πρωτότοκος).[82] In Psalm 89, it is David who is declared to be the firstborn, though

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[77] Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 179.

[78] As noted earlier, this phrase is missing from the AD 381 Constantinople Creed. Some scholars have proposed that this phrase was put into the Nicene Creed primarily for rhetorical purposes. Leary says, "The addition of τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ in N, not retained in C, does not suffice to give the Creed a broad cosmic dimension and rather suggests an effort to fill up a felt lack with a hollow rhetorical flourish" (Joseph S. O'Leary, "Johannine Revelation, Nicene Witness," *Religions* 15 [2024]: 8). However, it makes more sense that given the battle against Arianism that was raging, the drafters of the Nicene Creed wanted to draw upon additional biblical language that referred unquestionably to Christ.

[79] The other was Proverbs 8:22, "The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old" (RSV).

[80] For a comprehensive survey, see Larry R. Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," *JETS* 31.1 (1988): 59–67.

[81] Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 95.

[82] Ps 88:28 in the LXX.

he was the youngest of his brothers. In this case, it cannot be temporal but a statement of authority and position.

This usage is similar to how Israel is labeled as God's firstborn (cf. Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9). An additional parallel is found in the Greco-Roman world, where Pao notes that "firstborn" can refer to "a legal term to refer to one who is the legal heir of his father's inheritance."[83] Thus, although it is grammatically possible that the term "firstborn" could refer to the temporal priority of a son, the surrounding context supports the idea that "firstborn" in Colossians 1 refers specifically to the preeminence, authority, and power of Christ.[84]

The broader context of Colossians 1:15–20 unmistakably emphasizes Christ's supremacy and authority. For example, "in Him all things were created" (v. 16a). Creation taking place "in Him" stands out, compared to the usual "through Him." This phrase, coupled with the concluding phrase of verse 16—"all things have been created through Him and for Him"—provides a triad of prepositional phrases describing Christ's creative work. All things are created (1) "in Him" (ἐν αὐτῷ), (2) "through Him" (δι' αὐτοῦ), and (3) "for Him" (εἰς αὐτὸν).[85]

Although it is possible that "in Him" (ἐν αὐτῷ) could be translated instrumentally—meaning Christ is the means by which God creates the world—there is a difficulty in explaining why Paul would essentially say the same thing with the second prepositional phrase, "through Him" (δι' αὐτοῦ). It seems better to view this first prepositional phrase as either the efficient cause (similar to the Greek preposition ἐκ), or, more likely, the sphere in which the work of creation takes place.[86] The significance of this nuance would be that "God's creation, like his election, takes place 'in Christ' and not apart from him."[87] Therefore, no part of creation can take place outside of Christ. He is the one who "actually brought the plans [of creation] into existence. Through his creative imagination and power, the created order exists."[88]

The second and third prepositional phrases, "through Him" (δι' αὐτοῦ) and "for Him" (εἰς αὐτὸν), respectively function to emphasize agency and goal. Taken

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[83] Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 95. Pao expands, "As the heir, this person also inherits the power and authority of his father over his household."

[84] It is also important to consider the kind of genitive that is in use in the phrase, "firstborn of all creation" (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως). Helyer lists four possibilities: (1) partitive genitive, which is preferred among temporal proponents; (2) genitive of comparison; (3) genitive of place, denoting the sphere of the firstborn's authority; (4) an objective genitive. Helyer opts for an objective genitive, which I believe makes most sense, and the meaning would be that Christ's supremacy extends over all creation (Helyer, "Arius Revisited," 64–65). Wallace understands this genitive to be a genitive of subordination (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 103–4.)

[85] Some have understood these three descriptions as relating to Aristotle's discussion of causation. For a brief discussion, see Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 96. Pao, who disagrees with the idea, notes, "If so, then, these three phrases point to the three causes that are involved in the act of creation: 'in him' points to efficient causation, 'through him' to instrumental causation, and 'for him' to final causation." However, Paul's argument makes sense without attempting to tie it into Greek philosophy.

[86] Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, New American Commentary 32 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 217; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 61–62.

[87] Bruce, *The Epistles*, 62.

[88] Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 217.

together, we have a full-orbed view of Christ's creative role. Creation *only* takes place in the sphere of Christ's operation. There is no other alternative. Christ Himself is the instrument or agent of the work of creation. And finally, in a statement that has significant claims to divinity, the purpose of creation is to bring glory to Christ.[89]

Paul further describes Jesus as the one who is "before all things" (πρὸ πάντων). Although this phrase could be understood similarly to "firstborn" (v. 15), that is, stressing Christ's authority, Paul consistently uses this phrase to communicate temporality.[90] As such, this text is strong evidence for the preexistence of Christ and teaches that Jesus existed before creation.[91]

Furthermore, Paul states that "in Him all things hold together" (τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν). Not only are all things created by Christ—itself a profound assertion—but He is involved in the continual maintenance of the entire created order.[92] This is another demonstration of Christ's equality with God. For in Scripture, God is the one who sustains and upholds creation (cf. Neh 9:6; Pss 104:27–30; 145:15–16; 147:8–9; Acts 17:25–28).

Colossians 1:15–17 speaks in a significant way to the role of Christ as the uncreated Creator. With a message similar to that of John 1:1–3, Christ is depicted here as the uncreated Creator. All things not only have their genesis in the Son, but their continual existence is in Him as well. Therefore, although some have interpreted the term "firstborn of all creation" to mean that Christ was created, we ought to understand "firstborn" as a title, emphasizing the authority and supremacy of Christ. This meaning reflects the context more faithfully.[93]

Conclusion

We have examined John 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:15–17 in detail. These texts demonstrate that the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son, is uncreated and is Himself the Creator. John's Prologue locates the Word in the beginning, prior to and independent of creation. John twice emphasizes—positively and negatively—that "all things" are created through Jesus (John 1:3). Paul's Christological hymn (Col 1:15–17) corroborates and amplifies this claim: the Son is the "firstborn of all creation," not as the first effect within creation but as its sovereign heir, the sphere, the instrumental agency, and the ultimate purpose of the entire cosmos. Such

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[89] In the words of Melick, "Everything exists to display his glory, and ultimately he will be glorified in his creation" (Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 218). The Old Testament regularly describes Yahweh being the Creator of all things and creation testifying of God's glory. For example, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and the expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Ps 19:1; cf. Ps 8:1; 29:9; 97:6; 145:10–12; 150:6).

[90] Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 98. Compare the usage in Rom 16:7; 1 Cor 2:7; 4:5; 2 Cor 12:2; Gal 1:17; 2:12; 3:23; Eph 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9; 4:21; Titus 1:2.

[91] Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 220.

[92] "The Creator has not forgotten the creation. He daily maintains a balance in the universe" (Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 220). Similarly, see Hebrews 1:3, where the Son is described as one who "upholds all things by the word of His power."

[93] In the words of Bruce, "This cannot be construed as though he himself were the first of all beings to be created. On the contrary, it is emphasized immediately that he is the one by whom the whole creation came into being" (Bruce, *The Epistles*, 59).

language is intelligible only if the Son shares divinity with God (something Colossians 1:19 states emphatically).

These textual conclusions vindicate the theological formulation of the Nicene creed—δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο—“through whom all things were made.” If all that has come to be did so through the Son, then the Son cannot be numbered among the things that came to be. He is the eternally unoriginated source who brings all creation into existence. Not abandoning His creative work, the Son continually sustains it (cf. Col 1:17; Heb 1:2–3), a role that emphasizes His equality with God.

Doctrinally, the Son’s status as uncreated deity carries significant ramifications. He participates in actions ascribed to Yahweh in the Old Testament, and He shares in the privileges and the honor reserved for Yahweh. Most importantly, He is worthy of the same undivided doxology that rightfully belongs to God alone.

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"FOR US AND FOR OUR SALVATION": THE PLAN OF SALVATION SEEN IN THE INCARNATION

τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα…

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man…

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At the center of the Nicene Creed is the doctrine of the Incarnation—God becoming Man. This article argues that the Incarnation is properly located within the eternal plan of God for salvation. Thus it is seen in several New Testament texts that refer to the Incarnation as "foreknown from before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8), as well as in the very first prophecy, Genesis 3:15. Moreover, pro-Nicene Trinitarian categories (such as the person/essence distinction) allow other texts in the Old Testament to be understood in light of the Incarnation. Such texts include those that refer to the appointment of the Son as the mediator (e.g., Ps 110; Zech 12:10), as well as by the existence of typology in the Old Testament. Considered as a whole, the Scriptures present the Incarnation as something planned by God before time, prophesied throughout the Old Testament, revealed in Jesus, and a reality that remains for all eternity.

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Introduction

In many ways, our lives revolve around Christmas. December 25 both bridges our calendar year and splits our academic year. Christmas creates traditions, and kids look forward to it months in advance. Even adults grow nostalgic for how the holidays used to be when children were in the home.

The centrality of Christmas is evident not just in our Western world, but it is seen in the Nicene Creed as well. The Creed is essentially a series of declarations,

centering on the Son. And in the middle of the Creed is this statement regarding the Son: "*Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man…*" (emphasis added). If the Son provides the Creed's primary structure, the Incarnation provides its heart and soul. As the Christian celebrates Christmas, he celebrates the Incarnation, and he celebrates the orthodoxy that Nicaea affirmed. In fact, the word "for," repeated twice in both English and Greek (δι' and διὰ) is the Creed's very first purpose clause. The first time the First Council of Nicaea chose to say *why* the Son did *what* the Son did in the Incarnation, it was a dual declaration—*for* us, and *for* our salvation. But what exactly is meant in that the incarnate Son of God was "for us" and "for our salvation"?

The Incarnation—What It Is Not

The Creed's central claim is that the Son, described in the first half, "came down" and was "incarnate." The *who* of the Incarnation is the Son. Specifically, the "Only Begotten Son of God" who is "born of the Father before all ages." The *what* of the Incarnation is "became man." What does it mean that the *who* (the Only Begotten Son of God) *became* man? It certainly cannot mean that the Son of God experienced change. After all, the Creed already established that he is "God from true God," and true God does not change (Ps 102:26–28). God is what He is, what He always was, and what He always will be (Jas 1:17). This is the classic doctrine of divine immutability, drawn from such texts as:

- "They will perish, but you will remain … you are the same, and your years have no end" (Ps 102:26–27),
- "I Yahweh do not change" (Mal 3:6) and,
- "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change…" (Jas 1:17).

Taken together, these texts teach that God Himself is not subject to alteration, change, or variation.[1] Given the eternal generation of the Son, it follows that if immutability is true of the Father, it must likewise be true of the Son. And of course that is exactly what the Scripture declares in Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."[2]

Because of texts like Psalm 102:26–27, Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8, and James 1:17, it is wrong to see the birth of Jesus as a change in God. But it is a change nevertheless. In the Creed, the change *is not* within God, but rather *is within* the world as God "came down from heaven" for us (κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν). Contrary to

[1] While James teaches the divine immutability of God (1:17), he also connects this doctrine to the practical benefit for believers—that the Father provides for His children. Being immutable, God shows no variation with this gracious disposition toward us. Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, ZECNT (Grands Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 74.

[2] Calvin argues that "yesterday" refers to God's immutability in the OT, "today" speaks of the time of the "promulgation of the Gospel," while "forever" extends to eternity. The point is that the Son is, "truly and properly" immutable. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 345.

the Arians, there never was a time when the Son was not.[3] The unchangeable and unchanging Son has always existed. Yet, something did change in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. The Son was born as Jesus.

The Incarnation's Definition: ἐνανθρωπήσαντα

God is Spirit, and has no body (John 4:24). As Jesus said, "A spirit does not have flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39). Simply put, God is invisible (ἀόρατον; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 11:27).[4] Further compounding the problem, God is outside of time (Deut 33:27; Job 36:26; Isa 40:28). God has no beginning, no succession of moments, and no end.[5] For God to visibly and personally reveal Himself to creatures, He (by logical necessity) must enter time.

Hence the Incarnation. The invisible God took on physicality. The eternal God entered time. He came down from heaven for us men, and for our salvation, and the means by which He came down was the assumption of a human nature.[6] Or, to say it as the creed does: He "was incarnate and was made man" (κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα). This word, κατελθόντα, describes the Son's assumption of a new nature, a second nature, a human nature. The result is stated in one Greek word but with an infinite mystery behind it: ἐνανθρωπήσαντα—He "was made man"—or, simply put, *the Incarnation.*

The humanity of Christ is on practically every page of the New Testament.[7] Jesus was, for example, *born* (Luke 2:1–20). He was *named* and *circumcised* (Luke 2:21). He *hungered* and *thirsted* (Mark 11:12; John 19:28). And, not to put too fine a point on it, He *died* (Matt 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30; Rom 8:34; 1 Thess 4:10).

The Incarnation does not simply indicate that Jesus experienced human things like humans do. It was not a mere show, and He was no trite actor. Rather, He was truly made (for a little while, anyway) lower than the angels (Heb 2:9; cf. Ps 8:2, 5). He took on a human mind and soul, with all their attendant limitations (Luke 2:52; Mark 13:32). The one who made all things became subject to all kinds of things—the one who made nature became subject to it, the one who ordained all law was arrested, the one who gave speech was silent, and the one who appoints death, died.

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[3] The Arian view is laid out by Athanasius in *De Synodis*, 8, Greek Text of the 4th Creed of Sirmium (also called the "Dated Creed"). It can be found in Hahn, *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der Alten Kirche* (Breslau: E. Morgenstern, 1897), 204–205.

[4] For a discussion of how ἀόρατον functions in Heb particularly in relationship to Moses "seeing" God, see: Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 616–17.

[5] Mark Jones, *God Is* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 51–57.

[6] The common way this was described in the early church was that "He remained what He was; what He was not, He assumed." This kind of language is seen in Cyril of Alexandria as well as Gregory of Nyssa, but probably has its origin with Gregory of Nazianzus, in *On God and Christ: the Five Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel R. Wickham, Popular Patristics 23 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 39.13.

[7] Macleod notes that the humanity of Christ is so evident, "this scarcely requires argument." Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 161.

It is in this way that Jesus was the true and better Adam (Rom 5:12–21). There are simply so many examples of the theological importance of the Incarnation that any attempt to list them could be absurd. But a key one to note: the devil tempted Jesus (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). Given that God cannot be tempted (Jas 1:13), it is both reasonable and necessary to deduce that Jesus was tempted according to His humanity; thus, the reality of the temptation affirms the veracity of the Incarnation (Heb 2:18; 4:15).[8]

The temptation is just one example of the Incarnation's theological significance. In His temptation, Jesus succeeded where Adam failed. While Jesus was not tempted *geographically* where Adam was, he was certainly tempted *spiritually* where Adam was. Both Adam and Jesus were sinless. Both Adam and Jesus were in some sense federal (or covenantal) representatives. Both Adam and Jesus were attacked by the Devil. Adam failed, bringing death to all of mankind who came from him and through him. Jesus succeeded, bringing righteousness and life to all who are under Him (Rom 5:12–21).[9] Of course, Jesus could have defeated the Devil specifically by virtue of His *authority as God*; but that is different than defeating the Devil by virtue of His *obedience to God* (Heb 2:14–18; 5:7–9). The latter validates Jesus as the incarnate redeemer.

The Nicene Creed was correct in giving the Incarnation center stage. There are basic tensions in the Bible that require a savior with two natures to resolve—e.g., the Savior must be God to be holy as God is holy, and He must be man to be put to death as an atonement for sins.[10] It was Calvin who wrote: "It was the greatest importance for us that the he who was to be our Mediator be both true God and true man."[11] When pressed on why it was so important, Calvin responded: "If someone asks why this is necessary … it has stemmed from a heavenly decree, on which men's salvation is depended."[12]

The Incarnation's Origin: The Eternal Christmas Story

There are many recent works that give excellent exegetical explanations and defenses of Jesus' humanity.[13] The rest of this article will take a narrower approach

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[8] Of course, one can go too far in this logic and end up bifurcating the work of Jesus. It is best to say that Jesus, the God-man, was tempted. It was the person who was tempted, not the nature. So when I say he was tempted "according to his humanity," I do not intend to imply that only his humanity was sinless, or that only his humanity mediates for us. For more on this careful distinction, see Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015), 28–29.

[9] Augustine covered the importance of Christ's humanity in the temptation accounts in *De Trinitate*, 4.3.5; 4.13.17. cf. Aquinas, *ST3*, Q41, A1–3.

[10] Augustine was one of the first to make this point. See *City of God*, 9.13. Cf. Charnock, "The Existence and Attributes of God," in *Works*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 60.

[11] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1 & 2.*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1:2.12.1.

[12] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:2.12.1.

[13] R. B. Jamieson, *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2021), 76–98; Brandon D. Crowe, *The Lord Jesus Christ: The Biblical Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ*, vol. 3, We Believe (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2023), 219–320; John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 255–77; Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 27–40.

by picking up Calvin's assertion that the Incarnation was essential because of "a heavenly decree." This so-called "decree" reveals how the Incarnation was *for us, and for our salvation*.

Ephesians refers to the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and the sending of the Spirit as a "plan for the fullness of time" (Eph 1:10; 3:9). In Ephesians 1 this plan is inclusive of election (v. 4), the sending of the Son (v. 5), His death (v. 7), and both the saint's regeneration and sealing (v. 13). Note that the "plan" inherently involves the Son's humanity, as it entails the "redemption through his blood" (v. 7).

Calvin said the Incarnation came from a "decree," and Ephesians describes it as "a plan for the fullness of time." Peter personalizes it as "God's plan" (Acts 4:8). Elsewhere Peter says that Jesus' death by crucifixion happened according "to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).

In other words, this plan did not originate on the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Rather, the Scriptures describe it as a plan with origins "before all time" (Jude 25). In fact, three key passages describe it as a plan "foreknown before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8).

1 Peter 1:20

First Peter 1:20 reads: "He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you." Verse 19 indicates that it was "Christ … a lamb without spot or blemish" who was foreknown. Peter particularly mentions that the lamb's atonement is what is in view ("you were ransomed … with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb …").

The *when* of the foreknowing is "before the foundation of the world" (πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου). This expression indicates that the history of the Incarnation "*begins* before the world began in the intra-trinitarian plan."[14] Thomas Schreiner writes that 1 Peter 1:20 confirms that "God determined before history ever began that the Christ would appear" as a man.[15]

Revelation 13:8

Revelation 13:8 reads: "everyone whose name has not been written *before the foundation of the world* (ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου) in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain"[16] (emphasis added). The italicized text is nearly the identical expression used in 1 Peter 1:20, except that Peter describes the plan of redemption as "before (πρὸ) the foundation of the world," while Revelation 13:8 says "from (ἀπὸ) the foundation of the world."

There is debate regarding what John describes as existing "before the foundation of the world." Two options are:

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[14] Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit*, NSBT 24 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 166.

[15] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 88.

[16] Osborne is one of many commentators who notes the connection between 1 Pet 1:8 and Rev 13:8. See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 503–504.

1. The writing of the book of life ("everyone whose name has not been written from before the foundation of the world"; e.g., ESV and LSB), or
2. the knowledge of the Lamb who was slain ("the lamb slain before the foundation of the world"; e.g., KJV, NIV).[17]

The argument for reading "the book of life written before the foundation of the world" in Revelation 13:8 is the connection to Revelation 17:8, where the same phrase is used ("the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life *from the foundation of the world*"; emphasis added). If that connection is followed, Revelation 13:8 refers to election as occurring before the foundation of time.[18] The argument against seeing a connection between Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 is simply word order; κόσμου is the last word in 13:8, while γέγραπται is twelve words earlier. If the connection between the two verses is minimized, then Revelation 13:8 is understood to declare that the Lamb's death was planned before time.[19] In both views, the germane point is the same: the Incarnation is assumed before time.

Ephesians 1:4

This same expression—"πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου"—is also found in Ephesians 1:4: "he chose us in him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (emphasis added). As it relates to the Incarnation, Ephesians 1:4 explicitly teaches that redemption through the blood of Christ is determined from "before the foundation of the world."

By NT standards, Ephesians 1:3–14 is an exceptionally long sentence.[20] It encompasses the spiritual blessings of salvation that are from the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit, with a sequential focus on election (vv. 3–6), redemption (7–12), and regeneration (13–14). In other words, it covers the whole breadth of salvation—hence the long sentence!

By progressing from Father to Son to Spirit, Ephesians 1:3–14 reveals a Trinitarian unity to the plan for the Incarnation. Verse 4 attributes election to the Father, but Paul says He chose us "in him," the "him" referring to Christ. Further, the use of καθώς indicates that the benefits that come to a believer through redemption only come through the Incarnation of Christ. Of course, the sentence will go on to more fully develop the plan of the Incarnation, inclusive of the Son's substitutionary death. But note *when* Paul understands that God purposed these blessings: "before the foundation of the world." Paul locates this plan for the Incarnation (with its attendant blessings) in heaven, before time.

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[17] For an overview of these two views, see: Osborne, *Revelation*, 503–504.

[18] This is the view followed by Craig Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 38a, AYBC (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 575; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 166.

[19] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 702; Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), 164; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 252; Osborne, *Revelation*, 503–504.

[20] Charles J. Robbins, "The Composition of Eph 1:3–14," *JBL* 105 (1986): 677.

Together, Ephesians 1:4, 1 Peter 1:20, and Revelation 13:8 reveal that "the second person of the Trinity was identified as the Christ before the foundation of the world, not merely in history."[21] In other words, the Incarnation was a pre-temporal plan.

The Incarnation's Company: Planned by Three, Experienced by One

Everything God does, He does as Trinity. So, the Incarnation is a Trinitarian plan. While the Incarnation itself is proper only for the second person of the Trinity, the Bible makes clear that all three Trinitarian persons planned it.

There are nearly a dozen passages that imply this, but deducing it requires a pro-Nicene framework which grants a conceptual distinction between God's essence and the Triune persons.[22] In the pro-Nicene understanding, omniscience is an attribute of God, but knowledge itself is resident in the divine persons. So, consider again 1 Peter 1:20: "[Christ] was foreknown before the foundation of the world." God is doing the foreknowing, and Christ is the one foreknown. If Christ was foreknown as the mediator, then He was foreknown by the Father. And if the Father eternally shares all of his knowledge with the Son, then Christ is foreknown as the mediator by both the Father and the Son (and likewise by the Spirit). Divine foreknowledge is itself intra-Trinitarian, as "coinherence in power leads to coinherence in knowledge."[23]

Another example makes a similar point concerning the Incarnation: Romans 3:25 ("… whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith"). There, Paul describes "God's eternal purpose" as putting Jesus forward to die.[24] Note that God is the actor, and "Christ Jesus"—in light of the Incarnation—is the object of His action, and thus this "putting forward" must be an intra-Trinitarian event.

That does not imply all three persons were necessarily involved in the same way (as we already saw in Eph 1). For example, one writer suggests that the putting forward of the Savior "can simultaneously be a work of the entire Trinity (with respect to the principle of the action) and a work of the Father alone (with respect to the subject of the action)."[25] More specifically, it could be said that the plan for the Incarnation was from the Father (as all things are; John 10:18). The Son's body was prepared by the Spirit (Luke 1:35). And the Son, of course, was the one to "take on

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[21] J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2016), 110–11.

[22] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6–7. Duby notes that the distinction between person and essence may be frowned upon in exegesis (he grants that some find it "overly clever"), but the fact remains that this distinction is essential to understand who God is, so it is essential in interpreting passages that have a focus on Christ, such as the ones in this section. While some might consider this kind of pro-Nicene category extraneous to exegesis, Duby writes, "if 'exegesis' simply means an unfolding and setting forth of what is already there in the biblical text … dogmatic theology's use of certain metaphysical concepts is an exegetical move." Establishing "intra-Trinitarian" planning is going to, by necessity, involve utilization of a Trinitarian metaphysic in the form of the person/essence distinction. Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 47–48.

[23] Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2018), 58–59.

[24] Colin Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 186.

[25] Kyle Claunch, "What God Hath Done Together: Defending the Historic Doctrine of the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity," *JETS* 56, no. 4 (2013): 798.

flesh" (John 1:14). Yet this still indicates that when God puts forward His Son for the Incarnation, it is an intra-Trinitarian "putting forward."

The Incarnation's Appointment: The Son as Mediator

The plan of salvation enters time in Genesis 3:15, which is often referred to as the *protoevangelium,* as it provides the Bible's first prophecy of the Incarnation.[26] John Sailhamer refers to this text as "programmatic and foundational to the plot" of the Bible, as it unfolds the plan of redemption.[27] Walt Kaiser calls Genesis 3:15 the Bible's "mother prophecy," because it gives birth to the rest of Messianic expectation, while also leading to the literal birth of the Savior to a woman.[28] God's response to the first earthly sin was judgment mixed with hope in Eve's seed who would defeat the Devil, yet be wounded by the same.[29] This pattern (judgment with Messianic hope) will be God's *modus operandi* for the rest of Scripture.

If the *protoevangelium* is understood as the "kernel of the gospel," what exactly is contained within the kernel?[30] Genesis 3:15 hints that from the very beginning, God's plan would involve a human offspring who brings mercy in the midst of judgment, who will crush (יְשׁוּפְךָ) the Devil, and yet that human would be wounded in the process.[31]

After Genesis 3:15, Scripture uses prophecy to unfold more details of God's plan for the Savior. The prophesied seed will be from the people of Israel (Gen 17:1–16), from Judah (49:10), and from David (2 Sam 7:11–17). In addition to being David's descendant, He will also be David's Lord (Ps 110:1; Matt 22:43–45). He will be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2), yet dwell in Egypt (Hos 11:1) and launch His ministry in Galilee (Isa 9:1–2). Gentiles would come to Him (Isa 11:10), and He would minister to them (Isa 42:1–4, 61:1). He would move from the Gentiles to the Jews, entering Jerusalem on a donkey where He would be met with songs of praise (Zech 9:9). Despite all this, He would still be despised and rejected (Isa 53:3), betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zech 11:12–13), His clothes would be stripped (Ps 22:18). He would

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[26] Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis," in *NBC*, ed. D. A. Carson, R. T. France, and Alec J. Motyer, 4th ed. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1994), 63.

[27] John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *Genesis–Leviticus*, rev. ed., vol. 1, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 89–91.

[28] Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity," in *The Law and the Prophets*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1974), 38.

[29] Johnston reviews the different proposals for understanding if the "seed" is singular or collective: Gordon H. Johnston, "Promises of a King," in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 39–40.

[30] Junod describes three interpretive options for the *protoevangelium*. First, that there is no victory in sight, but it just points to warfare between people and the devil. Second, that it points to Mary and the immaculate conception (Junod describes how the Catholic Church has since abandoned even the pretense of exegetically defending this view). Third is the view taken here, that the *protoevangelium* points to the gospel through the Savior's death. See Eric Junod, "Protevangelium," in *EC,* vol. 4 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2005), s.v.

[31] James M. Hamilton, "The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15," *SBJT* 10, no. 2 (2006): 31; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 39.

be beaten (Isa 53:5), stabbed (Zech 13:7), pierced in His hands and feet (Ps 22:16;[32] Isa 53:5; Zech 12:10). This affliction would result in His physical death (Isa 53:7–8; Dan 9:26), His burial (Isa 53:9), and His resurrection (Ps 16:10).

Two notes about a list like that: first, there are methodological questions about each of those prophecies (e.g., Were they understood as prophetic in their original context? Does the NT note them as fulfilments? Are they fulfilled in the same way as they were prophesied?).[33] The point here is not to get lost in the details of evaluating individual prophecy, as much as it is to establish that the Savior's Incarnation was prophesied in the OT. These prophecies outline a plan for redemption according to which God was directing history toward the Incarnation.

The Incarnation's Typology—The Savior Fits a Pattern

Beyond specific prophecies, there are entire thematic elements in the OT that point to the mission of the Messiah in the Incarnation. James Hamilton calls this "promise-shaped typology," by which he means that there are promises God makes that form the outlines that are filled in as history progresses toward Christ.[34] While a study of typology is outside the scope of this article, the very existence of typology is a strong argument for including the Incarnation in our understanding of God's eternal plan of redemption. Typology demonstrates that there is a fixed goal in God's mind—namely redemption through the Incarnation—and God then directs history toward that goal through patterns and promises that approximate the outline of Jesus.[35] While there are many of these types, especially in the Torah, this analysis will briefly consider two: the Passover lamb and Melchizedek.

First, the image of the Passover lamb, established in Exodus 12, demonstrated that in the midst of judgment, God would spare His people at His own initiative, through a sacrifice of blood. In so doing, God would authenticate Himself as the deliverer by providing His own substitute (namely, a lamb).[36] As it pertains to redemption, the declaration that Christ is the Lamb of God reveals that it had always been God's plan for His Son to take on a human nature in order to die (John 1:29, 36; 1 Cor 5:7; Rev 5:6; 7:17).[37]

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[32] There are numerous difficulties with the Hebrew in Ps 22:16 (Heb. v. 17). It is clear enough that David has in mind some affliction of the hands and feet, but the exact nature of that affliction is obscured. Possibilities range from "encircled my hands and feet like a lion" (so Keil and Delitzsch, 5:199–200) to "my hands and feet wither" (NRSV). For a brief summary of these options, see Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 131.

[33] Kaiser explains the methodology behind a study of Messianic prophecies, ultimately concluding that the point of such a list is that there is "an eternal plan" of God, and these prophecies reveal God's enactment of that plan. See Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 28–34.

[34] James M. Hamilton, *Typology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 3–6. He calls these "promised shaped patterns," and he gives scores of examples of these, using the categories of persons, events, and institutions.

[35] Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 7.

[36] Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross: Wisdom Unsearchable, Love Indestructible*, BST (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 2001), 51–67.

[37] T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity, 2008), 128–31; Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 33–34.

Second, Jesus' mission as a high priest in the line of Melchizedek implies that the Torah's typology of priesthood was part of a plan that would be fulfilled by Christ. At the very least, it is notable that Melchizedek is a man—albeit without genealogy. It may seem like Melchizedek came onto the pages of Scripture out of the blue, so to speak (Heb 7:3), but there is more that makes Melchizedek unusual than his lack of pedigree—namely, he is a priest who is also a king. Apart from the prophesied branch in Zechariah 6, there really is no other priest/king ruler to grace Israel's history. Yet God had purposed to have a savior who would fulfill this type—who would be a reigning human king who would also mediate between both people and God as priest. This makes Melchizedek "the human archetype of the ideal priest-king of Jerusalem."[38] That type was in God's mind and plan before Abraham (Gen 14:18), and thus before Israel.

In Craig Koester's study of Melchizedek, he notes that Hebrews describes him as one who existed before the world was created, and who will endure after it is ended. He is said to "resemble" the Son of God. Koester is not arguing that Melchizedek literally had no parents. Rather, he is describing how Hebrews paints him. Koester suggests that Hebrews uses this kind of language to tie the pattern of Melchizedek to the Son of God, thus confirming God's eternal plan for redemption through an Incarnation—that Son becoming man.[39]

Taken together, the Passover lamb indicates God's plan was for the Savior to die—requiring a human nature and an Incarnation. The Melchizedekian priesthood indicates it was the plan for the Savior to have two offices (both priest and king), again implying the Incarnation.

When the use of typology (such as the Passover lamb or the Melchizedekian priesthood) is considered with other Messianic prophecies listed above, a well-developed picture emerges of a descendant of Eve who will be a human priest by dying as a human substitute. Kaiser concludes, "By now it should be clear that the messianic prophecies came in a series of predictions that belonged together as a single plan of God"—the plan for the Incarnation.[40]

The Incarnation's Natures: Man (Gen 3:15) and God (Ps 110)

Not all messianic prophecies are explicitly contained within the *protoevangelium*. Yet at least one feature is clear from Genesis 3:15: the one who will crush the serpent and redeem mankind will be a human being.[41] Yet, the characteristics of the redeemer described in the OT nullify any notion of a purely human mediator, and in turn require a mediator who is also divine. There are simply

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[38] Michael C. Astour, "Melchizedek (Person)," in *AYBD* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:685. Astour goes on to describe him as "the eternal priest of Yahweh, a supernatural being engendered by Yahweh."

[39] For Koester's study of Melchizedek, see: Craig Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 36, AYBC (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 342–52. See also Daniel Stevens, *The Theme of Promise in the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Promise Remains*, Library of New Testament Studies 706 (London: T & T Clark, 2025), 59–61.

[40] Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 30. In fact, he says it is right to call the plan "the eternal covenant."

[41] Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 105–7; Jack Collins, "A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is the Woman's Seed Singular or Plural?," *TynBul* 48, no. 1 (1997): 145–46.

too many properties of the prophesied mediator that cannot agree with an exclusively human nature of Christ—not the least of which is that David calls the redeemer "my Lord" in Psalm 110:1.

Psalm 110 has been understood by many Jewish interpreters to point to the Davidic King *par excellence*, or "the perfect priest-king."[42] This psalm preserves the "high theology of Judean kingship," as it describes the anointed king in terms evocative of a global conqueror.[43]

Of course, no OT Judean king reached the fulfillment of this psalm, and so the psalm would have been received with mixed emotions. Every reading would remind Israel that her kings have disappointed them.[44] Nevertheless, there is an anchor in this psalm: divine communication between Yahweh and "my Lord." This communication is difficult to locate chronologically. It has future implications ("until" in v. 1, "the people will offer" in v. 3), yet it is spoken of in the past ("Yahweh has sworn" in v. 4). The present sense of verse 5 only compounds the problem, as there the Messiah is *already* at God's right hand. Psalm 110 is thus a notoriously difficult psalm to interpret.[45] It falls to the NT to locate this decree, and when it does, it does not locate it at a recurring enthronement ceremony in Jerusalem, but rather in the throne room of heaven.[46]

The NT helps by repeatedly identifying Jesus as the subject of Psalm 110 (cf. Matt 26:64; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:34–35; Heb 5:6, 7:17–21, 10:13). In particular, the author of Hebrews emphasizes the Incarnational nature of Psalm 110, applying it directly to the "Christ" (5:5) whom he identifies as "Jesus" (5:7). Thus, Psalm 110 seems to have the two natures of Christ in view. The Messiah will be a king reigning on a throne, but will also be divine. Bateman concurs, noting that the divinity of the messianic Lord is "the traditional view, supported by older and contemporary scholars alike."[47] The divine identity view has Hebrews 1:13 on its side, noting that the speaker (identified in Ps 110:1 as Yahweh) was addressing the Son; in fact, the author of Hebrews argues for both the Son's pre-existence and deity from that very point.[48]

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[42] Alec J. Motyer, "The Psalms," in *The New Bible Commentary*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 560; Herman Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 67, 119. Certainly this was not the only way Jews viewed the psalm. Others identified David's Lord with Solomon, or Hezekiah. For a survey, see Herbert W. Bateman, "Psalm 110:1 and the New Testament," *BibSac* 149, no. 596 (December 1992): 438–53.

[43] Leslie Allen, *Psalms 100–50*, WBC 21 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 118.

[44] Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 368.

[45] Bühner writes: "The complicated and sometimes frustratingly inconsistent way Jews in antiquity read and interpreted holy Scripture is even more relevant with regard to the history of interpretation of Psalm 110." Ruben A. Bühner, *Messianic High Christology: New Testament Variants of Second Temple Judaism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 85.

[46] Madison N. Pierce, "Hebrews 1 and the Son Begotten 'Today,'" in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 121.

[47] Bateman, "Psalm 110:1 and the New Testament," 445. Bateman himself argues that the psalm was spoken by David to his physical offspring (Solomon, and by extension the line of David), but he grants that it is fulfilled in Jesus as the "ultimate referent," and who of course is the Son of God (pp. 448, 452).

[48] Gathercole raises concerns about putting too much emphasis on Ps 110 as an actual dialogue. He prefers the concept of a "dramatic script." However, I believe Bates satisfactorily responds to Gathercole's

Finally, if this is understood as discourse in heaven between Yahweh and the pre-existent Messiah, when did that take place? The psalm itself identifies the "day of [the king's] power" as occurring at "the womb of the dawn" (מֵרֶחֶם מִשְׁחָר; v. 3). Hamilton defines the expression as "the place where light gestates, from which it broke forth in the beginning," and concludes that the phrase attaches "eternal connotations" to the divine dialogue.[49] Murray Smith notes that because the LXX reads ἐκ γαστρὸς πρὸ ἑωσφόρου ἐξεγέννησά σε ("from the womb before the morning star I have begotten you") that "patristic writers commonly appeal to this text to support Christ's pre-existence as the eternally begotten 'Son of God.'"[50] Bühner gives the LXX rendering of this verse as evidence that the messianic king was understood to be "divinely begotten."[51] He goes on to argue that "before the morning star [was created] I have begotten you" is a legitimate and likely rendering of the text, and represents the most natural reading of the Hebrew.[52] Motyer understands that phrase to give "a picturesque allusion to the supernatural origin of the king."[53]

Fortunately, we are not left with only "a picturesque allusion" to the conversation's chronology, because in Matthew 22:43–45 Jesus leverages the timing of this conversation to argue for His own pre-existence. He asked the Pharisees, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord … if then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" Jesus' use of the present tense is noticeable ("calls him Lord" καλεῖ), and so His logic is clear: the conversation between Yahweh and the Messiah took place prior to the Incarnation.

Gathercole makes a compelling case (through the Marcan account of this exchange) that Jesus was clearly advocating for His own pre-existence. He explains: "since David hails the Messiah as Lord, the former cannot be regarded as the forefather of the latter. The clear implication here is that Jesus is not so much son of David as Son of God."[54] Some might argue that the Messiah of Psalm 110 is merely a descendant of David, who by virtue of his divinely-aided victories will be adopted as God's Son and then identified as David's Lord.[55] However, Jesus dismisses that perspective as logically contradictory. The Messiah cannot be David's Lord, Jesus implies, if he is only David's son.

Read retrospectively and in light of Psalm 110, the humanity of the Savior in Genesis 3:15 provokes an obvious question: when Psalm 110 (or Matt 22:43–45; Heb 1:15) identifies the Messiah using language fitting of deity, was it an intentional

concerns: Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 43–45; Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament*, Reprint edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 164–66.

[49] James M. Hamilton, *Psalms*, vol. 2, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 293.

[50] Murray J. Smith, "Jesus, the Son of Man, and the Final Coming of God: The Origin of Early Christian 'Second Coming' Expectation in Jesus' Eschatological Vision" (Ph.D. diss., Macquarie University, 2022), 136n777. See also Quentin F. Wesselschmidt and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Psalms 51–150*, vol. 8, ACCSOT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 265–67.

[51] Bühner, *Messianic High Christology*, 89.

[52] Bühner, 90–91.

[53] Motyer, "The Psalms," 560.

[54] Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son*, 236–38.

[55] This view (sometimes described as adoptionism) is defined and critiqued by Macleod; see Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 83–86.

broadening of Genesis 3:15?[56] This is an important question, because if it is answered in the affirmative, it would be strong evidence that the plan of redemption included a Savior with two natures—the divine nature of the eternal Son and the incarnate human nature of a descendant of Eve.

Richard Hays has developed a matrix of seven criteria to help judge the intertextuality of passages, and these criteria are helpful to discern the likelihood that the later author wrote with an intentional connection with the earlier passage in mind. Those seven criteria are: availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, history, and satisfaction.[57] Elsewhere, Hays describes these criteria as "modestly useful rules of thumb."[58] Iosif Zhakevich renders these in the form of questions:[59]

1. Did the second author have access to the first, and is it reasonable to assume he would have been familiar with it?
2. Is the connection linguistically, syntactically, and structurally clear?
3. Is the connection limited to one verse, or is it repeated throughout the rest of the book (or Psalm)?
4. Do the two passages have "thematic coherence"? Are they about the same theme?
5. Would the second author's readers have picked up the allusion?
6. Did other authors (i.e., Jewish interpreters, NT authors, church fathers etc.) see the connection?
7. Does the allusion to the first passage strengthen the message of the second passage?

In the case of Psalm 110:1 and Genesis 3:15, these questions all strongly indicate intertextuality of the two passages. The author of Psalm 110 (presumably David) would have had access to Genesis 3:15 and would have assumed his readers were familiar with it. Both passages are about judgment in the midst of sin, and yet God promises to squash the power of sin through the provision of a mediator. In both cases, the language used implies the battle between sin and the mediator "transcends the domain of human combat."[60]

Both passages have stylistic overlap: direct discourse from Yahweh to the representative head—Satan as head over evil, or the Son as head over righteousness.

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[56] Howard writes "The term 'intertextuality' has recently come into favor in discussions of the use of Scripture by other scriptural writers." For a discussion on this term and its usefulness, see I. Marshall Howard, "Acts," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Nottingham, England: Baker Academic, 2007), 526.

[57] Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 132.

[58] Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 34.

[59] Iosif J. Zhakevich, "Reverse of the Curse: An Allusion to Genesis 3:15 in Psalm 110:1," *TMSJ* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 240.

[60] Zhakevich, "Reverse of the Curse," 239.

Beale draws attention to their thematic overlap, noting they both contain "the implicit reversal of the work that introduced death."[61]

While Hays' criteria are useful, not all seven are equal. Abner Chou argues that more weight should be given to demonstrating "linguistic distinctiveness," or how a term (or terms) in a later passage is unique enough to point to an earlier passage, "but at the same time does not point to other texts."[62] As an example, Genesis 3:15 and Psalm 110:1 "are the only two passages in the Old Testament in which the root איב ("enemy, enmity") appears as the object of the verb אשית ("put").[63]

Finally, the connection between the two passages is affirmed in the NT (1 Cor 15:25–28 and Rom 16:20 both meld Gen 3:15 and Ps 110:1).[64] When the evidence is considered as a whole, it is reasonable to conclude that Psalm 110 has in view the *protoevangelium.* This connection confirms that the plan of redemption included a Savior who would be both David's Lord (Ps 110:1) and Eve's son (Gen 3:15). It falls to the NT to bring clarity to how one person could fulfill both prophecies. Nevertheless, "full messianic potential" is embedded in both of these passages, and that potential culminates in the Incarnation.[65]

The Incarnation's Unlikely Murder: Isaiah 53 and Zechariah 12:10

For a second example of how intertextual connections demonstrate God's plan for the Incarnation, consider Zechariah 12:10 in light of Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 is often referred to as the final of "The Suffering Servant Songs," so named because they describe an unnamed "servant" of Yahweh and develop the nature of his suffering and ultimate exaltation by God. While all four songs share the same themes, the final song (52:13–53:12) is more particular in its descriptions of the servant's trials, and connects his suffering to God's plan of salvation.[66] At the heart of this description of the servant is his appointed death, which will provide atonement for sin.[67]

There are numerous interpretive options to identify the servant—everything from the people of Israel collectively to Isaiah himself.[68] While it is outside our scope here to develop the evidence for each view, it is best to conclude that the four servant songs of Isaiah either are direct prophecies of the Messiah, or typologically point

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[61] G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 228.

[62] Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 39–40.

[63] Zhakevich, "Reverse of the Curse," 241.

[64] F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, vol. 6, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 277; James Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38b (Dallas: Word, 1988), 905; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 932–33; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: InterVarsity, 2018), 314–15; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1232–35.

[65] Johnston, "Promises of a King," 100.

[66] J. Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets*, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 128–32.

[67] John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, AB (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967), 132.

[68] For a comprehensive overview of different interpretive options for the "servant," see McKenzie, XLIII–LV.

forward to Jesus.[69] In this interpretation, Isaiah 53:10 takes on particular importance: "It was Yahweh's will to crush him; he has put him to grief."

There are at least four other details in Isaiah 53 that relate to the Incarnation. First, note the passive voice in the descriptions of the Savior's death: "he *was wounded* for our transgressions," and "he *was crushed* for our iniquities" (emphasis added; Isa 53:5).[70] Together with verse 10, this reinforces that it was God's will that the Savior be afflicted—the Savior would be acted upon.

Second, the means of the servant's death are variously described with imagery evocative of an animal sacrifice—he will be "marred" (Isa 52:14), his blood will "sprinkle" (v. 15), and his death will be "for our transgressions" (53:5).[71] Ultimately, his death will be "an offering for sin" (v. 10). This language is picked up by Jesus in the NT as He describes Himself as coming to pay "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). This points to the foreordained nature of the Incarnation manifest in redemption.[72]

Third, the means of death by which Jesus pays the ransom is that of "wounding" or "crushing" (Isa 53:5). The verb the ESV translates as "wounded" (חלל) has various concepts in its semantic domain, including "to slay" (cf. Ezek 28:9) and "to cut into pieces" (cf. Isa 51:9). Perhaps most significantly, it includes the concept of "to pierce" (cf. Job 26:13).[73] The concept of "to pierce" is supported by the use of both the cognate adjective and noun, which "often refers to the bodies of those who have been fatally pierced by a sword or other weapon (e.g., Isa 22:2; Jer 14:18; 41:9; Ezek 6:13; 9:7)."[74] In Isaiah 53:5, חלל is both *Poal* and passive, giving the meaning of "impaled" or "pierced."[75]

Finally, Isaiah 53:5 not only describes the *how* of the servant's death, but it also describes the *why*: "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities." This confirms that Yahweh's plan is for the Savior to die a substitutionary and atoning death.

As noted above, there are various interpretive options as to the identity of the servant (from Moses, to Isaiah, to the Savior), but regardless of *who* he is, the *what* is clear: the suffering servant will be a man.[76] Watts concludes that from this fourth

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[69] If the reader wants to see the exegetical evidence pointing towards a Messianic understanding of the servant, see R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 76–99; Menachem I. Kalisher, "Isaiah 52: The Identity and Ministry of the Servant of the Lord," *TMSJ* 33, no. 2 (2022): 319–34.

[70] For a study on how the passive voice ended up influencing the NT portrayal of Jesus' death, see Cilliers Breytenbach, "The Septuagint Version of Isa 53 and the Early Christian Formula 'He Was Delivered for Our Trespasses,'" *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 4 (2009): 343–49.

[71] Schipper argues that the language in the fourth servant song is broadly evocative of animal sacrifice, and that it mirrors terms from Leviticus; specifically, Isaiah uses Levitical terms for a marred animal who is thus unfit for sacrifice. See Jeremy Schipper, "Interpreting the Lamb Imagery in Isaiah 53," *JBL* 132, no. 2 (2013): 323–25.

[72] Hamilton traces out patterns in the fourth servant song that point to a broader canonical theme of "the righteous sufferer." Hamilton, *Typology*, 200–12.

[73] *HALOT*, s.v. חלל.

[74] Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55*, 591.

[75] Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, ed. Peter Machinist, trans. Margaret Kohl, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 410; John P. Brown, "Techniques of Imperial Control: The Background of the Gospel Event," *Radical Religion* 2, no. 2–3 (1975): 74.

[76] Alec J. Motyer, "Stricken for the Transgression of My People," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 251.

suffering servant song "emerges a universal truth about God and his ways that is vital for the faith of Jew and Christian: the principle of substitutionary atonement, not only through animal sacrifice as in the day of atonement, but supremely through a willing person."[77]

This description of the Savior dying through piercing/impalement provides a connection to Zechariah 12:10, where again Yahweh prophesies of a future day when Israel will "look upon me, *on whom they have pierced*" (אֲשֶׁר־דָּקָרוּ; emphasis added). The connection between Zechariah 12:10 and Isaiah 53:5 is often noted. It is not simply that they both come into English with the word "pierced" (חלל/דקר respectively) but the passages themselves have similar themes.[78] Like Isaiah, the book of Zechariah puts forth a future hope for the house of David. That hope is seen in the shoot that binds together chapters 1–8, who then becomes both a king and a shepherd in chapters 9–14.[79] Zechariah's various descriptions of the "shoot" set the reader up for the height of hope in Zechariah 12, where "the House of David shall be like God, like Yahweh's angel, going before him" (vv. 7–8). However, this hope comes with a cost—namely, the piercing of the one promised. The text reads as if the Israelites saw blood on their hands, then went looking for the body of the one whom they stabbed, and found God Himself.[80]

Even before the Incarnation itself, the notion that it was God who was pierced was a common way of understanding the text.[81] This has given rise to several theories in Judaism concerning the identity of the crucified one (a Messiah, a remnant from Jeroboam, a descendent of Abijah, the son cared for by Elijah in 1 Kgs 17, etc.).[82] Theories are multiplied because there is an interpretive issue with the pronoun in 12:10—"the person pierced is identified by the first-person pronoun *me* (אֵלַי) and the third-person pronoun *him* (עָלָיו)."[83]

Yet the significance of the pronoun dispute is minimal because it is evident that "the shocking antecedent of both pronouns is Yahweh."[84] This is "shocking" because, as Stuart dryly notes, "the concept of piercing God is difficult theologically."[85] This is especially so since "to pierce is generally to put to death."[86]

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[77] John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–56*, rev. ed., WBC 25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 790.

[78] For more on דקר, see: Thomas E. McComiskey, "Zechariah," in *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1214. "The qal stem always connotes killing or wounding by piercing with some kind of instrument."

[79] Anthony R. Petterson, *Behold Your King: The Hope for the House of David in the Book of Zechariah*, ed. Claudia V. Camp and Andrew Mein, LHBOTS 513 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 1–10, 129, 159–212.

[80] Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 715.

[81] Daniel E. Stuart, "Zechariah 12:10–13:1," in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*, ed. Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 1285–88.

[82] A. Cohen, *The Twelve Prophets*, rev. 2nd ed., vol. 8, Soncino Books of the Bible (Jerusalem: Soncino, 1994), 321–22.

[83] Dean R. Ulrich, "Two Offices, Four Officers, or One Sordid Event in Zechariah 12:10–14?," *WTJ* 72, no. 2 (2010): 251. Menken traces the history of the textual variations concerning the pronoun in this passage: Maarten J. J. Menken, "The Textual Form and the Meaning of the Quotation from Zechariah 12:10 in John 19:37," *CBQ* 55, no. 3 (1993): 499–504.

[84] Ulrich, "Two Offices, Four Officers," 251.

[85] Stuart, "Zechariah 12:10–13:1," 1287.

[86] Hinckley G. Mitchell, John M. Powis Smith, and Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 330.

For this to be true, there must be an Incarnation—God must take on a human nature and a human body capable of, at the very least, being stabbed.

The surprise of the passage is not limited to the divinity of the one pierced but extends to the one doing the piercing. The text identifies the murderer: it is none other than Israel herself ("*they* [the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem] will look … *they* will mourn … *they* will weep bitterly"; emphasis added; 12:10). The identity of Israel as God's assailant is so surprising because it is the antithesis of Israel's calling as a nation. Israel was supposed to produce the Messiah, not pierce him.

Yet the story will not end there: Zechariah points the reader to a time even further in the future when God would save Israel by turning their hearts back to Yahweh (12:10). When Israel repents, they will look upon Him whom they pierced, and they will mourn, and they will find grace and forgiveness through the pierced one. It is as if the murder happened like the Nicene Creed declares: "for them, and for their salvation."

This sets up Zechariah 13, where the one who brought deliverance is called "a man, my companion" (ESV: "the one who stands beside me;" וְעַל־גֶּבֶר עֲמִיתִי). The word rendered "companion" or "the one who stands beside me" (עָמִית) is used in only one other biblical book—Leviticus—where it refers to members of similar covenantal standing within a community.[87] Thus Zechariah is implying that the deliverer stands in God's presence by virtue of belonging to the same community as God Himself. This comports with the description of the Savior as "Yahweh" back in 12:10. Peterson concludes: "It is only the king who could be said to represent Yahweh, so that to pierce the king is to pierce Yahweh … there is a real sense in which Yahweh and his king are inseparable."[88] This is why the synoptic writers, John (in Revelation), and the early church all understood Zechariah 12:10 as applying to Jesus by means of the Incarnation.[89] Brandon Smith summarizes the argument: "Somehow when Jesus the man is pierced, God is pierced—a description that communicates shared divine attributes."[90]

The intertextual connection between Zechariah 12:10 and Isaiah 53:5 strengthens this argument. The fourth suffering servant song established that the plan of salvation was for the Savior to be pierced as an atoning sacrifice for sin. However, in Isaiah 53 the Savior was to be a man, while in Zechariah he is God.

Applying Hayes' seven criteria used earlier (availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, history, and satisfaction), one can reasonably conclude that Zechariah 12:10 deliberately connects to Isaiah 53:5. Zechariah would have had access to Isaiah, and there are at least a dozen other references to Isaiah in Zechariah.[91] Although the words used for "pierce" are different in Isaiah and Zechariah (חלל/דקר), the words themselves are unusual and overlap significantly in their semantic domain. With so many of Zechariah's descriptions of

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[87] Ulrich, "Two Offices, Four Officers," 261.

[88] Petterson, *Behold Your King*, 238–39.

[89] For a survey of those uses, see Menken, "The Textual Form," 509–10.

[90] Brandon D. Smith, *The Trinity in the Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2022), 93–94.

[91] Petterson lists twelve descriptions of the Savior in Zechariah that are drawn from Isaiah. See Petterson, *Behold Your King*, 242–45.

"the branch" drawn from Isaiah, it is reasonable to conclude that the piercing in Zechariah 12:10 also represents a connection to Isaiah 53:5, despite the different word usage.[92]

The humanity of the Savior is established from Isaiah 53, while his deity is confirmed in Zechariah 12. The plan of redemption includes a savior who is human, and yet identified as Yahweh. Yahweh designed this plan, and Yahweh will execute this plan, even though it entails God Himself, in human flesh, being executed on the cross in the Person of Jesus (compare Zech 12:10 with John 19:37; see Acts 20:28).

In other words, Jesus knew what He was signing up for. This is why Jesus spoke of His death and resurrection as events that "must" take place (Luke 9:22; 17:25). Marshall explains "that for Luke, the 'must' indicates the necessity to fulfill what was laid down in the Scriptures."[93] Bock expands on this by noting that when Jesus described His humiliation as something "that must take place," there were at least four components in view: he must suffer, be rejected, killed, and resurrect. Because all of these are prophesied in the OT, all four of these have "an inevitability" to them.[94]

The Incarnation's Agreement: A Charge

The connection between Isaiah 53 and Zechariah 12 teaches us that the Incarnation is not something that just *happened* to Jesus, but rather that it was a plan to which Jesus (in His deity) willingly consented. The voluntary nature of the Son's participation in the Incarnation is stated paradoxically in John 10:18: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." There are two truths in this passage, each pulling on the other: Jesus has authority over His life, death, and resurrection, and this authority comes in the form of a "charge" from the Father.

Germane to the plan of redemption is Jesus' declaration that His death and resurrection is "of my own accord" (ἀπ' ἐμαυτοῦ). In John 10:18a Jesus uses the first-person repeatedly in rapid succession—eleven words are in this verse, and five of them are first-person: ἐμοῦ, ἐγὼ (2xs), τίθημι, and ἐμαυτοῦ. By speaking this way, Jesus teaches that He went to His death the same way He went into His human life: "not as a victim of circumstance, but as one who was in control of his destiny."[95] Mounce concludes his study of John 10:18 by noting, "It was by his own volition he laid his life down for the sheep."[96] Jesus received a charge from His Father to lay His life down, but it is a charge which He received voluntarily. Jesus' words, "no one

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[92] Stead covers questions of intertextuality in Zechariah 9–14. See Michael R. Stead, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: Return and Restoration*, T & T Clark Study Guides to the Old Testament (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 67–78. There are numerous examples from church history (as well as the NT) linking these two passages. See Menken, "The Textual Form," 508–10.

[93] I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 369.

[94] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 847–48.

[95] Colin Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., TNTC (London: InterVarsity, 2017), 235.

[96] Robert H. Mounce, "John," in *Luke–Acts*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, Rev. ed., vol. 10, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 504.

takes my life from me, I lay it down of my own accord," indicate that the Son of God was a willing participant in his Incarnation. He is, as Rhyne Putman says, "the Son who chose his own parents."[97]

The Incarnation's Result: Eternal Worship

As a doctrine, the Incarnation teaches us that God came to earth. The Creator came to the creature. This means that while an unimaginable gulf remains between God and man, the gulf has been bridged by Jesus, so that we can truly worship God if we come to Him through Jesus Christ. In that sense, the Incarnation makes true worship of the true God possible.

For this reason, the Incarnation has to remain for all eternity. Jesus remains the God-Man in His resurrection, in His ascension, in His kingdom, and in eternal glory. If He shed one of His two natures, the avenue of true worship of the true God would be cut off (1 Tim 2:5). The Word *became* flesh, and with Jesus there is no unbecoming (John 1:14; Acts 1:9–11; Phil 3:20–21).

Instead of outgrowing His humanity, Jesus' plan is for the Incarnation to be on full display at His Second Coming. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him" (Rev 1:7; Zech 12:10). For all eternity God will be glorified because His glory was displayed from the mouth of an infant, and thus the Incarnation will eternally "still the enemy and the avenger" (Ps 8:2).

The Incarnation was the means of accomplishing our salvation. The preexistent and divine Son of God became the existent and human son of Mary. He was holy, sinless, and human. Thus, He could be the virgin-born Immanuel, achieving salvation for sinners, and this was all according to the eternal plan of God.

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[97] Rhyne R. Putman, *Conceived by the Holy Spirit: The Virgin Birth in Scripture and Theology* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2024), 45.

SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD PREACHING

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THE NICENE CREED: THE SAVING WORK OF THE SON

παθόντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ,
ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανούς…

He suffered, and the third day He rose again,
ascended into heaven…

Kevin D. Hall
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Adjunct Professor
The Master's Seminary

* * * * *

The Nicene Creed has been a fundamental statement of the Christian faith, rooted in the truth of Scripture, since it was crafted in AD 325. Although it was written 1,700 years ago, it continues to serve the church well in affirming the truth about the Person and work of Christ. This article will focus on the Son's saving work in the Nicene Creed and examine the core of the Christian message, reflecting on the statement, "He suffered, and on the third day He rose again, ascended into heaven…" This research will break down the statement, analyzing each event in the text of Scripture and highlighting the significance and beauty of these events, with the hope of providing understanding and encouragement about what Christ did for the believer, as articulated in this part of the creed.

* * * * *

Introduction

The significance of the Nicene Creed is immense. It emerged when the church was combating heresy and, as Kevin DeYoung states, "trying to discern how best to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity and define the person of Christ."[1] From the work at Nicaea, the church gained a beautiful treasure grounded in Scripture that remains

[1] Kevin DeYoung, *The Nicene Creed: What You Need to Know about the Most Important Creed Ever Written*, Foundational Tools for Our Faith (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025), 15.

valuable 1,700 years later. The term "creed" derives from the Latin term *credo*, which means "I believe," and the first words in the Nicene Creed are "we believe," or πιστεύομεν in Greek.[2] These are powerful words, yet not as powerful as the truth on which they are based. Language is essential; words have meaning; and thus language shapes one's understanding of the truth. The language of the Nicene Creed is crucial for conveying the truth of Scripture and reflects the beauty of what Christ did for believers. This research focuses on the significance of the creed regarding the Son's saving work. This section of the creed states, "He suffered, and the third day He rose again, ascended into heaven"; in Greek, παθόντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανούς. This article argues that the Nicene Creed embodies the truth of what Christ accomplished on behalf of sinners and is rich in theological significance regarding who the Son is and what He did in His saving work of suffering, resurrection, and ascension. It illustrates the beauty of God in salvation while clarifying the central realities of Christianity as testified to in the Word of God.

The Son Suffered

The suffering of Christ often becomes the focal point for Christians as they contemplate the essence of the gospel message and Christ's salvific work. While this aspect of salvation is central, it represents only one part of the entire Nicene Creed concerning the person and work of Christ. The work of Christ is based on His Person, with salvation being the result of what He accomplished in His suffering through the incarnation. Thus, the creed as a whole is essential for understanding what Christ did in His suffering, resurrection, and ascension for the salvation of those who would believe.[3] This first section will explore the narrative in Scripture regarding Christ's suffering, discuss its theological significance, and highlight the beauty of what occurred.

The Events of the Suffering of the Son

The Nicene Creed states, "He suffered," which is simply παθόντα in Greek. However, there was no simplicity to what occurred during the Son's suffering. The narrative of Christ's suffering is present throughout the four Gospels, providing readers with a complete picture of the events surrounding the Son's trials and crucifixion. Describing the time that led up to the Son's arrest, France beautifully sets

[2] Phillip Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023), 17–18. See also DeYoung, *The Nicene Creed*, 27.

[3] DeYoung explains, "The Nicene Creed is best known for its affirmation that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is of 'one substance with the Father.' We are right to focus on the *homoousios* declaration, for it was the most consequential debate at the original Council of Nicaea. At the heart of the creed is this confession related to the person of Christ. But the longest section in the creed is actually related not to the person of Christ but to his work. The transition to this new section occurs with the words 'who for us and for our salvation.' It's easy to overlook this subordinate clause, but these phrases are what make the Nicene Creed tick. If 'one substance with the Father' is the heart of the creed, then 'who for us and for our salvation' is the beating of that heart. The reason that we care so much about the person of Christ is because of what the doctrine of Christ means for salvation in Christ. Only a Savior who is true God of true God can save us from our God-defying sins. We need a God who comes all the way down to us, and we need one to come down who is fully God unlike us." DeYoung, *The Nicene Creed*, 53–54.

the context for the suffering of Christ as depicted in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 26, declaring:

> The beginning of the passion narrative in Matthew, as in Mark, consists of a "concentric" drawing out of three aspects of the setting. The outer layer, in vv. 1–2 and 17–19, is the approach of the Passover festival, which provides both the historical and the theological context for what is to follow. Within that broader context we hear of the plotting of the priestly authorities against Jesus, and their recruiting of Judas, vv. 3–5 and 14–16. And set within that framework is the symbolic incident of the anointing of Jesus by a woman at Bethany (vv. 6–13). The devotion of this unnamed woman contrasts with the hostility of the priests and the treachery of Judas, while Jesus' interpretation of her act (v. 12) prepares the reader for the success of their plot. But all this is to be understood in the context of the Passover, the festival of God's redemption of his people and the occasion of the covenant which constituted Israel as the people of God.[4]

After Jesus' arrest, Scripture details His trial before both Annas and Caiaphas (Matt 26:57–68; Mark 14:53–68; Luke 22:54–57; John 18:13–24), followed by his trial before Pilate (Matt 27:2, 11–14; Mark 15:1–5; Luke 23:1–5; John 18:28–38). When Pilate discovered a possible way to avoid condemning the One whom he perceived as an innocent man, he sent Jesus to Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6–12), who treated the Son contemptuously. Pilate then received him back, and Jesus was flogged, condemned, crowned with thorns, mocked, and subsequently led away to be crucified (Matt 27:15–34; Mark 15:6–23; Luke 23:13–23; John 18:39–19:17).[5]

The suffering of the Son happened at "The Place of the Skull," outside the city wall, where "they crucified Him, and two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them" (John 19:18).[6] The fourfold account of the events, as seen in the Gospels' testimony, shows that the focus is on those present at His crucifixion, with the central focus on the suffering of the Son. Köstenberger reminds the reader of what crucifixion entailed,

> In ancient times, crucifixion was synonymous with horror and shame, a death inflicted on slaves (Cicero, *In Verrem* 2.5.65.168), bandits (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.13.2 §253), prisoners of war (*J.W.* 5.11.1 §451), and revolutionaries (*Ant.* 17.10.10 §295). Josephus terms it "the most pitiable of deaths" (*J.W.* 7.6.4 §203; cf. 1.4.6 §97), Cicero calls it "that cruel and disgusting penalty" (*In Verrem* 2.5.64.165)…. For hours (if not days), the victim would hang in the heat of the sun, stripped naked and struggling to breathe. In order to avoid asphyxiation, he had to push himself up with his legs and pull with his arms, triggering muscle spasms that caused almost unimaginable pain. The

[4] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 969.

[5] See Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1986), and John F. MacArthur, *One Perfect Life: The Complete Story of the Lord Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

[6] All Scripture, unless otherwise cited, is from *The English Standard Version.*

> end would come through heart failure, brain damage caused by reduced oxygen supply, suffocation, or shock. Atrocious physical agony, length of torment, and public shame combined to make crucifixion a most horrible form of death.[7]

For those who were present at the crucifixion, the mocking of Christ continued.[8] Matthew testifies, "And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'" (Matt 27:39–40). The religious leaders hurled their contempt, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matt 27:41–43). Yet as France explains, "But that temptation had already been faced and overcome in Gethsemane (and cf. 26:53–54). Indeed, it is that very relationship as 'Son of God' which paradoxically requires Jesus to go through with His Father's purpose on the cross. In some sense, even the Gentile soldiers will see the truth of this in v. 54."[9] Matthew further gives the account that those dying beside Him "also reviled him in the same way" (Matt 27:44).

The Son was not only at the center of ridicule as He hung on the cross but also the source of the salvific event that occurred there. Christ's suffering on the cross procured salvation for those who believe, which is the significance this research will soon address. Although crucifixion was a common method of execution in Rome, the testimonies of the Gospels make it clear that this suffering was anything but ordinary. The simplest way to understand what happened is to examine what Christ said at the center of the narrative during His suffering, particularly the seven sayings of Christ on the cross.

The first statement is the Son crying out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Christ died forgiving those who sinned against Him, even the vilest of sins, the act of killing the Holy One, God in the flesh.[10] Bock explains, "Jesus thus intercedes for his enemies, portraying the very standard he sets for his disciples in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:29, 35; 1 Pet. 2:19–23; Ernst 1977: 634)…. Thinking of others, Jesus still desires that they change their thinking (as some do in the Book of Acts) and that God not hold their act against them. Jesus' love is evident even from the cross."[11]

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[7] Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 543.

[8] Those who were present also included those who loved and followed Christ, including the mother of Jesus, Mary, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene, yet only one of the twelve disciples was present, John, the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 19:25–27).

[9] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1070–71.

[10] Note that there is an argument about the origin of this statement and to whom Jesus refers. Is it the Roman executioners, or is it primarily to the Jews? See, I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 867–68; W. F. Arndt, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1956), 469.

[11] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1850.

The second statement of Jesus from the cross is also found in Luke: "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This exclamation demonstrates who Christ is and the significance of faith in salvation. The One being crucified between the two criminals was the Prince of Life, the Son of God—something that most at the crucifixion denied, but not the penitent criminal.

The love of the Son is also evident in His third statement from the cross to Mary: "Woman, behold your son," and then to John: "Behold your mother" (John 19:26–27). Even in this ultimate suffering, Jesus thinks of and cares for others. Regarding the exchange between Jesus and John, where John is given care over Mary, Jesus' mother, Carson writes, "If Jesus was the breadwinner of the family before he embarked on his public ministry … it is wonderful to remember that even as he hung dying on a Roman cross, suffering as the Lamb of God, he took thought of and made provision for his mother."[12]

The fourth statement by the Son is from Matthew 27:46, which references Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This declaration marks the climax of the Son's suffering, highlighted by a heart-wrenching cry of relational separation. It demonstrates that Christ is enduring the cup of God's wrath, which He had asked to be spared from the night before in Gethsemane. As France explains, "But it is surely also significant that Jesus, like the abandoned psalmist, still addresses God as 'my God'; this shout expresses not a loss of faith, but a (temporary) loss of contact."[13] Sin separates, and Christ came to bear the sin of those who would believe, becoming the penal substitute by taking their sin upon Himself, along with the wrath and the penalty for sin.

The fifth statement from the cross is "I am thirsty" (John 19:28). These words reveal that Jesus is truly man while also fulfilling Scripture (Ps 69:21). In His incarnation, He needed sleep and food, and here, in this ultimate place of suffering, He was thirsty. The juxtaposition of the fourth and fifth statements is staggering, highlighting that only One who is truly God can take upon Himself humanity's sin and its penalty (which makes His statement of forsaking all the more amazing and tragic). To be the perfect mediator, He also needed to be truly man.

The sixth statement signifies completion, where the Son cries, "It is finished" (John 19:30). With these words, which consist of just one word in Greek (τετέλεσται), Köstenberger notes, "Jesus triumphantly announces the completion of his mission entrusted to him by the Father at what may be considered the lowest point of his life, his death by crucifixion. Jesus dies on Friday afternoon, with the Sabbath approaching, just as God completed his work of creation at the end of the sixth day in order to rest on the seventh."[14]

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[12] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 616–17.

[13] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1076–77.

[14] Köstenberger, *John*, 551. Carson digs into the term τετέλεσται, acknowledging that the "verb *teleō* from which this form derives denotes the carrying out of a task, and in religious contexts bears the overtone of fulfilling one's religious obligations. Accordingly, in the light of the impending cross, Jesus could earlier cry, 'I have brought you glory on earth by completing (*teleiōsas*; *i.e.* by accomplishing) the work you gave me to do' (17:4). 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them *eis telos*—not only 'to the end' but to the full extent mandated by his mission. And so, on the brink of death, Jesus cries

The last statement on the cross is where the Son entrusts His spirit to the Father, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Regarding this final statement of Christ on the cross, Garland argues, "The Jewish leaders wanted 'to lay hands on' Jesus (20:19) and got their wish; but in the end Jesus gives himself over to his Father's hands, who ultimately controls his destiny. He entrusts himself to the Father's saving power. The hand of God will rescue him from the hand of all who hate him (1:71) and who are enemies (1:74)."[15]

Many other events occurred when the Son's suffering ended, highlighting His true identity. These accounts are best reflected in Matthew 27:51–54:

> And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

The Significance of the Suffering of the Son

The theological significance of the suffering of the Son cannot be overstated. Bruce Demarest notes, "Christ's death on the cross is not a peripheral issue or a secondary theme; it is the central, indeed crucial doctrine of the faith."[16] In the suffering and sacrifice of Christ, redemption is accomplished for the believer, reversing the curse that emerged from the Fall in the Garden and fulfilling not only the *protoeuangelion* in Genesis 3:15 but also every other prophecy concerning the central motif of Scripture: salvation through the Son. However, it is also important to note that this work of salvation is integral to the depiction of the Son in the Nicene Creed. As Morgan and Peterson make clear, "Without the Son's incarnation and spotless life, we would not be saved, for the Son had to be a sinless man to die as our perfect substitute. But Jesus's incarnation and sinless life do not accomplish salvation; only Jesus's death and resurrection do that."[17]

What occurred in the suffering of the Son? The narrative is rich with implications derived from Scripture. One scholar makes this observation,

> The importance of the cross is reflected in part by the attention Scripture gives to the death of Jesus Christ…. Matthew devoted 33 percent of his gospel to the final week of Jesus' life, Mark 37 percent, Luke 25 percent,

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out, *It is accomplished!*" Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 621. See also Reiner Schippers, τέλος, in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:59–65.

[15] David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 928–29.

[16] Bruce A. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 166.

[17] Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Christian Theology: The Biblical Story and Our Faith* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 281.

> and John 42 percent. It has been said that in addition to the many prophetic anticipations of the Messiah's death in the OT, there are 175 direct references to his death in the NT.[18]

Paul proclaimed, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:2–4). This truth is the gospel message, and it is also the message of Scripture. Therefore, what is seen in the prophecy in the Old Testament and the explanation of Christ's suffering in the epistles is rich in theological significance regarding what occurred. This research has briefly covered the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death, which should be considered in terms of their importance from a theological perspective, drawing on a few key texts from Scripture.

The language used in Scripture to describe what Christ accomplished on the cross is varied and multilayered. This language highlights the richness of sacrifice as illustrated by the image of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, where Isaiah notes that He will suffer to save sinners. Isaiah 53:5–6 reads, "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The sacrificial system anticipated what Christ would do, as the "… Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), which is why the timing of Passover, coinciding with the crucifixion, is no mere coincidence. Jesus is both the perfect mediator and the sacrifice itself, as the author of Hebrews makes clear, "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Heb 10:14).

There is also the language of victory, where Jesus was victorious over the forces of evil. In Colossians 2:15, Paul writes, "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." F. F. Bruce articulated this truth, from this passage, stating,

> Christ by his cross releases his people not only from the guilt of sin but from its hold over them. "He breaks the power of cancelled sin." Not only has he blotted out the record of their indebtedness but he has subjugated those powers whose possession of that damning indictment was a means of controlling them. The very instrument of disgrace and death by which the hostile forces thought they had him in their grasp and had conquered him forever was turned by him into the instrument of their defeat and disablement. As he was suspended there, bound hand and foot to the wood in apparent weakness, they imagined they had him at their mercy, and flung themselves on him with hostile intent. But, far from suffering their attack without resistance, he grappled with them and mastered them, stripping them of the armor in which they trusted, and held them aloft in his outstretched hands, displaying to the

[18] Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 166–67.

> universe their helplessness and his own unvanquished strength. Such seems to be the picture painted in these words.[19]

It is this victory that enables Paul to declare that there is "now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1) and that nothing can "separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus," whether "angels or rulers," "powers," or "any other created thing" (Rom 8:38–39).

Not only were the powers of darkness conquered when Christ cried "It is finished," but sin was also defeated through the suffering of the Son, which brought redemption. Redemption is a rich concept found throughout Scripture, from God redeeming Israel from Egypt (Exod 6:6) and Babylon (Isa 43:1–2) to the vivid illustration of Hosea and his wife, whom he would buy back from the slave market (Hos 3:1–5), depicting what God would do for His people. This idea of redemption, and consequently deliverance, is echoed in the New Testament as Ephesians 1:7 states, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace."[20]

One of the most foundational images of Christ's work in Scripture is the concept of penal substitution, which reveals what he did on the cross for sinners in his suffering. This truth of penal substitution appears in many places in Scripture (Isa 53; Rom 3:25–26; Gal 3:10–14; Col 2:14; Heb 2:14–15), as seen clearly articulated in 1 Peter 3:18, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit."[21] Christ takes the sinner's place as the believer's substitute, enduring the penalty for sin.[22] As Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach state, "penal substitution upholds the truthfulness and justice of God: it is the means by which he saves people for a relationship with himself without going back on his word that sin has to be punished."[23]

Building on the understanding of penal substitution, one can see how justification occurs for the believer, followed by reconciliation, with all three concepts unfolding in Romans 5. Justification is positional and can occur only if the penalty for sin has been paid. As Paul describes, "For while we were still weak, at

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[19] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 110–11.

[20] The text continues through Ephesians 1:8–10 stating, "which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

[21] See Morgan and Peterson, *Christian Theology*, 296–307.

[22] MacArthur and Mayhue continue to help the reader understand the concept of penal substitution writing, "In addition to these clear statements, the New Testament attaches the concept of penal substitution to the cross of Christ by using four Greek prepositions that all have a substitutionary force: *peri* ("for," "concerning"), *dia* ("because of," "for the sake of"), *anti* ("in place of," "instead of"), and *hyper* ("on behalf of"). First, Christ "suffered … for sins" (Gk. *peri hamartiōn*, 1 Pet. 3:18) and thus is "the propitiation for our sins" (Gk. *peri tōn hamartiōn hēmōn*, 1 John 2:2; 4:10). These texts teach that our sins demanded that we suffer under the wrath of God yet that Christ has done this in our place. Second, Jesus is said to have died "for your sake" (Gk. *di' hymas*, 2 Cor. 8:9; cf. 1 Cor. 8:11), another clear indicator of substitution." John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 523.

[23] Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 137.

the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:6–8). As Thomas Schreiner points out concerning Romans 5:6–8, "The idea behind ὑπέρ is that Christ died both as our representative and as our substitute…. he took the punishment we deserved."[24] Jesus became the propitiation for the believer's sin (Rom 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). Regarding this idea being worked out in Romans 5, Douglas Moo writes, "Justification language is legal, law-court language, picturing the believer being declared innocent by the judge. Reconciliation language, on the other hand, comes from the world of personal relationships. 'To reconcile' means to bring together, or make peace between, two estranged or hostile parties (cf. 1 Cor. 7:11)."[25] Because of what God accomplished through the Son's suffering as a substitute, mankind can now be justified before God and thus reconciled to Him.[26]

The Son could perform what He did because of the truth of what Scripture testifies regarding His person, in both His deity and humanity, as demonstrated by the Nicene Creed. He is also the Second Adam, as Romans 5:12–21 elaborates, who reversed the curse so that "as one trespass led to the condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men" (Rom 5:18). The suffering of the Son is one aspect of the redemptive work that the Second Adam accomplished through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, which is affirmed in the Nicene Creed as a whole.

The Beauty of the Suffering of the Son

The topic of beauty in the suffering of the Son may initially seem odd to some. However, it should not be foreign to Christians, as they recognize what took place and the love demonstrated in Christ's suffering. Jonathan Edwards addresses this concept of beauty in who Christ is and what He has done in His suffering when he wrote: "A sight of the greatness of God in his attributes, may overwhelm men, and be more than they can endure; but the enmity and opposition of the heart, may remain in its full strength, and the will remain inflexible."[27] But he goes on to state, "one glimpse of the moral and spiritual glory of God, and supreme amiableness of Jesus Christ, shining into the heart, overcomes and abolishes this opposition, and inclines

[24] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 268.

[25] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 311.

[26] Morgan and Peterson articulate the truth about the love of the Son and necessity of His two natures in what He did for humankind: "Incredibly, because of his great love for us and in obedience to the Father, the preexistent, eternal, and glorious Son of God humbles himself and voluntarily becomes a man. As one person with two natures (fully divine and fully human), Jesus is uniquely able to save us and represent us. Only God can save, and only a human can represent us as the new Adam. In response to Jesus's work on our behalf, the Father exalts him to the highest place, which in turn also glorifies the Father." Morgan and Peterson, *Christian Theology*, 264.

[27] Jonathan Edwards, "True Grace, Distinguished from the Experience of Devils," in *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach and Harry S. Stout, vol. 25, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 635.

the soul to Christ, as it were, by an omnipotent power: so that now, not only the understanding, but the will, and the whole soul receives and embraces the Savior."[28]

Because of what Christ did through the brutality of the cross, there is beauty in the fact that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8b), which demonstrates that the events and theological significance of the cross are immeasurably beautiful. There are two aspects to the beauty of the Son's suffering: one is the intimate realization that Christ acted out of love, and the second is understanding what that love provides in the context of salvation.

First, Christians recognize what Christ has done for them through His death and the extent to which He suffered because of His love for sinners. The fact that God would become a man to die in man's place, most horrifically, reveals the beauty of God's love, which is personal and directed at the individual as the believer exercises faith in what was accomplished, acknowledging his or her need due to sin and the provision available in Christ. This beauty is illustrated by God's willingness to condescend and become a man, to tabernacle with humanity (John 1:14), so that He could accomplish what sinful humanity could not. This beauty is evident in the cross, where Christ took on sin, and the penalty for that sin, enduring all the suffering he experienced, so much so that Paul proclaims, "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13). Even the hardened centurion who witnessed Christ's crucifixion got a glimpse of the beauty of the Son in His suffering declaring, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39).

Second, Christians have their eyes open to an understanding of what Christ did in bringing salvation, enabling the believer to grasp the implications of salvation: a relationship with the God of the universe. As Jonathan Edwards testified, "I have loved the doctrines of the gospel: they have been to my soul like green pastures. The gospel has seemed to me to be the richest treasure; the treasure that I have most desired, and longed that it might dwell richly in me. The way of salvation by Christ has appeared in a general way, glorious and excellent, and most pleasant and beautiful."[29] This reality is what the Christian experiences as he or she comprehends what Christ has accomplished, having the heart enlightened to "know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (Eph 1:18). With this prayer, Paul also implores that the Ephesians would understand "what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:19–21).

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[28] Edwards, "True Grace, Distinguished from the Experience of Devils," 635.

[29] Jonathan Edwards, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn and Harry S. Stout, vol. 16, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 799.

The Son Rose Again on the Third Day

The resurrection of the Son is integral and inextricably linked to the Christian message.[30] Yet resurrection must always be connected to the Son's death.[31] Even as one reads in the Gospel of Luke, as Jesus interacts with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, "And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?'" (Luke 24:25–26). Peter proclaimed on Pentecost,

> Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. (Acts 2:22–24)

Following "The Suffering of the Son" in the first section of this article, this section will explore what the Nicene Creed says about Christ's resurrection, examining the narrative and theological significance of Scripture regarding the resurrection of the Son, and then noting its beauty.

The Events of the Resurrection of the Son

The Nicene Creed continues to state, "and the third day He rose again" (καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ). All four Gospels provide testimony to the truth of the resurrection. The empty tomb and the presence of eyewitnesses of the risen Christ are key elements of the resurrection narratives.[32] The events that occur after Christ's death set the stage for the resurrection. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take the body of Jesus to place Him in a freshly hewn tomb in a garden near the place where Christ was crucified (Matt 27:57–66; Mark 15:42–47; Luke 23:50–56; John 19:31–42). Included in the narrative is the fact that the religious leaders approached Pilate on the Day of Preparation, asking for a guard to be placed at the tomb to secure it, so that no one could go and take the body since Jesus said that after three days He would arise. Pilate replied, "'You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.' So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a

[30] MacArthur and Mayhue state, "There exists no greater event in redemption history than the resurrection of Christ, because it completes and validates his sacrificial death and advances the program of the kingdom with an eternally living King. The resurrection must be believed in order for someone to experience salvation (Rom. 10:9–10)." MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 320–21.

[31] Morgan and Peterson note, "We have separated Christ's death and resurrection for the sake of our study, but we also must keep them together, as Scripture does (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34; John 2:19; 10:17–18; Acts 2:22–24; Rom 4:25; 10:9–10; 1 Cor 15:3–4; 2 Cor 5:15; Phil 3:10; Heb 1:3; 1 Pet 1:11). Jesus's death and resurrection are the core of his saving work. They are distinct events and yet are inseparably joined." Morgan and Peterson, *Christian Theology*, 282–83.

[32] Thompson argues concerning the resurrection, "For Luke (and for the proclamation of the early Christians) … the authentic apostolic *eyewitness* testimony of the historical reality was fundamental." Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke's Account of God's Unfolding Plan*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 27, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 78.

guard" (Matt 27:65–66). Like the events of the Son's suffering, this work will observe the events of the Son's resurrection by analyzing those involved in revealing what happened.[33]

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and another Mary, along with several other women, went to the tomb early Sunday morning to anoint the body of Christ (Matt 28:1–8; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–8; John 20:1–2). When they arrived, the Gospel of Matthew states,

> And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay." (Matt 28:2–6)

The interesting aspect of this account is who was at the tomb and who was absent. Jesus was no longer there but had risen, with one commentator stating, "Note the irony that those assigned to guard the corpse themselves become 'corpses,' while the one they guarded is already alive."[34]

The women who came to the tomb were the ones to whom the angels spoke, declaring what had happened and instructing them to go and tell the disciples what had occurred. The Gospel of Mark testifies to the angel's commission to the women to be witnesses to what they had seen: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you" (Mark 16:6–7).[35] In addition, Luke mentions as part of the angelic message the truth that Jesus

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[33] France explains the differences and harmony of the Gospel accounts, "The accounts of the finding of the empty tomb in all four gospels display an intriguing mixture of agreement and independence. Negatively, all agree in refraining from giving any account of Jesus actually leaving the tomb (contrast *Gos. Pet.* 9–10 [34–42]), and simply report how the women found it already empty. Positively, all agree on an early morning visit to the tomb by one or more women (one of whom is Mary the Magdalene), on the tomb being empty, and on an encounter with an angel or angels, but each develops the narrative around these elements in different ways. Matthew's account, as usual, follows a similar pattern to Mark's, including the important instruction to the disciples to go to Galilee, but adds four distinctive features: the earthquake, the angel rolling away the stone, the effect on the guards, and the women's meeting with Jesus himself on their way from the tomb. The first three of these are peculiar to Matthew; the last may be compared with the account of Mary the Magdalene meeting Jesus outside the tomb in John 20:14–17." France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1097.

[34] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1100. One can see what occurred with these soldiers in the continuing narrative of Matthew 28:11–15: "While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, 'Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."

[35] Concerning the testimony of the women, Lane interestingly reveals, "The fact that women were the first to receive the announcement of the resurrection is significant in view of contemporary attitudes. Jewish law pronounced women ineligible as witnesses. Early Christian tradition confirms that the reports of the women concerning the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection were disregarded or considered

had told them, "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise" (Luke 24:6–7).

After the women returned to the disciples to inform them of what had happened and that the tomb was empty, Peter and John ran to see what had occurred. John arrived at the empty tomb first and stopped at the entrance, while Peter went in to see for himself. John writes that Peter "saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (John 20:6–9).

The first interaction anyone has with Jesus is Mary Magdalene. She is at the tomb, weeping because the body of Christ is gone, and she encounters two angels before meeting Jesus, whom she does not recognize. Jesus asks why she is crying and who she is looking for at the tomb. D. A. Carson explains the interchange between Mary and Jesus: "The first (why are you crying?) becomes mild rebuke; the second (Who is it you are looking for?) becomes an invitation to reflect on the kind of Messiah she was expecting, and thus to widen her horizons and to recognize that, grand as her devotion to him was, her estimate of him was still far too small. The evangelistic implications for John's readers are transparent."[36] It is when Jesus mentions her name, "Mary," that she recognizes him.[37] After a short interchange, "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'—and that he had said these things to her" (John 20:18).[38]

After appearing to Mary Magdalene and then to the other women (Matt 28:9–10; Luke 24:9–11), Jesus appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) and then before a gathering of his disciples twice, once without Thomas (Luke 24:36–43; John 20:19–23) and then with Thomas (John 20:24–31), allowing them to see His hands, feet, and side. It is during the second appearance in the upper

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embarrassing (cf. Lk. 24:11, 22–24; Mk. 16:11). That the news had first been delivered by women was inconvenient and troublesome to the Church, for their testimony lacked value as evidence. The primitive Community would not have invented this detail, which can be explained only on the ground that it was factual." William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 589.

[36] Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 641.

[37] Carson elaborates, "Whatever the cause of her blindness, the single word *Mary*, spoken as Jesus had always uttered it, was enough to remove it. The good shepherd 'calls his own sheep by name … and his sheep follow him because they know his voice' (10:3–4). Anguish and despair are instantly swallowed up by astonishment and delight." Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 641.

[38] Of the interesting interchange between Jesus and Mary, Köstenberger explains, "Jesus' reply to her, 'Don't hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father,' highlights the change that has occurred in Jesus' relationship with his disciples (Ridderbos 1997: 637). In fact, what all of Jesus' resurrection appearances in John 20–21 reveal is that the disciples now find themselves in a transition period in which they cannot revert to their familiar pattern of relating to their Master during his earthly ministry, yet at the same time they cannot fully grasp the nature of the new spiritual relationship with their Lord that soon will be mediated to them by the Holy Spirit. This transitory condition explains the awkwardness that surrounds the interim between the resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit." Köstenberger, *John*, 569. Concerning what was stated Beasley-Murray comments, "The virtual replacement of the language of resurrection with that of ascension is an indication that the two are fundamentally one, and indissolubly bound with the death of Jesus." George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Dallas: Word, 1999), 377.

room that Thomas sees Christ after doubting the others' testimony and proclaims, "My Lord, and my God" (John 20:28).[39] The key to all these appearances is that Jesus had risen again and was in physical form, as evidenced by being able to be touched, and He even ate.

Jesus would also appear to the disciples while fishing, beautifully restoring Peter three times after His threefold denial before the crucifixion (John 21:1–25). He then appeared to many disciples in Galilee (Matt 28:16–20; 1 Cor 15:6–7) and later returned to Jerusalem before His ascension (Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:3–8). In Luke 24:46–47, Jesus is seen teaching the disciples, opening their minds to the Scriptures. He states, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

The Significance of the Resurrection of the Son

The resurrection of the Son is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Chase Mitchell writes concerning the events of the resurrection, "The narratives in the four Gospels introduce us to the one who would bear our sins on the cross and rise from the dead on the third day. His teachings affirmed a future resurrection for the righteous and the wicked, but he himself was raised in the middle of history as the firstfruits of the life that will be ours."[40] This truth signifies the importance of the resurrection of the Son, a reality that Paul articulated wonderfully in 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection chapter.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul addresses the denial of the resurrection of the dead by appealing to the Christian testimony of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, supported by both tradition and the eyewitness accounts of the disciples, which provide the theological foundation for the resurrection and its necessity to the Christian gospel. As Fee asserts, "Paul is not here setting out to *prove* the resurrection of Jesus. Rather, he is reasserting the commonly held ground *from which* he will argue against their assertion that there is no resurrection of the dead."[41]

Paul's main issue is that if there is no resurrection from the dead, then Christ has not been raised: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor 15:17). The truth of the resurrection is crucial to the Christian faith, because of sin, which serves as the primary foundation of Paul's argument for the necessity of Christ's death and resurrection. Bruce Ware emphasizes this central issue: "Sin is for all of us a twofold problem. Sin presents us with a penalty that we cannot pay and a power that we cannot overcome. And, interestingly, if we inquire just what that penalty is, and what sin's strongest power is, we find that we come to

[39] Köstenberger explains, "Jesus' scars on his hands and his side (cf. 19:34) are marks not only of his suffering but also of his victory (Ridderbos 1997: 641). In fact, his mere presence among his followers is evidence of his triumph (cf. 20:5–7; Moloney 1998: 530–31, 534)." Köstenberger, *John*, 572–73.

[40] Mitchell L. Chase, *Resurrection Hope and the Death of Death*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt and Dane C. Ortlund, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 96.

[41] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 2014), 797.

the same answer. As Paul says in Romans 6:23, the wages of sin is death."[42] Death is the consequence of sin and acts as the great disruptor.[43] Death brings separation, manifested physically by the separation of the body and soul, and spiritually by the separation of humankind from a relationship with God, so that, because of Adam's sin, all humanity is born dead in trespasses and sin (Rom 5:12; Eph 2:1–3).[44]

The testimony of the resurrection reveals that what Christ did—taking the penalty of sin and enduring the wrath of God on behalf of believers—was effective, since the wages of sin is death, yet death could not hold Christ in the grave. Paul's declaration in Romans states that Jesus "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25). Since death has held authority over humankind since the fall, and since all were in Adam, it is now evident, "for by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:21–22). The resurrection confirms the victory of Christ over sin and the grave, as well as all the powers of evil (1 Cor 15:24–25), with "the last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor 15:26). Sin received its death blow in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. This truth undergirds Paul's entire argument about the resurrection from the dead: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19). Thus, if the dead are not raised, "let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor 15:32). Concerning this text, Garland writes,

> "In Christ" refers to the source of this hope that "if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, then we shall certainly be united in the likeness of his resurrection" (Rom. 6:5). But if Christ is not raised, then our hope is nothing more than whistling in the dark. Christians become pathetic dupes, taken in by a colossal fraud. Their transformation and glorious spiritual experiences in this life are all make-believe. They are the most pitiable (ἐλεεινότεροι, *eleeinoteroi*) of all human beings because they have embraced Christ's death and suffering in this life for nothing. Christianity would be an ineffective religion that is detrimental to one's health since it bestows only suffering on its followers. Suffering the loss of all things because of Christ and sharing his sufferings by becoming like him in his death with the hope of attaining the resurrection (Phil. 3:7–11) turn out to be foolish. The world would be right: the cross is utter folly (1 Cor. 1:23). The joy that characterizes the basic orientation of Christian life is based on the confidence that Christ will return, the dead will be raised, and all wrongs will be made right. If that is not true, then joy is replaced by despair.[45]

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[42] Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 131.

[43] Chase, *Resurrection Hope*, 15.

[44] Chase explains, "The outworking of death takes manifold forms. Whatever inhibits, harms, or destroys life is a kind of death. When the biblical authors tell of God's power that restores, frees, heals, or raises, you are reading about the power of life overcoming the forces of death. The reason resurrection hope is more prevalent in Scripture than it may first seem is because the promises and actions of the God of life pervade the testimony of the biblical authors." Chase, *Resurrection Hope*, 23–24.

[45] David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 703.

It is the resurrection that brings hope. Because of the resurrection, "What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:42–44). Garland continues the testimony of this passage by arguing, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then death remains unconquered and still holds sway beyond the end as a power set over against God."[46]

The Beauty of the Resurrection of the Son

The beauty of the Son's resurrection is evident in what follows in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul continues to discuss the resurrection with increasing intensity, emphasizing its significance for believers. Sin is the great divider, separating humanity from the God who created him. This separation causes every person to wrestle with the concept of death and the consequences of sin, which was not God's intention when He created men and women as embodied beings to be in relationship with him. Death results from sin. Yet what Christ accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection removes the sting of death caused by its consequences. The beauty of the resurrection is that it brings life from death. As Paul writes, drawing from the Old Testament prophets, "'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'" (1 Cor 15:54–55).[47] Paul continues, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:56–57).

Michael Reeves captures the beauty of what the Son, as the firstborn of the dead, means to the believer: "The greatest declaration brought about the greatest event since the creation of the world: the inauguration of the new creation. Bursting through death, out of the grave, the Son overturned the old order—or disorder, we should say—of Adam. The reign of death and corruption was undone, and a human being now stood, body and soul, wholly beyond the reign of the curse."[48] One sees that an

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[46] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 704.

[47] Ciampa and Rosner explain, "In Paul's mind, the final destruction of death requires the resurrection of the dead. In citing Isaiah's eschatological vision Paul ties God's triumph over death (and universal salvation) to the resurrection of the body. For Paul, resurrection is the necessary outcome of what God has done in Christ and what he intends to do for his people. Paul's personification of death, following the lead of both Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14, depicts it not as the inevitable and benign fate of all humans but as 'an alien, inimical power,' nothing less than a tragedy. In the words of Isaiah 25:7, death is 'the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations.' Death for Paul is a power that casts its ominous shadow over us all and must be not just removed but defeated. A key emphasis of this whole chapter has been that what is required for complete victory over God's enemies includes the total defeat of death, 'not a compromise in which death is allowed to have the body while some other aspect of the human being (the soul? the spirit?) goes marching on.'" Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 833.

[48] Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ* (Downer Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 64. Reeves goes on to quote, "J. R. R. Tolkien called that moment a *eucatastrophe*, 'the greatest eucatastrophe possible,' in fact. That is, the resurrection was a catastrophic event, but a *good* catastrophic event. Or, to be more precise, a eucatastrophe is '*the happy turn* in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears … your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back." Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*, 64.

"otherwise unremarkable tomb in Jerusalem thus became the womb of new creation."[49]

Worship is a response to beauty, so it is no wonder that many of the most beloved hymns in the Christian faith celebrate the wonder of the cross and the resurrection. The third stanza of "Crown Him with Many Crowns" rejoices,

> Crown Him the Lord of Life;
> Who triumphed o'er the grave,
> And rose victorious in the strife
> For those He came to save.
> His glories now we sing,
> Who died, and rose on high,
> Who died eternal life to bring,
> And lives that death may die.[50]

The beauty of the Son's resurrection brings hope to a world that holds no hope outside of God. The Son of God breaks into the world by becoming man and living a holy life to take the believer's place, substituting for his or her sin, and then rising again, victorious over the enemy of mankind, death. This kind of hope and beauty deserves a response!

The Son Ascended into Heaven

The ascension of the Son is often overlooked in comparison to other aspects of Christ's saving work; yet, it holds great importance in displaying who He is, concluding His redemptive mission, and in the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed testifies that the Son "ascended to heaven" (ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανούς). Paul states, "In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Eph 4:9–10). Following "The Resurrection of the Son" in the last section of this article, this third section will conclude by exploring what the ascension is, surveying the testimony of Scripture, its theological importance, and its beauty.

The Events of the Ascension

The Lord appeared to many after His resurrection, presenting Himself alive, and He also ministered for forty days, speaking about the kingdom (Acts 1:3). During this time, he opened the Scriptures to His disciples, emphasizing the necessity of His death and resurrection and the salvation His work brings, while also promising the Holy Spirit, who would come in His absence (Luke 24:45–47; Acts 1:4–5). The disciples posed an essential question to Jesus, as seen in Acts 1:6, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" The Son's answer indicates that God's plan

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[49] Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*, 64.

[50] Matthew Bridges, "Crown Him with Many Crowns," in *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration* (Waco, TX: Word Music, 1986), Hymn #234.

encompassed far more than the disciples understood, for Jesus replies, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:8). From this response, the reader receives the outline for the book of Acts and the beautiful promise of God's plan: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

From Jesus' answer concerning the Father's plan, the narrative of Acts transitions directly to the ascension: "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven'" (Acts 1:9–11). This event was a crucial part of the Son's saving work and a testimony to his identity.[51] The eyewitnesses to Christ's resurrection have now become the eyewitnesses to His ascension, an event of great theological significance. The testimony of the ascension continues in the New Testament, as MacArthur and Mayhue cite, "Christ's ascension was confirmed by the visions of Stephen (Acts 7:55–56), Paul (Acts 9:3–5; 22:6–8; 26:13–15), and John (Rev. 4:1; 5:6). For Paul, Jesus' ascension left a lasting impression and was a key element in his salvation experience—the living, risen, ascended, heavenly Messiah spoke to him from heaven."[52]

The Significance of the Ascension

The ascension of the Son holds great theological importance. In this event, Christ returns to heaven, from where He came, completing the work God gave Him on earth.[53] The Son would return to heaven, being the forerunner, to sit down at the right hand of God the Father in His session, sending the Helper in His absence, preparing a place for believers, and one day returning from heaven. Morgan and Peterson argue, "The ascension is also the prerequisite for the subsequent saving works of Christ: his session, Pentecost, intercession, and second coming."[54]

A significant aspect of the Son's ascension is His session, or sitting at the Father's right hand, which encompasses His ongoing mediatorial work and His

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[51] See Morgan and Peterson, *Christian Theology*, 284. Bruce writes concerning the manner of Christ's ascension, "The words 'a cloud received him out of their sight' are reminiscent of those with which the Gospel incident of the transfiguration comes to an end: 'a cloud came and overshadowed them;' … and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone' (Luke 9:34–36). They are reminiscent, too, of Jesus' own language about the parousia of the Son of Man—'coming in clouds with great power and glory' (Mark 13:26); 'coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mark 14:62). The transfiguration, the ascension (as here described), and the parousia are three successive manifestations of Jesus' divine glory." F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 37–38.

[52] MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 322. See also Luke 24:50–52.

[53] On the necessity of Christ ascending bodily as one person with two natures see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 630; and Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–1997), 367.

[54] Morgan and Peterson, *Christian Theology*, 284–85.

authority in exaltation. Upon coming to heaven from earth, the Son presented His sacrifice in a temple made without hands (Heb 8:5; 9:11–12; 23–24) and then sits down (Heb 10:12), demonstrating His completed work of redemption as the perfect Priest.[55] However, Christ's mediatorial work continues as He intercedes for the saints in heaven, as Berkhof claims, being an authorized intercessor who "never fails" in His intercession.[56] By sitting down after His passion and resurrection at the Father's right hand as both Lord and Christ in the fulfillment of Psalm 110, Christ, being truly God and truly man, occupies His rightful place, a position of exaltation.

Another crucial aspect of the ascension is that for the Son to send the Spirit, He needed to ascend to heaven, as Christ states in John 16:7, "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." The Holy Spirit applies salvation by imparting the power behind Christ's call to discipleship and the Great Commission to live holy lives and witness in power. As Sinclair Ferguson writes, "Pentecost publicly marks the transition from the old to the new covenant, and signifies the commencement of the 'now' of the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2). It is the threshold of the last days, and inaugurates the new era in which the eschatological life of the future invades the present evil age in a proleptic manner."[57] The Holy Spirit would come not only to bring inspiration to the New Testament authors, but also to bring illumination, conviction, conversion, communion, and power to proclaim the gospel and live the Christian life to all believers.[58]

When Christ ascended, He did so to prepare a place for believers, as He states in the Gospel of John, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going" (John 14:2–4). Here, Christ encourages His disciples with a glorious truth. As Köstenberger argues, "Jesus thus conveys to His followers a vision of future heavenly living that surpasses even that enjoyed by the most exalted ruler or wealthy person of that day."[59] The believer's final home will be heaven, where God, the One who created humankind for Himself, is, and Christ went to prepare a place there for those whom He saved.

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[55] See Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:634–35. Moo makes an important note, "In contrast to the many priests who 'stand' at their ministry is the one priest who, having completed his atoning ministry, now 'sits.' The 'offering that Jesus our priest makes is sometimes thought to refer narrowly to his offering of his own blood before the Father in the heavenly sanctuary. However, as I have argued elsewhere, 'offer' (προσφέρω) appears to be used by our author to refer to the entire sacrificial process, including the death of the victim. Here, then, he will be referring to Christ's sacrificial work as a whole, at least including death, resurrection, ascension, and entrance into the heavenly sanctuary. The sequence of events culminates in Christ's sitting down at the right hand of God. As is often noted, the act of sitting suggests the completion of a particular process. 'A seated priest is the guarantee of a finished work and an accepted sacrifice.' 'He sat down' is the equivalent of the Johannine 'it is finished' (John 19:30). Douglas J. Moo, *Hebrews*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 361.

[56] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 405.

[57] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, ed. Gerald Bray, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 57.

[58] Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 69–72.

[59] Köstenberger, *John*, 426.

The angels proclaimed that Christ's return would be in the same way as His ascension. Jesus would come back, and His return would be personal, visible, and glorious.[60] The promise of the Son's return signifies fulfillment. Christ left as the forerunner, assuring Christians that they would follow Him one day.[61] When He arrives in His Second Advent, in the same manner as He ascended, He will bring His reign to earth in the millennial kingdom, ultimately leading to the final judgment and then restoration in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21–22).

The significance of the ascension is often unnoticed, yet it holds profound theological significance. It is an aspect of Christ's work that the Nicene Creed emphasizes as essential to the Christian faith and is something Christians must understand as connected to the saving work of the Son. As Patrick Schreiner attests: "Christ's ascension was not an afterthought, nor a superfluous rubber stamp on the truth of the resurrection. It was a unique event in its own right. It confirmed and vindicated Jesus' authority as prophet, priest, and king. However, it did more than this. It not only confirmed Christ's work, but contributed to and even continues Christ's work."[62]

The Beauty of the Ascension of the Son

The beauty of the ascension rests on two main facets of Christology: who Christ is and what He does. This truth is embraced by the Nicene Creed, which emphasizes the ongoing ministry of the Son even after His redeeming work on earth had been completed. There is beauty in the significance of the ascension, as Christ's care and concern for the believer continue even in heaven. The ramifications of Christ's ongoing work and the permanence of the incarnation demonstrate His depth of love for those He came to save. The beauty of the ascension lies in Christ taking His rightful place at the right hand of God and in the sending of the Holy Spirit, whose ministry is to open the eyes of sinners to see God's beauty, thereby enabling growth and discipleship. As He sends the Holy Spirit, He also continues to intercede for believers at the Father's right hand. Yet, one of the most beautiful aspects of the ascension is that Christ has gone to prepare a place as a forerunner to "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb 11:16), where the treasure is God Himself.

The ramifications of the session of the Son are evident in the beginning of the eschatological fulfillment of Psalm 110, the most often quoted text in the New Testament, which also sets the stage for what would come in Christ's Second Advent. There is a beauty here pointing to the overall work of the Son, as Allen attests of Psalm 110: "The text became a prime testimony in the theological process of exegeting the person and work of Jesus. Several NT texts, such as Rom 8:34; Col 3:1; Eph 1:20; 1 Pet 3:18–22, appear to attest its presence in a confessional christological tradition that traced the suffering, resurrection, and ascension of Christ in a comprehensive formula."[63] It is the reality of the person of Christ, in both His

[60] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:638.

[61] Morgan and Peterson, *Christian Theology*, 285.

[62] Patrick Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 115–16.

[63] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, vol. 21, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), 119.

deity and humanity, that underscores who He is and what He has done even in His session. As Turretin reminds the reader, this is "the glorious state of Christ's person and the administration of the mediatorial office, whose works … are common to the whole person with respect to both natures."[64] Concerning the incarnation, it is stunning to see the extent of what Christ did, even in understanding its permanence; by sitting down at the Father's right hand, He has done so as One who is truly God and truly man.[65] As Hebrews 4:14–16 shows:

> Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

There is also beauty in Christ's sending of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit opens the believer's eyes to Christ's beauty, making spiritual growth possible. Jonathan Edwards declared, "The Spirit of God is given to the true saints to dwell in them, as his proper lasting abode; and to influence their hearts, as a principle of new nature, or as a divine supernatural spring of life and action…. And he is represented as being there so united to the faculties of the soul, that he becomes there a principle or spring of new nature and life."[66] Without the Helper, the believer would not see the beauty of Christ and have his or her affections changed. Additionally, a sustained sight comes with the Spirit's work of illuminating the truth, which continues to sanctify and drive the believer toward the goal of faith, which is God Himself.

Finally, behind the ongoing work of Christ in the ascension lies the understanding of culmination and communion. The culmination will come with the ultimate restoration of all things, which believers will experience due to their relationship with the Son, who has gone to prepare a place for them. MacArthur and Mayhue delve into the beautiful picture of heaven and communion with the Son, stating,

> Indeed, such communion with Christ seems to be the import of Scripture speaking jointly of God and the Lamb (the slain Savior) when revealing the happiness of the saints in heaven: "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 7:17). Also, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:3–4). The word translated "dwelling place"

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[64] Turretin*, Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:370.

[65] Morgan and Peterson, *Christian Theology*, 262–63.

[66] Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John H. Smith and Harry S. Stout, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 200.

> here is the same word sometimes translated "tabernacle" in signifying the flesh of Christ (John 1:14). Finally, the apostle John declares, "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22–23).[67]

Reflecting on the Son's saving work brings a joyful opportunity to appreciate the depth and beauty of what God the Father has accomplished through Christ in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The work of redemption is complete; it is finished. However, Christ's ministry continues for believers in heaven, making the ascension a lasting wonder for them. Christ maintains His care and concern for believers in a place He is preparing for those who are saved, which is beautiful because He is there.

Conclusion

The Nicene Creed emphasizes the importance of the Son and His saving work, highlighting the beauty of God's plan in salvation while clarifying the central doctrines of Christianity as affirmed in the Word of God. The testimony of Scripture serves as the foundation of the Christian faith, which the Nicene Creed upholds as it reflects on the Son's saving work in His suffering, resurrection, and ascension. Christ's work saves; yet it ultimately reveals the glory of Christ, as Paul testified in 2 Corinthians 4:4. Michael Reeves points out concerning 2 Corinthians 4:4 and the glory of Christ, "For Paul, the gospel could not be about anything else first. It could not be about forgiveness first or justification first, for what is the point of being forgiven and justified? Not simply that we might stand forgiven and righteous in heaven. We are forgiven in order to know and enjoy Christ. Knowing him is the only true life."[68] The Nicene Creed highlights the Son's glory in His saving work, as revealed in Scripture—a reality that is true as testified in the text of Scripture, of great theological importance in demonstrating God's goodness in His grace, and beautiful in revealing His love and plan for sinners.

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[67] MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 327.
[68] Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*, 121.

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THE JUDGMENT OF THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS AND ADDENDUM: AN OVERVIEW OF FUTURE JUDGMENTS

ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς…

He shall come to judge the quick and the dead…

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* * * * *

The Nicene Creed culminates with the triumphant declaration, "He [Christ] shall come to judge the living and the dead" (ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς). This doctrine, the return of Christ in judgment, is a key component of the Bible's presentation of Christ. Addressing the eschatological judgments revealed in Scripture, this article consists of two parts. First, it includes a discussion about the judgment of the sheep and the goats from the Olivet Discourse. Second, to provide a greater understanding of all the future judgments, it concludes with an overview of each end-time judgment. As the reader will observe, Nicaea's declaration of Christ's return in judgment and glory is thoroughly biblical and worthy of consideration today.

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The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats[1]

Everything in the Olivet Discourse progresses toward a climactic judgment. Motifs of judgment involving the separation of believers from unbelievers run right through the discourse. We have seen already that all three of the parables in the discourse contain graphic symbols of coming judgment. And the great

[1] This article is adapted and republished with permission, appearing as the final chapter in John F. MacArthur, *The Second Coming: Signs of Christ's Return and the End of the Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 177–89.

overriding theme of the whole discourse—the sudden appearing of Jesus Christ—is continually portrayed as the ultimate event that will precipitate and signal the arrival of a massive, catastrophic judgment. Now Christ gives a powerful description of that judgment:

> When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. (Matt 25:31–33)

No one in Scripture had more to say about judgment than Jesus. He repeatedly warned about impending doom for the unrepentant (Luke 13:3, 5). He spoke of hell far more than of heaven and always in the most vivid and disturbing terms. Most of what we know about the everlasting doom of sinners came from the lips of the Savior. And none of the biblical descriptions of judgment are more severe or more intense than those given by Jesus.

Yet He always spoke of such things in the most tender and compassionate tones. He pleaded with sinners to turn from their sins, to be reconciled to God, and to take refuge in Him from the coming judgment. He better than anyone knew the high cost of sin and the severity of divine wrath against the sinner, for He would bear the full force of that wrath on behalf of those He redeemed. Therefore when He spoke of such things, He always spoke with the utmost empathy and not the least hostility. He even wept as he looked over Jerusalem, knowing that the city and the entire nation of Israel would reject Him as their Messiah and would soon suffer complete destruction.

> He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation." (Luke 19:41–44)

In an important sense, the entire Olivet Discourse is simply an expansion of that compassionate plea. Beginning from the same starting point—a lament about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem—Christ simply broadens His perspective and gives the disciples an extended appeal that encompasses the whole eschatological future, right up to His return and the judgment that ensues. The same spirit that prompted Christ's weeping over the city of Jerusalem therefore permeates and colors the entire Olivet Discourse. And Matthew, who was there to hear it all firsthand, recorded it in his Gospel, where it stands as a beacon to all sinners throughout the entire age. It is the Lord's final tender plea for repentance before it is too late.

Looking back over the discourse, we see that all His various urgings to be faithful and all His admonitions to be prepared boil down to this: they are a compassionate call to repentance and faith in Him. He is warning us to be prepared for His coming

because when He returns, He will bring final judgment. And as He concludes His discourse, He describes that judgment in detail.

This remaining part of the Olivet Discourse is one of the most severe and sobering warnings about judgment in all of Scripture. Christ the Great Shepherd is the Judge, and He separates His sheep from the goats. These words of Christ are not recorded in any of the other Gospels. But Matthew, intent on portraying Christ as King, here shows Him seated on His earthly throne. In fact, this judgment is His first act following His glorious return to earth, suggesting that judgment is His first order of business as *earthly* ruler (cf. Ps 2:8–12). This event therefore inaugurates the millennial kingdom and is distinct from the Great White Throne judgment described in Revelation 20, which occurs *after* the millennial age is brought to a close. Here Christ is judging those alive at His coming, separating the sheep (true believers) from the goats (unbelievers). The goats represent the same class of people who are portrayed as evil servants, unwise virgins, and an unfaithful steward in the immediately preceding parables.

The Judge

Christ Himself is the Judge in the events described here. This is in keeping with what He said on another occasion: "For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:22–23).

Thus, the same compassionate One who wept and pleaded with sinners to be reconciled to God will one day be their sovereign Judge.

And He will judge with "a rod of iron" (Rev 19:15); He will "dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps 2:9; Rev 2:27). The judgment will be fierce, pictured in Revelation 19:15 with the imagery of Christ "tread[ing] the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God."

He will return with a large company of angels: "The Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him" (Matt 25:31). Several passages of Scripture teach that the angels will play an assisting role in the judgment. According to 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8, "The Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven *with His mighty angels*, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (emphasis added). Matthew 24:31 says the angels will "gather together the elect from the four winds." Believers who have died or were caught up in the Rapture will also be part of the company that returns with Christ: "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all" (Jude 14–15; cf. Zech 14:5). "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Col 3:4).

Here's an interesting fact: this passage in Matthew 25:31–46 marks the first time in any of Christ's recorded statements that He explicitly refers to Himself as King. Throughout His ministry He had much to say about the kingdom of God; but He did not expressly feature Himself as King until He did so in this context, speaking privately to the disciples. (Later, before Pilate, He publicly acknowledged that He is King—John 18:37.)

The title Christ most frequently applied to Himself was "Son of Man." Even here He employs that expression, but only to say that the Son of Man will come in His glory and subsequently take *His* throne (v. 31). In verse 34 he calls Himself "King" for the first time on record. Moreover, He declares that when He takes His rightful place as King, His first duty will be to execute righteous judgment, and thus to determine who will have the right to enter His kingdom.

The Time

Scripture is precise about the timing of this judgment. It will take place "when the Son of Man comes in His glory" (v. 31). Everything in the account suggests that His judgment will begin at the very moment He appears (cf. 24:30–41). This accords perfectly with the prophecy about His coming in Revelation 19:11–21:

> Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great." And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh.

So when Christ appears, the opportunity for salvation will be gone forever. The day of mercy already spent, Christ will summarily cut off the wicked without remedy. Like the evil servant, they will be caught unawares by their Lord's return. Like the five foolish virgins, they will find the door closed and themselves locked out. Like the foolish and lazy steward, they will have no legitimate plea by which to excuse themselves. For them, the day of salvation is over. Christ is returning to establish an earthly kingdom, and none but the sheep will be permitted to enter it.

The Place

How do we know Christ will be seated on an *earthly* throne? Everything in the context points to this. He comes to earth in glory first; "*then* He will sit on the throne of His glory" (Matt 25:31, emphasis added). This marks the establishment of the earthly kingdom, emanating from Jerusalem, that is spoken of so frequently in the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. This will be the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, given in 2 Samuel 7:12–16, 1 Chronicles 7:11–15, Psalm 89:3–4, and Zechariah 14:9. He will sit "upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever" (Isa 9:7). "He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely" (Jer 33:15–16). This signifies the fulfillment of the promise the angel gave Mary: "You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and *the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David*. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31–33, emphasis added).

David's throne was an earthly one, in Jerusalem, and Scripture identifies Jerusalem as the place to which Christ will return, as well as the location of His throne:

> In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west, making a very large valley; half of the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south…. And in that day it shall be that living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them toward the western sea; in both summer and winter it shall occur. And the LORD shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be—"The LORD is one," and His name one. All the land shall be turned into a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be raised up and inhabited in her place from Benjamin's Gate to the place of the First Gate and the Corner Gate, and from the Tower of Hananel to the king's winepresses. The people shall dwell in it; and no longer shall there be utter destruction, but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited. (Zech 14:4, 8–11)

There is no good reason to interpret those promises in any sense except the literal one. Just as His ascension was literal and bodily, so shall He literally come in bodily form at His return. And since that is so, there is no valid reason to see His throne as anything but the literal reestablishment of David's earthly kingdom. His throne will be situated in Jerusalem, and Christ will rule over all the earth, finally bringing about the literal fulfillment of all the Old Testament millennial prophecies, as well as all the promises God made to Abraham about the land of Israel and all the promises He made to David about the throne.

But before the kingdom is established, a dreadful judgment must take place. Joel wrote of it centuries before Christ:

> Let the nations be wakened, and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, go down; for the winepress is full, the vats overflow—for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will grow dark, and the stars will diminish their brightness. The LORD also will roar from Zion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem; the heavens and earth will shake; but the LORD will be a shelter for His people, and the strength of the children of Israel. So you shall know that I am the LORD your God, dwelling in Zion My holy mountain. Then Jerusalem shall be holy, and no aliens shall ever pass through her again. (Joel 3:12–17)

Thus, God Himself pledged that the sheep would be separated from the goats. And none but those who love Christ will be permitted to enter or pass through His kingdom.

The Subjects

Some suggest that the subjects of this judgment are political entities—literal nations. After all, Matthew 25:32 says, "All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another." (The passage cited above from Joel also speaks to "nations.")

But the Greek term translated "nations" in Matthew 25:32 is *ethna* (from which we derive our word *ethnic*), and it speaks of *peoples*, not political or national entities. Furthermore, the context makes clear that individuals are in view in this judgment:

> Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." Then they also will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?" Then He will answer them, saying, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matt 25:34–46)

That describes a judgment based on actions for which people are individually responsible. The punishment also applies to individuals, not corporate groups. The notion that political entities could be the subjects of this judgment is completely foreign to the text.

The Process

The focus and goal of this judgment is the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous. By this judgment is brought to pass what Christ prophesied earlier in the discourse when He said, "Two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left" (24:40–41). This judgment also fulfills what was represented by the closing of the banquet door to the foolish virgins.

Notice that the judgment is not designed for Christ to *discover* who are sheep and who are goats; He knows this at the start of the judgment, when He seats the sheep on the right hand (the place of favor) and the goats on the left (the place of disfavor) (25:33). "The Lord [already] knows those who are His" (2 Tim 2:19). "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3). The purpose of the judgment is therefore only to render a formal verdict between the sheep and the goats.

The significance of the sheep-and-goat imagery would have been obvious to the disciples. They were familiar with the sight of sheep and goats being herded together. (The same practice can be observed in the Middle East today.) A single shepherd can easily oversee both kinds of creatures together, but the character of the two animals are markedly different. Sheep are docile, gentle creatures.

Goats are often unruly and hyperactive. So the two cannot easily be kept in the same fold at night. A shepherd would therefore separate the animals in the evening before closing them in pens.

The Great Shepherd will undertake a similar process before the launch of His millennial kingdom. The believing sheep will be welcomed into their domain—a kingdom full of blessings that will never end. And the unbelieving goats will be sent to a place of punishment that will never end.

The Evidence

Jesus as Judge cites the evidence that proves who is fit for the kingdom and who is not. It is the testimony of what they thought of Jesus, as evidenced by how they have treated His brethren.

Many imagine support for a doctrine of salvation by works in Jesus' words to the faithful. But the context clearly rules out such an interpretation, because our Lord makes clear that their destiny was settled and the kingdom prepared for them by the gracious decree of a sovereign God "from the foundation of the world" (Matt 25:34). In other words, their inheritance was settled in eternity past, long ages before they had done any good or evil, "[so] that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls" (Rom 9:11).

So the words of Christ underscore the biblical truth of divine election. The sheep are sheep by the grace of God alone, not because of anything they have done to make themselves worthy.

Yet their deeds are clear *evidence* of their election. These deeds are the fruit of faith. And therefore works are fitting evidence to be cited either for or against people in judgment (cf. Rom 2:5–10). Christ is in effect saying, "You are the chosen children of My Father, and your faith is made clear by the service you have rendered to Me. Welcome into My kingdom" (v. 40).

The works He cites involve compassion shown to His people by ministering to them when they are hungry, thirsty, alienated, naked, sick, or imprisoned. Such good deeds are "pure and undefiled religion," the truest evidence of a vibrant, living faith (Jas 1:27). The one who lacks such deeds reveals "dead" faith, not the living kind (cf. Jas 2:15–17). The apostle John said something similar: "Whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:17–18).

So Christ is not suggesting that such good works are *meritorious* for salvation. But they are vital evidence that the principle of eternal life really exists within a person.

Notice that those who receive the King's commendation are surprised (Matt 25:37–39). They seem almost unaware that their deeds constituted service to Christ. Much less were they thinking they might have earned his favor by such works. The good deeds were merely the natural outflow of a heart of faith.

The Condemnation

The goats are consigned to eternal punishment on similar grounds. They have proved by their works that they are "cursed" (v. 41). Christ no more condemns these people solely because they failed to do good works than He saves the others because of their works. The goats are accursed because they are wicked unbelievers. Their unfitness for the kingdom stems from a constitutional sinfulness, not merely from a shortage of philanthropic good works. They despise the King, and their contempt for Him is clearly displayed in their treatment of His people. These are Christ-rejecting unbelievers, not merely people who failed to be altruistic enough.

They are as surprised as the righteous ones were about Christ's verdict. They protest that they have not consciously or deliberately slighted Christ, but Christ exposes their guilt by calling to mind their treatment of His people—or rather their total indifference (vv. 44–45). His words of condemnation to them are an exact but inverted echo of His earlier commendation of the righteous.

The goats are eternally separated from all that is good and righteous, and they are consigned forever to "the everlasting tire prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41). Christ describes hell as a place of "everlasting punishment" (v. 46) from which there is no relief or respite forever. The English translation of this verse speaks of "everlasting punishment" and "eternal life," but in the Greek text the same word is used for both "everlasting" and "eternal." It is the word *aiōnios*, which denotes something perpetual, something never-ending. The double use of the word establishes a deliberate parallel. Christ thereby signifies that the punishment of the wicked is eternal in the same sense as the reward of the righteous. This verse therefore overturns the view of those who believe the wicked will simply be eradicated from existence. Here and throughout Scripture we are taught that the torment of hell is as

endless and unremitting as the blessedness of heaven (cf. v. 41; Dan 12:2; Mark 9:43–48; Luke 16:22–26; 2 Thess 1:9; Rev 14:11; 20:10).

The millennial kingdom will cover the entire earth; so those excluded will not even be permitted to remain alive on earth. "They will *go away* into everlasting punishment" (emphasis added).

The righteous, however, are admitted to "eternal life." They will enter the kingdom in an unglorified state and then be glorified at the end of the thousand years.[2] Their admission to the millennial kingdom is the threshold of eternal life for them. Although they enter the kingdom in an unglorified state, there is no reason to assume they will subsequently die. With the earth under the rule of righteousness, the human life span will be restored to the antediluvian norm—and probably even longer (cf. Isa 65:20). All those who enter the kingdom could therefore survive the whole thousand years, after which they will be glorified and enter fully into the eternal state. Thus entering the kingdom, they are said to enter "into eternal life."

The future of the unrighteous and the future of the righteous could hardly be more starkly different. The implication of this is plain: the time to think deeply about one's destiny is now. The time to prepare for judgment is now. The day of salvation is now. And those who wait until Christ returns will find it is already too late. We don't know the day or the hour of His return. But the time is fast approaching.

It's time to get ready:

> Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch! (Mark 13:35–37)

Addendum: Overview of Future Judgments[3]

The Bible clearly teaches that all people will face a judgment day before God when His judgment will be all that matters. A day of reckoning is coming when all will stand before the Creator to account for every thought and deed.

God is the sovereign, holy, and righteous Creator of the universe. Man is His creation, a volitional being who is obligated to serve God and live in conformity to His righteous laws and commands. Man is not an autonomous being. Everything he is and does must be measured against his Creator. Because God is perfectly holy, He cannot allow sin to go unpunished. Judgment, therefore, is a divine necessity. Moral

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[2] This would explain how the earth is populated in the kingdom. Children born to these people during the thousand years would therefore need redemption. Perhaps that is why at the end of the millennial kingdom, when Satan is released for a little while, there will still be people susceptible to his deception (Rev 20:3). After he is released, he will even be able to garner followers for one last futile rebellion (vv. 7–9).

[3] This section has been adapted and republished with permission from its original occurrence in John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 864–70. Special thanks go to Michael J. Vlach for his initial contribution to produce this discussion on future judgments.

creatures must stand before God someday to account for their deeds and motives: "And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:13).

As with other aspects of eschatology, God's judgments are multifaceted, occurring in stages. Some judgments of God such as the global flood judgment, His judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, and past historical judgments on Israel and Judah have already occurred. Judgments described in Romans 1:18–32 have gone on throughout all human history as God's wrath has fallen on corrupt societies. Plus, there is a sense in which the wrath of God already remains on the unbeliever (John 3:36). The focus of this section, however, is on future judgments.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

All Christians are headed for a day of judgment before Jesus Christ. Scripture explicitly mentions the judgment seat of Christ in two places; in each, Paul is addressing Christians:

> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Cor 5:10)

> Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. (Rom 14:10)

In both cases, the Greek word for "judgment" is *bēma*. In ancient times, a *bēma* was a raised platform or step used in athletic or political arenas. Rulers or judges would ascend the *bēma* to render decisions in legal cases. Pilate judged Jesus from his *bēma* seat (Matt 27:19; John 19:13). In athletic events, an authority figure would be elevated to a *bēma* to judge the competition and award the winners.

Scripture reveals several truths about the judgment seat of Christ. First, Jesus is the Judge who presides over this *bēma* judgment. Second Corinthians 5:10 states that this is a judgment seat "of Christ." Also, since the Father has granted all judgment to the Son (John 5:22, 27), little doubt exists that the "judgment seat of God" in Romans 14:10 also involves Jesus.

Second, the subjects of this judgment are Christians. In both 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Romans 14:10, Paul addresses Christians in Rome and Corinth. There will be other judgments, including the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers at a later time (Rev 20:11–15), but the judgment here is for Christians. In 1 Corinthians 3:11–15, Paul speaks of a judgment for Christians who have Jesus Christ as their foundation.

This judgment results in rewards for what a Christian has done with his or her life—for deeds good or bad (2 Cor 5:10). This is a whole-life evaluation. The "good" refers to those works done in the power of the Holy Spirit that bring glory to God. The "bad"' refers to worthless deeds that do not bring God honor, works done in the

flesh (Gal 5:19–21). This evaluation of good and bad deeds is further explained in 1 Corinthians 3:12–15:

> Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

The "gold, silver, [and] precious stones" here are the "good" of 2 Corinthians 5:10. Likewise, the "wood, hay, [and] straw" represent the "bad." The Lord Jesus with his judgment of fire "will test what sort of work each one has done" (1 Cor 3:13). Good works will lead to a reward (1 Cor 3:14), but bad works will be burned up in the fire. They cannot lead to reward. In fact, bad or worthless deeds are linked with suffering "loss" (1 Cor 3:15). What is this loss? It cannot be a loss of salvation since Paul says, "though he himself will be saved" (1 Cor 3:15). Nor can it be a punitive loss coming from judgment for sin. The Christian is under no condemnation for sin since Jesus has atoned for his sins (Rom 8:1). The "loss" could be the realization and awareness of lost opportunities for Christ and a deep remorse for wasting valuable opportunities to bring God glory and to gain greater eternal reward. Still, the Christian's appearance before Jesus is a joyous event. Paul told the Corinthians to "wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:7–8). Yet the Christian should strive to avoid a sense of shame and loss. John warned about this when he said, "And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming" (1 John 2:28).

The judgment seat of Christ does not stop with an evaluation of deeds; rather, it goes deeper to motives. First Corinthians 4:5 says that the Lord "will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God." Thus, the judgment before Jesus is so penetrating that motives behind deeds are evaluated as well. Not only does what we do matter, but so does why we do what we do.

The *bēma* of Jesus also has corporate implications for the church. The resurrected and rewarded church will return victoriously with Jesus at His second coming to earth (Rev 19:14). The church will also be granted the right to share in Jesus' Davidic throne reign (Rev 3:21) and to rule the nations with Him (Rev 2:26–27). Thus, faithful service in this age affects a Christian's position in the coming kingdom of Jesus. Not all Christians will receive equal reward and authority; according to Luke 19:11–27, some will be granted more ruling authority than others.

Judgment of Israel

Jesus will return to earth and set up His kingdom (Zech 14:4, 9), yet since only those who are redeemed can enter the kingdom (John 3:3), there must be judgments

to determine who will enter. One of these judgments involves Jews living at the time of Jesus' return. Ezekiel 20:33–38 explicitly explains this event:

> As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be king over you. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, declares the Lord GOD. I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. I will purge out the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against me. I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

This coming judgment of Israel will be a mighty act of God. With "wrath poured out," God will "be king" over Israel (Ezek 20:33). He will gather Jews from the "countries" where they were scattered (Ezek 20:34). The setting for this judgment scene will be "the wilderness of the peoples," and it will be an actual face-to-face meeting that parallels God's meeting with Israel in the wilderness of Egypt (Ezek 20:35–36). Israel will pass under the Lord's kingly and shepherd-like rod to enter the "bond of the covenant" (Ezek 20:37). This refers not to the Mosaic covenant but to national Israel's entrance into the blessings of the new covenant. Paul speaks of this in Romans 11:26–27, where the salvation of "all Israel" is linked with the new covenant passages of Isaiah 59:20–21 and Jeremiah 31:31–34. The new covenant was inaugurated with Jesus' death (Luke 22:20), and some of its spiritual blessings are experienced in this present age, but Israel will come into the covenant as Jesus establishes his kingdom on earth. Yet not all Israelites will enter this kingdom. The Lord says, "I will purge out the rebels from among you" (Ezek 20:38a). Even for Israel, spiritual birth is the prerequisite for entering the kingdom of God. The wicked will not enter the kingdom. Though they have been gathered from the nations for this judgment, "they shall not enter the land of Israel" (Ezek 20:38b).

This judgment of Israel could occur during the coming tribulation period or at a specific judgment setting immediately after Jesus' return to earth. The judgment of Israel at Jesus' return may also be in view in the parables of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1–13) and the talents (Matt 25:14–30). In these parables, the coming of Jesus finds people who are both foolish and wise concerning His return. The application of these parables certainly goes beyond Israel to all who await Jesus' return, but the Jewish context of Matthew 24–25 makes application of these parables to Israel likely, especially since the Sheep-Goat judgment described in Matthew 25:31–46 focuses specifically on Gentile nations.

Judgment on the Nations

The return of Jesus to earth also results in a judgment of living Gentiles. Two passages directly address this: Joel 3:1–16 and Matthew 25:31–46. First, the prophet Joel predicted,

> For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel. (Joel 3:1–2a)

The context of this passage is the day-of-the-Lord judgments of Joel 2, which involve the salvation and blessing of Israel. At this "time" when God restores Israel, He will "gather all the nations" and judge them on behalf of Israel. The Gentile nations will be judged for scattering the Jewish people and dividing up Israel's land, as well as for other atrocities (Joel 3:2b–3). The place of this judgment is specific—"the Valley of Jehoshaphat." From there God will "judge all the surrounding nations" (Joel 3:12). In sum, Joel 3 reveals that God will judge the nations that harmed Israel.

Next, Matthew 25:31–46 also describes a general judgment of Gentile nations:

> When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Matt 25:31–32)

This judgment of Gentiles is often referred to as *the sheep-goat judgment* since believers are likened to "sheep" and the wicked to "goats." The purpose of this judgment is to determine who is qualified to enter Jesus' earthly kingdom and who is not. The righteous sheep enter Jesus' kingdom while the wicked are excluded from it and slain.

The basis of this judgment is how the Gentile peoples treated others. Those who treated "the least of these" (Matt 25:40, 45) with kindness and mercy were really treating Jesus in that way, even though they were unaware of it. Likewise, mistreatment or neglect of others showed contempt for Jesus. This judgment, which is based on acts of compassion, does not indicate that salvation is based on works but rather makes clear that works accurately reveal character (see Rom 2:5–11). Faith, or the lack of it, is evidenced by works.

While the treatment of the group called "the least of these" has implications for all people, this passage may also have the treatment of the Jewish people in view. Joel 3, which is the background for the judgment of Matthew 25:31–46, declares that the judgment of the nations was on behalf of Israel and reflected how the Gentile nations treated Israel. This may be the case in Matthew 25 as well, especially since persecution of Jews is described in Matthew 24:15–28.

Matthew 25 makes no mention of a resurrection from the dead for those experiencing this judgment. This judgment, therefore, is for Gentiles alive at the time of Jesus' return. Also, it makes no mention of glorification. The "sheep" enter the earthly kingdom of Jesus in their mortal bodies, while the "goats" are executed and enter eternal fire (Matt 25:41, 46).

Judgment of Satan and Demons

Satan and his demons suffered original judgment when Satan sinned against God in heaven (Rev 12:1–4). They also experienced a Calvary judgment where their power was defeated by Jesus at the cross (Col 2:14–15). Yet three future judgments for Satan and the demons await—tribulational, millennial, and eternal judgments.

Revelation 12:7–13 tells of a tribulational judgment when Satan and his demons will be thrown from heaven to earth. At this point, Satan's access to heaven will be forever removed, and he will turn his attention to persecuting Israel on earth. This will happen around the midpoint of Daniel's seventieth week (Dan 9:27) since this event is linked with the period called "a time, and times, and half a time" (Rev 12:14), which is three and one-half years. From this point onward, Satan will no longer be able to accuse believers of sin in the presence of God (Rev 12:10–11).

Satan is currently active, opposing God's plans, deceiving the nations, and persecuting the saints of God. But Revelation 20:1–3 chronicles a coming millennial judgment, after Jesus' return to earth (Rev 19:11–21), when Satan will be seized, bound, and thrown into a pit. This pit is not the lake of fire but a spiritual prison that will completely remove Satan's access to the earth and his ability to deceive. It is probable that all demons will be incarcerated with Satan during this time, while Jesus and his saints will rule the earth for a thousand years with no interference from Satan and his corrupt fallen angels (Rev 20:4).

The final judgment of Satan and the demons will take place in the eternal judgment after the millennium (Rev 20:7–10). The forces of hell will be released for one final yet doomed rebellion. Satan, demons, and a foolish Christ-rejecting multitude from the nations will attempt to attack the beloved city of Jerusalem, but fire from heaven will instantly consume them in judgment. At that time, Satan and all demons (Matt 25:41; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6) will join the Antichrist and the false prophet in the lake of fire (Rev 20:10). This is the final judgment of Satan and his demons, when they will forever be removed from opposing God's kingdom and God's people.

The Great White Throne Judgment

All unbelievers are ultimately destined for the Great White Throne judgment. This terrifying event is described in Revelation 20:11–15:

> Then I saw a Great White Throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

This final sentencing of the lost is the most serious, sobering, and tragic passage in the Bible. This is the last courtroom scene in history.

The timing of this Great White Throne judgment takes place after the thousand-year reign of Christ and His saints (Rev 20:4–7). The One present on the throne is none other than God Almighty (Rev 4:2–11), which must certainly refer to Jesus since all judgment has been granted to Him (John 5:22, 26–27).

The purpose of this judgment is to declare who will be sent to the lake of fire (Rev 20:15), which is also referred to as "the second death" (Rev 20:6). The subjects of the Great White Throne judgment are unbelievers, whose bodies are raised from "Death and Hades" for this judgment (Rev 20:13).

The basis of the Great White Throne judgment is works (Rev 20:13), and the evidence for this judgment is contained in books that reveal the character and deeds of every person. The reference to "books were opened" may include records of the deeds of those before the throne. Then "another book" identified as "the book of life" is opened. This book lists those who have been saved by Jesus. The book of life is a testimony against the unsaved, whose names are not in it. These are "thrown into the lake of fire," which is the final destiny of the lost.

Are the Sheep-Goat Judgment and the Great White Throne Judgment the Same?

Some theologians view the Sheep-Goat judgment of Matthew 25:31–46 and the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 20:11–15 as the same event. They suggest that both describe a judgment scene and a fiery destiny for the wicked. But a close examination reveals that these two judgments cannot be the same. First, the *timing* of the Sheep-Goat judgment occurs in close proximity to Jesus' Second Coming (see Matt 25:31–32). Jesus comes in glory with His angels and sits on His glorious throne (i.e., His Davidic throne), and then all the nations are gathered before Him for judgment. So the Sheep-Goat judgment is closely connected to Jesus' Second Coming. On the other hand, the Great White Throne judgment occurs after the thousand-year reign of Jesus and His saints (Rev 20:4–7). Subsequent to the thousand years (Rev 20:7), the Great White Throne judgment takes place (Rev 20:11–15). This point alone shows that these judgments are distinct. One judgment occurs at the beginning of Jesus' kingdom reign, while the other occurs after the millennium in the transition to the eternal state. Also, the resurrections, separated by a thousand years (see Rev 20:4–5), strongly suggest that these are two distinct judgments.

In addition to timing, differences exist in the details of these judgments. The *purpose* of the Sheep-Goat judgment is to see who will inherit the kingdom (Matt 25:34) and who will not (Matt 25:41). The purpose of the Great White Throne judgment is to see who will be sent to the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). Their purposes are different, and no hope is offered at the Great White Throne.

Also, the *subjects* of the Sheep-Goat judgment are both believers and nonbelievers—sheep and goats (Matt 25:32). But the subjects of the Great White Throne are only unbelievers. While Revelation 20:11–15 does not exclude believers being present as spectators at this judgment, it does not mention them. The subjects of the Sheep-Goat judgment are those alive at the time of the Second Coming of Jesus, but the Great White Throne judgment involves the resurrection of the lost (Rev 20:13). The sea and Hades give up their dead for this judgment. These differences indicate that the two judgments are each unique and occur at separate times.

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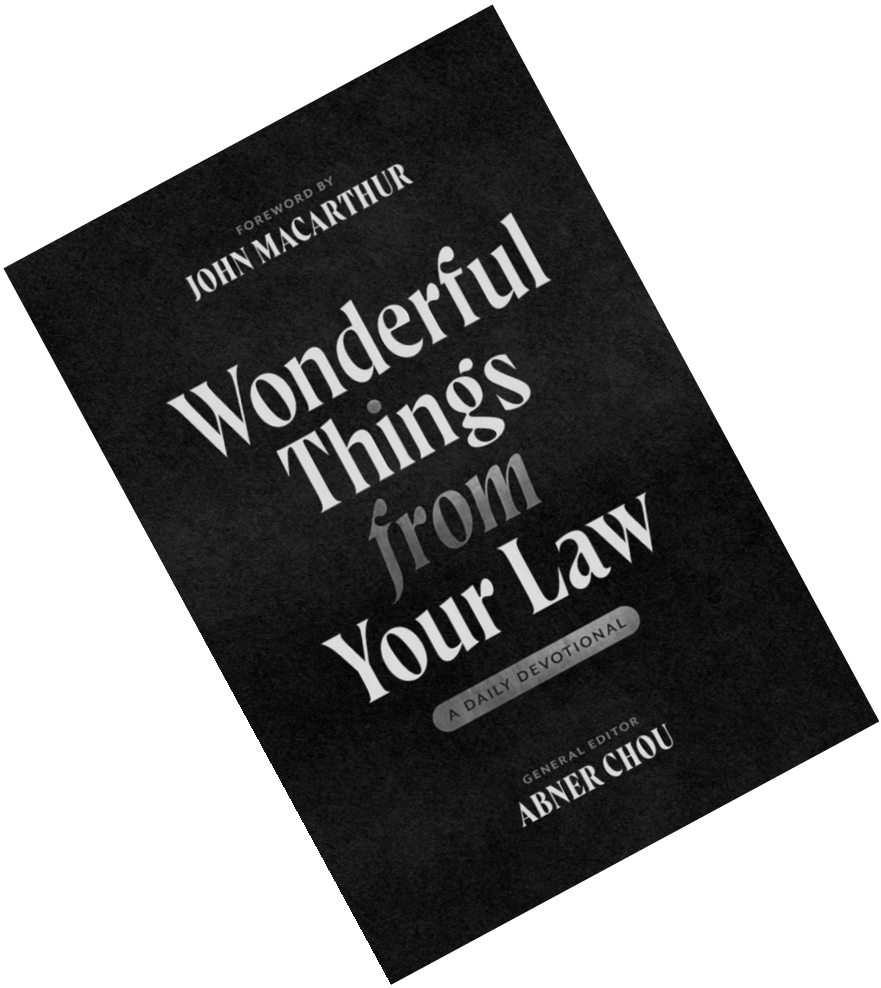

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FROM NICAEA 325 TO CONSTANTINOPLE 381—ATHANASIUS, BASIL OF CAESAREA, GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS AND GREGORY OF NYSSA ON TÒ ἍΓΙΟΝ ΠΝΕΥ̃ΜΑ: PART ONE

...καὶ εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα.

...and in the Holy Spirit.

Kevin Zuber
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Theology Department Chair
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* * * * *

This article is Part One of a two-part series on what the church believes about the Holy Spirit. This article—Part One—has three sections. First, there is a brief examination of the question, "Why is the statement of the Nicene creed of 325 on the Holy Spirit so brief?" Second, there is a succinct excursus presenting the biblical teaching that the Holy Spirit has both deity and personhood. Third, there is the first installment of an examination of the work of four key fourth-century theologians on the subject of the Holy Spirit. This first installment examines the work of Athanasius; the other installments (constituting the whole of Part Two) examine the work of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. The objective of this examination of the work of these theologians is to understand how the church went from the inadequate statement about the Spirit in the Nicene Creed of 325 to produce the better statement about the Spirit in the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381. In particular, the intention of this study is to show the part Scripture played as these theologians engaged with heretical views and as they articulated their doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

* * * * *

Introduction

The Nicene Creed 325: Πιστεύομεν … εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα

The Nicene Creed of 325 has about a dozen words in the statement of belief (Πιστεύομεν) about God the Father (Θεὸν Πατέρα), it has around eighty words in the statement about the Son (καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν, τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ), but it has just five words in the statement of belief about the Spirit—καὶ εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα.[1] This disparity begs for an explanation; however, that explanation might not be easily discovered.

To begin with, the statement about God the Father would have been considered as something of a given. To affirm His one-ness (monarchy) and the fact that He Himself is uncreated (and is the source of all that is creation) and that He was "un-generate" would not have been contested before, during, or after the council by most (or likely by any) of the council's attendees.[2] A brief statement on this point of belief is not surprising.

With respect to the affirmation of belief about the Son, it must be observed that this in large part was the issue the council had been called to address. The controversy had begun when Arius in 318 initiated a controversy concerning the personal status and nature of the Son.[3] Since this issue was the central issue debated in the council, it would naturally follow that the most extensive affirmation of belief in a creed published by the council was about the Son. In short, the council was called to address the Arian heresy and the creed expressly repudiated Arianism by affirming the consubstantiality of the Son; it just makes sense that more words were needed to express this affirmation.

So much for the affirmations concerning the Father and the Son; this still leaves the question of the brevity of the affirmation of belief in the Holy Spirit. Several explanations might be proposed. Some historical theologians have suggested that the theology of the Spirit had been neglected in the theologies of the third century. Kelly

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[1] Hanson suggests the Nicene Creed "dismissed the subject [of the Spirit] in six words καὶ εἰς τὸ ρνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον." R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 741. Hanson does not cite a source for this version of the creed.

[2] The doctrine reflected in this first statement was based of course on the Scriptural revelation about the God and Father (see Abner Chou's article, "One God in Nicaea, 1 Corinthians, and Deuteronomy: The Hermeneutic of the Biblical Writers and the Early Church," in this issue) which was uncontested by the theologians of the church from the second century on: "The doctrine of one God, the Father and creator, formed the background and indisputable premise of the church's faith." J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978), 87.

[3] There are a number of good historical and theological surveys of the Arian controversy; these works are highly recommended: Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*: *The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Lewis Ayers, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Behr, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, *The Nicene Faith*: *Part One: True God of True God* and *Part Two: One of the Holy Trinity* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy*; Francis Young with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*: *A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); for a briefer survey, see Franz Dünzel, trans. John Bowden, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*, (New York: T&T Clark / Continuum, 2007).

writes "Since Origen's day, theological reflection about the Spirit had lagged noticeably behind devotional practice."[4] Bray bluntly suggests that "the doctrine of the Holy Spirit" had settled into "relative oblivion" prior to the fourth century.[5] And Hanson notes, "The doctrine of the Holy Spirit emerged into the fourth century as a minor concern of the church's theologians."[6]

However, in the comment quoted above Kelly acknowledges that the Spirit was included in the church's "devotional practice," and if this "devotional practice" included the church's worship and rites such as baptism, then the suggestion that the Spirit had been "neglected" in the prior centuries seems less credible. Indeed, as far back as Irenaeus in the second century, the "rule of faith" had affirmed "the faith in one God, the Father Almighty, who has made the heaven, the earth, the seas, and all things in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who has proclaimed through the prophets, the plans of God and the comings of Christ, both of the birth … and his coming again…"[7] The "rule of faith" was most likely related to the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 and was likely the confession of belief made by those submitting to the rite of Christian water baptism.[8] Thus the "worship and religious experience of the Church and the continually practiced custom of baptizing into the Triple Name prevented the intellectuals from omitting the Holy Spirit altogether from their calculations."[9] Thus, in fact "the Spirit was not totally neglected before the doctrinal debates of the fourth century. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, for example, had significant things to say

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[4] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 255.

[5] Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 620. To be fair, Bray also notes that the Holy Spirit "did not disappear from view altogether." Bray further notes that Eusebius of Caesarea had written about the Spirit but "he clearly promoted a subordinationism that made the Spirit less than fully God." Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 621; see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 255. Bray (*God Has Spoken*, 621) also notes the contribution of Cyril of Jerusalem on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Cyril—with an eye to the validity of the baptismal formula (*Catechetical Lecture* 16)—taught that the Spirit "had the same dignity of status as the Father and the Son, and that he spoke the Word of God through the prophets of both Old and New Testaments"; but while Cyril confessed that the Spirit was subsistent with the Father and the Son, he never fully affirmed the consubstantiality of the Spirit (Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 256).

[6] Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 739.

[7] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1; cited in and quoted here from Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 4. For more examples where Irenaeus mentions the three—God Almighty/God the Father, and the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.33.7 and Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 6, quoted in Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith*, 5–6. The reader should note that even this brief quotation indicates how close Irenaeus came to the final form of the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.

[8] See Tomas Bokedal, "The Rule of Faith: Tracing Its Origins," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (2013): 233–55; The "rule of faith" also "provided a 'road map' for the proper interpretation of Scripture." Paul Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith' and Patristic Biblical Exegesis," *Trinity Journal* 28 (Spring 2007): 66. "The rule was often associated with Scripture and the apostolic tradition transmitted through Scripture. The rule was an epitome, the essential content, of the Scriptural tradition, an abstract of the plan of salvation." Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith*, 39. For more on the relation of the "rule of faith" to baptism, see Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 433.

[9] Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 739.

about the Holy Spirit."[10] It is true that the controversy over the person and nature of the Son—a controversy begun by the heretical notions of Arius, notions opposed by Alexander and his young associate Athanasius[11]—did dominate the proceedings at Nicaea in 325. Thus it might be conceded that the focus on the Son at Nicaea "precipitated a certain forgetfulness of the Holy Spirit."[12] It could therefore be argued that since there was no one advocating heretical notions of the Spirit (as Arius was advocating heretical notions of the Son),[13] there was no need to elaborate when it came to the statement of belief about the Spirit. Thus, while there must have been at least enough interest in the Spirit for this brief affirmation of belief to be included at all—however brief—there was not yet enough controversy to require elaboration on belief in the Spirit.

To expand on that line of thinking, it may be suggested that on the one hand there was enough of a shared understanding of the referent of τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα—the bishops at Nicaea must have had some notion and to some degree a shared notion—of who or what was being referenced by the words τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα that further elaboration was considered to be unnecessary. On the other hand, a counter argument to that might be that the brevity of this affirmation of belief perhaps reflected a serious divergence of opinion about τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα, that—if not openly discussed among bishops assembled at Nicaea in 325—prevented them from elaborating on the person and nature of the Spirit as they had on the Son. In short, either there was such accord regarding the Spirit that elaboration was unnecessary (as with the statement of belief

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[10] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 133. Indeed, Mark DelCogliano suggests in a "brief survey of pre-fourth century pneumatology" ("General Introduction," in *Works on the Spirit: Athanasius the Great and Didymus the Blind*, eds. Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz and Lewis Ayres [Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011]) that the fourth century debates were a "third stage" in the church's theological reflection on the Holy Spirit, (see pages 7, 11, 13). The other stages DelCogliano posits are: (1) the first and second centuries including the works of a few of the apologists and Irenaeus and (2) the third century including the works of Tertullian and Origen (both of which employed the "Trinitarian order"—Father, Son, and Spirit—but both of which were subordinationist. DelCogliano, "General Introduction," 12–13.

For more on the theology of the Spirit in the centuries before Nicaea 325, see these works that indicate the Holy Spirit was not "neglected" in those centuries: J. Patout Burns and Gerald M. Fagin, *Message of the Fathers of the Church: The Holy Spirit* (Eugene, OR; Wipf and Stock, 1984, 2002); Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church*: *A Study of Christian Teaching in the Age of the Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912).

[11] For the details see the works cited in footnote 3 above.

[12] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 133. "This forgetting is all the more explicable if we consider that the question of Christ's divinity was wrapped up with how God and creation relate and how Jesus Christ, as somehow 'divine' and Creator while also a human creature* mediates this relation. The framework structured by the Father-Son and God-world binaries did not readily extend itself to the consideration of the third [member] of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit," Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 133. *This is an unfortunate choice of words; in the opinion of this writer, Anatolios should have said "while taking a human nature."

[13] At one point after the council, Athanasius briefly mentioned Arius' views on the personal status and nature of the Spirit. Athanasius cites Arius' in *Thalia* as affirming that "'the essences of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, are separate in nature, and estranged, and disconnected, and alien, and without participation of each other;' and, in his own words, 'utterly unlike from each other in essence and glory, unto infinity.'" Athanasius, "Four Discourses Against the Arians," in *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 4, trans. John Henry Newman, rev. Archibald Robinson, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 309; see Allison, *Historical Theology,* 434. However, Hanson cautiously writes "From such scanty evidence no firm conclusions can be drawn." Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 744.

regarding the Father), or there were so many incongruent views that a more precise statement was not possible.

There does not seem to be enough evidence to argue convincedly either way, and it could be that there is some truth to both of these notions. Nevertheless, it seems that the bishops gathered at Nicaea in 325 had a pretty good idea about the place of the Spirit in the triad—a triad that the "devotional practice" of the church had affirmed since the second century—so a statement about the Spirit was included. However, since they were focused on the issues raised by Arius about the Son—that being the heresy *de jour* that commanded their attention—it seems that at that time they did not raise, or address (or elaborate on) issues related to the Spirit.

Indeed, as events turned out even with the precise statement of the Son's consubstantiality with the Father, the creed of Nicaea 325 did not end the controversy over the person and nature of the Son; that controversy in one form or another occupied the defenders of the Nicene Creed 325 for another half century until the Council of Constantinople in 381 (see Part Two). This also likely contributed to the ongoing (relative) inattention regarding the status of the Spirit. Hanson suggests that at least until about AD 360, while that debate about the Son was going on, there was still no parallel debate about the Spirit.[14] Only when certain heretical notions of the Spirit arose—surprisingly, (see below) among those who affirmed the Nicene doctrine of the consubstantiality of Son—did the church turn its attention to the inadequacy of the statement of belief about the Spirit in the creed of 325.

The reasons for the brevity of the statement may never be fully explained, but the fact was (and is) this statement about the Spirit was inadequate because the "creed does not, of course, say whether the Spirit is God or not."[15]

The Bible Teaches That the Holy Spirit Is God

Before going further, it would serve the purpose of this issue of *The Master's Seminary Journal* to include a brief survey of the Bible's teaching about the deity of the Holy Spirit. This is to answer the question, "What might an evangelical believer today reasonably and biblically mean when affirming, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit'?"

The Scriptures indicate that the Holy Spirit is a Person—as are the Father and the Son—and that He is God—deity. Three passages in the New Testament make the case (more or less) indirectly for the deity of the Holy Spirit. The first is found in Acts 5 in the account of the incident with Ananias and his wife Sapphira (cf. Acts 5:1–6). In this situation as the Apostle Peter was rebuking Ananias for his duplicity, Peter indicted him for lying and charged Ananias with lying "to the Holy Spirit" (5:3);[16] but in the same speech Peter advised Ananias: "You have not lied to men

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[14] "When we examine the creed and confessions of faith which were so plentifully produced between the years 325 and 360, we gain the overwhelming impression that no school of thought during that period was particularly interested in the Holy Spirit." Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God,* 741.

[15] The statement here is from Hanson (*Christian Doctrine of God*, 741) and he is referencing "the Dedication Creed" of Antioch 341—but it equally applies to the creed of Nicaea 325.

[16] All quotations from Scripture are from the *New American Standard Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Lockman, 1995).

but to God." (5:4).[17] To state the obvious, Peter here equates lying to the Holy Spirit as lying to God.

Another text that makes the case for the deity of the Holy Spirit is found in Matthew 12:31 where Jesus teaches that "any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven" (12:31). If the definition of blasphemy as "evil, slanderous, or defamatory speech about God" is accepted,[18] then this is an indication that Jesus considered the Holy Spirit to be God.

In the Apostle Paul's discussion of true and false wisdom in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, he explained how it was that he was able "to speak wisdom among those who are mature" (2:6). It was because he spoke "God's wisdom" (2:7), a wisdom "which none of the rulers of this age has understood" (2:8). He further explained how he had received that wisdom: "For to us God revealed [it] through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God" (2:10). And he went on to explain that this Spirit-revealed wisdom from God was truly God's wisdom because "the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God" (2:11). The completed thought is, Paul knew God's wisdom because the Spirit who is God was the one who revealed God's wisdom to him.[19]

In addition, a number of texts apply certain perfections and attributes of God to the Holy Spirit. For instance, the Holy Spirit possesses: "eternality (Heb. 9:14); glory (1 Pet. 4:14; cf. Isa. 42:8; 48:11); holiness (Ps. 51:11; Isa. 63:10–11; Matt. 1:18; Rom.1:4); omnipotence (Gen. 1:1–2; Luke 1:35; Rom. 1:4); omnipresence (Ps. 139:7–10; cf. Jer. 23:24); omniscience (Isa. 40:13; 1 Cor. 2:10–11)."[20]

Other texts ascribe actions to the Holy Spirit that are "the actions of God" such as "creation (Gen. 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4), inspiration [of the Scriptures] (2 Pet. 1:20–21), regeneration (John 3:5–8; Titus 3:5)[21] and sanctification [and glorification of those who are justified, Rom. 8:30b] (2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2)."[22]

Also, the Spirit is referred to in a number of texts that indicate He is to be regarded as the equal of the other two persons in the Trinity. For instance, "in relation to the Father he is called: 'his Spirit' (Num. 11:29; Rom. 8:11); 'your [Holy] Spirit' (Ps. 139:7; 51:11); 'the Spirit of God' (Gen. 1:2; Matt. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:11)"; the Spirit "'of our God' (1 Cor. 6:11) … [Spirit] of the living God" (2 Cor. 3:3) and [Spirit] '…of the Lord God' (Isa. 61:1)."[23] And significantly in "relation to the Son he is

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[17] As will be seen this passage was prominently referenced by the church fathers surveyed below.

[18] L. Bretherton, "Blasphemy," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell and T. A. Noble (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 125. On "The Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit…" see also John MacArthur, ed. *Essential Christian Doctrines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 195.

[19] See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 258. "In a different tradition from Athanasius to Barth this verse [1 Cor 2:11] has been understood, rightly, as indicating that in Barth's words, 'God is known through God alone.'" Thiselton is citing Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 2, no. 1, section 27, 179, and referring to Athanasius' *Letters to Serapion*, 1.22 (PG, 26:581), 258.

[20] MacArthur, *Essential Christian Doctrines*, 190.

[21] It is argued, "only God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit can give new spiritual life to those who were previously dead in their sins (Rom. 8:2, 6, 10–11). Regeneration directly addresses this gracious act of God." MacArthur, *Essential Christian Doctrines*, 193.

[22] MacArthur, *Essential Christian Doctrines*, 190.

[23] MacArthur, 190.

called: 'the Spirit of Jesus' (Acts 16:7) and [Spirit] 'of Christ' (Rom. 8:9; 1 Pet. 1:11; cf. Phil. 1:19)" as well as "'the Spirit of his Son' (Gal. 4:6)."[24]

There are other texts that

> associate the Holy Spirit with the other members of the Godhead [such as] Matthew 28:19, the baptism instructions; 1 Corinthians 2:10–13, the Father (God) and the Spirit complement each other equally in the revelation, illumination, and interpretation of God's Word; 2 Corinthians 13:14, all three members of the Godhead are mentioned and set on equal footing in this Pauline Trinitarian benediction; Revelation 1:4–6, this Johannine Trinitarian invocation links the Father, the Spirit, and the Son together as coequals. In John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7 the Spirit is called "another Helper" (Gk. *allos*, "another of the same kind"), where the other Helper in view is Jesus, a member of the triune Godhead.[25]

These texts that indicate the Spirit is to be regarded as the equal of the other two members of the Trinity also serve to indicate that He is a person just as they are persons. For instance, a key text is Matthew 28:19—the baptismal formula. In this formula, as a confession of one's faith it would make little sense to consider the Spirit an impersonal force or influence and the Father and Son as persons—especially since a candidate was to be baptized in the singular "name" (ὄνομα) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[26] Another text, John 14:16 records the promise of Jesus: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, so that He may be with you forever." Here Jesus promised to send "another Helper" (ἄλλον Παράκλητον) to the disciples. Jesus' use of the term ἄλλον with Παράκλητον has the sense of "another Comforter similar to Himself,"[27] and since Jesus was a person, it may be presumed that the Holy Spirit must be a person as well.[28]

Finally, if "personhood" is "determined by the possession of three basic characteristics: (1) cognition/intellect, (2) volition/will, and (3) emotion/affection," one needs only to consider the following three collections of texts to appreciate that Scripture recognizes the Spirit as a person.

> Examples of his cognition/intellect: he knows, and he counsels and imparts wisdom (Isa. 11:2); he possesses a mind (Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 2:10–13); he inspired Scripture and provides truth (Acts 1:16; Heb. 3:7; 10:15; 1 Pet. 1:11; 2 Pet. 1:21; cf. John 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6); he testifies (John 15:26; 1 John 5:7–8).

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[24] MacArthur, *Essential Christian Doctrines*, 190.

[25] MacArthur, 190.

[26] Leon Morris notes: "we should notice that the word *name* is singular; Jesus does not say that his followers should baptize in the 'names' of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but in the 'name' of these three. It points to the fact that they are in some sense one." Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 748.

[27] Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1880), 357.

[28] See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 876.

> Examples of his affection/emotion: he experiences joy (1 Thess. 1:6); he grieves over sin (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30); he loves (Rom. 5:5; 15:30; Gal. 5:22).
>
> Examples of his volition/will: he contends with sinners (Gen. 6:3; Acts 7:51); he directs believers and distributes spiritual gifts (Acts 16:6–7; cf. 1 Cor. 12:11; Heb. 2:4).[29]

However, it must be admitted that the bishops of Nicaea probably did not see these texts as (more or less clear) proof texts for the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit as these texts are seen by evangelical theologians in the twenty-first century. The rest of this article (and Part Two) will explore how the church moved on from the inadequate statement of belief about the Spirit in the Nicene Creed of 325 to the more adequate (if even then not yet fully adequate) statement of belief about the Spirit in the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.

Getting to Constantinople in 381: Part One – Athanasius on the Holy Spirit

As noted above, the debate over the person and nature of the Son did not end after 325. Indeed, some events such as the Council of Sirmium 357 (and its creed, which came to be known as "The Blasphemy of Sirmium")[30] seemed to portend a victory for Arianism at the time. Over the decades of the fourth century ever newer (and more tenacious) versions of "Arian-like" doctrines (such as those of the "Neo-Arians," Aetius and Eunomious)[31] continued to appear. But through the relentless work of men like Athanasius and the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa), Nicene orthodoxy regarding the consubstantiality of the Son not only survived but in time began to prevail.[32]

The controversy over the Spirit, however, was something of a delayed reaction waiting both a widespread (if not thorough) acceptance of Nicene orthodoxy regarding the Son and the rise of notions about the Spirit that were incompatible with Nicene orthodoxy. In comments which are perhaps a bit too sanguine, Bray asserts "with the resolution of the Christological problems thrown up by Arianism," Nicene orthodoxy "began to prevail" and "raised the question of the identity of the Spirit."[33] "If the Father was fully God, which almost no one had ever doubted, and the Son was equally divine, what could be said about the third person of the Trinity."[34] Bray indicates that the "Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381" would finally address that question.[35] But that came about only because—as is so often the case—some

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[29] MacArthur, *Essential Christian Doctrines*, 186.

[30] Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 345.

[31] Hanson, 598–636.

[32] "The three theologians were responsible, building on the foundation which Athanasius had laid, for establishing finally that the Son … must not be in any sense subordinated to the Father." "All the Cappadocians maintained that in becoming man, the Son of God betrayed no inferiority in divine status or compromised his divinity." Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 730, 732. See Allison, *Historical Theology*, 238–40; Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 273–87; Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 639–737.

[33] Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 610.

[34] Bray, 610.

[35] Bray, 610.

heretical notions compelled the church to search the Scriptures to accurately articulate true doctrine.

The remainder of this article (Part One) will begin a study (extended in Part Two) of four fourth-century theologians: Athanasius, and the three Cappadocians—Basil of Caesarea (alternatively, Basil the Great), Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa.[36] In large measure these theologians are the men who (in combating heresy) articulated the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that led to the expanded affirmation of belief concerning τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα in the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381. The focus of this study is not just to determine that each one of these theologians affirmed the deity of the Spirit—they all did (in their own terms); rather this study is an examination of how each of these theologians regarded and employed Scripture in articulating their doctrine and in combating those who denied the deity and consubstantiality of the Spirit.

Athanasius: His Method and Use of Scripture in *Orations against the Arians*[37]

It will be helpful to begin by understanding something about Athanasius' regard for Scripture and his hermeneutical method when confronting his main theological opponents—the Arians and later the Pneumatomachians. Michael Haykin writes, "Athanasius [was] a theologian steeped in the Scriptures." "His broad knowledge of the Scriptures served Athanasius in good stead" when engaging with his opponents in the several controversies.[38] Commenting on Athanasius' method in responding to the dangers of Arianism, Archibald Robinson notes that Athanasius "went back to the authority of Scripture and the Rule of Faith. He was influenced *positively* by the Nicene formula … [which] found in Athanasius, a mind predisposed to enter into its spirit to employ in its defense, the richest resources of theological and biblical training, of spiritual depth and vigor…"[39] In other words, Athanasius knew well, and put his greatest confidence in, the Scriptures; but he also knew the tradition and upheld the validity (and hermeneutical value) of the "rule of faith."[40] The Scriptures were the source of his doctrine, the "rule of faith" informed and sustained his commitment to that truth (being itself faithful to the teaching of Scripture), and these led to his commitment to the rightness of the theology behind the words (correctly understood) of the Nicene Creed of 325. In short, the Nicene Creed of 325 was the correct expression of Scriptural truth and the rule of faith.

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[36] The first installment of this part of the study is here, in Part One of this two-part series, and deals with Athanasius. Part Two will have three more installments, one each for Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa.

[37] Athanasius, "Four Discourses Against the Arians," in *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, 308–447.

[38] Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Spirit of God*: *The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), 63. "But the main and paramount source of his doctrine is the Bible." Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 422.

[39] Archibald Robinson, "Prolegomena," in *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), lxviii–lxix; emphasis in the original.

[40] See discussion, definition, and sources at footnotes 7 and 8.

This characterization accords well with the insights of Frances Young in her analysis of Athanasius' use of Scripture in his *Orations against the Arians*.[41] Young observes that "It is now generally accepted that Athanasius' *Orations against the Arians*, written in the 340s, effectively constructed "Arianism."[42] That is, it was Athanasius' rebuttal of Arian teaching that "sharpened up the issues" between Nicene orthodoxy and Arianism, "refuting [the latter's] basic principles and challenging 'Arian' exegesis of key texts."[43] In the first part of *Orations against the Arians* Athanasius engaged with "the scriptural texts that emerged in the controversy"; his objective was—not so much to prove Arian exegesis was wrong but—to show how these texts were "susceptible to opposing interpretations."[44] However, instead of proceeding directly to his own "correct" exegesis of Scripture texts, "Athanasius first [set] out the basic shape of Arian doctrine, then [summarized] his own overall approach and [contrasted] the two."[45]

Young calls "the basic shape" and "overall approach" of the two sides "frameworks."[46] Young cites the work of James Ernest,[47] who suggests that Athanasius understood Scripture as a "unified whole" that reveals a "biblical metanarrative," even a "controlling metanarrative."[48] Young summarizes this "metanarrative" as encompassing "creation, fall, redemption, and union with the divine by participation in the truly divine son … the fundamental story into which we are drawn by scripture, and which only makes sense if the redeemer embodies absolutely the divine nature into which we may be adopted."[49] By the third book of

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[41] Frances M. Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute: Doctrine and Scripture in Early Christianity*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), 30ff.

[42] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 30.

[43] Young, 30.

[44] Young, 31. It was due the disparate and opposing frameworks (i.e., the theological presuppositions) of each side that the texts were "susceptible to opposing interpretations." That is, each side—reading the texts through the lens of their own frameworks—came up with "opposing interpretations" each more-or-less plausible from within the opposing framework; see below at footnote 51.

[45] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 31.

[46] Young, 31. Of course, any such "framework" will claim that was drawn from or emerged from Scripture itself. But such "frameworks" are not immune from the influence of other frameworks and worldviews. It should be kept in mind that the theological and scriptural debates of the fourth century took place when the prevailing philosophical framework was Neo-Platonic. Anatolios notes in the case of Arius: "It may also be that Arius found philosophical resources for asserting the absolute sovereignty and priority of the biblical God in emerging Neoplatonism, which tended to elevate the first principle beyond any secondary and intermediate 'divine' beings." Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 45. In other words, it may be that Arius could think of the being of the Father as utterly separate from all lesser beings, including the Son, because Plotinian ideas of the One as a being utterly separate from all lesser beings were floating around in the intellectual circles of the day. Thus, "Arius may have been influenced by contemporary Platonist philosophy, which distinguishes kinds of divinity, including generated ones … but Arius may also have been led to such a view because of his wish to defend a stronger and more hierarchical monotheism than Origen." George Karamanolis, *The Philosophy of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 91–92. In any case, theologians (both orthodox and otherwise) must be wary of claims of presuppositionless reading of the Bible and neutral exegesis of Scripture.

[47] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 36.

[48] James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 131–32, 136, 141–42, 151.

[49] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 36. Young adds that this "metanarrative" can be discerned in Athanasius' earlier works such as *On the Incarnation;* Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 36.

Orations against the Arians[50] (and significantly "by the time of his third exile[51]—which was when he began responding to the Pneumatomachians [see below]), Athanasius was referring to this "biblical metanarrative" as "the scope of scripture," "the scope of the Christian faith," and "the ecclesiastical scope."[52] Athanasius understood that these "frameworks" were "fundamental to the way, scripture is read on either side."[53] "The rival frameworks [even] determine the selection of [scriptural] texts and the reading of those texts."[54] For Athanasius the true guide to right reading of Scripture is the *skopos* (σκοπός) of Scripture, "which is not an exegetical method, but an insistence that the Bible is a coherent whole whose central motif is the incarnation of the uncreated Word of God for human salvation…. This is how, for Athanasius, the metanarrative controls the interpretation of particular images and verses."[55]

How did Athanasius come to discern the "framework," "biblical metanarrative," or "the scope of scripture?" Young notes, "scripture itself, along with traditional readings of it … undoubtedly contributed to these frameworks."[56] There was a sort of narrowing of the perspective: starting from the "unified whole"[57] of Scripture which enabled Athanasius to discern[58] "the mind of Scripture,"[59] he would weave texts and language "from all parts of the canon into concise summaries of the overall shape of the biblical narrative";[60] he also discerned what Ernest calls "elements or windows into the narrative"—(the term Athanasius used for this is παραδείγματα, which refers to)—the images, titles or key texts "from which deductions can be drawn and on the basis of which statements about the Logos can be judged, adequate or inadequate."[61]

Haykin, in a similar line of thinking, writes that Athanasius "presupposed an understanding of the central theme of the Bible, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and a life lived in obedience to that revelation" (*The Spirit of God*, 63).

[50] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 37.

[51] Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius*, 142.

[52] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 37.

[53] Young, 31.

[54] Young, 33. In [ ] added by this writer.

[55] Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius*, 150–51.

[56] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 31.

[57] Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius*, 131.

[58] Elaboration of the points made in this sentence would go well beyond the scope (no pun intended) of this article. The point here is only to indicate that Athanasius' understanding of the "framework," "biblical metanarrative," "the scope of scripture" is not that of an arbitrary standard *imposed on* Scripture but understanding of Scripture that *emerges from* Scripture itself.

[59] On this see Frances M. Young, "The Mind of Scripture," in *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997), 29–45. "But fundamentally, it is his sense of the overarching plot, a sense inherited from the past and ingrained in the tradition of the Church, which allows him to be innovative in exegetical detail, and confident of providing the correct and 'pious' reading." Young, "The Mind of Scripture," 43.

[60] Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius*, 132.

[61] Ernest, 152. "Next in importance are the images, which are elements of the metanarrative, or provide a means of grasping the metanarrative, and so far as humans can grasp it." Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius*, 125. Again, for Athanasius it seems that getting to the "framework," "biblical metanarrative," or "the scope of scripture" was not so much a "linear process" that began with "neutral inductive exegesis," followed by the discovery of biblical themes, culminating in something like a proposition of systematic

But at the heart of it all—at each phase—(as noted by Ernest above[62]) was the central fact of the Incarnation. Charles Kannengiesser writes,

> Athanasius insists that the Arians are mistaken in their concept of theology, because they believe they are able to form a Christian idea of God by first developing in isolation the theory of the divinity of the Father and the Son without taking into consideration *right from the start* the mystery of the incarnation of the Son … he remained faithful throughout his life to this fundamental intuition: that which is first in the exposition of the Christian faith is not God as such, nor the universe in its divine origin, but the historical event of salvation accomplished by Christ.[63]

With this "biblical metanarrative," "the scope of scripture," and with the "concise summaries" he put together, and with the παραδείγματα in mind, Athanasius was ready to proceed with his exegesis. In dealing with the Arians, he discovered that a "literalistic approach to the Scriptures" combined with the fact that the Arians selected their own proof-texts "was not a satisfactory hermeneutic."[64] In dealing with the texts of his opponents, Athanasius had a variety of defensive tactics.[65] But his primary approach was to engage in "dogmatic exegesis" in which his argumentation proceeds directly from those passages of Scripture which are central to his position."[66] His exegetical method was not allegorical, and he demonstrated "respect for the normal or 'earthly' meaning of words." But, Young observes, the words were "elevated for their theological context."[67]

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theology; rather, for Athanasius it was an understanding that emerged. It began with a basic "grasp of the whole"—the "mind of Scripture"—that emerged from Scripture itself; this was what was reflected in tradition (the "rule of faith"). That "basic grasp" was better formed and informed by the "concise summaries" he put together and the παραδείγματα he discerned (quite often in the course of his arguments against his opponents). It was that emergent and emerging but continually formed and informed "scope of scripture" that Athanasius brought to his exegetical work and his theological works. Athanasius did not provide a prolegomenon of this theological method; he engaged heretics and in the course of theological debate, he discerned and defended what he understood as the truth of Scripture—and all the while, he firmly believed the Nicene creed of 325 articulated that truth. The reader should reread Archibald Robinson's quote at footnote 38.

[62] See footnote 53 above.

[63] Charles Kannengiesser, "Athanasius of Alexandria and the Foundation of Traditional Christology," *Theological Studies* 34, no. 1 (Mar 1973), 112. Emphasis added by this writer.

[64] Haykin, *The Spirit of God*, 63. See Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 101; here Anatolios quotes a letter of Alexander of Alexandria to the effect that the Arians select texts "which refer to the economy and to his humiliation" but "evade those which proclaim his divinity."

[65] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 34–35. He could make an appeal to the "immediate wider context" to show that the exegesis of his opponents was strained. He would simply cite "countertexts," or point out terminological issues that made his opponents' exegesis less likely. Quite often, he would point out the texts used by his opponents (to argue for the Son's subordinate status) were referring to the time and mission of the Son's incarnation. Texts "referring to the Divine nature of the Word" needed to be distinguished "from those referring to the time when 'the Word became flesh' (John 1:14)." Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 35.

[66] Haykin, *The Spirit of God*, 63; see Kannengiesser, "Foundation of Traditional Christology," 110–11.

[67] Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 35.

Consider one example in *Orations against the Arians* 1.37ff where Athanasius deals with Philippians 2:9–10.[68] In refuting the Arian reading of this text, he does address the faulty exegetical conclusions of the Arians; but he spends most of his effort appealing to the "whole plot that the passage summarizes"[69]—that is, to the "story outlined in the 'Canon of Truth'—the "story of salvation"[70] and incarnation.[71] Young summarizes Athanasius' argument, "At considerable length, and with many quotations, particularly from the gospel of John, but also from Paul and Hebrews, what we might call 'salvation history' is rehearsed."[72] And at the end of the argument Athanasius summarizes, "This then I consider the sense of this passage, and that, a very ecclesiastical sense."[73] That is, in a deductive manner, Athanasius reads the various texts and along the way shows that his reading of these texts "fits" the framework, or scope of the Scriptures, while the reading of the Arians did not. Young concludes,

> Fundamentally it is his sense of the overarching plot, a sense inherited from the past and ingrained in the tradition of the Church, which allows him to be innovative in exegetical detail and confident of providing the correct and 'pious' reading. The 'Canon of Truth' or 'Rule of Faith' expresses the mind of scripture, and an exegesis that damages the coherence of the plot, that *hypothesis*, that coherence, that *skopos*, cannot be right.[74]

To briefly summarize: It seems that Athanasius used at least three tactics in his use of Scripture in *Orations against the Arians*:

> 1) Engage with the opponents and show that the texts they use are texts that were "susceptible to opposing interpretations."
> 2) Set forth the frameworks (metanarratives, scope of Scripture) of the opponents and his own.
> 3) Do "dogmatic exegesis" that reads the key texts in such a way as to demonstrate that his reading "fits" (coheres) with the "mind of Scripture" and does not damage "the overarching plotline" of Scripture.

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[68] Athanasius, "Four Discourses Against the Arians," in *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 4, trans. John Henry Newman, rev. Archibald Robinson, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 327–31.

[69] Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 43.

[70] Young, 43.

[71] Athanasius, "Four Discourses Against the Arians," 331, writes that "the Lord, who supplies the grace has become a man like us … humbled Himself in taking our body of humiliation, and took a servant's form, putting on that flesh, which was enslaved to sin."

[72] Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 43.

[73] Athanasius, "Four Discourses Against the Arians," 331.

[74] Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 43. Haykin writes (referencing Adolf Laminski, "Der Heilige Geist als Geist Christi und Geist der Gläuben. Der Beitrag des Athanasios von Alexandrien zur Formulierung des trinitarischen Dogmas im vierten Jahrhundert," *Erfurter theologische Studien* 23 [Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag GMBH, 1969], 38): "Athanasius usually conducts his discussion of the Arian position by means of a methodical analysis which has a dual aim: 1) the discovery of the 'core' of his opponents' arguments; 2) the demonstration of its absurdity, so that the orthodox position may thereby be clearly manifested as right."

Athanasius: His Method and Use of Scripture in *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*

It has been said that Athanasius' *Letters to Serapion* was the "first thorough attempt to deal with the question of the divinity of the Spirit."[75] These letters were written in the later 350s,[76] likely at the time of Athanasius' "desert refuge during his third exile."[77] The three letters[78] were written to "Serapion, the bishop of Thmuis in lower Egypt," a man whom Athanasius had traveled with a few years before[79] and who was "one of Athanasius' most trusted agents."[80] Serapion had written to Athanasius[81] about a certain group who oddly enough accepted the deity and consubstantiality of the Son but who "had set their minds against the Holy Spirit claiming not only that he is a creature but also"[82] an angel. Athanasius charged this group with "heterodoxy and diabolical presumption"[83] and labeled them the "Tropiki"[84] (later to be identified as Pneumatomachians or "Spirit fighters."[85]) because they relied on a "certain mode of exegesis"[86] that relied on "allegorical construction of scriptural 'tropes'"[87] in their exegesis of biblical texts.

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[75] Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213–14; Weinandy notes: Athanasius was "the first to write, in a sustained and coherent manner, a 'treatise' on the Holy Spirit." Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 108n22.

[76] Mark DelCogliano ("Introduction to Athanasius's *Letters to Serapion*" in *Works on the Spirit: Athanasius the Great and Didymus the Blind*, ed. Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz and Lewis Ayres [Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011], 25–29) carefully considers the evidence for the date of composition of these letters and suggests the period 359–361 is plausible. See also Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 59.

[77] Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 59.

[78] Three comments on these letters are in order:

Comment 1: Older scholars and older editions refer to four letters (e.g. C. R. B. Shapland, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit* [London: Epworth Press, 1951]), but "it is now generally accepted that those [letters] traditionally called the second and third letters were originally a single letter." DelCogliano, "Athanasius's *Letters to Serapion*," 19n25; see Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 59–60.

Comment 2: The edition used for this article is: Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*, trans. and ed. Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz and Lewis Ayres (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011, 53–137). All quotations and references of the letters in this article will be from this edition; they are footnoted as *Letters to Serapion* with the citation numbering of that edition and page number of that volume; for the first instance see Comment 3 below.

Comment 3: The three letters cover essentially the same topics: the second letter is "an epitome of Letter One," and the third is "a renewed treatment" of some of the content in Letter One (see Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion,* 1.15.1–1.21.4) that was omitted in Letter Two. See DelCogliano, "Athanasius's *Letters to Serapion*," 22–23.

[79] Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 212.

[80] DelCogliano, "Athanasius's *Letters to Serapion*," 19.

[81] "The letter [i.e., from Serapion to Athanasius] of Your Sacred Kindness has reached me in the desert." *Letters to Serapion*, 1.1.1, 53.

[82] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.2.2, 53; i.e., "ministering spirit."

[83] Athanasius, 1.1.4, 54.

[84] Athanasius, 1.10.4, 69.

[85] Athanasius refers to the Tropikoi as "those who are fighting the Spirit," or as Pneumatomachians, in *Letters to Serapion*, 3.1.2, 128; see editor's note at *Letters to Serapion*, 1.32.2, 103n79.

[86] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.2.2, 54. "Thus one might translate 'Tropikoi' as 'Misinterpreters.'" DelCogliano, "Athanasius's *Letters to Serapion*," 21.

[87] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 137.

As noted in the previous section, Athanasius employed three strategies in *Orations against the Arians*; he used these same three strategies again in his *Letters to Serapion* in confronting the "Tropici."

The "Tropici" used two texts to argue that the Spirit was a creature. The first was Amos 4:13[88] which (in the NASB) is rendered, "For behold, He who forms mountains and creates the wind" but in the LXX is "διότι ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ στερεῶν βροντὴν καὶ κτίζων πνεῦμα."[89] The "Tropici"—by taking πνεῦμα as a reference to the Holy Spirit—argued this was a clear statement that the Spirit is created—he is a creature.[90] The other text was 1 Timothy 5:21 which in the NASB reads "I solemnly exhort you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of *His* chosen angels"; in the reading of the "Tropici," the triad "God, Christ Jesus and chosen angels" is simply an alternate form of the triad—"Father, Son and Holy Spirit."[91]

In his response Athanasius employed the first tactic and engaged with the opponents to show that the texts they used were texts that were "susceptible to opposing interpretations."[92] In the case of Amos 4:13, πνεῦμα could just as well be taken to mean "winds"[93] or the human spirit;[94] in the case of 1 Timothy 5:21, to read "chosen angels" as just angels made perfect sense on the face of it.[95]

Athanasius then countered the faulty exegesis of the "Tropici" with some impressive lists of texts—assembled with brief comments—that reveal his sense of the scope of Scripture on the Spirit.

With respect to the mis-reading of Amos 4:13 by the "Tropici," Athanasius assembled at least three lists of texts: (1) one list of texts supports Athanasius' claim that "if 'spirit' is said without the definite article" or without certain modifiers, "it cannot be the Holy Spirit who is signified."[96] (2) Another list cited texts in which certain "qualifiers" identified "spirit" as the Holy Spirit.[97] (3) A third list cited texts where the term "spirit" is not qualified so as to be easily put in list (1) or (2); this list included generic uses of "spirit."[98] By these lists Athanasius was demonstrating that

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[88] Hanson (*Christian Doctrine of God*, 749) dryly notes that this text "would strike all modern students of the Bible as grossly irrelevant."

[89] "The Septuagint: LXX," Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and the Hellenic Bible Society, accessed April 30, 2025, https://www.septuagint.bible/home, https://www.septuagint.bible/-/amos-kephalaio-4.

[90] Thus, "by the magical wand of mistranslation," Amos 4:13 is taken to teach that the Holy Spirit is a created being! Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 749–50.

[91] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.10.4, 69.

[92] Athanasius, 1.10.4, 69.

[93] Athanasius, 1.9.3. 66. If Athanasius had personal access to a Hebrew text, he might have made this point more confidently.

[94] Athanasius, 1.9.3–1.9.10, 66–68.

[95] See Athanasius, 1.14.7, 75; In the last part of this portion Athanasius simply writes, "Nonetheless, it was appropriate for him to mention the elect angels," and he gives a couple of plausible explanations.

[96] Athanasius, 1.4.2, 58; see the list in 1.4.2–1.4.3, 58.

[97] Athanasius, 1.5.1 to 1.6.13, 59–63. Many of the qualifiers indicate that the Spirit is in relation to God (e.g., "My Spirit" Gen 6:3—God speaking; "Spirit of God," Gen 1:2; Matt 12:28; 1 Cor 2:11–12; 3:16; Phil 3:3), in relation to the Lord (e.g., "Spirit of the Lord," Gen 6:3; Judg 3:10, 11:29; Isa 6:1; Mic 2:7; Acts 8:39), and in relation to Christ (e.g., "the Spirit of Christ" 1 Pet 1:9–11; Rom 8:9–11; Phil 1:18–20). This association of the Spirit to God, the Lord and Christ is meant to be indicative that the Spirit is not a creature.

[98] Athanasius, 1.7.3 to 1.8.2, 64–65.

the "Tropici" had illegitimately read the πνεῦμα in Amos 4:13 as the Holy Spirit, thus "Out of sheer audacity [they] have invented [their] own mode of exegesis."[99]

Athanasius also assembled a list of texts to answer the mis-reading of 1 Timothy 4:13. This list was meant to demonstrate that the Scriptures clearly differentiated between the Holy Spirit and angels; Zechariah 4:5 is highlighted,[100] and the list continued with more than twenty more texts cited.[101] In a final argument on this point, Athanasius points to texts where "the Lord" and "the Spirit" are juxtaposed—but the Son is not (at least not explicitly) mentioned (i.e., Isa 48:16 and Hag 2:4–5),[102] and to texts where "God" and "Jesus Christ" are referenced but not angels or the Spirit (i.e., 1 Tim 6:13–14), and to still other texts where other names or titles are juxtaposed in unexpected ways (i.e., in Exod 14:31 "God" and "Moses" are both mentioned).[103] The upshot of these lists was to show that the application of the same specious exegesis of the "Tropici"—which they had applied in the case of 1 Timothy 4:13—to these texts would lead them to "great error,"[104] it would lead them by "their own modes of exegesis … [to] misinterpret,"[105] it would be "irrational audacity,"[106] and—most significantly—it would display "ignorance of the Divine Scriptures and thus divergence from the truth."[107] In short, to read the Scriptures with the τρόπος ("exegesis") of the "Tropici" would not "fit" with "the meaning of the Divine Oracles."[108]

Athanasius used even more caustic language in introducing the next argument of his opponents. He refers to "the blasphemy which our irrational opponents utter against the Spirit," and described them as, "Yet still defiant in their struggle against the truth."[109] But this time [their] error is no longer based on the Scriptures (since they do not find it there) but [has been] belched up from the surfeit of their own heart." Their error is presented in a sort of riddle:[110] "If the Spirit is not a creature, nor one of the angels, but proceeds from the Father, then is he also a son? And are the Spirit and the Word two brothers?"[111] And if the Spirit comes from the Son, is the Father a grandfather of the Spirit?[112] At first, Athanasius dismisses this as idle speculation about "the depths of God" which humans should not try to fathom (citing

[99] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.7.2, 63–64; page 63n15. The footnote indicates the term "exegesis" here is the Greek τρόπος.
[100] Athanasius, 1.11.2–1.11.3, 70–71.
[101] Athanasius, 1.11.4–1.12.5, 71–73.
[102] Athanasius, 1.13.3, 74.
[103] Athanasius, 1.14.1–1.14.6, 74–75.
[104] Athanasius, 1.3.1, 56.
[105] Athanasius, 1.10.4, 69.
[106] Athanasius, 1.11.1, 70.
[107] Athanasius, 1.13.1, 73.
[108] Athanasius, 1.15.1, 76.
[109] Athanasius, 1.15.1, 76.
[110] Athanasius appears to be reproducing a form of his opponents' argument but casts it into this "riddle" to expose its absurdity.
[111] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.15.1, 76. See below on the matter of Athanasius' imprecision on the notion of the Spirit's procession.
[112] See Athanasius, 1.15.3, 76–77.

1 Cor 2:10–11). Besides it is absurd, impious, and foolishness for "God is not like a human being."[113]

But Athanasius turns this absurd line of reasoning to his own purpose because it shows how the "Tropici" have mis-reasoned and why. In an earlier comment, Athanasius asserted (citing Eph 4:6) "there is one divinity, and one God who is over all, and through all, and in all."[114] This one divinity must not be divided so "when the Father is mentioned, with him are both his word and the spirit who is in the Son. If the Son is named, the Father is in the Son, and the Spirit is not external to the Word."[115] Whatever the relations are which are indicated by the names Father, Son, and Spirit, those relations must account for the mutual indwelling of three in one divinity.

But the "Tropici" have made a category error; they have regarded the names "Father," and "Son" in a human / creaturely way;[116] "this is not how things are for the divinity. For God is not like a human being [Num 23:19]. Nor does he have a nature that is divisible into parts."[117] The "Tropici" do not think rightly about the Father and Son and Spirit because they do not follow how Scripture itself uses the names[118] which is to identify the divinity (but not to explain it). In Scripture the Father is always called "Father"—never "Son" or "grandfather"; in Scripture the Son is always called "Son"—never "Father" (much less "brother"). "In the Scriptures the Spirit is never called a son, lest he be considered a brother."[119] The Scriptural names simply do not reveal anything about the dynamic of the relationships of *the divine* Father, Son and Spirit as such names might when used in speaking of any *human*, creaturely, or temporal family relationships. The "Tropici" "have backed themselves into the most absurd corner. Because they cannot understand how the Holy Trinity is indivisible,"[120] they are thinking like Arians who "make the Son one with the created order," and they "themselves classify the Spirit with the creatures."[121] The "Tropici" should "acknowledge what is written [in Scripture]." The Scriptures speak of "the Son with the Father and not dividing the Spirit from the Son, so as to preserve the truth of the Holy Trinity's indivisibility and sameness of nature."[122] In short, as Haykin notes, "Athanasius asserts that there is a proper way to discuss the Trinity: first by faith, that is, through the faith of the Church that believes in a God who exists

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[113] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.15.4, 77; 1.17.1–1.17.5, 80; 1.18.1–1.18.4, 81. "His initial answer to this argument is an insistence upon the impenetrable mystery of the inner life of the Godhead." Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 61.

[114] Athanasius, 1.14.6, 75.

[115] Athanasius, 1.14.6, 75.

[116] Athanasius, 1.16.3–1.16.4, 78.

[117] Athanasius, 1.16.5, 78.

[118] Indeed, the "Tropici" have invented "novel terms other than those in the Scriptures." Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.17.6, 80.

[119] Athanasius, 1.16.7, 78–79.

[120] Athanasius, 1.17.4, 80. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 216, has "Triad" for "Trinity" here.

[121] Athanasius, 1.17.4, 80.

[122] Athanasius, 1.17.5, 80; see also 1.25.1–1.25.4, 92. It should be recalled that the "Tropici" accepted the consubstantiality of the Son and the unity of the Father and Son as stated in the Nicene Creed of 325. In effect, Athanasius is urging them to accept that this indivisibility and sameness of nature extends to the Spirit as well.

in inseparable Trinity; second, through the illustrations from the Scriptures, which provide the proper vehicle for a discussion of the Trinity."[123]

Having engaged the "Tropici" directly, Athanasius now engages in some "dogmatic exegesis." He indicates how his argument will proceed: he will argue that "the Spirit is unlike creatures based both on scriptural proofs … and Trinitarian arguments."[124] In making these arguments Athanasius deploys his other tactics: he lists and discusses the key texts of Scripture but always with "the faith of the Church that believes in a God who exists in inseparable Trinity" in mind.[125] In the course of these arguments, he is both relying on and validating the scope of Scripture so as to demonstrate that his reading "fits" (coheres) with the "mind of Scripture" and does not damage "the overarching plotline of Scripture."[126] In his concluding words to Serapion, Athanasius reveals what was his plan throughout these letters:

> And so, the Divine Scriptures consistently show that the Holy Spirit is not a creature, but is proper to the Word and to the divinity of the Father. Thus the teaching of the saints is in agreement on the holy and indivisible Trinity, and this is the one faith of the Catholic Church. But the irrational fictions of the Tropikoi diverge from the Scriptures and agree with the irrationality of the Ariomaniacs [Arians] … What I have handed on accords with the Apostolic faith that the Fathers handed down to us. I have not made anything up that falls outside of it, but have written only what I learned in harmony with the Holy Scriptures. For it also harmonizes with those passages of the Holy Scriptures cited as proof. It is not something made up on the basis of external sources…[127]

In his scriptural proofs Athanasius begins with important παραδείγματα that are found in Scripture. Father, Son, and Spirit are each—each in his own way—related to the images of "fountain and light."[128] These images are "analogies" and "illustrations" not to be taken "as reality [of the Godhead] itself"[129]—for "God's nature is ineffable" but as a way to speak truly "about God and his activity."[130] But these παραδείγματα are not to be taken lightly because they "are given to us by Scripture" and to reject them can lead to false ideas about God. And yet to rightly read these illustrations, the exegete must be "governed by a set of theological premises"[131] about the order, unity and inseparability of the persons of the Trinity.[132]

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[123] Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 71. See Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 3.5.2; see footnote 133 below.
[124] DelCogliano, "Athanasius's *Letters to Serapion*," 23.
[125] Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 71.
[126] Quotation marks for emphasis.
[127] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.32.1, 103; 1.33.2, 104.
[128] Athanasius, 1.19.1–1.19.4, 82. The texts Athanasius cites may or may not seem convincing to modern exegetes.
[129] Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 71.
[130] Haykin, 72.
[131] Haykin, 73.
[132] See Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.20.1, 84.

In Scripture the three are referred to in ways that reveal a mutuality between them: wisdom is a mutual quality,[133] and indwelling and the giving of life in Christians are mutual works.[134] But—given that the nature of the Holy Trinity is inseparable from itself[135]—to attempt to distinguish a wisdom particular to each one is impossible; nor can anyone explain how the Spirit's indwelling is different than that of the Son.[136] Athanasius goes on to compare the mission of the Son—as the one sent by the Father—to the mission of the Spirit—as the one sent by the Son;[137] and he comments that in those missions the Son glorifies the Father *and* the Spirit.[138] Thus, since "the Spirit's rank in nature, vis-à-vis the Son corresponds to the Son's vis-à-vis the Father,"[139] it is inconsistent to think that the Spirit is a creature (and again, even these "Tropici" would not claim the Word is a creature of the Father).

Athanasius continues listing such "scriptural linguistic patterns"[140] that "demonstrate that the Spirit is biblically characterized in terms of divine attributes such as inalterability, incorruptibility, and omnipresence."[141] He also includes examples from Scripture of the divine activities of the Spirit:[142] the Spirit is the agent of sanctification;[143] the Spirit is the giver of life;[144] the Spirit is the anointing and seal of Christians;[145] the Spirit is the agent of the Christian's participation in God;[146] the

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[133] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.19.6, 83.

[134] Athanasius, 1.19.7–1.19.8, 83.

[135] The rhetorical questions (see Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.20.1, 84) are "actually the presuppositions which control the exposition of those Scriptures used in relation to the illustrations." Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 73.

[136] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.20.1–1.20.4, 84.

[137] Athanasius, 1.20.5, 85. Although Athanasius tantalizingly speaks here of the Son as "only-begotten offspring" and the terms "to proceed" of the Spirit (see *Letters to Serapion*, 1.2.5), "He is speaking of what informal theological language is called the Spirit's mission not his procession." Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 751; see the discussion on this issue in Athanasius below.

[138] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.20.6, 85.

[139] Athanasius, 1.21.1, 85.

[140] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 138.

[141] Anatolios, 138; Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.26.1–1.26.7, 93–94.

[142] Anatolios, 138.

[143] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.22.3–1.23.1, 88.

[144] Athanasius, 1.23.2–1.23.3, 89.

[145] Athanasius, 1.23.4–1.23.7, 89–90; 2.12.1–2.12.3.

[146] Athanasius, 1.24.1–1.24.4, 90. Citing this list of "soteriological" activities of the Spirit may allow a word about the Trinitarian formula for baptism and Athanasius' use of Matthew 28:19. Athanasius refers to this text six times in these letters: this first is in the list of texts that identify "spirit" as the Holy Spirit (Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.6.4, 61); the second is in the list that distinguishes the Spirit from angels (Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.11.6, 72), the third is found in *Letters to Serapion* at 1.28.4 where Athanasius cites it as a source of the trinitarian faith of the church; the fourth is found in *Letters to Serapion* at 2.6.1 where again this formula and three-fold confession is an expression of "our faith"; the fifth is found in *Letters to Serapion* at 2.25.4 where it is again an expression of the church's faith in a command of the Lord and here Athanasius makes the observation that "if the Spirit were a creature, he [the Lord] would not have ranked him together with the Father"; the sixth is found in *Letters to Serapion* at 3.5.2 where Athanasius explains (as has been seen above) that this is just how the order of the names was given and the names themselves are just what they are. Thus asking if the "Father" is a grandfather because of the order of the names is category error and so it is irrelevant; the names have a different function in the faith of the church—this is just "the faith," of the church, preached everywhere and "the faith is not to be stated otherwise than the Savior stated it"—he is the Son and the other is the Spirit.

Spirit is an agent of creation (with the Father and the Son);[147] the Spirit is the agent of "grace gifts";[148] the Spirit is the agent of prophecy.[149] All of these *divine* activities—attested to by Scripture—indicate that the Spirit cannot be understood as a creature. Athanasius also notes the different ways the Spirit and creatures are described in Scripture: Christians as creatures "partake of the Spirit" (cf. Heb 6:4) but not the other way around; there are many types of creatures (e.g., among angels there are cherubim, seraphim and archangels) but there is only one Holy Spirit;[150] creatures are "from nothing and have a beginning to their existence" (Gen 1:1), "but the Holy Spirit is and is said to be from God, as the Apostle said" (1 Cor 2:12).[151]

Throughout these letters Athanasius has built lists of texts and arguments "on the foundational principle of the primacy of scripture language."[152] Repeatedly he has demonstrated in these texts that there is a pattern "by which the three are scripturally named." Even the "non-communicability of the names of 'Father' and 'Son'"—which was at the heart of the errors of the "Tropici"—"is based on the intractable givenness of the scriptural patterns of naming."[153] It is on the basis of this consistent scriptural naming—and taking it as a given that the Father and Son are of one nature—that Athanasius argues that it would be inconsistent (worse, blasphemous)[154] to consider the Spirit to be of a different nature—a creature.

There are two features of the framework or scope in which one can discern from Athanasius' arguments that the Spirit is not a creature. One is the way Athanasius recognizes a correlation between "the intertextual patterns of Scripture" (i.e., the patterns of naming Father, Son, and Spirit") and—most significantly—the ontological status of the persons in the Godhead.[155] In other words, "Seeing that there is such an order and unity in the Holy Trinity"—as is manifestly the teaching of the Scriptures—"who could separate either the Son from the Father"—not even the "Tropici" would want to do that (again, they accepted "the full divinity of the Son"[156])—"or the Spirit from the Son or from the Father himself. Who could be so audacious" (apparently the "Tropici" could) "as to say that the Trinity is unlike Itself and different in nature? Or that the Son is foreign to the Father in substance? Or that

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What did Athanasius intend by these citations? The topic is complex but the answer in Anatolios seems about right: "Athanasius's construction of a distinctive interpretation of baptism enfolds the threefold name with an emphasis on the single divine agency, which he interprets as the content of the 'oneness' of baptism." (See Eph 4:5) Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 146; "Thus baptism becomes a hermeneutical principle for discerning the inner life of the Triad especially the position of the Holy Spirit." Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 106. In other words, these three are inseparably the agent(s) of baptism, and baptism was a testimony to adherence to the church's belief in the Trinity. Furthermore—and to the argument of these letters—if the Spirit does not have the same nature as the Father and the Son, if he is only a creature, then Christian baptism is invalid. See Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.30.1–1.30.3, 98–99.

[147] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.24.5–1.24.6, 91.
[148] Athanasius, 1.30.4–1.30.6, 99–100.
[149] Athanasius, 1.31.3–1.31.12, 101–102.
[150] Athanasius, 1.27.1–1.27.3, 95–96.
[151] Athanasius, 2.11.2, 120.
[152] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 140.
[153] Anatolios, 140.
[154] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.15.1, 76.
[155] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 142.
[156] Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 212.

the Spirit is estranged from the Son? How could such things be possible?"[157] Once again, Athanasius is making bold claims in these rhetorical questions. They are not mere question-begging assertions but claims based on "the intertextual patterns" and scope of Scripture that the Father, Son, and Spirit are of the same substance and nature!

The other feature of Athanasius' framework revealed in these arguments (that the Spirit is not a creature) is his "fundamental concern to maintain the utter difference in nature between creature and Creator."[158] Athanasius' arguments "on behalf of the divinity of the Spirit" are grounded in "his typical starting point … the radical polarity of the Creator-creature distinction."[159]

Athanasius' arguments are based in the biblical metaphysical distinction of Creator/creature in contrast to a neo-platonic (or just generally Platonic) notion of chain-of-being[160] that his mentor, Alexander of Alexandria had framed in opposing Arius.[161] For many, possibly Arius and those after him,[162] the idea of one radically separate One being—the source of all being but utterly separate—under whom is a hierarchy of being,[163] and beings, was not just plausible but probable. So, to posit a being who was not the Highest One but nevertheless held a higher status (demi-god) was also likely. For some this thinking—if not this doctrine—could be made to fit with the Christian teaching of the Logos, a being who, did not have the absolute priority of God (Father), who was higher on the scale of being than ordinary souls, who may have been in some sense even preexistent "divinity," who had a certain degree of preeminence but who was still a creature. This created divinity may have had some part in the process of the creation of everything after or below him—but he was still a creature himself. This was something like Arius' view of Christ.[164] For Arians, "The Son, therefore, is a creature who originated from nothing through the sovereign and gracious will of the Unbegotten: 'He was not before he was begotten and created…'"[165] It is that sort of metaphysical thinking with which Athanasius' mentor, Alexander of Alexandria had to contend when dealing with Arius. Anatolios summarizes: "it is Alexander who initiates the central argument that the Creator-creature distinction constitutes mutually exclusive categories that allow for no middle term," that is no semi-divine but created being, because "the notion of a created creator is simply nonsensical."[166] Thus, since the Scriptures attest that the Son was Creator, he necessarily was on the divine side of being.[167] Just so, when Athanasius' establishes—as he does from Scripture—that the Spirit is not a creature, he is at the

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[157] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.20.1–1.20.2, 84.

[158] Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 49.

[159] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 138.

[160] See footnote 44 above. To delve into even the complexities of Greek metaphysical ideas in the third and fourth centuries is well beyond the purpose of this article. The author recognizes the shortcomings of the next few comments and asks for the reader's understanding and indulgence.

[161] See Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 79ff.

[162] Anatolios, 45.

[163] See Dominic J. O'Meara, "The Hierarchical Ordering of Reality in Plotinus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus,* ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 66–81.

[164] See Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 45.

[165] Anatolios, 45–50; citing Arius.

[166] Anatolios, 80.

[167] Anatolios, 80–81. The reader should consult the whole of Anatolios' discussion here.

same time presupposing that "there is no middle term" and so he must be Creator—and as Creator, He must be God.

Athanasius concludes the first letter by once again affirming where his confidence lay:

> Nonetheless, in addition to these arguments, let us also examine the tradition, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which is nothing other than what the Lord gave, and the Apostles preached, and the Fathers preserved. On this the Church is founded, and whoever falls away from it can no longer be nor called a Christian. So, the Trinity is holy and perfect, confessed in Father and Son and Holy Spirit. It has nothing foreign or external mixed with it, nor is it composed of Creator and creature, but is entirely given to creating and making. It is self-consistent and indivisible in nature, and it has one activity.[168]

Athanasius was quite clear that the Spirit was not a creature and that the Spirit shared the same nature as the Father and the Son. But he is not quite so clear on the matter of the relations of the Son and Spirit. The relationship of the Father and Son is taken as the model—the given—for the "Son is the only begotten offspring";[169] but then the relationship of the Spirit to the Son is … what? Athanasius asserts: "Indeed, *just as* the Son is the only-begotten offspring, *so too* is the Spirit, who is given and sent from the Son."[170] For Athanasius there is more than a *similarity* in the relation of Father to Son and Son to Spirit—the Father to Son relation is of same nature (*homoousias*[171]) and Athanasius wants to affirm that is also true of the Son to Spirit. But the Son is "offspring" (γέννημα) to the Father—so what is the Spirit to the Son? "One cannot say … 'the Spirit is begotten of the Son'"[172] because that would be tantamount to repeating the error of the "Tropici." A few lines later Athanasius writes: "Since there is one living Word, there must be one perfect and complete living activity and gift whereby he sanctifies and enlightens. This is said to proceed from the Father, because the Spirit shines forth, and is sent, and is given from the Word, who is confessed to be from the Father."[173] The term "proceed" and the entire point in this sentence is an allusion to John 15:26, but (as noted above, see footnote 124) Athanasius does not seem to be using the term as it came to be used in later theological reflection on the trinitarian relations.[174] So, although Athanasius has successfully argued that "the Holy Spirit's divine nature and divine subjective/identity are predicated upon his existential relationship both to the Father and the Son,"[175] he needed a way—or a term—to distinguish the Spirit's "unique

[168] Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.28.1–1.28.2, 96–97.
[169] Athanasius, 1.20.5, 85.
[170] Athanasius, 1.20.5, 85. Emphasis added.
[171] This *is* what the Nicene Creed 325 affirmed!
[172] Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 112.
[173] Weinandy, 112.
[174] Emery notes that it was Basil of Caesarea who introduced the category of relation in his responses to Eunomius of Cyzicus (Gilles Emrey, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 80–81; later theological reflection refined the category of relations using the terms paternity, filiation and spiration / procession.
[175] Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 113.

existential relationship" with the Father (and the Son[176]) "that differs from the Father's and the Son's existential relationship."[177] It seems Athanasius never did seem to find that way or term.[178]

Bray seems to suggest that Athanasius attempted to "develop his own understanding of Trinitarian relations."[179] Bray quotes *Letters to Serapion* (from a different translation):

> Since the Son is one [with God] as the living logos, his perfect and fully sanctifying and illuminating energy (*energeia*) and gift must also be one [with him]. He proceeds from the Father because he is light, being sent and given from (*para*) the Son, whom we confess comes from (*ek*) the Father.[180]

Bray notes the prepositions in the line "from (*para)* the Son, whom we confess comes from (*ek*) the Father."[181] He observes that there may not be a real difference between the Greek prepositions *para* and *ek,* but "perhaps the former means 'from alongside of' and the latter 'from inside of." But that may not be altogether helpful because that might "imply that the second and third persons have different origins and perhaps different natures also."[182] The use of the nuances of Greek prepositions to help clarify (or not) the trinitarian relations will be explored by Basil of Caesarea in his great work *On the Holy Spirit*.[183] The fact is Athanasius left this matter unresolved—a matter with which later theologians will resolve by using the term "procession" in a way that did not occur to Athanasius himself.

Athanasius' teaching on the Holy Spirit in his *Letters to Serapion* had a significant influence on the Nicene theologians who came after him—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa. As noted above, Part Two will examine the Scriptural teaching on the Spirit of these three Cappadocians to demonstrate that after Athanasius these men established "a foundational phase in a trajectory of reflection that [came] to resolution in the affirmation of the Spirit's divinity by the council of Constantinople in 381."[184]

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[176] But that is another debate!

[177] Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 113.

[178] This is the observation of Shapland (*The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 183)—Athanasius was "in urgent need of a term which shall distinguish the relation of the Spirit to the Father as (γέννημα) in the previous sentence distinguishes that of the Son." Weinandy addresses this problem in different terms, Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 112–13.

[179] Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 625.

[180] Bray, 625. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.20.5, 85.

[181] Bray, 625.

[182] Bray, 625.

[183] St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

[184] Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 214.

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REVIEWS

Stevens, Daniel. *Songs of the Son: Reading the Psalms with the Author of Hebrews*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025. 176 pp., $19.99 Paperback.

Reviewed by Caden Colson, ThM Student, The Master's Seminary.

What would it be like to sit under an inspired teacher—not just an inspiring one, but one through whom the Holy Spirit actually speaks? How exhilarating it would be to take a course in hermeneutics from Paul, or a seminar on Christian love from John, or a class on biblical history from Dr. Luke. In *Songs of the Son: Reading the Psalms with the Author of Hebrews*, Daniel Stevens ushers his readers into the classroom of the preacher behind this great epistle to study a course in the Christology of the Psalms. By studying under the author of Hebrews, Christians can learn to become better interpreters of the Psalms, especially in understanding how many of them speak intentionally about Christ.

Stevens (PhD, University of Cambridge), an alumnus of the Master of Divinity program at The Master's Seminary and current assistant professor of New Testament interpretation at Boyce College (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY), brings a combination of exegetical expertise and pastoral sensitivity in *Songs of the Son*. Undergirded by his doctoral work in the book of Hebrews,[1] Stevens illuminates the function of the Psalms in Hebrews, employing an easy-to-read, devotional style. While the book is written largely for a lay-level audience, Stevens' explanations and conclusions also well-serve pastors and scholars, who may imitate Stevens' example of boiling down complex issues in a very understandable way. As will be elaborated below, this contribution to the study of the Christology of the Psalms and the use of the Psalms in the New Testament is overall very helpful, while it could be sharpened still more by greater hermeneutical clarity regarding precisely what it means to see Christ in the Psalms.

To provide an idea of the flavor and content of *Songs of the Son*, this review will summarize the book's general purpose, highlight some key principles for interpreting the Psalms that emerge from the book, and finally give an assessment of the book's strengths and a couple minor critiques.

The purpose of this book is to help the reader better interpret and understand the psalms that are quoted in the book of Hebrews—psalms which that epistle claims teach directly about Jesus, the Son of God. Thus, Stevens includes in this book each

[1] Stevens' PhD work has recently been published as the monograph, *The Theme of Promise in the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Promise Remains* (London: T&T Clark, 2025).

Psalm quoted in the book of Hebrews to teach something about Jesus (Pss 2, 8, 22, 40, 45, 95, 102, 110, 118).[2] In studying how the Psalms are interpreted in Hebrews, Stevens seeks to provide the reader with a practical example of how to use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Thus, in Hebrews, Stevens finds a model for rightly reading the Psalms, seeking to answer to the question, "How are we, as Christians, to read the Psalms? Or to put it another way, what does it mean to read the Psalms (or the whole Old Testament) as Christian Scripture?" (149).

The book's nine chapters are organized around the nine psalms that the author of Hebrews cites with direct reference to Christ. Because the book is primarily about the Psalms with insight from the book of Hebrews, its chapters follow the order of the Psalms as they appear in the OT, not the order in which they appear in Hebrews. For each chapter, Stevens adopts a pattern of covering each psalm twice. First, he analyzes the psalm in its original context in the OT, asking questions and leading the reader to conclusions regarding its intended teaching in its original context. Then, he walks through the psalm's use in Hebrews and how it contributes to the argument of that epistle, pointing out how the Messiah was always meant to be seen in the psalm. Then, equipped with the insights from an inspired interpreter, Stevens turns back to the psalm itself to summarize what it teaches believers today about Christ's person and work. Each chapter closes with several discussion questions to help readers assess whether they have grasped the main emphases of each chapter.

Songs of the Son may be characterized by drawing out four principles Stevens teaches his readers about the Psalms: (1) the Psalms ought to be read according to their original context and intent, (2) the Psalms intend to teach rich theology, including messianic theology, (3) the Psalms often contain intra-Trinitarian dialogue, and (4) the Psalms may be interpreted by identifying tensions and asking good questions for how those tensions can be understood.

First, Stevens teaches his readers by his example in this book that there is a correct way to read and interpret the book of Psalms, and that is to interpret them the way the psalmists intended their work to be read in their original context. The reader ought to pursue the original author's intent. It is encouraging to see this affirmation, especially in a book that covers the use of the Psalms in Hebrews. The NT use of the OT is an oft-debated topic, and many scholars hold that OT passages are reinterpreted or assigned a new or fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*) in the NT. Yet Stevens maintains a consistent hermeneutic between the Old and New Testaments, emphasizing authorial intent and demonstrating that the author of Hebrews read the Psalms the way their authors intended them to be read, rather than reinterpreting them for his own purposes. Additionally, Stevens points out that because the author of Hebrews is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Christians can be confident the author is interpreting OT Scripture rightly. By following the example set in Hebrews, believers can become better readers and interpreters of Scripture themselves. Stevens explains,

> As we strive to see what the author of Hebrews saw in the short selections of psalms that he references, we will learn how those psalms, how the whole

[2] While Psalm 104 is also quoted in Hebrews (1:7), Stevens relegates a brief discussion of this psalm to an appendix, as the psalm references angels, not Christ.

> Psalter, can be read. We must not miss these lessons. Only at these times can we see infallible interpretation. Only in these moments of inspired exegesis can we precisely know how God would have us read his words. Only by reading Scripture with Scripture can we be perfectly taught how to read Scripture. (8)

Thus, the author of Hebrews is not foisting his own meaning onto the ancient psalms. Rather he interprets them according to their original context and intent, so that as believers follow his example, "we will learn to read the Psalms for what they truly are" (8). And Hebrews holds some particularly exciting examples, as the psalms in this epistle intentionally speak beforehand about the Lord Jesus. Stevens elaborates on the benefit of reading them with the author of Hebrews, explaining that "Their meaning will unfold as we see precisely how they witness to Christ: not only as predictions to be fulfilled but also as a testimony to the very voice of God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit" (8).

The latter part of this quotation leads to the second principle Stevens teaches his readers about the Psalms. In addition to providing comfort to those under trial and models of true prayer and praise for every believer, the Psalms contain profound theology about the triune God. They are not only for comfort and praise; the Psalms especially intend to teach sound doctrine. As Stevens puts it, "the New Testament authors find a rich theology of God in the Psalter" (3). This is why the Psalms so frequently find a place in the NT as the apostles instruct believers about their God, His Messiah, and His great plan of redemption. Psalm 2, for example, is packed with theological instruction about what kind of Messiah lost sinners need. As Stevens explains, it reveals that "God's solution for human wickedness is a human king" (13) and goes on to indicate that this king must also be God's anointed, David's heir, and even God's Son. Additionally, the vivid description of suffering and death in Psalm 22, as Stevens explains, "is not a crucifixion prophecy shoehorned into an otherwise unrelated psalm. Rather, it tells the whole story of Christ's suffering, his death, his resurrection, and the proclamation of his gospel" (49).

Stevens similarly sees Psalm 40 as "a gospel psalm," noting that "The shifting pattern of speakers, the change from salvation to an ongoing need for deliverance, and the intrusion of one who obeys and proclaims God's will" teach the reality of a people in need of salvation and a Messiah who will accomplish that salvation through real, human obedience (63). This psalm therefore reveals the necessity of the divine Messiah's incarnation.

Then in Psalm 45, the psalmist portrays "a man who is God, who also exists in relationship *to* God. That is, God has a God who rewards him for the wonderful things he does as a man" (70, emphasis original). Stevens further comments that the statements in Psalm 45 "fit Scripture's story of the Son of God who, though possessing every divine prerogative, emptied himself by adding humanity, lived perfectly, died for his people, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven in the highest glory" (74). These examples demonstrate the rich messianic theology taught in many psalms, which Stevens recaps in his conclusion:

> Through the psalms we have studied, we have seen a man who is both human and God, whose rule determines the fate of nations, who sits at God's right

> hand as king and priest, who offers his body in the place of all Levitical sacrifices, who occupies the position over creation that humanity was meant to inhabit, who created the world and will make it anew, and who is our help and only offer of eternal rest with God. (148)

In addition to teaching believers to read the Psalms per their original intended meaning and demonstrating that the Psalter contains rich theology, a third principle Stevens would have his readers learn is that the Psalms contain not just the human psalmists' words, but God's own speech. This is not simply to affirm that the doctrine of inspiration, which is of course crucial to affirm in all Scripture. But what Stevens would like Christians to see is that while the Psalms were written in their ancient context, the psalmists were not restricted to their ancient context. They could write about themselves in the present, but they could also write intentionally about the Messiah in the future. Indeed, Peter affirms that David, the quintessential psalmist, did this as a prophet (Acts 2:30). Thus, while the psalmists certainly often spoke of their own human troubles and joys, many times they intended to directly record God Himself as the speaker.

This notion is one of Stevens' favorite and oft-repeated insights in *Songs of the Son*. He explains, "when we read the Psalms sometimes Jesus directly speaks to us—not only in the sense that he inspired them but also that the psalmist speaks in the person of Christ" (17). Thus, "Psalm 2 is not only about Jesus; it also contains his words" (17), and as for Psalm 22, "the whole psalm contains Jesus's words" such that David's words in the psalm "are not simply typological but are the words of Christ speaking through him (Heb. 2:11–12)" (47). The Father also speaks directly in the Psalms. Based on its use in Hebrews 1, Stevens argues that in Psalm 102, "the Father proclaims to us the Son's true divinity" (108). In Psalm 110, David "overhears a conversation between the Lord God and his Lord" (114). In pointing these things out, Stevens directs his readers to see the Psalms not just as the words of their human authors, but in many cases as the words of God Himself, whether to believers directly, the Father to the Son, or the Son to the Father.

A fourth principle Stevens brings out in his book is this: to be a good interpreter of the Psalms, one must ask good questions of them to solve difficult tensions. Many psalms easily become confusing if the reader only has the psalmist in mind as the subject. Yet this is not always the case as explained above. Helpfully, Stevens demonstrates what it looks like to ask questions of the psalm in such cases, ultimately to answer the same query of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, "Of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" (8:34).

In the Psalms, the reader will often find that the Messiah Himself is the only one who can truly match the descriptions in the text. For example, in Psalm 45 a king is described in glorious and glowing terms as he goes forth to meet his bride. Stevens asks, "Why use the language of extravagant praise—language elsewhere in the Scriptures reserved for God alone—to describe this man who rides out to claim his bride?" (66), then making the observation, "This king stands above all others" (67). Another puzzling element is that at one point, the psalmist is speaking to God and yet makes reference to "Your God" (vv. 6–7). It becomes apparent, as Stevens observes, that "God has a God" (69). Rather than skipping over these difficulties, Stevens models what it looks like to ask honest questions that lead inevitably to

unavoidable conclusions. In the case of Psalm 45, the human king described in glorious terms must somehow be God Himself, and the presence of two subjects called "God," reconciled with the truth that "God is one" (Gal 3:20; Jas 2:19; cf. Deut 6:4) requires multiple persons subsisting in one essence. While the depths of this trinitarian truth will be further plumbed in the NT, Psalm 45 is setting up for that further elaboration, teaching marvelous theology about the nature of God and His divine Messiah.

Thus, rather than seeking to explain away difficulties and tensions in the Psalms, "refusing" as some do "to accept that the psalm means exactly what it says" (69), believers should recognize the tensions, ask good questions, and reason through what the psalm must be saying about God. Because this can be a daunting task for imperfect interpreters, Stevens points out in every chapter of his book the advantage of following an inspired reader—the author to the Hebrews. In sum, Stevens models in this book the four principles of reading the Psalms in their original context, recognizing that the Psalms intentionally teach rich theology about the Messiah, realizing that God the Father and the Son often speak directly in the Psalms, and reasoning through difficult tensions by asking thoughtful questions. These principles helpfully exemplify to the believer how one can become a better interpreter of the Psalms and understand how and where they intentionally speak directly about Jesus.

To summarize the foregoing analysis, *Songs of the Son* is a helpful contribution, as Stephens demonstrates a consistent hermeneutic, affirms that the Psalms should be read according to their original authors' intent, and shows a depth of thought and careful exegesis to carefully and correctly interpret the Psalms. For believers in general, the book is an insightful and exegetically sound investigation of the messianic psalms quoted in the book of Hebrews. For pastors and teachers of Scripture, *Songs of the Son* also provides an exemplary model of clearly expressing the truth to others with a sense of joyful devotion and pastoral encouragement in the truth. Stevens' ease of explanation shows a depth of careful, exegetical study in the background, and he also regularly pauses to express the wonder of what God teaches believers through the Psalms in a way that is truly Christ-exalting. Thus, there is much to appreciate in this book.

There are, however, a couple of critiques to offer as suggestions for how this book may have been even more helpful. These critiques come mainly as a request for greater precision and clarity regarding how believers should use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

First, a more precise explanation could be requested regarding exactly what it means to interpret OT passages on their own terms while at the same time relying upon an inspired interpreter in the NT. While Stevens demonstrates a consistent hermeneutic in this book, his approach seems to betray a semblance of NT priority in interpretation. To be sure, Stevens arrives at the correct conclusion that the NT writers read OT Scripture according to its originally intended meaning, but some of his statements in the book seem to imply that (some?) OT Scriptures can only fully and rightly be comprehended by looking at NT quotations and interpretations of it. For example, Stevens seems to argue that believers can only fully understand Psalm 110 when looking at it through a NT lens: "[O]nce we know the story of the Son of God who became a man, who sat down at the right hand of God until his enemies are made his footstool, our perspective shifts and Psalm 110 falls into focus. *We had the*

pieces all along; we simply did not know how to read them rightly until Jesus came" (126, emphasis added).

The issue here is that if the NT and all it reveals about Jesus are necessary to rightly understand the psalms written about Jesus, the believer is hopeless to understand a messianic psalm that is not quoted in the NT. And if one would argue that the psalm need not be quoted, the believer need only take his knowledge about Jesus from the NT into the OT psalm, the implication is that the OT saints could never have rightly understood messianic psalms for what they really were. As a hopefully edifying suggestion, it would be better to phrase things specifically in terms of using New Testament *principles* of interpretation to read the OT Scriptures, rather than requiring the NT conclusions themselves for given passages. The author of Hebrews helps believers to rightly read the Psalms not by simply providing an interpretive conclusion (giving believers a fish), but by demonstrating the principle of reading the Psalms the way the inspired psalmists intended (teaching believers to fish). The Psalms themselves contain all the pieces needed, and while the NT provides the interpretive answer key for many of them, for others, the reader may correctly ascertain the original meaning through diligent labor in study, seeking with the illuminating Spirit's help to understand the author's intent.

Finally, a request could be made for greater precision in explaining how the author of Hebrews teaches believers "how the whole Psalter can be read" (8). On the one hand, Stevens would not argue that every psalm is directly about Jesus, nor even every part of some messianic psalms (e.g., Ps 40, see pg. 61), yet on the other, he states that "the Psalter is a book where Jesus is present and is near to us. On every page, he is spoken of, spoken to, or himself speaks" (152), and again, "The Psalms are about him. They are his songs" (152). Such statements seem to lead the reader to find some way to read Jesus into every psalm, or that the psalmist's intent is always to say something about God's Son even when that is not at all clear in the original context.

Of course, every psalm is about Christ in the sense that every psalm is inspired by His Spirit and fits into His story of redemption, but it would be helpful to clarify more precisely how believers ought to carefully study the Psalms according to their original intent without consciously or unconsciously making them say something they did not intend. Again, it is more helpful to point the reader to the hermeneutical method of the author of Hebrews than merely to his conclusions. This way, believers will rightly see Christ in all His glory in those psalms in which He is intentionally portrayed, while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of eisegesis in psalms that allude to Christ more indirectly as they contribute to the overall storyline of Scripture.

To conclude, *Songs of the Son* is an edifying and exemplary coverage of the psalms that are quoted in the book of Hebrews. Stevens provides both encouragement and instruction for any believer as well as a model of faithful exegesis, evident devotion, and clear explanation every pastor and teacher of Scripture would do well to emulate. Readers would only be better served with a bit more clarity and precision on what it means to read all the Psalms in relation to Christ and how to do this legitimately according to authorial intent. Overall, Christ is rightfully honored in this work as Stevens explains why the Psalms are truly *Songs of the Son*.

Varner, William. *The Preacher and the Song: A Fresh Look at Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*. Dallas, TX: Fontes Press, 2023. 132 pp., $13.95 Paperback.

Reviewed by James Seth Adcock, Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Zurich.

Professor William Varner, who teaches at The Master's University and pastors at Grace Baptist Church in Santa Clarita (California), has authored various books in the realms of biblical, Christological, theological, Jewish, Christian, and/or Patristic studies. Prof. Varner is both a biblical professor/pastor and something of a modern, Christian renaissance man. Dr. Varner has a great variety of interests and areas of expertise that one might observe throughout his professional career. For example, Prof. Varner has personally guided, over his long tenure of teaching, many Christians on tours in Israel and in other biblically-related places for believers in the Scriptures. He always gives his reader an interesting read and his recent book, *The Preacher and the Song*, is no exception to this rule.

With *The Preacher and the Song*, Prof. William Varner sets out to present an "introduction to Solomon's life and writings, with original translations of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, and a novel reading strategy for both" (cf. the book's webpage at Fontes Press).[1] The book's table of contents reveals the following main sections, all of which must be read to fully appreciate the arguments and themes of Varner's contribution: "Preface, 1. Overview of Solomon's Life, 2. But What about Proverbs?, 3. The Challenge of the Song of Songs, 4. A Translation of the Song of Songs, 5. Ecclesiastes or the Kohelet, 6. Tracing the Goads and Nails, 7. The Preacher and the Song." After reading the preface, I got the real impression that *The Preacher and the Song* resulted from a personal journal that taught Varner to view Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs in the way that he describes in the book. Moreover, this "personal touch" of Varner's can be seen throughout the book as he relates various life experiences and bibliographic resources that have taught him personally how to approach the difficult-to-interpret books of Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.

For example, Varner personally learned his positive approach to Ecclesiastes and his "three-character view" (xiii) of Song of Songs from a Bob Jones University professor named "Dr. Fred Afman" (xiii, 26, 111), yet, as Varner relates, Afman's book is unpublished and might be difficult to obtain. However, it seems that Afman's "three-character view" is faithfully reflected in Varner's argumentation throughout the book. Varner does not provide any footnotes, or any endnote bibliography, or an annotated bibliography in the book's backmatter, or even any type of index such as a glossary of Scripture references. However, despites these substantial absences in the book's contents, Varner does offer an excellent, broad overview and practical approach to the two books for serious students or researchers of these two very-difficult-to-understand books of the Bible. The book, as Varner explicitly states in the preface (xv) is not written for biblical scholars or serious academics, but rather, is intended for the serious church layman who wishes to read the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes in a better light than they are often read, either among believers in the church or even critically among biblical scholars.

[1] https://www.fontespress.com/product/the-preacher-and-the-song/

In general, I agree with Varner's admirable approach to the books of the Song of Songs and of Ecclesiastes (i.e., the Kohelet), although one can quibble with him, as with any commentator, on the details of his interpretation at times. Personally, I learned much from Varner's "Dramatic" approach to the book of Song of Songs (31–36), which sees the Song of Songs as portraying three main characters of King Solomon, the Shulamite woman (e.g. Song 1:5–7), and an unnamed and otherwise unknown "Shepherd" figure (not to mention a fourth personified group of the "Daughters" that speak in frequent refrains, e.g., Song 1:2–4). For me personally, Varner's book was my first exposure to an increasingly popular (primarily Protestant) interpretation of the Song of Songs, which argues that the book portrays a drama between these four groups or characters, with 8:14 being the Shulamite maiden's answer to her beloved Shepherd's call in 8:13. Likewise, I heartily agree with Varner's "positive" approach to Ecclesiastes, which makes sense of the important refrains of wise instruction from the "Preacher," as well as the stunning conclusion of Ecclesiastes 12:8–14's apparent repentance by King Solomon (103–105). All in all, Varner does quite the admirable job of relating the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs to each other in the life of King Solomon, as well as to our current, modern audience of Christian believers who earnestly desire to understand properly the original context and meaning of these two often neglected books of the Old Testament. I will now briefly relate the structure and sections of the book.

Following the important and necessary "Preface" (xiii–xv), Varner gives an excellent "Overview of Solomon's Life" in the first chapter (1–14), providing a proper foundation for his analysis of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs as books written by the historical person commonly named "King Solomon." In his second chapter "But What about Proverbs?" (15–24), Varner relates the book of Proverbs to King Solomon's life, including his authorship of the two books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Varner postulates that Solomon lived roughly sixty years (7, 23), writing Ecclesiastes at the end of his life, but writing the Song of Songs probably closer to the middle of his life, nearer to the possible time he also wrote Proverbs, early in his kingly reign at Jerusalem.

In Varner's third chapter "The Challenge of the Song of Songs" (25–36), Varner lays out his over-arching perspective and thematic arguments for his perspective of the Song of Songs. He also gives a brief overview of scholarship (35–36). In the fourth chapter "A Translation of the Song of Songs" (37–59), Varner provides a schematic layout of the verses in the Song of Songs, along with a slightly-modified text form of the "Legacy Standard Bible" translation. Next, in Varner's fifth chapter labeled "Ecclesiastes or the Kohelet" (61–73), Varner lays out his over-arching approach and thematic outline for his interpretive framework that he utilizes to interpret Ecclesiastes, or the book of "Kohelet" (61). Then, in the sixth chapter entitled "Tracing the Goads and Nails" (75–111), Varner utilizes Richard De Haan's thematic outline published in *The Art of Staying off Dead-End Streets* (see Varner's book on page 73 and pages 110–111)[2] to interpret and expound the entire book of Ecclesiastes by utilizing a modified text form of the "Legacy Standard Bible." Lastly,

[2] See also the outline of Ecclesiastes published by Martin Wyngaarden of Calvin Seminary under the article title of: Martin Wyngaarden, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes" *The Calvin Forum* 20, no. 8: (March 1955): 57–60. (See also Varner's book on page 111).

in the seventh and final chapter called "The Preacher and the Song" (113–14), Varner hammers home twelve points or principles that he has earlier explained from the books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

Essentially, Varner has made two rarely-read and rarely-understood books, which are both ascribed to the famous King Solomon, much easier to grasp and apply in a comprehensible manner. He has unfolded the so-called "enigmas" of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs for a modern audience that wishes to revere the two books' respective messages. Often Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are compared to riddles wrapped in enigmas. However, Varner convincingly assists his readers to untangle the enigmatic riddles of Solomon's two books. Avoiding a risqué view of the Song of Songs and a pessimistically existential take from Ecclesiastes, Varner provides his readers two interpretive "keys" from their final chapters (i.e., chapter 8 in Song of Songs and chapter 12 in Ecclesiastes). This is to say, Varner advocates viewing the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes through an interpretive key found at the back door of each one of these two books. Varner's reading approach "from the back door" provides the modern reader with a means to understand the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes through a very natural way to read the end of each book (i.e., at chapter 8 of Song of Songs and chapter 12 of Ecclesiastes).

Varner's take on Ecclesiastes and on the Song of Songs rang with quite a unique sound in this reviewer's reading. Even though Varner does not intend the book to be a scholarly work, I wish biblical scholars would read it. I think serious and critical interpreters of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes will find much to avoid a simply risqué view or the former and an overly pessimistic interpretation of the latter. Varner's approach in this book is to give the big pictures of Ecclesiastes and of the Song of Songs, so that one should not expect an in-depth, verse-by-verse commentary of both books, although I hope future authors will utilize Varner's simple introduction to write lengthier commentaries. Hence, I would argue that Varner's "three-character view" of the Song of Songs and the "positive take" on Ecclesiastes should be a starting point for future, serious scholarship on both books. For example, the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs simply does not work exegetically. King Solomon simply does not function as any type of Christ or godly example in the book of the Song of Songs. Nor does the Song of Songs work as simply a series of love poems exalting the praiseworthy nature of sexual love between a Shepherd figure and a woman among King Solomon's harem. Song of Songs simply demands a higher message throughout the various contexts and background descriptions provided in the poetry. While one can disagree with Varner's take on certain verses, such as his explanation or perspective on dramatic personas speaking the passages in the Song of Songs, I think that it is quite clear that Varner is essentially correct in his primary points of interpretation concerning Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs as presented in his book *The Preacher and the Song*.

In conclusion, I would utilize Varner's book *The Preacher and the Song* when teaching in an academic setting to provide a helpful corrective or guidance to the critical commentaries which one must often incorporate when instructing academic courses on the Bible. It is difficult to find commentaries on Ecclesiastes or on the Song of Songs that give Varner's same needed, common-sense approach toward these two biblical books while also relating them to the life of their traditional author – King Solomon. Moreover, it is nearly impossible today to find commentaries that

would still uphold Solomonic authorship of these two difficult-to-interpret books as well. Varner's *The Preacher and the Song* is a welcome addition to any minister's or serious Bible student's library, although one should not expect any annotated bibliography or explanatory citations of earlier bibliographic sources that would support views like Varner's! Yet, even though Varner's book does not attempt to be a serious academic or scholarly resource on Ecclesiastes or the Song of Songs, I still enthusiastically give it my highest recommendation and praise for those who want a great introduction and a practical guide for these two often-neglected books that are ascribed to King Solomon's authorship!

Cole, Graham A. *Theological Method: An Introduction*. Short Studies in Systematic Theology. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025. 128 pp., $16.99 Paperback.

Reviewed by Daniel Clouthier, Assistant to the Executive Director at the John MacArthur Publishing Group.

Graham A. Cole (ThD, Australian College of Theology) serves as the Emeritus dean and professor of biblical and systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In his work *Theological Method: An Introduction*, from the *Short Studies in Systematic Theology* series, Cole sets out to equip not only the academic, but also pastors, theological students, and interested laypeople with an understanding of the "why" and "how" of doing theology. Because right ideas about God stem from right methods, Cole lays out five elements that are foundational to a proper method. It is these which form the basis of this book.

This brief manual begins in chapter 1 with the self-revelation of God. Chapter 2 moves into the witness of Christian thought and practice in Church history. The third chapter recognizes that Christians do theology "outside of Eden," taking into consideration the noetic effect of sin and other various threats to our theology. In light of that, the fourth chapter calls for an understanding of the role of wisdom in doing theology in such a context. And lastly, to bring it all together, the practicing theologian does this as an act of worship to God.

The strength of this book is found in its succinct and logically fluent nature. Cole does a commendable job of introducing the reader to theological method as he sees it. While not sacrificing theological profundity, he easily leads both the trained and the layperson through his approach. Equally commendable is his front-loading of the place of Scripture in doing theology, which the first chapter addresses.

Chapter 1 begins with a powerful personal anecdote highlighting the importance of proper theological training. This story concerns a previous classmate of Cole's from his undergraduate work who likewise went on to theological studies, though at a much different college. Having compared their training, Cole revealed how he was pressed to always base his theological claims in Scripture. For his former classmate though, the Bible was never opened in his studies. The necessity of Scriptural evidence for doctrine was thrust upon Cole effectively, lest, as his teacher stated, one would have "a textless doctrine" unbecoming of such a title as doctrine (20).

Cole goes on to highlight the prime position of Scripture in theology. First, it is Spirit-inspired, inerrant, and infallible. Contrasted with liberal theology, Scripture is

to be understood as the highest revelation from God to man. Therefore, it is the definitive *norma normans* (norming norms). He also gives attention to hermeneutics, making the case that Scripture is to interpret Scripture, making use of genre and biblical theology. Given the high place of Scripture, Cole argues that the theologian has other authorities that he is to take into consideration as well, pointing to Christian tradition, which he covers in the next chapter. Though he elevates Christian tradition, he makes clear that Scripture is the final word. This chapter serves the reader well giving them the right foundation for study, while also recognizing the place of tradition, seeing it as a derived authority sitting under the Word of revelation.

Having laid the groundwork, chapter 2 addresses more fully the use of Christian thought and practice in history. The faith once for all handed down to the saints is mediated by tradition. Therefore, as Cole argues, tradition cannot be escaped, and the practicing theologian does well to learn from the past. Rightly so is Christian tradition contrasted with the Word of God in that the latter is a norming norm while the former is a normed norm (*norma normata*). While upholding the principle of *sola Scriptura,* he rejects the notion that Scripture should be stripped of its interpretive context in the Church. With such a rich history and theological victories like those of Nicaea, the theologian should not neglect the past.

Moving from the past to the present, in chapter 3, Cole deals with the context in which the theologian does his work today. Life outside of Eden confronts one with the noetic effects of sin, a groaning creation, and an enemy of the soul engaged in spiritual warfare. In light of such a daunting environment, Cole highlights the need for humility and the guardrails of doing theology in fellowship with other believers. Given the believer's propensity to err, among other challenges, this chapter serves the reader well, knowing that knowledge still puffs up.

So far, Cole has showcased the primacy of Scripture, the need for past generations, and the predicament of the present. With these three considerations before the reader, he introduces the work of wisdom in utilizing this data for proper theologizing. Grounded in the fear of God, wisdom protects one from wrong ways of doing theology. Calling upon the use of the believer's capacity to reason, Cole urges readers to take up the right tools for the job. Employing such concepts as dogmatic rank (distinguishing between level 1 and level 2 convictions, as he refers to them), control beliefs (theological boundaries), and biblical theology. In sum, this is a helpful chapter that highlights the nuances of utilizing wisdom in one's theology.

Bringing it all together, Cole seeks to show how this is done in practice with an aim towards worship. Not content with merely affecting the mind, faithful theology, Cole argues, must impact one's life. With a practical application of the methods spelled out in this book, this chapter is a fitting capstone to this work.

Prior to this book's close, Cole points out the logical flow found within his theological method (start with God's Word, move to Christian thought, consider our broken world, in light of that utilize wisdom, and do all this as an act of worship). This, he states, is the "essential order" (104). He goes on to caution though that one should avoid holding too rigidly to method. For example, theological reflection may be initiated in us as result of some reality in our broken world. Ultimately though, the questions that arise from this are to direct us back to God's self-revelation as the final authority and the testimony of Christian thought and so on. In line with that, he gives a current example having to do with the question of gender fluidity. In this, his

proposed order for theological reflection places the contemplation of the witness of Christian thought and practice prior to that of Scripture. Such a change in order might leave the reader asking the question, "Why?" Having done so well to highlight the prime place of Scripture over tradition, it is unclear as to why that would change the order for this given issue (or any for that matter). Perhaps maintaining some rigidity of method would best serve the theologian. Always going first to Scripture regardless of how theological reflection arises ensures that Scripture remains primary.

All in all, this work is readily recommended to the reader. It provides the student of Scripture a firm foundation as they embark on the work of doing theology well, and doing it all for the glory of God.

Morell, Caleb. *A Light on the Hill: The Surprising Story of How a Local Church in the Nation's Capital Influenced Evangelicalism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025. 352 pp., $24.99 Hardcover.

Reviewed by Karl Walker, Associate Editor, The Master's Seminary.

A Light on the Hill: The Surprising Story of How a Local Church in the Nation's Capital Influence Evangelicalism narrates the history of Capitol Hill Baptist Church (hereafter CHBC) in Washington, D.C. The author, Caleb Morell (PhD [in progress], Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary), possesses a background in history from the University of Georgetown and serves at CHBC as an assistant pastor. Morell's narrative is a collection of characters, pastors and parishioners alike, in recounting the contours of CHBC's history. As Morell puts it, "this book probes the factors and conditions that contribute to gospel faithfulness … tell[ing] the story of how Capitol Hill Baptist Church has navigated the past century and a half as an evangelical witness in Washington" (3–4). The almost 150 years of faithful gospel proclamation testifies to the truth of Christ's statement that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church (Matt 16:18).

The book begins with CHBC's origin as the fruit of a prayer gathering begun by Celestia Ferris (ch. 1). This faithful woman, along with her husband Abraham, began hosting prayer meetings in her home in 1867 with the desire "for a Baptist church to be established on Capitol Hill" (22). That prayer was answered in the formation of an assembly whose first pastor was Joseph W. Parker (ch. 2). Though Parker laid the ecclesial groundwork of the then named Metropolitan Baptist Church, its next steps were mired by controversy regarding the church's financials and proposed building plan (ch. 3). Yet Morell traces the providential guiding of God through the midst of difficult times, noting the gracious response of Metropolitan's members to those who separated and formed their own church (62–64).

The next few eras take the reader from the instability after this church split to the eventful period during World War I, with the fiery evangelist Billy Sunday and the Spanish Flu of 1918 (chs. 4–7). More times of faithfulness, courage, and discernment, though not absent from difficulty, continued in the post-war period, the next segment of the church's history (chs. 8–10). Personalities like Agnes Shankle shine at

potential turning points for the congregation such as the decision of a new pastor. The arrival of Carl F. Henry eventually resulted in the calling of Mark Dever as the current pastor of the church. And in between Dever's installation as pastor (1994) and Henry's arrival as a member (1956) is no shortage of intriguing historical threads such as the shifting demographics of the neighborhood of the church (ch. 11) or the fall of a renowned pastor (ch. 12). Finally, the book concludes by describing the motto of Dever in coming to CHBC: "Preach, Pray, Love, and Stay" (ch. 13), and the elders' approach to CHBC's size problem—"Doing Nothing and Church Planting," interspersed with brief accounts of the creation of 9Marks and T4G (ch. 14).

Several reflections on this book might be worth consideration in recommending *A Light on the Hill* to potential readers. First, Morell's effort to write a 'biography' of a church, though not unique, remains compelling. Studying the larger view of a church raises questions in a historical context that may not be generated if study were isolated to single individuals. For example, what should a church do when its membership relocates geographically? Should the church cater to the geographically distanced members? Should it address the motivations behind moving? Should it adapt to reflect the presence of new neighbors? How would these decisions affect future generations in the same assembly? The socio-demographic shifts of 1950–1970 in Washington, D.C. that affected the membership of CHBC occur in many other cities today. How should a church respond when such circumstances happen? These questions are the fruit of a well-constructed narrative by Morell that allows for appropriate reflection.

Second, the lay person will be stimulated by the impact a single faithful church member might make in his or her local body. The bold, faithful examples set by women like Celestia Ferris, Agnes Shankle, or Margaret S. Roy evidence the blessing of godly members to their local churches. And for the elder or aspiring pastor, the contrast between the ministry of Walter Pegg and K. Owen White prompts one to meditate on the nature of pastoral faithfulness, the importance of practiced church membership, and other questions of ecclesiology. These examples are strengthened by being placed in the context of a church's existence for nearly 150 years.

Third, the historian may at times be frustrated by the approach Morell adopts in narrating CHBC's history (a point the author acknowledges).[1] Rather than avoiding providentialist interpretation, Morell makes an intentional effort to observe the hand of God in beginning, preserving, and guiding CHBC to its place of gospel ministry today. Yet that being observed, there are places in which this approach of historiography may prove distracting. Each chapter concludes with an applicational section in which the author notes "here is what the reader learns from…" At times, this becomes too much of a restatement of the chapter for the astute reader. Is there a way to write history such that the conclusions become evident to the reader without having to say "here is what to look for—"?

[1] For reference to the author's perspective on the chosen method of historiography, listen here: https://www.9marks.org/episode/on-a-light-on-the-hill/.

Another historical issue, though perhaps a triviality, is the choice of subtitle—"The Surprising Story of How a Local Church in the Nation's Capital Influenced Evangelicalism." This title is somewhat anachronistic, in that for 75 years of CHBC's history, the church's influence on 'evangelicalism' was limited. The influence of Capitol Hill Baptist Church beyond Washington, D.C. appears to be minimal prior to the arrival of Carl F. Henry in the mid-20th century. In seeking fairness to the author, this review recognizes the publisher's role in such decisions as the subtitle, in that it did not appear as if the book's primary argument was to connect the history of CHBC to evangelicalism as a movement. The same might be said of the reflection and application section at the end of each chapter. Yet, regardless of these two minor historiographical preferences, the work as a whole is a thought-provoking account of God's grace in the midst of an ordinary church. It comes well-recommended by the reviewer in the hopes of generating further reflection on what enables a local church to shine as a light in the world, whether in a rural city or on Capitol Hill.