

Third Edition

# THEOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSIS

MOVING FROM  
TRINITARIANISM TOWARDS  
BIBLICAL MONOTHEISM



Presented at the  
24th Theological Conference  
Atlanta Bible College, 2015



BENTLEY C.F. CHAN

# Theological Metamorphosis

## *Moving From Trinitarianism Towards Biblical Monotheism*

This paper, presented at the 2015 Atlanta Theological Conference, consists of two parts. In Part One, I explain the “theological metamorphosis” of Christian Disciples Church which took place around 2005 when we *en masse*, as a whole church spanning three continents, abandoned our longstanding belief in trinitarianism. In so doing, we were moving towards what we call “biblical monotheism,” in which no one but the Father of Jesus Christ is true God. A Bible verse that impelled us in this direction was John 17:3 in which Jesus declares that his Father is “the only true God”.

In Part Two, the longer of the two parts, we reevaluate the deity of Jesus Christ in John’s Gospel. The sole authority for our study will be the Scriptures, the inspired Word of God. There will be no further mention of our church in Part Two.

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# THEOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSIS

Moving From Trinitarianism  
Towards Biblical Monotheism

Version 3



BENTLEY C.F. CHAN

Presented at the  
24th Theological Conference  
Atlanta Bible College  
April/May 2015

Revised and Expanded  
After the Conference



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Theological Metamorphosis: Moving From Trinitarianism  
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Bentley C.F. Chan

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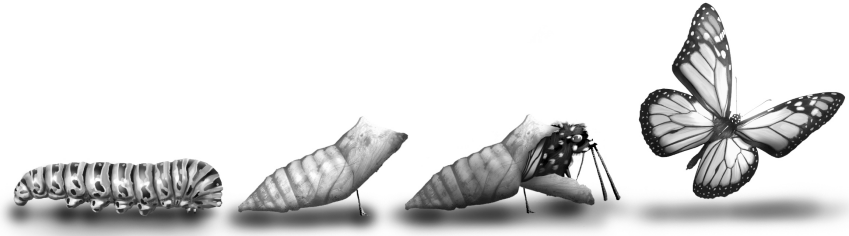
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# Introduction



## metamorphosis

**Zoology** (in an insect or amphibian) the process of transformation from an immature form to an adult form in two or more distinct stages.

→ a change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one, by natural or supernatural means:

*his metamorphosis from presidential candidate to talk-show host*

[New Oxford American Dictionary]

**T**his paper consists of two parts, the shorter of which is Part One. In Part One, I briefly explain the “theological metamorphosis” of Christian Disciples Church (CDC), a church in which I have served in various capacities for a few decades. In speaking of this metamorphosis, I am referring to something that took place around 2005 or 2006 when we *en masse*, as a whole church spanning three continents, abandoned our longstanding belief in trinitarianism. In so doing, we were

moving towards true monotheism or what we call “biblical monotheism,” in which no one but the Father of Jesus Christ is true God. A Bible verse that impelled us in this direction was John 17:3 in which Jesus declares that his Father is “the only true God”.

So whereas for several decades we had been promoting a trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, we now proclaim the one and only God—the Father—and the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Our shift away from trinitarianism is more thoroughgoing than, say, a switch from Calvinism to Arminianism, or from Protestantism to Catholicism, because the God of biblical monotheism is incompatible with the God of trinitarianism. What changed for us was not just the content of our faith but its nature.

Hence even the word *metamorphosis* falls short as an adequate metaphor of our transition, for a butterfly’s basic nature remains the same whether it is a caterpillar, a cocoon, or a full monarch.

Yet in a real way, *metamorphosis* accurately describes our journey. We went through a winter of inner stirrings as we searched the Bible for the truth about God. Then came the warmth of spring as we stepped out into the world of biblical monotheism.

Our story is not just about the past but the present and the hopeful future. In recounting our past, we are moving towards a future strategy for the cause of biblical monotheism, to proclaim the one and only God.

**I**n Part Two, the longer of the two parts, we re-evaluate the deity of Jesus Christ in John's Gospel. The sole authority for our study will be the Scriptures, the inspired Word of God. There will be no further mention of our church in Part Two.



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Special thanks to Sir Anthony F. Buzzard for inviting me to speak at the Atlanta theological conference, and for the Christian hospitality that you and your family have shown me and Sylvia and others visiting from Canada.

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This paper is divided into two parts. Part One is short and introductory. Part Two explains the biblical basis of our departure from trinitarianism.

A few chapters are taken from Eric H.H. Chang's *The Only Perfect Man* (2nd edition) of which I was the second author. But 80% of the material in the present work came from me, so I take responsibility for all mistakes in it.

The views expressed in this paper are mine, and do not necessarily represent those of Atlanta Bible College. But that doesn't stop me from recommending the great resources from Atlanta Bible College and the Restoration Fellowship.

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# Part One



## The Trinitarian Past and the Monotheistic Present and Future of Christian Disciples Church



## CHAPTER 1

# A Brief History of Christian Disciples Church's Position on Trinitarianism



**C**hristian Disciples Church (CDC) is a fellowship of churches united by belief, history, and leadership. Most of our churches are located in Asia, along with a small presence in western countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

Our website at [www.christiandc.org](http://www.christiandc.org) lists some 25 or 30 churches, but we have a similar number of other groups not listed.

Our story begins circa 1976 when Eric H.H. Chang (1934-2013) was invited to pastor a young church in Montreal, Canada. Initially there was no church called Christian Disciples Church, but over the years, CDC emerged from its early roots

and took on a more international presence, notably in Asia. Chang served as CDC's main pastor (along with many other pastors) for over thirty years until his retirement from leadership several years ago.

Prior to Montreal, Eric Chang had lived all his years in China and the United Kingdom, and for a time in Switzerland. He was born in Shanghai. As a young adult he had come to know God in post-liberation China through a series of miracles, as recounted in his book *How I Have Come to Know the Living God* (see the bibliography at the end of this book).

In the 1950s, Chang left China for the United Kingdom where he would end up staying two decades. He studied at the Bible Training Institute (Glasgow) and London Bible College (now London School of Theology) before reading Arts and Divinity at the University of London (King's College and SOAS). During his time in London, he served in a local church. After completing his studies, he served in a church in Liverpool where he was ordained by the Reverend Andrew McBeath.

## **Why are we called Christian Disciples Church?**

Christian Disciples Church teaches that every Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ. The predominant New Testament term for a follower of Jesus is "disciple" (Greek *mathētēs*) which occurs 261 times in the NT, whereas "Christian" (*christianos*) occurs only three times (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1Peter 4:16).

Discipleship involves right doctrine and right life. Right doctrine means accepting the truth of what Jesus taught about God and himself even if it runs counter to church tradition. Right life means applying Jesus' teachings to our daily lives.

Two books by Chang (see the bibliography)—one on total commitment to God, the other on the new life in Christ—are representative of our emphasis on the spiritual life. This is seen, for example, in our stand against the materialism that is so prevalent in Christendom today.

## **Eric Chang breaks with tradition**

We move forward to 2005 or 2006 by which year Eric Chang had been an ardent trinitarian for half a century, having done much to promote trinitarianism in his preaching, in his defense of Christ's deity, and in his leading many to the divine Christ of trinitarianism. But in his re-reading of the Bible he had come to see that his trinitarian view of things such as the deity of Christ is not supported by the biblical data.



He then wrote a book, *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism* (see the bibliography) in which he rejects his former trinitarian belief. In the introduction to the book, he reflects on his trinitarian past:

“I am writing as one who had been a trinitarian from the time I became a Christian at the age of 19—a time which spans over fifty years. During the nearly four decades of serving as pastor, church leader, and teacher of many who have entered the full-time ministry, I taught trinitarian doctrine with great zeal, as those who know me can testify. Trinitarianism was what I drank in with my spiritual milk when I was a spiritual infant. Later, in my Biblical and theological studies, my interest focused on Christology which I pursued with considerable intensity. My life centered on Jesus Christ. I studied and sought to practice his teaching with utmost devotion.

“I was in a practical sense a monotheist, devoted to a monotheism in which Jesus was my Lord and my God. Intense devotion to the Lord Jesus inevitably left little room for either the Father or the Holy Spirit. So, while in theory I believed in there being three persons, in practice there was actually only one person who really mattered: Jesus. I did indeed worship one God, but that one God was Jesus.”

## **Why did our church reject trinitarianism *en masse*?**

CDC could well be the only multi-congregation church in the past 20 years to abandon trinitarianism *as a whole church*. This scenario is not to be confused with the case of a few individuals who, after having seen the errors of trinitarianism, choose to leave their trinitarian church to join a monotheistic one.

How did a church of almost 30 congregations rooted in trinitarianism come to reject trinitarianism and the deity of Christ *en masse*? The answers to this question may be instructive for other churches grappling with similar issues. Here are my observations:

- Even in our trinitarian days, our church did not force anyone to accept trinitarianism as a condition for staying with the church. We did not ask people to sign a membership form or a document of doctrinal assent. We have never taught that we are the only true church. We advocated trinitarianism but no one was forced to accept it. This is seen in the case of my wife Sylvia who all her life to this day has never been convinced of trinitarianism, not even when she was ordained in 1996 at our church in Melbourne, Australia. My point is that CDC even in its trinitarian days had people like Sylvia who did not believe in the trinity, and people like me who were cautious trinitarians because we were keenly aware of the weaknesses of trinitarian dogma.
- When the day came for CDC to abandon trinitarianism in the light of Scripture, those who weren't yet ready to go along with our new stand were given the freedom to stay with us or to leave without the fear of being censured. In our churches worldwide, a minority left us over the issue of trinitarian doctrine, but a clear majority chose to stay, with the percentage varying from church to church. Against expectations, we have been seeing more

people attending some of our church events. This deepened our trust in God, for He will show His mercy and protection when we faithfully proclaim the truth about Him.

- Chang's re-evaluation of trinitarianism enjoyed a good measure of credibility because of his longstanding reputation in our church as a careful and competent Bible expositor. That reputation is impeccable among his fellow pastors and coworkers.
- Chang did not reject trinitarianism in a dogmatic *ex cathedra* manner but participated with his coworkers in a year-long evaluation of the scriptural evidence for biblical monotheism. It was a Berean exercise that sharpened our understanding of the biblical data, and assured us that the Bible was being held as the higher authority over church tradition and doctrine.
- Throughout our history, notably our early history, CDC has been training lay people in biblical exegesis. When I was still a layman in Canada, many ordinary church people were already using tools such as Greek grammars, *New Bible Dictionary*, *Modern Concordance*, Greek-English interlinear NTs; and even UBS3, BDB, TDNT, Blass-Debrunner, and BAGD before it became BDAG.

When a church finds itself in a situation of doctrinal reevaluation, it is crucial that the lay people, or at least some of them, be equipped to study the Bible for themselves and to assess the biblical merits of a doctrine



such as trinitarianism. Church leaders gain trust and credibility, and are perceived as being open-minded, when they willingly give the lay people the freedom—and the means—to study the Bible for themselves.

- The final and ultimate reason for our departure from trinitarianism is that it has weak biblical support. In my trinitarian days, I was already aware of the weaknesses of trinitarianism. So when the day came for CDC to abandon trinitarianism in the light of Scripture, we were doing it with an awareness of the strong biblical basis of our new position.





## CHAPTER 2

# יהוה

## Knowing Yahweh God

### **Yahweh: God's personal name**

**O**ne of the things that guided us towards biblical monotheism was a deeper realization that God has a personal name: “Yahweh” or some similar rendering (from the Hebrew יהוה). We knew of the Name in theory, but it meant little to us

in our trinitarian days just as it means little to most trinitarians today, apart from scholars.

Exactly who is God and does He have a name? Why do so many Bible scholars and Bible dictionaries and Bible encyclopedias call Him by the name “Yahweh”?

In English Bibles, when the word “Lord” is printed in small capitals as LORD, it indicates that the original word in the Hebrew Bible is YHWH or Yahweh, the personal name of God.

For example, the familiar phrase “the word of the LORD” is in the Hebrew literally “the word of Yahweh” (1Ki.18:1, “the word of Yahweh came to Elijah”). In Psalm 23:1, “The LORD is my shepherd” is literally “Yahweh is my shepherd”. The familiar term “the Spirit of the LORD” is literally “the Spirit of Yahweh” (Ezek.11:5, “the Spirit of Yahweh fell upon me”).

The typographical convention of printing “Lord” in small capitals as LORD is explained in the prefaces of many modern Bibles. ESV says, “The ESV usually renders the personal name of God (YHWH) with the word LORD (printed in small capitals).” ESV’s helpful statement that YHWH is “the personal name of God” reminds us of the crucial fact that YHWH or Yahweh is God’s personal name. This is seen throughout the Hebrew Bible, even in the Ten Commandments: “You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain” (a literal translation of Ex.20:7). It is also seen in Exodus 3:15 in which God says to Moses:

“Say this to the Israelites: Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. *This is My name forever*; this is how I am to be remembered in every generation.” (Exodus 3:15, HCSB, italics added)

In saying, “This is my name forever,” God is referring to His own name Yahweh which appears in the same verse. The word “forever” indicates that Yahweh is God’s name not just for one generation but for all eternity; indeed it is “to be remembered in every generation”.

There is common agreement among Bible scholars, both liberal and conservative, that Yahweh is God’s personal name, as seen in Bible encyclopedias such as ISBE (“Yahweh is the only truly personal name of God in Israel’s faith”), in Hebrew dictionaries such as TWOT (“Yahweh, the personal name of God”), and in Bible commentaries such as UBC (“the knowledge of the personal name of God, Yahweh, was arguably the greatest gift of God entrusted to Israel”).<sup>1</sup>

In fact the conventional rendering of Isaiah 42:8 makes no sense (“I am the LORD, that is my name”) unless the name Yahweh is restored, as in NJB and HCSB: “I am Yahweh, that is my name”.

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<sup>1</sup> Respectively, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (God, Names of)*; *Theological Wordbook of the OT* (484a, YHWH); *Understanding the Bible Commentary* (Dt.5:11).

## The preponderance of the name “Yahweh”

Most Christians in the English-speaking world don't know that God's name is YHWH (Yahweh) or that He even has a name. The ignorance of God's name is unacceptable given that YHWH occurs 6,828 times in the Hebrew Bible. The ignorance is puzzling because many academic books regularly use the name Yahweh or YHWH in their biblical or theological studies. For example, the exact word “Yahweh” occurs 2287 times in the revised *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2090 times in the *United Bible Societies OT Handbooks*, and 9983 times in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, possibly the most scholarly Bible dictionary or encyclopedia ever, has 3280 instances of “Yahweh”.

What about *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים), the well-known Hebrew word for “God” or “god”? Whereas *Yahweh* occurs 6,828 times in the Hebrew Bible, *Elohim* occurs only about 2,602 times. Hence the primary term for God in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) is not even “God” but “Yahweh”.

Moreover, around 10% of the 2,602 instances of *Elohim* refer to false deities such as the gods of Egypt, the golden calf, and the goddess Ashtoreth (Ex.12:12; 32:4; 1Ki.11:33). In rare cases, *Elohim* is used of human beings, e.g., Moses (Ex.4:16; 7:1), unjust judges (Ps.82:6), and possibly Samuel's spirit (1Sam.28:13). The remaining 90% of the instances of *Elohim* refer to the God of Israel.

The Hebrew Bible's primary designation of the God of Israel is "Yahweh" rather than "God" not only in terms of numerical predominance (6,828 versus 2,602 instances) but also in terms of precision of reference: The 6,828 instances of "Yahweh" all refer to the God of Israel and never to false gods, *without exception*. Hence it is unacceptable that God's unique and personal name Yahweh is rendered in most English Bibles as LORD, a title of honor that is sometimes applied to human beings.

In fact some Bible scholars are calling for a return to the original name Yahweh. The five-volume New International Dictionary of OT Theology says:

The "translation" LORD is something of a problem from various perspectives. LORD obscures the fact that Yahweh is a name and not a title ... In view of this reality, it could be argued that, as with other personal names, we simply transliterate what the original Hebrew was thought to be—Yahweh. (NIDOTT, vol.5, "Yahweh")

## **The identity of Yahweh: Who is He?**

To understand a person, whether human or divine, it would be helpful to make a few summary statements about him. This will guide us to the exact identity of Yahweh. Here are four identifying statements:

**Yahweh is the one and only God**

Yahweh says, “I am Yahweh, and there is no other, besides me there is no God” (Isaiah 45:5); and “there is no other god besides me” (v.21).

**Yahweh is the only Creator**

Yahweh says, “I am Yahweh, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself.” (Isaiah 44:24)

**Yahweh is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**

Yahweh told Moses to tell the Israelites: “Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” (Exodus 3:15)

**Yahweh is the God and Father of Jesus Christ**

First we note that Yahweh is our Father: “You, O Yahweh, are our Father” (Isa.63:16; cf. 64:8; Dt.32:6; Mal.2:10). Paul says specifically that He is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom.15:6; 2Cor.1:3; 11:31; Eph.1:3), a truth echoed by Jesus when he says, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Jn.20:17). Three chapters earlier, Jesus calls his Father “the only true God” (Jn.17:3), an identification that aligns with Isaiah 45:5: “I am Yahweh, and there is no other, besides me there is no God”. Hence Yahweh is the God and Father of Jesus Christ.





## CHAPTER 3

# The Road Ahead for Biblical Monotheism

### **A theological awakening**

**A** new openness to God's word is sweeping through the world in a way not seen before. It moves with quiet power, breaching religious and denominational barriers.

It is summed up in one word, *freedom*, specifically the freedom to read God's word without being controlled by dogmatic traditions. At long last, after two thousand years, that

freedom has arrived, thanks to the Internet and other transformational changes in society.

But hasn't that freedom always been with us for 2,000 years? The answer is "yes" for some, but "no" for the vast majority who have lived in the world, even the Christian world. That is because great and formidable obstacles have for centuries stood in the way of those who hunger and thirst for the pure word of God. These barriers have had to be dismantled one by one, brick by brick, until the final and greatest barrier was overcome (partially) in the 21st century.

**The first barrier** was the dire lack of Bibles even among church leaders in the centuries before the arrival of the printing press. Today more copies of the Bible are produced in one month than in the first 1,400 years of church history. Constantine's edict of AD 331 to produce copies of the Bible for Constantinople involved the production of only fifty handwritten copies (my iPad alone has 30 Bibles). But even after the printing press had been invented, the church had at times brutally suppressed the translation of the Bible into the common languages of the people.

**The second barrier** was general illiteracy in the early church. Widely quoted studies have suggested a literacy rate of 10-15% in classical Athens and a lower rate in the Roman Empire of the first century. In those days, one could be counted as literate if he or she could sign his or her own name or write the letters of an alphabet. Wikipedia article *Literacy* explains

how literacy in Europe increased rapidly in the past five centuries; in earlier times, general illiteracy was the norm in much of Europe.

**The third barrier** was the non-specialist's lack of access to the original languages of the Bible even up to the 19th century. The phrase "lost in translation" may sound tired but it reminds us that mistranslation can happen even between modern languages. The problem is greater when it comes to translating the Bible, not only because its original languages are ancient (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) but also because there is a real danger of doctrinal bias in Bible translation. The good news is that today we can study the Bible in its original languages if we are willing to invest the time and effort to learn them, and the money to acquire a small library of books and references.

**The final barrier**, overcome partially, is the trinitarian suppression of non-trinitarian teaching. The barrier was erected at the Council of Nicaea (325) where an *anathema* was cast on all dissenters in the entire Christian world, and also later at the Council of Constantinople (381). The barrier stands to this day, as seen in tragic episodes of history such as the burning at the stake of Michael Servetus.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the only places in Canada where I could buy good Christian books were the Christian bookstores located in the major cities. The problem was that the selection of books was censored by the doctrinal leanings of the bookstores and/or their parent organizations. The censorship was not total, however, for the stores were willing to stock books

that were liberal, atheistic, or even hostile to Christianity. But they would never stock a Christian book with a non-trinitarian perspective even if it is based on the Bible because such a book, all the more so if it has solid biblical support, would be viewed by the church as being deadlier than atheistic books. A book may be rooted in the Bible and adhere to *sola Scriptura*, yet is viewed as *anathema* for not falling in line with trinitarian dogma.

The power to suppress a biblically-based book merely for not adhering to trinitarian dogma will inevitably shape our interpretation of the Bible. I have experienced this kind of power first hand. Because the bookstores had no books that deviated from trinitarian dogma, for years I literally equated trinitarianism with the Christian faith.

Another example of the trinitarian suppression of non-trinitarian doctrine is seen in the case of the Evangelical Theological Society which, at its founding in 1949, had only one doctrinal requirement for society membership: acceptance of biblical inerrancy. So far so good. But 41 years later, in 1990, a new requirement was added: adherence to trinitarianism. But if trinitarianism is really rooted in Scripture as trinitarians say it is, why was it necessary for them to add the second requirement when the first would have safeguarded the doctrine (assuming that it was biblically based in the first place)? What happened to the bold confidence in *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone? ETS started as a biblical society but ended as a doctrinal society.

Ironically, the two requirements for ETS membership—accepting the inerrancy of the Bible and accepting trinitarianism—are incongruous because the word “trinity” is not even found in the Bible.

Finally, the supreme example of trinitarian control is seen in the fact that most Bibles today are translated with a trinitarian bias. But that is a topic for another day.

## **The final barrier is being eroded**

But things had changed by 2009, the year I moved back to Canada after being away two decades. The formerly largest Christian bookstores in Montreal are now smaller than what they used to be. Collectively they have a reduced and aging inventory of books amid a plethora of bookmarks, greetings cards, and Bible cases. (I still show my support to these bookstores, having bought many books from them in the past eleven years.) Christian bookstores in other cities may fare better but none can stop a global development that is neutralizing any effort to suppress non-trinitarian titles.

Today you can order Christian books of any theological persuasion from Amazon.com, making it impossible for any church to silence a writer who speaks the truth about God. Every book now has a distribution channel to a global audience.

Today you can Google for monotheistic resources and expositions of God’s word which in an earlier era would be suppressed by the bastions of dogma. With every passing year,

we see new websites and blogs and books that uphold biblical monotheism.

Today's churchgoers are less likely to blindly accept doctrines from the church, and are trained to search the Internet for alternative interpretations that may have stronger biblical support.

Despite the openness of the Internet, the final barrier—doctrinal suppression—still stands to some extent. But in practice, this has been neutralized for those who seek the truth. For the one who is open minded, there is now a clear channel to the truth of God's word that is free of doctrinal control. The Internet is a two-edged sword that can be used for promulgating the truth or for spreading lies. But with prayer and God's help (John 7:17; James 1:5), the seeker of the truth is now empowered to arrive at the truth, and to experience God in a deeper way on account of his or her deeper understanding of the only true God.

Ultimately the key to the successful promulgation of biblical monotheism will be God's help and the fact that trinitarianism finds weak support in God's word.

## Part Two



# A Re-evaluation of the Deity of Jesus Christ in John's Gospel





## CHAPTER 4



# John 17:3 The Only True God

**I**n Part Two of this paper, we now re-evaluate the deity of Jesus Christ in the light of John's Gospel. Because this is a conference paper, we cannot cover every passage in John. We won't follow the verse order in John's Gospel, but will begin with John 17:3:

“This is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

This statement comes from the mouth of the Lord Jesus. It is deep, yet clear and simple. There is nothing theologically complex about it. Even if the meaning of “eternal” is vague to some, surely the vocabulary of the sentence as a whole is not beyond that of a primary school student.

What then is Jesus saying in John 17:3? Within one sentence, Jesus twice uses the pronoun “you” (which is singular in the Greek text) to address the One he is praying to. It is clear from verse 1 that Jesus is praying specifically to his Father: “Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son”. This fact is not debated by trinitarians, and is stated in most commentaries. Hence Jesus is simply saying, “You, Father, are the only true God,” a statement that rules out everyone else, including Jesus himself, as being God.

In addressing his Father as the only true God, Jesus is ruling out any other, even a so-called “god” or “God,” as true God. This is doubly reinforced by the use of the article “the” and the adjective “only,” both of which, especially in combination, imply strict exclusion. The triple emphasis (the+only+true) is a triple rejection of any divine person alongside the Father of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, in John 5:44, Jesus calls the Father “the only God,” a verse that is problematic to trinitarians, even some early trinitarians.<sup>2</sup>

Who then is the Father whom Jesus calls the only true God? He is none other than Yahweh Himself, the God of Israel, for who else can be “the only true God” (Jn.17:3) but Yahweh who is the only God (“I am Yahweh, and there is no other, besides me there is no God,” Isa.45:5)?

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<sup>2</sup> John 5:44 was problematic to some early advocates of Christ’s deity. Ancient manuscripts P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup> simply removed the word “God” from John 5:44 to avoid saying that the Father is “the only God”. Now the Father is simply “the only,” making it possible for Jesus to be God.

How could we in our trinitarian days have imagined that the Father is not the sole person in “the only true God”? Did we really think that Jesus was praying to all three persons of the Trinity, including Jesus himself? Does the word “you” (singular in Greek) which is uttered by Jesus include “me”—Jesus himself? Is Jesus praying to himself? And what do we make of the words that follow, “and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”? Here Jesus is making a sharp distinction between “you” (the Father) and “Jesus Christ” by which he excludes himself from being “the only true God”.

## **John 17:3 defeats every attempt to make it trinitarian**

The monotheism of John 17:3 is rock solid and defeats every attempt to give it a trinitarian meaning. That is why some Bible commentaries avoid mentioning this verse altogether. Some other commentaries quote the words “the only true God” for the sake of completeness, but give them zero commentary. Yet others quote only the first part of John 17:3 which they find tame and inoffensive (“this is eternal life, that they may know you”), but are silent on the second part which they find objectionable (“the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”). I have looked at two dozen trinitarian commentaries.

But a few trinitarians are so bold as to try to explain away Jesus’ clear statement in John 17:3. Yet even the greatest minds in church history (e.g., Augustine) have failed to reverse the

meaning of John 17:3. That is the clear proof of the strict and absolute monotheism of John 17:3 and of Jesus Christ.

A common trinitarian tactic is to alter Jesus' words in such a way as to expand the scope of "the only true God" to absorb Jesus or even the whole Trinity into the redefined "only true God".

Augustine, after quoting John 17:3 correctly and accurately, goes on to change its word order in a way that absorbs Jesus into "the only true God". The alteration is not an accidental slip because Augustine calls it "the proper order". Then he does something similar for the Holy Spirit.

In the following paragraph from Augustine's exposition of John's gospel, his alteration of John 17:3 is highlighted in boldface:

"And this," Jesus adds, "is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent." **The proper order of the words is, "That they may know Thee and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent, as the only true God."** Consequently, therefore, the Holy Spirit is also understood, because He is the Spirit of the Father and Son, as the substantial and consubstantial love of both. For the Father and Son are not two Gods, nor are the Father and Son and Holy Spirit three Gods; but the Trinity itself is the one only true God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, series 1, vol.7, *St. Augustine: Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John*, tractate CV, chapter XVII.1-5, paragraph 3, translated into English by Rev. John Gibb, D.D.

In the first sentence, Augustine quotes John 17:3 accurately, but in the second sentence (in boldface), he moves “Jesus Christ” into juxtaposition with the Father such that both constitute the only true God!

The fact that Augustine, a brilliant thinker, feels compelled to do this to John 17:3 is clear proof that this verse, in its unaltered form, does not support the doctrine of the Trinity. His alteration of John 17:3 is all the more puzzling because he does quote the verse accurately in the first sentence, which means that he had access to a good text of John 17:3, not a corrupted text. John 17:3 has no textual issues, and is given zero commentary in UBS5’s critical apparatus.<sup>4</sup>

A similar but more subtle approach is seen in the article “Trinity” in ISBE (vol.5, pp.3012f) by B.B. Warfield, a gifted writer who is known as “the last of the great Princeton theologians”. From his ISBE article we see the subtle process by which Jesus’ words—and his strict monotheism—are brushed aside by philosophical sophistication and the persuasive argumentation from human wisdom.

Only the first part of Warfield’s essay is quoted below. It is skillfully presented. First he admits what cannot be denied, namely, that trinitarian language is unbiblical and derived from philosophy, while asserting that it is nonetheless Scriptural in

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine would be reading from one of the Latin versions. The scholarly critical edition of the Latin text, *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, 5th edition, published by the German Bible Society, says that in the case of John 17:3, the Latin versions are in agreement except in the choice between *verum* and *uerum*, two variant spellings of the word for “true”.

essence. Using the language of chemistry, Warfield says that trinitarian truth is the “crystallization” of what is hidden in Scripture as a “solution” and in “solvent” state. While conceding that the doctrine of the Trinity is an extrapolation from “fragmentary allusions,” Warfield goes on to say that it is nonetheless a “genuinely Scriptural doctrine”.

Warfield gets bolder in the next paragraph and says that the Trinity is “undiscoverable” in Scripture and can only be known by revelation! By this clever argument, Warfield has transformed a glaring trinitarian weakness (the lack of biblical support) into a supposed strength, and the non-existent into something that is knowable only by trinitarian illumination!

For brevity we quote only the first paragraph of his essay. Notice how his non-Scripture position comes out, without exaggeration, in almost every sentence:

The term “Trinity” is not a Biblical term, and we are not using Biblical language when we define what is expressed by it as the doctrine that there is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence. A doctrine so defined can be spoken of as a Biblical doctrine only on the principle that the sense of Scripture is Scripture. And the definition of a Biblical doctrine in such un-Biblical language can be justified only on the principle that it is better to preserve the truth of Scripture than the words of Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity lies in Scripture in solution; when it is crystallized from its solvent it does not cease to be Scriptural, but only comes into clearer view. Or, to speak without figure,

the doctrine of the Trinity is given to us in Scripture, not in formulated definition, but in fragmentary allusions.

Warfield's persistent non-use of Scripture to uphold trinitarianism comes close to an explicit admission that trinitarian doctrine is unscriptural. He even says that it uses "un-Biblical language" and is "undiscoverable" in the Bible.

Notice further that Warfield defines trinitarianism as "the doctrine that *there is one only and true God*, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons" (italics added). The words in italics are a direct reference to Jesus' statement in John 17:3 in which Jesus declares that the Father is "the only true God". But by failing to quote Jesus in full, Warfield is sidestepping the key word "you" which is singular in the Greek and refers to the Father only. In this verse, Jesus is not merely saying, "there is one true God," but is saying specifically, "You (the Father) are the only true God". Jesus is not making a vague or general statement about monotheism but states specifically who the only true God is (namely, the Father).

The same fundamental error is made in the hymn, "We believe in One True God," by Tobias Clausnitzer, 1668, and translated from the German by Catherine Winkworth, 1863. Whereas Jesus says that only the Father is true God (Jn.17:3), the first line of this hymn goes off on a tangent: "We believe in one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". Just as puzzling, the Bible verse given by a hymnbook as the biblical basis of this hymn is none other than John 17:3!

A similar error is seen in the title of a book by Clarence Benson: *The One True God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*.

It is this crucial fact—that Jesus addresses his Father as the only true God—which is suppressed in trinitarianism. The error then slides into a distortion of the word “monotheism” to make it mean something other than monotheism, namely, that “in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons” (Warfield). But how can a doctrine of a three-person Godhead be monotheism, the doctrine of one and only God?

But because the Father is the only true God, it will come as no surprise that it is almost impossible to find the deity of Jesus in the Bible. This leads us to the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 5



# A Trinitarian’s Colossal Efforts to Prove That Jesus is Called “God” in the New Testament

Note: *Theos* is the Greek word for “God” (cf., *theology*), this being a transliteration of θεός or ΘΕΟΣ (miniscule and majuscule script). We use *theos* in our discussion except when quoting writers who use θεός or ΘΕΟΣ, but they all mean “God”.

### **Troubling questions for the trinitarian**

**I**n the last chapter, we saw that the only true God is the Father, not the Son. That being the case, does Jesus ever call himself *theos* (God)? Does the Bible ever call Jesus *theos*? These are not trick questions or flippant statements but weighty questions discussed by biblical scholars, even trinitarian scholars. The fact that such questions could be raised in the first place—

and debated—may surprise those who believe that the deity of Christ is an established fact above biblical investigation.

But to Brian J. Wright, a biblical scholar and trinitarian, the question of whether Jesus is ever explicitly called *theos* in the New Testament is not an idle question but one that merits scholarly investigation. He examines the question—of whether Jesus is ever called *theos*—in a dense and lengthy essay (with 149 footnotes) which is titled, *Jesus as ΘΕΟΣ: A Textual Examination*. Before I summarize his key findings, there are three things I need to say up front:

- The author, Brian J. Wright, is a fervent trinitarian, and is seeking to defend trinitarianism.
- His essay constitutes the last chapter of the book, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*,<sup>5</sup> edited by Daniel B. Wallace, an equally ardent trinitarian.

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<sup>5</sup> Full title, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence* (Daniel B. Wallace, ed., Kregel, 2011). This book has six essays which argue for the textual reliability of the New Testament.

- Wright investigates the question (of whether Jesus is explicitly called *theos*) from various angles, notably that of NT textual criticism.<sup>6</sup> This approach has the advantage of bypassing the trinitarian bias of English Bibles such as ESV and NASB, thereby removing one possible layer of distortion from our examination.

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<sup>6</sup> In its traditional meaning, New Testament textual criticism aims to recover the “original” words (the *autograph*) of the New Testament writings through a scientific analysis of the thousands of extant NT manuscripts. A readable introduction to this topic is Neil R. Lightfoot’s *How We Got the Bible*, 3rd edition; but it is silent on the topic of intentional alteration of the manuscripts. A shorter but more substantive introduction is J. Harold Greenlee’s *The Text of the New Testament: From Manuscript to Modern Edition*. A standard work is *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th edition, Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman. A recent (2015) intermediate-level work that is aware of recent developments is *Fundamentals of New Testament Textual Criticism*, by Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts.

## Wright's trinitarian dilemma

Wright begins his essay with the crucial observation that “every major NT scholar” from “Aland to Zuntz” has searched the New Testament for texts that explicitly call Jesus *theos*. This statement is striking when you think about it. It is an early warning that New Testament references to Jesus as *theos* are rare, perhaps non-existent.

Wright then pours cold water on the false hope that a search for NT references to Jesus as *theos* is going to be “painless”. He also dismisses the fantasy held by most Christians that there are “plenty of proof passages” that refer to Jesus as *theos*. Wright, despite being an ardent trinitarian, goes on to enumerate several “stumbling blocks” for those who think that Jesus is explicitly called *theos* (θεός, “God”) in the Bible:

No author of a Synoptic Gospel explicitly ascribes the title θεός to Jesus. Jesus never uses the term θεός for himself. No sermon in the book of Acts attributes the title θεός to Jesus. No extant Christian confession of Jesus as θεός exists earlier than the late 50s. Prior to the fourth-century Arian controversy, noticeably few Greek manuscripts attest to such “Jesus-θεός” passages. And possibly the biggest problem for NT Christology regarding this topic is that textual variants exist in every potential passage where Jesus is explicitly referred to as θεός.

This quotation ought to be read a second time and a third time, so that we may take in the gravity of the trinitarian dilemma. Every sentence in this excerpt is a weighty barrier against hastily

concluding that Jesus is explicitly called *theos* (“God”) in the New Testament. Wright’s last sentence tells us, further, that the “biggest problem for NT Christology” is that textual variants (i.e., conflicting manuscript witness) attend “every” passage that may potentially speak of Jesus as *theos*. This is a most perplexing dilemma to Wright, and he reiterates his sentiments in a footnote in which he says that it may “unfortunately” be the case that all the verses which may potentially speak of Jesus as *theos* could be textually suspect.

In another footnote, Wright observes that Jesus even differentiates himself from God: “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mk.10:18; Lk.18:19). Wright then points us to Bishop H.W. Montefiore’s view that Jesus is here explicitly denying his own deity (a denial that would agree with John 17:3).

## **Wright dismisses ten passages up front**

Wright then gathers 17 passages from the New Testament which he thinks may potentially speak of Jesus as *theos* (“God”). But he dismisses 10 of them up front for various reasons, keeping only 7 for the next round of examination. The following are the 10 dismissed passages, with my explanation of his reasons for dismissing them.

Bible passage (ESV)	Wright's reasons for excluding the passage (as explained by B. Chan)
<p><b>Romans 9:5.</b> To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.</p>	<p><b>Punctuation issue.</b> The earliest Greek NT manuscripts had no punctuation. This is generally not a problem when we read the Greek NT because context often resolves any ambiguity that may arise from the lack of punctuation, but it poses a problem in the case of Romans 9:5 because the meaning of this verse is governed by how we modern people punctuate it. One way of punctuation makes Christ the same as God, the other way makes Christ distinct from God. Because of the ambiguity, Wright does not regard Romans 9:5 as a proof text for calling Christ <i>theos</i>.</p>
<p><b>Colossians 2:2</b> ... to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ</p>	<p><b>Uncertain syntax.</b> It is uncertain if the syntax of this verse allows us to identify Christ with <i>theos</i>.</p>
<p><b>Matthew 1:23.</b> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).</p>	<p><b>Uncertainty over how to interpret a name.</b> It is uncertain if the meaning of the name Immanuel ("God with us") is to be taken as identifying Jesus with <i>theos</i>. In fact many Jewish given names contain the short form of YHWH or Elohim.</p>
<p><b>John 17:3.</b> And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.</p>	<p><b>Uncertain syntax.</b> It is uncertain if the syntax of this verse allows us to identify Jesus Christ with <i>theos</i>.</p>
<p><b>Ephesians 5:5.</b> For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.</p>	<p><b>Uncertain syntax.</b> It is uncertain if the syntax of this verse allows us to identify Christ with <i>theos</i>.</p>

<p><b>2 Thessalonians 1:12.</b> so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.</p>	<p><b>Ambiguous syntax.</b> The final clause of this verse can be translated either as “according to the grace of our God and Lord, namely Jesus Christ” or as “according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ”. Wright thinks that the latter is more probable (i.e., that this verse does not equate Jesus with God).</p>
<p><b>1 Timothy 3:16.</b> Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.</p>	<p><b>Uncertain syntax.</b> It is uncertain if the syntax and the context of this verse allow us to identify Christ with <i>theos</i>.</p>
<p><b>Titus 2:13.</b> waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ</p>	<p><b>Uncertain syntax.</b> It is uncertain if the syntax of this verse allows us to identify Christ with <i>theos</i>. Daniel B. Wallace thinks it does. Gordon Fee, a NT scholar and trinitarian, thinks it does not.</p>
<p><b>1 John 5:20.</b> And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.</p>	<p><b>Uncertain syntax.</b> It is uncertain if the syntax of this verse allows us to identify Christ with <i>theos</i>.</p>
<p><b>Jude 4.</b> For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.</p>	<p><b>Textual uncertainty.</b> The best manuscripts have “Master and Lord” (Wright accepts this variant) but a few have “Master God and Lord”.</p>

## Wright's short list of seven verses

The following are the seven remaining Bible verses which Wright believes are the best candidates for providing explicit reference to Jesus as *theos* (“God”). We quote these verses from ESV, but in two cases also from NJB because of its notable non-trinitarian departures from ESV (the differences between the two are highlighted in boldface):

Bible verse from ESV (with two verses also from NJB)
<p><b>John 1:1.</b> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.</p>
<p><b>John 1:18.</b> No one has ever seen God; <b>the only God</b>, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.</p> <p><b>New Jerusalem Bible.</b> No one has ever seen God; it is <b>the only Son</b>, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.</p>
<p><b>John 20:28.</b> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”</p>
<p><b>Acts 20:28.</b> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with <b>his own blood</b>.</p> <p><b>New Jerusalem Bible.</b> Be on your guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you the guardians, to feed the Church of God which he bought with <b>the blood of his own Son</b>.</p>
<p><b>Galatians 2:20.</b> I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.</p>
<p><b>Hebrews 1:8.</b> But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.”</p>
<p><b>2 Peter 1:1.</b> Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ</p>



## Wright’s final conclusion

I will spare you the details, and skip over Wright’s technical discussion on these seven verses (it deals with textual-critical and other issues) and go straight to his final conclusion. Those who want the details and know some basic Greek and textual criticism can buy Daniel B. Wallace’s book at Amazon.com (paperback, 284 pages, US\$21.50).

At the end of his essay, Wright arrives at this final conclusion: **In the whole New Testament, only in John 20:28 (“my Lord and my God”) is Jesus explicitly called *theos* with full certainty.** Wright offers a few other less certain verses for which he says there is “no reason to doubt” that they refer to Jesus as *theos* despite having textual or other difficulties.

Towards the end of his essay, Wright triumphantly says that there is “at least one text that undoubtedly calls Jesus θεός in every respect (John 20.28)”.

From this and other statements, I get the feeling that Wright is not satisfied with what he has obtained for the deity of Christ from his detailed investigation. If anything, his essay seems to achieve the very opposite by exposing the paucity of NT references to Jesus as *theos*.

Because John 20:28 does not suffer from any textual uncertainty, Wright goes on to conclude that Jesus is thereby called *theos* in this verse. He says, “John 20.28, no matter which variant or manuscript one chooses, is categorically secure for referring to Jesus as θεός.” (p.250)

But this is a *non sequitur* (a conclusion that does not follow logically from its premise) because textual certainty by itself proves nothing but textual certainty. The textual certainty of John 20:28 is not debated by scholars; in fact UBS5's critical apparatus has zero commentary on this verse.

Trinitarians will need to take a second step—biblical exegesis—to demonstrate that Jesus is actually called *theos* in John 20:28. This leads us to the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 6



# John 20:28: “My Lord and My God!”

In the previous chapter we saw that Brian J. Wright, a Bible scholar and a trinitarian, concludes that John 20:28 is the only verse in the New Testament that, with full certainty, refers explicitly to Jesus as *theos* (“God”), with a handful of other verses that can be “assumed” to have “a similar degree of certainty”.

It is one thing for Wright to establish the textual certainty of John 20:28 (this is actually a non-issue in NT scholarship) but quite another to demonstrate that the verse itself actually speaks of Jesus as *theos*.

The following is John 20:28 in its full context, with the key verse v.28 shown in boldface. Five words are underlined for later discussion.

<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told [Thomas], “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” <sup>26</sup> Eight days

later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”<sup>28</sup> **Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”**<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:25-29, ESV)

Does this passage—which culminates in Thomas’s exclamation, “My Lord and my God!”—teach the deity of Jesus? Most trinitarian commentaries take this for granted without any analysis. Yet there are six weighty points—all based on Scripture—that they ought to take into consideration for an understanding of John 20:28.

## **Point 1: The only true God is the Father, not the Son**

The trinitarian claim that John 20:28 establishes Jesus as God is weakened, even nullified, by the fact that the Father is “the only true God” (John 17:3). In using the word “only,” Jesus is excluding himself as “true God”.

We cannot isolate John 17:3 and 20:28 from each other because John 17 and John 20 are separated by only two chapters. Moreover, the two verses, 17:3 and 20:28, come from the same gospel (of John), and hence are rooted in the same Johannine

concept of God. As a result, the trinitarian interpretation of John 20:28 (that Jesus is God) would create a genuine conflict with John 17:3 (that Jesus is not true God). We cannot wave away the contradiction by saying that the two verses carry two different meanings of “God” (an argument that might be plausible if one of the verses had come from John and the other from a different writer like Paul or Peter).

Moreover, this contradiction between John 17:3 and 20:28 (which exists *only* in trinitarianism) would make Jesus the perpetrator of the contradiction. For it is Jesus who in John 17:3 declares that his Father is the only true God, but also Jesus who in John 20:28 accepts Thomas’s ascription of deity, at least according to trinitarians.

Jesus’ declaration in John 17:3 that the Father is the only true God is affirmed by 1Corinthians 8:6 which says, “there is one God, the Father”. Note that Paul does not say, “There is one God: Father, Son, and Spirit”.

In Ephesians 4:6, Paul establishes the exclusive deity of the Father when he speaks of “one God and Father of all”. Paul is saying that there is only one God, and that this God happens to be the Father of all. Therefore anyone who is not the “Father of all” cannot be God. But Jesus Christ is not the Father (not even in trinitarianism), much less the Father of all, which means that Jesus is not God. In fact, 1John 5:18 says that we are “born of God” and that Jesus was “born of God”—in the same sentence!

## **Point 2: Jesus was mainly concerned with Thomas's unbelief**

Notice the five underlined words in the Bible passage quoted above: *believe, disbelieve, believe, believed, believed*. The first was uttered by Thomas, the other four by Jesus.

What exactly did Thomas refuse to believe? Earlier on, he told the other disciples that he refuses to “believe” unless he sees and touches the wounds of Jesus. This was his response to the claim, “We have seen the [risen] Lord,” which he dismissed as fantasy. Thomas refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, so he demanded the physical evidence that he could see and touch.

Eight days later, Jesus appeared to Thomas and presented the very evidence that he had demanded: the wounds that he could see and touch. Jesus then said to him, “Do not disbelieve but believe”. Thomas then exclaimed the memorable words, “My Lord and my God!” It is striking that Jesus then straight-away pulls the conversation back to the issue of unbelief: “Have you believed because you have seen me?” Jesus has not shown any *explicit* interest in his alleged deity.

## **Point 3: Jesus was speaking of belief in his resurrection, not belief in his deity**

When I was a trinitarian, I paid close attention to Jesus' rebuke of Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

After much thinking, I realized even as a trinitarian that John 20:28-29 was not being explicit enough, for it had left unanswered a crucial question: When Jesus rebuked Thomas for his unbelief, what kind of unbelief was he referring to? Unbelief in regard to his deity? Or unbelief in regard to his resurrection?

Even as a trinitarian, I could not rule out the latter because the whole account is about Thomas's refusal to believe that Jesus had come back to life. In fact Jesus addressed the issue by inviting Thomas to touch his wounds: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not **disbelieve**, but **believe**."

Note the two words I highlighted in boldface: The word "believe" is the reversal of "disbelieve," that is, Thomas now believes what he had previously disbelieved, namely, the resurrection of Jesus! That is a clear answer to my question.

Yet in my study of John 20:28 as a trinitarian, *the clear answer to my question was already standing right in front of me!* In John 20:28, I only had to turn one page in my Bible to go to the next book: Acts of the Apostles. In a real sense, John 20:28 is prefatory to the book of Acts. Chronologically they are separated by a short span of time, the few weeks from the resurrection to the ascension. The importance of John 20:28, together with the pivotal placement of John's gospel just before Acts in the canon, means that John 20:28 sets the pattern for the apostolic preaching of Jesus in Acts.

This leads us to the crucial question: In the book of Acts, did the apostles preach Jesus as God or Jesus as the risen Lord? I

think we already know the answer: they preached Jesus as the risen Lord.

Even trinitarians admit that in the book of Acts, Jesus never calls himself *theos* (God), and that the apostles proclaimed Jesus as the *risen* Lord rather than a *divine* Lord. *That is the clear answer to my question!*

Let's get this clear: In the book of Acts, Jesus is never called *theos* by the apostles or by Jesus himself, a solid fact that is not disputed in New Testament scholarship. This is even admitted by the trinitarian Brian J. Wright in a statement we have already quoted:

No author of a Synoptic Gospel explicitly ascribes the title θεός to Jesus. Jesus never uses the term θεός for himself. No sermon in the book of Acts attributes the title θεός to Jesus.

In the book of Acts, the apostles never proclaimed Jesus as God. On the contrary, they consistently proclaimed that Jesus was raised from the dead. At Pentecost, Peter told the multitudes that “God raised him up” (Acts 2:24) and that “God raised up this Jesus” (v.32). In the next chapter, Peter said, “You killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (3:15); and “God raised up his servant” (v.26). Throughout the sermon, Peter was accompanied by John, the very person who recorded Thomas's exclamation in John 20:28!

If it is really true that John 20:28 teaches the deity of Jesus, why didn't the apostles preach it once in the book of Acts? And who do we follow as the pattern for our gospel message, the apostles of Jesus Christ or trinitarian scholars?



There are many academic papers on the apostolic preaching of the risen Jesus in the book of Acts (e.g., *The Resurrection in the Acts of the Apostles*, I. Howard Marshall), but I cannot find a single academic paper on the preaching of Jesus' deity in Acts!

Jesus' rebuke of Thomas—"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"—is illuminated by Romans 10:9 which says, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." In the Bible, saving faith is not about believing that Jesus is God but believing that God raised Jesus from the dead, by which Jesus was made "Lord" in an exalted sense (Acts 2:36).

**Summary of Point 3:** The trinitarian claim that John 20:28 equates Jesus with God does not align with the apostolic preaching of the risen Jesus in the book of Acts, and is therefore false.

### **Point 4: There is more explicit evidence for the deity of Yahweh in one verse, Exodus 20:2, than for the deity of Jesus in the whole New Testament, including John 20:28**

In my two decades as a trinitarian, I was troubled by the fact that the Bible would never explicitly say that Jesus is God. Verses such as John 20:28 come tantalizingly close, but why doesn't the Bible "seal the deal"? Why not add a few more words to make it explicit and unassailable and incontrovertible? In my

trinitarian days, I would sometimes wonder if the Bible even cares about the deity of Jesus.

So why doesn't Jesus *verbally* confirm Thomas's declaration with something like, "Yes, Thomas, you are right, I am your Lord and your God". That statement alone would be enough to convince me of Jesus' deity, even today.

The indirectness of Jesus' alleged deity in John 20:28 ought to be contrasted with the *explicit* affirmation of Yahweh's deity in Exodus 20:2: "I am Yahweh your God". *That's it! That's 100% explicit!* In one clear statement, we get the equation, *Yahweh = God*. This equation is not a solitary one-off statement, but something that is repeated several hundred times in the Bible in various forms, all explicit:

- "Yahweh God" (11 times in Genesis 2 alone)
- "Yahweh, God of heaven and God of earth" (Gen.24:3,7)
- "Yahweh your God" (17 times in Exodus alone)
- "Yahweh, God of Israel" (Ex.5:1; 32:27; 34:23)
- "I am Yahweh your God" (Ex.6:7; 16:12; 20:2)
- "Yahweh our God" (Ex.8:6,22,23)
- "Yahweh, Yahweh, God of compassion" (Ex.34:6)

Here I quoted only from Genesis and Exodus. With repeated use of the BibleWorks program, I estimate that the Bible has over 400 instances of the explicit equation *Yahweh = God* in its various forms. By contrast, the equation *Jesus = God* does not occur even once in the Bible.

If “Yahweh God” could occur 11 times in Genesis 2 alone (that is, 11 times in 25 verses), why don’t we ever see “Jesus God” even once in the Bible (that is, zero times in 31,102 verses)? Why don’t we ever see phrases such as: “Jesus, God of Abraham” or “Jesus, God of heaven and earth” or “Jesus your God” or “Jesus, God of Israel” or “I am Jesus your God” or “Jesus, Jesus, God of compassion” (despite the fact that compassion is integral to Jesus’ nature)?

The total absence of *Jesus = God* in the Bible has compelled some to argue that Jesus is God by the indirect equation *Jesus = Yahweh = God*. There are many problems with this, but I will state only three.

Firstly, whereas the equation *Yahweh = God* occurs hundreds of times in the Bible, the equation *Jesus = God* or *Jesus = Yahweh* occurs not even once, which would be inexplicable if Jesus is God.

Secondly, the Bible never speaks of God and Yahweh as two distinct persons, yet it would often make a sharp distinction of persons between God and Christ as seen in verses such as 1Tim.5:21 (“in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus”) and most strikingly 1Cor.11:3 (“the head of Christ is God”). See also 1Cor.8:6.

Thirdly, Yahweh declares His exclusive deity in Isaiah 45:5, “I am Yahweh, and there is no other, besides me there is no God,” which aligns exactly with the fact that the Father is “the only true God” (John 17:3). Hence Yahweh is the Father, not the Son.

The total absence of the equation *Jesus = God* in the Bible ought to be taken for deep reflection by trinitarians. Searching for Jesus' deity in the Bible is like trying to squeeze water from a stone in the desert. The Bible—the living word of God—is not giving trinitarians the very thing they desire most. The Bible's total silence on Jesus' deity is the very reason for Brian J. Wright's colossal efforts to search the Bible for references to Jesus as *theos*, only for Wright to conclude that John 20:28 is the only verse in the New Testament that, with full certainty, refers to Jesus as *theos* ("God").

## **Have we forgotten the meaning of "explicit"?**

Yet not even John 20:28 has an *explicit* reference to Jesus as God. At best we have a plausible implication from Thomas, but even that could be nothing more than an exclamation of surprise at the sight of the risen Lord. In fact, many trinitarian commentaries use the exact word "exclamation" to describe Thomas's utterance of shock—"My Lord and my God!"—at the sight of the risen Lord. The ambiguity of this verse for Jesus' deity troubled me in the summer of 1983 when I was teaching Adult Sunday School in Ottawa, Canada, as a trinitarian.

It seems that trinitarians have forgotten the meaning of the word "explicit". An explicit statement from Jesus would be something like, "Yes, Thomas, I am your Lord and your God".

To drive home the plain meaning of "explicit," let me ask a simple question: Why is the deity of the Father not debated by Christians? Because the Bible states it explicitly again and again:

“peace from God our Father” (Rom.1:7); “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom.15:6); “there is one God, the Father” (1Cor.8:6); and so on. But where do you find a statement such as “there is one God, Jesus Christ”? There is not a single explicit statement in the whole Bible of the deity of Christ, not even in John 20:28.

It is crucial for us to demand from trinitarians full explicitness for John 20:28 for the simple reason that, according to Wright, this verse stands alone in the Bible in calling Jesus *theos* with full certainty. Yet Wright wants to use this sole exception (which is not even explicit) to overthrow the entire weight of evidence in the rest of the Bible! We must bear in mind that Wright himself admits that “Jesus never uses the term θεός for himself” (p.230)—an all-encompassing fact that reaches to John 20:28-29.

I recently came upon a book with an intriguing title, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford University Press), in which Richard Swinburne, an eminent Christian philosopher-theologian at Oxford and a trinitarian, searches the Bible and church doctrine for evidence that Jesus is God. The fact that such a provocative title, *Was Jesus God?*, could even be conceived by a trinitarian scholar shows that the Bible may have little evidence, perhaps zero evidence, for the deity of Jesus.

Swinburne gives deep and philosophical reflections on the church and her beliefs, but offers no explicit proof from the Bible that Jesus is God. He finds mainly faint and indirect evidence such as that God raised Jesus from the dead. In fact

Swinburne finds more evidence for Jesus' deity in the historic faith of the church than in the Bible.

In the final chapter titled "Final Conclusion," Swinburne displays cautious uncertainty when he says that "it is very probable that Jesus was God". What? Only "very probable"? As a responsible scholar, he refrains from expressing a level of certainty that is unwarranted by the biblical data. Two pages later he admits that some NT passages "deny this doctrine" of "the divinity of Jesus". On the next page he says, "It is undisputed that Jesus did not teach this doctrine" of the Trinity. This is quite a concession from a learned trinitarian.

Another committed trinitarian, Robertson McQuilkin, in his careful work, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, gives sound advice that is urgently needed in the evangelical world today. In chapter 16 of his book, in the section titled, "Base the Doctrine Solely on the Bible," McQuilkin, an evangelical, cautions the reader not to base doctrine on inference but on explicit Bible teaching. He immediately goes on to give one and only one example of such an inference: "In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity is such an inference. But the way in which the three ultimately relate is not revealed in Scripture, and thus our theories for relating them should be held tentatively."

Most of you in this conference would have read Sir Anthony F. Buzzard's *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian: A Call to Return to the Creed of Jesus*. Chapter 4 of this book, "The Titanic Struggle of Scholars to Find the Triune God in the Bible," contains some eye-opening admissions by prominent trinitarians who struggle to account for the paucity of biblical references to Jesus as God.

Since the Bible does not explicitly say that Jesus is God, trinitarianism is ultimately a doctrinal edifice that is built on arguments from silence; weak inferences; invalid parallels; the conflation of persons; the misrendering of Greek prepositions; the last-resort appeal to mystery and to tradition; the reversal of biblical terms (e.g., changing the biblical “Son of God” into the unbiblical “God the Son”); and the use of highly philosophical concepts (e.g., *homoousios*, an originally Gnostic term that trinitarians have adopted for depersonalizing God into an essence).

### **Point 5: If Jesus is really called “God” in John 20:28, this verse would support modalism, not trinitarianism**

John 20:28 has a complication that is known in NT scholarship. In the Greek text of John 20:28, Thomas does not merely say “God” (*theos*) but “the God” (*ho theos*), with the article *ho*. This crucial fact does not come out in English translations of the Bible.

The presence of the article “the” in John 20:28 makes the title “the God” too strong to apply to Jesus because it would undermine the trinitarian assertion that Jesus shares a divine essence with the Father. We must bear in mind that trinitarians, in arguing for Jesus’ deity in John 1:1, stress that “God” in “the Word was God” has no article.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Most trinitarians regard “the God” (*ho theos*, with the article *ho*) as being too strong to apply to Christ because it undermines trinitarian doctrine. Marcus Dods, a well-known NT scholar, explains: “The

The problem runs even deeper because if Jesus is “the God,” this would rule out the Father as God, as admitted by some prominent trinitarians.<sup>8</sup>

The trinitarian claim that John 20:28 equates Jesus with *theos* is problematic because that would make Jesus “the God” and not just “God,” and would lead to one of two possibilities, both of which are detestable to trinitarians.

One possibility is that Jesus is “the God” to the exclusion of the Father as God (a blasphemous statement even to trinitarians). The other possibility—to safeguard the Father’s deity—is that *Jesus = the Father*; but this would be the error of modalism or Sabellianism.<sup>9</sup>

What trinitarians seek for Jesus in John 20:28 is not “the God” but “God” (a distinction that is vital to the trinitarian interpretation of John 1:1). Some ancient manuscript copyists

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Christian doctrine of the Trinity was perhaps before anything else an effort to express how Jesus Christ was God (*theos*) and yet in another sense was not God (*ho theos*), that is to say, was not the whole Godhead” (*Expositor’s Greek Testament*, Greek transliterated by me).

<sup>8</sup> For example, C.K. Barrett, an eminent trinitarian scholar, in a comment on John 1:1, says: “The absence of the article indicates that the Word is God, but is not the only being of whom this is true; if ὁ θεὸς [*ho theos*, the God] had been written, it would have been implied that no divine being existed outside the second person of the Trinity [i.e., it would have been implied that only Christ, not the Father, is God].” (*The Gospel According to St. John*, my explanatory words in brackets added)

<sup>9</sup> Modalism, also called Sabellianism, says that God, in salvation history, is manifested to believers in one of three modes, Father, Son, and Spirit. These are the three modes of the one God, analogous to the fact that H<sub>2</sub>O can be liquid, ice, or vapor.



realized that John 20:28 poses a problem for trinitarianism, so they “solved” it by deleting the article “the” from “the God” in this verse but also in other verses with similar Christological difficulties.

Bart D. Ehrman is one of the world’s leading NT textual experts, and this is acknowledged even by those, including myself, who might not agree with his pessimism over the state of the New Testament manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> In his important work, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*,<sup>11</sup> Ehrman explains how some early copyists simply deleted the problematic word “the” from “the God” (*ho theos*) in John 20:28:

Another passage that can be taken to suggest that Christ is “God” himself (i.e., *ho theos*, with the article) occurs near the end of the Fourth Gospel, and here again one should not be surprised to find scribes modifying the text. Upon seeing the resurrected Jesus, Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God” (*ho theos mou*). The passage has caused interpreters problems over the years; Theodore of Mopsuestia argued that the words were not addressed directly to Jesus but were uttered in praise of God the Father. Modern commentators have also found the

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Daniel B. Wallace, in the book I referred to, acknowledges that Ehrman is “a scholar with impeccable credentials in textual criticism”. In fact, Ehrman was handpicked by Bruce M. Metzger, the great textual scholar, to work on the 4th edition of Metzger’s classic work, *The Text of the New Testament*.

<sup>11</sup> Full title, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (2011 revised edition, Oxford University Press).

phrasing problematic, because unlike the statement of 1:1, where the Word is *theos* (without the article), here Jesus is expressly entitled *ho theos*. How can one avoid drawing from this designation the conclusion that he [Jesus] is the one and only “God”? Several scribes of the early church adroitly handled the matter in what can be construed as an anti-Patristicist [i.e., anti-modalist] corruption: the predecessor of codex Bezae and other Gospel manuscripts simply omitted the article. Jesus is divine, but he is not the one “God” himself. (pp.311-312 footnotes omitted, Greek transliterated)

Ehrman gives other examples of ancient manuscripts being altered in order to make Jesus God, but we won’t go further into this topic except briefly in this footnote.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ehrman goes on to give two other similar cases of trinitarian corruption of Scripture. The first is in Mark 2:7 where the Pharisees say, “Who can forgive sins but God alone”. Early trinitarians wanted to say that “God” in this verse refers to Jesus, but the difficulty for them is that the Greek text has “the God” rather than “God”. So the early codex Bezae altered the text “by omitting the emphatic *eis*. Now, by implication, Christ is still divine, yet he is not the embodiment of the Father himself” (words in quotation marks are Ehrman’s).

The other case is in Mark 12:26 where Jesus tells the Sadducees of God’s words spoken to Moses from the burning bush: “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Trinitarians insist that the one who spoke these words to Moses was the preincarnate Christ; but again the problem for them is that the Greek text of Mark 12:26 has “the God” rather than “God” (“the God of Abraham”). Not surprisingly, several manuscripts simply deleted “the articles in the passage, so that the divine name identifies himself as *theos* (God) but not *ho theos* (the God).” (Ehrman)

## **Point 6: Jesus is not worshipped in the New Testament**

Despite the immense problems with the trinitarian interpretation of John 20:28, most trinitarians will not surrender the belief that Jesus is called “God” in John 20:28. That being the case, we ought to widen our examination to include the crucial question of whether Jesus is actually worshipped as God in the New Testament. If it is really true that Jesus is called “God” in John 20:28, we would expect Jesus to be worshipped again and again in the New Testament: in the gospels, in Acts, in Paul’s letters, in John’s letters, in Revelation. Again and again and again.

But as we shall see, the clear answer from the biblical data is, “No, Jesus is not worshipped in the New Testament. On the contrary, he teaches us to worship the Father.” This leads us to the next chapter.





## When *Proskyneō* is used of Jesus, Does it Mean Divine Worship?

### **Worshipping Jesus or paying homage to Jesus?**

**W**hen the magi visited the infant Jesus (Mt.2:11), did they “worship” Jesus (ESV) or did they pay him “homage” (NJB)? Here we see two rather different ways of translating the Greek word *proskyneō* by two mainstream Bibles.

As we shall see, Greek-English lexicons give two basic definitions of *proskyneō*, one of which is primary and fundamental, and the other of which is secondary and derivative. The primary meaning is “to kneel before someone” or “to prostrate oneself before someone”. This is a bodily expression of paying homage to someone without necessarily ascribing deity to him (e.g., bowing before a Roman centurion). But in some contexts, *proskyneō* can have the derivative sense of *worship*. Whereas the

primary meaning does not necessarily involve the attribution of deity, the second may involve divine worship.

When we encounter *proskyneō* in the New Testament, the question of which is its intended meaning can often be resolved by seeing who the object of the *proskyneō* is. If the object is God, then *proskyneō* would imply divine worship (e.g., Mt.4:10, “You shall worship the Lord your God”). But if the object is a human dignitary such as a Roman commander, then *proskyneō* would mean kneeling or paying homage without the attribution of deity.

Hence the intended meaning of *proskyneō* is often governed by the object of the *proskyneō*, as to whether he is viewed as divine. The mere use of the word *proskyneō* does not, in itself, confer deity on a person, for an act of kneeling does not necessarily involve divine worship.

In the ancient Near East, kneeling or bowing was a familiar gesture of reverence or courtesy, and was not in itself taken as divine worship. We see this not only in the NT but also in the LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. To give two examples, Abraham bowed before the Hittites (Gen.23:12) and David bowed before Saul (1Sam.24:8; v.9 in LXX). In the LXX of these two verses, *proskyneō* is the word that is used. Hence it is erroneous to conclude that Jesus is God solely by the fact that *proskyneō* is used of him.

## What does *proskyneō* mean when it is used of Jesus?

There are exactly 60 occurrences of the word *proskyneō* in the New Testament, of which 17 are used of Jesus (as the object of *proskyneō* in all 17 cases). A full list of the 60 instances will be given below.

Where *proskyneō* is used of Jesus, ESV would often translate it as “worship” (e.g., the disciples “worshipped” Jesus after he had calmed a storm, Mt.14:33) but occasionally as “kneel” (Mt.20:20). ESV, NIV, and NASB have a tendency to translate *proskyneō* as “worship” when it is used of Jesus, presupposing his divinity.

But many other Bibles differ from ESV in the way they translate *proskyneō* when it is used of Jesus. Instead of saying that the magi “worshipped” the infant Jesus (Mt.2:11), these translations give no indication of worship. Here are some examples: “did him homage” (NJB, NRSV, NAB, Darby); “honored him” (CEB); “adored him” (Douay-Rheims); “bowed low in homage to him” (REB); “prostrated themselves in reverence to him” (ITNT). This is despite the fact that some of these Bibles have trinitarian credentials, either by reputation or by the *Imprimatur*, the Catholic Church’s “seal of approval” for NJB, NAB, Douay-Rheims.

ESV renders Mt.2:11 to mean the “worship” of the infant Jesus, but this reading is rejected by many *trinitarian* commentaries in their study of this verse. For example, *Tyndale Commentary* says that “the verb *worship* (*proskyneō*) need mean

no more than to pay homage to a human dignitary”. John Calvin in his commentary says emphatically that the magi did not come to worship Jesus but to salute him as “a very eminent King”. *Dr. Constable’s Expository Notes* says that the magi’s statement “does not necessarily mean that they regarded Him as divine” but “that they wanted to do Him homage”. *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says that the magi’s “statement suggests homage paid to royalty rather than the worship of Deity”.

The divergence in translation is seen in other verses such as Mt. 14:33 where ESV says that the disciples “worshipped” Jesus after he had calmed a storm. But most of the aforementioned Bibles speak instead of bowing to Jesus or paying homage to him. For example, NJB has “bowed down before him,” and NEB and REB have “fell at his feet”.

## **A crucial question for trinitarians**

Since *proskyneō* can mean either “pay homage” or less commonly “worship,” which is its intended meaning when it is used of Jesus? Is it possible for us to arrive at a correct understanding of *proskyneō* that does not depend on doctrinal presuppositions? Can we break the deadlock in which trinitarians take *proskyneō* to mean worshipping Jesus, and non-trinitarians take to mean kneeling before Jesus?

Adding to the problem is that Matthew 2:11 (on the magi and the infant Jesus) has no obvious internal evidence in favor of the one interpretation over the other. So if you presuppose that the magi worshipped Jesus as God, then *proskyneō* would



mean “worship” to you. But if you believe that the magi paid homage to Jesus, then *proskyneō* would mean “pay homage” to you. So are there external and objective factors that can break the deadlock?

Fortunately, we do have a way of breaking the deadlock because there are four verifiable and objective facts at our disposal that do not depend on doctrinal presuppositions. None is conclusive by itself, but when the four are taken in combination, they guide us to the correct meaning of *proskyneō* when it is used of Jesus.

### **Fact #1: Worship is not the fundamental meaning of *proskyneō* but only a derivative meaning**

Two standard Greek-English lexicons, BDAG and Thayer’s, indicate that “worship” is only a secondary or derivative meaning of *proskyneō*. BDAG gives the following definitions of *proskyneō*, quoted here verbatim with citations omitted (the lone boldface is mine):

- to express in attitude or gesture one’s complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure
- (fall down and) **worship**
- do obeisance to
- prostrate oneself before
- do reverence to
- welcome respectfully

Thayer's lexicon similarly gives the following definitions of *proskyneō*, quoted here verbatim with citations omitted (again the lone boldface is mine):

- to kiss the hand to (towards) one, in token of reverence
- to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead as an expression of profound reverence
- kneeling or prostration to do homage (to one) or make obeisance, whether in order to express respect or to make supplication
- It is used a. of homage shown to men of superior rank;
- b. of homage rendered to God and the ascended Christ, to heavenly beings, and to demons: absolutely (or *to worship*)

In BDAG and Thayer's, the two tiny words in boldface are the only definitions of *proskyneō* that have to do with divine worship. In both these lexicons, the idea of worship is given far less prominence than the idea of kneeling or paying homage. In fact, only one quarter of BDAG's citations have anything to do with "worship," indicating that in the New Testament, the fundamental meaning of *proskyneō* is not worship but kneeling or paying homage. The sense of "worship" is possible in some contexts, but is derivative.

What it means is that we cannot conclude that Jesus is God merely by the fact that *proskyneō* is applied to him; we need more evidence beyond that bare fact.

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**Fact #2: Despite its continued use in the NT, *proskyneō* is almost no longer used of Jesus after his ascension!**

The word *proskyneō* occurs 60 times in the New Testament: 29 times in the four gospels, and 31 times after the gospels. Hence *proskyneō* is about evenly balanced (29-to-31) between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

This 29-to-31 balance stands in stark contrast to the following 15-to-2 imbalance: whereas *proskyneō* is used 15 times of Jesus in the four gospels, it is used of Jesus only twice after the gospels! This 15-to-2 imbalance is seen in the following table which we will call the “shorter” table:

The 17 occurrences of <i>proskyneō</i> applied to Jesus Christ in the New Testament	
The Four Gospels (15x)	After the Gospels (2x)
Matthew 2:2	Hebrews 1:6
Matthew 2:8	Revelation 5:14
Matthew 2:11	
Matthew 4:9	
Matthew 8:2	
Matthew 9:18	
Matthew 14:33	
Matthew 15:25	
Matthew 20:20	
Matthew 28:9	
Matthew 28:17	
Mark 5:6	
Mark 15:19	
Luke 24:52	
John 9:38	

Note the imbalance between the two columns.

The next table—the longer one—lists all 60 occurrences of *proskyneō* found in the NA28 Greek New Testament. The table is divided into the same two sections: the four gospels with 29 occurrences, and after the gospels with 31 occurrences. In this longer table, the 17 occurrences which refer to Jesus are highlighted in boldface and correspond to the 17 verses listed in the shorter table.

All the 60 occurrences of <i>proskyneō</i> in the Greek NT							
Matthew	<b>2:2</b>	<b>2:8</b>	<b>2:11</b>	<b>4:9</b>	4:10	<b>8:2</b>	<b>9:18</b>
	<b>14:33</b>	<b>15:25</b>	18:26	<b>20:20</b>	<b>28:9</b>	<b>28:17</b>	
Mark	<b>5:6</b>	<b>15:19</b>					
Luke	4:7	4:8	<b>24:52</b>				
John	4:20	4:21	4:22	4:22	4:23	4:23	4:23
	4:24	4:24	<b>9:38</b>	12:20			
Acts	7:43	8:27	10:25	24:11			
1 Cor	14:25						
Hebrews	<b>1:6</b>	11:21					
Revelation	3:9	4:10	<b>5:14</b>	7:11	9:20	11:1	11:16
	13:4	13:4	13:8	13:12	13:15	14:7	14:9
	14:11	15:4	16:2	19:4	19:10	19:10	19:20
	20:4	22:8	22:9				

From both tables, we see that *proskyneō* is no longer used of Jesus after the four gospels, with two exceptions: Hebrews 1:6 and Revelation 5:14. But Hebrews 1:6 does not count as an exception because it is not post-Gospel but a reference to Jesus' physical birth:

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." (Heb.1:6, quoting Psalm 97:7, LXX 96:7)

This verse comes from a passage in Hebrews that declares Jesus' superiority over the angels. Yet the idea of worship is not entrenched in this verse. NJB avoids using the word "worship" in Hebrews 1:6 when it says, "Let all the angels of God pay him homage"; ITNT has "All God's angels must revere him"; REB has "Let all God's angels pay him homage".

But the more significant verse for trinitarians is Revelation 5:14 because it is the only verse in the New Testament that has anything close to the explicit worship of Jesus, by the fact that *proskyneō* is applied to Jesus together with God. This verse will be discussed soon.

## Why the sudden drop?

What could account for the sudden drop—indeed, the near disappearance—in the application of *proskyneō* to Jesus after the gospels (only twice, but in reality only once, i.e., a 16-to-1 imbalance) despite the continued use of *proskyneō* in the New Testament?

A clue is found in a key fact: The dividing line between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament is also the dividing line between the earthly Jesus and the ascended Jesus. While Jesus was still on earth, people bowed to him in his physical presence, but after he ascended into heaven, he was no longer around for people to bow to him.

Therefore, when *proskyneō* is used of Jesus, it ought to be understood in the sense of paying homage to him or kneeling to him rather than worshipping him as God. After Jesus

ascended into heaven, he was no longer physically present on earth for people to kneel or to bow to him. That is why the New Testament stops applying *proskyneō* to Jesus after his ascension into heaven.

But if we take the trinitarian view that *proskyneō* means the worship of Jesus as God, there would be no obvious reason for the worship to stop after his ascension into heaven. For if Jesus is God as he is in trinitarianism, then divine worship ought to continue even in Jesus' absence, for an omnipresent God can be worshipped anywhere in the universe. In fact, if Jesus were God, we would expect an increase, not a decrease, in the application of *proskyneō* to Jesus after his ascension, for the risen Jesus is now the exalted Lord who has been given the name above every name.

Chronologically, the very last time prior to Revelation 5:14 that *proskyneō* is used of Jesus is in Luke 24:52, at *precisely the point of his ascension into heaven!* This is not a coincidence. Luke 24:52 is most significant for fixing the cutoff precisely at the demarcation of the earthly Jesus and the ascended Jesus.

### **Fact #3: *Proskyneō* is used mainly by John, yet he almost never applies it to Jesus**

Of the 60 occurrences of *proskyneō* in the NT, 35 are found in John's writings versus 25 in the rest of the NT, which would make *proskyneō* a predominantly Johannine word. Yet John applies this word to Jesus only twice in all his writings! (See the

longer table above.) These two occurrences are John 9:38 (a man healed of blindness bows before Jesus) and Revelation 5:14 (the verse we have noted and will be discussing soon).

On the other hand, John applies *proskyneō* ten times—in the full sense of worship—to Satan or the beast or its image!<sup>13</sup>

Although *proskyneō* is a predominantly Johannine word, John almost never uses it of Jesus, a surprising fact given that trinitarians regard John’s writings as espousing a high Christology. But there is really nothing shocking about this at all, for it is in John’s Gospel that Jesus declares that his Father is the only true God (Jn.17:3). In this same gospel (of John), we see the intentions of Jesus’ heart when he exhorts us to worship his Father: “worship the Father” (Jn.4:21); and “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (v.23).

## **Fact #4: The *latreuein* group is never applied to Jesus**

We explain this fourth point as follows:

- By word group we mean a group of Greek words derived from the same root. In our present case, the *latreuein* word group consists of three words: *latreuein*, *latreia*, *leitourgein*.

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<sup>13</sup> Revelation 13:4 (2x); 13:8; 13:12; 13:15; 14:9; 14:11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4.



- Respectively, these three words mean: (i) to serve as a cultic activity; (ii) cultic devotion; (iii) to render cultic service. The word “cultic” pertains to religious devotion to God.
- Here is a crucial fact: The *latreuein* word group expresses divine worship more strongly than any other word group in the New Testament, yet it is never used of Jesus!

That the *latreuein* word group is never applied to Jesus is explained by James D.G. Dunn in section 1.2 of his book, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence*.

The following excerpts are taken from pp.13-15 of his book (with footnotes omitted and boldface added). If you wish to skip the details, you can just read the bolded words:

The most common of the other near synonyms is *latreuein*, which basically means ‘to serve’. In biblical literature, however, the reference is always to religious service, the carrying out of religious duties, ‘to render cultic service’ . . . .

And in several passages *latreuein* is translated ‘worship’ in English translations. It is noticeable that in each case the object of the verb, the one who is (to be) served/worshipped, is God. Apart from one or two references to false worship, the reference is always to the cultic service/ worship of God. **In no case in the New Testament is there talk of offering cultic worship (*latreuein*) to Jesus . . . .**

As with *latreuein*, so also with the matching noun, *latreia*, ‘(cultic) service, worship’. It refers always to the worship of God ... Here we need simply note that the number of *latreia* references is very limited, and here too **the ‘service/worship’ is never thought of as offered to Jesus . . . .**

Bearing in mind that the *latreuein* word group is the nearest expression for the offering of ‘cultic worship’, the fact that **it is never used for the ‘cultic devotion’ of Christ in the New Testament** is somewhat surprising for Hurtado’s main thesis and should be given some attention.

## **Conclusion of the four facts: Jesus is not worshipped as God**

We have presented four facts that can be verified objectively, empirically, biblically, and independently. None of the four facts is conclusive by itself, but when they are taken in combination, they show beyond doubt that *proskyneō*, when used of Jesus, means kneeling to Jesus, or reverencing him, or paying homage to him—but not worshipping him as God. On the contrary, Jesus exhorts us to worship the One whom he calls, “my Father and your Father” and “my God and your God” (Jn.20:17). True worship is not the worship *of* Jesus but the worship of the Father *with* Jesus or *through* Jesus.

## Appended note: The special case of Revelation 5:14

Of the 60 occurrences of *proskyneō* in the New Testament, 24 are found in Revelation. That is a high percentage (40%) for one book, yet none of the 24 instances in Revelation is used of Jesus with the sole exception of verse 5:14 where the elders in heaven “worship” both God and Jesus. Here the worship (*proskyneō*, shown below in boldface) is directed not to Jesus alone but also to God who is seated on His throne:

<sup>13</sup> And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” <sup>14</sup> And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and **worshiped**. (Revelation 5:13-14, ESV)

Here is a crucial fact: In the book of Revelation outside verse 5:14, *proskyneō* is always used of God the Father and never of Jesus, *without exception* (we are not counting the worship of the beast or its image). Hence it is clear that when *proskyneō* is applied to both God and Jesus in the sole verse, Revelation 5:14, it is God rather than Jesus who is the principal reason for the use of *proskyneō*. This aligns with the fact that in the immediate context of Revelation 5:14, the central figure is God who is seated on His throne.

This reminds us of the way the people of Israel bowed before God and before King David (note the words in boldface):

David then addressed the whole assembly: “Now bless Yahweh your God!” And the whole assembly blessed Yahweh, God of their ancestors, **bowing down in homage to Yahweh, and to the king.** (1Chr.29:20, NJB)

Here the words “bowing down in homage” correspond to *proskyneō* in the LXX. The use of *proskyneō* in this verse, 1Chronicles 29:20, is crucial because it tells us that the LXX does not hesitate to apply *proskyneō* to David when it is also applied to Yahweh! The parallel between David in 1Chr.29:20 and Jesus in Rev.5:14 is heightened by the fact that Jesus is the Messiah who comes from David’s line.

We notice further that in 1Chronicles 29:20, the main intended recipient of the worship is not David but Yahweh, by the fact that David said, “Now bless Yahweh your God.” But that does not rule out David (or Jesus in Rev.5:14) participating with Yahweh as the recipient of the *proskyneō*!

## A personal message

I will always offer heartfelt *proskyneō* to Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, the one who loved me and gave himself for me, but I will not do this in an idolatrous way. On the contrary, I will follow his example in “worshipping the Father” (Jn.4:21). Indeed, “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and

truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (v.23).

Dear reader, may you and I be forever true worshippers of Yahweh, our loving God and Father, the One whom Jesus calls “my Father and your Father, my God and your God” (Jn.20:17). All this is to the praise and glory of the only true God and His Son Jesus Christ.



## CHAPTER 8



# John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled in us”

We now look at John 1:14 which, when translated literally and accurately, effectively undermines trinitarianism. For convenience, we divide the verse into its three clauses, a, b, c:

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>John 1:14a</b> | And the Word became flesh  |
| <b>John 1:14b</b> | and dwelt among us,  |
| <b>John 1:14c</b> | and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. |

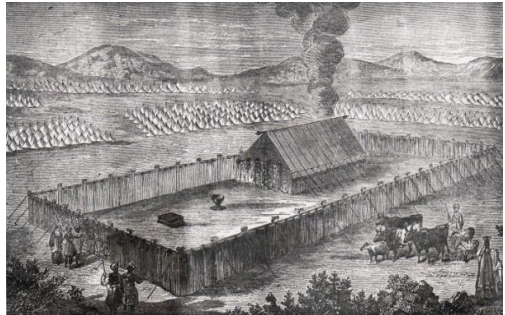
We will look at 1:14b in this chapter, and 1:14a in the next chapter.

To interpret the whole verse properly, we will need to take into consideration the concept of the tabernacle and the temple. That is because the word “dwelt” in John 1:14b (“dwelt among us”) does not come from the common Greek word for “dwell” or “live” but from a special word which means “to tent in” or “to tabernacle in”.

## Tabernacle and temple: a quick overview

The word *tabernacle* is not used in English except in a religious context. For this reason, it is a mysterious word to many, but it is really nothing more than a fancy or traditional word for “tent” (from Latin *tabernaculum*, “tent”). Hence we will use *tent* and *tabernacle* interchangeably. In the Old Testament, the English word *tabernacle* usually translates the Hebrew *mishkan* (“dwelling place”).

Here is a drawing of the tabernacle found in an 1891 German Bible. It shows the tabernacle being filled with God’s *Shekinah* glory. The word *shekinah* pertains to the dwelling or the settling of God’s glorious presence.



In the picture we see a courtyard surrounded by thousands of small tents arranged according to the 12 tribes of Israel. Inside the courtyard is the tabernacle itself, which in the Bible is also called the “tent of meeting”. All the objects seen in the



picture—the tabernacle, the courtyard fixtures, the altars, the surrounding tents—can be dismantled and transported by the Israelites as they journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

The tent is further divided into two sections: the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The latter is the special dwelling of God’s Shekinah glory that descends upon the tabernacle and opens a way for God to meet with His people there (cf. “tent of meeting”). As seen in the picture, Yahweh’s glory appears as “a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night” (Ex.13.22) that descends upon the tabernacle, filling it with His glory and presence: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle.” (Ex.40:34)

Even before the tabernacle had come into being, God had already conceived it as His dwelling, for He had earlier said to Moses, “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Ex.25:8).

Several centuries later, the tabernacle was replaced by the temple, for by then Israel had long settled in the Promised Land, and no longer needed the tent to be mobile. So the tent was replaced by a permanently settled structure, Solomon’s temple, also known as “the house of the LORD,” literally “the house of Yahweh” for it was Yahweh’s dwelling, as seen in the following passage (note the boldface):

... a cloud filled **the house of Yahweh**, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for **the glory of Yahweh filled the house of Yahweh**. Then Solomon said, “Yahweh has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have indeed built you an exalted house, **a place for you to dwell in forever.**” (1 Kings 8:10-13)

But a few verses later, Solomon laments that God’s presence is too vast to be confined in the temple: “Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (1Kings 8:27; cf. Acts 7:48)

Yet the infinite God, in His love and mercy, was pleased to dwell in the house built by His chosen people, the Israelites, and to fill it with His glory and presence.

Note: In English, *tabernacle* is a noun, not a verb, but Greek has both a verb form *skēnoō* (to tabernacle in) and a noun form *skēnē* (a tabernacle). BDAG says that the noun is used in the LXX of “Yahweh’s tabernacle”. Significantly, BDAG says that in John 1:14, the verb is “perhaps an expression of continuity with God’s ‘tenting’ in Israel”.

## In John 1:14, “among us” is literally “in us”—a fact that undermines trinitarianism

The conventional translation of John 1:14b (“dwelt among us”) is defective on two counts, and in each case, an important Greek word is not being translated according to its principal or literal meaning. We have already mentioned the first case: In the original Greek text, the word “dwelt” does not come from the common Greek word for “dwell” or “live” but from a special word that means “to tabernacle in” or “to tent in”. This fact is well known and mentioned in many study Bibles.

But the second case is more significant because it undermines trinitarianism: The conventional rendering “among us” in John 1:14b (“dwelt among us”) is inadequate because the Greek has “in us”. The exact phrase in Greek is *eskēnōsen en hēmin* (“tented in us”) where *en* is the common Greek preposition for “in”. If the spelling of *en* looks familiar, it is because the English word “in” is derived from the Greek “en” via Latin “in” and Old English “in” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

It is a plain fact that in John 1:14, “among us” is literally “in us,” as noted by people such as Raymond E. Brown, an eminent NT scholar.

Trinitarians reject “in us” even though it is the literal translation of *en hēmin*, and is lexically more probable than “among us”. It is striking that English Bibles, contrary to their usual practice, do not state in a footnote that in the Greek text of John 1:14, “among us” is literally “in us”; or at least state that “in us”

is an alternative reading. Their silence may be an early hint that “in us” lends no support to trinitarianism.

The term “in us” undermines trinitarianism for a specific reason: John is saying that the Word “became flesh” by tenting “in us”—*in God’s people!* But that is not what trinitarians want. They prefer the non-literal “among us” in order to imply that the Word, by incarnation, became the person of Jesus Christ who now lives “among us,” that is, the Word became flesh in Jesus rather than “in us”.

The literal “in us” nullifies Jesus’ deity in John 1:1 and the God-man incarnation in 1:14 by denying the identification of the “Word” with Jesus Christ which is so central to trinitarian dogma.

We now present the biblical evidence for “in us” in seven points.

### **Point 1: In John, *en* almost never means “among”**

The Greek word *en* occurs 474 times in John’s writings (226 times in his gospel, 90 times in his letters, 158 times in Revelation). The crucial question is this: How many of these 474 instances actually mean “among”? One way of arriving at an answer that is acceptable to trinitarians is for a trinitarian Bible such as NASB to do the “counting” for us via *actual translation*.

If you are willing to do the hard work by going through the 474 instances, here is the final tally: Of the 473 instances of *en* in John’s writings outside the disputed Jn.1:14, only 7 are translated as “among” by NASB (Jn.7:12; 9:16; 10:19; 11:54;

12:35; 15:24; Rev.2:1). Hence, even by NASB’s own reckoning, *en* almost never means “among”—a sense that occurs in only 1.5% of all instances of *en*.

By contrast, NASB translates *en* as “in” in over 95% of the instances. Hence the choice of “among us” over “in us” in John 1:14 appears to have been influenced by tradition.

## **Point 2: In John’s writings outside John 1:14, *en hēmin* always means “in us” and never “among us”**

Instead of the single word *en*, what about the phrase *en hēmin* that we see in John 1:14? The exact and literal translation of this phrase is “in us” rather than “among us”.

Here is a crucial fact: In John’s writings outside the debated John 1:14, *en hēmin* always means “in us” and never “among us,” *without exception!* Hence the trinitarian rendering “among us” for John 1:14 is foreign to John’s understanding of *en hēmin*.

In John’s writings, *en hēmin* (“in us”) is consistent in meaning. To repeat: In his writings outside the debated John 1:14, *en hēmin* always means “in us” and never “among us,” *without exception*.

To give specific data: Outside John 1:14 *en hēmin* occurs ten times in John’s writings. Interestingly, NASB never translates the ten instances as “among us” but always as “in us”. An exception is 1John 4:16 where NASB has neither “in us” nor “among us”, but “for us”. But it is more likely to be “in us” (as in the NET Bible) because that is how NASB translates the other

four instances of *en hēmin* in the very same chapter (vv.9,12, 12,13).

It is a straightforward exercise to verify that “among us” makes no sense in any of the following ten instances of *en hēmin* (all verses are quoted from NASB; note the words in boldface):

**John 17:21** ... even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be **in Us** ...

**1 John 1:8** If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not **in us**.

**1 John 1:10** If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not **in us**.

**1 John 3:24** ... We know by this that He abides **in us**, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

**1 John 4:9** By this the love of God was manifested **in us** ...

**1 John 4:12** ... if we love one another, God abides **in us**, and His love is perfected **in us**. [*en hēmin* occurs twice in this verse]

**1 John 4:13** By this we know that we abide in Him and He **in us**, because He has given us of His Spirit.

**1 John 4:16** We have come to know and have believed the love which God has **for us** ... [more likely to be “**in us**” as we have mentioned]

**2 John 1:2** for the sake of the truth which abides **in us** ...

### Point 3: In John’s writings, *en hēmin* often means “God dwells in us”

The word “abide” in the above verses will confuse some modern readers because NASB uses “abide” in the sense of “live” or “dwell,” which is an archaic meaning of “abide” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). But we gain insight when we read three of the verses from the more readable NIV (note the words in boldface):

**1 John 3:24** The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that **he lives in us**: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

**1 John 4:12** No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, **God lives in us** and his love is made complete in us.

**1 John 4:13** This is how we know that **we live in him and he in us**: He has given us of his Spirit.

In these three verses, the concept of God living in us comes out powerfully: “he lives in us” (3:24); “God lives in us” (4:12); “we live in him and he in us” (4:13). This strengthens the case for the literal translation “tented in us” in John 1:14, proving that “tented in us” is correct not only lexically and grammatically but also theologically for aligning with John’s concept of God living “in” His people.

## Point 4: John distinguishes “in us” and “among us” by two Greek words in the space of 12 verses

To repeat: Outside the debated John 1:14, John never uses *en hēmin* to mean “among us” but always “in us,” without exception. That being the case, does John ever use a Greek word other than *en* to express “among us”? Yes he does, for just 12 verses later, in Jn.1:26, he records the following words by John the Baptist: “but **among** you stands one whom you do not know”. Here the Greek for “among” is *mesos*, which is different from *en* in John 1:14. Hence, within the space of 12 verses, John makes a distinction between “in” and “among” using two different words, *en* and *mesos*. There is no reason for the trinitarian conflation of “among us” and “in us” in John 1:14.

## Point 5: The rendering “in us” for John 1:14 is known in church history

There is nothing novel or farfetched about the fact that *en hēmin* literally means “in us” rather than “among us”. This is an elementary fact of the Greek language. Ask anyone who knows some biblical Greek to translate *en hēmin* without showing him or her John 1:14, and he or she will *immediately* tell you “in us” without batting an eye.

In fact many famous people in church history from the early church to the present have taken John 1:14 to mean “in us”. Some examples:



- **Jerome** (347-420), principal translator of the Latin Vulgate
- **Augustine** (354-430), the most influential theologian of the Latin church
- **Theodore of Antioch** (350-428), bishop of Mopsuestia, best known for his perceptive criticism of the allegorical method of Bible interpretation
- **John Wycliffe** (1331-1384), Bible translator, whose Bible (the Wycliffe Bible) has a note on John 1:14 which says that “dwelled among us” is actually “dwelled in us”
- **George Fox** (1624-1691), founder of the Quakers, who says *en hēmin* is often mistranslated as “among us” (he says it should be “in us”)
- **Allen D. Callahan**, Baptist minister and Associate Professor of New Testament at Harvard University, in his book, *A Love Supreme: A History of the Johannine Tradition* (p.51)
- **Raymond E. Brown**, one of the foremost New Testament scholars of the 20th century. In his acclaimed two-volume commentary on John’s gospel in the Anchor-Yale series (Yale University Press), Brown notes that in John 1:14, “among us” is literally “in us”.

The meaning “God in us” is seen often in Augustine’s writings, e.g., his exposition of Psalm 68. In his *Confessions*, he would speak of God dwelling in people: “For when I call on him I ask him to come into me. And what place is there in me into which my God can come? How could God, the God who made both heaven and earth, come into me?” (*Confessions*, Book 1, chapter 2)

Jerome is probably the greatest biblical scholar of the early church. The 29-volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, in volume 4, says that “Jerome has generally been viewed as the finest scholar among the early church fathers and has been called the greatest biblical scholar ever produced in the history of the Latin church.”

Jerome is the main translator of the *Vulgate* (commonly known as the Latin Vulgate), a Latin Bible translated from the Greek and Hebrew sources available to him. In John 1:14, the Vulgate translates the Greek *en hēmin* as Latin *in nobis* (see the critical Latin text by the German Bible Society) which in secular contexts is often translated into English as “in us”. For example, *in nobis* is well known in English through *est deus in nobis*, a saying by the Roman poet Ovid which means “there is a god in us” or “there is a god within us”.

## **Point 6: John’s teaching that the Word “tented in us” aligns with Paul’s teaching that God dwells in us, the temple of God**

John’s monumental declaration that the Word “tented in us” (the literal translation) aligns with Paul’s teaching that we are the temple in which God dwells. Paul’s teaching is seen in the following passages, all from the NET Bible; note the words in boldface:

Do you not know that **you are God’s temple** and that **God’s Spirit dwells in you?** (1Cor.3:16)

Or do you not know that **your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you ... ?** (1Cor.6:19)

... Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being joined together, **grows into a holy temple in the Lord**, in whom you also are **being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.** (Eph.2:20-22)

These three passages combined have a total of 11 instances of “you” or “your,” all plural in the Greek. The plural brings out the corporateness of God’s people as the temple of God, with Christ as the “cornerstone” (Eph.2:20).

Note the parallel between Paul and John: Paul says that God dwells in us the temple of God, just as John 1:14 says that the Word (who is God) “tabernacled in us” (the literal translation of John 1:14).

Christ is the temple of God, and we too are the temple of God, yet there is only one temple: the temple of God whose cornerstone is Christ (to use the metaphor of a building), or equivalently a body whose head is Christ (to use the metaphor of a body).

Paul uses two equivalent metaphors: a building (the temple) and a body (the body of Christ). Just as there is one temple of God in the Old Testament, there is only one temple of God in the New Testament, or equivalently one body of Christ, the church (Eph.5:23; Col.1:18).

In the Old Testament, the tabernacle is not God Himself nor is it divine, but is God's dwelling. Likewise, in the New Testament, the temple of God consisting of God's people (with Christ as the head) is not God Himself nor is it divine, but is God's dwelling filled with His glory (cf. Ex.40:34, "the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle").

God's glory shines most brightly in Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of the temple and the head of the body. Just as Paul speaks of the "glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2Cor.4:6), so John says, "And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn.1:14).

## **Point 7: God’s entire fullness dwells in Christ— and in us!**

Finally, God’s entire fullness dwells in Christ:

For God was pleased to have **all his fullness dwell in him**  
(Col.1:19, NIV)

For in Christ **all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily  
form** (Col.2:9, NIV)

Paul is saying that God’s entire fullness (Col.1:19)—indeed “all the fullness of the Deity” (2:9)—dwells in Christ “bodily”.

It will come as a shock to trinitarians that God’s entire fullness also dwells in God’s people, for Paul says: “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph.3:19). In this verse, the word “you” is plural because “filled” is plural in the Greek. This brings out the corporateness of God’s people who as the dwelling place of God are filled with all His fullness. Indeed we are the “dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph.2:22).



## CHAPTER 9



# The Meaning of “Became” in “The Word Became Flesh”

**H**ow do we understand John’s declaration that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14a)? It is generally agreed that “flesh” refers to humanity, but what is the meaning of “became”? Trinitarians say that the Word—which they take as the eternal second person of the Trinity—“became flesh” in the sense that God became a man by incarnation, yet without ceasing to be God.<sup>14</sup> As a result, Jesus is the God-man who is fully God and fully man, forever.

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<sup>14</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* defines the incarnation as “the act whereby the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, without ceasing to be what he is, God the Son, took into union with himself what he before that act did not possess, a human nature, and so He was and continues to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person, forever.”

In the last chapter, we saw that this incarnational view is undermined by the fact that in the Greek text, “dwelt among us” is literally “tented in us”. John is saying that the Word, who is God, “became flesh” in the sense of tenting “in us”—*in God’s people*, who are the temple of God, with Christ as the cornerstone.

Paul likewise does not support the trinitarian view that God became a God-man. To the contrary, Paul says that “all the fullness of the Deity lives in him in bodily form” (Col.2:9). Paul depicts God and Jesus as two distinct individuals (cf. 1Cor.11:3, “the head of Christ is God”). God lives “bodily” in Jesus who elsewhere is said to be the temple of God, reminding us of the words, “the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle” (Ex.40:34).

We too are the temple of God with Christ as the cornerstone. As a result, God’s entire fullness dwells not just in Christ but also in God’s people: “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph.3:19).

## **BDAG’s definition of *ginomai***

Our main question is: What is the meaning of “became” in “the Word became flesh” (Jn.1:14)? In the Greek, “became” is *egeneto*, a grammatical form of the verb *ginomai*. BDAG gives ten definitions of *ginomai*, listed here with citations omitted. I highlighted definitions #5 and #6 because they are relevant for the various interpretations of John 1:14. If you wish to skip the details, just read definitions #5 and #6:



1. to come into being through process of birth or natural production, *be born, be produced*
2. to come into existence, *be made, be created, be manufactured, be performed*
3. come into being as an event or phenomenon from a point of origin, *arise, come about, develop*
4. to occur as process or result, *happen, turn out, take place*
5. **to experience a change in nature and so indicate entry into a new condition, *become something***
6. **to make a change of location in space, *move***
7. to come into a certain state or possess certain characteristics, *to be, prove to be, turn out to be*
8. to be present at a given time, *be there*
9. to be closely related to someone or something, *belong to*
10. to be in or at a place, *be in, be there*

Since *ginomai* has so many nuanced definitions, John 1:14 is one of those verses in the Bible (in fact one of many such verses in the Bible) in which the dictionary meaning of a word (in this case, *ginomai*) does not govern the meaning of the whole verse. It is rather the reverse: It is our understanding of the whole verse that governs the meaning of a specific word in the verse.

I drew your attention to definitions #5 and #6. Definition #5 (“to experience a change in nature”) aligns with the trinitarian view that the second person of the Trinity changed in nature to become a God-man by incarnation. In fact definition #5a is the one that BDAG assigns to John 1:14. It is possible that BDAG may be presupposing the trinitarian view, but this is not stated explicitly. As a result, BDAG rightly refrains from entering into non-biblical theological territory.

It is crucial to note that almost none of BDAG’s biblical citations given in support of “change in nature” actually speaks of a change in nature as we might understand that phrase. Most of these citations speak rather of a change in one’s relation to another person (e.g., Herod and Pilate “became friends,” Lk.23:12, indicating a new status in their relationship).

Definition #6 (“make a change of location in space”) is helpful for bringing out the biblical meaning of John 1:14 where God makes a change of location in the sense of taking up residence in a tabernacle (“tented in us”). This meaning—“make a change of location”—is seen also in v.6 of John’s Prologue where *ginomai* carries this meaning for John the Baptist: “there came (*ginomai*) a man sent from God”.

Hence definition #5 (“a change in nature”) remains relevant for John 1:14 for expressing God’s new mode of existence in humanity (God now dwells “in us”).

But an examination of BDAG’s supporting citations for definition #5a outside the disputed John 1:14 shows that none carries any meaning that resembles trinitarian incarnation.

Here are some examples: the disciples will “become fishers of men” (Mk.1:17); Judas “became a traitor” (Lk.6:16); Herod and Pilate “became friends” (Lk.23:12); Abraham will “become the father of many nations” (Rom.4:18); Christ “became a high priest” (Heb.5:5). Not even John 1:12 (“the right to become children of God”) or Matthew 5:45 (“that you may become sons of your Father”) has any meaning that resembles trinitarian incarnation.

In all these cases, people remain people. They are not transformed from man to God, or from God to man, or from God to God-man. There is, however, a new status in their relationship with their fellow men or with God.

Not even Matthew 4:3 (“command these stones to become bread”) can be used in support of the incarnational view of John 1:14, not only because Matthew 4:3 has to do with material things (bread and stones, whereas God is spirit) but also because it is the only biblical citation for definition #5a in BDAG that carries even the slightest hint of material transformation. Matthew 4:3 therefore does not represent any common meaning of *ginomai* but only a rare and solitary meaning. So why assign to John 1:14 a rare and solitary meaning above the many other plausible meanings? One would do this only if one is already presupposing the trinitarian view of John 1:14. This kind of circular reasoning is called “begging the question”—the fallacy of presupposing the validity of a conclusion while building an argument for it. In any case, the trinitarian view of John 1:14 is untenable because this verse literally says that the Word tented “in us”—not “among us”.

In the end, the only biblical citation left standing in BDAG's definition #5a that may "support" the trinitarian view of John 1:14 is John 1:14 itself! So if anyone cites BDAG definition #5a to prove the *trinitarian* view of John 1:14 (which BDAG itself does not), it would be an exercise in circular reasoning. It is immensely tautologous to say that the meaning of John 1:14 is determined by the meaning of John 1:14!

Ultimately the meaning of *ginomai* in John 1:14 is governed by the meaning of the whole verse. The declaration that "the Word became flesh" brings out a picture of God dwelling in flesh—in humanity—in one sense or another. God now lives and tents "in us"—in God's people who make up the temple of God—such that we, and preeminently Jesus the Messiah, are "filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph.3:19).

## CHAPTER 10



# John 1:18: The Only Begotten Son or the Only Begotten God?

## English Bibles disagree over John 1:18

ESV and HCSB, two modern Bibles that were first published at around the same time, give conflicting translations of John 1:18:

**ESV:** No one has ever seen God; *the only God*, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

**HCSB:** No one has ever seen God. *The One and Only Son*—the One who is at the Father's side—He has revealed Him.

Which is correct, ESV or HCSB? ESV has “the only God,” a trinitarian rendering that makes Jesus the only God, whereas HCSB has “the One and Only Son,” a non-trinitarian rendering that makes Jesus the Son of God.

These represent two camps. One camp includes HCSB, CJB, KJV, NJB, RSV, REB, which prefer the non-trinitarian “the only Son” or variations such as “the one and only Son”. The other camp includes ESV, NASB, NIV, NET, which prefer the trinitarian “the only God” or variations such as “the only begotten God”.

In the “only God” camp (the trinitarian), there is further differentiation between “the only God” and “the only begotten God” as seen in ESV versus NASB (*italics added*):

**ESV** No one has ever seen God; *the only God*, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

**NASB** No one has seen God at any time; *the only begotten God* who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

ESV’s rendering is problematic in both logic and theology. What sense do we make of “the only God”? If Jesus is the only God, then Jesus must be invisible in some concrete sense, for the verse says that “no one has ever seen God”. Worse yet, if Jesus is the only God, that would exclude the Father as God, a conclusion that would be blasphemous even to trinitarians; it would also contradict John 17:3 which says that the Father is the only true God.

## The external evidence

These two camps represent two opinions on which Greek text-type is to be used for translating this verse: the Byzantine versus the Alexandrian. To put it simplistically, the “only Son” rendering is based on the Byzantine text-type (popularly known as the Majority Text), which is the text-type with the widest attestation (textual support) among all known Greek manuscripts. On the other hand, the “only God” is based on the Alexandrian text-type which is represented by manuscripts which, though fewer, are generally of an earlier date and usually given more weight in UBS5 and NA28.

The criterion of early date is reasonable but does not by itself take into account the fact that even early manuscripts can have errors (e.g., a misreading of the Aramaic, as we will see). Responsible NT exegesis takes into consideration both the Majority Text and the UBS5/NA28 critical text, supplemented with educated assessment, so it is not a matter of choosing the one to the exclusion of the other.

The Greek text underlying the “only begotten God” translation is the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (NA27/NA28) and the United Bible Societies Greek NT (UBS4/UBS5).

The companion volume to UBS4, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek NT* (2nd edition), explains on pp.169-170 that manuscripts P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup> were what influenced the “majority” of the UBS editorial committee of five scholars to prefer “the only begotten God”.

But one of the five, Allen Wikgren, a distinguished Greek and NT textual expert, registered his objection to the committee's decision in a note that is included in the commentary in which he says that *monogenēs theos* (the only begotten God) “may be a primitive [early] transcriptional error in the Alexandrian tradition”—the tradition that asserted Jesus' deity and later triumphed at Nicaea.

Wikgren adds, “At least a D decision would be preferable.” When a text in UBS4 is classified as {D}, it means that “there is a very high degree of doubt concerning the reading selected for the text”. In fact there is already slight doubt for this reading in UBS4 and UBS5 where the classification is {B}, indicating that the textual evidence favors *monogenēs theos* (the only begotten God), but not overwhelmingly so.

Another committee member, Matthew Black, in his book *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, cites with approval another Aramaic scholar's assessment that:

... one of Burney's most valuable observations of this kind [a misreading of the Aramaic] is that the disputed *monogenēs theos* in John 1:18 mistranslates *yehidh 'elaha*, “the only-begotten of God” (p.11).

In other words, some early copyists misread “the only begotten of God” as “the only begotten God”! It is alarming that the decision of a “majority” of the five-member committee has resulted in millions of copies of the Bible being printed with “the only begotten God” rather than “the only begotten of God”. Most Bible readers don't know the story behind this reading.



## The internal evidence

Here is the situation so far: The manuscript evidence for John 1:18 is divided between “the only begotten Son” and “the only begotten God”. The divergence is seen in the lack of consensus within the UBS committee—hence the {B} level of uncertainty in favor of “the only begotten God”—but also in the divergence among mainstream Bibles, some of which prefer the trinitarian reading (ESV, NASB, NIV, NET) and some the non-trinitarian (HCSB, CJB, KJV, NJB, RSV, REB). Hence the textual evidence does not, by itself, settle the issue. So what about the internal evidence?

In the New Testament, *monogenēs* (“only” or “unique,” BDAG) is used of Jesus only in John’s writings. Moreover, the five instances of *monogenēs* in John’s writings all refer to Jesus and to no one else.

Hence we only need to focus on John’s writings for our analysis. Here are the four verses in the New Testament outside John 1:18 in which *monogenēs* is applied to Jesus (all verses are from NASB):

**John 1:14** 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 3:16** For God so loved the world, that He gave His **only begotten** Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

**John 3:18** He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the **only begotten** Son of God.

**1 John 4:9** By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His **only begotten** Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

We make a few observations:

- The last three verses in this list are outside John's Prologue, and all three speak of the "only begotten Son". Hence, outside the Prologue, whenever *monogenēs* is used of Jesus, it always refers to him as the only begotten Son and never the only begotten God.
- The first of these four verses, John 1:14, has neither "Son" nor "God," so for our purposes it constitutes "neutral" evidence for deciding between "the only begotten Son" and "the only begotten God".
- If we read the debated John 1:18 as "the only begotten God" (the trinitarian reading), it would contradict all the other verses in John's writings that speak of "the only begotten Son". The fact is that the phrase "only begotten God" appears nowhere in the NT outside the debated John 1:18. Why would John be inconsistent with himself, using "only begotten Son" consistently except in John 1:18? If we detach this verse from the rest of John's writings by making it say "only begotten God," it would be left without parallel anywhere in John's Gospel or even

the NT. We must bear in mind that John applies *monogenēs* to Jesus with careful deliberation because he applies it to no one else.

- But if we read John 1:18 to say “the only begotten Son,” all five verses would harmonize.
- Not surprisingly, of the five verses, only John 1:18 has significant textual issues. The other four have no textual problems and are given zero commentary in UBS5’s critical apparatus.

One could, however, argue as a basic principle of textual criticism that since “the only begotten God” is the more difficult reading than “the only begotten Son,” it is more likely that the former was changed to the latter to smooth out the difficulties. This could be so, but the fact remains that the textual issues for John 1:18 are not doctrinally neutral, unlike some other verses which are doctrinally neutral despite having textual issues. An example is the verse just after it, John 1:19, which has textual variations in the clause, “the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem,” but is doctrinally neutral.

Doctrinal forces are a crucial factor because the process of deifying Jesus started before A.D. 200. If indeed “the only begotten God” was the established reading in the early manuscripts already in circulation around A.D. 200, wouldn’t it be quickly adopted by the Gentile church leaders who were by then already elevating Jesus to deity? Yet the fact remains that the majority of NT texts have “the only begotten Son”.

That is why Allen Wikgren, whom we quoted, says that the “only begotten God” reading may be an early “transcriptional error in the Alexandrian tradition,” i.e., it is the result of early trinitarian influences.

James F. McGrath, in his book, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context*, makes some striking comments on John 1:18, including the observation that manuscripts P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup> (regarded by some as tipping the balance in favor of “the only begotten God”) contain evidence of trinitarian influence. For example, both P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup> delete the word “God” from John 5:44 to avoid saying that the Father is “the only God”; the Father is now simply “the only,” making it possible to include Jesus as God. P<sup>66</sup> adds “the” to “God” in John 10:33 to make Jesus “the God” rather than “god” in the reduced sense of Psalm 82:6 (“you are gods”). Here is an excerpt from McGrath’s book:

The attestation of two early Alexandrian papyrus manuscripts of the Gospel, known as P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup>, is frequently given more weight than it deserves. P<sup>75</sup> is indeed a very early text, but it frequently gives a reading which is generally accepted to be inferior, and in a few instances shows signs of conscious additions or alterations having been made. Also significant is the agreement of these two manuscripts in omitting the word *God* in John 5:44, which almost all scholars agree was part of the original text. Beasley-Murray regards this as accidental, but it may equally be the case that the scribes who copied these manuscripts had difficulty referring to the Father as the *only* God, since the Logos can also be spoken of as “God.” Also

significant is that P<sup>66</sup> adds the definite article before the word “God” in John 10:33. There are thus indications that the copyists of these manuscripts had a particular theological view which their transcription reflects. Both of these manuscripts preserve inferior readings in abundance ... (p.65, footnotes omitted)

Philip W. Comfort, in his ardently trinitarian textual commentary, *A Commentary of the Manuscripts and Text of the New Testament*, says on p.248 that “the only begotten God” is the probable reading for John 1:18 for aligning with the rest of John’s Prologue in promoting the deity of Christ, and is a mirror of John 1:1 and a fitting conclusion to the Prologue. But this argument is unconvincing not only because of its circular reasoning (it presupposes the deity of Christ while trying to argue for it), but also because the evidence could equally argue for the opposite by exposing an obvious trinitarian motive for giving John 1:18 a trinitarian reading, a factor that cannot be ignored because of the rising deification of Jesus in the early church.

Bart D. Ehrman (*Misquoting Jesus*, p.162) says that the original wording of John 1:18 is more likely to be “unique Son” than “unique God” because the alteration of “unique Son” to “unique God” is plausibly accounted for by the preservation of “unique” in both. The point is that if a copyist had, for doctrinal reasons, changed the unproblematic “unique Son” to the problematic “unique God” (problematic because it would exclude the Father as God), then by failing or forgetting to remove the

accompanying word “unique,” the scribe exposed his own alteration and defeated his own efforts.

In the final analysis, irrespective of what may be the external or internal evidence, the end result is that Bibles such as CJB, KJV, NJB, HCSB, RSV, REB, despite their trinitarian leanings to one degree or another, have chosen to translate John 1:18 in a non-trinitarian way. By contrast, ESV gives John 1:18 a trinitarian reading despite the immense difficulties that it creates. It makes John contradict himself and implies that Jesus is “the only God” to the exclusion of the Father as God.

Thayer’s Greek-English lexicon on *monogenēs* rejects the “only begotten God” reading for John 1:18 because it is incongruous with John’s way of thinking and may have been doctrinally motivated:

The reading *monogenēs theos* (without the article before *monogenēs*) in John 1:18, which is supported by no inconsiderable weight of ancient testimony ... is foreign to John’s mode of thought and speech (John 3:16,18; 1John 4:9), dissonant and harsh—appears to owe its origin to a dogmatic zeal which broke out soon after the early days of the church.

## CHAPTER 11

# John 1:1

## “And the Word was with God”

### Does *pros* mean “with” in John 1:1?

This chapter is a prelude to the next chapter where we will discuss the trinitarian depersonalization of God. We begin by looking at the clause, “And the Word was with God,” in John 1:1. For convenience, we denote the three clauses in John 1:1 by the suffixes a, b, c:

John 1:1a    In the beginning was the Word,  
John 1:1b    and the Word was with God,  
John 1:1c    and the Word was God.

The key word is “with” (see the underlined) which is translated from the Greek preposition *pros* whose basic meaning is “to” or “towards” rather than “with”. Trinitarians render John 1:1b as “and the Word was with God,” but it ought to be noted that “with” is not the usual meaning of *pros*. There are other

prepositions which are used far more often for conveying the idea of “with”: (a) *syn* means together “with” someone (cf. *synchronize*, *sympathize*); (b) *meta* means “with” someone or “after” someone (cf. *metaphor*); (c) *para* means “beside” someone or something (cf. *parallel*).

But *pros* is not one of these prepositions. If John had intended to express the idea “with God” in John 1:1b, he would likely have used one of the other three prepositions instead.

This is suggested by the data compiled in *Modern Concordance to the New Testament*, a study tool that is immensely useful for its categorization by domains of meaning in Greek. Though not widely known, this reference is esteemed by Protestant and Catholic scholars alike <sup>15</sup> and is particularly useful for finding out what a Greek word *actually* means in *actual* writing.

On pages 679–681 under the heading “With,” *Modern Concordance* gives 164 instances of *meta*, 66 instances of *syn*, 34 instances of *para*, but only 16 instances of *pros*. Hence *pros* rarely carries the meaning “with” even though the word itself occurs 700 times in the New Testament, far more frequently than the other three prepositions: *syn* (128 times), *para* (194 times), *meta* (469 times). In fact, a few of these 16 instances of *pros* do not obviously carry the meaning “with” as we normally understand “with” in English.

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<sup>15</sup> *Modern Concordance* is praised as a “magnificent achievement” by David Noel Freedman, the general editor of the *Anchor Bible* series and a well-known expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls; and as “the best modern language concordance that I have seen” by Raymond E. Brown, an eminent Catholic biblical scholar.



The following table shows the overwhelming preponderance of the three prepositions (*meta*, *syn*, *para*) over *pros* for the meaning “with,” based on the comprehensive data in *Modern Concordance*. The bottom cell of the table has only one line, indicating that *pros* rarely means “with” despite occurring 700 times in the NT. You don’t need to go through the verses in the table. The table is only meant to give you a quick visual sense of how rarely *pros* carries the meaning “with”.

<b>Verses listed in Modern Concordance in which prepositions <i>meta</i>, <i>syn</i>, <i>para</i>, and <i>pros</i> mean “with”</b>
<b><i>Meta</i>: 164 of 469 occurrences (35%)</b>
Matt 1:23; 2:11; 9:11; 9:15; 16:27; 17:17; 26:18; 26:20; 26:29; 26:36; 28:20; Mark 1:13; 1:29; 2:16; 2:19; 3:7; 5:24; 8:10; 8:38; 11:11; 14:14; 14:17; Luke 1:28; 1:58; 1:66; 1:72; 2:51; 5:30; 5:34; 6:17; 7:36; 22:11; 22:15; 22:53; 24:29; 24:30; John 3:2; 3:22; 3:26; 4:27; 6:3; 7:33; 8:29; 9:37; 11:54; 13:33; 14:9; 14:16; 14:30; 16:4; 16:32; 17:12; 18:2; Acts 7:9; 10:38; 11:21; 14:27; 15:4; 18:10; Rom 15:33; 16:20; 16:24; 1Cor 16:23; 2Cor 13:11; 13:13; Gal 6:18; Eph 6:24; Phil 4:9; 4:23; Col 4:18; 1Thess 3:13; 5:28; 2Thess 1:7; 3:16; 3:18; 1Tim 6:21; 2Tim 4:22; Titus 3:15; Phlm 1:25; Heb 13:25; 1John 4:17; 2John 1:2; 1:3; Rev 1:12; 2:16; 3:20; 4:1; 10:8; 21:3; 22:21; Matt 12:30; 17:3; 25:31; 26:23; 26:38; 26:40; 26:51; 26:69; 26:71; Mark 3:14; 4:36; 5:18; 5:37; 14:18; 14:20; 14:33; 14:67; 16:10; Luke 5:29; 11:23; 22:21; 22:28; 22:33; 22:59; John 6:66; 9:40; 11:16; 12:17; 13:8; 13:18; 15:27; 17:24; 18:26; 19:18; Acts 2:28; 7:38; 1John 1:3; 1:6; Rev 3:4; 3:20; 3:21; 14:1; 17:14; 20:4; 20:6; 22:12; Matt 5:25; 12:3; 12:4; 27:54; Mark 1:36; 2:25; 5:40; Luke 6:3; 6:4; John 11:31; 20:24; 20:26; Acts 9:19; 9:39; 20:34; Titus 3:15
<b><i>Syn</i>: 66 of 128 occurrences (52%)</b>
Luke 7:6; 24:29; 24:44; John 18:1; 1Cor 15:10; Matt 26:35; 27:38; 27:44; Mark 15:27; 15:32; Luke 8:1; 8:38; 8:51; 9:18; 22:14; 22:56; 23:32; John 12:2; Acts 4:13; Rom 6:8; 8:32; 2Cor 4:14; 13:4; Phil 1:23; Col 2:13; 2:20; 3:3; 3:4; 1Thess 4:14; 4:17; 5:10; 2Pet 1:18; Mark 2:26; Luke 2:13; 5:9; 7:12; 8:45; 9:32; 24:10; 24:24; 24:33; Acts 5:17; 5:21; 13:7; 14:4; 22:9; 22:11; 27:2; Rom 16:14; 16:15; Gal 2:3; Col 2:5
<b><i>Para</i>: 34 of 194 occurrences (18%)</b>
Matt 6:1; 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 1:30; 2:52; 9:47; 11:37; 18:27; 19:7; John 1:39; 4:40; 8:38; 14:17; 14:23; 14:25; 17:5; Rom 2:11; 2:13; 9:14; 1Cor 3:19; 7:24; Gal 3:11; Eph 6:9; 2Thess 1:6; James 1:17; 1:27; 1Pet 2:4; 2:20; 2Pet 3:8
<b><i>Pros</i>: 16 of 700 occurrences (2%)</b>
John 1:1; 1:2; 12:32; 14:3; Rom 4:2; 5:1; 2Cor 5:8; 1Jn 1:2; 2:1; Mt 13:56; Mark 6:3; 9:19; 14:49; 1Th 3:4; 2Th 3:10

The black bars of the table show the percentages of occurrence for the meaning “with”: *meta* 35%, *syn* 52%, *para* 18%, *pros* 2%. The low percentage for *pros* (2%) means that *pros* seldom means “with”—only 16 times in 700 occurrences. Hence, *in actual*

*usage*, “with” is not the usual meaning of *pros* but a rare or secondary meaning. Yet it is the rare meaning that has been conscripted for trinitarian use in John 1:1.

## The meaning of “pros” in the standard lexicons

The meaning “to be with someone” that trinitarians seek in John 1:1b (“the Word was with God”) is possible, but does not reflect the usual meaning of *pros*. This is seen not only in the way *pros* is actually used in the NT (cf. *Modern Concordance*) but also in how it is defined in Greek-English lexicons. BDAG gives many definitions of *pros*, and these are listed below. If you wish, you can skip over these definitions without impairing the flow of reading. But it may be helpful to glance at the words shown in boldface (all italics and boldface are BDAG’s):

**3** with accusative, **marker of movement or orientation toward someone/something**

(a) of place, person, or thing ***toward, towards, to***, after verbs

α. of going

β. of sending

γ. of motion generally

δ. of leading, guiding

ε. of saying, speaking

ζ. of asking, praying

(b) of time ***near, at, or during (a certain time)***

α. denoting approach *toward*

β. of temporal duration *for*

- (c) of goal (**aiming**) **at** or (**striving**) **toward**
- α. with conscious purpose *for, for the purpose of, on behalf of*
  - β. generally of design, destiny
  - γ. of the result that follows a set of circumstances (*so that*)
- (d) of relationship (hostile or friendly), **against, for**
- α. hostile *against, with* after verbs of disputing, etc.
  - β. friendly *to, toward, with, before*
- (e) to indicate a connection by marking a point of reference, **with reference/regard to**
- α. *with reference to*
  - β. *as far as ... is concerned, with regard to*
  - γ. elliptically *ti pros hēmas*
  - δ. *in accordance with*
  - ε. expressing purpose
- (f) in adverbial expressions
- (g) **by, at, near** *pros tina einai be (in company) with someone*<sup>16</sup>

Of the many definitions listed here, the only one that matches the trinitarian reading of John 1:1b (“the Word was with God”) is the very last one (g). In fact this is the one that BDAG assigns to John 1:1. But being in the last position, (g) is not considered by BDAG to be the principal meaning of *pros* but a secondary meaning.

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<sup>16</sup> We quote only the third section of BDAG’s definition of *pros* (with citations omitted, abbreviations spelled out, Greek transliterated). We skip the first two sections because they pertain to the genitive and the dative whereas the third section pertains to the accusative, which is the grammatical case used in John 1:1b.

The trinitarian choice of the very last definition for John 1:1b, to the exclusion of other equally plausible meanings, is a double-edged sword for trinitarians, because it creates a serious trinitarian dilemma that we will discuss in the next chapter.

And when we examine BDAG's definitions (a) to (g), an important fact emerges: the dominant sense of *pros* (with the accusative) is not characterized by "with" but by "to" or "towards".

We see something similar in another lexical authority: the Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English lexicon (under *pros*, C-III, 1-5). In this lexicon, a principal meaning of *pros* with the accusative is "in reference to" (a meaning also supported by BDAG, *pros* 3e). Hence "the Word was with God" would plausibly mean "the Word had reference to God," that is, the Word referred to God or pointed to God. This would flow well with John's next clause, "and the Word was God," with these two clauses forming a natural progression. In fact nothing in the massive LSJ lexicon on *pros* supports the trinitarian reading "the Word was with God". This standard lexicon of classical Greek, unlike lexicons of biblical Greek, is not particularly interested in finding support for trinitarianism.

The referential use of *pros* is common in the Bible, and is seen for example in Mark 12:12, "he spoke the parable against them," which in the Greek is literally, "he spoke the parable with reference to them". This is confirmed by the *Linguistic Key to the Greek NT*, which translates *pros autous* in this verse as "with reference to them".

**Conclusion:** From the lexical data in BDAG and Liddell-Scott-Jones, John 1:1 may be translated as: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word had reference to God (pointed to God), and the Word was God.” The Concordant Bible translates John 1:1b correctly: “and the word was toward God”.

## **Does *pros ton theon* mean “with God” in John 1:1?**

We have looked at the single word *pros*. What about the phrase *pros ton theon*? Does it mean “with God” in John 1:1? This meaning is possible but is improbable because it creates a trinitarian dilemma that we will discuss in the next chapter, and because alternative readings are less problematic.

It is interesting to see how ESV, a consistently trinitarian Bible, generally translates *pros ton theon*, the phrase used in John 1:1. This phrase occurs 20 times in the New Testament: twice in John’s Prologue and 18 times outside the Prologue.<sup>17</sup> In the 18 instances outside the Prologue, ESV never translates *pros ton theon* as “with God” except in Romans 5:1 (“we have peace with God,” which has a different meaning from “with God” that trinitarians seek in John 1:1b). ESV instead translates *pros ton theon* as “to God” or “toward God” in 14 of the 18 verses outside John’s Prologue. The same is true of NASB.

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<sup>17</sup> The 18 instances outside John’s Prologue are Jn.13:3; Acts 4:24; 12:5; 24:16; Rom.5:1; 10:1; 15:17,30; 2Cor.3:4; 13:7; Phil.4:6; 1Th.1:8,9; Heb. 2:17; 5:1; 1Jn.3:21; Rev.12:5; 13:6. The two instances in John’s Prologue are John 1:1 and 1:2.

The reading “towards God” for John 1:1b is acknowledged even by some trinitarian commentaries such as *New American Commentary*:

Most translators render this statement “and the Word was with God”. Actually it is difficult to translate the Greek phrase *pros ton theon* (in both vv. 1 and 2) into English. Literally it means “toward God.” (*New American Commentary* on John 1:1)

NAC is not the only trinitarian commentary to say that *pros ton theon* in John 1:1b literally means “towards God”. Others include *New Bible Commentary* (“the thought is literally ‘towards God’”); *The Bible Speaks Today* (“*With* here is literally ‘towards’”); *The Preacher’s Commentary* (“The literal translation could be ‘the Word was towards God’”).

The LXX has around 70 instances of *pros ton theon*, most of which are translated as “to God” rather than “with God” in English Bibles.

Why then do trinitarians choose the secondary meaning “with” for the word *pros* in John 1:1 but not in the rest of the New Testament? One reason is doctrine. The rendering “the Word was with God” aligns with trinitarianism by implying a second entity that was “with” God at the creation, and trinitarians want to imply further that this entity is the preexistent Jesus. But to prove their case from the Bible, three more conditions will have to be met.

First, it must be shown that the Genesis creation involved another entity besides Yahweh. But anyone who is familiar with

the Genesis account would know that no one was involved “with God” when He brought creation into being. There is no record of any person, being, or entity besides God who was involved in the creation. There was also no “second deity,” a term used by Philo but which has been appropriated by trinitarians to mean something different from what Philo meant. Thus whatever *pros* might mean in John 1:1, it does not mean “with” in any sense that implies another person alongside God.

Second, even if it could be shown that there is an entity which was “with God” at the Genesis creation, it must be further demonstrated that this entity is a real person and not just a hypostatization or personification of something like wisdom in Proverbs 8:30. So whether the Word in John 1:1 is a second divine person alongside Yahweh would still need to be demonstrated. As far as Scripture is concerned, that effort would be futile because there is simply no such person. Yahweh expressly declares that He alone is God (Isa.45:5) and that He created the heavens and the earth by Himself (44:24). So even if we accept “with God” as a valid reading of *pros ton theon* in John 1:1 (which is semantically possible), that alone would not be enough to prove trinitarianism.

Third, it must be demonstrated that John’s Prologue identifies “the Word” with Jesus, something that trinitarians have not done. In fact, trinitarians have not gone beyond the first point, let alone the second and the third.

This leads us to the next chapter.







## The Trinitarian Depersonalization of “God” in John 1:1

**I**n this chapter I discuss something that is fundamental to trinitarianism: *the depersonalization of God*. But first I would like to say a few things about how “ordinary” (non-specialist) trinitarians understand the Trinity as a result of this depersonalization.

### **Few trinitarians understand trinitarianism**

Most Christians are trinitarian in name, but lack an accurate understanding of trinitarian doctrine. For example, most trinitarians think that the deity of Christ is the essence—indeed the sum total—of trinitarianism, not realizing that if they stop there, they would be descending into tritheism, the doctrine of

three Gods. The deity of Christ is only the “public face” of trinitarianism, not its full representative.

Indeed, some “ordinary” (non-specialist) trinitarians are baffled when they find out that God is only one being, not three beings, in trinitarianism. They are not aware that in trinitarianism, God has been depersonalized and is no longer a person. These Christians, despite having been exposed to trinitarian terminology over the years, had somehow gained the fuzzy notion that God is three beings (since God is three persons) rather than one being. The confusion can be blamed partly on trinitarian language which uses terms such as “being” and “person” which are easily conflated in the minds of most people, even thinking people. When people see the word “being,” they would immediately think of a whole individual (as in “human being”), so it is only natural for them to think of a tripersonal God as three beings.

Trinitarianism thrives on conflationary language in order to make an incoherent and unbiblical doctrine sound plausible to Christians. In this case, it is seen in the concept of God as “one being,” a concept that was invented to give trinitarianism some semblance of monotheism on account of the word “one,” but also on account of the word “being” which to most people implies an individual, thus giving trinitarianism a facade of monotheism, the doctrine of one God.

In fact many “trinitarian” churchgoers are tritheists in reality as noted by Tom Harpur, a former professor at the University of Toronto and a famously astute observer of Christianity:

You simply cannot find the doctrine of the Trinity set out anywhere in the Bible. St. Paul has the highest view of Jesus’ role and person, but nowhere does he call him God. Nor does Jesus himself anywhere explicitly claim to be the Second Person of the Trinity ... This research has led me to believe that the great majority of regular churchgoers are, for all practical purposes, tritheists. (*For Christ’s Sake*, p.11).

Every once in a while, I would meet a pastor or a church leader who is nominally trinitarian, yet doesn’t fully grasp trinitarian doctrine. Some of them hold views of the Trinity which border on tritheism (the doctrine of three Gods) or modalism (the doctrine of one God who reveals himself in one of three modes, Father, Son, or Spirit).

While some of these church leaders may be genuinely confused about the Trinity, I get the feeling that most of them are deep thinkers who quietly do not accept the notion that God is three persons in one being.

Compounding the problem is that the concept of “one being” is often expressed as “one substance” or “one essence”—unbiblical terminology that was invented to confer pseudo-monotheistic language on a doctrine that is fundamentally tritheistic.

## The trinitarian depersonalization of “God”

At the start of this chapter, I said that the depersonalization of God is fundamental to trinitarianism. This is seen in the crucial fact that God is not a person in trinitarianism. The famous C.S. Lewis, a wholehearted trinitarian, puts it frankly:

Christian theology does not believe God to be a person. It believes Him to be such that in Him a trinity of persons is consistent with a unity of Deity. In that sense it believes Him to be something very different from a person. (*Christian Reflections*, p.79).

Lewis’s shocking statement that trinitarianism “does not believe God to be a person” is actually standard trinitarian belief, and is echoed by other trinitarian authorities such as the NET Bible which on p.2017 rejects the notion of “the person of God”. Similarly, James R. White in *The Forgotten Trinity* (p.27) says that God is a *what*, not a *who*. This explains why some trinitarians prefer the bizarre term “Godhead” to “God”.

In the rest of this chapter, I discuss the trinitarian depersonalization of God. It partly has to do with *pros*, a Greek preposition that is traditionally translated “with” in the clause, “and the Word was with God,” implying a second person who was “with” God.

We previously saw why trinitarians would translate *pros* in John 1:1 according to its rare meaning (“with”) rather than its usual meaning (“to” or “towards”). This is to safeguard trinitarianism by implying that the Word is a second person who was “with” God in the beginning. We do not totally reject “with

God” as a valid translation of John 1:1b, but as we shall see, this reading is improbable because it creates a grave dilemma for trinitarians. And it was this dilemma that forced the hand of trinitarians to depersonalize God. After reading the rest of this chapter, you will know the true face of trinitarianism.

## **Trinitarians admit that their understanding of *pros* creates a conflict between John 1:1b and John 1:1c**

It may come as a surprise to many that the key word in John 1:1 is not *logos* (word) or even *theos* (God)—these words are seldom controversial in themselves—but the word *pros*. That is because the way we understand *pros* in John 1:1b governs the way we interpret the whole verse.

The plain fact is that *pros* is not an obscure or mysterious word but a common word that creates no complications for John 1:1 unless we pull *pros* away from its common meaning as trinitarians have done. In the last chapter we saw from BDAG and Liddell-Scott-Jones that *pros* has several meanings but the main one is characterized by “to” or “toward” whereas “with” is a possible but rare meaning.

If we don’t have a good reason for rejecting the common meaning of *pros* for John 1:1, then the choice of its rare meaning would be arbitrary. But we do have a good reason for choosing the primary meaning of *pros*: *referential consistency*. And we do

have a good reason for rejecting the rare meaning of *pros*: *referential inconsistency*. To see what I mean, let us compare the two possible renderings of John 1:1:

Primary meaning of *pros*:

- a. In the beginning was the Word,
- b. and the Word had reference to God,
- c. and the Word was God.

Secondary meaning of *pros*:

- a. In the beginning was the Word,
- b. and the Word was with God,
- c. and the Word was God.

These two renderings are identical except for the underlined words. The first one has the advantage of referential consistency: the word “God” means the same in line #b as in line #c. In both lines, “God” refers to *the* God or the very person of God. This is what gives the whole verse its natural flow and progression, with line #b leading naturally to #c.

But the second reading (the trinitarian one) lacks referential consistency because “God” in line #c is forced to have a different meaning from “God” in line #b. Trinitarians say that “God” refers to the Father in line #b, and to the divine essence in line #c.

The inconsistency between lines #b and #c is perplexing, yet it is demanded by trinitarians in order to imply a second person who was “with” God in the beginning. Many trinitarian scholars

are aware of this inconsistency as anyone who reads their literature on John 1:1 would know.

## The root problem

The root problem is this: It makes no sense to say that “the Word was with God” if also “the Word was God”! This is a genuine dilemma for some well-known trinitarians, as we shall see. When John 1:1 is translated in the conventional way as in most Bibles, a logical conflict arises between 1:1b and 1:1c. The problem is not with John 1:1c (“and the Word was God,” which is a valid translation though not the only one) but with 1:1b (“the Word was *with* God,” an improbable rendering that is nonetheless demanded by trinitarians to safeguard trinitarianism). But the conflict is strictly a trinitarian one because it is not inherent to John 1:1 when read properly.

The conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c, which arises only in trinitarianism, is not a trivial one, and is noted by many trinitarians. We now give five examples of this. The first four are brief and simple. The fifth one is longer and also touches on the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ similarly flawed interpretation of John 1:1. Along the way we will encounter the trinitarian depersonalization of God by which “God” in John 1:1c is no longer a person but a divine essence. The depersonalization of God is not, however, limited to John 1:1c but pervades all of trinitarian dogma.

## Five examples of the trinitarian effort to resolve the conflict between John 1:1b and John 1:1c

**Example #1.** F.F. Bruce, trinitarian and eminent NT scholar, is aware of the conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c when they are translated the conventional way. He says of John 1:1c that “the meaning would have been that the Word was completely identical with God, which is impossible if the Word was also ‘with God’” (*The Gospel of John*, p.31). Notice the strong word “impossible” that F.F. Bruce uses to describe the conflict. The conundrum impels him to search for a rendering of John 1:1c that would resolve the conflict but without surrendering trinitarian doctrine. For example, he speaks positively of the rendering in New English Bible, “what God was, the Word was,” but admits that it is just a paraphrase. In the end, F.F. Bruce doesn’t seem to have found a solution that is satisfactory to himself beyond taking John 1:1c to mean, “the Word shared the nature and being of God”.

**Example #2.** *IVP New Testament Commentary*, which often expresses a trinitarian opinion, mentions the same logical problem that F.F. Bruce mentions, and then concludes, “These two truths seem impossible to reconcile logically and yet both must be held with equal firmness.” (These “two truths” are the two conflicting clauses that F.F. Bruce points out.) But after admitting that the two clauses “seem impossible to reconcile logically” (strong words), the commentary offers no solution beyond the bare suggestion that we simply accept the two



positions “with equal firmness”—i.e., we simply accept the contradiction as it stands, without further ado.

**Example #3.** H.A.W. Meyer, in *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* (p.48), is aware that John 1:1b can be read in the referential sense (the Word referred to God) and correctly saw that this would make the Word a “periphrasis” (an indirect term) for the person of God himself. But this periphrasis undermines the trinitarian insistence that the Word is a second distinct person who was “with” God the Father in the beginning. So Meyer de-emphasizes the periphrasis and retreats to the conventional reading, “and the Word was with God”. But he immediately sees the same conflict that F.F. Bruce sees. So Meyer insists that “God” in John 1:1c “can only be the predicate, not the subject,” and proposes the reading, “He was *with* God, and possessed of a *divine nature*” (italics Meyer’s). This is not really a satisfactory solution to the problem because the rendering simply hides the word “God” in John 1:1c. Meyer’s paraphrase may seem labored, yet it is in line with standard trinitarian dogma, especially in the way that “God” in John 1:1c has been depersonalized into “a divine nature”.

**Example #4 (an explicit depersonalization of “God”).** The NET Bible (whose extensive footnotes often express a trinitarian opinion in the NT but less so in the OT) is aware of the conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c in the way they are usually translated in most Bibles. To resolve this conflict, NET takes the principle that any reading of John 1:1c that collides with 1:1b

must be “ruled out”. This statement is more shocking than most readers may realize. In other words, precedence is given to the trinitarian understanding of John 1:1b as to override any possible translation of John 1:1c *even if it happens to be correct*. This methodology, which violates the principles of exegesis by forcing a presupposition on a verse, is seen in the following statement in the NET Bible. The crucial words in parentheses are not mine but NET’s:

The construction in John 1:1c does not equate the Word with the *person* of God (this is ruled out by 1:1b, “the Word was with God”); rather it affirms that the Word and God are one in *essence*.

NET here acknowledges the conflict between John 1:1b (“the Word was with God”) and 1:1c (“the Word was God”) when they are translated the conventional way. NET rejects the common rendering of 1:1c (“the Word was God”) for making the “Word” identical with “the person of God”. NET doesn’t want “God” in John 1:1c to mean “the God” or “the person of God” because that would undermine the trinitarianism which NET reads into John 1:1b. In wrestling with this trinitarian dilemma, NET boldly decides to depersonalize “God” in John 1:1c so that the “Word” no longer refers to what NET calls the “person of God” but to someone who is “one in essence” with the Father. This is adding a lot of abstraction to John’s simple statement.

NET’s depersonalization of “God” in John 1:1c may seem cold and shocking, but it accurately reflects the trinitarian view that God is not a person. We have already quoted C.S. Lewis as saying that, “Christian theology does not believe God to be a person.”

In the end, NET translates John 1:1c as “the Word was fully God,” a paraphrase that depersonalizes the term “God” such that it no longer refers to *the* God or the person of God. It is now a statement of the divine essence rather than an equation of identity between the Word and God as seen in “the Word was God”. That is why some trinitarians such as James R. White (in *The Forgotten Trinity*) say that God is a *what*, not a *who*.

## **The trinitarian interpretation of John 1:1 is identical to that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in terms of exegetical procedure**

**Example #5.** This is perhaps the most eye-opening of our examples but some may find it too lengthy. It is written in such a way that you can glide through the technical details and get the main point.

It is not our aim in this example to study trinitarianism or the Jehovah’s Witnesses in depth but to show that the two are similar in their respective grammatical analyses of John 1:1. The similarity is surprising given their sharp disagreement over the deity of Jesus.

Trinitarians and the Jehovah's Witnesses are in surprisingly close agreement in their exegesis of John 1:1. In fact they seem to agree on every aspect of exegetical procedure that matters for the interpretation of John 1:1:

- They agree on the Greek text of John 1:1 (i.e., no textual issues)
- They agree, down to the last word, on how the first two clauses, John 1:1a and 1:1b, ought to be translated into English (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God”)
- Both take “the Word” in John 1:1 as referring to the preexistent Christ
- Both take “God” in John 1:1b as referring to God the Father
- Both take *pros* in John 1:1b in its secondary sense “with” (the Word was with God), rejecting its primary sense “to” or “toward”
- Both understand “the Word was with God” as referring to two distinct persons, God the Father and the preexistent Christ
- Both are aware of the conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c that arises when *pros* is translated in its secondary sense “with”
- Both try to resolve the conflict by changing the meaning of “God” in going from John 1:1b to John 1:1c

- Both take “God” in John 1:1c as predicative, qualitative, and indefinite; and both use the predicate anarthrous *theos* argument to justify their qualitative understanding of “God” in John 1:1c
- Both depersonalize “God” in John 1:1c such that it no longer refers to the very person of God but to a divine quality or essence or nature. In other words, both take John 1:1c not as an equation of identity (that the Word is God by metonymy) but as a statement of God’s essence or divinity (which is the trinitarian view, e.g., Marcus Dods, J.P. Lange, H.A.W. Meyer, C.K. Barrett, R. Bowman).

The close agreement of trinitarians and the Jehovah’s Witnesses in their exegetical procedures comes out strikingly in one of the most detailed grammatical-exegetical analyses of John 1:1 ever written by an evangelical. Robert M. Bowman Jr., an ardent apologist for trinitarianism, wrote a book, *Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of John*, in which he gives a detailed exposition of John 1:1 from a trinitarian perspective, interwoven with a critique of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ interpretation of the same verse. But the inconvenient fact for Bowman is that their respective interpretations of John 1:1 are fundamentally identical in terms of grammatical-exegetical procedure.

For convenience we refer to the Jehovah’s Witnesses as the JWs without intending anything pejorative in the use of that

term. Their translation of the Bible, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (2013 edition), will be abbreviated NWT.

To spare you the technical details, I won't go into the details of Bowman's book (which I have read twice) except to summarize the two main currents of his exposition of John 1:1.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, these two currents, especially the second one, have the surprising result of undermining Bowman's own trinitarian interpretation of John 1:1.

**First current:** Bowman, like many trinitarians, is keenly aware of the conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c when they are translated in the conventional way as seen in most Bibles today. He even refers to the conflict explicitly:

What needs to be treated in some depth is the question of how the Word can be with God and yet be God ... The Word certainly cannot be with "God" and be "God" unless the term *God* somehow changes significance from the first to the second usage. (pp.25-26)

*Here we see the true face of trinitarianism.* Bowman here explains to us the very dilemma which confronts trinitarianism: If the word "God" means the same in John 1:1b as in 1:1c, then trinitarianism cannot be true, for then we must choose between

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<sup>18</sup> For the details, see Bowman's *Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of John* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1989); and the Jehovah's Witnesses' *Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures*, 1965, pp.1158-1160.

two possibilities, both of which are detestable to trinitarians: One option is biblical monotheism in which the Father, not the Son, is the only true God (John 17:3). The other option is the error of modalism (in which Jesus = Father = Spirit, just as H<sub>2</sub>O can be water, ice, or vapor).

Neither option is acceptable to trinitarians, and this would account for the trinitarian effort to make “God” in John 1:1c mean something different from “God” in 1:1b. This is the very dilemma that Bowman is trying to resolve when he makes the astonishing demand that “the term *God* somehow changes significance from the first to the second usage,” by which he means that we change the meaning of “God” in going from 1:1b to 1:1c!

But Bowman’s efforts to resolve the conflict is notable for the casual manner in which he alters the words of John 1:1 here and there without batting an eye, in contrast to the careful attitude of F.F. Bruce who hesitates to do this to even one word. Bowman speaks freely of “shifts” in wording, of changing the “significance” of words, of coming up with a “translation-paraphrase” (which is his euphemism for “paraphrase”). So it comes as no surprise that after making all the changes, here is his final and fully trinitarian reading of John 1:1:

In the beginning the Word was existing; and the Word was existing in relationship with the person commonly known as God, that is, the Father; and the Word was Himself essentially God. (p.26)

**Second current:** Bowman's analysis of John 1:1 confirms the shocking fact which I sensed some time ago, that the trinitarian interpretation of John 1:1 is fundamentally identical to that of the JWs in terms of grammatical-exegetical procedure! Trinitarians and the JWs agree on the first 90% of their interpretation of John 1:1 and diverge only in the final 10%. This accounts for the many grammatical-exegetical presuppositions that they share in common for the interpretation of John 1:1 (see the bullet points listed two or three pages back).

Bowman admits agreement with the JWs on three key aspects of *theos* (God) in John 1:1c: the qualitiveness of the anarthrous *theos* (p.37); the predicateness of *theos* (p.38); the indefiniteness of *theos* (pp.41,47). In agreeing with the JWs on these points, Bowman faces the rather difficult task of disproving "the Word was a god," which is the JWs' favored rendering of John 1:1c.

This brings us to the greatest irony of all: Bowman, on p.62, after giving the lengthiest grammatical analysis of John 1:1 that I have seen, has no choice but to admit that the JW's rendering of John 1:1c ("and the Word was a god") is "a possible rendering" and is "grammatically possible" (Bowman's own words)! Believe it or not, Bowman is conceding that the JWs are grammatically correct in their rendering of John 1:1, but he rejects it only because it is not *doctrinally* acceptable to him.

There is nothing unusual about a trinitarian who admits that "the Word was a god" (the rendering preferred by the JWs) is grammatically possible. Dr. Thomas Constable, a trinitarian of Dallas Theological Seminary, likewise concedes that "the Word



was a god” is grammatically possible, but like Bowman he rejects it as *doctrinally* unacceptable:

Jehovah’s Witnesses appeal to this verse (John 1:1) to support their doctrine that Jesus was not fully God but the highest created being. They translate it “the Word was a god.” Grammatically this is a possible translation since it is legitimate to supply the indefinite article (“a”) when no article is present in the Greek text, as here. However, that translation here is definitely incorrect because it reduces Jesus to less than God. (*Dr. Constable’s Expository Notes*, 2010 edition, on John 1:1)

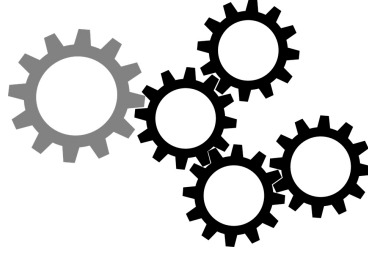
In the final analysis, the true disagreement between trinitarians and the JW’s is over doctrine rather than grammatical-exegetical procedure. After agreeing in the first 90%, they diverge in the final 10%, specifically over the right way of describing Jesus’ divineness: “God” versus “a god”.

But even here they agree more than disagree because when trinitarians speak of “God” in John 1:1c, they don’t really mean “the God” or “the person of God” or “God Himself,” but “God” in the depersonalized sense of a divine essence or nature, which is similar to how the JW’s understand “a god” to mean divine or godlike. In fact, Bowman (on p.63) and the JW’s (in a footnote in NWT) both accept “and the Word was divine” as a valid alternative reading of John 1:1c. This is further proof of the deep agreement between trinitarians and the JW’s in their grammatical-exegetical analysis of John 1:1.

In the final analysis, Bowman's disagreement with the JWs is only skin deep, mainly over the best way of depicting the divineness of the Word: "God" versus "a god," both in a qualitative sense. When you think about it, this is really nothing more than a theological spat over the qualitative meaning of *theos* in John 1:1c. Interestingly, Bowman uses many pages just to show that his qualitative understanding of *theos* is better than the JWs' qualitative understanding of *theos*!

The weakness of Bowman's analysis of John 1:1—and therefore that of the Jehovah's Witnesses—is that they never consider the possibility recognized by Meyer that *pros* could be taken referentially. This meaning is more natural and would make John 1:1b read, "and the Word referred to God," which harmonizes progressively with the next clause, "and the Word was God," without ever depersonalizing "God" and without ever changing the meaning of "God" in going from John 1:1b to 1:1c.

But Bowman refuses to accept the referential use of *pros* in John 1:1 even though it is a common function of *pros* in Greek. It is because this usage would undermine Bowman's trinitarian presuppositions, something that he wants to avoid at all cost, even the cost (to him) of agreeing with the Jehovah's Witnesses and the cost of depersonalizing God.



## CHAPTER 13

# The Logical Problems of the Trinity

### **A basic definition of the Trinity**

**A**mong those who uphold the doctrine of the Trinity, few know much about it beyond the “God in three persons” formula. Most churches in Canada regard trinitarianism as the foundation of their faith, yet few teach the Trinity to the lay people in any depth, probably because exposing them to formal trinitarianism will create objections to the doctrine. The first thing the people will notice is its use of non-biblical terms (including “trinity” itself), its weak biblical support, and its lack of logical cohesion. The incessant appeal to tradition and the church creeds is becoming passé in this age of open information.

So what is the Trinity? The following point-by-point definition of the Trinity is representative of how it is explained by trinitarians, and adheres to the trinitarian language used by trinitarians.

For the meanings of English words, we consult *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (5th edition) and *Oxford Dictionary of English* (3rd edition), abbreviated AHD and Oxford, respectively.

The following definition of the Trinity includes brief explanatory notes by me. According to trinitarianism:

- There is one and only one God.
- God subsists in three persons.
- Note: The word “subsist” is unfamiliar to most people, but it is used often in trinitarian writing to mean “to exist, be” (AHD).
- The three persons are: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.
- Each person is fully God.
- The three are coequal and coeternal.
- The three are distinct from one another, yet are not three Gods.
- God is not God except as Father, Son, and Spirit—*the three together*.

- Note: Many trinitarians use the term “Godhead” to refer to the triune God. AHD defines “Godhead” as “the Christian God, especially the Trinity”. One reason for the trinitarian use of “Godhead” rather than “God” is that in trinitarianism, God is not a person.
- God is three persons, yet only one “being” or “essence”.
- Note: Although the word “being” usually refers to a whole and complete person (e.g., “human being”), trinitarians use it in the sense of “one’s basic or essential nature” (AHD, similarly Oxford).
- Note: Trinitarians use the Greek word *hypostasis* (or the Latin *persona*) as an approximate equivalent of “person” (there is a long history behind this which we won’t go into). Hence God is three *hypostases* (three persons).
- Note: The three *hypostases*—Father, Son, and Spirit—share one *ousia* (essence or substance). Hence trinitarians speak of three *hypostases* in one *ousia* (three persons in one substance).
- Note: From *ousia* comes *homoousios* (“of one essence” or “of one substance”), which is historically the key term in trinitarianism because it is this term or its concept that supposedly makes trinitarianism “monotheistic”.
- Note: Because the three persons are of one substance, they are said to be “consubstantial”.

- By incarnation the second person of the Trinity—namely, the eternally preexistent God the Son—acquired a human nature and took on God-man existence as Jesus Christ, who now, as one person, forever possesses both a divine nature and a human nature, and is both fully God and fully man through the “hypostatic union” (of Christ’s two natures, divine and human, in one person or hypostasis).

This basic definition of the Trinity is based on dozens of definitions given by trinitarian authorities, Protestant and Catholic. It is complete in the sense that any further discussion on the Trinity will be fundamentally an elaboration on these basic points, e.g., how the three persons relate to one another; or their different roles in salvation history (the economic Trinity); or how Christ’s divine nature relates to his human nature within the one person (debate over the last question resulted in years of violence *within* trinitarianism).

Anyone who reads the formal or technical literature on the Trinity would know that it tends to use Greek and Latin terms (or their equivalent English terms), and is imbued with neo-Platonic and other philosophical concepts. These generate more confusion than illumination on how the three persons can be one God.

## ***Homoousios* has no biblical support, and is vehemently rejected by Martin Luther**

The word *homoousios* (“of one substance”) is historically the key term in trinitarianism because it is this term or its concept that, on account of the word “one,” gives trinitarianism some semblance of monotheism. The early trinitarian opinion that *homoousios* is “the foundation of orthodoxy” (Victorinus) is shared by modern trinitarians, yet the word *homoousios* is found nowhere in the Bible. That this word has no biblical basis is noted by a lexical authority, *New International Dictionary of NT Theology* (NIDNTT, ed. Colin Brown, article *God > The Trinity > NT*).

The following is an excerpt from this article which cites Karl Barth who, despite his lifelong advocacy of trinitarianism, admits that the doctrine of the Trinity is not found in the Bible. The excerpt has two levels of quotation. For your convenience, I put Barth’s words in boldface to separate them from the surrounding words of NIDNTT:

The NT does not contain the developed doctrine of the Trinity. [Barth says:] **“The Bible lacks the express declaration that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of equal essence and therefore in an equal sense God himself. And the other express declaration is also lacking, that God is God thus and only thus, i.e., as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These two express declarations, which go beyond the witness of the Bible, are the twofold content of the Church doctrine of the Trinity”** (Karl Barth, *Church*

*Dogmatics*, I, 1, 437). It also lacks such terms as trinity ... and homoousios which featured in the Creed of Nicea (325).

In this striking admission, Barth concedes that the two main tenets of trinitarianism (the concept of one essence and the concept of three persons in one God) are absent in the Bible.

Since *homoousios* is not a biblical term as noted by NIDNTT and Barth, it comes as no surprise that strong objections to this term have come from the ranks of trinitarians. Sure enough, Martin Luther, a trinitarian, vehemently rejects *homoousios* for its being an unbiblical term, going so far as to “hate” it. *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (p.151) quotes Luther as saying, “Our adversaries ... are fanatics about words because they want us to demonstrate the truth of the trinitarian article ... by asking us to assent to the term *homoousios*”. *The Cambridge Companion* goes on to say that “trinitarian terms such as *homoousios* are for Luther a ‘stammering’ and ‘babbling’”.

Luther rejects *homoousios* even more vehemently in a statement quoted in Adolf Harnack’s seven-volume *History of Dogma*:

[Luther] declared such a term as *homoousios* to be unallowable in the strict sense, because it represents a bad state of things when such words are invented in the Christian system of faith: “... but if my soul hates the word *homoousios* and I prefer not to use it, I shall not be a heretic; for who will compel me to use it ... Although the Arians had wrong views with regard to the faith, they were nevertheless very right in this ...



that they required that no profane and novel word should be allowed to be introduced into the rules of faith.” (*History of Dogma*, vol.7, ch.4, p.225)

Luther’s objection to *homoousios* for its unbiblical origins was so vehement that he was willing to concede that the heretical Arians—of all people!—were “very right” in rejecting this “profane” word. Luther was aware that his public criticism of *homoousios* could expose him to the charge of heresy because *homoousios* is the cornerstone of trinitarianism’s dubious claim to monotheism, and that without this term, trinitarianism would immediately descend into explicit tritheism, the doctrine of three Gods.

## **A Catholic scholar’s admissions about the Trinity**

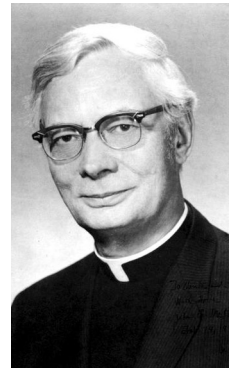
Luther comes from the ranks of Protestants but is there similar dissent from the ranks of Catholics? Hans Küng, one of the greatest Catholic theologians of the 20th century, wrote a section titled, “No doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament,” in his classic work, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, in which he firmly rejects trinitarianism. Here are some statements from his book starting from page 95:

... while [in the New Testament] there is belief in God the Father, in Jesus the Son, and in God’s Holy Spirit, there is no doctrine of one God in three persons (modes of being), no doctrine of a ‘triune God’, a ‘Trinity’.

... according to the New Testament, the principle of unity is clearly not the one divine ‘nature’ (*physis*) that is common to several entities, as people were to think after the neo-Nicene theology of the fourth century. For the New Testament, as for the Hebrew Bible, the principle of unity is clearly the one God (*ho theos*: the God = the Father), from whom are all things and to whom are all things.

... where does this doctrine of the Trinity really come from? The answer is that it was a product of the great paradigm shift from the early Christian apocalyptic paradigm to the early church Hellenistic paradigm.

We give one more example from the ranks of Roman Catholics. An esteemed Bible dictionary—one of the most popular for two decades and in its time the most widely used one-volume Bible dictionary ever—was the scholarly *Dictionary of the Bible* written by Father John L. McKenzie, which, though written by a Catholic, was also used by Protestants for its intellectual depth and lucid writing.



In the dictionary article “Trinity,” McKenzie, himself a trinitarian, makes some observations that are unfavorable to trinitarianism, including that: (i) The doctrine of the Trinity was reached only in the 4th and 5th centuries, and does not represent biblical belief. (ii) The trinitarian terms used for describing God are Greek philosophical terms rather than biblical terms. (iii) Unbiblical terms such as “essence” and “substance”

were “erroneously” applied to God by early theologians. (iv) The personal reality of the Holy Spirit is uncertain and was a later development in trinitarianism. (v) The Trinity is a mystery that defies understanding. (vi) The Trinity is not mentioned or foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

We must keep in mind that Father McKenzie is a trinitarian. Here are the relevant excerpts from his article:

TRINITY. The trinity of God is defined by the Church as the belief that in God are three persons who subsist in one nature. The belief as so defined was reached only in the 4th and 5th centuries AD and hence is not explicitly and formally a biblical belief. The trinity of persons within the unity of nature is defined in terms of “person” and “nature” which are Greek philosophical terms; actually the terms do not appear in the Bible. The trinitarian definitions arose as the result of long controversies in which these terms and others such as “essence” and “substance” were erroneously applied to God by some theologians.

.....

The personal reality of the Spirit emerged more slowly than the personal reality of Father and Son, which are personal terms ... What is less clear about the Spirit is His personal reality; often He is mentioned in language in which His personal reality is not explicit.

.....

... in Catholic belief the Trinity of persons within the unity of nature is a mystery which ultimately escapes understanding; and in no respect is it more mysterious than in the relations of the persons to each other.

.....

The OT does not contain suggestions or foreshadowing of the Trinity of persons. What it does contain are the words which the NT employs to express the Trinity of persons such as Father, Son, Word, Spirit, etc.

## **Dissent from the ranks of evangelicals**

I now give an example from the ranks of evangelicals. Marshall Davis is a trinitarian and an evangelical, though no longer the conservative evangelical that he used to be. He served as a Baptist pastor for 40 years, and has a doctorate from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Among his many books is *What Your Pastor Won't Tell You: But I Can Because I'm Retired*. The title may sound lighthearted or even frivolous, but in fact the book is a somber and often painful discussion of the things that many evangelical pastors know in their hearts to be true, but won't tell others for fear of being ostracized or losing their jobs.

One of the vexing issues that Marshall Davies addresses is the Trinity, which he discusses in chapter 5 under the heading, "No One Understands the Trinity". Davis, himself a trinitarian, begins with these words:

For Christians the concept of one God in three persons is very important, yet it is also very confusing. When you think about it, the Trinity does not make sense. No one understands it, not even your pastor.

The doctrine of the Trinity came into existence as a consequence of believing that Christ was divine. Christians believed that Jesus was divine in the same way that God the Father is divine. Yet Christians were loath to worship two Gods. It smacked of polytheism, not to mention the heresy of Marcionism. Add the Holy Spirit into the mix, and Christianity seems to worship three gods—tritheism.

Davis then explains the trinitarian dilemma:

Yet there could only be one God according to the Hebrew Scriptures. “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.” (Deuteronomy 6:4) So they were forced into the untenable position of saying that God was both three and one, even though that statement was logically self-contradictory. The Father, Christ and the Spirit were all God, and they were also one God.

Christians had painted themselves into a theological corner. After repeated attempts by theologians to resolve the problem (all declared heresy), they simply gave up and declared that the Trinity was true, even though it didn’t make sense. It is a mystery! A paradox! Actually it was just a problem they could not solve. Instead of abandoning the doctrine as untenable, they declared it to be true by fiat.

Davis says that the Trinity has no biblical basis:

Another thing your pastor will not tell you is that the Trinity is not in the Bible. The terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are found in the Bible. There are even a few places where the three words (or something similar) are found together. The most famous example is the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, where Jesus commands his apostles to baptize all nations “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” But nowhere is there any attempt in the Bible to define these names as three equally divine persons of one unified Godhead.

The doctrine of the Trinity, as we know it today in all its glorious confusion, originated in the third century by Tertullian. He was the first theologian to use the term “Trinity.” He was also the first to use the words “person” and “substance” to explain the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It has been all downhill ever since. Christianity would have been better off if [Tertullian] had just left it as a description of Christian experience instead of trying to theologize it.

## **The Gnostic use of *homoousios***

Gnosticism is widely regarded as the greatest threat to the life of the church in its first two centuries. We won't explain what Gnosticism is since it is a standard topic in church histories, except to say that it was a cancerous movement that grew deep roots in the church and nearly killed it. Eminent church historian Justo L. González says, “Of all these differing interpretations

of Christianity, none was as dangerous, nor as close to victory, as was gnosticism.”<sup>19</sup>

It will come as a shock to trinitarians that the Gnostics were the first to use the word *homoousios*. The first person known to have used it was the Gnostic theologian Basilides (2nd century A.D.) who used *homoousios* to explain his concept of a “threefold sonship consubstantial with the god who is not”.<sup>20</sup>

When Gnosticism was at its peak, *homoousios* had a reputation in the church for being a Gnostic term. Well before the Council of Nicaea in 325, many church fathers were already aware of the Gnostic use of *homoousios*. R.P.C. Hanson’s authoritative work, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, says on p.191: “Hippolytus quotes Gnostics as using the word *homoousios* ... Clement of Alexandria also uses the word in quotations of Gnostic authors, as does Irenaeus ... Origen similarly uses the word only when he is quoting Gnostic heretics.” The academic authority of Hanson’s work is well known to every church historian and patristics scholar in the English-speaking world.

Although Gnosticism was in relative decline by the third or fourth century, it left some of its roots in the church as seen in the adoption of *homoousios* at the Council of Nicaea in 325. A central concept in Gnosticism is the emanation of divine beings, the lesser from the greater. So it comes as no surprise that at Nicaea it was decreed on pain of *anathema* that the second

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<sup>19</sup> *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day*, vol.1, p.58.

<sup>20</sup> Hippolytus in *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 7:22.

person emanates from the first, much as light emanates from a source of light. Nicæan formulations of Jesus as “God of God, Light of Light” and other lofty descriptions are nothing more than direct echoes of Greek philosophy and religion.

## **Immense logical difficulties: Is trinitarianism tritheistic?**

**T** trinitarianism is the doctrine of one God in three persons whereas tritheism is the doctrine of three distinct Gods. The latter is a special case of polytheism, the belief in many Gods (e.g., Hinduism).

Trinitarians vigorously deny that trinitarianism is tritheism, yet the two are inherently similar, as we will see. To put the matter plainly, trinitarianism is tritheism that claims to be monotheistic.

In trying to make sense of trinitarianism, the immediate problem that we encounter is its use of doublespeak: Trinitarianism assigns two different meanings to the word “God,” and then switches back and forth between them, usually to evade logical dilemmas.

There is the first sense of “God” in which God is not God except as Father, Son, and Spirit—*the three together*. This formulation was designed as a means of avoiding explicit tritheism, and is one of the two main tenets of trinitarianism according to Karl Barth (whom we quoted a few pages back).



In trinitarian doublespeak, there also is a second and contradictory sense of “God” in which each person of the Trinity is individually and fully God: “So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God” (Athanasian Creed). Trinitarians say further that each is “fully God” (White, Grudem, Bowman) or “fully and completely God” (ESV Study Bible, p.2513).

The historically important Fourth Lateran Council (1215, Rome) is even clearer: “each is God, whole and entire”. In other words, the Father is God whole and entire; the Son is God whole and entire; and the Spirit is God whole and entire. Yet the three together are God whole and entire.

**I**n trinitarianism, each person of the triune Godhead, whether the Father or the Son or the Spirit, is fully God, coeternally God, and coequally God, such that trinitarians can and do speak of “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit” in language that ascribes whole deity to each. Whole deity of each is preserved even if we reverse the word order within each of the three clauses: “the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God” (Athanasian Creed).

Trinitarianism says that each person—whether the Father or the Son or the Spirit—is “fully” God (“each is God, whole and entire,” Fourth Lateran Council). Moreover, trinitarianism assigns sufficient distinction between the persons such that the Father is not to be confused with the Son, nor the Son with the Spirit, nor the Father with the Spirit. The Athanasian Creed says, “For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son,

and another of the Holy Spirit”. To state the obvious, the distinction of persons is already seen in the basic fact that trinitarians speak of “three persons” in one God.

Since the three are each “fully” God yet are three distinct persons, it would be semantically correct to say that they are three Gods (tritheism). The force and clarity and obviousness of this point is keenly noted, yet its validity is rejected, by the Athanasian Creed: “And yet they are not three Gods, but one God”.

This violation of semantic sense for which the Athanasian Creed offers no explanation apart from denial by fiat, must be rejected unless it is allowed by mitigating factors such as explicit biblical support. But does the Bible really teach the three-in-one trinitarian formulation? Many trinitarians (Barth, Küng, Davies) admit that it is absent in the Bible. One such trinitarian is Dr. Charles C. Ryrie, author of the *Ryrie Study Bible* and professor of systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, who makes a shocking admission about trinitarianism:

But many doctrines are accepted by evangelicals as being clearly taught in the Scripture for which there are no proof texts. The doctrine of the Trinity furnishes the best example of this. It is fair to say that the Bible does not clearly teach the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, there is not even one proof text, if by proof text we mean a verse or passage that ‘clearly’ states that there is one God who exists in three persons ... The above illustrations prove the fallacy of concluding that if something is not proof texted in the Bible we cannot clearly teach the results ... If that were so, I could never teach the doctrine of

the Trinity or the deity of Christ or the deity of the Holy Spirit. (*Basic Theology*, pp. 89-90)

Dr. Ryrie, without a trace of hesitation or subtlety, elevates trinitarian doctrine above the witness and authority of Scripture.

Another trinitarian who says that the Trinity is found nowhere in the Bible is Millard Erickson, a prominent specialist on trinitarian doctrine and the author of *Christian Theology*:

[The Trinity] is not clearly or explicitly taught anywhere in Scripture, yet it is widely regarded as a central doctrine, indispensable to the Christian faith. In this regard, it goes contrary to what is virtually an axiom of biblical doctrine, namely, that there is a direct correlation between the scriptural clarity of a doctrine and its cruciality to the faith and life of the church. (*God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity*, p.11)

The classic way of explaining away the tritheistic underpinnings of trinitarianism—by positing that the three persons share one essence (*homoousios*)—is unconvincing. It's not only because the word *homoousios* is absent in the Bible, but also because a shared essence or nature *characterizes tritheism as much as it does trinitarianism!* Whether we are speaking of a unity of three Gods (tritheism) or a unity of three persons in one God (trinitarianism), the three share the one substance or essence of deity. Applying the concept of “one essence” to three persons who are each “fully” God does not make them “one God”; it only makes them a unity of three full Gods. Hence the

term *homoousios* (of one substance)—whose first known use was by the Gnostic theologian Basilides, and which was adopted at Nicaea over the objections of some bishops from both camps—offers no help to trinitarianism but in fact draws unwelcome attention to trinitarianism’s affinity with tritheism!

The tritheistic underpinnings of trinitarianism come out in many books such as James R. White’s *The Forgotten Trinity*, which is endorsed by J.I. Packer, Gleason Archer, Norman Geisler, and John MacArthur, indicating its acceptance among evangelicals.

White gives what he calls a “short, succinct, accurate” definition of the Trinity: “Within the one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (p.26) Here White makes a distinction between “person” and “Being” such that God is three persons yet one Being. To explain what this means, White says:

When speaking of the Trinity, we need to realize that we are talking about one *what* and three *who*’s. The one *what* is the Being or essence of God; the three *who*’s are the Father, Son, and Spirit.

This shocking statement tells us that trinitarianism’s claim to monotheism rests on the concept of “one Being” or “one essence” rather than “one person”. Here we see again the trinitarian depersonalization of God—He is no longer a person. In trying to give trinitarianism some semblance of monotheism, White is forced to make God a *what*, not a *who*—a blasphemous

description of God. The God of trinitarianism is technically an “it” rather than a “He”.

If you take this to mean that God in trinitarianism is not a person, you are correct. Tertullian says: “God is the name for the substance” (see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p.114). We have already quoted C.S. Lewis, a trinitarian, as saying: “Christian theology does not believe God to be a person.” (*Christian Reflections*, p.79).

## Trinitarian semantics

In the strange logic of trinitarianism, the mere use of “one” as in “one essence” is supposedly sufficient to qualify trinitarianism to be monotheism. This is what we might call “monotheism by vocabulary”: You declare that a doctrine is monotheistic simply by appropriating a word such as “one” that sounds monotheistic and has a monotheistic ring to it.

An enduring difficulty for trinitarians is that in both tritheism and trinitarianism, there are three who are “fully” God, i.e., there are three persons each of whom is “God whole and entire”. This formulation, as it stands, is tritheistic rather than monotheistic, so what do trinitarians do to make it sound monotheistic? They simply say that the three share “one” essence!

In the strange logic of trinitarianism, the tritheistic concept of “three persons who are each fully God” (note the key word “fully”) does not disqualify trinitarianism from being monotheism. This is trying to have it both ways, to have monotheism

and tritheism, to have God as one and God as three, to have one God and three who are each fully God. In the final analysis, the convoluted logic of trinitarianism is the inevitable result of an attempt to prove, at times almost mathematically, that three equals one or that  $1/3$  equals one.

James White says: “The Father is not  $1/3$  of God, the Son  $1/3$  of God, the Spirit  $1/3$  of God. Each is fully God, coequal with the others, and that eternally.” This statement is problematic because if God is three persons, then anyone who is “fully God”—i.e., God whole and entire—would have to be all three persons at the same time or else he would be incomplete God (unless we change the meaning of “God” using doublespeak).

The problem runs even deeper, for if Jesus is not all three persons at the same time, he would not be God at all, for God must always exist as three or else we would be breaking the “monotheism” of trinitarianism such that it descends into explicit tritheism. We must bear in mind that one of the two main tenets of trinitarianism is that God is not even God unless He is all three at the same time (Barth).

White rejects the idea that Jesus is one third of God, yet it cannot be denied that Jesus is one third of the Trinity in the sense of being one of the three persons of the Trinity which trinitarians equate with God.

White’s statement that the three are each “fully God” is but a naked assertion of pure and classic tritheism. But trinitarians deny that their doctrine is tritheistic, and they do this by insisting that God is not God through the Father alone, or the Son alone, or the Spirit alone, but by all three together. This is

one of the two foundational tenets of trinitarianism (Barth) and is stated in the following words of Millard Erickson, a prominent spokesman for trinitarianism:

God could not exist simply as Father, or as Son, or as Holy Spirit. Nor could he exist as Father and Son, or as Father and Spirit, or as Son and Spirit, without the third of these persons in that given case. Further, none of these could exist without being part of the Trinity... None has the power of life within itself alone. Each can only exist as part of the Triune God. (*God in Three Persons*, p.264)

Erickson runs into vast difficulties in his attempt to defend the illogical and the incoherent. His statement that “none has the power of life within itself alone” is a most shocking way of describing someone who is supposedly God. In the case of the Father, Erickson’s statement even contradicts John 5:26 in which Jesus says, “the Father has life in himself”.

Equally shocking is Erickson’s statement, “none of these could exist without being part of the Trinity”. Erickson is not just saying that God is ontologically triune, but that each Person has no power of existence outside the framework of the Trinity! Erickson’s statement was probably designed with the purpose of avoiding explicit tritheism.

Erickson’s statement—that “none of these could exist without being part of the Trinity”—effectively destroys what it means to be God. For if Jesus (or the Father or the Spirit) is fully God, his existence would not depend on anyone or anything, for God “is”. The eternal God is the “I am who I am” or “I will

be what I will be”. Nothing can limit or determine or circumscribe God’s existence. Yet in trinitarianism, the ultimate ontological reality is not God the Father despite His being fully God and despite His being the One of whom the Son is begotten and from whom the Spirit proceeds. To the contrary, the ultimate ontological reality in trinitarianism is an eternal triune framework that governs the existence of three persons, none of whom can exist outside it (“each can only exist as part of the Triune God,” Erickson). In other words, this triune framework is what constitutes the real God. That is why trinitarians say that God is not a “person” but a “what”.

Erickson’s statement that “God could not exist simply as Father, or as Son, or as Holy Spirit” contradicts the trinitarian tenet that the Father is fully God, the Son is fully God, the Spirit is fully God.

In fact the unbiblical teaching of Sabellianism or modalism (which says that in salvation history, the one God is manifested in three modes, Father, Son, and Spirit) is infinitely more logical than trinitarianism. That is because modalism is free of self-contradiction, as is tritheism. If trinitarianism is to be logical and self-consistent, it can only be so as modalism or outright tritheism, both of which are as unbiblical as trinitarianism.

Tritheism, being a special case of polytheism, would be expected to borrow from the language of polytheism. We would expect this to be equally true of trinitarianism. Sure enough, the famously polytheistic religion of Hinduism would occasionally



speak of the “divine essence” or “divine substance”<sup>21</sup>—a fact that further exposes trinitarianism’s affinity with polytheism.

The trinitarian term “divine substance” is also used in polytheistic Greek mythology<sup>22</sup> and Gnosticism,<sup>23</sup> yet is absent from the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures!

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<sup>21</sup> Klaus Klostemaier, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, p.124; Klostemaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, p.487; Steven Rosen, *Essential Hinduism*, p.193; Sri Swami Sivananda, *All About Hinduism*, p.134.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Caldwell, *The Origin of the Gods*, Oxford, p.137.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, p.39; and Sean Martin, *The Gnostics*, p.38.





## Trinitarian Mystery versus Biblical Mystery

**T**he stark reality is that trinitarians like Millard Erickson are trying to do the impossible task of explaining trinitarianism, a doctrine that has never been explained coherently for two millennia. That is why trinitarianism is said to be a “mystery beyond the comprehension of man” (James White, *The Forgotten Trinity*, p.173).

Roger Olsen and Christopher Hall say: “According to the church father Augustine, anyone who denies the Trinity is in danger of losing her salvation, but anyone who tries to understand the Trinity is in danger of losing her mind.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Roger E. Olsen and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity*, Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 2002, p.1. In the complete works of Augustine on my iPad, “mystery” is mentioned several times of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Trinitarianism remains a mystery in the 21st century because trinitarians still cannot explain coherently how three persons, each of whom is “God whole and entire,” is one God together. This accounts for the retreat into “mystery” even by a brilliant mind as Augustine’s.

For sixteen centuries the church has been using the word *mystery* to account for the incomprehensibility of the trinitarian doctrine, notably in regard to insolvable issues such as how one God can exist in three persons, or how Christ’s divine nature relates to his human nature. These ideas defy logic and understanding, so the solution is to consign them to the realm of mystery, the unknowable, the unfathomable.

Some have criticized the trinitarian appeal to mystery. A Google search will show that some regard the use of mystery as being a “cop-out” for evading difficult questions under the cover of mystery. I think “cop-out” is too harsh a word because it implies an unthinking and dismissive attitude. In reality, the appeal to mystery is often accompanied by deep theological reflection. As a trinitarian for two decades, I sympathize with the trinitarian effort to understand “the deep and hidden things” of God (cf. Daniel 2:22), though I myself have never used *mystery* to explain trinitarian incomprehensibility.

Trinitarians consign the Trinity to the realm of mystery, to the sphere of the unknowable and the unfathomable. But this meaning of “mystery” is unbiblical. In the Bible, a mystery is not something illogical or beyond human comprehension but something that is unexplained simply because we lack some key information or revelation. This meaning is often true in secular

usage, e.g., the mystery of how the pyramids were built, or a mystery being investigated by Sherlock Holmes, but once he solves it, it is no longer incomprehensible but is “Aha!” understandable.

We must bear in mind that the “mystery of the kingdom” which is hidden in Jesus’ parables can be unlocked simply by explaining their meaning (Mk.4:11); then it becomes understandable even to fishermen.

Likewise, Paul says that we understand a mystery *as clear as light* when God reveals it to us: “to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God” (Eph.3:9). Paul aspires to “declare the mystery of Christ” not incomprehensibly but “that I may make it clear” (Col.4:3-4), a statement that simply cannot be true of the trinitarian mystery of Christ.

In trinitarianism, a mystery remains a mystery even after an explanation has been given for it! But not so in the Bible. The following Bible dictionary gets it right when it says that a mystery is not something “for which no answer can be found” but something that “once revealed is known and understood, a secret no longer”:

But whereas “mystery” may mean, and in contemporary usage often does mean, a secret for which no answer can be found, this is not the connotation of the term *mystērion* in classical and biblical Gk. In the NT *mystērion* signifies a secret which is being, or even has been, revealed, which is also divine in scope, and needs to be made known by God to men through his Spirit. In this way the term comes very close to the NT

word *apokalypsis*, “revelation”. *Mystērion* is a temporary secret, which once revealed is known and understood, a secret no longer. (*New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., “Mystery”)

## **Trinitarian mystery versus mystery in Daniel**

What is true of mystery in the New Testament—that it is understood once it has been explained—is also true in the Old Testament.

In Daniel chapter 2, King Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by a series of dreams collectively called “the dream,” so he summoned his priests, mediums and sorcerers to tell him the dream. They could not tell him the dream, so they said, “May the King tell the dream to his servants, then we will give the interpretation” (v.7).

Nebuchadnezzar saw through their pretense, and decreed for them either death or reward, depending on whether they can tell him the dream and its interpretation. They replied that no one can make the dream known “except the gods whose dwelling is not with mortals” (v.11). The King fell into a rage and issued a decree to kill all the wise men in his kingdom, including Daniel and his friends.

Daniel and his companions prayed to God for help. Their prayer was answered when “the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision at night” (v.19). Daniel then praised God, saying that “He reveals the deep and hidden things” (v.22) and that “You have let us know the king’s mystery” (v.23).

Nebuchadnezzar then summoned Daniel and asked him, “Are you able to tell me the dream I had and its interpretation?” (v.26). Daniel said he is unable, “but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has let King Nebuchadnezzar know what will happen in the last days” (v.28). Daniel explained that God is “the revealer of mysteries” (v.29) and that “this mystery has been revealed to me” (v.30).

Daniel then described a great statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay—five elements to be shattered by a stone that will become a great mountain and fill the earth. “This was the dream; now we will tell the king its interpretation” (v.36).

Daniel then outlined the coming world kingdoms that will be destroyed by an everlasting kingdom. He ended his interpretation with these words: “The great God has told the king what will happen in the future. The dream is true, and its interpretation certain” (v.45).

The king fell to the ground, paid homage to Daniel, and confessed, “Your God is indeed God of gods, Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, since you were able to reveal this mystery” (v.47).

Hence in the book of Daniel, a mystery is understandable, unlike the trinitarian mystery. Note the preponderance of the words “reveal” and “tell” and “know” and “understand” in Daniel 2, as opposed to “unknown” and “beyond human comprehension” in trinitarianism.

To this day trinitarians still cannot coherently explain the Trinity despite sixteen centuries of theological discourse. And it will never be explained in the years to come, for the trinitarian

mystery is innately incomprehensible. The debate over the nature of the Trinity continues unresolved to this day, with modern theologians disagreeing with one another (cf. Michael L. Chiavone's work listed in the bibliography).

Biblical mystery is incompatible with trinitarian mystery. Clarity and obscurity are polar opposites.





## A Closing Thought

The term “coequality” which is so fundamental to trinitarian doctrine is a denial of God’s greatest attribute: *sole and unshared supremacy*.

Sole and unrivalled supremacy is His great and singular attribute because this is what defines someone as God. God, by definition, has no peer or equal or coequal.

“Yours is the kingdom, O Yahweh, and you are exalted as head above all” (1 Chronicles 29:11).

“For Yahweh is a great God, and a great King above all gods” (Psalm 95:3).

May Yahweh our loving God and Father—and His Son Jesus Christ—be exalted in our hearts and in our lives for all eternity, Amen.



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