

# Presenting the Deity of Christ from the Bible

*by Rick Brown*

**T**he ontological nature of Jesus Christ is not a prominent topic of the Bible, but neither is the Bible quiet on the issue. It provides many subtle indications that Jesus is in some sense God. Theological reflection on this issue led in the fourth century to the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, with further elaborations in the fifth century. But the everyday Christian has rarely been on track with this doctrine, usually veering off towards modalism or tritheism, and sixth century Arabs were apparently confused about it as well. The Qur'an asserts that Jesus is neither the offspring of God nor one of a threesome of gods (Allah, Jesus, Mary) (5: 17, 72-73). Several other Qur'anic passages have Jesus denying that he is a god besides Allah. Arian Christians actually taught that Jesus was a separate god who had a beginning in time, and many of them had been banished to Arabia as heretics. Today, Jehovah Witnesses teach that Jesus is a god besides God and identify him with Michael, the ruler of angels. Mormons teach that Jesus is the physical offspring of a sexual union between the Father and Mary, and that Christ and his Father are distinct gods among many gods. As for Muslims, they are taught that all Christians—not just Mormons—claim that Jesus is the physical offspring of Allah and Mary and himself a separate god.

As it happens, some Muslims encounter orthodox Christian teaching and realize that Christians believe that Jesus is God, or more correctly, the Word of God incarnate, the second person of the Trinity, and not a distinct god. Unfortunately, the Qur'an also condemns anyone who says that "Allah is Jesus" (23:91). Now this odd statement<sup>1</sup> is not one that Christians would normally say, since it implies that Jesus is the totality of God rather than part of God, but when Muslims hear Christians say that Jesus is God, this is what they think is meant. So they ask, "If God was incarnate as Jesus, then who was running the universe and listening to prayers while he was on earth, and to whom was Jesus praying? Whom was he obeying?" They need to understand that God the Father still filled the universe and still ran things, and that he revealed his moral nature to mankind in human form by causing his Word to be incarnate as Jesus. The Qur'an agrees that God cast his Word, whose name is Jesus, into the virgin Mary to be born as a baby boy, and Muslims

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call him 'Jesus the Word of God', even though they don't know what it means.<sup>2</sup> So if a Muslim is really interested to know what the Bible says about the nature of Christ, it is most helpful simply to present Jesus as he is presented in the Bible, and show what it means for Jesus to be the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible is subtle on this matter. As Bauckham points out in his book *God Crucified*, the Bible presents Jesus as God not so much through statements about his nature and being but by showing Jesus' participation in the identity of God. This in turn is seen in Jesus' exercise of functions reserved for God. So the key in presenting the deity of Jesus is not to assert that Jesus is God, but to present the Biblical picture of Jesus, showing what he did and said, how God confirmed his message through the miracles, what the Apostles said, and how God confirmed their message. All the time, rather than trying to persuade inquirers, we should be asking them what they think about Jesus. Are these the words and actions of a mere human being? If not, then who is he? Let them think about this and discover for themselves who Jesus is. We can also encourage them to ask God to confirm the matter to them personally.

Jesus took the same approach most of the time. The Gospels show him making few explicit declarations about himself, but each Gospel includes over a hundred questions about Jesus that are answered by his actions rather than by statements: "Who then is this, that he commands even wind and water, and they obey him?" "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" "How [could] a man who is a sinner do such signs?" A fair number of these questions are presented by Jesus himself: "Where is your faith?" "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." "Who do you say that I am?" "Do you not yet perceive or understand?" The obvious intent is to move people to reflection and prayer, so that God can open their understanding. "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17).

But aside from personal revelation, can we really demonstrate from the Bible that Jesus is in some sense God himself?

We need to show that he is not human, not an angel, not a god, not an offspring of God, but rather God himself in some sense. As we look into this matter, it will be convenient to distinguish in the paper between the words 'divinity' and 'deity'.

The word 'divinity' (from Latin *divus* 'lesser god') will be used for the nature of a supernatural being who dwells in heaven. The word 'deity' (from Latin *deus*), as in Col. 2:9, will be used for the nature of a being who is the supreme and uniquely self-existent God. (The Authorized King James Version uses 'Godhead', meaning "Godhood.") The reason for this is that many of the passages that Christians cite to prove the deity of Christ only demonstrate his divinity; they would not easily convince a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness that the Bible teaches that Jesus is consubstantial with God Almighty.

But we will still include these passages because they support our claim, even if they don't prove it, and they can imply consubstantiality to Jews and Muslims because they are strongly monotheistic. Note that there are also passages where angels and the leaders of God's people are called 'sons of gods' and 'gods', so we need to take care with any verse where that could be the intended meaning.

### *Evidence from the Old Testament*

Several Old Testament passages imply that the Messiah is more than a human. Micah mentions the coming savior's birth in Bethlehem but adds that his actual "origin is from of old, from ancient days" (5:2). So what kind of person is this whom Micah describes in language ordinarily used for the eternal God (Ps 74:12; 90:2; 93:2; Isa 43:13; 63:16)? We find additional clues in Proverbs, where God's Wisdom (also called his Word) is described in similar language:

The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, Before His works of old. From everlasting I was established, From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth...When He established the heavens, I was there...When He marked out the foundations of the earth; Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His

delight, Rejoicing always before Him, Rejoicing in the world, His earth, And having my delight in the sons of men. (8:22–30 NASB)

Thus one of God's personal attributes, his wisdom, is presented as having a distinct personhood and being a joyful participant in creation. This leads us to Genesis 1:26–27, where God says "Let us make man in our image... So God created man in his own image." In the same passage we find both 'our image' and 'his image', with God as the antecedent of the pronouns. Thus God's Wisdom is both one with God and distinct from God, just as God's Spirit is both one with him and distinct from him, having separate mention in the creation story (Gen. 1:2). The Psalmist seems to reflect these aspects of God when he says, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (33:6).

Could the Old Testament really foretell that the Messiah would be part of God himself? One can see several hints of this. Zechariah, for example, alternates between saying that a human will come to Jerusalem as the savior King (9:9) and that Yahweh God will come to Jerusalem as the savior King (14:9 cf. Matt. 25:31). In an important messianic prophecy, Isaiah seems to describe the Messiah variously as God's glory, God's word, God's arm, and God himself:

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD... And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh will see it together... the word of our God will stand for ever... lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Isa. 40:3–11; cf. Matt. 3:3; Luke 3:4–6; Mark 13:31; John 10:11)

Isaiah uttered another important messianic prophecy in 52:7 to 53:12. Here he describes the savior as God's servant (52:13; 53:11), his righteous one, but also as his arm (52:10; 53:1; cf. Ps. 98:1–2; John 12:38; Rom. 3:25). We

understand that an arm does not act on its own but is a part of a person, the part that interacts physically with the world. The interaction Isaiah describes in this passage is very physical, nothing less than physical suffering to compensate for the sins of the world. The implication is that God's righteous arm is of such surpassing worth that his momentary suffering is of more consequence than all the sin and evil suffered by the world since its creation. To have such value it is impossible for the Messiah to be a mere man or to be less than part of God himself. In fact, Isaiah says that when God looked for a savior, "He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene; then his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him" (Isa. 59:16). And there are many other such passages which imply that Yahweh God himself will be the lord and savior who comes to Jerusalem: Eze. 34:11-17; 24 (cf. Luke 19:10; John 10:14-16; Matt. 25:32), Isa. 24:21-23; Isa. 60:19; Micah 3:1; 4:5-7.

### *Evidence from Jesus' Own Words*

While conservative scholars agree that Jesus did not openly proclaim himself to be God, they point out that he ascribed to himself divine attributes. Among these are the following, which are listed in five blocks:

#### *A. Jesus declared that he (the Son of Man) has*

- authority to forgive sins (Matt 9:6; Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24);
- the power to raise the dead (John 5:21,28; cf. Php 3:21);
- the power even to raise Himself from the dead (John 2:19; 10:18);
- the authority to grant eternal life to others (John 17:2; Matt 25:34, 46);
- the authority to declare which people are saved and which are rejected (Luke 12:8-9; Matt 10:32-33);
- a kingdom not of this world (John 18:36-37);
- authority higher than the Law and the Sabbath (Matt 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5).

The Qur'an does not attribute to Jesus a kingdom, in fact, it denies that God

has a son or partner in his reign. Few Muslims are aware of that verse, and it is contradicted by their expectation that Jesus will come again in power to rule the earth, but all are of the belief that Jesus has no essential role in the current state of affairs. When people learn that Jesus is holding sway over the earth from his throne in heaven, it makes them take him more seriously in the present!

Muslims recognize that only God can forgive sins and grant eternal life in paradise. If God has given this authority to Jesus, it makes Jesus exceedingly important, but it does not make him God in their mind.

For Jesus to have authority over the law is even more remarkable. For Muslims and Jews, even God does not change the law; it is eternal. The Sabbath law was special. As Sproul points out, "The Sabbath was not merely a piece of Sinaitic legislation, but a creation ordinance given by the Lord of Creation" (1999:40). So Jesus' claim to be Lord of the Sabbath not only makes him a higher authority than the Law of Moses, it makes him an authority over the created earth. (But this is not always a convincing verse on which to base a case, especially with those for whom the Sabbath is not a familiar concept.)

It may be noted that many or most of the attributes that Jesus attributed to the Son of Man were ones which were usually reserved for God alone. For example,

#### *B. Jesus declared that in the last day(s), he (the Son of Man) will*

- come in *his* glory (Matt 25:31), the glory of his Father (Matt 16:27; Mark 8:38);
- send *his* angels (Matt 13:41; 16:27; 24:31; Mark 13:26) into *his* kingdom (Matt 13:41);
- raise *his* people from the dead (John 6:40, 44);
- sit on *his* glorious throne (Matt 19:28; 25:31); and
- judge everyone in all the nations (Matt 16:27; 25:31ff).

Again, the Muslim is astounded to learn that Jesus sends angels, and even more astounded to hear that Jesus

will be the judge on the last day. This fact was one of the basic tenets of the Gospel as preached by the Apostles in Acts, and it was supposed to make people realize how important it was not to reject Jesus. Jesus himself said that people would be judged according to their relationship with him (Matt 7:3), which would be seen in the way they had treated his followers (Matt 25:31-46). As it is, some Muslims spend inordinate time praising their prophet, in hopes that he will be pleased and will mediate for them on the last day. But better still to try to please the judge himself, Jesus! And this one can do by affirming that Jesus is indeed the Judge, Savior, and Lord of all, who can indeed forgive our sins and grant us eternal life (because he died for the sins of all who believe in him) and by trusting in him in that capacity.

#### *C. Jesus declared that the Father had given him*

- every word he said (John 8:28, 38, 47; 12:49-50; 14:10; 17:8);
- every deed he did (John 5:19, 36; 14:10);
- all things (Matt 11:27; John 13:3; 16:15; Luke 10:22; cf. Eph 4:10);
- all authority and power (Matt 28:18; cf. John 3:35; 17:2; Eph 1:10);
- all judgment (John 5:22; Matt 25:31-46; cf. Ac 10:42);
- all honor and praise due to God (John 5:23);
- all of his flock (John 6:37,45; 10:27,29); and
- a throne at the right hand of God (Mark 14:62 and parallels; cf. Ps. 110:1).

For Muslims the greatest sin is the sin called *shirk*, which is to ascribe partners to God and to pray or worship anyone besides the one God, and they have been told that the Bible teaches *shirk*. A reassuring verse to them, one that overcomes their fear of the Bible, is Mark 12:29-30. There Jesus gives highest priority to the oneness of God and our duty to give God our sole attention. So it shocks them to read elsewhere in the Bible that God has enthroned the Messiah at his right hand and has given him all

authority in heaven as well as on earth and that God calls us to respect Jesus as we respect God (John 5:22–23). They even read that Jesus accepted worship from his followers (Matt. 28:9, 17). This is shocking. On the one hand Muslims agree that God can give authority to whomever he wants, but on the other they deny that God would delegate any part of his rule to any supposed offspring or partner. Although they call Jesus “the Messiah” and “God’s Word,” they do not know the meanings of these terms, and of course they are unfamiliar with the self-designation ‘Son of Man’.

But a careful study of the relevant Scriptures can demonstrate the meanings of these titles. Our friends can learn that the word ‘Messiah’ describes the holy descendant of David whom God promised to send to rule and save his people forever. They can discover that the ‘Son of Man’ term is based on the heavenly figure described by Daniel, who looked like a human but moved on the clouds and was enthroned by God as king over all peoples forever (Dan 7:13–14; cf. Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62; Matt 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27; Acts 1:9–11; Rev 1:13; 14:14–16). And they can discover that ‘God’s Word’ refers to God’s own wisdom and power expressed to mankind. The resolution of the partnership dilemma then comes when they realize that if Jesus is God’s right arm, the incarnation of his Word and Wisdom, then he is part of the one God and not a separate god or partner. Since Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, sent as the Messiah to rule and save mankind, then there is no partnership of distinct gods and hence no sin of *shirk*.

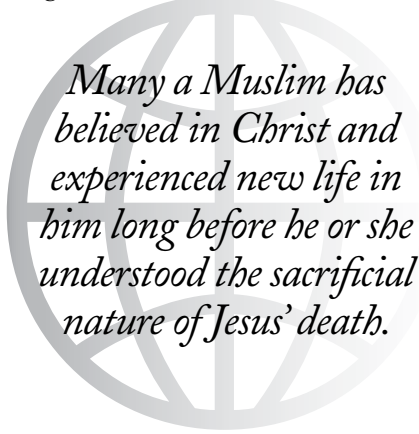
#### *D. Jesus further declared that*

he came to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28, Mark 10:45; cf. John 1:29).

The doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ is a hard concept for Muslims to grasp. Evangelicals have traditionally made this a cornerstone of the “Gospel”, but in fact it receives little attention in the Gospels or the evangelistic messages of Acts, and it took the church over a thousand

years to figure it out.

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sacrificial nature of Jesus’ death. Paul explains it in detail to those who already believed. But like the early Christians, Muslims tend to be impressed by the fact that Jesus rose from the dead, victorious over death and vindicated over his opponents. This demonstrates to them, as is emphasized in Acts and in Romans 1:1–4, that he is truly all that he said his is. There is, of course, great value in sharing the Biblical teaching on human sinfulness, the need to fulfill the law’s requirement for punishment, and the substitutionary suffering of Christ, but some people will never understand this before they have been born again and received the Holy Spirit. It should not be treated as if it were a doctrinal requirement for salvation. We are not saved by doctrine but by personal faith. At the same time, many Muslims feel a great need for cleansing and strengthening, and they are drawn by the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, whom one receives through faith in Christ.

#### *E. Jesus further declared that*

he proceeded and came forth from God (John 8:42; 7:29; 13:3);

he existed before Abraham (John 8:58);

he was enjoying the love and glory of God before the world was made (John 17:5, 24);

he came from heaven (John 3:13, 31; 6:33, 38, 51; cf. 18:37);

he had been in glory with God

and was returning to glory (John 17:5, 24);

he is the only one who has seen God (John 6:46);

he is the one who knows God (Luke 10:22; Matt 11:27; John 10:15);

he is the sole gateway for anyone to know God (Luke 10:22; Matt 11:27);

he is the sole gateway for anyone to come to God (Luke 10:16; John 14:6);

he is the gateway for praising God (John 5:23);

he embodies the truth (John 14:6);

he is present wherever two or three gather in his name (Matt 18:20; 28:20);

he is the image of the Father, who is revealed in him (John 14:9–11);

he is the source of life and strength for those who abide in him (John 15:5–6);

he will send the Spirit from the Father (John 15:26; 16:7);

he and the Father are one (John 10:30, 38; 14:9–11; cf. 5:18);

he and the Father jointly dwell in believers (through the Holy Spirit) (John 14:23).

With these declarations one sees that Jesus is more than a man, even greater than an angel. For Muslims, only God is eternal, (although many hold to a kind of Islamic trinity in which God’s book and the light of their prophet are also eternally ancient). Only God is the truth. Only God can be in several places at the same time. How could Jesus indwell a person jointly with God unless they were one? If Jesus said these things, and if Jesus pleased God and was without any sin, having not even a forgetful lapse, then he must have said the truth. What Jesus said clearly indicates his divinity. If we add to this the doctrine that God is one, which Jesus affirmed in Mark 12:29, then it indicates his deity, because the inescapable conclusion is that Christ is not a separate god but is an incarnation of an aspect of the one God, namely his Wisdom-Word.

At this point seekers need confirmation that the Bible is accurate in reporting these matters. They need confirmation



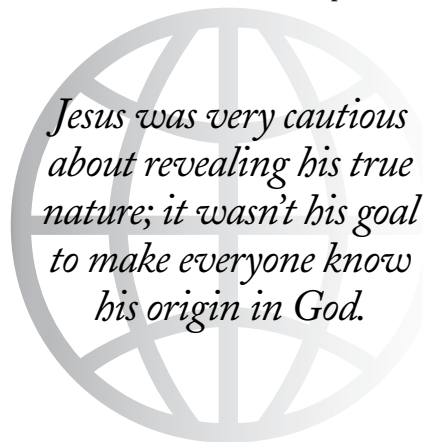
regarding Jesus. What should be their relationship with him? They can be encouraged to ask God to show them whether these things are true. This seems to them like an awesome request, to ask God for personal guidance, but we can reassure them that God answers those who seek him with all their heart. Jesus was very cautious about revealing his true nature; it wasn't his goal to make everyone know his origin in God. Most of the statements in block E above were made in private. But in some of Jesus' parables, he hinted at his unity with the God of the Old Testament. He described himself using functions and metaphors that the Old Testament had used for God alone, such as the sower (Matt 13:3-9; cf. Jer 31:27; Ez 34:9), the shepherd (John 10:11,16; cf. Gen 49:24; Psalm 23:1; 80:1; Ezekiel 34:11-12), and the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1; Mark 2:19; cf. Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:16). Payne (1981) shows that twenty of the narrative parables of Jesus portray Him in roles, real and metaphorical, attributed to God in the Old Testament.

Witherington (1990), Erickson (1995), and others have detected the voice of God in Jesus' frequent use of 'truly (*amên*) I say to you' to introduce new teachings. Unlike a prophet, Jesus never says 'thus says the Lord' but speaks with His own authority. This is especially remarkable in his use of the phrase *egô de legô* ('but I say') to present new legal doctrines and practices. Unlike any Israelite teacher or prophet, he makes no appeal to precedent, Scripture, or inspiration but makes pronouncements on his own authority. "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt 7:28-29).

### ***Evidence from the Apostles***

But in spite of what Jesus did and what he said about himself, the disciples did not fully recognize his deity before his resurrection. They asked one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41) When Jesus walked on the water, they all bowed down to him as "God's son" (Matt. 14:33), but Mark comments that "their hearts were hardened" and they still lacked understanding (6:52).<sup>4</sup>

But after the resurrection, Thomas says to the risen Christ, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), and Jesus affirms Thomas' faith.<sup>5</sup> Paul presents



a hymn affirming that Christ is in nature God and equal to God but took on the nature and appearance of a man (Phil 2:6-8), and he affirms that in Christ "the fullness of Deity dwells" (Col 2:9; cf. Rom 9:5, 2 Th 1:12, and Titus 2:13). The Apostle John receives the revelation he records in the prologue to his Gospel (John 1:1-18); there he declares that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate (John 1:1,14), God's agent in creation, who reveals God to mankind (v. 18) and is in fact God (v. 1).

All of these writers, however, would agree that Jesus is the Word of God through whom all things were created and through whom all life is derived and sustained. Christians should be aware that the Word of God concept was well developed and frequently mentioned in the Aramaic Targums (translations of the Bible), which were read or recited in every synagogue service. In these the Word of God appears as the personalized projection of God through whom the world was created and life is sustained, through whom God's communications and activities on earth are performed, and through whom God reveals Himself. (Appendix II of Edersheim 1886 includes a list of Biblical passages in which the Targums use *memra* "the Word" to express God revealing himself.) Although the Targums were used in the Aramaic-speaking synagogues, a similar concept is found among Greek-speaking Jews, as reflected in the Wisdom of Solomon (in the Apocrypha). There it is God's Word that heals and preserves those

who trust in him (16:12, 26) and it is God's Word that executes judgment on their enemies. In recounting God's plague against the first-born sons in Egypt, the writer of Wisdom personifies the Word in imagery that reminds one of Rev. 19:13:

Thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of thy authentic command, and stood and filled all things with death, and touched heaven while standing on the earth. (Wisdom 18:15-16 RSV)

The Greek-speaking Jewish theologian Philo focused his theology around the concept of the Word, seeking to unite it with the Greek concept of the Word (*logos*). (In later centuries Philo's writings had great influence on Greek Christian theologians.)

Although the Word concept was familiar to first-century Jews and mentioned throughout their translation of Scripture, and although the Messiah concept was very much on their mind and also mentioned throughout their translations of Scripture, there is no evidence that they ever made the connection between the two. Even though there was curiosity about what kind of being this Messiah would be, who exists in heaven and will live and reign forever, and even though there are hints in the Old Testament that the Messiah will in some way be God's arm, his Wisdom-Word born to the house of David, there is no record that anyone at the time of Jesus was expecting the Messiah to be an incarnation of the Word of God. But once the Apostles realized who Jesus was, they easily described him in the same terms as the Word of God—creator, life-giver, revealer, and sustainer. Paul describes Jesus as the Wisdom-Word of God when he declares him to be "the image of God" (Colossians 1:15) and "the likeness of God" (2 Cor 4:4), for we see "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6), in whom the fullness of Deity dwells (Col 1:19; 2:9). Many passages in John make the same point, saying that in Christ we see and hear the Father (14:8-11). The writer to the Hebrews argues that Christ is more than an angel, and he uses the language of Wisdom Christology to describe Christ. The author of Revelation calls

Jesus 'the Word of God' in 19:13 and elsewhere.

In the book of Revelation Christ is closely identified with God. In 1:8 we read the following statement:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

The first part of this verse is an allusion to Isaiah 41:4 and 44:6, where God announces that he is first and last and that beside him there is no other. The second part includes the Greek wording of Exodus 3:13, where God reveals the meaning of his name YHWH.<sup>6</sup> But in Revelation 1:4, 17, 2:8 and 22:13, it is Jesus who uses these words of himself. He is the Alpha and the Omega. It is clear that the author sees an essential unity in the Godhead.

We noted earlier that the seeds of the Word concept are found in the Hebrew Old Testament itself: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made" (Ps 33:6). Similarly, Peter notes that the earth was created by God's word and is sustained by it until the day of judgment (2 Peter 3:5-7), and John says that all things were made through the Word (John 1:3). Isaiah and the Psalmist say that God sends forth his Word to accomplish his task (Isa 55:10-11; Ps 107:20). When Paul records the hymn about the incarnation of Christ, to whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess to the glory of the Father (Phil. 2:6-11), he is echoing a statement in Isaiah 45:23 about people responding to the word that comes forth from God.<sup>7</sup>

The same concept is described in Proverbs as 'Wisdom', saying "The LORD by wisdom founded the earth" (3:19). The Apostles write about the preexistence and incarnation of Christ using a variety of terms. Some of the descriptions prove little more than his preexistence, but others use descriptions that could not be used of men or angels but only of God and his Word:

#### *Preexistence*

God sent "his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3)

"the supernatural Rock which followed" the Israelites "was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4)

"our Lord Jesus Christ"

"became poor" (2 Cor 8:9)

"God sent forth his Son, born of woman" (Gal 4:4)

"He was manifested in the flesh" (1 Tim 3:16)

"Jesus" the "son of man" was made "lower than the angels" (Heb. 2:6-9)

"Jesus Christ" came "in the flesh" (1 John 4:2)

#### *Preexistence with the attributes of the Word of God*

"the Word became flesh" (John 1:1, 14)

"He is before all things" (i.e., eternal and uncreated) (Col. 1:17)

"the form of God" took "the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:6-8)

"he, for whom and by whom all things exist" partook of "flesh and blood" (Heb 2:10-14)

"the life was made manifest" (1 John 1:2)

The inquirer is confronted with several issues. Who is this Word who existed before all things? Can God's Word and Wisdom have any origin outside of God himself? In what sense can God's Wisdom be distinct from God?

For all practical purposes first-century Judaism already had a Trinity of God, Word, and Spirit. That being the case, once Christ was recognized to be the Word, it was natural to associate the Spirit intimately with him as well. Jesus had said that he and the Father would dwell in the disciples (John 14:23), and the implication was that this would be through the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17, 25-26), whom Jesus would send from the Father (John 15:26; 16:7). So it was natural for Paul (Rom 8:9) and Peter (1 Peter 1:10) to call the indwelling Spirit of God "the Spirit of Christ" and to speak of Christ being "in" his followers (Col 1:27; Rom 8:10). Paul could also write about believers being "in God" and also "in Christ." One cannot talk about someone being "in Moses" or in any other human!

The Acts and Epistles record that even the earliest Christians prayed to Christ, and that they invoked God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in their doxologies and benedictions. Christ

himself said it was God's will "that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (John 5:23-24). He said "Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24). These statements seem to validate the practice of worshipping and petitioning Christ. These practices are also validated in the lives of his people, in the response they receive to their worship and prayers.

Again the inquirer is confronted with some issues. Jesus used language of himself that only befits God. So if he was not in some way God, then must have been a liar and a blasphemer. And he pointed to the miracles he did as the testimony of God endorsing him. Lunatics and liars do not command the storm, give sight to the blind, and raise the dead. Does this not prove that Jesus told the truth about himself?

Does he not meet their needs and sometimes heal their diseases in Jesus' name? And when believers pray directly to Jesus, are not the results the same as praying to God in Jesus' name? When open-minded Muslims ask God to show them the truth, does he not confirm to them in some way that the biblical Jesus is the truth they should follow? Has God not used a dream or vision to confirm the truth of Jesus and the Bible to many thousands of Muslims? What is the significance of these events? Do they not demonstrate that Jesus really is Lord and the one and only Savior?

#### **The need for a rebirth in the Spirit to be able to discern the deity of Christ**

It can be observed that the deity of Christ is revealed in the Scriptures with some subtlety. It is demonstrated in the Gospels, but explicit teaching is found primarily in the Epistles, which are addressed to people who are already believers in Christ. These people have the benefit of the Holy Spirit to enlighten their understanding. The evangelistic preaching in Acts, on the other hand, makes no attempt to explain the deity of Christ to prebelievers. In fact, the Bible clearly states that prebelievers are unable to understand these things because they lack the Holy Spirit:

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. (John 16:12-13)

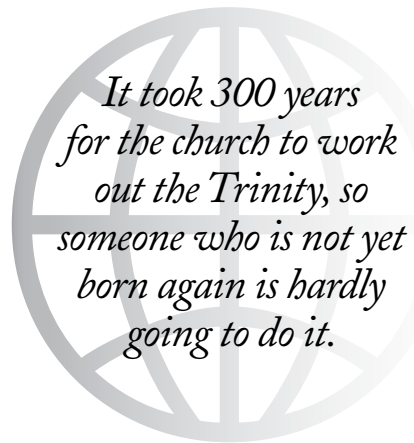
The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:14 NIV)

Just as one needs to be born again of the Spirit to see the Kingdom (John 3:3), one needs the new birth to see the King for all that he is. The implication is that once people have come to faith in Jesus as the Christ their Lord and Savior, they can grow in understanding as the Holy Spirit enlightens their minds.

The Scriptures warn us not to put stumbling blocks in the way of others (Luke 17:2 Rom 14:13). But people do this when they insist that Muslim seekers must accept the deity of Jesus and the Trinity before they can be saved. It took 300 years for the church to work out the Trinity, so someone who is not yet born again is hardly going to do it. When Muslims want to debate the divinity of Jesus, they can be challenged to read the Gospels and answer the question, "Is Jesus merely a human? And if not, then Who is he?" That can open their minds to the mystery of Christ, in spite of the statement in the Qur'an that Allah is not Jesus. But we should not allow debates about the nature of Christ to sidetrack our friends from the core issue, which is Jesus' call to accept him personally as Lord Messiah, as the One who cleanses and strengthens his followers and gives them eternal life in the Kingdom of God. The testimony of many believers is that once they had accepted Christ and received the Holy Spirit, they began to grow in understanding of his deity.

### Talking about the Trinity

The concept of the Trinity is based on a simple observation of Biblical data: God is one and there is none beside him, and yet Christ and the Holy Spirit are also one with God. That is the Trinity as it appears in the Bible. But unlike the theologians, the Scriptures provide no set formula for explaining the Trinity or even naming the parties to it, as can be seen in the



examples that follow:

- ... the Father ... *the Son* ... the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19)
- ... *I* ... the Father ... the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17)
- ... the Holy Spirit ... God ... *his own Son* (Acts 20:28)
- ... the same Spirit; ... *the same Lord*; ... the same God (1 Cor 12:4-6)
- ... *the Lord Jesus Christ* ... God ... the Holy Spirit ... (2 Cor 13:14)
- ... *him* ... the Father ... the Spirit ... (The antecedent of 'him' is '*Christ*') (Eph 2:18)
- ... *him* ... God ... his Spirit ... (The antecedent of 'him' is '*Jesus Christ*') (Eph 2:22)
- ... one Spirit ... one *Lord* ... one God and Father of us all (Eph 4:4-6)
- ... God the Father ... the Spirit ... *Jesus Christ* (1 Peter 1:2)

If we look at the 99 or so "Trinitarian" passages, we find the following terms used to refer to the second person of the Trinity: (the) Christ: 33x; Jesus/I/me: 33x; the/our Lord: 17x; the/his/God's Son: 10x; (our) Savior: 2x; other terms: 4x. This makes it clear that the titles 'Son', 'Christ', and 'Lord' all refer equally well to the One who is the Word of God incarnate as the Messiah, whom we call the second person of the Trinity. (If these words differed significantly in meaning, it would not have been possible to interchange them this way.)

Even in the matter of baptism, the Scriptures reveal flexibility in the terms used to refer to the second

person of the Trinity:

- "in the name of the Father and of *the Son* and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19)
- "in the name of *Jesus Christ*" (Acts 2:38)
- "in the name of *the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 8:16)
- "in the name of *Jesus Christ*" (Acts 10:48)
- "in the name of *the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 19:5)
- "into *Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 6:3)
- "into *Christ*" (Gal. 3:27)

For the Christians of the first four centuries, what we now call 'the Trinity' was usually expressed as God, his Word (or his Son), and his Holy Spirit. They explained this by saying the Word and Spirit proceeded from God, just as light and heat proceed from the Sun. So in Christ we see the glory of God; with the Holy Spirit we feel his love and grace. But as Christian theologians tried to describe it to themselves more precisely, they came up with a large number of formulations, and bickered fiercely about wordings. Does the Trinity consist of three modes of interacting with mankind (modalism), three beings, three persons? Does Christ have one or two essences? One or two natures? One or two wills? Did the Father feel the pain on the cross? Although the church arrived at a reasonable statement that almost all Christians accept, a lot of bad fruit came from the debates. In fact, while the churches were fighting among themselves, Islam arose and took over much of the world. God allowed it. He was evidently displeased with the churches, although not for that reason alone. (Many possible reasons come to mind!)

There is really little to be gained by trying to persuade someone that the Trinity is sensible. It's not!<sup>8</sup> It is beyond human understanding, because God is beyond our comprehension. Muslims can accept this, because they acknowledge that God is beyond our understanding. Could God extend from himself a spiritual influence? Could he extend from himself a personal representative? Of course he could; God can do anything. It is the very incomprehensibility of God that explains why he



has to use human languages and parables and concepts that we can understand. It is because of his transcendence that he extended to us his Word as a human being to help us understand his true nature and character, and to model for us the kind of relationship he wants to have for us, the kind of lives he wants us to live, the kind of love and faith he wants us to have (Matt 11:29; 16:24; Heb 12:1; 1 Pet 2:21). Even some Muslim theologians have admitted that an incarnation would be the best way for God to reveal himself; they just deny that it happened.

Muslims often ask, if Jesus is God, then why did he pray? Why was he not omniscient? Because the Word was incarnate as a real human being, he had the limitations of a human being. That is why he slept, ate, asked questions, and prayed for guidance. This was essential, so that he could show us how to live and relate to God within our own human limitations. That is why he spent so much time in prayer, both for fellowship with God and for an example to us, that we should love God and spend time in prayer. The incarnation is a bit like an invisible puppeteer who puts his hand into a puppet so that it can be seen by other puppets and can talk with them. The puppet can tell them about the invisible puppeteer and show them how to relate to him. Jesus demonstrated faith and obedience, even a willingness to suffer and die, so that we could know what it means to be truly faithful and obedient. That is why he kept waking his disciples so that they could hear how he prayed in the garden when the time of his suffering had arrived:

My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt (Matt 26:39).

*Even some Muslim theologians have admitted that an incarnation would be the best way for God to reveal himself; they just deny that it happened.*

Jesus taught us two things in this prayer. One is that we should voice our desires to God, yet always seek to fulfill God's will rather than our own desires. Prayer is not intended as a means to manipulate God but to strengthen our relationship with God and to seek the fulfillment of God's will. The second thing we learn from this prayer is that in spite of God's great love for Christ, it was *not* possible for him to take this cup of suffering away from Jesus; it *was* God's will that the only sinless human who ever lived should suffer death, because the sacrifice of Christ *was necessary* for the salvation of the world. **IJFM**

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>This statement is probably a reflection of one of the early mistranslations of John 1:1 into Arabic, which say "God was the Word"; this reading arose because in the Greek word order of this sentence, the predicate noun 'God' came first and the subject 'Word' came last.

<sup>2</sup>Muslim teachers who oppose Christianity often interpret 'word' in these verses to mean "conceived by the command of God," but it doesn't seem that the average Muslim is aware of that. The usage in the Qur'an is clearly incarnational, and John the Baptist is called to bear witness to Jesus as the Word (3:39, 45; 4:171). Note as well that although *kalima* 'word' is feminine in Arabic, it is construed in these verses as masculine, even before the conception, as a "word from God,

his name is Jesus".

<sup>3</sup>The titles 'Word of God' and 'Messiah' are bridges to communication with Muslims, whereas 'Son of God' is an obstacle. We need to use the bridges and deal sympathetically with the obstacles. Note that the early Greek Christians used the words *logos* (Word), *sophia* (Wisdom), and *gnosis* (Knowledge) as bridges to present the Gospel to the Greek-speaking world.

<sup>4</sup>The Greek wording in Matthew lacks the article, so 'God's son' could mean "Messiah" or "a righteous person." But since one bows down to kings rather than to saints, it must have been a confession of Christ as the Messiah. Matthew reports this recognition prior to the important confession by Peter in Matthew 16:16.

<sup>5</sup>Although Pharaoh and Caesar are said to have been addressed in similar ways, pious Jews would not have addressed them this way, and the words of Thomas are clearly a confession of faith, rather than a polite address to the sovereign.

<sup>6</sup>In the Hebrew text it says "I am who I am, so say to the children of Israel 'I AM sent me to you.'" The Greek reads "I am he who is, so say to the children of Israel 'HE WHO IS sent me to you.'" (God's Hebrew name, YHWH, actually means "he is" rather than "I am".)

It might be appropriate to express some reservation at this point about the interpretation of the "I AM" passages in John, notably 8:24, 58; 13:19. Some preachers have taught that Jesus is quoting Exodus 3:13, where God reveals or explains his name. The wordings are identical in English, but in Greek they are quite different, and in Hebrew they are different as well. There is no reason to think the original listeners could have been expected to make the connection and deduce that Jesus is proclaiming himself to be YHWH. The wording Jesus used was not awkward like the English sounds; it was the normal way of saying these things. Jesus was in any case more subtle than to say "I am YHWH." The context elucidates what Jesus really meant. In 8:25-28 he explains who he is, that which "I have told you from the beginning... the Son of Man."

<sup>7</sup>Paul seems to be choosing his words from the Greek Septuagint translation of this text.

<sup>8</sup>It is not sensible in the sense that 3=1 is beyond our human experience and comprehension, but so are the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics. A three-dimensional basketball can be turned inside out in a four-dimensional space without tearing it, but this is also beyond our normal comprehension. Even if we can describe it mathematically, our