

The Messiah Before Metaphysics

Recovering Scriptural Christology

Thesis

The apostles possessed everything they needed to know and communicate who Jesus is from an existing framework of words, concepts, and metaphysics based on Old Testament typology. And when later interpreters approached the New Testament through post-biblical categories such as divine substance, hypostasis, and eternal processions, they didn't provide simply an interpretation of apostolic teachings; instead, they gradually replaced it with different and incompatible teachings.

What were they asking?

If your view of Christianity today is even remotely influenced by social media and the Internet, you'd probably think the central question of the Christian faith is, 'Is Jesus God?' Indeed the idea of Jesus as God himself is promoted through a broad swathe of Christian media by scholars, apologists, and laymen. But have you ever considered that this question isn't asked by anyone in the New Testament? They do, however, ask other questions. Here's just a few of them. They ask if he's God's Messiah.¹ They ask if he's the Son of God.² They ask if he's the Son of David.³ And they ask if he's Daniel's Son of Man.⁴ Christians are quick to affirm these verses and others like them, and of course they should; but it's been my experience that few have fully realized the gravity of these titles, and how, taken together, they fully communicate who Jesus is, fully ground the things Jesus said and did, and fully distinguish Christianity from other religions that make claims about Jesus's identity, totally apart from any claim to Jesus being God.

I believe understanding this is the key to cutting through all the noise, and getting directly to who the New Testament reveals Jesus to be. It's imperative, therefore, that we understand them, and to do that, we need to understand typology set forth in the Old Testament. Typology in a scriptural sense simply refers to the study of theological types, or patterns that foreshadow later realities. The biblical authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit, established a shared grammar of meaning across time, that culminates in the New Testament portrayal of Jesus.

¹ "So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly'" (John 10:24). Unless otherwise noted, scriptural quotations are from the NRSV.

² "But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?'" (Mark 14:61).

³ "All the crowds were amazed and were saying, 'Can this be the Son of David?'" (Matthew 12:23).

⁴ "The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?'" (John 12:34).

1. Elements of Scriptural Christology

God as Israel's True King

Let's explore this starting with the king of Israel. Israel was unique as a nation in that at first it was not ruled by kings but by prophets, priests, and judges. However, when the people demanded a human king so that they could resemble the surrounding nations, God told the prophet Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." (1 Samuel 8:7)⁵

Israel was not originally formed to have a human king because Israel already had a King. Unlike the surrounding nations, whose gods supposedly supported their rulers, Israel was governed directly by YHWH. He delivered the nation, gave its law, judged its people, and led them into the promised land. Israel was not merely a nation that worshiped God; it was a kingdom whose reigning monarch was God.

And this is why Israel's demand for a king would have such monumental theological influence; because when God incorporates the human monarchy into his own rule, Israel's king would rule as God to the people. His throne was God's throne. The king literally *became a type* of earthly representative of YHWH's heavenly reign. By God's appointment and power, he judged God's people, commanded God's armies, defended God's inheritance, and administered God's covenant, just as God would.

This representative structure becomes explicit in the language used of David and Solomon. David declares, "And of all my sons, for the LORD has given me many, he has chosen my son Solomon to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel." (1 Chronicles 28:5) Solomon did not sit upon a throne belonging independently to himself. He sat upon the YHWH's throne. "Then Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD, succeeding his father David as king" (1 Chronicles 29:23).

One of the most influential scholars of the Old Testament, Sigmund Mowinckel, a leading twentieth-century authority on the Psalms and Israelite sacral kingship, recognized the same representative structure at the heart of Israel's monarchy:

"When the king as the 'son of Yahweh' seats himself on his throne, this is a symbolic expression of the fact that he, as Yahweh's appointed governor, sits on the Lord's own throne, i.e. wields sovereign power in the name of Yahweh."⁶

Matthew 27:11 says, "Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.'" Does this make Jesus God because he is Israel's king and God is Israel's true King? If so, the same reasoning would make David and Solomon God. But David was not YHWH because he sat upon YHWH's throne. Rather, he was YHWH's appointed royal representative. His authority to act on behalf of God

⁵ Later, Samuel makes the same point: "When you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, 'No, but a king shall reign over us,' though the LORD your God was your king" (1 Samuel 12:12).

⁶ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, commentary on Psalm 110:1.

was real, but it was received. The throne remained God's because YHWH's appointed him, not because he was YHWH.

Similarly, Jesus did things God did, not because he himself is God "in essence and substance" but because God has exalted him with his own power and authority. That is the New Testament view.⁷ He is the promised and final King of Israel, who fulfills this office perfectly and permanently, but the office itself had already been defined through types before him, such as David, Solomon, and Israel's monarchy in general.

This also explains Hebrews 1:8–9, where the following is said to the Son:

"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

The author here is quoting Psalm 45:6–7, a royal wedding song originally addressed to a human king. The Psalm identifies its subject directly in Psalm 45:1: "My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king." The Psalm then addresses this king as *elohim* (God), while immediately distinguishing him from "God, your God," who anoints him. HALOT, one of the standard Hebrew lexicons, likewise classifies this use of *elohim* in Psalm 45 as language applied to the human king.⁸

Hebrews applies this passage to Jesus because he is the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy that a king in the line of David will rule permanently (2 Sam. 7:11-17). When the author takes words already addressed to God's human king and applies them to the final and exalted human king, he's saying Jesus is the final revelation of a well known Davidic kingly typology--not a godman as imagined by later, catholic traditions. Simply put, the king acted as God because God invested him with authority, not because he was God ontologically or *homoousios* with the Father. Old Testament theology did not require *ousia*, *hypostasis*, eternal generation, or two-nature metaphysics to understand this relationship, and neither does New Testament theology.

David as Messiah

The Hebrew *mashiach* means 'anointed one'; its Greek equivalent is *christos*, 'Christ.' David bore this title long before Jesus. Psalm 89:20 says, 'I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him.' John 1:41 supplies the translation directly: 'We have found the Messiah,' which means Anointed."

'Jesus Christ' therefore means 'Jesus the Messiah,' not Jesus possessing a divine nature. This already had an established meaning, because David was genuinely YHWH's Messiah, his chosen human agent, within his own historical setting. Just as with his ancestor David, so with Jesus: God chooses, anoints, empowers, and rules through a human servant. Jesus fulfills that office in its highest and permanent form.⁹

⁷ Acts 2:22, Heb. 3:1, John 14:10, Matt. 28:18.

⁸ HALOT, 1:51, s.v. "מָלִיךְ", 6.

⁹ See Luke 1:31-35.

Abraham's Promised Offspring

In Genesis, “offspring” can refer collectively to Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 12:7). Paul nevertheless identifies Jesus as the particular representative offspring through whom the promise reaches its climactic fulfillment. He writes,

“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ as of many, but it says, ‘And to your offspring,’ that is, to one person, who is Christ.” (Galatians 3:16)

Matthew establishes these same covenantal coordinates in the opening sentence of his Gospel. Matthew gives us “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Matt. 1:1) Before Matthew records a miracle or teaching, he identifies Jesus as Abraham’s offspring, David’s royal descendant, and Israel’s Messiah. Paul locates Jesus within that history as the representative offspring through whom God’s blessing reaches the nations. No imaginary “eternal generation” is in view, nor does Matthew credit Jesus with creating the world. He is literally a descendent of David and Abraham, and therefore a real human person.

The Davidic Covenant and Royal Sonship

In 2 Samuel God promises through the prophet:

“I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.” (2 Samuel 7:12–14)

The first fulfillment of this is David’s son Solomon. Solomon built the temple, inherited the throne, and entered a father-son relationship with God in virtue of his royal calling. Solomon was already David’s son, but God additionally chose him “to be a son to me.” Royal sonship describes the covenantal relationship created by God’s selection and appointment of the Davidic king. Being called God’s “son” did not mean Solomon was a second divine Person within Israel’s God, it didn’t mean he must have a divine nature, or was *homoousios* with the Father. It meant that God had chosen him as the Davidic ruler who would sit upon the throne of YHWH’s kingdom and exercise delegated authority over YHWH’s people, just like his father David.

Similarly, the New Testament asserts Jesus to be the unique and greatest son, the highest of what had previously been known only in type, so that the title “the Son of God” is his ever after. He declares about himself, ‘I am the Son of God.’” (John 10:36) The angel Gabriel tells Mary that “The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35) And by God’s revelation his apostle Peter confesses, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16) This is how we understand the New Testament in its context. Jesus is God’s Son not because the title originally denoted an eternally generated divine *hypostasis* in God, who’s of the same nature as him, but because he is the promised and climactic Davidic king. What was typologically embodied in David and Solomon is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. It’s that simple.

The King as God’s Son and Firstborn

This royal sonship and eternal kingdom appears again in Psalm 89, where God says of David:

“He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’ I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm. I will establish his line forever and his throne as long as the heavens endure.” (Psalm 89:26–29)

Here David calls God his Father, and God makes David his firstborn. David was not literally God’s first created being, nor was he biologically the firstborn son in his own family. “Firstborn” is a status conferred upon him. God appoints David as the preeminent king, “the highest of the kings of the earth.” The same royal framework appears in Psalm 2.

“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed ... ‘I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” (Psalm 2:2, 6–7)

Paul applies Psalm 2 to Jesus in Acts 13.

“And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second psalm, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you.’” (Acts 13:32–33)

The ordinary New Testament use of “begetting” reinforces this. The Greek verb γεννάω (*gennaō*) appears nearly one hundred times in the New Testament. Matthew uses it throughout Jesus’s genealogy when Abraham begets Isaac, Isaac begets Jacob, and successive generations bring forth their descendants. Acts 7:20 uses it for the birth of Moses. John uses it for natural birth, spiritual rebirth, and the man who was “born blind.”¹⁰ Throughout these varied uses, the word consistently describes someone or something being brought forth or coming into a new condition. Nowhere does the verb itself mean an eternal, beginningless relation within God. Such a metaphysically charged statement wouldn’t exist until hundreds of years later.

Luke gives the reason Jesus would be called “the Son of God” with unusual clarity. The angel tells Mary,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)

The phrase translated “the child to be born” (more literally: *the one* to be born) is τὸ γεννώμενον (*to gennōmenon*), the second word being a form of the verb *gennaō*. Notice Luke’s explicit “therefore.” Jesus will be called “the Son of God” *because* God’s spirit will come upon Mary so that the power of the Most High will cause his conception. Luke does not direct the reader toward an eternal begetting, an atemporal relation within the divine essence, or a Son who had already been generated before his human birth, who is now coming down and entering Mary’s womb. He grounds Jesus’s sonship in God’s miraculous act within Jesus’s mother. Dr. Dustin Smith summarizes the New Testament’s presentation of Jesus’s historical origins:

“To put the beliefs and teachings of the Early Church, as they are presented in the New Testament, plainly, we can conclude that the early followers of Jesus were convinced

¹⁰ See John 3:3, 6, & 9:2

that Jesus was a genuine member of the human race who was begotten by God's Spirit in the womb of Mary, and was the heir of the promises made to the offspring of Abraham, Judah, and David. Since Jesus was the human descendant of all these key Old Testament figures, it follows that Jesus did not consciously preexist his birth in any way. It is obvious and rather self-evident that a son cannot exist before his ancestors."¹¹

Smith here brings the entire biblical pattern together. Jesus is not called Abraham's offspring, Judah's descendant, David's son, and Mary's child merely with respect to an added human nature (something unmentioned in the New Testament). These descriptions locate Jesus himself within Israel's history as the genuine human descendant in whom God's promises reach their fulfillment.

Psalms 2 then adds another decisive moment to this sonship. The Messiah who was conceived by God's power is publicly vindicated and installed as God's royal Son through resurrection. That is how Paul employs the declaration, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you," in Acts 13. He does not treat the begetting as a timeless event within God's substance. He places it within the historical fulfillment of God's promises to Israel: God brought forth the promised descendant, raised him from the dead, and installed him as the everlasting Davidic king.

The New Testament therefore uses the concepts of sonship and begetting within an intelligible scriptural history. Jesus fulfills the earlier royal pattern while also surpassing it. The typology therefore involves both continuity and escalation. It uses the same royal terms previously applied to David and Solomon for Jesus, but he fulfills them uniquely, sinlessly, and permanently. Later interpreters may choose to add an additional doctrine of eternal generation from this, but that doctrine should not be confused with the ordinary meaning of *gennaō* or with the historical and royal framework in which the apostles actually used it.

Origin: From Historical Begetting to Eternal Generation

Here the later framework changes the category. Origen denies that God ever existed without Wisdom and describes the Son's generation as eternal, like radiance continuously proceeding from light.¹² Hanson calls Origen a brilliant example of synthesizing Christian doctrine with Middle Platonism; Stead explains his use of the Platonic categories of archetype and participation.¹³ That is not merely the ordinary meaning of *gennaō* stated more precisely. Luke locates Jesus's begetting in Mary; Acts applies Psalm 2 to resurrection and vindication. Origen misunderstands it as a timeless metaphysical process.

The Shoot from Jesse and Paul's Royal Gospel

Isaiah 11:1–2 promises a shoot from Jesse upon whom the Spirit of YHWH will rest. Paul identifies Jesus with this ruler in Romans 15:12: 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the gentiles.' He then summarizes the royal gospel in Romans 1:1–4: Jesus is

¹¹ Smith, *Systematic Theology*, 232.

¹² Origen, *On First Principles* 1.2.2, 1.2.7, and 1.2.11, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973).

¹³ Hanson, *Search*, 859; see also the discussion of Origen's archetype and participation model in Stead, *Divine Substance*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 141, 152, 182–89.

descended from David and appointed Son of God in power through resurrection. Paul's controlling framework is the fulfillment of Israel's promises. Jesus is the spirit-anointed shoot from Jesse, David's descendant, and the Son appointed in power. His gospel has no need of a later theory of divine substance.

Nicaea: From Royal Sonship to Divine Substance

The council at Nicaea in 325 asserted that the Son is 'begotten from the substance of the Father,' 'begotten, not made,' and *homoousios* with the Father. But this vocabulary was unclear. Kelly notes that *hypostasis* and *ousia* were originally synonyms, which is why the creed makers in 325 anathematized any who say the Son is "from another hypostasis of substance [*ousia*]." ¹⁴ Hanson records several competing usages before *hypostasis* became 'distinct existence' and *ousia* 'nature.' ¹⁵ The formula itself required development. 'Today I have begotten you' has moved from Israel's royal history into an imagined eternal generation from divine substance.

The Prophet Like Moses and the Authorized Son

Moses provides another established scriptural pattern for understanding Jesus. Moses was not God, yet God spoke and acted through him with extraordinary authority. God actually called Moses "God," for he was the mediator God commissioned to deliver his people and speak his words. ¹⁶ And Moses declares in Deuteronomy,

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet ... I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable." (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18–19)

The authority of this prophet would be real but received. He would speak in God's name *because* God had placed his words in his mouth, not because he would be God himself. Peter applies this promise directly to Jesus. ¹⁷ This prophecy and fulfillment helps us to understand Jesus's statements about his relationship to God. In John 7:16, he says, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me." Likewise, Jesus declares, "I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak." (John 12:49)

It's clear from the whole New Testament picture that Jesus is greater than Moses, ¹⁸ but still the later prophet is like the earlier one. ¹⁹ God commissions his chosen mediator, places his

¹⁴ "Profession of Faith," 5; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 129.

¹⁵ Hanson, *Search*, 184–85.

¹⁶ "And the Lord said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet." Exod. 7:1, KJV.

¹⁷ "That he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus.... Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me; you must listen to whatever he tells you.'" (Acts 3:20–22)

¹⁸ John 1:14–18, Heb. 1–2, Phil 2:9–11, Rev. 5,

¹⁹ That the Messiah Jesus is also a prophet is a neglected aspect of New Testament Christology. See for example: Luke 24:19, Mark 6:1–6.

words in his mouth, and requires the people to listen to him. Jesus possesses unique authority as God's Son precisely because the Father has authorized and sent him, not because he's the second person of a tri-personal God.

Tertullian: From Divine Agency to Substance and Person

Scripture explains Jesus's God-like authority through commission: one sends and the other is sent; one gives words and the other speaks them. In contrast, Tertullian speculates about one divine substance and three persons. Hanson says his metaphysic 'borrowed directly from Stoicism,' conceiving *spiritus* as a refined corporeal substance shared by Father, Son, and Spirit.²⁰ But Tertullian's innovations are unnecessary and without any scriptural foundation. The New Testament tells us in what sense Jesus is God's unique Son, and this doesn't have to do with his being composed of some divine stuff.

The Son of Man and the Lord at God's Right Hand

Daniel 7 contains a memorable vision that is important to the authors of the New Testament. In part,

“As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.” (Daniel 7:13–14)

The figures in the vision are distinct. This one, who came to be referred to as “The Son of Man,” approaches the Ancient of Days--obviously, God--and is presented before him, receiving dominion, glory, and a kingdom from him. His universal authority is real, but it is bestowed by God, and as Paul points out, in his exaltation Jesus remains subject to God (1 Cor. 15:27).

The Gospels show that “Son of Man” did not stand in isolation from Jesus's other titles. In Matthew 16:13, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matt. 16:16) The question begins with the Son of Man and is answered with the Messiah and Son of God. Those are three co-referring titles. Jesus is Daniel's Son of Man, the promised Messiah and royal Son appointed to receive God's kingdom.

Jesus brings these categories together again at his trial. At one of his trials, the high priest asks, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.’” (Mark 14:61–62) In one answer, Jesus joins the Messiah, the Son of God, Daniel's Son of Man, and the royal lord of Psalm 110, the human king to whom Yahweh says, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.”

Psalm 110:1 became foundational to the apostles' proclamation of Jesus. Biblical scholar Roy B. Zuck observes that “The Old Testament verse most frequently quoted in the New is Psalm 110:1”²¹ That frequency is significant. When the earliest Christians wanted to explain who Jesus had become through his resurrection and exaltation, they repeatedly returned to this

²⁰ Hanson, *Search*, 184; Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 2, 7–9.

²¹ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 252

scene: YHWH enthroned another as lord at his right hand. Scholars generally agree that the original setting of this psalm was the coronation of a human king; Jesus too is a human 'Lord.' The relationship between Yahweh and the "my Lord" of this text is intelligible within Scripture. YHWH is the God who grants authority; Jesus is David's lord who receives it (Matt. 22:41-46)

Peter explains the final fulfillment of this prophetic psalm in his sermon on Pentecost.

"This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you see and hear ... Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:32-36)

The actors and actions here matter. God raises Jesus, exalts him, and makes him Lord and Messiah. Jesus receives the promised spirit from the Father and pours it out upon the church. His lordship is the royal authority granted to him by the God at whose right hand he sits.

Paul comments on this important exaltation of Jesus by God in his letter to the Philippians.²² God is the one who exalts and gives; Jesus is the one exalted and given the supreme title of "Lord." The universal confession of Jesus's lordship does not terminate upon Jesus as though he had displaced God. It redounds "to the glory of God the Father." The exalted Lord represents, administers, and glorifies the God who exalted him. Because of this exaltation, honoring Jesus is a means of honoring his and our God.

This distinction remains visible in Paul's confession in his first letter to the believers at Corinth.²³ Paul identifies the one God as the Father and the one Lord as Jesus Christ. This is not a denial of Jesus's unrivaled authority. It is an ordered confession of that authority. The Father is the ultimate source of all things, while Jesus is the one Lord through whom God accomplishes his purposes. Although Paul is not directly quoting Psalm 110:1 here, his language the ideas expressed there.

We see the ideas of Psalm 110:1 again in Paul's discussion of things to come in 1 Corinthians 15, where he tells us that Christ "must reign until he [God] has put all his enemies under his feet," and he clarifies that "when it says, 'All things are put in subjection,' it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him," that is, God. Even at the peak of his exaltation, Jesus remains subject to God (1 Cor. 15:25-26).

This is the scriptural grammar of Jesus's exalted lordship. Jesus is Daniel's Son of Man, David's lord, God's Messiah, and the Son of the living God. God raises him, seats him at his right hand, and places everything beneath his feet. None of this diminishes Jesus; it communicates the astonishing height of the authority God has given him. Yet it does not erase the distinction between Jesus and the God who exalted him. Nor does it deny that "God is the head of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:2).

²² "Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

²³ "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:6).

Wisdom and Word

But wait, there's more, and you might have already thought about John's famous passage featuring "the Word" (*logos*). What about this? The Old Testament background is crucial to understanding this text as John and his original audience would have. In Scripture, God creates, reveals, commands, judges, and accomplishes his purposes through his word and wisdom.

This pattern begins in the opening chapter of Genesis. "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." (Genesis 1:3) Psalm 33 expands on this theme. "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth.... For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm." (Psalm 33:6, 9)

Like God's word, his wisdom is similarly portrayed as belonging to God and expressing his creative purpose. In Proverbs 8, personified Wisdom declares: "The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.... Then I was beside him, like a master worker, and I was daily his delight, playing before him always." (Proverbs 8:22, 30) This is poetic personification; read literally, this text would seemingly locate some sort of goddess at God's side when he created. But in Proverbs, lady Wisdom speaks, calls out in the streets, builds a house, prepares a feast, and invites people to learn from her. Wisdom is described *as if* it were a person so that God's wisdom can be portrayed as living, active, and available to humanity.

Word and Wisdom are parallel expressions of God's own creative activity, and in some intertestamental literature the characters are merged. Thus in Sirach 24 lady Wisdom says, "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High," making her also God's Word. Both characters belong to God, proceed from God, reveal God, and accomplish God's purposes. They are really just ways of describing God as expressing his wisdom or reason as he creates and governs our world. These literary traditions provide the immediate Jewish background for John's description of the Logos.

But don't take my word for it, here's the BDAG, the standard Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament, which recognizes this background. Under *logos*, it gives the specialized Johannine meaning: "The independent personified expression of God, the Logos." BDAG then explains that this usage reflects a way of thinking found in "Jewish wisdom literature" and identifies John's distinctive claim as the Word taking human form in the historical person of Jesus.²⁴ Raymond E. Brown writes that "In the Old Testament presentation of Wisdom, there are good parallels for almost every detail of the Prologue's description of the Word."²⁵ Gail R. O'Day similarly observes: "The Jewish wisdom tradition, both biblical and extra-biblical, has emerged as the governing view of the provenance of the language of the prologue."²⁶

John signals this background from his opening words. The Greek text of Genesis 1:1 begins:

En archē epoiēsen ho theos

"In the beginning God made..."

²⁴ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 601, s.v. "λόγος," 6.

²⁵ Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 523.

²⁶ O'Day and Hulen, *John*, 517.

The Greek text of John 1:1 begins with the same opening words:

En archē ēn ho logos

“In the beginning was the Word...”

The verbal correspondence, *en archē*, “in the beginning,” is widely recognized as a deliberate echo of Genesis. The present-day Jewish biblical scholar Daniel Boyarin calls the opening of the fourth Gospel “a midrash, that is, a homily, on Gen. 1.1-5” that employs ideas from Proverbs 8 and other Jewish wisdom literature.²⁷ John is inviting his readers to hear the creation account again, now in light of God’s new creation and revelation through Jesus. John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:1–3, 14) This does not mean that Jesus is merely a spoken sentence or an abstract idea. John’s claim is far greater. The divine Word, again, had an entire set of tradition and lore surrounding it, which is magnificent, in so far that it represents the expression of God’s mind, reason, or wisdom. John is saying *that* becomes embodied in a genuine human life. What God had expressed through creation, Scripture, wisdom, and the prophets is now personally revealed in his Son.

Paul applies the same Wisdom framework directly to Christ when he calls Jesus “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:24) Elsewhere Paul writes that Christ “became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (1 Corinthians 1:30) This is scriptural typology in action. What was spoken of in the Old Testament, becomes a type of a greater reality which comes later.

The New Testament’s theme of Jesus as God’s Word and Wisdom is *extraordinarily elevated*, but elevated language does not interpret itself. John and Paul proclaim the culmination of an existing Jewish pattern: God’s Word has become flesh, and God’s Wisdom has been revealed in Christ. Earlier authors had spoken of the Torah as a physical manifestation of God’s Wisdom and even of Moses as an embodiment of God’s Wisdom.²⁸ John and Paul teach us that God’s creative word, saving purpose, and wisdom have come to their fullest historical expression in his Messiah. But this, in their view, is wholly consistent with Jesus being “a man” (John 1:30, 8:40), as Paul says, God’s Son who was “born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4). Presumably then, like you and me, Jesus’s existence began at some point in his mother’s pregnancy.

Justin: From Personified Wisdom to a Second Numerical Subject

In contrast, Justin does not merely say that God’s Word and Wisdom become flesh in the Messiah. He argues that the one appearing to Abraham and Moses was another called “God” and “Lord,” numerically distinct from the Maker: the preexistent Word or Son generated before creation.²⁹ Justin seems to think that only a lesser god could become incarnate³⁰ and that God could not create directly, but had to first emanate out another who could, so to speak, get his

²⁷ Boyarin, “Logos,” 691.

²⁸ For primary source references and discussion see Smith, “Incarnation of Wisdom.”

²⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* chapters 56, 61, 62, 128; *First Apology* sections 21, 46, 63.

³⁰ *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 60.

hands dirty.³¹ But these are problematic, speculative, and unscriptural claims. Scripture never says that God incarnated in the sense of becoming human, although he is able to appear in human form.³² And why on earth should anyone think that the Almighty can't create directly? In fact, through the prophet God takes credit for creating *on his own* (Isa. 44:24). Justin's speculations seem designed to solve problems which the authors of Scripture don't consider to be problems!

In John 1, the Word belongs to God, is the means by which God creates (really, on his own),³³ and becomes flesh in Jesus. In Justin, the Logos functions as a second preexistent divine subject within a hierarchy of transcendence and mediation based on the intermediary principle of middle platonism. The title "Word" remains, but its metaphysical role and status have changed.

2. What Changed?

The development is cumulative. Representative, kingly and messianic sonship becomes eternal generation of one sharing God's nature. God's personified Word becomes a preexistent, lesser, second god through whom God created.³⁴ By the late fourth century, God and his agent become persons sharing one substance and eternally being in some sense "in" the one God as so many "Persons." Chalcedon then interprets Christ through two natures (humanity and divinity), assigning his growth, ignorance, temptation, obedience, and death to humanity while assigning other predicates like eternity and impassibility to divinity. That *sounds like* two Sons, but they simply stipulate that there is only one Christ.

The biblical titles of Christ survived, but their biblical meanings no longer controlled the explanation. Messiah became an office of an eternal divine Person; Son became an eternal relation within the divine essence; begotten became timeless generation. The words remained, but the human Jesus of the New Testament, God's Messiah, had been replaced by an eternal, fully divine "Person" who entered into some sort of mysterious union with "a complete human nature" (a body and a soul) making him, as it's sometimes said, "man but not a man"--in other words, a divine Person who can be called "man" in a new made-up sense, but who is not a human person.³⁵

³¹ This idea that the ultimate reality couldn't be the direct source of the cosmos and so needed a lesser intermediary was a theme of Platonism because of a passage in Plato's *Timaeus*, on which see Tuggy, "Metaphysics," sec. 2. On the pre-creation emission or emanation of the Logos by God, see *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 61.

³² See Genesis 18, where God visits Abraham with two other "men" who turn out to be angels, and Genesis 32:22-32, where Jacob wrestles with God.

³³ The reader Jeremiah understands that what at first glance appear to be intermediaries are not that; rather, the claim is simply that God, in creating, expresses these three attributes. "It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom and by his understanding stretched out the heavens" (Jeremiah 10:12). In other words, the prophet here assumes only one was at work in creation--God.

³⁴ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chs. 50, 55-56.

³⁵ A recent Catholic source assures us that "the child Mary gave birth to in Bethlehem is not a human person; he is a divine Person, the Word of God, who has taken to himself a human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary" (Baker, *Jesus Christ*, 31).

3. The Protestant Opportunity

Protestants possess a special opportunity. We confess Scripture as uniquely normative, councils as subordinate, and tradition as fallible. Justin, Tertullian, Origen, Nicaea, and Chalcedon remain invaluable witnesses, but witnesses are not apostles. Returning to the sources must reach behind patristic metaphysics to the prophets, our Teacher Jesus, and his apostles. The question is not whether a doctrine became traditional, but whether it preserves the scriptural identity of Jesus or replaces it with another.

Conclusion: Returning to the Messiah

The apostles were not waiting for the language of *ousia* and *hypostasis* before they could accurately proclaim Jesus. They knew the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. They knew the promises to David, the prophet like Moses, the Spirit-filled shoot from Jesse, the Son of Man who receives dominion, the wisdom and word of God, and David's lord seated beside YHWH. With those resources, they proclaimed Jesus's birth, authority, works, death, resurrection, exaltation, present lordship, and future kingdom. Their gospel remains "God's saving power for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

Recovering their gospel from beneath a collapsed heap of unhelpful, later traditions does not lower the Lord Jesus Christ. It restores his exalted, scriptural status: the final prophet, the unique Son, the image of the invisible God, the embodied wisdom of God, the risen Lord, and the appointed ruler and judge of the world (Acts 17:31). His greatness is not threatened by having received everything from his Father or from his permanent subject to his and our God (John 20:17). In the apostolic proclamation, that relationship is his glory.

The Messiah before metaphysics is not an impoverished Christ constructed by modern rationalists. He is Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by God, crucified by human hands, raised by God, exalted to God's right hand, and made Lord and Messiah. Before asking whether later, humanly-devised metaphysical systems can be made coherent, Christians should ask whether those systems are really needed for understanding inspired Scripture. The way forward is a return, not to a lesser Jesus, but to God's Messiah.

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