

God in Three Persons: The Trinity and the Third Revelation

By identifying a ‘third’ revelation, I am simply wanting to indicate that God’s self-revelation comes at identifiable points in time and that were we to have been present we would have heard, seen with our eyes, looked at and possibly touched the revelation of God (1 John 1:1). That was obviously not the case of God’s revelation of himself in the *action* of creation, but certainly men and women are continually confronted by that self-revelation in what has been created (Rom. 1:19–20). And in Israel, God himself was known in his fullness, even though I have suggested that his being as ‘triune’ was not made plain.

The ‘third’ revelation is the incarnation of the Word in the person of Jesus Christ. It is my contention that apart from that event, which cannot be separated at all from the cross, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost, we can know nothing of God as Trinity. While I have argued that it is a futile effort, even the search for ‘clues’ in the Old Testament is undertaken by those who have first been convinced that God is three-in-one because they have encountered the Lord Jesus.

The understanding of God as triune is distinctly Christian; Israel, even with all its privileges, was not given this revelation. What is more, the suggestion that God is three-in-one was deeply offensive and seen as blasphemous:

But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working.’¹⁸ For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God (John 5:17–18).

Christianity was not a gentle drift from Judaism. Israel, indeed the whole of the Old Testament revelation, did set the stage for the coming of Jesus, but the coming of Jesus was a totally new thing and marked the end of Israel’s special role in the history of salvation. Not only was Israel not a ‘pre-Christian Christian’ people, neither is the church a ‘post-Israel Israel’. The ‘new Israel’ is part of the Christian church but the church is far more wonderful than merely being an extension of Israel of old.¹ The ‘new Israel’ is Jews who have come to Christ, and they stand alongside other nations who have come to Christ. But this is the point: these all have come to Christ. Now there is, or should be, no stress on one’s ethnic background,² precious as that may be, because Jesus has accomplished something quite new and amazing. There is now a ‘new humanity’, literally a ‘new man’ (see Eph. 2:11–22).

This is why the incarnation is so significant. In becoming flesh, the Word has become not merely ‘a’ man—that is, an individual person—but Man.³ He was not just

¹ See Ian D. Pennicook, *Jews, Gentiles and the People of God*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2007.

² Compare Gal. 3:28; although it has been used to push that these distinctions have been abolished, especially that between male and female, Paul’s point is not that. He is simply pointing out that distinctions of ethnicity and gender or social status mean nothing with regards to our standing in Christ. It is the divisiveness and not the distinctions which has been abolished. A person is not more saved because he is Jewish or male or free.

³ The use of Man (capital ‘M’) is intended to specify the unique head of the race, either Adam or Jesus, and so to the whole race in Adam, without paying attention to gender. I do this because the words ‘mankind’ or ‘humanity’ often seem to me to carry overtones of plurality. According to Gen. 1:27f. Man (Adam) is male and female together.

humanity either, but in a particular person all of God's purposes for 'humanity' are restored and fulfilled.

THE WORD BECOMES FLESH⁴

Obviously, the early church soon found itself with a dilemma. How do we adequately explain to ourselves and to others what we mean by the Word becoming flesh? The task of answering that question was daunting and has never been adequately fulfilled. The study of church history reveals that each generation, faced with new ways of thinking, has had to re-examine the questions that have been raised.

Our task at this point, however, is not to engage with the old answers and definitions, though we cannot avoid the effects that centuries of working through the questions have had on the Christian church. Rather, I want to come to the New Testament and rediscover the wonder that was aroused in the writers when they met Jesus and came to an awareness of who he was. They were not men who were simply excited by their discoveries. Their works are not the ancient equivalent of modern picture books full of beautiful photographs. They had a message to bring, but that message and the way they presented it was informed by their new awareness of who Jesus was and by what that meant for the whole understanding of God and his purposes.⁵

First, though, a word of explanation about the New Testament. Although there is a general order to the documents, following the story of Jesus from his birth to his resurrection (the gospels), then the story of the early church (The Acts of the Apostles) followed by letters written to various churches or individual people, climaxed by the book of the Revelation, the books were probably not written in that order and some we know very little about. Each book has impressed itself on the mind of the church (though not to all the minds in all the churches) and now we have a collection of documents which most Christians would generally associate with apostolic authority, and so with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Basically, the writers were Jewish, either by birth or by close association.⁶ So their writings were heavily influenced by the documents of the Old Testament. There are constant quotes from the Old Testament and numerous allusions to it. So while I said that the church is not just an extension of Israel, nonetheless they understood that Israel had a unique place in the plan of God and that the revelation of the Old Testament was the basis for all that the church proclaimed (see Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 15:3–4; 2 Tim. 3:15–16).

When describing Jesus, therefore, the writers made statements that must be understood in the light of their Jewish background and understanding. They were informed by the Old Testament and the Old Testament made more sense to them since they knew Jesus.

First, from the 'Prologue' of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one

⁴ See 'Jesus was a man' in 'The Humanity of Jesus Christ', my Saturday Studies 2001, pp. 1–5.

⁵ Previous papers in this series have taken this for granted and I will not set out to reproduce that material, though some repetition may be unavoidable. I would add though that the awareness I spoke of does not refer to any capacity to answer later philosophical questions.

⁶ Col. 4:10–14 would possibly imply that Luke was a Gentile, but he was evidently a companion of Paul for some length of time.

thing came into being. What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."')¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1:1–18).

We have already examined the force of 'The Word of God' to the Jewish mind and, in particular, what it did not mean. It did not mean anyone or anything *beside* the 'one LORD'. The Word of God was God himself speaking, and in doing so revealing himself to humanity as the God who does speak. When he speaks something happens. The revelation that God gives is in the context of his action within creation so that it is first personal and then propositional. But John was not saying anything that did not fit perfectly with the Old Testament, as, for example, in Genesis 1:1–5.

Then John went further: the Word is God but there is a far more amazing element. The Word was 'with God' and then, in the fullness of time, 'became flesh'. It was one thing to say that the Word created flesh; John said that the Word *became* flesh. 'We have seen his glory' sounds appropriate for a human being, especially since Psalm 8:5 says that God crowned Man with glory and honor, but John adds that the glory he saw was that of 'only begotten from the Father'. While the word for 'only begotten' is used elsewhere to refer an only child (Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; Heb. 11:17⁷), John restricts the title 'Son' to Jesus when speaking of God, preferring to use the words 'child' or 'children' for Christians. Jesus was unique in his relationship with Father while being fully human (Heb. 2:14), in the same way that Adam was fully human prior to the Fall. This is borne out in Hebrews 2:6–9 which quotes Psalm 8:4–6 and expressly identifies that psalm with Jesus. The psalm looks with amazement at the high dignity of created Man, noting that God has put all things under his feet. It is not only Hebrews 2 but also Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:27–28 and Ephesians 1:22 which applies this to Jesus.⁸ Jesus is 'the last Adam', 'the second man' (1 Cor. 15:45, 47).

Also there is the phrase 'the son of man', evidently the title Jesus preferred for himself.⁹ This phrase is used in the Old Testament in three areas. The first and major one is the reference to the weak humanity of the prophet Ezekiel, but also to others as in Job 25:6 and Daniel 8:17, and so on. Notably the phrase is also used of the high

⁷ Isaac was not Abraham's only offspring (cf. Gen. 17:23 where Ishmael is called his 'son'), but he was the only son in the sense of inheritance and promise. Isaac was 'your son of love' (Gen. 22:2, LXX). The word *μονογενής* (*monogenēs*) occurs in the NT at Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Heb. 11:17 and 1 John 4:9. It also is found in the LXX and, independently of the NT in the works of Josephus. Basically it means 'only', in the sense of 'unique'. We should watch out lest presumed etymology makes things more difficult. Words mean what they mean in their context.

⁸ Perhaps Phil. 3:21 does the same thing.

⁹ Those wishing to pursue this area might start, for example, with Douglas R. A. Hare, *The Son of Man Tradition*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1990.

exaltation that God gives to this weak human being, again in Psalm 8:4. Also we note that on occasions the phrase ‘son of man’ is used in poetic contexts in a parallelism with ‘man’. Psalm 8:4 and Job 25:6 are examples of this.¹⁰ That is what the phrase means—the son of man is man. But there is a third area and that is Daniel 7:13 and its context. There the son of man is the one to whom is given ‘dominion and glory and kingship . . . that shall never be destroyed’ (Dan. 7:14). Associated with this giving is the restoration of the kingdom to ‘the holy ones [saints] of the Most High’ (Dan 7:18, 27). In the exaltation of this ‘son of man’, evil is totally ‘taken away . . . consumed and destroyed’ (Dan. 7:26).

In all this, when Jesus uses the phrase of himself, if the reference is to Daniel 7:13ff. as I suspect it is, then the reference is to Jesus the man. His conception in the womb of Mary was a genuine conception, even if the ‘father’ was the Holy Spirit. His birth, growth as a child, adult life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension were all fully human.

Yet the announcement was that the Word became flesh. There is no explanation given, but the reality is that the eternal Word stands as somehow distinct from, while remaining one¹¹ with, the Father (John 10:30). As it has been put elsewhere, the New Testament stresses Jesus’ humanity while assuming his deity. And it does so because it is the second man Jesus who redeems those who were lost in the first man, Adam.

THE MAN JESUS WAS GOD

It would not be impossible to say that the Word became flesh and then leave it at that. There would still be a puzzle but nothing as great as when we observe that language used elsewhere in the scriptures concerning God is applied to Jesus. It is not as obvious as the stress on Jesus’ humanity, nor so common, but nonetheless there is a regular recognition that Jesus and the LORD of the Old Testament are one and the same without being identical.

For instance, Paul’s opening benedictions lead us to see that grace and peace come not only from ‘God our Father’ but also from ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; etc.), while ‘God our Father’ (Eph. 1:2) is also ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Eph. 1:3; also Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; 1 Pet. 1:3).

The explanation for the latter title seems plain. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ because our Lord Jesus Christ is the man Jesus and so God is his God and Father. But it is the title ‘Lord’ which adds some wonderful complexity. First an example of the way the matter occurs: Acts 2:14–47 is the account of Peter’s explanation of the gift of the Spirit and the resultant formation and growth of the church in Jerusalem. Peter’s explanation is in terms of the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel 2, and he concludes:

The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:20–21).

Twice the word ‘Lord’ occurs in the quote and on both occasions it represents the Hebrew *Yahweh*, which the English translations of the Old Testament usually translate as LORD (in capital letters). This was evidently because of the Hebrew practice of saying *adonai*, which actually means ‘Lord’, whenever the name *Yahweh*

¹⁰ Also Ps. 90:3; Isa. 51:12; 56:2.

¹¹ The Greek is clear that Father and Son are not ‘one person’ but ‘one (thing)’, (ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατήρ ἓν ἔσμεν).

occurred, in order to avoid uttering the divine name. So when the Old Testament was translated into Greek (called the LXX) both *Yahweh* and *adonai* were translated by the Greek word *kurios* which we translate as 'Lord/lord'. What that meant was that in order to distinguish which Hebrew word was being used it was necessary to go back to the Hebrew original.

The New Testament was written in Greek, so even when translating Old Testament passages the same word was used. But the conclusion of Peter's address is the declaration that:

... God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:36).

The significance of this was surely more than just Jesus is master, though that was undoubtedly true, but that the Lord on whom Israel must call in order to be saved (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21) was none other than the crucified and resurrected Jesus. But the Lord on whom they must call, according to Joel, was Yahweh, their covenant God. So without being specific, it seems clear that Peter is saying that Jesus is Israel's messiah (Christ) and also he is Israel's LORD! It then follows that 'day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47).

Another significant statement is 1 Corinthians 8:6:

... 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.

Here the issue being dealt with is the eating of meat offered to idols. Some, with weak consciences, assumed that they were actually participating in the worship of the idols, while others, without such scruples, would eat the meat with full liberty, while possibly doing great damage to their weaker brothers and sisters. Paul's response was to identify the fact that while there are many gods and lords, nonetheless for those in Christ there is only one God and one Lord. The allusion here, almost a quotation, is to Deuteronomy 6:4. We have one God, and he is the Father, and we have one Lord, Jesus Christ — 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD' (Deut. 6:4). Speaking as a convinced Jew whose adherence to the Old Testament scriptures was absolute, Paul's observation was the 'one LORD' of Israel was Jesus Christ, just as the 'one God' was the Father. He does not offer an explanation or rationalisation; he just says it. We might note too that in Philippians 2:9–11 Paul says of Jesus what Isaiah declares to be true only of Israel's God:

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. ²³ By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear' (Isa. 45:22–23).

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9–11).

There are a number of statements in the New Testament which come close to saying that Jesus is God. Some are open to question, usually on the grounds of how they are punctuated, while others are more or less clear:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1:18).

Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ (John 20:28).

Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son (Acts 20:28).

... to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 9:5).

... while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13).

But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.’⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’ (Heb. 1:8–9).

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ . . . (2 Pet. 1:1).

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 (1 John 5:20).

My purpose here is not to debate these statements and so forth but to see that there is sufficient information in the New Testament to have caused people to enquire about who the man Jesus really was, knowing that the apostolic writers were saying far more than simply that Jesus was a good man setting a good example and so on. Indeed, before the early Church debated the doctrine of the Trinity, they first had to deal with what are called the ‘christological controversies’: How could Jesus be God and man? How could two wills co-exist on the one person? ¹²

THE DIVINE SPIRIT

It was not hard for the Old Testament writers to recognise the deity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord was never understood to be other than the presence of God, his breath or the wind of God, in the same way that the word of God was simply the utterance of God.¹³

But the New Testament writers do understand that there are things that can be said of the Holy Spirit that are distinct from things that can be said of the Father and the Son. For instance, it was the ascended Jesus who was exalted at the right hand of God who poured out the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33). The action of the cross was Christ offering himself to God through the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14). The gifts given to the church are manifestations of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). The cry of the believer ‘Abba! Father!’ is the result of the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God (Rom. 8:15) and indeed the Spirit himself cries out ‘Abba, Father’ also (Gal. 4:6). The cry of longing for the return of Jesus is jointly the cry of the bride and the Spirit (Rev. 22:17).

¹² See N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: Part One: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, Grace Publications Trust, London, 1997, 2002, pp. 263–86.

¹³ Keeping in mind that the phrases ‘the word of God’ or ‘the word of the Lord’ were never used to describe written documents.

As mentioned elsewhere, the language used of the Holy Spirit is sometimes unusual. The Greek word for 'spirit' is πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) and it is a neuter word. But there are occasions when masculine pronouns are used (John 16:13–14; Eph. 1:14) and we have also noted that the Spirit 'speaks' to the churches in Revelation 1–3.

There is also the notable passion of Jesus for the honour of the Spirit, as evidenced in Matthew 12:31–32. And we will also see in a later chapter that the Spirit may be known in personal experience by men and women in Christ.

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