

# PAPER #10

## A Response to Various Biblical Objections

There remain a number of passages or other evidence from the Bible that are often used in defense of Orthodox Trinitarianism. Many of these would likely be used as evidence against the Transcendent Monotheism that I espouse. In this paper I will outline some of the more important of these objections and briefly respond to them. I have not opted to address them in any particular order.

**Objection #1:** In a handful of assertions by Jesus, he certainly appears to describe himself as having existed prior to his incarnation, in a relationship with and in proximity to God, his Father. He describes seeing the Father [John 5:19, 6:46, 8:38], knowing the Father [John 8:55, 10:15], hearing the Father [John 8:26], being taught by the Father [John 7:16,12:49], and then coming down to earth from God [John 3:13, 6:32-46]—having been sent from the Father [John 7:16, 8:26,12:49]. Does this not describe exactly what Orthodox Trinitarianism espouses? Is it not incompatible with Transcendent Monotheism?

**1.1)** Whether this is any sort of evidence for Trinitarianism, of course, depends on exactly what all these assertions mean. That, in part, depends on how literally Jesus is speaking in these various assertions. Does Jesus mean that there was literally a time when he “saw” the Father? If so, then this is indeed evidence for the Trinitarian position and evidence against Transcendent Monotheism. Does Jesus mean to suggest that he literally heard God “speak” to him in some pre-existent state in heaven? If so, then it is important evidence in support of Trinitarianism.

However, it is also something of a problem for some Trinitarian doctrines. To the extent that, according to Trinitarianism, the Son is co-equal with the Father, why would the pre-existent Son need to be instructed by the Father? (Usually, Trinitarianism “solves” this problem by distinguishing between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. This seems to be an *ad hoc* doctrine employed by Trinitarianism to resolve this apparent contradiction.)

Does Jesus mean to say that he literally “came down” from God out of heaven? If so, then certainly this would be evidence of Jesus’ pre-existence and, hence, evidence against Transcendent Monotheism. Does Jesus mean to say that he was literally “sent by” the

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Father, in the sense that he was present with the Father and the Father instructed him to leave on a mission? If so, then, we have further evidence for Trinitarianism and against Transcendent Monotheism. With respect to whether we have evidence for Trinitarianism, everything hinges on how Jesus is speaking, literally or figuratively.

1.2) It is not likely that “descending out of heaven,” in and of itself, requires Jesus to be saying that he was with the Father as a divine peer before he became a man.

Consider Matthew 28:2, “And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.” It is not likely that this implies that an angel of the Lord is a peer of God, because he “descended from heaven.” This is probably meant to be literal, that is, this angel simply “descended from out of the sky.” Jesus cannot be using that description of himself. We know that Jesus was born of Mary and grew up in Nazareth; he did not fall out of the sky. So, Jesus means something else.

Consider Revelation 3:12, “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which **comes down out of heaven from My God...**” Again, Revelation 21:10, “And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, **coming down out of heaven from God.**” In these two statements in Revelation, while it is likely that the language is literal—that is, he is describing a vision of the holy city descending out of the skies—the book of Revelation itself is highly symbolic. What does it mean for the holy city to be “coming down out of heaven from God”? It certainly doesn’t mean that the holy city is a person in an eternal godhead. In all likelihood, it is a metaphorical way of emphasizing the specific role that it plays in the purposes of God. It is the city designed expressly by God to be the final destiny of his people. God himself has prepared this abode for his people; it is straight from the dwelling of the transcendent God himself! It is not literal. The city was not literally constructed in some transcendent realm. That is neither necessary, nor plausible.

In all likelihood, these statements in Revelation help us understand Jesus’ description of himself. To have “descended out of heaven from God” is to be the one specifically created and appointed by God to be the Messiah, the Coming One. Jesus is the one granted authority by God to come into the world and effect his eternal purposes for the salvation of the world and the establishment of his eternal Kingdom.

This is also the sense of those statements Jesus makes about being “sent from God.” He was “sent from” God in that he was appointed by God to accomplish specific purposes. He was “sent” to be the Messiah and to do all that the Messiah was appointed to do. Being “sent from” God does not have to imply Jesus’ pre-existence; nor does it imply his being an eternal person of a triune godhead. In John 1:6 we read, “There came a man **sent from God**, whose name was John.” John is describing the coming of John the Baptist. Clearly John the Baptist’s being “sent from God” does not imply *his* pre-existence. He was an ordinary human being, but he was created for a specific mission, with a divinely given appointment: to be the forerunner of the Messiah. Being “sent” does not imply

John's having existed with God before creation; and neither does it imply that in Jesus' case.

All things considered, it would seem that "coming down out of heaven from God," "being sent from God," and similar statements are intended by Jesus in a metaphorical sense. None of them are intended as literal descriptions of a cosmic reality.

**1.3)** With regard to the point above, note John 6:38, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent me." Note that "coming down from heaven" is clearly linked with God having "sent" him. Further note that both are linked with having a specific purpose: "to do the will of Him who sent me." This seems to support my contention that both "being sent" and "coming down from heaven" are metaphors intended to stress the fact that Jesus has a God-given purpose and authority to accomplish that purpose.

**1.4)** Jesus' talk of his hearing the Father, being taught by him, and similar comments are also most likely metaphorical. Consider John 8:38 where Jesus says to some unbelieving Jews, "I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father." In 8:44, Jesus identifies who the father of these unbelievers is: "You are of your father the devil." In 8:38, Jesus is drawing this parallel: what I have seen from my Father is what I believe and teach; what you have heard from your father the devil is what you believe and do. Is Jesus suggesting that these unbelievers literally heard the oral teaching of the devil? If not, then it is equally possible that Jesus has never literally seen the things from his Father. He is saying that he *has an understanding of* them, not that he literally laid eyes on them. Indeed, he is referring to abstract, intangible things that could never literally be seen anyway.

**1.5)** Furthermore, consider Jesus' claim that he has "seen" the Father. In John 6:46 he says, "Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father." Jesus clearly means to denote himself as the One who is from God. Therefore, he is the one exception; he has "seen the Father." To understand what he means, note 6:45: "It is written in the prophets, 'AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me." Jesus' point here is that, as the prophets predict (when they announce the coming of the New Covenant), there will be some Jews whose hearts will be circumcised and will accordingly "be taught of God."

What will it mean for them to "be taught of God"? What will it mean for them to have "heard and learned from the Father"? Will it mean that they know everything there is to know about God? No. It means that God will have prepared their hearts to be responsive to the truth about God and his purposes. They won't automatically know everything there is to know; they won't have "seen" God. But they will be open and receptive to any and every truth. Accordingly, Jesus says, they will "come to Me," for "everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me." When Jesus asserts immediately

following this, "Not that anyone has seen the Father...", he is making a distinction between "having heard and learned from the Father" and "having seen the Father."

What is the distinction? The one who has "heard and learned from the Father" is the one who is open and receptive to what the Father wants to teach him. The one who has "seen the Father" is the one who has somehow managed to acquire "full and complete" knowledge of the Father. No Jew has done that, Jesus insists. One and only one person possesses complete and full understanding of the Father: the Christ, the "One who is from God."

Exactly what knowledge of God does the Christ possess? Does he know the transcendent God in his unknowable transcendence? There is no reason from this passage to conclude that this is what Jesus is claiming. Jesus is merely a man; he does not know God in any sense that surpasses the bounds of what a man can know. His point is that no one *except him* is in a position to give authoritative and infallible knowledge of who God is and what God's purposes are. Jesus is unique in his being in possession of impeccable knowledge of God.

**1.6)** Visual knowledge, throughout the whole history of ideas, commends itself as a metaphor for knowledge that is certain and reliable. If you "see" something, then you KNOW it is true. If you have clearly seen something, you have accurate and complete knowledge of it.

**1.7)** Clearly, Jesus is speaking literally when he speaks of "knowing the Father." However, the fact that he literally knows the Father does not require Jesus to have been the second person of the Trinity, nor even to have pre-existed. Indeed, one day we will all "know" the Father in somewhat the way Jesus did. Jesus' insistence that he "knows the Father" is his way of underlining the fact that he has something important to teach us. His contemporaries would be foolish to ignore what he has to say; what he has to teach them is the truth itself. He knows what he is talking about because he knows and has been instructed by the Father, who is the source of all that is true. This parallels exactly the point about "seeing God" in 1.5 above and about "ascending to heaven" in 1.8 below.

**1.8)** Let us consider John 3:13 in more detail. John 3:13 reads, "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man." To understand this, we must first understand what he means by "no one has ascended into heaven." To understand that, we must understand the context. John writes, "Truly, truly, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" In this encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus is asserting the authority he has as a teacher, which is grounded in his extraordinary knowledge of the things of God. He "speaks of things he knows" and "testifies of what he has seen." (As we saw in an earlier note, "what he has seen" is probably metaphorical, not literal. To "see" God and the things of God is to have an extraordinarily clear and full understanding of these.)

Next, Jesus says, "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you

believe if I tell you heavenly things?” It is difficult to know what distinction Jesus is making between “earthly things” and “heavenly things.” Here is my best judgment. Nicodemus, the “teacher of Israel” does not understand that a person must be born of the Spirit to be saved. That “surprises” Jesus. The prophets specifically teach it. How could an honored rabbi like Nicodemus have missed it? Such a fact is an “earthly thing,” but Nicodemus has been reluctant or unable to readily accept it. So, Jesus says, “I won’t bother to try to discuss any ‘heavenly things’ with you.” What is this distinction Jesus is making?

By “earthly thing” it would seem that Jesus means something that is directly accessible to us who are here on the earth (notably, the explicit revelations of God through his prophets). Accordingly, a “heavenly thing” must be something that is not directly accessible through revelation. Is it then unknowable? I don’t think so. Jesus implies that he would have gone on to discuss “heavenly things” with Nicodemus if he had been more receptive to the “earthly things.” “Heavenly things,” I think, are those things about God and his purposes that can only be known from a broader and more direct insight into the character of God himself. Knowledge of “heavenly things” can be inferred from the Scriptures—if one is spiritually receptive and therefore has eyes to see the implications of what God has explicitly revealed; but heavenly things are not explicitly revealed in a direct form. To come to know a “heavenly thing” is not a simple matter of opening the Bible and reading about it. One can understand the assertion of a biblical text, but fail to have real INSIGHT into all that it entails. To understand “heavenly things” is to have real insight into the character of God (as that could be discerned from the Bible) such that one can “see” how all of God’s purposes fall into place and fit together.

The passage we are examining (3:13) comes next. “No one has ascended into heaven.” To ascend into heaven is to go up to where God is and to get a direct, personal tutorial from God himself. It has to do with the completeness and reliability of one’s knowledge of the things of God. One ascends into heaven in order to get understanding. [See Deuteronomy 30:12.] No one has ever done that, Jesus asserts. But there is one who has come down to us, having been sent with complete and reliable knowledge of the things of God: the Son of Man. The Son of Man is one who has “descended from heaven.” Accordingly, he has the authority and the understanding to teach anyone who will listen about “heavenly things,” for his knowledge is infallible and complete.

Notice that the Greek of 3:13 could quite legitimately be translated, “no one has ascended into heaven, but the one who has descended from heaven is the Son of man.” Or, perhaps better, “no one has ascended into heaven, but the Son of man is he who has descended from heaven.” When he says that no one has ascended into heaven, his point is that heretofore no human being has ever managed to ascend to the presence of God, get fully informed about the nature and purpose of human existence from him, and then come down to tell us what they learned. While no one has ever done that, there is one—the Son of Man—who has specifically been sent by God from heaven (has “descended from heaven”) in order to give us the full truth about human existence.

It would be a mistake to read too much into “descended from heaven”, as if it implied

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that he existed in heaven before he came down. Jesus' intent is to contrast the fact that no other human being has ever attained a full understanding of Truth with the fact that just such full understanding has been granted to him. If another human being had ever ascended to heaven and then had **DESCENDED FROM HEAVEN** to tell us what he learned, his descent from heaven would not imply that he was a pre-existent person of the Godhead. It would imply nothing more than that he had his information straight from God himself. That is all Jesus is claiming for himself: his knowledge comes straight from God himself.

**1.9)** In John 8:29, Jesus makes it clear that the one who "sent" him "has not left him [Jesus] alone." This does not make sense if both "sent" or "has not left him alone" are literal. This would make Jesus' statement nonsensical. At least one of them is metaphorical. I think both are.

**1.10)** John 5:19 reads, "...the Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing...." The act of seeing the Father do something, in this case, is clearly something the human Jesus is doing. It is not something the pre-existent, eternal Son did. This sort of statement has no bearing on our question.

It is an interesting question to know what it means for Jesus to "see the Father doing something." I don't know exactly what he means. Probably it refers to some sort of relationship to God akin to a prophet—where God reveals things to him. Perhaps the manner in which the Father reveals things to Jesus makes it apt for him to describe it as "seeing."

**1.11)** Objection #1 is based on a faulty premise. In Jesus' comments about himself, he does not mean to describe himself "as having existed prior to his incarnation, in a relationship with and in proximity to God, his Father." On the contrary, they describe him as being in possession of complete knowledge of the things of God, and as having been appointed by God to come and reveal that knowledge to mankind, in accordance with the will of his Father, who "sent" him for that very purpose. None of Jesus' comments assume that he is anything other than a human being who has been granted this unique role and authority.

**Objection #2:** In a handful of assertions, Jesus certainly appears to describe himself as being about to ascend to be with God, the Father [John 6:62; 20:17; Eph. 4:8–10;], as being about to go back to God, the Father [John 7:33; 13:1, 3; 16:10, 28]. These assertions seem to imply that he is returning to where he existed once before. Does this not describe exactly what Orthodox Trinitarianism espouses? Is it not incompatible with Transcendent Monotheism?

**2.1)** There are a number of occasions in the New Testament where Jesus is described as “ascending to the right hand of the Majesty on High”—or something to that effect. Is this intended to be literal? Does it describe Jesus’ physical location currently—subsequent to his resurrection and ascension?

Certainly, the ascension was literal in one sense. Jesus did literally, physically rise up into the skies and out of sight. But why? Is it because he was journeying to some place in the physical universe? Possibly, but nothing in the New Testament requires that conclusion. We really have no information about the current physical state and location of Jesus. It is more likely that Jesus’ literal, physical ascension into the skies was a symbolic event—not the practical reality of Jesus moving from here to there. In all likelihood, once out of sight, Jesus was supernaturally transported to a whole other dimension. We simply do not and cannot know.

What we can know is that the New Testament sees a close, inseparable connection between Jesus ascending and Jesus taking his place at the right hand of God. Being at the right hand of God is not literally the location where Jesus is to be found. (How can God, who is spirit, have a right side literally? Where would it be?) It has to be a symbolic representation of something. Some scholars have suggested that, in the ancient world, the most powerful councilor to the king always sat on the king’s right hand. If that is right, then “being seated at the right hand of God” symbolizes the fact that Jesus has taken up the position of power and authority that God, his Father, had promised him. Jesus was the Son of God at his birth. After his obedience to his Father—submitting to death on the cross—Jesus became qualified to actually assume the power, authority, and status that being the Son of God entailed. The resurrection was God’s honoring Jesus’ obedience by raising him up to actually assume the authority and power for which he had been destined from the beginning. This assumption of his rule is very frequently described as “being seated at the right hand of God.” Therefore, to have Jesus’ ascension closely linked with his “being seated at the right hand of God” is tantamount to having Jesus’ ascension closely linked with his entering into his power, authority, and rule.

1 Peter 4:22 would seem to support the connection between Jesus’ ascension and his being seated at the right hand of God. It reads, “...who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to him.” Notice also that Jesus’ power is always inferior to that of his Father. John 14:28 reads, “You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.”

**2.2)** Accordingly, when Jesus predicts that he is “going back to God” or “ascending to the Father” or “going to be with him who sent me,” he is saying, in effect, that he is going to assume his rightful place as the highest authority in the whole cosmos under God himself. He is not specifying where he will be located; he is specifying who he has become. He is specifying the nature of the authority and power that he is about to assume. John 13:3 is particularly telling in this regard. It reads, “...Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up ....” Jesus knew the authority that he was predestined to have. He

knew that God had sent him for the very purpose of qualifying for that role and authority. He also knew that the time had come to assume that authority—that is, to “go back to God.” The connection between “all things having been given into his hands” and his ultimately “going back to God” is quite clear and explicit in this statement. [I would interpret John 7:33, 13:1, and 20:17 and Ephesians 4:10 along these same lines.]

**2.3)** There are other passages where the assumption of authority is not in the forefront. (Though it may still be in the background.) What is in the forefront is the fact that Jesus will no longer be physically present in the world. He is departing and will thenceforth be absent and unavailable to his disciples. John 16:10 and 16:28 are, I think, best understood that way.

**2.4)** It is quite clear that Jesus’ ascension is meant to indicate his status and authority—and not his location—in Ephesians 4:10. It reads, “He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.” He didn’t ascend far above all the heavens so that he would be located in that particular location. Rather, he ascended far above all the heavens so that he would “fill all things.” I think to “fill all things” means to bring to full completion all that had been promised with respect to him—that is, to fully enter into all the honor, status, power, and authority that he was created to have.

**2.5)** John 6:62 is a very puzzling statement. As translated by the NASV, it reads, “What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?” Translated this way, it appears to be a very compelling piece of evidence for Trinitarianism. The basic Trinitarian picture is that an eternal Son, existing with the Father from all eternity, comes to earth and incarnates as the man Jesus and then, after his resurrection, returns to his former state of existing with the Father. Given this basic Trinitarian picture, it seems utterly natural to take John 6:62 to be a reference to Jesus predicting his return to the Father to resume existing as the eternal Son, as he did before the creation of the world.

The interpretive crux is how to translate *to proteron*—translated “before” by the NASV. (To translate it “before” is completely consistent with how it is used elsewhere in the New Testament.) While it is “natural” for the Trinitarian to interpret it as he does, it is a mistake to assume that the most “natural” interpretation is the right one. The “naturalness” of a reading is a function of one’s pre-understanding. An interpretation strikes me as “natural” when it fits nicely with what I already think and believe. Therefore, a “natural” reading is only as good as the pre-understanding that informs it. If the Trinitarian picture is false, then the interpretation that strikes one as “natural” (when he is reading through Trinitarian lenses) would be invalid. So far, we have seen no definitive evidence that the Bible actually teaches Trinitarianism. Hence, we cannot presume that Trinitarianism is true in our approach to the interpretation of this verse. Rather than ask what reading seems “natural,” it is more important to ask what reading makes the most sense in the context.

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The whole interchange between Jesus and his disciples in John 6:62 is puzzling. The NASV reads, "But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, 'Does this cause you to stumble? What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.'" Little in this statement is easy to understand.

We must first understand what his disciples are "grumbling" about. Actually, "grumbling" would be better translated "murmuring." Specifically, they are complaining among themselves at what they take to be an embarrassing performance by their master. He is embarrassing them because, in their judgment, he is not making himself look good. What is embarrassing about his performance? There are two options: (i) it could be his use of rather grotesque metaphors about "eating his body" and "drinking his blood" and, more generally, the totally outlandish statements he is making; or (ii) it could be his shameless self-adulation, his embarrassing forthrightness about what an important person he is. The first option would make sense, but the second option better explains why Jesus responds as he does.

Understanding it in accord with this second option, we could paraphrase the interchange this way: "Do you have a difficult time accepting my claims about myself? Do you think I have an exaggerated view of myself? Do you not believe that I am who I say I am? What will you do if you should see the Son of Man ascending to where he was *to proteron*? Will you believe me then? It is your spirit that will qualify you for eternal life; your natural achievements and virtues will profit you nothing in that regard."

(I take "spirit" here not to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, but to the spirit of the individual person. The connection in Jesus' mind is probably something like this: whether a person is able to believe Jesus' claims about himself is a matter of the condition of his spirit. Eternal life will come to the one who believes—that is, to the one whose spirit is open to God and truth. There are no virtues in one's natural-born humanity that can qualify a person for eternal Life; only the condition of one's spirit can do that.)

If this is the right way to understand this interchange, then what does *to proteron* mean? To begin with, I think we need to adjust the NASV to make it more apparent that he is posing a hypothetical: "What then if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was *to proteron*?" This is the basic gist of his question: What if you were to see the Son of Man actually realize his exalted status so that it became completely manifest to you who he was? Would you believe then? So, whatever ὅπου ἦν τὸ πρότερον [*hopou en to proteron* ("where he was before")] means, it is tantamount to meaning "where he was the important person that he has claimed to be." That being so, it is noteworthy that *to proteron* could be translated something like "pre-eminent" or "of first importance."

The lexicon by Liddell and Scott lists one possible meaning of *proteros* as priority in "Rank, Worth, and generally of Precedence, *before, above, superior.*" Furthermore, in an apocryphal book, *Wisdom 7:29* reads, "For she is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior [*proteros*]. . . ." Clearly, the verse in *Wisdom* is using *proteros* to indicate priority in excellence, not priority in time. [Note that the only reason the citation from *Wisdom* does

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not use exactly the same form *proteron*—and parallel Jesus’ statement precisely—is because the Greek noun *sophia* is feminine and calls for the adjective *protera* rather than *proteron*.]

If we understand Jesus to be using *proteros* in a manner more in line with these meanings, then we could translate John 6:62 this way: “What then if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was **pre-eminent**?” This would make a great deal of sense in the context of this interchange with his disciples. Furthermore, there is precedence—albeit rare (in the Bible)—for *proteros* to mean such a thing. All things considered, I think this is the right way to understand Jesus’ statement in John 6:62.

There are two possible objections that could be raised against this interpretation: (i) Why is the neuter *to proteron* used rather than the masculine *ho proteros*, if Jesus is using it to describe himself? (ii) The neuter *to proteron* is frequently used as an adverb to mean “before” with respect to time. Why would you not construe it the same way it is used everywhere else in the New Testament?

With respect to the first objection, it is true that Jesus could have used the masculine. However, it is also true that, when a speaker is referring to an abstraction rather than to a particular, concrete person, he might very well use the neuter to refer to it. Jesus may not be saying, “. . .to where he was the pre-eminent person.” Rather, he may be saying, “to where he was the pre-eminence.” I believe it is quite in keeping with Greek idiom to use the neuter in this way.

With respect to the second objection, it is true that the particular form *to proteron* is used adverbially, but it is fundamentally an adjective that is being used adverbially. As a consequence, there is always the risk of ambiguity. In certain contexts it will not be clear whether it is functioning as an adverb, as a modifier of a substantive, or as an abstract concept. There is no ambiguity in *Wisdom*, for the context makes it quite clear. There is ambiguity in John 6:62. However—all things considered—I think the statement should be read in the way I have proposed: **“What then if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was the pre-eminence?”**

Even if one is not persuaded of my interpretation of *to proteron* and insists that it should be read as “previously (in time),” it is still not a foregone conclusion that the Trinitarian picture underlies Jesus’ assertion. Jesus could simply be asserting—in an admittedly awkward and confusing way—that his status as the most important person in God’s creation pre-dated his incarnation. In such a case, it would not be because he literally existed prior to the incarnation. Rather, it would be because God’s pre-destined purpose for Jesus—to be the embodiment of God’s rule and authority—already existed before the creation of the earth. [Note my interpretation of John 1:1–3.] There are other instances of Jesus saying essentially this very thing. It could be that this is what Jesus is saying here. In accord with such a reading, we could translate it this way: “What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to that place he already was before?” To capture the sense of this, we could paraphrase it: “What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to that place of status and authority which was already his, by right, from before?”

There is yet another option. We have already seen occasions where Jesus says, "I came down from the Father, now I am returning to be with my Father." I have already argued that Jesus is not speaking literally when he says such a thing. He is not describing where he is before and after his incarnation. Rather, the picture of "coming from" the Father and "returning to" the Father is a way to indicate the source and nature of his authority and honor. It is possible that Jesus is doing the same thing here. According to this reading, I would translate it: "What then if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" To capture the sense of this, we could paraphrase it: "What then if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to that place of authority under God that is consonant with the prior purposes God had for me when he sent me to begin with?" This is not the interpretation I prefer; it seems like it stretches the metaphor too far. While I don't prefer it, I cannot altogether rule it out.

All things considered, the interpretation of John 6:62 that I think most likely captures Jesus' intent is this: **"What then if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was the pre-eminence?"**

**2.6)** It is possible that John 6:62 means something that is compatible with Trinitarianism and incompatible with Transcendent Monotheism, but John 6:62 presents difficult challenges to the modern interpreter. Our English translations are not incontrovertible. Therefore, as evidence for Trinitarianism, it is very shaky evidence indeed.

**Objection #3:** In one particular passage, John 8:58, Jesus clearly describes himself as existing "before" Abraham. Is this claim not compatible with Orthodox Trinitarianism and incompatible with Transcendent Monotheism?

**3.1)** The NASV translation of John 8:58 reads, "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born I am.'" To adjust this translation slightly, I think it should be translated, "...before Abraham came to be, I am." I think Jesus means this in the sense of "...before Abraham came to be, I am there."

The crucial question is why Jesus would think that his being there before Abraham is significant. If we can determine that, we will be in a better position to understand the sense in which Jesus does exist before Abraham.

In the context, Jesus seeks to draw attention to the importance of who he is. He does so by saying, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." John tells us that the Jews responded to Jesus' claim with, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Apparently, they are taking offense that Jesus would presume to know what Abraham did and did not rejoice in. Wouldn't he have to have known Abraham personally in order to know that? Does Jesus really mean to suggest that he knew Abraham personally? The Jews are scornful of Jesus' claim. In response to their scorn Jesus responds, "... before Abraham came to be, I am there." Then, in response to

this claim, these Jews threaten to stone him. Why? The answer to that will help us understand how these men interpreted Jesus' statement.

In other cases where people set out to stone Jesus, it is for blasphemy. I think the same is true here. As they understand what Jesus is claiming, he is committing blasphemy. What did they understand Jesus to be saying such that they judged it to be blasphemous?

One of the keys to understanding Jesus' response is to understand that it was not a direct answer to their question. Their question did not invite a response; it was not a real question. It was a scornful rhetorical question. It was their way of accusing Jesus of being presumptuous and ridiculous. Jesus' response was not an answer to their stated question; it was a response to their scorn.

How does he respond to their scorn? By directly and explicitly announcing his superiority to Abraham. That is what he had begun to do that raised their ire to begin with: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day...." In other words, "Abraham understood that I am more important than he." Now, responding to their scorn, he makes the same point again. This time he does so by asserting that "before Abraham had even come into existence, I was there." His opponents apparently grasped the import of what he was saying. Jesus was claiming to be more important than Abraham. That was blasphemy! So they took up stones with the intention to stone him.

How (and in what sense) would claiming to "be there" before Abraham even existed make Jesus more important than Abraham? Only if being there "before" implied that Jesus had a more important role than Abraham's. How could being there before Abraham in time imply that he had a more important role? Only if it meant that Abraham's role found its definition in relation to Jesus' role and not *vice versa*. The mere fact that Jesus existed in time before Abraham would not, in and of itself, imply that he had a more important role. (Adam, Enoch, and Noah existed before Abraham too; but that doesn't prove that they had a more important role than Abraham.) So that cannot be what Jesus means. He is not saying that he existed *as a person* before Abraham did; rather, he is saying that *his role, status, and destiny were already determined before Abraham's role, status, and destiny were determined*. Jesus is saying, "My role is more important than Abraham's. Mine came first. His role is only meaningful to the extent that it contributes to mine. That is why '...Abraham rejoiced to see My day.'"

Therefore, Jesus is not making the claim here that he actually existed before Abraham did. It is not his personal existence that is in view. What is in view is his pre-destined role and purpose. The pre-destined role of Jesus **did** exist before that of Abraham. Hence, Jesus is claiming that he is more important than Abraham, the Father of the Jews. That is blasphemy! (Unless it is true.)

**3.2)** Jesus also says, with respect to Abraham, that "he saw it [Jesus' day] and was glad." What does Jesus mean when he says that Abraham "saw" it? Jesus must mean that Abraham "envisioned" it and found it a source of joy. Abraham never did see the fulfillment of the promises that had been made to him; but he believed that God was going to fulfill them. The prospect of those promises being fulfilled was personally significant to Abraham (such that it brought him joy to contemplate their fulfillment)—

even though he would not personally be around to see their fulfillment. In what sense did Abraham “envision” Jesus’ day? The promise to Abraham was that “in him all the peoples of the earth would be blessed.” It was the fulfillment of that, among other promises, that made Abraham “glad” when he contemplated or envisioned it. Jesus knows that it is he, Jesus, who will bring about the fulfillment of that promise. He is going to bring the blessing of Life to all the peoples of the earth. Accordingly, it was his (Jesus’) day that Abraham rejoiced to see.

**3.3)** The New Testament is full of examples of things being predicated of people before they actually exist. A good example is the notion that we believers have been chosen [“foreknown”] before the foundation of the world to be glorified in the age to come. [Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:28–30, Rev. 13:8] In describing the situation this way, the New Testament is not implying that we believers pre-existed before the world was formed. When God “chose” us, we did not yet exist as actual beings. We did exist in the mind and purposes of God however. It is in that sense that God chose or “foreknew” us.

Revelation 13:8 (under one possible reading) speaks of “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” The event of Jesus’ dying on the cross did not actually transpire before the world was in existence. Clearly that is not what this phrase means. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that Jesus’ destiny had been pre-determined, before the world even came into existence.

Similarly, in Matt. 25:34 it says, “...inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Again, this statement is not meant to imply that, before or at the time God created the cosmos, he built the Kingdom of God. Jesus is not saying that the Kingdom of God already exists in the heavens, waiting for people to come. Rather, he means that, from the foundation of the world, God has planned to form such a Kingdom.

It is this same viewpoint that informs Jesus’ statement here in John 6. Jesus is not suggesting that he **actually existed** before Abraham did. Rather, just as the Kingdom has been prepared from the foundation of the world, so also Jesus has existed as the Son of God, the King of that Kingdom, from the foundation of the world. He has not existed in his actual being from the foundation of the world; he has existed in the mind, purpose, and resolve of God from the foundation of the world.

**3.4)** There is an important parallel between God “foreknowing” his elect and Jesus’ being “foreknown” [1 Peter 1:20 > “For He (Jesus) was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you...”]. If being foreknown by God does not imply my pre-existence, then Jesus’ being foreknown need not imply his pre-existence. Indeed, the fact that Peter uses “foreknow” with respect to Jesus might suggest that he understands Jesus’ election to be the Messiah in the same way that Paul understands my election to be a child of God—namely, neither Jesus nor I actually existed at the time we were chosen. Rather, Jesus and I were chosen or “foreknown” in the sense that God pre-determined to create each of us for our respective destinies. The passage in 1 Peter does not rule out Jesus’ actual pre-existence. However, this parallel could suggest that Peter does not conceive of Jesus as pre-existent.

**3.5)** John 8:58 does not provide any decisive evidence that Jesus pre-existed as an actual existing person. Hence, it is not at all conclusive as evidence for Trinitarian doctrine.

**Objection #4:** In a handful of assertions [John 5:18; 10:33; 17:20–23], Jesus certainly appears to describe himself as being equal with (or, *one* with) God. Does this not describe exactly what Orthodox Trinitarianism espouses? Is it not incompatible with Transcendent Monotheism?

**4.1)** As should be clear from Papers #3 and 4, Transcendent Monotheism holds that Jesus just *IS* God. Accordingly, it holds that he is “equal to” God and “one” with him. None of these assertions is at all inconsistent with the claims of Transcendent Monotheism.

**4.2)** The only way these assertions could be evidence against Transcendent Monotheism (and evidence for Orthodox Trinitarianism) is if they explicitly asserted that Jesus is “equal to” or “one with” God with respect to the ontological stuff from which he is made. None of the above passages can be construed to suggest such a thing specifically— unless the interpreter reads that meaning into the text. Whether the assumption underlying these assertions is Trinitarianism or Transcendent Monotheism cannot be determined on the basis of these assertions alone.

**Objection #5:** There are a handful of statements that either explicitly state that Jesus is God or imply it indirectly. [John 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20] If the Bible explicitly teaches that Jesus is fully God, this would seem to support Trinitarian doctrine.

**5.1)** As should be clear from Papers #3 and 4, Transcendent Monotheism holds that Jesus just *IS* God. Accordingly, it holds that he could legitimately be called “God.” Therefore, none of these assertions is at all problematic with respect to Transcendent Monotheism.

**5.2)** Many of the passages cited in this objection involve problems involving their syntax. I will not explore the difficulties in these passages since nothing hinges on the outcome. If they do state or imply that Jesus is God, that is exactly what both Transcendent Monotheism and Trinitarianism would expect. If they do not, then they are irrelevant to this discussion.

**Objection #6:** Paul describes Jesus in Colossians as the *pleroma* [fullness] of God. [Col 1:19; 2:9] Surely Paul means that Jesus consists of the fullness

of all that God is ontologically; and this certainly must imply that Jesus consists of divine stuff, fully and undiluted. This is just what Trinitarianism maintains; and it is in conflict with Transcendent Monotheism.

**6.1)** It is not obvious that the premise of this objection is accurate—namely, that Paul means to say that Jesus consists of the fullness of God’s ontological nature. It is just as likely that Paul simply means to say that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.” By asserting that “all the fullness dwells in” Jesus, Paul’s point may very well be that, as an “image” of God, Jesus *fully* and *completely* reflects who God is. Jesus is not a partial image; neither is he an image of only a part of God. Jesus is a full and complete image; he is an image of the fullness of what God is. To be the “fullness” [*pleroma*] of God, Jesus can be a full and complete image of God in the medium of human “stuff.” He needn’t be made of God stuff to be the “fullness” [*pleroma*] of God.

**6.2)** I have never thoroughly studied and translated Colossians, so I can offer no confident judgment about what Paul means by *pleroma*. It is worth noting that it may not mean the “fullness of God” at all. [Although, because of Col. 2:9 (*pleroma tes theotetos*), I think it is highly probable that is what Paul means.] Note that in Ephesians 3:19 *pleroma* is used to describe the nature of the believer’s inheritance: “...and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness [*pleroma*] of God.” Is Paul saying that the destiny of a child of God is that he be completely filled with the fullness of the ontological being of God himself? Is he saying that believers will become God?! I don’t think so. It is highly more likely that *pleroma* means something like “the fullness of all that God has purposed for his elect.” Accordingly, Paul may be using *pleroma* in Colossians in a comparably more nuanced way as well. It would take its precise meaning from the context of the argument. However, since that is something I cannot speak to with any confidence, I have no basis to know exactly what Paul means when, in Colossians, he describes Jesus as the indwelling of the *pleroma*.

**6.3)** It should be clear that we do not find in Paul’s description of Jesus as the indwelling of the *pleroma* any indubitable, determinative evidence for Trinitarian doctrine.

**Objection #7:** Your earlier interpretation of John 8:58 is mistaken. The blasphemous assertion that raises the ire of his opponents is his claim to be “I AM,” the name of God himself. God tells Moses that his name is “I AM.” Jesus says that he is “I AM.” Hence, Jesus is calling himself Yahweh. There are other passages where Jesus does this same thing. [John 4:25–26; 8:24,28;

13:19; 18:5,6,8]. If Jesus explicitly calls himself Yahweh, this would seem to support Trinitarian doctrine.

7.1) This is a bizarre reading of John 8:58 and all the other passages of which this point is alleged. If you were to understand the verse the way the objection suggests it should be understood, it would read, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I was Yahweh" (on the most charitable of renderings). This rendering asks us to ignore the verb that is explicitly a part of the statement [i.e., the verb "I am"]. We are to decide that it is **not** the verb of the sentence. That leaves us with no verb in the sentence. Then, since we have no verb in the sentence, we must supply a verb—namely, the verb "I am," (which is the same word as the one we excluded when we decided that the verb explicitly present was **not** the verb of the sentence). This strikes me as bizarre. Why would I conclude that the verb of the sentence is *not* the verb, and then supply a verb that is not actually there—especially when the word I supply is exactly the same word as the one I excluded to begin with?

7.2) What makes this reading all the more problematic is that I don't accept the premise of the objection. I see no reason to think that the Greek, *ego eimi* (I am) is the equivalent of YHWH [Yahweh]. I would argue, in agreement with the Septuagint and Thomas Aquinas, that YHWH means "He who is," not "I am." The interpretation of YHWH as "I am" does not even occur (to my knowledge) until much later. This interpretation takes a pure coincidence—namely, that the plain ordinary English translation of *ego eimi* happens to coincide with the normal English translation of a faulty interpretation of what the name Yahweh means—and turns it into an argument for the deity of Jesus. This is not at all convincing.

7.3) When an argument for Jesus' deity is made from the fact that he utters the words, "*ego eimi*," in most, if not all, of those passages, the syntax simply does not cooperate. The requisite interpretations are utterly implausible. Accordingly, some will argue that Jesus is not making a direct statement that he is Yahweh. Rather, the fact that he utters the words, "*ego eimi*" (I AM) is an *allusion* to the name of God. Therefore, it is an *intimation* that he is God, not a direct assertion. This too is a bizarre suggestion. Consider John 9:9 where a blind beggar, whom Jesus healed by slapping mud in his eyes and having him go to the Pool of Siloam to wash it out, has returned to his neighborhood and is now able to see. This verse describes his neighbors debating the identity of the man. It reads, "Others were saying, 'This is he,' *still* others were saying, 'No, but he is like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the one.'" The statement translated "I am the one" is simply *ego eimi* in the Greek. The clause *ego eimi* is exactly the phrase Jesus uses in John 8:58. Is this formerly blind beggar intimating that he is Yahweh? If this man's use of *ego eimi* is not such an intimation, then why would we think it is when Jesus uses it?

**PAPER #10: A Response to Various Biblical Objections**

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7.4) Some argue that, in Isaiah, where God says (in Hebrew), “*ani hu*”—“I (am) he”—God is speaking his own name. Since the Septuagint translates *ani hu* as *ego eimi*, it follows that, when Jesus utters *ego eimi*, he must be speaking the name of God as well. This argument does not make sense. To begin with, *ani hu* is not the name of God in those Isaiah passages. It is an idiomatic way of saying “I (am) he” or “I (am) the one.” The context determines the exact referent of “he” or “the one.” Similarly, *ego eimi* is the corresponding Greek idiom for “I am (he)” or “I am (the one).” Again, the context determines the referent for “he” or “the one.” [The parentheses indicate the part of the English that is implicit rather than explicit in the respective Hebrew or Greek phrases.]

7.5) In John 18 the temple guard comes to take Jesus into custody. Jesus asks them whom they seek. They say that they are seeking Jesus the Nazarene. Jesus replies, “*ego eimi*” [“I am he”= “that would be me; I am Jesus the Nazarene”]. Upon Jesus saying, “*ego eimi*,” the soldiers—apparently supernaturally—are forced backward and toppled to the ground. If I understand it rightly, there is a show of supernatural power in connection with Jesus uttering the words “*ego eimi*.” But there is no reason to think that this fact proves that *ego eimi* is the name of God. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, God has performed supernatural signs to validate Jesus’ claim to be the Christ, the Son of God, and to have a unique authority granted by God. For this particular supernatural miracle to occur as a sign of Jesus’ unique authority is perfectly consistent with the whole story of his life on earth. This event is not a matter of the name of God possessing power in and of itself. This event is a matter of God validating that Jesus is his Son, the Messiah.

7.6) After all is said and done, however, nothing is at stake here. As should be clear from Papers #3 and 4, Transcendent Monotheism holds that Jesus just *is* God. He is the very incarnation of Yahweh himself. Accordingly, it holds that he could in a certain sense legitimately be called “Yahweh.” Even if these assertions are intimations by Jesus that he is Yahweh, that would present no problems for Transcendent Monotheism.

**Objection #8:** In Matthew 28:19 we have perfectly clear evidence of the Trinity—“in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Jesus’ use of this explicit formula assumes that the Trinity is a true description of God. Not only do we find this explicit Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28, but also we see a consistent pattern of making mention of all three of the members of the Trinity in the apostles’ teaching. [2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 4:4–6] We would not see the use of this formula, nor this pattern, if Jesus and the apostles did not affirm the Trinity.

8.1) To the Transcendent Monotheist it is not the least bit surprising that there is the above-described pattern in the apostolic teaching. It makes sense that there would be mention of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in connection with the saving work of God.

God—the one and only transcendent creator—is the ultimate author of man’s salvation. Jesus—the incarnation of the transcendent creator who embodies his authority and rule—is a critical agent in God’s saving work. The Spirit of God is describe when he is at work in the lives of those people he has chosen to save, sanctifying them. Accordingly, each of these three names—Father, Son, and Spirit—is connected with a distinct, important element of God’s saving work. God saves, Jesus died in order to become the ground of that salvation, and the Spirit sanctifies the elect to mark the fact that they are being saved.

As we have seen, God and Jesus *are distinctive persons*. Jesus is a human person who bears the identity of the divine person, God. However, the fact that the Spirit is identified with a distinctive part of God’s saving work does not necessitate that he is a distinct person. Rather, it means that God’s working is being described in a distinctive way.

‘God’ describes the divine being from the standpoint of his transcendent sovereignty; ‘Spirit’ describes the divine being from the standpoint of his intimate, immanent, invisible, and inexplicable effects in the inner being of a human individual. The apostles could legitimately say that God sanctifies his elect; but that would not stress the invisible, mysterious working of God in the inner life of a particular individual in the same sort of way. The apostles could legitimately say that the Spirit of God is the creator of all that exists [Jesus does explicitly teach that God is spirit]; but that would not stress the transcendence and otherness of God in the same sort of way. Their pattern is to speak in terms of the Spirit of God when they are describing the intimate, close connection of God’s work to and within his creation; and to speak of God himself when they are describing the more general transcendent sovereignty of God. As we saw in Paper #9, both are a distinctive and important aspect of God’s work in relation to his people. God is the transcendent author of our very beings; but God is also the intimate, immanent, invisible power (spirit) at work within our hearts (spirits).

Everything in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles would encourage us to see the hand of God in saving us in three distinctive aspects: God insofar as he providentially controls the entire scope of our lives, God insofar as he became incarnate and died on the cross for our sins, and God insofar as he works powerfully and invisibly within our hearts transforming them. The habit or pattern of the apostles is to connect each of these three functions with a different concept: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Spirit. The regularity of this pattern, therefore, is grounded in the structure of God’s work in saving us. It is not grounded in the ontological structure of God’s being. There is no good evidence in the New Testament to say so.

**8.2)** I have not actually done the research, but it might prove instructive to look for statements in the New Testament that describe two of the roles outlined in 8.1, without describing the third. I suspect that there would be a significant number of such statements. God did X through his Son, Jesus; God did Y through his Spirit; Jesus does Z by the working of the Spirit, etc. If my hunch were to prove true, it would show that the so-called pattern alleged in the objection is not the pattern of writers who are concerned to acknowledge a Trinity. Rather, it is the pattern of writers who are trying to teach the full extent of God’s saving involvement in our lives. The division of Father, Son (Jesus),

and Spirit functions as a sort of conceptual correlate to the three most important elements of that saving work.

Obviously, correlating Jesus with the work of dying on the cross for our sins is not arbitrary. Correlating Father and Spirit in the way that they do is somewhat arbitrary—to be specific, it is logically arbitrary, but not historically arbitrary. The correlation derives directly from Jesus' teaching in John 14–16. He instructed the disciples not to fear because he had requested of the Father that he send another *paracletos* to them, the Spirit of Truth whom the Father would send. The apostles' awareness of the work of God in transforming the human heart is forever linked, by Jesus' instructions on that memorable night, to the Spirit of Truth. Hence, whenever these disciples wanted to speak of God's work in the inner lives of a person to open their hearts and minds to truth and to "circumcise" their heart to love God, they would always speak in terms of this Spirit whom Jesus promised the Father would send. This does not at all require one to conclude that the Spirit is a different and distinct person from the Father. See Paper #9 for more on this.

**8.3)** The "formula" in Matt. 28:19 is not a formula. It is a profoundly meaningful truth being passed on to Jesus' disciples before he leaves them. To understand his point, one needs to understand the significance of "being baptized in the name of someone." When John the Baptist [who, I would argue, is the prophet who gave baptism its meaning] baptized people who had decided to turn away from their sin, he was making them his disciples. They did not merely undergo a ritual. They were making a decision to obey God in accord with what John would teach them they must do. They were making a decision to be John's disciples. They were choosing him to be their Rabbi.

We know that the early disciples of Jesus were disciples of John the Baptist before they became disciples of Jesus. The gospel accounts tell us so. It was a sign of John's incredible humility that, when it was brought to his attention that people were leaving him (as their Rabbi) to make Jesus their Rabbi, he responded, "He must increase. I must decrease." To have been baptized by someone is to have made a decision to be that person's disciple.

As we see later, one could decide to become a disciple of Jesus and not be baptized by Jesus. In that event, whoever did the actual baptizing was doing so "in the name of Jesus." If Paul were to baptize someone, he was not making that person a disciple of himself—that is, he wasn't baptizing him in the name of Paul. Rather, he was making him a disciple of Jesus; he was baptizing him in the name of Jesus.

When we get to Jesus' instruction in Matt. 28:19, he is commanding his disciples to go out into all the world and make disciples. He doesn't explicitly say "disciples of Jesus", but that is precisely what he means: "Go therefore and make disciples of me, Jesus, of all the nations...." The way he indicates his exact meaning is by specifying that it is "in his name" that they are to baptize the nations. They are to go out and convince people to become disciples of Jesus, which is to say, convince them to be baptized as disciples "in Jesus' name." Except, he doesn't say, "in Jesus' name." He says "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

How do we make sense of that? From what we have seen so far, to be baptized in the name of someone is to become a disciple of that person; to make a commitment to sit at his feet and learn from him. To be baptized "in the name of the Father" is to become a disciple of the Father; it is to make a commitment to sit at the feet of the Father and learn from him. To be baptized "in the name of the Son" is to become a disciple of the Son; to make a commitment to learn from him. To be baptized "in the name of the Holy Spirit" is to become a disciple of the Holy Spirit and commit to learning from him. What, then, does it mean to be baptized in the name of all three. That is where the profound truth in Jesus' statement lies.

As Jesus himself taught, there is a sense in which there is one and only one person who is qualified to be our teacher: God, our Father. (Matt. 23:8 > "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers.") However, Jesus also taught that anyone who listens to the Son is listening to the Father, for they are one. Jesus' understanding and teaching is an infallible and authoritative manifestation of what God, the Father, wants us to know and learn. To be a disciple of Jesus is one and the same thing as being a disciple of the Father.

Likewise, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth that Jesus promised his disciples would come to take his place in "guiding them into all the truth." [John 16:13] Accordingly, what would it mean to "be a disciple of the Holy Spirit" except to be committed to responding to the inner workings of the Holy Spirit as he opens one's heart to the truth that has its ultimate source in the Father and was taught to us by the Son. Therefore, to be a disciple of the Holy Spirit is one and the same thing as being a disciple of the Son, which is one and the same thing as being a disciple of the Father.

Jesus captures this truth effectively and poignantly in his final instructions to his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father (which is one and the same thing as baptizing them in the name of) the Son (which is one and the same thing as baptizing them in the name of) the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I (the Son) commanded (taught) you....*"

When we understand why Jesus has this triple reference to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this commandment, nothing in it suggests that he believes in the Trinity. Certainly he believes that he (Jesus, the Son) had a separate and distinctive role in God's purposes in history. Jesus also believes that God was going to do a distinctive work in history following his ascension—he was going to "pour out his spirit" in an unprecedented way. Connecting the distinctive work of the man, Jesus, and the unprecedented working of God in the hearts of men with the work and purpose of the transcendent Father is an important and reasonable thing for Jesus to do. It does nothing to suggest that God is ontologically triune.

**8.4)** Insisting that the apostles' sole purpose was to exalt the "blessed Trinity" in everything they taught by following the pattern of always mentioning Father, Son, and Holy Spirit runs afoul of this statement in 1 Timothy 5:21: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels [messengers?], to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality." This is a perfectly

reasonable statement in and of itself. However, Paul is obviously not concerned to follow a pattern or formula that will exalt each member of the blessed Trinity.

**Objection #9:** There are examples throughout the history of the Old Testament of an eternal, pre-existent Son manifesting himself to human beings. These christophanies would not have been possible if Jesus did not exist before his incarnation. The “angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament accounts is Jesus coming to speak with men. The book of Hebrews tells us specifically that Melchizedek was a christophany.

**9.1)** The “angel of Yahweh” makes several appearances to men throughout the history of the Old Testament. God also seems to appear at times when his appearance is not identified as the “angel of Yahweh”. The claim that we are to understand these appearances as appearances of the eternal, pre-existent second person of the Trinity is a completely *ad hoc* doctrine designed to “discover” evidence in the Old Testament for Trinitarian beliefs. Apart from the dogmatic assumption that that is how these appearances are to be understood, there is no actual independent evidence in the Bible that these theophanies or angelic visitations are, in truth, christophanies.

**9.2)** Because of how they read Hebrews 7, some people understand Melchizedek to be a christophany. They would make the following argument. Isn’t Paul (the author of Hebrews?) arguing that Jesus the Son is of higher standing than Abraham? Isn’t he making his case by arguing that Melchizedek is of higher standing than Abraham? Such an argument only makes sense if Melchizedek is one and the same person as Jesus. The only way that can be is if Melchizedek is a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. Therefore, Hebrews 7 clearly requires that Melchizedek be a christophany.

This is a complete misunderstanding of what Paul is doing. In the core argument of the letter—Hebrews 5:1–10:39—Paul is arguing that Jesus is the real and true High Priest mediating between God and mankind. His priesthood is established in accordance with a new and better covenant than the Mosaic Covenant and, therefore, it is a new and better priesthood.

To ground his claim in Scriptural authority, Paul looks to Psalm 110. Most of the argument of 5:1 through 10:39 is an exegesis of and commentary on Psalm 110—most notably, it is an exegesis of the statement, “You are a priest to the end of time, according to the order of Melchizedek.” Paul understands Psalm 110 to be speaking of the Messiah, the Son of God. Accordingly, David is saying something important about the Messiah when he says of him that he is “a priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” Paul wants to examine what that means. Why did David describe the Messiah as “a priest according to the order of Melchizedek”? What are the implications of that?

Hebrews 7 is the part of Paul’s argument where he focuses most explicitly on what it might mean to describe the Messiah as a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek.” I

won't outline his conclusions here. The important thing to notice is that Hebrews 7 is not describing the historical truth about the person of Melchizedek. Rather, Hebrews 7 is exploring what it is in the scriptural account of Melchizedek that provides the resources for David to use Melchizedek as a metaphor.

Neither David nor Paul believes that there is literally an "order of Melchizedek" of which Jesus is a member. To be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek is clearly a metaphorical description of the Messiah, created by the poet David. The important exegetical question, therefore, is what David meant by this metaphor. Hebrews 7 is where Paul reflects on the Genesis account of Melchizedek to determine what it is that caused David to use him as a metaphor for the Messiah.

Paul's approach to all of this makes perfectly good sense, even if Melchizedek is nothing more than an early Jebusite King-Priest presiding over the city that would ultimately become Jerusalem. Nothing about Paul's argument requires Melchizedek to be anything other than that. It is important to know something about Melchizedek in order to understand who the Messiah is—not because Melchizedek is the pre-incarnate Jesus; but because Psalm 110 reveals the truth about the Messiah using Melchizedek as a metaphor.

**9.3)** Because they misconstrue the nature of the argument, many interpreters make rather grandiose claims about Melchizedek from Hebrews 7. Misunderstanding 7:3, they maintain that he was an eternal being (without beginning or end), and that his existence was not due to his being born (without mother or father). Hence, he must have been the second person of the Trinity appearing to Abraham in a christophany.

When Paul says, "without father, without mother, without genealogy" he simply means that Melchizedek had no line of ancestry that would qualify him to be a priest by the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. That is, he was not a Levite from among the Jews. To the extent that he functioned as a priest, he was not a priest according to the order of Levi. He was a priest in accordance with an entirely different order. Psalm 110 claims that the Messiah will be a priest according to terms that are very different from the Mosaic Covenant as well. The Messiah will not be a priest according to the order of Levi. He will be a priest according to an entirely different order, just like Melchizedek was. David captures this point, figuratively, by describing the Messiah as having been appointed a priest according to the "order of Melchizedek."

When Paul says, "having neither beginning of days nor end of life" he is not suggesting that Melchizedek never came into existence and never died. Rather, Paul is looking at the data of the Genesis account. Genesis gives us no information about how Melchizedek began to serve as a priest. Nor does Genesis give us any information about how Melchizedek's priesthood came to an end. *So far as the Genesis account is concerned*, Melchizedek appears out of nowhere, functions as priest in relation to Abraham, and is still there to function as priest, but not because that is the literal historical truth about Melchizedek. The historical truth about Melchizedek is that he is long since dead, but David is using the literary account of Melchizedek as a metaphor. In Hebrews 7 Paul is asking this: what is it in the literary account of Melchizedek that connects "being a priest forever" with Melchizedek? Paul's conclusion: *so far as the Genesis account of*

*Melchizedek is concerned* (and that is all that matters, because it is the Genesis account that is the basis of David's metaphor, not the actual facts of Melchizedek's life), Melchizedek's authority to be a priest is without beginning and without end. We never see the beginning of his authority and we never see the end of it.

Similarly, that is the sort of priestly authority that the Messiah will have. It is an authority of which we never see the beginning and we will never see the end. That is why the entire sentence in Hebrews 7 reads, "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God [when David in Psalm 110 turns him into a metaphor of the Son], *he remains a priest perpetually.*" When David chose Melchizedek as a metaphor for the priestly authority of the Son—Paul is suggesting—it was in order to represent the transcendent eternity of that priestly authority. Melchizedek's authority was not itself transcendentally eternal, of course. But as a character taken from the story of Genesis, the nature of the story about him can be turned into a metaphor that suggests just such a thing—the eternal and unending priesthood of the Son. "You are a priest *forever*, according to the order of Melchizedek."

Nothing in Paul's understanding of Melchizedek assumes that he is an earthly manifestation of the second person of the Trinity.

**Objection #10:** We have clear evidence of the Trinity in the Hebrew word for God. The word for "God" is a plural noun (*elohim*); and yet it is often used with a verb form that indicates a singular subject. Hence, the very grammar points to the Trinity—a plurality that is a unity.

**10.1)** Consider Isaiah 19:4. "Moreover, I will deliver the Egyptians into the hand of a cruel master, And a mighty king will rule over them," declares the Lord GOD of hosts. The Hebrew that is translated "a cruel master" is אֲדֹנִים קָשָׁה [adonim qashah]. The word for master, *adonim*, is plural in form. The adjective *qashah* [cruel] is singular in form. As the NASV itself translates it, it is describing a single individual. Hebrew idiom sometimes uses certain words to denote a single individual even though the word is plural in form. In other words, some Hebrew words are plural in form while being singular in meaning. The word *elohim*, like the word *baalim* (master), is plural in form, but both can be used to describe a single person.

It is this feature of the Hebrew language that sometimes results in sentences with the plural *elohim* as the subject of a sentence that contains a verb form that implies a singular subject. There is no mysterious triunity behind this syntax; it is purely a function of Hebrew idiom.

In 1 Samuel 5:7, *elohim* (the plural form) is used to designate the Philistine god Dagan in the same sentence that it designates Yahweh the God of Israel. Surely the plural form of *elohim* used to designate Dagan does not suggest that Dagan is a triune being. Judges 11:24 reads, "Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the LORD our God has driven out before us, we will possess it." The plural

form *elohim* is used to designate not only Yahweh but also Chemosh, the god of the Amorites. Is Chemosh a Trinity? I would argue that it is simply a function of the Hebrew language that *elohim* (like other words in the language) is plural in form while being singular in meaning.

**10.2)** Genesis 1:26 reads, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over . . . .’” We have the odd situation where the subject of the sentence “*elohim*” is plural in form, the verb “to make” is correspondingly plural, and the pronoun “our” is correspondingly plural, but the verb “said” is singular. Now the use of the singular verb “said” with the plural noun “*elohim*” is consistent with the Hebrew idiom that we just described above. Less understandable is the continuation of the plural form in the verb and possessive pronouns within God’s decree: “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. . . .” Why does it not read, “Let me make man in my image, according to my likeness. . . .”?

My best guess is that we confront here another ancient cultural reality. Presumably, it could be idiomatic for an important person (e.g., a king) to refer to himself in the plural, thereby creating an air of importance and gravity around what he says. There is probably an underlying cultural assumption that what a king decrees, for example, does not involve only him. When he decides something, it is decided for the whole people. The plural would be a natural way to speak under such a view.

This is not completely unknown even in modern English. A boss might very well say to his employees, “Here’s what we are going to do. We are going to stay and work as long as it takes us to get this job done.” Now, in our modern situation, this may very well literally be true. It is what “we” are going to do. Yet, on what basis can the boss speak for everyone? On the basis that he is the boss. It is a small step from this modern example to an ancient king saying, “Here’s what we are going to do. We are going to take us a wife.” If the king views every decision he makes as a decision on behalf of the whole people, then his decision just is the decision of the entire people—even if it directly involves only him. The plural is a natural idiom to reflect such a mindset.

It that’s right, then the syntax of the record of God’s decree in Genesis 1:26 could easily be an idiom that reflects God’s rule as King over the whole of creation. It is “Let us make man in our image. . . .” because it is the decree of a king—the King over all creation. In any event, something roughly like this is highly more likely than that the syntax reflects the literal reality that God is a Trinity. Genesis 1:26 is far from conclusive evidence for the Trinity.

## **Conclusion:**

We have looked at ten different lines of evidence from the biblical text that are alleged to prove the distinctive model of Orthodox Trinitarianism. As I have tried to argue, none of these alleged proofs is compelling. They do not provide definitive evidence of the eternity of the Son or any other distinctive aspect of the Trinitarian model.