

# **God's Project**

## **Through the Window of John 5**

By  
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## Part I

### Chapter 1

#### My Project

I am ambivalent about this book. On the one hand, when I think of having studied the Bible during the last thirty years and finally having taken the opportunity to write down certain ideas that I have learned from it, I get excited about simply pursuing the truth about God, which the Bible presents to us—even if, more than likely, I am not completely correct in my interpretations of the various passages that I mention in this book.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, when I think of how different my conclusions are from those of traditional Christianity, I become afraid, because I know enough about Church history to realize that many Christians will respond to my book with criticism, rejection, anger, and even condemnation—questioning my eternal destiny, because I am not “orthodox.” And I am not exactly excited about receiving people’s disapprobation.

Nevertheless, because of my deep and constant desire to understand the biblical God, whom I believe to be the one and only God, I cannot help but forge ahead with the express purpose of doing two things in this book. First, I will show that God’s project as presented in the Bible has been to create the present world with all its good aspects and evil aspects, while introducing His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, to the creation as the Jewish Messiah and the very centerpiece of eternal history. Thus, when the purposes of the present creation have all been fulfilled, God will move on and create a future universe for Jesus, who, as the very embodiment of God, i.e., God incarnate, will rule over all God’s creation eternally. With this in mind, God has brought into existence and continues to bring into existence the history of our temporary and decaying world, in order to handpick a group of human beings from all races and nations to whom He will grant mercy and bring into the new, permanent, and deathless world of the eternal kingdom of Jesus. Thus, Jesus will fulfill his biblical destiny as King and High Priest for the human race.<sup>2</sup>

Second, I will show that the traditional view of the trinity, with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three coeternal persons who are also one God, is not what the Bible teaches. Instead, it presents us with one God, the Father, who is constantly causing the creation to exist just as a novelist causes his story to unfold while he writes it. In addition, Jesus as the Son of God is a human being, whom God has written into the story of creation with the role and function of the Jewish Messiah and God in the flesh. In other words, if you see Jesus, you see God, but he is God only in the story, not God outside the story. Only God the Father is God outside the story, i.e., who transcends the story and, therefore, transcends the creation. In addition, the Holy Spirit is a manner of speaking about God’s activity within the story, especially the activity that is specific to God’s project of gathering individual human beings from all of history who willingly submit to God and, therefore, who will submit to the authority of Jesus as their King and Ruler in the eternal Kingdom of God. In other words, the Holy Spirit is not a separate *person* from the Father. The Holy Spirit is the Father’s, the novelist’s, activity in the

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<sup>1</sup> My contention is that no one has been 100% correct in his theology except for the biblical authors. This means that no church theologian, church council, seminary professor, minister, or pastor can claim to be an authoritative source of biblical truth. The Bible is our *only* authoritative and accurate intellectual repository of truth.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this book I will capitalize the first letter of pronouns that refer to God the Father, transcendent God who inhabits a realm that is outside the creation that He has made, and I will use a lower case letter at the beginning of pronouns that refer to God the Son, Jesus. I, obviously, mean no disrespect toward Jesus, but I only want to make it clearer when I am speaking of God the Father and when I am speaking of God the Son.

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creation specific to His overall project of making His Son, Jesus, not only God within the story but also the Ruler over all the creation that exists in the story. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is definitely God, but He is God's causing certain, specific things to occur that most clearly point to His overall purposes of making Jesus the focal point of human history and the focal point of His plan to create an eternal Kingdom.

While some readers will be disturbed by my description of God's project, many will probably be more than disturbed by my description of God. Even though I will affirm that the Bible teaches that Jesus is God in the flesh and that the Holy Spirit is God, many Christians who are familiar with the traditional view of the trinity will find themselves frightened and probably confused by the way that I will explain God, because I employ a different paradigm from that with which they are familiar. Most Christians think of the creation, especially human beings who make moral choices, as operating fairly independently of God. For them, God controls the movements of the stars and planets, the changing weather patterns and natural events such as ocean currents and floods, but God has given "freewill" to human beings, so that He does not control their choices. My paradigm of a storyteller and a story (cf. a potter and his clay in Romans 9:20-24) requires that all things within the creation, including people's choices, are under the absolute control of the transcendent Creator and Novelist, God the Father—for His eternal purposes and project.

However, the manner in which some readers will react to their fear and confusion as they encounter my description of God frightens me. I am naturally a fearful person. If John Calvin, a revered theologian of the Protestant Reformation, can burn Michael Servetus at the stake for daring to suggest that the Bible does not teach the traditional, "orthodox" trinity, then I am at least glad that I do not live in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1553. Yet, I have already experienced the rejection of traditional, evangelical Christians, who labeled me as dangerous and told me that I am not welcome at a church where I served as a pastor for twenty years. Nevertheless, in the midst of my unpleasant experience I have constantly reminded myself of what Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke

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[Luke 12:4](#) "I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do.

[Luke 12:5](#) "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him! (NAS95)

My natural inclination is to fear people and what they can do to me more than to fear God and what He can do to me. However, something deep within me still leads me to fear God more than people. Why? Because I firmly believe that God is miraculously working in my heart, and I long to know exactly who God is, so that I may obtain what He has promised to Abraham and to all those who properly mimic Abraham's belief—eternal life and all that is included with it, moral perfection and escape from God's eternal condemnation. If the Bible is teaching that I cannot obtain God's promises because my theology is wrong and not "orthodox," then may God still be praised for how He deals with all of us human beings at the final judgment. Nevertheless, I do not think that the Bible is teaching that a person's eternal destiny is based upon the correctness of his theology. Instead, the Bible claims that it is **how** a person relates to his biblical ideas and his authentic desire for truth in the midst of facing into his immoral condition and his accountability before God. In other words, it is not the **what** of a person's theology that determines whether or not God is pleased with him. It is the **how** of a person's theology in the midst of his pursuit of biblical truth that is important to God, because what human being, except for Jesus and the biblical authors, can claim that his ideas are completely

accurate? In other words, God is more interested in my willingness to seek out and learn biblical truth than in whether or not the conclusions that I draw from studying the Bible conform perfectly to the ideas that the biblical authors intended to communicate. God, of all persons, understands the difficulty of studying the Bible and understanding it correctly. In addition, I would contend that the fundamental issue in what God is interested is whether or not each of us has come to grips with his morally depraved condition and God's justice and mercy. I hope that this will all be clearer by the time the reader finishes my book.<sup>3</sup>

While my book includes challenging the traditional idea of the trinity, it is also much more than this. It is about God and His project of establishing Jesus of Nazareth, the man who was and is God in the flesh, as the Jewish Messiah and King. Jesus will, at some time in the future, rule over the Jews in the land of Israel and, later, will, for all eternity, rule over the creation and the eternal kingdom of God that He will bring about at the end of the temporal realm in which we now live. My book is also about how God accomplishes His entire goal through mercifully rescuing a people in the present realm for Himself and from Himself, i.e., from His eternal condemnation.

I will address these issues by focusing on chapter 5 in the Gospel of John where Jesus makes many important statements to his Jewish interlocutors that in turn will lead us to examine numerous other passages of the Bible that will progressively allow us to unpack Jesus' comments more completely. As a result, we will look at the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant—all of which God makes or discusses with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. I believe that these four covenants and their relationships to one another not only explain the heart of the message of the Bible but also provide the necessary information for understanding the person and role of the Jewish Messiah and the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

However, I want to point the reader toward what the apostle John, the author of the Gospel of John, writes in John 20:30,31 as he is drawing his story to a close –

[John 20:30](#) Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;  
[John 20:31](#) but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (NAS95)

John states explicitly that his purpose for documenting the events in his “gospel” is to provide the reader with adequate evidence for the truth of Jesus’ “signs” so that, then, the reader can confidently and appropriately believe that Jesus is the “Christ” and the “Son of God.” At least four important questions arise out of these verses, and we should keep these in mind as we consider John 5 and the other passages in the Bible that we will look at:

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<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher and theologian, has helped me to understand the *how* and *what* of biblical belief in his book, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). For example, he writes, “*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person*” (pg. 203). Kierkegaard’s whole argument is based upon the fact that we are beings who are constantly in the process of being created by a transcendent God. Thus, our knowledge is always less than complete, less than completely certain, and in process. Therefore Kierkegaard emphasizes the subjective aspect of our knowledge which is *how* we relate to God and His promise of eternal life as opposed to the objective aspect of our knowledge which is *what* we think that we know. This is why Kierkegaard also says, “*Objectively the emphasis is on what is said; subjectively the emphasis is on how it is said*” (pg. 202), which leads to his conclusion that “*Truth Is Subjectivity*” (pg. 189).

1. What is the “life” that John says that a person can have by believing in Jesus’ name?
2. What are “signs” such that Jesus “performed” them, and how does his performing them relate to his identity as the “Christ” and the “Son of God”?
3. What do the words “Christ” and “Son of God” mean that obviously refer to Jesus’ identity, and are these two separate concepts or the same?
4. What does it mean to believe “in His name?”

As I said, I will seek to answer these questions by examining chapter 5 in John’s gospel, which will allow me to roam far and wide in the Bible and to discuss God’s project of making Jesus the Jewish Messiah and King over the earthly Kingdom of Israel and the heavenly Kingdom of Heaven. The latter will involve an entirely new creation—what we can also call the eternal Kingdom of God.

John 5, along with many other passages that we will look at in the Bible, contain several statements that, in Church history, have led to a traditional view of Jesus as the pre-existent, coeternal, 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, that is comprised of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Christians have long believed that God the Father, the eternal 1<sup>st</sup> person of the trinity, “begat” (gave birth in some sense) to His Son in eternity past in such a way and at such a “time” that the Son is just as eternal as the Father. Therefore, even though the Father was the source of the beginning of the Son, the Son had no actual beginning when it comes to the length of “time” that the Son has been in existence in comparison to the Father. The same is true of the Holy Spirit, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the trinity, that he comes from the Father and the Son but is coeternal with them.<sup>4</sup> Then, after creating the “heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1) and after a certain amount of human history had transpired (Genesis 3-Malachi and beyond), God the Father “sent” His Son from his transcendent position outside the creation alongside the Father to inhabit and mix with a human body in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In so doing, Jesus became a unique human being, who was comprised of both divine essential “material” (even though divine material is not really material since God is spirit) and human essential material. The result was the “hypostatic union,” whereby Jesus, in his very being, was mysteriously fully God and fully man and who had existed as fully God with the Father from eternity past.<sup>5</sup> Then, Jesus was born of the virgin Mary as a real human being (albeit divine, too), lived, died on a cross, rose from the dead, and ascended back to his original, transcendent location with the Father for all of eternity future.

In addition, Jesus, as the pre-existent, coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, is what most Christians believe to be the meaning of the words “Son of God,” because the Father begat the Son in eternity past. For most Christians also, the word “Christ” (the English translation of the Greek *χριστός* [*christos*], which is the translation of the Hebrew *מָשִׁיחַ* [*masheeah*], from which we derive our English word Messiah, all of which fundamentally mean “anointed one”) refers to Jesus as the King of the eternal kingdom of God. This kingdom is basically “heaven” where God’s people, those who have

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<sup>4</sup> There are some Christians, such as the Copts in Egypt, who believe that the Holy Spirit proceeds from only the Father and not the Son. My understanding of what the Bible teaches about God means that the Copts are more correct than other Christians when we consider the relationship between God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase “hypostatic union” has been used since the fourth century to describe the combining of divine and created essences into the one human person of Jesus as he existed on earth. As Charles Hodge writes, “The facts which the Bible teaches concerning the person of Christ are, first, that He was truly man, i.e., He had a perfect or complete human nature... Secondly, He was truly God, or had a perfect divine nature... Thirdly, He was one person... This is the whole doctrine of the incarnation as it lies in the Scriptures and in the faith of the Church” (*Systematic Theology, Volume II*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981), pg. 380.

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believed in Jesus after his first coming and who have believed in the God of the Old Testament before his first coming, will live for all eternity. Therefore, while Christ is an earthly title, because it was used to refer to other anointed persons in Israel (for example, priests), Son of God is a transcendent and divine title. As the Christ, Jesus is the created, human King; as the Son of God, Jesus is the uncreated, transcendent God. Thus, Jesus is “God, Jr.,” and he is both Christ and Son of God after having ascended back to his original, transcendent position with the Father. In other words, he has been the Son of God from eternity past as the pre-existent, coeternal, 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. Now, he is also the Christ, the King, after his living, dying, rising from the dead, and ascending back into heaven with the Father.

Thus, the purpose of my book is not only to answer the questions posed above regarding John 20:30,31, but also to explore if John 5 and the rest of the Bible explicitly teach the traditional view of the trinity and, therefore, what they teach regarding the person of Jesus and the role that God has given him within the created reality. However, before we look at John 5 in Part III of this book, I want to discuss, in Part I, three concepts that are mentioned in other parts of John’s gospel and, in Part II, the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New Covenants, all of which will help us reach our goal of understanding God’s project. The concepts that I will discuss in Part I are:

1. Life
2. The signs that Jesus performed, along with the fact that he was sent by God
3. The fact that God causes authentic belief in a human being



## Chapter 2

### This Life or Eternal Life?

God has certainly designed us human beings to want to live and not die, to want to live well and not poorly, to want to succeed and not fail. We naturally avoid discomfort and suffering as much as possible and seek comfort and enjoyment. The biblical message uses the word “life” to refer to the quality of existence that we naturally desire as human beings, but there are also various nuances to the Bible’s use of this word. For example, after Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden, the Bible records God’s statement –

**Gen. 3:17** Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it;’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life (כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ בְּעִבּוֹרָהּ, *ba’avooreka be’itzavoen toe’ca’lenah coal yemay chayyeyka*) (ἐπικατάρατος ἡ γῆ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις σου ἐν λύπαις φάγη αὐτήν πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς σου, *epikataroatos hay gay en tois ergois soo en lupais phagay autayn padas tas haymeras tays zoeays soo*).”<sup>6</sup> (NAS95)

What meaning is God giving to the word “life” in this context—physical life, eternal life, spiritual life, moral life, emotional life, etc.? Because God speaks of the physical ground and Adam’s days, i.e., the time of his physical existence on earth, God is clearly referring to Adam’s physical life on earth. Then, in the New Testament and at the end of the parable of the sheep and the goats where Jesus describes two kinds of people in the present world—those who do not properly obey God, the goats, and those who do, the sheep—he says of them respectively –

**Matt. 25:46** “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *ays zoeayn aioenion*).” (NAS95)

There is the possibility that αἰώνιον (*aioenion*) is referring to a quality of human existence on earth in the present realm, so that even the punishment that the

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<sup>6</sup> When I quote the Old Testament and I want to provide the Hebrew text for particular words, phrases, or clauses, I will include the Greek translation called the Septuagint (LXX) that was performed by Jewish scholars around 200 B.C. More often than not, the New Testament authors, writing in Greek, quote directly from the Septuagint rather than doing their own different translation. From their examples, we can conclude that they considered the Septuagint to be highly authoritative, perhaps as authoritative as the original Hebrew text. The problem that this produces for students of the Bible is that sometimes the Septuagint is possibly interpreting an Old Testament passage differently from our English translations. For example, here in Genesis 3:17, the NAS95 translates the Hebrew word בְּעִבּוֹרָהּ as “because of you,” while the Septuagint uses a Greek phrase ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις σου that could mean “in your works,” referring to the future and meaning that Adam will find himself working the land in the midst of pain and sorrow. However, the Greek phrase also could be translated “because of your works,” referring to the past and meaning that Adam will find it a sorrowful experience to work the land as a result of his actions of eating from the prohibited tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The obvious question then becomes, which interpretation is the valid one in this context? By the way, I also am inventing my own transliteration of both the Hebrew and Greek words in hopes of making it easier for those who are not familiar with these languages to sound out the words.

disobedient receive from God in this world is the gravest quality possible.<sup>7</sup> However, Jesus begins this parable by speaking of coming in glory with all the angels and sitting on his throne to separate the sheep from the goats, which certainly sounds like the the final judgment at the end of history. Therefore, the “eternal punishment” and “eternal life” that the goats and sheep will experience will follow the judgment and extend beyond it forever. While this still permits a qualitative meaning to the word αἰώνιον (*aioenion*), there is certainly a quantitative, chronological component to its meaning. In addition, Jesus says in verse 34 –

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed of my Father, and inherit the kingdom which has been prepared for you since the foundation of the cosmos.” (My translation)

In this book, I am going to explain my understanding of the biblical message, that the kingdom of which Jesus speaks in v. 34 is God’s project and the very reason that He created the present reality. The story that God is currently writing and that began with the creation of “the heavens and the earth” in Genesis 1 is heading toward the eternal Kingdom of God where God Himself will rule over this kingdom as the man Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus’ subjects in this eternal kingdom will be those who have chosen to believe God for the truth that He has presented through the biblical authors. They, in effect, are the sheep in Jesus’ parable. Consequently, in v. 46, Jesus is not referring to temporary, mortal, earthly life but to never-ending, immortal, heavenly life.

An important question for us is, what does the apostle John mean by the word “life” when he uses it at the end of his account of Jesus’ experiences on earth when John states his purpose for having written the whole book –

**John 20:30** Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;  
**John 20:31** but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (καὶ ἵνα πιστεύοντες ζωὴν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ, *kai hina pisteuontes zoeayn ekayte en toe onomati autoo*). (NAS95)

Exactly what kind of life is John expecting people to be able to live if they believe that Jesus is the Christ? Is it a comfortable, happy, and successful mortal life on earth? Or is it a comfortable, happy, and successful immortal life in heaven? Or is it even something else? The initial use of the entire phrase “eternal life” in the book of John is in Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus, the Jewish leader –

**John 3:14** “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;  
**John 3:15** so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *zoeayn aioenion*).

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Louw & Nida, page 642, “The most frequent use of αἰώνιος in the NT is with ζωὴ ‘life,’ for example, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον ‘so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life’ Jn 3:15. In combination with ζωὴ there is evidently not only a temporal element, but also a qualitative distinction. In such contexts, αἰώνιος evidently carries certain implications associated with αἰώνιος in relationship to divine and supernatural attributes. If one translates ‘eternal life’ as simply ‘never dying,’ there may be serious misunderstandings, since persons may assume that ‘never dying’ refers only to physical existence rather than to ‘spiritual death.’ Accordingly, some translators have rendered ‘eternal life’ as ‘unending real life,’ so as to introduce a qualitative distinction.”

**John 3:16** “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *zoeayn aioenion*). (NAS95)

By connecting the concept of eternal life with the phrase “Son of Man” in v. 14 and the word “Son” in v. 16, Jesus is referring to the eternal Kingdom of God. As I will explain in later chapters, both the phrase “Son of Man” and the word “Son” are messianic titles of both a royal and a priestly distinction. Similarly, the Kingdom of God refers to a future and everlasting realm whose existence will never end and in which human beings will be morally perfect and completely content and satisfied in their lives.

Likewise, after the local, Roman governor Pilate asks Jesus if he is the “King of the Jews” in John 18:33, John writes –

**John 18:36** Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world (οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, *ook estin ek too kosmoo tootoo*). If My kingdom were of this world (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, *ek too kosmoo tootoo*), then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm (οὐκ ἔστιν ἐντεῦθεν, *ook estin enteuthen*).” (NAS95)

The last word in particular that Jesus uses, ἐντεῦθεν (*enteuthen*), typically refers to spatial source of something, even a person’s position in space and time. Thus, Jesus is telling Pilate that he will not find the source of his kingdom in the present, temporary realm. Indeed, the source will be in the future, everlasting realm that God will create later. Consequently while Jesus says nothing about the length of time that his kingdom will exist, he is referring to the never-ending Kingdom of God. However, as I stated above, there is more to eternal life than its duration and its being a realm that is different from “this world.” Only morally perfect human beings will inhabit the eternal Kingdom of God. For example, in the fourth beatitude at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says –

**Matt. 5:6** “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (NAS95)

“Righteousness” is certainly a fancy, biblical word, but, here, Jesus means simple, moral perfection. He is telling his disciples and the listening crowd that anyone who has an inward craving for moral perfection will eventually have this craving satisfied. When will this craving be satisfied? It will be in eternity, when God will miraculously resurrect from death and then morally transform morally depraved human beings who have met the necessary condition in the present realm of having a fundamental longing in their inward being for goodness and morality. While each of the remaining beatitudes in Matthew 5 describes a different attribute of the person who meets the necessary condition to obtain eternal life, let us consider, in addition, the second beatitude –

**Matt. 5:4** “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (NAS95)

Here, the attribute of a person who qualifies for everlasting life is sadness. What kind of sadness is Jesus talking about? It is a sadness that comes from a broken and contrite heart in the face of a person’s immorality, i.e., as he encounters his own hostility and rebellion toward God. We notice that Jesus mentions brokenness and contrition in the

second beatitude before hungering and thirsting for moral perfection in the fourth beatitude. However, a person typically experiences sadness after realizing that he has lost something important and valuable. Thus, a person wants moral perfection and then discovers that he lacks it. And his sense of deprivation, i.e., loss, is so profound, that he weeps and laments the fact that he lacks moral perfection. In the biblical context, his lack also includes a feeling of guiltiness before God along with the realization that he stands condemned before Him. Consequently, there are two elements of his thinking that result in his sadness. The first is that he actually is an immoral person who desires to be moral. The second is that he is not pleasing to God, whom he longs to please.

Because of the way that God has designed our minds, all human beings throughout history know that we ought to *be* good and that we ought to *do* what is good. We naturally evaluate our thoughts, words, and actions from a moral basis of judgment. We do not measure actions simply quantitatively. We also measure them qualitatively. In other words, we do not merely count the number of times a person gives a glass of water to a thirsty person. We also judge whether or not giving a glass of water to a thirsty person is good or evil. The reason that we perform an analysis of the quality of the action is because, what if a person is a serial killer who has murdered twenty people? Certainly, the quantity of the people whom he has killed is great, but does this mean that we admire his actions. No, indeed, the quantity of the serial killer's murder horrifies us. Nevertheless, the very act of murder by itself is evil and ought to horrify us.

When Jesus says that the attribute a person who qualifies for eternal life is sadness, he means that the person is constantly sad, because he recognizes that his lack of moral perfection is so profound and complete that he always lack it. Then, in the midst of his hungering and longing for morality, he has discovered that he is basically so morally depraved that he is hostile and rebellious toward God, and he cannot help himself. Indeed, he is fundamentally stuck in his immorality.

The apostle Paul makes this same point in Romans 1 where two ideas stand out. The first is that all human beings know that there is a God and that they are obligated to worship Him. The second is that all human beings know that they stand eternally condemned before God, because they have rebelliously refused to worship Him properly. I will come back to Romans 1 in my discussion of the Abrahamic Covenant, but the fact is that every human being, except Jesus the Messiah, knows that he ought to do what is good and yet rebels against God and chooses evil instead, even if it is not explicitly obvious that he is doing evil.

Thus, when we properly come to grips with our sinfulness, we feel guilty and are correctly sad, while we yearn to be good. We grieve over our immoral condition and would like to be comforted, because we also realize that we deserve God's eternal condemnation and destruction, which is certainly a frightening prospect. However, Jesus says that those who are fittingly fearful of God's condemnation and who mourn over their immorality will eventually be comforted. When will they be comforted? At the judgment when God, through Jesus (as we will learn from John 5), is gracious and forgiving toward them and rescues them from His eternal condemnation. In the meantime, though, these same people feel the lack of goodness within them. Thus, they are like those who have been in a desert for days without food and water and are experiencing hunger pangs and unbearable thirst. They crave goodness and hunger and thirst for righteousness. Consequently, God will eventually satisfy their craving in the eternal Kingdom of God when He transforms them into morally perfect beings.

While I would love to say that I always experience a desire for goodness like Jesus' description in John 5:6 of the person who qualifies for eternal life, my conscious feelings of sadness and longing with respect to my immoral condition seem few and far between. In addition, the exposure to human history that I have given myself through books leads

me to conclude that there are very few people, if any, who have *a/ways* felt the kind of craving for goodness that corresponds exactly to Jesus' words. However, the moments when I have felt the greatest desire for morality are the same when I have felt the greatest guilt and sadness over my moral depravity, particularly my pride and my thinking that I am a morally better person than others.

Should I be surprised that my greatest longing to be good is in the midst of my greatest sadness over my pride and arrogance, especially in the light of the two beatitudes of Jesus that I mention here? If mourning over evil is a necessary attribute of the person who will receive eternal life, then certainly strongly desiring to be rid of one's moral depravity is also. Certainly, it makes sense that these two attributes exist in a person at the same time, perhaps when the person's evil, even outwardly, is manifesting itself most explicitly and consciously. In other words, why long for goodness when I am pridefully thinking that I am good and, indeed, better than other people? And why be sad over my lack of goodness while I pridefully thinking that I do not lack goodness but, instead, am better than all others? However, this psychological trap of pridefully thinking that I am a good person is also a vicious circle. I am pridefully evil and, as a result, think that I am good. As I continue to think that I am good, I become proud of my goodness, which, in turn, increases my problem of pride that must lead me to think that I do not lack goodness. Therefore, I, even more than before, think that I am good, and the circle begins again. The result is that I become psychologically and spiritually trapped in the circle of pride so that I need outside help to break the circle.

In Matthew 5 and Romans, Jesus and Paul are indicating that God is the only person who breaks the human circle of pride, stopping its return to the beginning, and who injects humility in the person where pride had ruled. And when God does break the circle and grant a person to recognize properly his pride and rebellion toward God, the person now mourns over his immoral condition while also yearning for moral perfection. However, the fact is that the person does not all of a sudden become a good person. Indeed, the situation is the exact opposite. The pride remains, the hostility to truth and to God remains, and the rebellion toward God and morality remains. Now, however, pride does not always trump humility. Instead, at a fundamental level, humility trumps pride and the person "mourns" while "hungering and thirsting for righteousness."

In other words, the sadness over a lack of goodness exists in the midst of a continued lack of goodness while the person continues to demonstrate to himself and, possibly, the whole world that he is a sinner and lacks goodness. Certainly, God sees the evil within the person, and, yet, He continues to break the circle of pride and lead the person humbly to feel sadness over his lack of morality, while also humbly desiring to be good. Thus, we need not despair when we commit evil, as though our immorality is an indication that we are disqualifying ourselves from obtaining eternal life. Of course we are going to commit evil. It is part of our existence as human beings in the present realm, even while we mourn over it and long to be good.

In addition, we are going to feel guilty before God. And well we should, and deeply, as deeply as our moral depravity takes us, because the deeper our immoral condition pushes us into guilt, the greater our craving for moral perfection as we watch God take us through the process of experiencing guilt and desiring moral goodness according to His grace, which is the only way we will go through it properly. God graciously breaks the circle of pride in the midst of the evil of pride and causes us to feel sad over our pride as we also feel a longing to be good and be rid of our pride. Plus, the more we are aware of our pride in the midst of our pride while also feeling the proper ill-feelings that the existence of our pride produces and the good feelings of wanting to be rid of it, the more we match the qualifications of a person who is bound for heaven that Jesus describes in the beatitudes.

Sometimes we hear from Bible teachers that it is inappropriate for Christians to ponder their immoral condition and experience the fullness of the guilt that it produces in them, and the reason they give is that dwelling on our evil denies and ignores the completeness of God's forgiveness through the death of Christ. These same teachers advocate that if I feel my guilt too intensely, then I am not feeling and accepting God's forgiveness enough. Therefore, it is just better to stay away from feeling my guilt altogether. In other words, pondering my immorality and experiencing all the fullness of its guilt that is possible denies the cross of Christ and the fullness of its significance.

I can certainly agree with the problem of wallowing in our evil without properly taking into account God's forgiveness that we receive through belief in His mercy and Jesus' death and resurrection. Perhaps, we even "humbly" claim that our immorality is too great for God to forgive. But such an attitude reveals that we are using our moral depravity as a perverse tool to avoid God's forgiveness. In our supposed humility, we are taking a hostile stance toward God and actually rebelling against Him. We are refusing to believe that there is no evil act or thought that God cannot forgive except a person's refusal to accept His forgiveness.

However, for pastors to state categorically that Christians should avoid thinking about the immoral nature of their humanity and experiencing the emotional consequences of it to the deepest level, because this would be a denial of God's forgiveness, is really no different from a person who is using false humility to claim that his immoral condition or action is unforgiveable. It is merely the flip side of the coin. While claiming to champion the cross of Christ, these pastors are, actually, denying it by refusing to believe that Jesus' crucifixion sends the strongest message possible from God about the ongoing nature of our moral depravity, even after we become authentic believers in Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus' death proclaims that our immoral condition is so deep and pervasive within our very beings that, not only is it impossible for us to escape it apart from God's sovereignly and graciously rescuing us from it, but also we will always experience it this side of eternity such that we will as constantly as possible "mourn" over it and hunger and thirst for moral perfection.

We would want to ask these pastors, is there really no value in feeling guilt for my immoral acts and thoughts to a depth that matches the pain that Jesus' felt on the cross? Is it completely inappropriate for me to sympathize with (literally "feel with") the Messiah as much as possible and as often as possible because of his death on behalf of my immorality and hostility toward God? Is it wrong for me not to allow myself to feel just how unresolvable on my own is my problem of evil and, instead, claim that my supposed intellectual grasp of my immorality is all that is valuable? No, I do not think so—especially in the light of Jesus' statements in Matthew 5, but we human beings are so clever in our ability to create a so-called biblical message that is completely contrary to the Bible.

Therefore, we have learned from the beatitudes in Matthew 5 that God will satisfy the craving of those who, because of their continuous sense of their moral depravity, "hunger and thirst for righteousness." The satisfaction of their craving will take place when God transforms them into morally perfect beings in eternity. In John's gospel, Jesus is making the same kind of point when he encourages his listeners to believe in him in order that they may gain eternal life. However, some Christians interpret certain of Jesus' references to "life" as life in the present realm and not eternal life, but such reasoning fails to take into account the context of these passages and the whole gospel of John itself, including John's stated purpose in John 21:30,31 for writing his gospel. The best example of misinterpreting Jesus is John 10:10 in the midst of his telling a parable in which he is explaining to the Jews and especially their leaders, the Pharisees, that he is the "good shepherd" –

**John 10:7** So Jesus said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

**John 10:8** “All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them.

**John 10:9** “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.

**John 10:10** “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (ἐγὼ ἦλθον ἵνα ζωὴν ἔχωσιν καὶ περισσὸν ἔχωσιν, *ego aylthon hina zoeayn ekoesin kai perisson ekoesin*).

**John 10:11** “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life (τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ τίθησιν, *tayn psookayn autoo tithaysin*) for the sheep.

**John 10:12** “He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

**John 10:13** “He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep.

**John 10:14** “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me,

**John 10:15** even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life (τὴν ψυχὴν μου τίθημι, *tayn psookayn moo tithaymi*) for the sheep. (NAS95)

We see here that Jesus uses “life” in two places, and he may or may not mean the same thing in each case. He says that he will “lay down [his] life” for his sheep. Because we can read in the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John about what happens to him, the most plausible interpretation is that he will give up his physical life on earth and die on the cross on behalf of people who will embrace the significance of his death. Jesus states also that the purpose of his laying down his mortal, earthly life is so that his sheep “may have life, and have it abundantly.”

While some commentators take Jesus to be referring ultimately to eternal life by the words “abundant life” in v. 10, they still understand him to be claiming that he brings “full satisfaction and perfect guidance” to life in the present realm.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, on a popular level, Christians interpret Jesus as saying that the “abundant life” means that people can experience God’s blessings of emotional joy and stability along with harmony and success in the world as long as they are not intentionally pursuing evil and, therefore, are walking closely with Jesus in an intimate relationship with God. In other words, they think that the abundant life is available now, but only to those who are monitoring themselves carefully and being obedient to God. As soon as people commit some evil act, then they lose the right to an abundant life, and God reveals their loss to them by causing them to go through some sort of difficulty and suffering. Thus, their suffering is a sign that God is displeased with them because of the evil in their life, which then they must discern, repent of, and thereby return to being good people who are obeying God. Once they repent and obey, He will grant them the abundant life as they again walk closely with God.

However, the context of John 10 and the context of John’s whole gospel point to Jesus’ referring to eternal life. The thief comes in to destroy the sheep *eternally*. Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, John 10:9-10



has come to lead the sheep into *eternal* life that will be the abundant life of moral perfection in the eternal Kingdom of God. In this parable, the thief and the hired hand (v. 12) are any Jewish leader who misunderstands the Old Testament and is selfishly promoting a message of legalism among his fellow Jews. Ultimately, any legalistic perspective leads to rejecting Jesus as the Messiah who has come to lead Israel into the abundant life, which is an eternal, morally perfect life in the next creation.

This same kind of misinterpretation can occur in several other passages in John's gospel. For example, Jesus says about himself in John 6:48 –

**John 6:48** “I am the bread of life. (NAS95)

Is Jesus saying that he is the necessary and proper sustenance for a happy and harmonious existence in the current realm? Possibly, but, again, the context does not bear this out, especially when we take into account the preceding verse of John 6:47 –

**John 6:47** “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *zoeayn aionon*). (NAS95)

As I have said, it is possible that Jesus is referring to only a quality of life in the present realm when he uses the phrase “eternal life.” It is also possible that Jesus is referring in the context to a life that never ends in the eternal Kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup> We will look more closely at John 5:28,29 in chapter 12, but a quick reference to them now will be helpful. In them, Jesus says –

**John 5:28** “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice,

**John 5:29** and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life (εἰς ἀνάστασιν ζωῆς, *ays anastasis zoeayns*), those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment (εἰς ἀνάστασιν κρίσεως, *ays anastasis kriseoes*). (NAS95)

While we could interpret the word “tombs” metaphorically, as though Jesus means spiritual dungeons that people experience because of their moral depravity, it seems more straightforward to understand him as meaning actual physical tombs in which people have been buried after physical death. Thus, the “resurrection of life” that they experience is that of an existence of moral perfection in the eternal Kingdom of God after the present realm. This same goes for the “resurrection of judgment.” It is actually a resurrection from physical death into eternal condemnation and destruction as a result of God's judgment. Consequently, the context of John 5 points to a chronological meaning of never-ending life for the phrase “eternal life” (ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *zoayn aionon*) in John 6:47.

Going back a shorter distance from John 6:47,48 to verse 27 of John 6, we see Jesus say –

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<sup>9</sup> cf. BDAG, pg. 33, regarding αἰώνιος, “**3. pert. to a period of unending duration, without end.**” In chapter 4 on the Abrahamic Covenant, we will look at the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint and the fact that the translators used αἰώνιος (*aionios*) to translate the Hebrew word עוֹלָם (*'olam*), which can mean “into perpetuity in the present realm” or “into eternity.” While both the Greek αἰώνιος (*aionios*) and the Hebrew עוֹלָם (*'olam*) seem to include a chronological connotation, the question still is, to how long a time is the author referring—a long time within only the present realm, or a long time within the future, eternal realm that does not yet exist, or both?



**John 6:27** “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life (ἀλλὰ τὴν βρωσιν τὴν μένουσαν εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *alla tayn broesin tayn menoosan ays zoayn aionon*), which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.” (NAS95)

Here, Jesus is claiming to be the source of “eternal life.” The fact that he identifies himself metaphorically as food that endures to “eternal life” contributes good evidence to interpret this latter phrase as never-ending life. Thus, those who believe in him, because they are believing the truth that God is presenting them about the most important human being in all history—Jesus of Nazareth, as the very embodiment of God and eternal King of Israel and the Kingdom of Heaven, will “eat,” so to speak, food that allows them to experience a human existence after the final judgment that goes on forever. This interpretation of the Greek words ζωὴν αἰώνιον (*zoayn aionon*) in this context is even clearer a little later in verse 54 –

**John 6:54** “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *zoeayn aioenion*), and I will raise him up on the last day (καὶ γὰρ ἀναστήσω αὐτὸν τῇ ἐσχάτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, *kagoe anastaysoe auton tay eskatay haymera*). (NAS95)

In other words, those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah will survive the final judgment at the end of present, temporary history with the result that they will obtain an unending existence in the eternal Kingdom of God, when God grants them mercy and forgiveness.

Another verse, John 14:6, is often quoted by Christians, and I think that most of them rightly understand it. They use this verse as an evangelistic tool, because Jesus is referring to eternal life chronologically speaking as the context actually requires. Jesus is saying to his disciples during the Last Supper –

**John 14:1** “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.

**John 14:2** “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.

**John 14:3** “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

**John 14:4** “And you know the way where I am going.”

**John 14:5** Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?”

**John 14:6** Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life (ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ, *ego eaymi hay hodos kai hay alaytheia kai hay zoeay*); no one comes to the Father but through Me.” (NAS95)

In verse 6, Jesus states that he is the avenue that people must take in order to reach his Father’s house, because he is the Messiah. Thus, those who believe in him will escape eternal condemnation at the judgment and acquire an everlasting existence with him in the Kingdom of God.

We will see from John 5 that Jesus and his identity as the King of Israel is the central truth of the plans and purposes of God to create an eternal kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, which will come into existence at the end of the current realm and which is

obviously still future to us. Jesus will rule over this eternal kingdom, and those who believe in him in the present realm will live in it with him. Thus, Jesus states in John 14:6 that he is the source or means to gain life, but here he must mean eternal life, which comes to all those who believe in him. Therefore, by believing in Jesus and his death and resurrection, a person demonstrates that he has understood the personally insoluble problem of his own moral depravity and his desperate need for God's unmerited mercy. In the words of the beatitudes, he is properly mourning over his inherent evil and hungering for moral perfection, which he can acquire only through God's gracious forgiveness. Then, in the midst of hearing and grasping the message about Jesus as the King of Israel and means to an existence in the eternal Kingdom of God, a person who properly mourns over his internal and external evil and hungers for moral perfection will request mercy and forgiveness from God and receive them.

Consequently, it makes the most sense to understand John's purpose statement at the end of his gospel as referring to an never-ending life in a future realm. He is encouraging people to believe in Jesus for the sake of a chronologically eternal life –

**John 20:30** Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;  
**John 20:31** but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (NAS95)

Because John means eternal life in terms of time, he does not mean some sort of happy, carefree, and painless existence in the present realm that God has promised to give us as long as we are not engaged in intentional acts of disobedience—as many people interpret the phrase “abundant life” in John 14:6. Instead, life in the present realm is going to be filled with trials, difficulties, heartaches, and pain, even for authentic believers in Jesus as the Messiah. We should remember that Jesus said to his apostles, and I think we can count on the same this side of eternity for the rest of us who are not apostles –

**John 16:33** “These things I have spoken to you so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NAS95)

As a result of the importance of the concept of an unending, eternal life, throughout the rest of my book I will refer to this kind of life as Life with a capital “L” in contrast to life that we experience in the current realm. The reason is because an enduring life, or Life, with all that it involves chronologically, morally, and spiritually in the eternal Kingdom of Heaven is God's ultimate goal for those of us who experience human existence here on earth—properly understood. In other words, part of the very meaning of human existence is that, while God has definitely created us to live in this temporary and earthly realm with all that it entails, He has ultimately designed us to live in the eternal Kingdom of God. Certainly, we can and should enjoy life now whenever we have the opportunity, as long as we are still pursuing goodness and morality. However, we should not deceive ourselves into thinking that happiness in the current world is our ultimate goal. Nevertheless, both Christians and non-Christians fall into the trap of thinking that it is. Therefore, it should not surprise us that even Christians misinterpret Jesus and claim that he is promising an existence of emotional, psychological, and even financial and physical success in the present realm.

However, to interpret Jesus this way is to make the Bible say something that it is not. We cannot transcend our moral depravity and become good people before we reach eternity. We cannot walk so closely to God that the painful stuff of this present world does not get on us and even stick to us. We cannot draw upon the power of God and be good people such that God gives us an “abundant life” that is devoid of hardships and difficulties. Yet, Christians try to make the Bible say that Christianity is the means to obtaining heaven on earth. However, according to the Bible, heaven and an existence free from all inherent evil and its earthly, sorrowful consequences are not possible in the current realm. As we will learn from John 5, God has reserved moral perfection for the next realm, the eternal Kingdom of God that He will create as a result of the final judgment. To think otherwise is to adopt an erroneous perspective of the present world that would convince us that life now is of the utmost importance and that we can and need to get every ounce of enjoyment and satisfaction out of it now.

Therefore, people who make it their major purpose in life to acquire fame, wealth, comfort, happiness, and freedom as the means to feel fulfilled, even in the name of Christianity, not only will become frustrated and bitter when human existence turns out to be less than fulfilling, but also will find themselves actually opposing God instead of obeying Him. In contrast, God would have us forsake all these goals, if necessary, in order to acquire Life that endures forever in His eternal kingdom ruled by Jesus.

Solomon, the “Preacher,” makes the same point in Ecclesiastes –

**Eccl. 1:2** “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” (NAS95)

Solomon is basically saying, “I don’t care where you go or what you do, even if you become a Christian, you will never achieve satisfaction and fulfillment in your existence on earth.” It is vitally important that we make a distinction between a meaningful/purposeful life and a satisfying/fulfilling life. Life in the present realm and “under the sun,” as Solomon speaks of it, is extremely meaningful. As human beings, we all have tremendous purpose, because God has an eternal purpose for His creation and for us, His creatures. Ultimately, our purpose is to glorify God, and indeed we will, whether we believe and embrace the truth that we learn from the Bible or we remain hostile and rebellious toward it. Therefore, life is very meaningful and purposeful. However, it is never fully satisfying. We can never feel as though all our expectations of happiness, joy, and fulfillment will be or have been met. Everything, including Christianity, cannot meet all the longings of our hearts *in the present realm*. Loss, sadness, heartache, feelings of disappointment, and even emptiness will always be our experience this side of eternity. Thus, the Bible teaches us that God has designed us to yearn for eternity as even Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 3:11, that God has “set eternity in [our] heart.”

In fact, realizing and making the task of one’s life the pursuit of eternity is the most important thing one can do. In his book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Søren Kierkegaard is answering the question, how may a person enter into a proper relation to what Kierkegaard calls “eternal happiness” and which he identifies as “the highest good” for any human being. Kierkegaard comments in the Introduction to his book that Christianity calls each individual to answer this question and he implies that Christianity actually provides each person with the only legitimate answer. Therefore, Kierkegaard says,

“That is, without having comprehended Christianity—since I am merely presenting the question—I have at least understood this much, that it wants

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to make the single individual eternally happy and that precisely within this single individual it presupposes this infinite interest in his own happiness as *conditio sine qua non* [the indispensable condition], an interest which hates mother and father<sup>10</sup> and thus makes light of [philosophical and religious] systems and [whether people are famous and well-off in this world or not].<sup>11</sup>

The gospel of Jesus as the Messiah does not promise us complete happiness and satisfaction in life before eternity, not even during the Christmas season as enjoyable it is. The gospel promises the satisfaction of happiness in the next life, i.e., in eternal Life in the eternal Kingdom of God that will be ruled by Jesus. Part of John's intention is to communicate this message in his gospel. Indeed, the entire Bible is communicating that God is saving a people for Himself from His eternal condemnation and from the relentless and unavoidable chaos and disappointments of life in the current realm so that He will eventually transfer these people into the relentlessly satisfying and fulfilling realm of eternity.

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<sup>10</sup> See Luke 14:26

<sup>11</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Volume I*, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1992, pg. 16

## Chapter 3

### People Who Are Special

The second concept that I want to discuss before we dive into the biblical covenants and John 5 is that of God's choosing certain individuals in human history to play special and unique roles on His behalf as He proceeds toward completing His eternal plans and purposes. This concept involves four subconcepts, referred to in the Bible by the fact that people "come from God," "are sent by God," and perform "signs," i.e., miracles, and by its being said that God is "with" them. For example, in John's purpose statement that we looked at in the last chapter regarding eternal Life, he mentions that he has described particular "signs" that Jesus performed in order to provide an intellectual foundation and a rational basis for his readers to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God –

[John 20:30](#) Therefore many other signs (σημεῖα, *saymaya*) Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

[John 20:31](#) but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (NAS95)

If we go to chapter 3 of John's gospel, the Jewish leader Nicodemus makes a comment to Jesus that is helpful for understanding the meaning and purpose of these signs –

[John 3:1](#) Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;

[John 3:2](#) this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God (ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας, *apo theou elayluthas*) as a teacher; for no one can do these signs (ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα, *taouta ta saymaya*) that You do unless God is with him (μετ' αὐτοῦ, *met' autou*)." (NAS95)

Nicodemus connects the fact that Jesus has been performing of "signs" with both his having "come from God" and with God's being "with" him. Therefore, in one sentence, Nicodemus mentions three of the four subconcepts that refer to God's choosing a human being to play a special role in biblical history. In this case, what are the signs that Jesus has performed to allow Nicodemus to conclude that he has "come from God" and that "God is with him?" The only one John has explicitly described so far is in chapter 2 when Jesus' miraculously turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. After the miracle, John comments –

[John 2:11](#) This beginning of His signs Jesus did (Ταύτην ἐποίησεν ἀρχὴν τῶν σημείων ὁ Ἰησοῦς, *tautayn epoiaysen archayn toen saymayoen ho iaysous*) in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him. (NAS95)

John is labeling Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine as a sign that demonstrates his glory, which ultimately is his elevated status as the Messiah and the Son of God, and which results in Jesus' disciples believing in him. Thus, John will end his gospel by

saying that the very reason he has written it is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah in order that people gain eternal Life by believing in him (cf. John 20:30,31).

After the wedding at Cana in John 2, Jesus travels to Jerusalem, and John says that there he performs other “signs” and miracles –

**John 2:23** Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing (τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίει, *ta saymaya ha epoiay*) and believed in his name. (NAS95)

Thus, we know that Jesus has performed several miracles, even in Jerusalem, by the time that Nicodemus attests to the fact that miraculous signs are the proper evidence for identifying Jesus as someone who can say that he has “come from God” and that “God is with him.” If we go back to the Old Testament, we find that God Himself used the latter phrase in Exodus 3 to refer to a special role that Moses would fulfill in human history according to His sovereign purposes. Via the theophany of the burning bush, God is conversing with Moses about sending him to the Pharaoh of Egypt to lead the Israelites out of slavery. While Moses is wondering if he is the right man for the job, God says –

**Ex. 3:9** “Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them.

**Ex. 3:10** “Therefore, come now, and I will send you (אֶפְתָּחֶנְךָ) (ἀποστείλω σε, *apostaylow se*) to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.”

**Ex. 3:11** But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

**Ex. 3:12** And He said, “Certainly I will be with you (אֲנִי עִמָּךְ) (μετὰ σοῦ, *meta sou*), and this shall be the sign (תּוֹטָה) (τὸ σημεῖον, *to saymayon*) to you that it is I who have sent you (אֶפְתָּחֶנְךָ) (ἐγὼ σε ἐξαποστέλλω, *ego se exapostellow*): when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” (NAS95)

Notice that God assures Moses, “Certainly I will be with you,” and we know that Moses goes on to perform many miracles as “signs” in order to demonstrate to Pharaoh the truth of God’s statement. However, the ultimate “sign” that Moses will perform (or really that God performs through Moses) is that the people of Israel will worship God at the same mountain where God is now appearing to Moses. Therefore, for God to be “with” someone is for God to use him in a unique and special way within history that pertains to God’s central plans. As in the above passage, it can also be said that God “sends” this person to perform his special function. Therefore, this person also “comes from God.” In the story of Exodus, God was “with” Moses and “sent” him to lead the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt and to bring them to Mt. Sinai to worship Him.

We can also look at this interaction between God and Moses from another angle. Because Moses seems concerned about having the right qualifications to be the Israelites’ leader who goes to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and who brings the people out of slavery from Egypt, he asks God, “Who am I that I should be able to accomplish this task?” God’s response is basically, “Moses, the question is not who are you. The question is who am I. I am God, the author of this story, and I have picked you with all your strengths and weaknesses to carry out this special responsibility within human



history. And I will make sure that you accomplish the purposes for which I have chosen you.” Consequently, for God to be “with” someone and “send” him is to disregard the person’s human qualifications and focus only on who God is. And this is the point. The human story is God’s story. We human beings are playing the roles that God has chosen for us, and the Bible speaks of certain persons whom God chooses to fulfill unique and special roles that He wants highlighted. We will keep this in mind as we continue to think through what it means for Jesus to “have come from God” and for God to be “with him,” because Jesus fulfills the most important and unique human role as God incarnate, the Messiah, and the Son of God.

Another example of God’s choosing people to play a unique and special role within history is in Isaiah 43, when God says that He is using the entire nation of Israel in a special way –

**Is. 43:1** But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!

**Is. 43:2** “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you (אֲנִי־עִמָּךְ) (μετὰ σοῦ εἰμι, *meta sou aymee*); and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you.

**Is. 43:3** “For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place.

**Is. 43:4** “Since you are precious in My sight, since you are honored and I love you, I will give other men in your place and other peoples in exchange for your life.

**Is. 43:5** “Do not fear, for I am with you (אֲנִי־עִמָּךְ) (μετὰ σοῦ εἰμι, *meta sou aymee*); I will bring your offspring from the east, And gather you from the west.

**Is. 43:6** “I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ And to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring My sons from afar And My daughters from the ends of the earth,

**Is. 43:7** Everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made.” (NAS95)

We will look more closely at similar passages about Israel and the Jews when we examine the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants, but, here, God is saying that He will remain faithful to the Jews throughout their history, so that, eventually, He will bring them back into the land of Israel and demonstrate that they have played a special role in history as His chosen people. We also see that God expresses His loyal commitment to accomplish all His plans for the Jews by saying, “I will be with you.” He exhorts them, “Do not fear, for I am with you.” Thus, the dangers that the Jews encounter down through history will not destroy them completely, because God will remain faithful to them and ensure that they survive to the end of this temporary, present realm. And the reason that He preserves them is that He has chosen them to play a special and unique role within history. Thus, He is always “with” them.”

Joseph in Egypt – genesis 39

Returning to John 3, while Nicodemus admits that God is with Jesus because of the miraculous signs that he is performing, he noticeably stops short of labeling Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. He calls him only a teacher. In other words, Nicodemus

knew his Old Testament and that God would demonstrate His power through special people in history by using them to perform miracles. However, these Old Testament people, such as Moses, were certainly not God incarnate, but God still chose to use them for unique and special purposes. Therefore, Nicodemus has learned from the Old Testament that a human being's performing miracles within the biblical story does not necessarily indicate that he is God, or even the Christ, the Messiah, or the Son of God. It just means that God is accomplishing His eternal plans and purposes through those who "come" from Him and are "sent" by Him. In fact, a person can be a morally depraved human being who has come into existence only at a particular moment in time, who desperately needs God's mercy in order to obtain eternal life, and whom "God has sent," and who "came from God." It can also be said of this person that "God is with him," and that he is doing "signs" and miracles that explicitly validate the special role that he is playing in human history. In other words, a person does not have to be God incarnate for all four of these things to be true about him.

We notice also that the gospel of John indicates that God "sent" John the Baptist –

**John 1:6** There came a man sent from God (*ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, apostalmenos para theou*), whose name was John.

**John 1:7** He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him.

**John 1:8** He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light. (NAS95)

God had sent Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and He declared to him that He would be "with him." Similarly, God "sent" John the Baptist to bear witness to the truth of Jesus as the Messiah, and we can say that God is "with" him, and that he has "come from God." However, we have no record of John's ever performing "signs" to demonstrate these explicitly. Nevertheless, having been "sent from God," John the Baptist is a human being whom God has designated to play a particularly important role in biblical history.

God's plan all along has been to grant eternal mercy and salvation to a group of completely immoral people and to install them in His eternal kingdom ruled by Jesus as their King and to change them in this kingdom so that they are morally perfect. During the course of history, God has "sent" certain individuals to participate and fulfill important responsibilities in His interactions with these people. Up to the time of Jesus of Nazareth, none of these special people born to women has been God incarnate. However, they have all spoken words and/or done special things, even miracles, in order to show that God wants other people to pay particular attention to them as they fulfill their responsibilities within human history.

Both the Old and New Testaments indicate that the most important responsibility for a special human being to fulfill is that of the eternal Messiah. This responsibility is at the center of God's project and involves God's placing Himself in the story of mankind to rule over those whom God chooses, especially in the eternal Kingdom of God. Thus, Jesus of Nazareth has become the most important person who has "come from God and is "sent from God," so that God definitely is "with him." John alludes to this fact in the first chapter of his gospel –

**John 1:14** And the Word [*logos*] became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NAS95)



While John the Baptist was clearly “sent from God” to play an important role in biblical history, Jesus’ being sent by God was unique in all of history. See Appendix A for a fuller discussion of John 1 and the meaning of the “Word” [*logos*], but a cursory inspection of a few verses in this chapters shows us that, by John’s referring to God as the Word [*logos*], God became a man as Jesus of Nazareth to use him for the most important role in human history –

**John 1:1** In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word [*logos*] was with God, and the Word [*logos*] was God. (NAS95)

And –

**John 1:14** And the Word [*logos*] became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten (μονογενοῦς, *monogenous*) from the Father, full of grace and truth.<sup>12</sup>

If “the Word [*logos*] was God” (1:1) and “the Word [*logos*] became flesh” (1:14), then Jesus was and is a human being who was and is God Himself. Indeed, he is the *only* human being who is *both* God in the flesh *and* the final and permanent human King who has fulfilled the covenant that God made with David to place one of his descendants on the throne of Israel forever. I emphasize the fact that Jesus is both God and a permanent human being, because he has not been the only human being in biblical history who is God. For example, in Genesis 18, three men visit Abraham –

**Gen. 18:1** Now the LORD (יהוה, *Yahweh*) (ὁ θεός) appeared to him [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day.

**Gen. 18:2** When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men (שלו אנשים) (τρεις ἄνδρες) were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth,

**Gen. 18:3** and said, “My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by.” (NAS95)

While the rest of the story reveals that two of the men are angels in the conventional sense (cf. Genesis 18:22;19:1ff.), the third man is God, in fact Yahweh (*Yahway*) as so named by the Hebrew text. The New American Standard Bible, Updated 1995 (NAS95), whose text I have been using in this book, translates the Hebrew יהוה as LORD, i.e., Lord in all capital letters. The reason it does so is because the Jews stopped altogether many centuries ago pronouncing יהוה and saying it out loud as part of their attempt to obey the commandment, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Exodus 20:7). The Jews believed that even mispronouncing the Hebrew יהוה (LORD) would be a

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<sup>12</sup> While some English translations, such as the NAS95, follow the King James Version and translate μονογενοῦς (*monogenous*) as “only begotten,” which tends to lead people to think that John is referring to Jesus’ having coming into existence as the second person of the trinity, albeit in eternity past so that he is co-eternal with God the Father, other translations use the word “only” or the phrase “one and only,” such as the NIV—“the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father.” The Greek word basically means unique and, therefore, only. Thus, Jesus was the unique human being who was not just temporarily God, like the man in Genesis 18 who appeared to Abraham, but who would go on to live for all eternity within the creation as the king of the Kingdom of God. Cf. Appendix A.

violation of the commandment. Therefore, out of respect for the Jews, our English translators have chosen not to use any word that would approach the way יהוה might normally have been pronounced (I say “might” because it has been so long that not even the Jews know how the Israelites originally pronounced יהוה in Old Testament times). Instead, the NAS95 always translates יהוה as “LORD.” The small symbols under the first and third letters of the Hebrew word (reading right to left as Hebrew should be read) were borrowed from another word, אֲדֹנָי, (*Adonai*), meaning “my Lord.” Since the time that the Jews stopped pronouncing יהוה, they have said *Adonai* whenever they encounter one of the 6,828 occurrences of יהוה in the Hebrew scriptures.

The King James Version translates the word as Jehovah in four places in the Old Testament (Ex. 6:3; Ps. 83:18; Is. 12:2 and 26:4), which more accurately takes into account the vowel symbols underneath. Some Christian scholars, meaning no disrespect toward the Jews, go ahead and translate יהוה as it perhaps was pronounced, Yahweh (*Yahway*), which is what I will do here in my book. In any event, the word is God’s name, which He gives Himself in Exodus 3:15, when He commissions Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt. In the passage, Moses asks God to tell him His name in case the Israelites ask him. God answers, יהוה [Yahweh] –

**Ex. 3:15** God, furthermore, said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘The LORD (יהוה) [Yahweh], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.” (NAS95)

In Genesis 18, after Abraham greets the three men and serves them some food and drink, one of the men asks Abraham where his wife Sarah is. He tells the man that she is nearby, and the story continues –

**Gen. 18:10** He said, “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him.

**Gen. 18:11** Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing.

**Gen. 18:12** Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?”

**Gen. 18:13** And the LORD (יהוה, *Yahway*) (κύριος, *kurios*) said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?’

**Gen. 18:14** “Is anything too difficult for the LORD (מַיְיָהוּוָה, *mayyahway*) (παρὰ τῷ θεῷ, *para toe theow*)? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

In verse 13, Moses, the author of the first five books of the Bible, uses יהוה [Yahweh] to indicate that the man who is speaking to Abraham about Sarah is God. Then, in verse 14, the man refers to Himself as יהוה [Yahweh], and the Septuagint translates it as θεός, i.e., God. As I will argue later in my book, this third man in Genesis

18, God, is not Jesus, who is a permanent manifestation of Yahweh, God the Father. The man in Genesis is merely a temporary manifestation of Yahweh, God the Father.

If we use the word theophany that is derived from the two Greek words θεός (*theos*=God) and φανός (*phanos*=manifestation) to refer to an incident whereby the uncreated Creator of all the creation manifests Himself within the creation by means of a particular material form, shape, and voice, then, both in the case of the man in Genesis 18 and in the case of Jesus of Nazareth, these were theophanies of God.

However, the man in Genesis 18 was a temporary theophany, while Jesus is a permanent theophany. The man in Genesis all of sudden appeared as a full-grown man and then, just as suddenly, disappeared after the events of Genesis 18 & 19. The man of John 1, Jesus, appeared as a zygote in a young woman's uterus, was born, lived for approximately thirty-three years, died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, only to return some day and, eventually, even become the permanent ruler of another, eternal creation that God will make after He destroys this temporary one.<sup>13</sup>

As we will learn from John 5, Jesus is not only God incarnate but also the one "sent by God" to remain within the creation as the eternal King of the Kingdom of God. One question that I have been wrestling with for a while and that I am attempting to answer in this book is, should we think that it is completely unreasonable that, like the man in Genesis 18 who had not existed prior to the event of God's showing up at Abraham's tent, Jesus also had not existed, even as the so-called 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, prior to God's creating the zygote in Mary's uterus? In other words, if God reveals Himself at one point in human history using the form of a man, and nothing about that human person existed before that moment except for the fact that the one Creator God, Yahweh, planned to bring that man into existence at a particular moment and did bring him into existence, why could God not reveal Himself as a man in another point in human history, and there was nothing about this man either that existed before that moment except the one Creator God, Yahweh, and His plan to bring him into existence so that He eventually did?

Granted, Jesus as a theophany prays to God the Father and is even called the Son of God, which was not the case with the theophany in Genesis 18. Therefore, Jesus as a person acknowledges that there is another person to whom he is accountable and to whom he submits, while the man in Genesis is simply a manifestation of the person to whom Jesus prayed. As a result, we have the issue in the New Testament of dealing with two persons who are God, while there is only one such person who is God in the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, there is a much more reasonable and biblical way to explain the relationship between Jesus as the Son of God and as a separate person from God the Father than the way chosen by the early church fathers and championed by traditionalists since then. I will lay out this more reasonable and biblical way through a study of John 5 in this book.

To summarize, we have learned that there are four concepts that basically mean the same thing when they are applied to a human being. The first concept is that of a person's "coming from God." The second is that of a person's being "sent by God." The third is that of a person's "doing signs," i.e., miracles, and the fourth is when it is said that "God is with him." All four of these concepts refer to that fact that God has chosen a particular human being to perform a special and unique role within biblical and human history as He moves toward accomplishing His ultimate, eternal purposes and plans within the creation.

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<sup>13</sup> We will need to think through carefully what "heaven" actually is and what it means to "ascend" into it.

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However, this special human being might not actually perform miracles, as in the case of John the Baptist. It depends upon exactly how God desires to make known to other human beings that His chosen person is performing a unique role.

## Chapter 4

### The Ultimate Source of Biblical Belief—God

The third concept that I want to discuss before we move on to the central issue in this book is that of how people acquire biblical faith, or belief. My contention is that God ultimately causes people to believe or have faith in truth that results in their obtaining eternal Life. I use the two words faith and belief because most Christians talk about faith, and I think that the Bible is talking about belief. What is the difference? You will hear people say that “some of the things in the Bible need to be taken simply on faith.” In other words, there is no obvious evidence to prove certain things in the Bible and/or there is no rational explanation for these things in the Bible, but we should *have faith*, anyway, that they are true. On the other hand, we *believe* that the earth is round, because there is hard evidence to indicate so, and it just makes sense. Therefore, a human being does “faith” when there is no really good reason to “believe” something, and we do “belief” when there is. However, the Bible encourages us to shun “faith” and do “belief.”

The direction that I am taking in this discussion may appear to be getting us a little bit off topic, but it is not. The problem with human beings is not one of “faith.” It is one of “belief.” We “have faith” in all sorts of things that do not make sense. For example, as I will show in this book, people have faith in the Christian trinity. However, no theologian that I have read argues that the trinity makes sense. Therefore, the trinity must be taken on faith, when my point in this chapter is that the Bible teaches that God causes people to believe ideas that are true and make sense, not ideas that do not make sense and, consequently, are obviously false—regardless of how many “theologians” have vociferously and passionately declared for 1700 years that the trinity is true.

A helpful example from the Bible is Genesis 15 where the concept of belief is first mentioned –

**Gen. 15:1** After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying,

“Do not fear, Abram,  
I am a shield to you;  
Your reward shall be very great.”

**Gen. 15:2** Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

**Gen. 15:3** And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.”

**Gen. 15:4** Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.”

**Gen. 15:5** And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

**Gen. 15:6** Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

**Gen. 15:7** And He said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.”

**Gen. 15:8** He said, “O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?”

**Gen. 15:9** So He said to him, “Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove,

and a young pigeon.”

**Gen. 15:10** Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.

**Gen. 15:11** The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

**Gen. 15:12** Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.

**Gen. 15:13** God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.

**Gen. 15:14** “But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.

**Gen. 15:15** “As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.

**Gen. 15:16** “Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.”

**Gen. 15:17** It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.

**Gen. 15:18** On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying,  
“To your descendants I have given this land,  
From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

**Gen. 15:19** the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite

**Gen. 15:20** and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim

**Gen. 15:21** and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.” (NAS95)

We will examine more closely the last part of this passage in the next chapter when we consider the Abrahamic Covenant, but we can see here that Abraham (Abram as he is called now until Genesis 17 when God changes his name) is uncertain that God is going to fulfill His promise in Genesis 12 of giving him a son. In response to his question and concern, God takes Abraham outside his tent at night and has him look up at all the stars in the sky. God then declares that Abraham’s descendants will be as numerous as the stars, thus implying that Abraham will eventually have an actual son. What does Abraham do?

**Gen. 15:6** Then he believed (וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם בְּיְהוָה, *vehe’emin bayahway*) (καὶ ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραμ τῷ θεῷ, *kai episteusen Abram toe theoe*) in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (NAS95)

The question for us is, was God asking Abraham to have faith in something that does not make sense and for which there is not rational evidence to basis on which to base true belief? Or was God asking Abraham to believe Him for His promise because there is all sorts of evidence and it clearly makes sense that he will have a son? I would argue that it is the latter. By having Abraham look at the stars, God is implying that He is their Creator. And, if He is the power and ability to create all the stars, He likewise can bring about a son for Abraham and his barren wife Sarah. Therefore, there are literally billions of obvious pieces of evidence on which Abraham can base his belief in God’s fulfilling His promise. As a result, Abraham “believed in the Lord” for this promise. He did not just

have faith the way that people talk about “having faith.” He “believed” the way that I am talking about “belief” and claiming that the Bible is talking about “belief.”

In addition, we notice that Abraham believed God for His promise of a son and descendants, but he was struggling in his belief regarding their obtaining the land of Canaan that God has also promised them in Genesis 12. Does God simply say, “Well, Abraham, you just need to “have faith” that I will give you and your descendants the land?” No, instead, He provides Abraham with the clear and obvious evidence of a ceremony whereby He walks down in between the halves of dead animals, a common ceremony in the Ancient Near East for ratifying a covenant. Thus, God declares that He holds over own His head the threat of ceasing to exist if He were to renege on His promise of the land. Thus, there is one more piece of important, rational evidence to give Abraham a basis on which to “believe” God and not just “have faith.”

Therefore, I suggest that “having faith” is not what the Bible wants us to do. Instead, God exhorts us to “believe” Him for who He is and what He is doing within the created reality. This means that the third concept that I am addressing in this chapter is that of the source or origin of biblical belief in a human being. The Bible indicates that the source is God. In other words, as John mentions in the introduction to his gospel and that will be repeated in other places in his account—it is only through God’s initiative and inward activity that sinners believe the truth about Jesus as the Messiah –

[John 1:12](#) But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

[John 1:13](#) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (NAS95)

John is declaring that people cannot receive Jesus as the Messiah and believe all that it means for Jesus to be the Messiah if God does not cause them to be “born of God.” They cannot believe simply by the will of their own flesh, i.e., their own natural born humanity. God must work within them and miraculously cause them to believe. Jesus says the same thing in his conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3 –

[John 3:7](#) “Do not be amazed that I [Jesus] said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

[John 3:8](#) “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (NAS95)

Just as the wind is out of our control and blows through the trees such that all a person sees is its effect of the rustling of the leaves, so also the Holy Spirit is out of our control and blows through a person’s being such that this person becomes “born again” and believes in Jesus as the Messiah. The bottom line is that God causes a person to believe the rational truth of the Bible. No one, in and of himself, can fulfill the requirement of God and believe His truth in order to qualify for obtaining eternal Life. In other words, true belief exists only where God has performed an inner, divine miracle in a human being.

Jesus also says as much in John 6. The Jews are seeking food from Jesus, because he fed them miraculously the previous day, but Jesus encourages them to “eat the bread” that brings eternal Life by believing in him as the Messiah. Thus, the story continues –



**John 6:35** Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.

**John 6:36** “But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.

**John 6:37** “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.

**John 6:38** “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

**John 6:39** “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.

**John 6:40** “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.” (NAS95)

Jesus says that God the Father “gives” him people. It could be because they have first given themselves to God by virtue of their belief that has merely come from themselves. However, all these passages are revealing that God gathers people to Himself by initiating and causing a change in them inwardly. Thus, God the Father gives believers to Jesus to whom he then grants eternal Life at the judgment (as we will see from John 5), and Jesus goes on to say even more explicitly –

**John 6:44** “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him (ἐλκύσῃ αὐτόν, *helkusay auton*); and I will raise him up on the last day.

**John 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.” (NAS95)

The word that the NAS95 translates in v. 44 as “draws” (ἐλκύσῃ) (*helkusay*) could actually be translated “drags.” Literally, God drags people to Jesus who obtain eternal Life by believing in him. *Helkusay* basically means to move an object from one position to another by means of a pulling motion. The pulling motion could be simply an attraction such as when a person is “drawn” toward something that interests him. It also could be more forceful, as I think Jesus means here, such as when we are talking about the transcendent Creator who “draws” or “drags” rebellious, hostile people into a position of believing in Jesus. It may sound as though God “drags” people against their will, which would be true if God were just another human being. It would be like my putting a gun to somebody’s head and compelling him to jump off a cliff to his own death—obviously much against his will. However, because God is the Creator, He supernaturally *changes* people’s inward condition of hostility toward Him so that their inward condition becomes one of commitment to the truth. In other words, God does not act against people’s will. He changes them at the level of their desires so that they miraculously become willing to believe in and embrace the truth. Thus, God “drags” them into believing in Jesus as the Messiah when they would not do so in and of themselves, even if they appear willing to submit to God because of their religious obedience to the Bible like these Jews with whom Jesus is speaking.

Therefore, the implication here is not that God drags people to Jesus *against their will*. Jesus means that God causes people who are morally and spiritually incapable of believing in him to believe in him. In reality, all human beings are unable to believe in God in such a way that they meet His requirement of authentic, biblical belief and,



thereby, obtain salvation and eternal Life. Thus, God must “drag” them, i.e., miraculously change them inwardly and cause them to believe, which is exactly what He does.

Jesus goes on to say above in John 6:45 that the Old Testament states in Isaiah 54:13 that, at some time in the future, God will cause the Jews to give up their natural born hostility to Him and, instead, believe in and embrace His truth from their hearts. The passage of Isaiah 54:1-55:5 is worth quoting in its entirety –

**Is. 54:1** “Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child; Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman,” says the LORD [Yahweh].

**Is. 54:2** “Enlarge the place of your tent; Stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; Lengthen your cords and strengthen your pegs.

**Is. 54:3** “For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. And your descendants will possess nations and will resettle the desolate cities.

**Is. 54:4** “Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; And do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced; But you will forget the shame of your youth, And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.

**Is. 54:5** “For your husband is your Maker, Whose name is the LORD of hosts; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, Who is called the God of all the earth.

**Is. 54:6** “For the LORD has called you, Like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, Even like a wife of one’s youth when she is rejected,” Says your God.

**Is. 54:7** “For a brief moment I forsook you, But with great compassion I will gather you.

**Is. 54:8** “In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, But with everlasting lovingkindness (וּבְחֶסֶד עוֹלָם, *ubechesed ’olam*) (ἐν ἐλέει αἰωνίῳ, *en eleay aioenioe*) I will have compassion on you,” Says the LORD your Redeemer.

**Is. 54:9** “For this is like the days of Noah to Me, When I swore that the waters of Noah Would not flood the earth again; So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you Nor will I rebuke you.

**Is. 54:10** “For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, But My lovingkindness (וְחֶסֶדִּי, *vechasdee*) (τὸ παρ’ ἐμοῦ σοι ἔλεος, *to par emou soi eleos*) will not be removed from you, And My covenant of peace will not be shaken,” Says the LORD who has compassion on you.

**Is. 54:11** “O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, Behold, I will set your stones in antimony, And your foundations I will lay in sapphires.

**Is. 54:12** “Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies, And your gates of crystal, And your entire wall of precious stones.

**Is. 54:13** “**All your sons will be taught of the LORD** (לְמוֹדֵי יְהוָה) (καὶ πάντας τοὺς υἱοὺς σου διδασκτοὺς θεοῦ); And the well-being of your sons will be great (וְרַב שְׁלוֹם בְּנֵי־ךָ) (καὶ ἐν πολλῇ εἰρήνῃ τὰ τέκνα σου) [emphasis mine].

**Is. 54:14** “In righteousness you will be established; You will be far from oppression, for you will not fear; And from terror, for it will not come near you.

**Is. 54:15** “If anyone fiercely assails you it will not be from Me. Whoever assails you will fall because of you.

**Is. 54:16** “Behold, I Myself have created the smith who blows the fire of coals And brings out a weapon for its work; And I have created the destroyer to ruin.

**Is. 54:17** “No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; And every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, And their vindication is from Me,” declares the LORD.

**Is. 55:1** “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost.

**Is. 55:2** “Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And delight yourself in abundance.

**Is. 55:3** “**Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, According to the faithful mercies shown to David.**

**Is. 55:4** “**Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, A leader and commander for the peoples** [emphasis mine].

**Is. 55:5** “Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you.” (NAS95)

The “barren” woman of 54:1 who has borne no child is the nation of Israel, which at the time basically had no Jews living in the land of Israel who were authentically obeying God from changed hearts, because the Jews had all been taken into captivity by the Assyrians and the Babylonians (circa 700 B.C. and 600 B.C. respectively). The married woman of 54:1 was different, because she was the nation of Israel that had been living on the land before the captivities, but whose “children,” the Jews, had been rebellious and disobedient toward God. The miracle is that the barren woman can rejoice, because she will bear children who will be more numerous than that of the married woman. In other words, eventually God will not only bring about a revival among the Jews, but he will also bring them back into their land where they will worship Him with authentic belief, because He will change their hearts (cf. Deut. 10:16; 30:1-14; Romans 2:28,29; 11:1-32). Thus, they will be “taught of God,” i.e., have their hearts changed by God. And whatever He teaches them for the sake of their properly being His people and their eternal salvation they will grasp and believe.

Notice also that, in Isaiah 55:3 & 4, God exhorts the Israelites to listen to Him and live, i.e., Live eternally, which will happen according to “an everlasting covenant” that He will make with them that involves King David. Therefore, David becomes the prototype of God’s witness and leader of all peoples, i.e., of all the nations, both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is claiming that he is the fulfillment of this passage as the ultimate and unique leader of anyone who desires eternal Life. It is thus that God “drags” people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. They have “heard and learned from the Father,” because He has changed them inwardly so that they “come” to Jesus as the Father’s gift to him and as authentic, faithful followers of him.

This concept of God’s dragging people into genuine belief helps solve the apparent riddle that Jesus teaches by saying that no one who hears his message will obtain eternal Life without believing in him as the Messiah, while no one can believe in him as the Christ without God’s miraculously and supernaturally causing him to do so. Even

though this paradox sounds unfair and strange to our earthly ears, nevertheless John mentions it several times in his gospel as the truth about how God deals with His creation.

We also notice that Jesus does not trust people who believe in him in spite of the fact that he, first and foremost, believes that God the Father miraculously causes people to believe. John writes at the end of chapter 2 –

**John 2:23** Now when He [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.

**John 2:24** But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men,

**John 2:25** and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. (NAS95)

What is “in man?” It is hostility toward God that can manifest itself not only in obvious and blatant immorality, but also in less perceptible immorality of a religious kind, even in “belief” (cf. Romans 1,2). The Jews know from their study of the Old Testament to look for a Christ, a *Masheek* (Messiah), who will rule over them. Plus, they know, as Nicodemus indirectly declares and as we considered in the previous chapter, that the Messiah will identify himself by performing miraculous signs. Therefore, some Jews, after seeing Jesus perform such signs, believe in him as the Messiah. Nevertheless, Jesus realizes from his own understanding of the moral and spiritual condition of man that this belief might be only fleeting, an example of which we see in chapter 6 after Jesus hears some of his own disciples grumbling about his statement that they must “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood” –

**John 6:64** “But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him.

**John 6:65** And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.”

**John 6:66** As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. (NAS95)

Notice John says not only that Jesus realizes that some of his disciples are not authentically believing in him, but also that Jesus uses their unbelief as the reason why he keeps telling them that only God the Father can cause them to have true, biblical belief. Then, “many of his disciples” demonstrate their lack of belief by leaving him. In the same way, Jesus is not completely trusting that the belief of the Jews in chapter 2 is genuine while also understanding that people whom God causes to believe will endure in their belief. If belief comes only from the human being, then it is not authentic, biblical belief. If belief comes ultimately from God, then it is not only genuine and authentic, but it endures to the end of a person’s life in the present realm. Consequently, only time will tell, and Jesus is not banking on these Jews’ having genuine belief. People can easily fake biblical belief in a religious environment, whether Jews in Jesus’ day or Christians in our day.

Thus, we conclude from these last three chapters that the present realm in which we live is only temporary and will not provide a completely satisfying and fulfilling existence for human beings—even for Christians—because of our inherent and ongoing moral depravity. Thus, the biblical message emphasizes waiting for eternal Life in the Kingdom

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of God that will last forever as a future realm that God will create. Nevertheless, in the midst of the history of the present realm, God has designated certain human beings to play unique and important roles as He accomplishes His purposes specifically among the Jews and also among the Gentiles. The Bible says that these human beings are sent by God, come from God, and God is with them. Some of them even perform miraculous signs to demonstrate explicitly the fact that they are fulfilling a special role for God. The human being who is the most special in this category is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the eternal Kingdom of God and God incarnate. Human beings qualify for eternal Life by believing the truth that God has presented, particularly the truth of the New Testament regarding Jesus as the Messiah. However, because of our rebellion toward God, God must miraculously change our fundamental inward desires in order for us to believe this truth. In addition, biblical belief is based upon good evidence that allows us to say that it makes sense that we believe the Bible. Indeed, irrational belief, or "faith" as Christians like to call it, is a false belief. Therefore, irrational ideas, such as the trinity, are, by definition, false ideas.

## Part II

### Chapter 5

#### The Abrahamic Covenant

In the gospels, Jesus is interacting mainly with Jews, i.e., physical descendants of Abraham through his son Isaac, and only occasionally with Gentiles, i.e., those who cannot trace their descendancy to Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. The Jews are sometimes religious leaders—Pharisees and Sadducees, and probably even members of the Sanhedrin, the high court in Jerusalem, who eventually put Jesus on trial and condemn him to death. The Jews are sometimes common people from Jerusalem and small villages throughout the land of Israel, or Palestine, as it is also called today. It does seem, though, that they all are well-versed in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament and are looking for the promised Messiah, the one who will come from God to rule over the Jews and destroy all their enemies.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, understanding the Old Testament is vital to figuring out what is happening in Jesus' interactions with people, both Jews and Gentiles. In other words, correctly interpreting the New Testament requires a correct understanding of the Old Testament, because the former is basically commenting on the fulfillment of the latter.

Consequently, before we look at John 5, we need to consider important Old Testament background material that will help us follow the conversations within this chapter. Ideally, of course, we should take the entire Old Testament into account, but there are four parts that I believe are particularly important, each of which involves God's making or mentioning a covenant between Himself and certain people. These four sections of the Old Testament are Genesis 11-22 involving the Abrahamic Covenant, Exodus-Deuteronomy involving the Mosaic Covenant, 2 Samuel 7 along with certain Psalms involving the Davidic Covenant, and Jeremiah 31 involving the New Covenant. I will deal with the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the New Covenants here in Part II and address the Davidic Covenant in my analysis of John 5 in Part III. These covenants are basically contracts or agreements between God and certain people where God initiated with them and obligated Himself to certain actions while obligating the people to fulfill particular conditions and perform certain actions in return.

In this chapter, we will consider the Abrahamic Covenant and only touch on the New Covenant. In the next chapter, we will examine the Mosaic Covenant and consider more closely the New Covenant. The account of the Abrahamic Covenant, an agreement that God made with Abraham, begins at the end of Genesis 11 –

**Gen. 11:27** Now these are the records of the generations of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran became the father of Lot.

**Gen. 11:28** Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.

**Gen. 11:29** Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah.

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<sup>14</sup> These Jewish leaders were probably well-versed in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament called the Septuagint.

**Gen. 11:30** Sarai was barren; she had no child (וּמִתְהַי שָׂרַי בְּקָרְבָּהּ אֵין לָהּ בְּלֶדֶד, *vatehee sarai 'akarah ayn la valad*) (καὶ ἦν Σαῤα στείρα καὶ οὐκ ἔτεκνοποιεῖ, *kai ayn sara steira kai ouk eteknopoiai*).

**Gen. 11:31** Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there.

**Gen. 11:32** The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran. (NAS95)

The text mentions several people, all of whom are descendants of Shem, the eldest son of Noah. Therefore, they are all Shemites, or as they are called today, Semites, who are a branch of the Semitic peoples. This particular branch end up being the Jews, which is why opposing the Jews is labeled as anti-Semitic. Then, the main person in the biblical account is Abram, whose name means “Exalted Father.” In Genesis 17, God will change his name to Abraham, which perhaps means “Father of Many” or is simply an expanded form of Abram and therefore also means “Exalted Father.” God also changes his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah.

Around 2000 B.C., Abraham and his family lived in southern Iraq. In that day, it was called Ur of the Chaldees. Abraham eventually left Ur in order to settle in the land of Canaan, which is modern day Israel. His father, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot accompanied him on this journey. On the way to Canaan, after traveling up the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in order to avoid the desert directly between Ur and Canaan, his father died in Haran, a city that would be located in northern Syria or eastern Turkey if it existed today.

One of the most important verses in the Bible is found in this passage. It is v. 30, “Sarai was barren; she had no child (וּמִתְהַי שָׂרַי בְּקָרְבָּהּ אֵין לָהּ בְּלֶדֶד, *vatehee sarai 'akarah ayn la valad*) (καὶ ἦν Σαῤα στείρα καὶ οὐκ ἔτεκνοποιεῖ, *kai ayn sara steira kai ouk eteknopoiai*).” This verse sets us up for the whole rest of human history, because it implies one of the main truths of the Bible—that if God is going to fulfill His promises, and, specifically here, to give Abraham and Sarah a son, then He will have to do so miraculously. Ultimately, God has promised to rescue a group of people from His judgment and eternal condemnation. In order to do so, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, God will graciously and miraculously change them inwardly by the work of His Holy Spirit. Then, and only then will they properly face into their incurable moral depravity and appeal to Him for His unmerited and divine mercy. Thus, they will satisfy God's requirement of authentic belief for those who stand to be granted eternal Life.

In contrast, many people believe that all human beings are capable in and of themselves to meet this requirement, and afterwards God extends His grace and forgiveness to them as a equitable compensation to their belief, faith, and obedience. Instead, the Bible teaches that, just as it was necessary for God to cause barren Sarah to get pregnant miraculously through Abraham, God miraculously has to cause morally depraved people to become “born again” internally so that they believe His truth. In this way, God causes them to become committed to escaping their immorality and acquiring eternal Life after death in the future Kingdom of God where He will transform them into morally perfect people.

Misunderstanding this important concept of God's causation has led to much erroneous thinking and teaching within biblical history. The essence of this false teaching is legalism. While many people define legalism as being overly concerned with obeying God's commandments, it is something entirely different. Legalism is simply thinking that we are sufficiently capable in and of ourselves, even as immoral human



beings, to obey God's commandments so as to make ourselves good people and worthy of God's blessings. Then, once we have performed well enough for God, He graciously forgives us and grants us His blessings of prosperity on earth and eternal Life in the future. Thus, we earn God's forgiveness, grace, and blessings. But the flip side must be true also. If we can gain God's favor and earn salvation by our worthy behavior, then we can always lose His favor by making ourselves worthy of judgment again.

Psychologically, this is a perilous mindset, because a person can never know if he has performed well enough for God. For example, might God get upset over one little immoral act? Absolutely. Therefore, even though most legalists appear to others as being very confident (and sometimes arrogant) people, because outwardly they are performing such wonderful deeds for God (and they love to let everyone know it), inwardly they are incredibly insecure and fearful—even angry and despairing. They live in constant fear of never having prayed enough, never having fasted enough, never having studied their Bibles enough, never having evangelized enough, never having attended church enough, never having given enough to the church, and never having performed enough good, moral deeds. Deep down inside, they are angry with God for being so harsh, and they love to take their anger out on anyone who disagrees with them in their theology or practices. In addition, they despair of ever pleasing God, because they know that they cannot.<sup>15</sup>

At the core of legalism is pride and rejection of God's grace, no matter how much legalists extol the grace of God and no matter how much they read in the Bible about the error of their legalism. Indeed, this error becomes the very reason for the Jews' rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. The Jewish leaders want to be affirmed for their diligent Bible study and valuable and stringent obedience to the Mosaic Covenant, but Jesus says the opposite, that they are in fact hostile and disobedient toward God. Certainly the Jews do not like hearing that they are relating to God inappropriately, and they condemn Jesus to death for *his* error. Likewise, if Jesus were to appear today, Christians would want to be affirmed for their diligent Bible study and valuable obedience to Jesus through their worship of him and their wonderful church programs in which they are involved in his name. However, Jesus would say the same thing to them as he said to the Jews, that, in fact, they are hostile to God. And they would condemn him for *his* error, regardless of how many songs they have sung about him and to him.

### ***The First Promise of the Abrahamic Covenant***

Getting back to the Abrahamic Covenant, the foundational text for understanding it is the first paragraph of Genesis 12 –

**Gen. 12:1** Now the LORD [Yahweh] said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you;

**Gen. 12:2** And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing;

**Gen. 12:3** And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."  
(NAS95)

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<sup>15</sup> Søren Kierkegaard has done a masterful job of describing in great detail the mindset and psychology of the despairing legalist in his book [A Sickness Unto Death](#). I have written a commentary on most of this book, which is available in pdf form on request. The last part of Kierkegaard's book is too difficult for me to understand currently, but I am working on it.

This paragraph begins with God's commanding Abraham to leave his land of origin and all his relatives and travel to what Genesis has already identified as the land of Canaan (cf. Gen. 11:31). Abraham will basically start life over again in a new land. God puts it in terms of His "showing" Abraham the land which he is to enter. This becomes the first promise that God makes to Abraham as confirmed by what God says in Genesis 13:14-17 after he has actually entered the land of Canaan –

**Gen. 13:14** The LORD [Yahweh] said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward;

**Gen. 13:15** for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever.

**Gen. 13:16** "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.

**Gen. 13:17** "Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you." (NAS95)

The operative term here regarding the land is clearly "give." God promises to give Abraham and his descendants, the Jews, the land of Canaan "forever" (עַד-עוֹלָם (*ad 'olam*) = into perpetuity, i.e., as long as the present realm exists until the creation of the new earth – cf. 2 Peter 3:10-13).<sup>16</sup> We are obviously still watching the process by which God is fulfilling this promise, because the Jews have never permanently possessed all the land which God is giving them, as can be seen by their history and the description of the land in Genesis 15:12-21. In this latter passage that we looked at briefly in the previous chapter, Abraham has just questioned God on how he can know that he really will possess the land that God has promised him. God chooses to show him the level of His faithfulness to His promise through a rather strange ceremony. This ceremony is what constitutes the actual making (literally "cutting" in Hebrew) of the Abrahamic Covenant –

**Gen. 15:9** So He [God] said to him [Abraham], "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon."

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<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew phrase עַד-עוֹלָם (*ad 'olam*) and even just the Hebrew word עוֹלָם (*'olam*) most often are translated in our English Bibles by the word "forever," which for us denotes eternally. But the Hebrew phrase and word do not have to include the meaning of eternity. They can mean simply "for as long as God wants something to last, which might be only until the end of the present realm." As a result, I have suggested the meaning "into perpetuity." If 2 Peter 3:10-13 is speaking of the destruction of the current realm and God's creating a completely new heavens and new earth, then His promise to the Jews that they would live on the land of Israel *in the present realm* cannot be *forever* in the sense of eternally. A clear example of this restricted meaning of the word is Exodus 21:6, where God commands that when a slave desires to remain with his master instead of going free after serving him for six years, the master shall pierce his ear with an awl and thus "he shall serve him permanently (*'olam*)." I suppose that we could interpret God's meaning as the slave's serving his master on into eternal Life, but it seems much more reasonable within the whole context of the Mosaic Covenant to understand Him as speaking of only during the physical and temporal life of either the master or the slave on earth. Therefore, *'olam* can have a restricted meaning of "for a long time in this realm" or, if referring to something God is doing, "until the end of the present realm." In addition, the Greek version of the Old Testament, that is called the Septuagint, translates the Hebrew word *'olam* with αἰώνιος (*aiownios*), which in the New Testament is translated "eternal" in our English versions. Therefore, even αἰώνιος (*aiownios*) could mean simply "into perpetuity" in the Septuagint, thus making it necessary for us at least to consider this restricted meaning in the New Testament passages.



**Gen. 15:10** Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.

**Gen. 15:11** The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

**Gen. 15:12** Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.

**Gen. 15:13** God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.

**Gen. 15:14** "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.

**Gen. 15:15** "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.

**Gen. 15:16** "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

**Gen. 15:17** It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.

**Gen. 15:18** On that day the LORD [Yahweh] made [כָּרַת, literally "cut"] a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

**Gen. 15:19** the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite

**Gen. 15:20** and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim

**Gen. 15:21** and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite." (NAS95)

Scholars have found elements of ancient Suzerain-Vassal Treaty ceremonies in this procedure that God enacted with Abraham.<sup>17</sup> When one people, tribe, or nation conquered another in the ancient Near East, they would perform a similar ceremony where they would cut an animal in half, lay the halves on the ground with space in between for at least two people to walk through, separate the two tribes opposite each other beside the halves of the animal, and then the leaders of the tribes (even kings of nations) would walk in between the halves of the cut animal. Thus, they "cut" a covenant between the two tribes. By the leaders walking together between the two halves of the animal, they were declaring to each other and their people that they were legally bound to keep the mutually agreed upon requirements of their treaty or else they would be cut in two like the animal. Therefore, each leader was in essence saying, "May it thus happen to me, that I would be split in half and killed, if my people and I do not uphold our end of the bargain."

However, notice something special in the story of Genesis 15. Only God, in the form of the smoking oven and flaming torch, "passed between these pieces" of the animals, while Abraham is asleep and off to the side. Thus, God is declaring that He alone has the *ultimate* responsibility to ensure that the covenant is kept, which includes making sure that Abraham and his descendants fulfill their requirements to the covenant. In other words, God, the transcendent Creator of all reality, is declaring unequivocally that He guarantees that He will uphold His promises to Abraham, including Abraham's possessing the land that He is giving to him and his descendants. And how will God make sure that Abraham's descendants acquire the land of Canaan? By miraculously

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<sup>17</sup> Consider, for example, the article entitled "Covenant" in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, New York, Doubleday, 1990.

working within them so that they fulfill the condition of believing the truth about God and obeying Him properly. In other words, God guarantees that He will change their hearts and cause them to believe and obey. God has already changed Abraham's heart as we have seen by virtue of his believing God for the promise of a son in Genesis 15:6, and, ultimately, God will change the hearts of some of the Jews, especially those of one generation in the future.

While we may think that God is promising to cause each and every Jew who has ever lived on earth to have a changed heart and to believe His truth authentically, it becomes clear in the rest of the Bible that this is not the case. God's plan is, eventually, for there to be one generation of Jews, all alive on the earth at the same time, who will be genuine believers. Indeed, because this believing generation has not yet existed, they will believe that Jesus of Nazareth is their Messiah, and they will embrace the eternal salvation from God's condemnation that he provides.

We also notice in Genesis 15 above that the land that God is giving the Jews extends from the "river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates." Many scholars have concluded that the "river of Egypt," the southern boundary of the land, is not the Nile River. Instead, they claim that it is a smaller and usually dry creek bed called the wadi El Arish in southern Israel. Wadi comes from Arabic and means valley or channel that is dry except in the rainy season. Then, God names the northern boundary as "the river Euphrates," which, if it is the actual river so named, is in the Mesopotamian Valley in modern day Iraq.

Even if the "river of Egypt" is not the Nile River, the land that God is describing is still quite expansive since it extends from the southern part of modern day Israel as far north as central Iraq. A quick glance at history reveals that there has been only one period of time when the Jews actually controlled the entire area described here in Genesis 15, and this was during the monarchy and reigns of David and Solomon around 1000 B.C. We can also certainly appreciate the problem today if the modern state of Israel were to try to extend its northern border past Lebanon and Syria into Iraq. Quite a few people would definitely object to such an endeavor by the Jews. We will consider later just how God chooses to fulfill His promise of the entirety of this land to the Jews at the time when He changes the hearts of an entire generation and causes them to believe and obey Him with the kind of inwardness that He requires.

### ***The Second Promise of the Abrahamic Covenant***

The second promise that God makes to Abraham in Genesis 12:2 is that he will become a "great nation" (גוֹי גָדוֹל (*goy gadol*)) (ἔθνος μέγα (*ethnos mega*) – LXX). Other uses of this phrase in the Old Testament indicate that God means that Abraham's physical descendants, the Jews, will be a great people in that they will be strong, well-known, and wise. Indeed, the Hebrew word *goy* (גוֹי) is typically used by Jews to refer to a Gentile, i.e., a person who is not descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. It can also have the collective meaning of people and, in fact, the people of Israel who will be great by virtue of their wisdom, understanding of God, and strength in comparison to other people and nations. Thus, in Deuteronomy 4:6, Moses predicts that, if the Israelites obey God as He has instructed them, then all the other peoples of the earth will consider them to be a "great" and "wise" "nation" –

**Deut. 4:6** "So keep and do [God's instructions in the Mosaic Covenant], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples (הַעַמִּים, *ha'ammeem*) (τῶν ἐθνῶν, *toen ethnoen*) who will hear all these

statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people (הַגִּיּוֹן הַנְּבִינִים הַנְּקִיָּים הַנְּחֻמִּים, *raq ‘am chakam venavown haggoy haggadowl hazzeh*) (Ἴδοὺ λαὸς σοφὸς καὶ ἐπιστήμων τὸ ἔθνος τὸ μέγα τοῦτο, *idou laos sophos kai epistaymown to ethnos to mega touto*).” (NAS95)

Notice that the Hebrew text uses two different words for people in this verse. The Gentiles are referred to as “peoples” (*‘ammeem*), while the Israelites are referred to as both a “nation” (*goy*) and “people” (*‘am*; *‘ammeem* being the plural of *‘am*). Both words mean basically the same thing—a collective group of people who have organized themselves into a common tribe or society within a particular governmental boundary. Thus, other peoples and nations will recognize the strength, wisdom, and understanding of the nation of Israel, if the Jews properly obey God and the Mosaic covenant. In fact, this is God’s second promise to the Jews through the Abrahamic Covenant, that He will make them such.

In addition, the message of the whole Bible indicates that true wisdom and greatness occur because people authentically obey God from their hearts, which have been miraculously changed by God. As I have already pointed out in Chapter 4, a change of heart leading to authentic belief and proper obedience to God involves His inward work as the Holy Spirit. God reorients people’s fundamental desires so that they become committed to goodness and morality while they also acknowledge their moral depravity before God and appeal to Him for His unmerited mercy. The final result is their obtaining eternal Life from God in the Kingdom of God. Thus, through the covenantal ceremony in Genesis 15, God has guaranteed not only the land to the Jews but also that they will eventually become a great nation, who properly obey Him and are wise because of His changing their hearts and their fundamental desires. However, God has not yet brought about the fulfillment of these promises. Nevertheless, He will do so in the future, because He is a faithful God.

### ***The Third Promise of the Abrahamic Covenant***

The third promise that God makes to Abraham is that He will “bless” him (Gen. 12:2). This could mean only that God will keep Abraham safe and cause him to prosper materially during his life on earth. In fact, God does provide Abraham with wealth and safety during the course of his existence, but God ultimately has something greater in mind here by His blessing. In addition, we should not extrapolate from Abraham’s life and conclude that God promises safety, prosperity, and health for all Christians. God certainly has His reasons for giving Abraham the quality of life that He did, but it was not so that Abraham’s external circumstances would be a model for all who become like him in his faith. For example, consider the apostle Paul, who suffered tremendously as the premiere theologian of all time (apart from Jesus) while also obeying God by proclaiming the message of Jesus as the Messiah. A quick look at his life shows that some authentic believers may experience great suffering and hardship while others, like Abraham, may not. As I said, God has His reasons for providing each believer with the quality of human existence that He desires.

The blessing that God has promised Abraham is eternal Life and salvation from His condemnation. Abraham was no different from any other person during human history who is rebellious and hostile toward God. He needed God’s forgiveness and eternal salvation just as much as anyone else. Thus, the best blessing that God can promise to give to Abraham is eternal mercy and Life. It is precisely this blessing that God is

promising in Genesis 12:2. We discover more explicitly later in the Bible that Abraham truly understands what God is saying. The author of the New Testament letter called Hebrews makes it clear in chapter 11, the so-called Hall of Faith, that Abraham was counting on God to grant him eternal Life. The author states that without authentic belief it is impossible to please God, and he cites examples of true believers in the Old Testament, one of which of course is Abraham –

**Heb. 11:8** By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

**Heb. 11:9** By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise;

**Heb. 11:10** for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God...

**Heb. 11:13** All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

**Heb. 11:14** For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own.

**Heb. 11:15** And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.

**Heb. 11:16** But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. (NAS95)

Even though God gives Abraham the physical land of Canaan, He also promises to bless him with eternal Life and a “heavenly” land, which is what the author of Hebrews is telling us. While it is true that Abraham obeyed God, traveled from Ur to Canaan, and, as a result of his obedience, partially received God’s promise of the physical land of Canaan, Abraham also had a desire for the promise of the “heavenly” land of eternal Life.<sup>18</sup> It is one thing to be blessed by God with safety, health, and prosperity in one’s present life, as many Christians wrongly believe that God promises them today. God may choose to provide some Christians and even non-Christians with safety, health, and prosperity in the present realm. However, these do not constitute the fulfillment of God’s promise of blessing to Abraham. Instead, His promised and future blessing is eternal Life, which includes forgiveness for our rebellion against God and salvation from the eternal destruction that we deserve. It is this blessing that He wants us to focus on and long for more than anything else that He could give us. Therefore, even though it does not appear to be explicit in the Genesis account, Abraham understands that God is promising him eternal Life, so that he ends up looking forward to it in the same way that we should.

In addition, Abraham comes by the blessing of eternal Life by the same mechanism that God uses to grant us eternal Life—by changing Abraham inwardly and causing him to believe the truth that God has expressed to him so that he becomes committed to the blessing that God is promising him. As God does with New Testament believers, he changes Abraham’s inward and fundamental desires, so that Abraham satisfies the necessary condition for both keeping the Abrahamic Covenant and obtaining eternal

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<sup>18</sup> I say that Abraham *partially* received the promise of the land of Canaan, because the indigenous Canaanites remained living there throughout his lifetime, and Abraham never truly settled on the land.

Life. The story in Genesis 15:1-6 implies that Abraham has qualified for salvation as also explained by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. First, Genesis 15:1-6 –

**Gen. 15:1** After these things the word of the LORD [Yahweh] came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.”

**Gen. 15:2** Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

**Gen. 15:3** And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.”

**Gen. 15:4** Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.”

**Gen. 15:5** And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

**Gen. 15:6** Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness (הַקְדִּיֶּנֶת לְאֵלֹהֵי שָׁמַיִם, *vayyachsh<sup>e</sup>veha low tz<sup>e</sup>daqah*) (καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην, *kai elogisthay autoe ays dikaiosunayn*). (NAS95)

Several years after God has promised in Genesis 12 to make of Abraham a great nation, Abraham still has no male heir by which this promise can be fulfilled. Therefore, he questions God regarding the subject of a male heir. God says in Genesis 15 that Abraham’s reward shall be very great. Abraham basically responds, “How can my reward be great when I still have no son?” God answers Abraham by affirming His promise of Genesis 12 to him and says that an heir “will come forth from [his] own body.” Then, He takes Abraham outside his tent at night and shows him the stars of the sky. While Abraham is observing the myriad of stars above him, God says that his descendants will be as numerous as those stars. Verse 6 is one of the most important in the whole Bible, “Then [Abraham] believed God, and He accounted it to him such that He granted him *tz<sup>e</sup>daqah* (δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosunay*) – LXX)” (my translation). The point here is that Abraham exhibits authentic belief in God in regard to one statement of truth that God makes to him—that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of heaven. Consequently, because of Abraham’s genuine, biblical belief in this one, true statement by God, God grants him *tz<sup>e</sup>daqah*, i.e., eternal forgiveness and Life, as I will explain below.

While many Jews and Christians hold to the view that the act of belief is something Abraham did on his own in order to satisfy the necessary requirement for acquiring *tz<sup>e</sup>daqah* or *dikaiosunay*, the apostle Paul makes it clear in his letter to the Romans that the situation is quite different. Indeed, the erroneous perspective that Abraham is capable in and of himself to believe God genuinely is none other than legalism as I described earlier and that is worthy of God’s condemnation, because it demonstrates hostility toward God and does not adequately understand either the depth of the problem of evil within human beings or the greatness of God’s grace. To reject categorically and fundamentally the biblical truths of both the profundity of human depravity and the inaccessibility of divine mercy to human beings who are trying to obtain it on their own is to reject God and incur His disapprobation.

The apostle Paul explains in Romans 1 that all human beings, in spite of when and where they have lived in human history, understand enough about God that they know

that they should worship Him properly and acquire His forgiveness and salvation. God has simply hardwired us with the ability to deduce His existence and worthiness of worship along with our moral accountability to Him. Our knowledge of our moral accountability includes not only the fact that we deserve His eternal punishment for our rebellion against Him, but also a realization that we are completely incapable on our own to escape His punishment. Thus, all it would take for any human being at any time in history and in any place on this earth to receive forgiveness and eternal Life is to bow down inwardly and authentically before his Creator and appeal to Him for mercy. When a human being appropriately makes such a request, Paul calls the result in Greek *dikaioSunay*, the state of God's having granted the person forgiveness whereby he stands to acquire eternal Life and salvation.

But the key to understanding how God grants *dikaioSunay* to a person is found in Romans 2, where Paul explains that it can happen only by means of a miracle of God that He chooses to perform in spite of the person's hostility toward Him. Thus, the sovereign and miraculous action of God resulting in *dikaioSunay* for a morally depraved human being becomes the very definition of His grace. In Romans 2, Paul is addressing a hypothetical Jew who believes that, because of his physical descendancy from Abraham and his obedience to the Mosaic Covenant and the commandment of circumcision, he stands to gain eternal Life. In other words, the hypothetical Jew believes that he has made himself *worthy* of God's mercy and grace by means of his excellent performance of the Mosaic Covenant. Paul bluntly tells the Jew that he is self-deceived and that the only Jew whom God blesses is the one whom God miraculously changes inwardly –

**Rom. 2:28** For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

**Rom. 2:29** But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (NAS95)

In other words, no human being has the innate ability to change himself inwardly, which is *the* necessary condition for obtaining eternal Life and which leads a person to obey God properly. This proper obedience includes genuinely believing the truth that God presents to him. Only God can cause this inward change, that happens through His gracious and miraculous action by reorienting a person's heart, i.e., altering his fundamental desires and commitments so that, instead of being devoted to rebelling against God and pursuing immorality, the person becomes devoted to obeying God and pursuing morality, even in an overall continued state of immorality.

We normally think of immorality in rather crass and obvious terms—murder, stealing, adultery, deceit, lying, cheating, etc., which is how Paul describes it in Romans 1. There he says that immorality results from people's hostility toward God, because their hearts are fundamentally evil. Paul goes on to cite the clear example of homosexuality, because it is so obviously contrary to God's natural design of our human bodies. The irony, however, is that, as Paul shows in Romans 2, human beings are very adept at taking their hostility toward God and acting it out within a religious context, indeed even a biblical and Christian religious context. Paul cites the example of the Jew who is an assiduous and diligent student of the Bible and an ardent follower of the Mosaic Covenant. Nevertheless, because of the Jew's self-righteousness, he is simply exhibiting his hostility toward God in a religious manner. For example, this Jew teaches the Bible to others and, thereby, believes that he knows and understands essential doctrines and truths. Paul says that, indeed, he does "know" certain essential doctrines and truths. But



does he really “know” these truths? Is he actually living his life on the basis of them? Or have these truths become merely a means to demonstrate his intellectual ability and to exercise power and control over others? Paul says that this diligent Bible teacher’s self-deception is so profound that he is not even listening to his own teaching, while firmly believing that he is not only listening to it but also following it.

We need to realize that many Christians, who are serious Bible students and teachers, may be guilty of the same self-deception. By not really listening to the Bible and their own teaching, they are only using the religious context of Christianity and the Church to express their hostility toward God. They have found a comfortable, religious means to hide their innate rebellion against God just as the Jews of Jesus’ and Paul’s day did within Judaism.

What are both the religious Jew and the religious Christian missing? The answer is, God’s grace and a changed heart that would lead to a proper recognition of the incurable and profound nature of their moral depravity and their desperate need for God’s undeserved mercy. An important word here is “undeserved,” because, while both the Jew and the Christian might verbally affirm that they do not deserve God’s forgiveness, their inner perspective and attitudes, along with some of their outward actions, betray the continued hostile condition of their hearts. They say that they do not deserve God’s mercy, but they actually believe that they do deserve it, along with God’s blessings, even the blessing of eternal Life. Thus, they believe that they have earned God’s mercy and eternal Life.

However, Paul declares in Romans 4:1-5 that Abraham, as the premiere Jewish, authentic believer and prime example of all authentic believers throughout human history, did not earn God’s favor in Genesis 15. Instead, he acquired *dikaioṣunay* only because of his belief, which, in turn, must have been given to him by God through His grace –

**Rom. 4:1** What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

**Rom. 4:2** For if Abraham was justified by works (ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη, *ex ergoen edikaoethay*), he has something to boast about, but not before God.

**Rom. 4:3** For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην, *kai elogisthay autoe ays dikaiosunayn*).”

**Rom. 4:4** Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor (οὐ λογίζεται κατὰ χάριν, *ou logizetai kata charin*), but as what is due (κατὰ τὸ ὀφείλημα, *kata to ophailayma*).

**Rom. 4:5** But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness [λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην, *logizetai hay pistis autou ays dikaiosunayn*],... (NAS95)

In vs. 3 & 4, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 and states unequivocally that belief is different from making oneself a worthwhile person through moral obedience to God. He clearly implies that belief comes about because of God’s miraculous inward change that takes place first (cf. Romans 2:28,29). Paul says that the one who “works,” who performs obedience thinking that he can make himself worthy of God’s blessing, would receive this blessing as what he “is due,” i.e., as what God owes him (if this were even possible). Paul, though, has argued earlier in Romans that, because of our innate moral depravity, no human being can obligate God to pay him His blessing as though he puts



God in his debt by obeying Him. Therefore, no one can claim that he has received God's "favor" (lit. grace (χάρις)) because he has earned it.

Instead grace is the unsolicited, miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, who performs an inward change in an evil, undeserving human being so as to reorient the person's fundamental desires (heart) and thereby cause true belief to arise within him. The result is that God grants the true believer *dikaionay*, so that he stands to receive eternal Life and salvation from God's judgment. Therefore, the spiritual mechanism by which Old Testament sinners became authentic believers and acquired eternal Life was no different from that which God uses now in New Testament times. The only difference is that the statements of truth that God spoke to Old Testament people when they became believers were not specifically about Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. Only people in New Testament times hear this latter message in the midst of their becoming believers in God's truth through the inner work of the Holy Spirit.

By referring to Abraham as an example of someone who acquires *dikaionay* from God, Paul is implying another very important point about genuine belief—that the content of the doctrinal truth that a person "hears" from God and believes is not what saves him. Instead, it is the inward change of a person's heart that the Spirit of God miraculously brings about in the midst of whatever truth the person is considering when God is changing his heart. If a person, like Abraham, is hearing that God is going to make his descendants as numerous as the stars of the heaven, and he believes this truth, then God rescues him from eternal condemnation and grants him eternal Life. If a person, like the apostle Paul, hears that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, and he believes this truth, then God rescues him from eternal condemnation and grants him eternal Life.

Nevertheless, Paul is also implying by his argument in Romans 1-3 that there is something else that is eventually the same for all human beings whose hearts God changes, who authentically believe God's truth, and to whom He grants eternal salvation. They face into the profundity of their immoral condition and recognize that they cannot solve this problem themselves. Therefore, they also realize that they desperately need God's gracious help and mercy in order to do so. In response to all this realization, they actually cry out to God for mercy, and He grants it to them. The irony, however, is that their recognizing these truths and facing into their problem of immorality happens only because God is already working within them, resulting in their hearts becoming changed. In other words, a person's fully realizing that an inward change must take place occurs because the inward change is already in the process of taking place by means of the gracious work of God through His Holy Spirit (cf. Romans 2:28,29).

It stands to reason also that God can cause this inward change to happen in the midst of whatever truth the person may be considering. For example, if a native in the jungles of Africa in 4000 B.C., which was long before the biblical message became known in that part of the world, is staring at a tree and pondering its origin, God could graciously change his heart and cause him to face into what his mind naturally deduces, that there is a transcendent Creator of the tree and of himself, and that he is accountable to his Creator for his moral rebellion against Him. Therefore, he would spontaneously cry out to his Creator for mercy, and God would grant him mercy and forgiveness—eternally. Then, this man who lived in Africa in 4000 B.C. would be granted eternal Life in the Kingdom of God after he died. Paul teaches this concept in Romans 1 –

**Rom. 1:18** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

**Rom. 1:19** because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

**Rom. 1:20** For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

**Rom. 1:21** For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. (NAS95)

Paul is saying here that every human being, no matter when and where he lives in history, has adequate information from his surroundings, even without hearing the biblical message, including the message that Jesus is the Messiah, to know that a transcendent Creator exists and that he is morally obligated to worship Him. However, because every human being inherently rebels against God and, therefore, against his own mind, which naturally deduces the existence of God as his moral instructor and judge, every human being also refuses to worship Him. Thus, we all place ourselves in a position where we stand to be condemned eternally by God—again, even without hearing the biblical message. Paul later goes on to say in Romans 1 –

**Rom. 1:28** And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,

**Rom. 1:29** being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,

**Rom. 1:30** slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

**Rom. 1:31** without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;

**Rom. 1:32** and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. (NAS95)

The apostle Paul is teaching his readers that all human beings know that God exists, know that God is their moral instructor, know that God is their judge, and know that they deserve eternal condemnation and will be destroyed if they persist in their rebellion against Him. Yet, they do persist in their rebellion against God, and He consigns them to an existence of rebelling against Him. Therefore, even the native in Africa in 4000 B.C. knows that he has chosen to rebel against the God of the tree and against his God, with the result that he deserves God's judgment. In other words, just as every human being who has ever lived knows he is obligated to worship God, so also every human being knows that he is accountable before God and deserves to be punished for his moral rebellion against Him. He also grasps all this knowledge without ever hearing the message about Jesus as the Messiah. Therefore, as Paul goes on to explain in Romans 2, those morally depraved human beings, who properly obey God from a changed heart that is brought about by the Holy Spirit, even if they have never heard any of the biblical message, whether before *or after* Jesus' first coming, will acquire from God His eternal salvation. Thus, Paul implies that God does not need people actually to hear the biblical message's through either a prophet in Old Testament times or an evangelist in New Testament times in order to change their hearts, grant them authentic, biblical belief, and rescue them from His eternal condemnation. He just needs to choose to do all these of His own sovereign and independent will.

Consequently, the biblical and doctrinal content of what human beings know is not what saves them. Instead, it is the way that they are relating to the truth that they are considering that saves them. Are they relating to it with a heart of rebellion (like Pilate, Herod, and the Jewish Sanhedrin who crucified Jesus) or with a changed heart of belief (like Abraham and Paul)? If the latter, then they will acquire eternal salvation, regardless of what “truth” God is proclaiming to them and what “truth” they are therefore pondering. For example, if they are looking at an apple, and thinking of the apple as an apple, which is true, and if they are thinking of this truth with a heart of rebellion toward God, then they will incur God’s eternal judgment for relating to the truth of the apple with a hostile heart. If they are thinking of the truth of the apple with a heart of belief, i.e., with a heart already or in the process of being changed by the miraculous work of God, then they stand to inherit eternal Life for relating to the truth of the apple with a heart reoriented by the Spirit of God.

Suppose that someone has never heard of the Bible. Then, suppose that God changes this person’s heart as he is looking at an apple and thinking the truth of the apple’s existence, so that he relates to the “truth” of the apple with a changed heart. Then, suppose that immediately afterwards he has a heart attack and dies. What will happen to him in eternity? He will obtain eternal Life—not because he believed in the correct biblical doctrine (e.g., Jesus as his Lord and Savior, the trinity (if it is actually true), or even God’s existence and His mercy), but because he properly related to truth, i.e., the idea of the apple, *with a heart that was changed by the miraculous work of the Spirit of God*.

We may want to ask, “Would God change a man’s heart to allow him to think of only the truth of an apple before the man died and in order that he may obtain eternal Life?” Honestly, we do not know. Obviously, the Bible places belief in the context of ideas about God and His commandments, His grace, and His mercy. Plus, modern Christians love to quote John 14:6 and Romans 10:9 to the effect that belief in only Jesus will lead to a person’s entering into eternal Life. I will look more closely at these two verses in a moment. However, even these verses do not prove that God does not have the sovereign right to choose to change a person’s heart whenever He desires, so that whatever happens in this person’s life afterwards includes this new, biblical inwardness and, ultimately, results in eternal Life.

We do know, though, that the story of Abraham in Genesis 12-22 and Paul’s comments in Romans 2 reveal that the biblical and doctrinal content of human knowledge is not what saves people from God’s eternal condemnation. Instead, it is **how** they relating to the truth that they are considering.<sup>19</sup> If it is with a new kind of inwardness that only God can bring about, then, eventually, and God willing, they will move on to the concepts that Paul talks about in Romans 1 and 2—God, His justice, human moral depravity, repentance, God’s mercy, and the importance of pursuing goodness and morality for the rest of their lives on earth. As I mentioned above, in Romans 1 Paul implies the significance of human beings’ coming to grips with the inherent knowledge that God has placed within them regarding His existence as the Creator, who exercises justice in response to their immorality. Then, in Romans 2, Paul adds two other valuable characteristics of the person who will acquire eternal Life—repentance for his innate evil and the pursuit of goodness and morality. Paul is challenging the religious Jew who is not facing into the profundity of his immoral condition, and he says –

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<sup>19</sup> See my comments in Chapter 1 regarding the **what** and **how** of a person’s knowledge and my reference to Søren Kierkegaard’s book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.

**Rom. 2:4** Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

**Rom. 2:5** But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

**Rom. 2:6** who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS:

**Rom. 2:7** to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life;

**Rom. 2:8** but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

**Rom. 2:9** There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek,

**Rom. 2:10** but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

**Rom. 2:11** For there is no partiality with God. (NAS95)

As I said, Paul is conversing with the kind of Jew who believes his obedience to the Mosaic Covenant pleases God to the extent that he makes himself worthy of God's forgiveness and blessings. Therefore, having read in the Old Testament that God killed the Israelites when they disobeyed Him, this hypothetical Jew interprets God's allowing him to continue to live as His approval of his obedience. Paul, though, warns the Jew that he is taking God's kindness and patience toward him too lightly. He thinks God is pleased with him because he is being a good person. Instead, he ought to interpret God's kindness and patience as an opportunity to look more closely at what is going on deep inside him and recognize the insoluble problem of his moral depravity. Then, he should seek God's forgiveness and everlasting mercy. Certainly, the religious Jew speaks to God about obtaining His forgiveness, but he needs to reach a deeper level of repentance that can come about only by means of a changed heart and true belief—if God so chooses to change his heart sometime during his life.

Paul also states here in Romans 2 that those who persevere in doing good are the people who acquire eternal Life. We might, as I did for so long, want to interpret Paul as speaking only theoretically—that God will grant eternal Life to anyone who is morally perfect. However, Paul's argument indicates that he is being very realistic. He is telling the self-righteous Jew, who believes that only those who obey the Mosaic Covenant and live like Jews will obtain eternal Life by making themselves worthy of it, that eternal Life comes to anyone, Jew or Gentile, who in the core of his heart is committed to moral goodness. In other words, a key result of God's changing a person's heart, whether Jew or Gentile, is that the person becomes fundamentally committed to goodness and morality such that he pursues morality throughout the rest of his life. This is what Paul means by "doing good" in v. 7.

Thus, according to Romans 1 and 2, three things—1) worshipping God, 2) facing into one's insoluble immoral condition and its consequences of God's judgment, AND 3) being committed to moral goodness and pursuing goodness in the present realm—are all valuable characteristics of the person who obtains eternal Life from God. The startling thing for the religious Jew (and, by extrapolation, the religious Christian) is that Paul goes on to say that these three characteristics can exist within even Gentiles who have never heard the biblical message (not even the message about Jesus as our Lord and Savior) –

**Rom. 2:14** For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, **Rom. 2:15** in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, **Rom. 2:16** on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. (NAS95)

The word “instinctively” in v. 14 makes it sound as though Paul is talking about the natural conscience that every human being has. I think, though, that he is referring to the effect of God’s miraculously changing the Gentiles’ hearts so that they respond by “doing the things of the Law,” i.e., they respond to the inward work of God by genuinely regretting their moral depravity and by pursuing obedience to the moral commandments of the Mosaic Covenant—even though they have never heard the Mosaic Covenant! However, Paul has taught in Romans 1 that Gentiles know what morality is because God has implanted this knowledge in their minds. Therefore, the “work of the Law written in their hearts” in v. 15 is God’s having changed their hearts so that they face into their immoral nature, appeal to God for mercy, and pursue goodness in their lives according to what they know to be true in their minds apart from exposure to the Bible. Thus, these are Gentiles who have never heard the “Law,” the Mosaic Covenant, nor for that matter, any other part of the Bible.

The statement “the work of the Law written on their hearts” is probably Paul’s reference to Jeremiah 31 when God says that He is going to make a New Covenant with the Jews –

**Jer. 31:31** “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD [Yahweh], “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, **Jer. 31:32** not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. **Jer. 31:33** “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. **Jer. 31:34** “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (NAS95)

God is saying here that, at some time in the future (indeed, still future to us), He will fulfill His promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation by changing the hearts of all living Jews so that they both believe in Him and obey His truth properly—as He has always required of them. God describes this change of heart as His putting His “law within them” and writing it on their hearts (cf. v. 33). We see that Paul uses basically the same expression in Romans 2 to describe the Gentiles who acquire eternal Life and have never explicitly been taught the moral commandments of God. While the Gentiles innately have the commandments already in their minds (as all human beings do), God then miraculously awakens them to face into their evil and pursue obedience to these commandments by “writing the Law on their hearts” (cf. Romans 2:15 and Jeremiah

31:33). Thus, these Gentiles worship God, face into their immorality and its consequences, commit themselves to pursue morality and goodness in the current realm, and obtain salvation and eternal Life without ever hearing the biblical message.

Paul is also implying that God can perform this inward miracle within a Gentile (or Jew) whenever and wherever He wants. He certainly does not need human beings to assist Him. Even more radically, God does not even need Christian missionaries to help Him. Nor does He need even the Christian message to save people. We have been taught within the Church that God needs both missionaries and the message of Jesus Christ to save people because of passages such as Matthew 28:19,20 and Romans 10:9,10 –

**Matt. 28:16** But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated.

**Matt. 28:17** When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful.

**Matt. 28:18** And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

**Matt. 28:19** “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη), baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

**Matt. 28:20** teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος).” (NAS95)

**Rom. 10:9** that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

**Rom. 10:10** for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (NAS95)

These passages certainly seem to indicate that, in the New Testament age, God’s mandate is to preach the gospel or else people *cannot* be saved and obtain eternal Life. Thus, we make the meaning of these passages absolute—that, after Jesus’ appearance on earth, a person must definitely hear the message about Jesus as his Lord and Savior in order to acquire eternal salvation. However, neither of these passages requires such a conclusion. Christians call Matthew 28:19,20 the Great Commission and take it as a directive from God for all Christians for all times to engage in missionary activity and evangelize the world in order to save the “nations.” However, the context indicates that Jesus is speaking to his apostles only and not to anyone else. While the relevance of this passage is certainly that all Christians in all periods of time in history should proclaim, out of love for others, the gospel message of Jesus Christ throughout the world, Jesus is giving his apostles, the “eleven disciples” (v. 16), a unique and special message. He says that he is with the apostles to the end of the age. Because he is speaking specifically to his apostles, he is saying that he is commissioning them (and them only) to proclaim the good news about him *with the same level of authority, clarity, and accuracy that he did*. Jesus conveys the same information to the apostles in the so-called Upper Room Discourse of John 13-17.

But to what age is Jesus referring, especially since he seems to be implying that the apostles will survive to the end of the age? He could be referring to the age of their own lives as though his being “with” them is his “spiritual” presence as long they are alive. But we learn from Matthew 24 that, although Jesus did not know exactly when his



second coming would occur, nevertheless he understood that the period of time between his first and second comings would be relatively long, perhaps even longer than a human being's lifetime.

If I am right, that Jesus is commissioning his apostles with the same level of authority, clarity, and accuracy with respect to the gospel message, then he is saying that this will be true of them regardless of their state of existence. Jesus says literally "all the days until the end/goal of the age." In other words, if the apostles pre-decease the end of this temporary realm, they will teach people to observe what Jesus commanded the apostles—as long as they are able. Did Jesus know that the apostles would write documents that would be included in a "New Testament" that people would read for thousands of years? It is impossible to say, because he never declares such knowledge. Indeed, he says that he does not know when he will return, implying that he does not know all that will take place between his first and second comings.

Would Jesus be surprised to find out that his apostles and close associates would write documents that would become the New Testament and be used for diligent study of the truth of his messiahship? Probably not. Therefore, he would not be surprised to find out that the significance of his words would result in his being with the apostles to the end of the age long after their deaths by virtue of their continued teaching of people through their written documents, i.e., through their inerrant writings and recorded stories as we find them in the New Testament. Plus, Jesus is telling his apostles that the message is not for Jews only, but for Gentiles also—indeed, all the nations. This is an important concept that we will examine more carefully when we consider God's fourth promise to Abraham.

Therefore, the "Great Commission" is for the apostles and not for all Christians down through history. Jesus is "with" them, not "with" all Christians, in the sense that he means in Matthew 28. The apostles, and the apostles alone, are Jesus' authoritative spokesmen. As long as they can speak to others, whether they are alive or dead, whether orally or graphically, whether through actual speech or written documents, it is as though Jesus is speaking through them. However, in this sense, Jesus does not speak through anyone else—not through modern pastors, seminary professors, or the average Christian in the pew. Certainly, Christians who live after the death of the apostles can and should use the apostolic documents to present the message of Jesus as the Messiah, but Jesus is not commissioning them in the same sense as the apostles. Nor is he implying that it will be by only the presentation of the message regarding his messiahship that people can be rescued from God's eternal condemnation. As Paul says in Romans 1 and 2, if God chooses to change people's hearts who have never heard the biblical message and save them in this manner, then He has the sovereign right to do so.

Likewise, Paul is not saying in Romans 10:9,10 that it is only by believing in Jesus that a person can be saved. Let us look at the verses leading up to these to understand the context –

**Rom. 10:1** Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them [legalistic Jews] is for their salvation.

**Rom. 10:2** For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.

**Rom. 10:3** For not knowing about God's righteousness [*dikaiosunay*] and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness [*dikaiosunay*] of God.

**Rom. 10:4** For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness [*dikaiosunay*] to everyone who believes.



**Rom. 10:5** For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness [*dikaio sunay*] which is based on law shall live by that righteousness [*dikaio sunay*].

**Rom. 10:6** But the righteousness [*dikaio sunay*] based on faith speaks as follows: “DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, ‘WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?’ (that is, to bring Christ down),

**Rom. 10:7** or ‘WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).”

**Rom. 10:8** But what does it say? “THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, (NAS95)

In this passage, the apostle Paul is admitting that his Jewish contemporaries are definitely enthusiastic about obeying God. They understand that God has given them, through Moses, the covenant that helps define them as the chosen people of God, and they are diligently seeking to obey it. However, they misunderstand both the covenant and their immoral condition. They have adopted a legalistic perspective of the covenant and believe that their moral depravity is not so problematic that they cannot obey God in such a way that they are pleasing to Him. They believe, in fact, that they can make themselves worthy of God’s granting them *dikaio sunay*. Thus, they are “seeking to establish their own” method of acquiring God’s blessing, because they do not understand God’s method—that He must grant them *dikaio sunay* strictly by His grace and changing their hearts. Their insoluble immoral condition is actually preventing them from being pleasing to Him while they are self-righteously convinced that they are pleasing to God.

Then, in verse 4, Paul states that the Messiah, i.e., Jesus, is the “end of the law for righteousness [*dikaio sunay*] to everyone who believes.” Some commentators understand Paul to be saying that the coming of the Messiah constitutes the end of the time period when the Mosaic Covenant is relevant to the Jews. Now only Jesus is relevant, and the Mosaic Covenant is obsolete so that the Jews can completely ignore it. However, I think Paul means that the goal of the Mosaic Covenant is to lead people to believing properly in the Messiah. The Greek word translated in the NAS95 as “end” is *τέλος* (*telos*) and can denote either the conclusion or the goal of something. Here, it means goal, that the Mosaic Covenant, with its emphasis on morality and rituals for appealing to God for mercy, ought to lead a Jew to examine honestly the depth of his moral depravity. Ultimately, this would result in the Jew’s recognizing and believing Jesus to be his advocate before God.

We will look at Romans 11 in more detail in a moment, but there Paul says that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,” referring to the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic Covenants with all their provisions (cf. Rom. 11:29; NAS95). In addition, the Old Testament prophets have predicted that the Jews will someday obey the Mosaic Covenant properly. For example, the passage below from Ezekiel describes how God will cause the Jews to obey Him with genuine inwardness –

**Ezek. 11:17** Therefore say, “Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘I will gather you [the Israelites, the Jews] from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.’”

**Ezek. 11:18** “When they come there, they will remove all its detestable things and all its abominations from it.

**Ezek. 11:19** “And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,  
**Ezek. 11:20** “that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.” (NAS95; emphasis mine)

The combination of all these passages and the immediate context of Romans 10 indicate that Paul means in Romans 10:4 that someone who understands the purpose of the Mosaic Covenant and is obeying it properly will consequently end up also believing in Jesus as the Messiah. Therefore, Paul goes on to say in verse 5 that “Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness [*dikaiosunay*] which is based on law shall live by that righteousness [*dikaiosunay*].” Paul is referring to Leviticus 18:5 –

**Lev. 18:5** “So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD [Yahweh].” (NAS95)

In the whole context of Leviticus 18, God is commanding the Israelites to “keep” the Mosaic Covenant. However, keeping the covenant and specifically its “statutes” and “judgments” is to *guard* them in one’s heart as the most valuable commodities that a person can hold and embrace. And the reason why a person chooses to guard the covenant in a heartfelt way is because its commandments allow him to understand the depth of the humanly insoluble problem of his innate evil and because they define morality, which he wants to pursue. Thus, God goes on to say that if a person “does them” in the way described in Leviticus 18, he will live. While, in the context of the Mosaic Covenant, God means live physically on the land of Israel without experiencing His temporal and physical judgment, ultimately, it is also true that the Israelite who “does” the instructions of the covenant by properly “keeping” them will also live eternally with a capital “L.” In other words, it is possible to keep the Mosaic Covenant and thereby obtain eternal Life, because a person will do so by properly facing into the depth of his moral depravity and into his need for God’s unmerited mercy. However, as we have been seeing all along, true repentance takes place only if God miraculously changes a person’s heart so that he believes the truth of the value of God’s statutes and commandments, resulting in his pursuing obedience to them, even obedience to the commandment to repent of his immoral nature and disobedience toward God on the basis of a changed heart.

Then, in Romans 10:6,7 the NAS95 translates the Greek text as follows –

**Rom. 10:6** But the righteousness [*dikaiosunay*] based on faith speaks as follows: “DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, ‘WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?’ (that is, to bring Christ down),  
**Rom. 10:7** or ‘WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” (NAS95)

The “But” at the beginning of v. 6 makes it seem as though Paul is saying something different from v. 5, in fact the opposite of v. 5. However, the word translated “But” could just as easily be translated “And,” which I think is correct. Therefore, Paul is not contrasting his comment in v. 5 with v. 6. He is continuing to explain it by paraphrasing Deuteronomy 30:12,13. Let me quote Deuteronomy 30:11-14 –

**Deut. 30:11** “For this commandment [to keep the Mosaic Covenant] which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach.

**Deut. 30:12** “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’

**Deut. 30:13** “Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’

**Deut. 30:14** “But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.” (NAS95)

Moses is aware that God’s covenant that he has mediated with the Israelites contains 613 commandments and that they are required to keep them all—which is a scary prospect. How can one person even remember all 613 commandments at all times? Thus, Paul mimics any Jew who would complain that it is impossible to keep such a lengthy and complex covenant. The Jew basically is saying, “Who is always going to explain the covenant to me well enough that I will know exactly what to do at every moment?” Moses’ response to this question is, “It really is not that hard. Yes, the covenant contains 613 commandments, but what God really is requiring of you is that *you have the kind of heart that wants to keep the covenant by recognizing the value of these commandments and pursuing obedience to them—even if you do not obey perfectly all 613 because of your continued immoral condition and your lack of complete understanding of the covenant.*”

Along these same lines, the apostle Paul is saying in Romans 10 to all Christians, especially to Jews who would focus on performing the Mosaic Covenant and reject Jesus as the Messiah, that no one need arduously to look for the Messiah. He has come, and he is Jesus of Nazareth. Instead, everyone needs look only as far as their own hearts and the message that is available and being proclaimed in Paul’s day by the apostles to find what they are required to believe, i.e., that Jesus is the Messiah –

**Rom. 10:8** But what does it say? “THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching,” (NAS95)

To reiterate, Deuteronomy 30:11-14 is saying that, for the Jews, obeying God is not about following the 613 commandments of the Mosaic Covenant, which is what religious, legalistic Jews would say is the case. Using this passage from Deuteronomy, Paul is saying that, for Christians, relating to God is not about performing the Mosaic Covenant and waiting and hoping that the Messiah comes. He has come and his message is being proclaimed, so that both Jews and Gentiles need only believe in the truth that God is making available through the apostles.

Thus, Paul goes on to say in Romans 10:9,10 –

**Rom. 10:9** that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

**Rom. 10:10** for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness [*dikaïosunay*], and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” (NAS95)

Paul is merely adding that, because he and other apostles are proclaiming the message of Jesus as the Messiah, that belief now is not just in the truth of the Mosaic

Covenant, but it is primarily in these ideas about Jesus. However, Paul is not saying that, if human beings never hear the message of Jesus that they will go to hell. He is saying that, now that the apostolic message of the Messiah is available, everyone who hears it must include it in their repertoire of truth—whether Jew or Gentile. Therefore, the fundamental ideas that eventually God’s grace can lead people to believe, regardless of where they dwell on the earth or when they have lived, are still those that Paul presented in Romans 1-3. If, by God’s miraculously changing a person’s heart, this person embraces the truths of God’s deserving his worship, of his incurable immorality, of his need for God’s unmerited mercy so that he subsequently appeals to God for mercy, and of pursuing a life of goodness and obedience to God from the sense of morality that God has built into his mind, then this person will acquire mercy and be welcomed into the eternal Kingdom of God after the judgment.

Should Christians still pursue evangelizing others even though salvation can come to them without hearing about Jesus as their Lord and Savior? Absolutely. The message of Jesus as our King and Messiah is the greatest information that a human being can ever learn regarding the reality that God has created. Therefore, the most loving thing that any of us can do toward any other human being is to make him aware of this message so that he can add it to his collection of truth.

Nevertheless, does God need Christians to preach the biblical message, because without it people will go to hell? Absolutely not. God is the sovereign God of miracles, and He chooses whenever and wherever He wants to perform His miracle of changing a person’s heart and causing him to believe whatever truth he is contemplating at the moment, even if it is just that an apple exists or that God is the Creator and Judge of the world who must forgive him for his moral rebellion lest it result in eternal condemnation (cf. Romans 1). Therefore, the fundamental *moral* truth that a human being should properly believe from a changed heart is that he, as a creation of the God who deserves his worship, is also unavoidably immoral and in desperate need of God’s unmerited mercy. Paul also explains in Romans 1 & 2 that God has hardwired this truth into every person when He created him in his mother’s womb. However, most Christians have believed differently for 2,000 years. The dominant thought in Church history has been that unless a person hears the message of Jesus specifically, he is doomed to hell. However, the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, is teaching the exact opposite. Hence, David writes in Psalm 51:14-17 –

**Psa. 51:14** Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.

**Psa. 51:15** O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise.

**Psa. 51:16** For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering.

**Psa. 51:17** The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. (NAS95)

David says nothing about believing the correct doctrine about Jesus, or the trinity, or even the necessity of going to church in order to be delivered from his guilt that has come from murdering Uriah the Hittite (which is probably the reason why David wrote this psalm). Instead, David says that what God requires and will not despise or reject is a “broken and a contrite heart.” It is David’s coming to grips with his immorality and his need for his Creator’s mercy, just these, that will bring about his deliverance from God’s judgment. Jesus says similarly in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in Luke 18 –

**Luke 18:9** And Jesus also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous [*dikaioi*], and viewed others with contempt:

**Luke 18:10** “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

**Luke 18:11** “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

**Luke 18:12** ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

**Luke 18:13** “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

**Luke 18:14** “I tell you, this man went to his house justified [*dedikaiomenos* – having obtained *dikaiosunay*] rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (NAS95)

Notice that Jesus says nothing even about the tax-collector’s believing *in him* in order for him to be justified! Nor does he say anything about the tax-collector’s belief in the trinity. He just mentions the man’s inner remorse for the insolvable problem of his evil and wickedness whereby he appeals to God for mercy. Jesus is also implying that the tax-collector knows that he does not deserve God’s mercy, because the tax-collector cannot even lift up his eyes to heaven and is beating his breast in the midst of his grieving over his immoral condition. It is “this man” who “went down to his house justified,” i.e., who had acquired *dikaiosunay* from God, not the Pharisee who thinks that his moral and religious performance, even his adherence to traditional doctrine, makes him worthy of *dikaiosunay*. Thus, Jesus is teaching that the fundamental moral information that a person must believe to obtain eternal salvation is that his incurable moral depravity requires God’s unmerited mercy. We remember, though, according to Paul in Romans 1 & 2, everyone has this information within himself and needs no one to tell him about it. Therefore, ultimately what every person needs is for God to change his heart so that he faces into his immorality and need for God’s mercy. However, God, the sovereign transcendent Creator of human history, can miraculously change a person’s heart and cause him to come to grips with his innate knowledge about his immorality and mercy anytime and anywhere He wants. God does not need our help in order to do so.

Consequently, facing into our innate wickedness and appealing to God for mercy are the fundamental moral truths that human beings believe in order to obtain eternal Life. But these truths still are not actually necessary to believe in order that we obtain *dikaiosunay* with its future result, eternal Life. Moses implies as much in Genesis 15:6 regarding Abraham when he writes,

And Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him in such a way that God granted him *tz<sup>e</sup>daqah* and *dikaiosunay*. (My paraphrase)

In this context of Genesis 15, for what exactly is Abraham believing God? Is he believing that God has declared that he is a sinner so that he needs God’s mercy? No. Instead, Abraham is believing God’s statement that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the heaven. Therefore, Moses is saying that Abraham’s belief of God’s statement about his descendants is enough for God to grant him *dikaiosunay*.



As a result, we can conclude that, some time before Genesis 15, God had changed Abraham's heart so that he properly responds to God's statement about his descendants. Abraham believes God with authentic and genuine belief. The text says nothing about Abraham's repenting of his evil condition or his pursuing morality or believing in Jesus or believing in the trinity. In fact, never in the entire story of Abraham throughout Genesis 11-25 is there any mention of Abraham's actually facing into his immoral condition. Nevertheless, God does command him to do so in Genesis 17, and, because Abraham continues to be a man who genuinely believes that God will fulfill His promises, especially the promise of eternal Life, more than likely Abraham did appropriately deal with his moral depravity before God and appeal to Him for mercy. However, Abraham's repentance, such as Paul writes about it in Romans 2 and Jesus speaks of in the parable of the tax-collector in Luke 18, is never made explicit by Moses, the biblical author. In spite of there being no mention of Abraham's personal repentance, God grants him *dikaionunay* for his belief in something rather dull in comparison to forgiveness of his inherent moral depravity. It is similar to someone's belief in an apple as I mentioned above. Can a person really be granted *dikaionunay* for believing in the truth of the existence of an apple? Yes, he can, if it is with a divinely changed heart that he is believing in what God is saying to him regarding truth of the creation, as shown in Psalm 19 –

**Psa. 19:1** The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

**Psa. 19:2** Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge.

**Psa. 19:3** There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard.

**Psa. 19:4** Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun,

**Psa. 19:5** Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.

**Psa. 19:6** Its rising is from one end of the heavens, And its circuit to the other end of them; And there is nothing hidden from its heat. (NAS95)

In this psalm, David is describing the “sermon” that the creation constantly preaches. The heavens, with the passing of each day and night along with the movement of the sun that warms the days, are always declaring the existence and the glory of God. Thus, God is always “speaking” truth to every human being throughout all of history and throughout all the world, which is why Paul in Romans 1 states that no one has an excuse for not properly worshiping God. God is always “preaching” to us human beings through the natural creation. Therefore, if God wants to change a person's heart and cause him to relate correctly to the truth that He is declaring to him, even just the truth of the creation (e.g., an apple), then this is His prerogative. Or if God wants to change a person's heart and cause him to relate correctly to the truth of the good news of Jesus as the Messiah when it is preached to him, then this, too, is His prerogative. Therefore, I do not think that passages such as Matthew 28:16-20 and Romans 10:9,10 confine God to only the latter. We can conclude that the necessary condition which a human being must fulfill in order to obtain eternal Life and salvation is not the **what** of that which he believes, but the **how** of that which he believes. If a person believes the truth of the creation, or just an apple, with genuine, biblical belief from a changed heart whereby he has appropriated and embraced the truth so that it becomes a part of his inner

commitments, then God will declare him *dikaios* like Abraham and bless him with eternal Life.

In addition, there is an even more profound implication that comes from these ideas. Even if **what** a person believes is not true, as long as he embraces it from a changed heart, God still grants him *dikaiosunay*, and he will obtain the promise of eternal Life.<sup>20</sup> The reason for this is really quite simple. No one's theology is ever completely correct, except for that of the biblical authors. The Bible is the inerrant "Word of God" (as Christians like to call it). Only the biblical authors are without error in their understanding of theology. All the rest of us, who study the Bible, are never completely correct in our theology. This is why our writings, including this book, are not the inerrant "Word of God." We are not the authoritative source of truth. Only the Bible is. Therefore, all the rest of us believe at least something that is not true. We may be improving in our understanding of truth as we continue to study the Bible, but we never arrive at the same point as the biblical authors where we are inerrant in our understanding. Thus, the Bible, and only the Bible, is our source of truth—not the Church fathers, not historical Church councils, not popes, not pastors, not seminary professors, not Bible study leaders, not any number of theologians whom we can gather together as peer reviewers of a theological treatise or set of ideas. Because only the Bible is inerrant, we can gather together as many theologians as we want to consider whether or not an idea is biblical, and all we are doing is multiplying the number of thinkers who are errant and wrong in some aspect or aspects of their theology. If one theologian is not inerrant, then a million theologians are not inerrant either. If one theologian cannot produce an inerrant peer review of a theological idea, then a million theologians cannot either. We easily forget that only the Bible is inerrant when we succumb to the legalistic temptation to place our faith in Church tradition and so-called "orthodoxy" instead of in the Bible and God.<sup>21</sup>

The bottom line of all of this is that everyone who studies the Bible, but who is not an author of the Bible, believes at least something that is not true. Consequently, God grants *dikaiosunay* to those whose hearts He changes and who believe some ideas that are true and other ideas that are not true. Again, the necessary condition that human beings must fulfill in order to obtain eternal Life and salvation is not the **what** of that which they believe but the **how** of their believing—with genuine, biblical belief from a changed heart whereby they have appropriated and embraced both truth and error that have become a part of their inner commitments. In other words, no one, other than the biblical authors, believes in only truth. And probably no one believes in only error. But

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<sup>20</sup> For one of the most radical comments on this issue, consider what Søren Kierkegaard says in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pg. 201, "If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth [like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable in Luke 18], and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol—where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God, although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore worshipping an idol." Because this statement by Kierkegaard along with one mentioned in a footnote above, "*Objectively the emphasis is on what is said; subjectively the emphasis is on how it is said,*" would not have made any sense to me years ago, I can safely say that anyone who declares that belief in the traditional view of the trinity, i.e., having this *objective* knowledge correct, is necessary for salvation will find that he wholeheartedly disagrees with Kierkegaard. Therefore, I am suggesting that, in spite of how much objective knowledge of the Bible this person has, he, as an advocate for the trinity, is actually disagreeing with the Bible.

<sup>21</sup> One of the most curious examples of Christians' forgetting that only the Bible is our authority is the case of the Protestant Reformers, especially John Calvin, who emphasized the Latin phrase *sola scriptura* (only scripture) in their criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church, whom they accused of relying on the pope, church councils, and creeds for their theology. However, when someone such as Michael Servetus, on the basis of the scripture, questioned the veracity of the trinity as defined by the Nicene Creed, Calvin was willing to burn him at the stake for daring to oppose such a *traditional* doctrine. *Sola scriptura* indeed!



anyone who relates to what he believes, even if it is untrue, with a heart whom God has miraculously changed is granted *dikaio sunay* and will obtain eternal Life.

2 Timothy 3 best describes the concept of the the inerrancy of the Bible as the “Word of God” –

**2Tim. 3:14** You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them (εἰδὼς παρὰ τίνων ἔμαθες),

**2Tim. 3:15** and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

**2Tim. 3:16** All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

**2Tim. 3:17** so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (NAS95)

Here the apostle Paul is encouraging his protégé, Timothy, to persevere in believing the truths that he has learned from the Bible, which, in the context, would be the Old Testament, because the New Testament had not yet been compiled. The NAS95 translates v. 14 so that it says, “from whom you have learned them,” as though Paul is referring to his human teachers, maybe his mother and grandmother whom Paul mentions in chapter 1 and who had genuine belief. However, the context indicates that he means “the sacred writings” of v. 15. If Paul would refer to any human being as a good and appropriate teacher for Timothy, it would be to Paul himself as an apostle. However, in this passage, even Paul is deferring to the Bible, the “sacred writings.” Paul’s encouragement to Timothy is to continue in his belief in what he understands about God that is based upon the biblical authors and on no one else. Consequently, the Greek clause εἰδὼς παρὰ τίνων ἔμαθες should be translated “knowing from what you have learned them.”

Paul then describes the Bible in v. 16 as “inspired by God,” but there is only one Greek word that he uses for the phrase “inspired by God,” θεόπνευστος (*theopneustos*), which literally means “God-breathed.” Therefore, the better way to translate this phrase is “expired by God,” not “inspired by God.” In other words, God breathed out the Bible. But because the Bible was written by human authors, who were mentally and rationally intent on communicating the ideas in their minds that they were understanding to human readers, Paul means that God superintended their writings in order to ensure that the ideas that they were communicating were true and accurate in every respect.

While sometimes it may appear as though a biblical author’s meaning is erroneous, e.g., the scientific community’s claim that the world was not created in seven literal days (cf. Genesis 1), the problem is not the biblical author’s intent but our interpretation of it. If our interpretation of a biblical text does not correspond to reality, the biblical author is not wrong. The problem is that we have misunderstood his meaning, which should not surprise us. The Bible is complicated, and it is difficult to become completely familiar with all its authors’ historical, social, political, economic, cultural, and spiritual contexts that span a minimum of 2,000 years. In addition, its authors used three different languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. It could be that Moses meant that God created the universe in seven literal days. Certainly, the transcendent God is capable of such a feat. However, figuring out Moses’ authorial intent (or any biblical author’s meaning) is not always easy.

Even though studying the Bible is the most eternally fulfilling and valuable quest for knowledge, because it alone (and not theologians’ conclusions about the meaning of the

Bible, no matter how many of them agree on a particular point of doctrine) is “God-breathed,” the condition that God is still ultimately asking human beings to satisfy in order to gain eternal Life is not having their theology correct, but having a heart that has been changed by Him that relates to ideas with genuine, biblical belief. Then, hopefully and eventually, at least one or some of the ideas in the mind of a person of genuine belief and that has come from studying the Bible will actually be true. Indeed, the goal of every person, whose heart God has miraculously changed and who can study the Bible, should be to align his understanding of God and reality with the truths of the Bible.

Also, no one with true belief should worry that the inaccuracies of his theology will prevent God from granting him *dikaioSunay* in the present realm and eternal Life in the next realm. However, part of the inaccuracy of his theology may be that he naïvely and honestly does not know that the inaccuracy of his theology is not a problem for God with respect to His granting him eternal Life. Indeed, he may believe that, without a completely accurate theology and belief in that theology, e.g., without an accurate understanding of and belief in the trinity, he stands condemned before God. Thus, he may innocently live with such inaccuracy and false understanding of God for a long time. Nevertheless, as long as he has a changed heart and therefore genuine belief, he is relating even to this falsehood properly, which ultimately satisfies God’s condition for his being granted *dikaioSunay* and obtaining eternal Life.

Naturally, obtaining eternal Life with false theology feels counterintuitive to most Christians who are taught the exact opposite within the traditional Church where the bottom line is getting one’s theology completely accurate (especially regarding the trinity) to avoid being doomed to hell.<sup>22</sup> The Bible demonstrates otherwise with its explanation of a changed heart that results in authentic belief and the fact that only the Bible is the authoritative source of accurate ideas, while it also is a difficult book to interpret. In addition, anyone who firmly believes that he has understood the Bible accurately and completely is claiming that he can substitute himself for the Bible. To claim an accurate understanding of the Bible comes either from immaturity or from pride and arrogance. The former is not immoral while the latter is and needs to be viewed as such.

I should also note that, in my translation of Genesis 15:6 above, *tz<sup>e</sup>daqah* and *dikaioSunay* are synonymous, the former being Hebrew and the latter being Greek. But they both refer to Abraham’s being granted forgiveness so that he stands to inherit eternal Life from God. This demonstrates that, in Genesis 15, because Abraham has true belief, God is currently fulfilling His promises inwardly to Abraham while He also declares that He will fulfill His promise of descendants to him outwardly in the future.

In other words, genuine belief is part of the condition that Abraham must fulfill in order to satisfy the requirements of the Abrahamic Covenant. God goes on to reveal this important point in the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son, Isaac, when He responds to Abraham’s willingness to obey Him. The story begins in Genesis 22:1-2 with God’s commanding Abraham to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah. In the very poignant account of verses 3-10, Abraham sets out to obey God and reaches the point where he raises the knife to slay Isaac, whom he has bound on the altar. Suddenly, Yahweh calls from heaven for him to stop as recorded in vs. 11-14, and God says to him in verse 12 that now He knows that Abraham properly fears and believes in Him –

**Gen. 22:11** But the angel of the LORD [Yahweh] called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”

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<sup>22</sup> Thus, “cults” are *incorrectly* defined by the inaccuracies in their theology, not by the status of their hearts. In other words, an evangelical denominational or non-denominational church could be a cult simply because the people attending it lack authentic inwardness while even teaching and hearing an accurate explanation of the biblical message.

**Gen. 22:12** He said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now (הַעַתָּה) (vôv) I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” (NAS95)

To “fear God” is to believe Him with a changed heart and to be willing to obey His commandments, even the commandment God has given to Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. God is saying that He *now* knows that Abraham fears Him. But this is a strange statement in the light of the fact that Abraham has already believed God in Genesis 15, and it has been taken into account so that God has granted him *dikaosunay*. Why would God in Genesis 22 even question the authenticity of Abraham’s belief, and why would He test Abraham’s belief as v. 1 actually states?

**Gen. 22:1** Now it came about after these things, that God tested (נִסָּה) (ἐπειράζειν) Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” (NAS95)

Besides, what is the point of testing Abraham’s belief when God ultimately is the One who causes it and has guaranteed it through the split-animal ceremony in Genesis 15? Does not God know whether or not He is causing belief? Certainly He does. Then why the test? I think that it is simply because God has chosen for human existence to work this way, that in spite of God’s sovereignty and His choosing when He will work in people’s hearts by means of His grace, He wants to demonstrate both to Himself and to human beings the importance of a person’s choice to believe and pursue obedience to Him. As a result, God goes on to say to Abraham later in Genesis 22 –

**Gen. 22:15** Then the angel of the LORD [Yahweh] called to Abraham a second time from heaven,

**Gen. 22:16** and said, “By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son,

**Gen. 22:17** indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies.

**Gen. 22:18** “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (NAS95)

When I finally came to understand how this passage connects with three previous parts of the story of Abraham—1) God’s first stating His promises in Genesis 12; 2) God’s granting *dikaosunay* to Abraham in Genesis 15 by virtue of his belief; and 3) God’s guaranteeing to Abraham through the covenant ceremony of the split animals in Genesis 15 that He will ensure that He fulfills His promises to Abraham—I realized that the two Hebrew words translated “because” in Genesis 22:16 and 18, יָאֵן (*ya’an*) and כִּי־אָמַרְתָּ (*ayqev*) respectively, are extremely important for understanding the dynamic between God as Creator and human beings as His creation. God has already guaranteed (through the Genesis 15 ceremony) that Abraham will have genuine, persevering belief and obedience. Now God says that, “because” of Abraham’s belief and obedience, which he has demonstrated by being willing to sacrifice his son, He has sworn an oath to fulfill all His promises to Abraham. These promises include causing Abraham to believe and obey Him, something that Abraham just did. In other words,

God now swears an oath to fulfill His promises that He has already guaranteed and that Abraham has just exhibited by his obedience.

It is obvious in the story of Genesis 22 that there is a lot of God's assuring Abraham that He will be faithful to His promises. God even swears an oath that He will. Is it really necessary for the transcendent God to swear an oath to keep His promises? Certainly not! After all, He is the transcendent God who is morally perfect and would never act contrary to His character and promises. Then why is God swearing an oath after He has guaranteed in Genesis 15 that He will keep the promises that He made in Genesis 12? Because God is choosing for reality to work this way for Abraham. Perhaps it is mainly for Abraham's sake, so that he can observe how God has caused him to persevere in his belief and obedience. It may be for our sakes as well. As a result, we have the privilege of reading about it both in Genesis 22 and in the letter of Hebrews in the New Testament. Consequently, we too learn about God's faithfulness to fulfill His promises. Whatever are God's sovereign purposes, we can see that Abraham's choice to obey Him by sacrificing his son Isaac is extremely important to the whole story. Consequently, God is in no way reluctant to say that it is *now*, because of Abraham's choice, that He will fulfill His promises to him. I think, though, that the real lesson here is that God has previously guaranteed that He will cause Abraham to be faithful to the requirements of the covenant, and now God affirms and honors Abraham for what He alone has actually caused Abraham to do. In other words, the dynamics of Abraham's relationship with God involve not only God's causing Abraham to do what He has promised, but also that He affirm what He has caused Abraham to do that results in His committing Himself again to do what He has promised. The implication, of course, is that ultimately God is honored, because He is fulfilling what He promised and guaranteed. God also gives Himself the opportunity to swear an oath that He is going to fulfill His promises because of Abraham's choice.

The story of Genesis 22 is a prime example of how valuable and important human choices are in the light of God's sovereign control over these choices. The popular view of the relationship between God's sovereignty and human free-will is that God rules over human choices, but he does not cause human choices. I am not completely sure what people mean by God's ruling over something without causing it to exist, and I am also not sure that they know what they mean. No one has been able to explain this concept to me in a way that makes any sense. Nevertheless, Christians will claim that God causes everything within the creation except human choices, because, in order for God to hold human beings accountable for their choices and in order for their choices to believe in God and to love God be real choices, God has created mankind with free-will. Thus, God sovereignly controls all aspects of the created reality except human choices, which are free from God.

Let me ask one question at this point in our discussion regarding free-will—how can human choices be a part of the creation and not be created by the Creator? In other words, if something, even a human choice, exists within the *creation*, then how can it not be *created by the Creator God*? Are we willing to say that something within the creation is actually uncreated? Someone may answer that uncreated choices are part of the mystery of God and His ability to create things, i.e., human choices, that are out of His control. The mystery is that God can create human beings, and then their choices exist on their own without any help of their existing from God. However, to say that human choices are completely independent of God is like saying that God can create what He has not created—the uncreated—which is completely illogical.<sup>23</sup> I realize that postulating

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<sup>23</sup> I am not using the word's "logical" and "illogical" to refer only to the ability of human beings to articulate explicitly how one idea follows from another, but instead to refer to our ability even to intuit that ideas are true and follow one

the notion that certain ideas are illogical does not stop many people from believing them, but we need to consider if this avenue toward “knowledge” is actually legitimate. For example, can God really create human beings with a free-will that is completely free from Him? If truth is illogical and does not make sense, then yes. If truth is logical and makes sense, then no.

Assuming that God is absolutely sovereign over even all human choices in all of human history, our tendency is to object to this idea, because it seems unfair that we are not completely free from God. Yet, we see in Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac that God is not bothered by His causing what He has guaranteed and then honoring the person in whom He has caused belief and obedience to occur. Indeed, we should be encouraged that the way reality works is that the perseverance of our belief and obedience does not ultimately depend on us, while God also holds us accountable for our choices. Thus, we can understand why the master’s response is entirely appropriate in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. For example, when the master returns from his journey and questions the servant to whom he had given five talents before he left, both the servant’s and the master’s responses are right in line with God’s sovereignty and human accountability –

[Matt. 25:20](#) “The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.’

[Matt. 25:21](#) “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’” (NAS95)

In this parable, the servant uses his five talents in such a way that he gains five more talents. And then the master praises him for his good and faithful choice. If the servant is portraying a human being who properly manages the truth that he understands, and if the master is portraying God who is holding the human being accountable for his choice, then Jesus is teaching a fundamental principle with this parable—that human accountability is entirely compatible with God’s sovereignty. If I am correct that God’s complete and absolute sovereignty makes sense and is true while anything less is false, then Jesus believes in God’s absolute sovereignty over human choices. But he also believes in human accountability. Like the servant, we choose to believe and pursue truth and obedience to God, and, like the master, God will praise us at the end of our lives and say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Ultimately, however, God is the one who is responsible for making us choose to believe and obey Him. He is also responsible for causing us to persevere in our belief and obedience, even while holding us accountable for our choices to believe and to persevere in belief. Plus, because God is faithful to all His promises to Abraham, we can count on His causing other people, both Jews and Gentiles, to obey Him with authentic belief and obedience. In the same way, we can count on God to change people’s hearts miraculously so that they initially believe and obey and then believe and obey Him still when their belief is tested by God later on. Really, both instances of belief and obedience are products of God’s absolute sovereignty, and both are miracles of God. This is because we all remain inherently immoral in the fabric of our being even after God changes our hearts and we begin our journey of belief like Abraham. What a

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from another. In other words, inarticulate hunches can be just as logical as explicit and articulate arguments. God has designed human minds to work this way.

miracle and how encouraging to know that God always remains so faithful to us—even while He legitimately holds us accountable for our choices.

We find that God expresses the same dynamic in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the midst of Abraham’s life in Genesis 18:17-19 –

**Gen. 18:17** The LORD [Yahweh] said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,

**Gen. 18:18** since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?

**Gen. 18:19** “For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.” (NAS95)

וַיִּתְהַלַּךְ אֱמֶת הַמִּכְסָּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי עֹשֶׂה  
וְאַבְרָהָם הָיָה לְגֹי גְדוֹל וְעָצוּם וְנִבְרַכְוּ בּוֹ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ  
כִּי יִדְעֻתָיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ הַדֶּרֶךְ יְהוָה  
לְעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבְיֵא יְהוָה עַל־אַבְרָהָם אֵת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר עָלָיו

ὁ δὲ κύριος εἶπεν Μὴ κρύψω ἐγὼ ἀπὸ Αβρααμ τοῦ παιδός μου ἃ ἐγὼ ποιῶ;

Αβρααμ δὲ γινόμενος ἔσται εἰς ἔθνος μέγα καὶ πολὺ, καὶ ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν αὐτῷ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη τῆς γῆς.

ἦδειν γὰρ ὅτι συντάξει τοῖς υἱοῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ μετ’ αὐτόν, καὶ φυλάξουσιν τὰς ὁδοὺς κυρίου ποιεῖν δικαιοσύνην καὶ κρίσιν· ὅπως ἂν ἐπαγάγη κύριος ἐπὶ Αβρααμ πάντα, ὅσα ἐλάλησεν πρὸς αὐτόν.

God is musing and wondering whether He should inform Abraham of His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He concludes that He will inform him, and His reason is an intriguing chain of “in order thats.” First, there is the fact in v. 18 that God reminds Himself that He has promised to make of Abraham, i.e., of the Jews, “a great and mighty nation” and to grant eternal Life to everyone who has the same kind of belief as Abraham, regardless of where the person lives on earth and when the person lives in human history. Then, God offers an important connection between His promises and Abraham’s own choices during his lifetime. He says that it makes sense that He inform Abraham of what He is about to do to Sodom and Gomorrah...

19 because I [Yahweh] have chosen him in order that he command his children and his household after him, and they will observe the way of Yahweh in order that they do righteousness and justice in order that Yahweh bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him. (my translation)

God knows and we know from Genesis 12:1-3 and Genesis 15 that He has promised and guaranteed to Abraham that He will make of him a great nation and bless with eternal Life all the other peoples of the earth who associate with him through true belief. Now God states that He will inform Abraham of His plans regarding Sodom and Gomorrah on the basis of these promises. He will inform Abraham, He says, because He has “chosen him.” I have included above the Hebrew words of the Masoretic text and



the Greek text of the Septuagint for anyone who may be interested. Both texts use a word that basically means “know” for God’s saying, “I have chosen him,” i.e., “I have known him.” This lends support to my point that nothing occurs within the creation without the Creator’s having caused it, because nothing can be in the creation, even a human choice, without its being created by God. Consequently, for God to say, “I have known Abraham,” indeed, that God has known that Abraham will command his children, etc. is for God to have chosen to create this event within human history. When God was formulating the story of the universe in His mind before He began creating the story, He chose and therefore knew that Abraham would command his children, etc.

Then, the Hebrew text goes on to use a word that basically means “in order that,” i.e., “I have chosen him *in order that* he command his children, etc.” The Septuagint says, “I have known *that* he will command...” The Septuagint scholars are probably not thinking that the text means something different from our English translators, because, again, for God to know that Abraham will command his children is for God to choose Abraham *in order that* he command his children. In other words, the purpose of God’s choosing Abraham is for him to command his children, and, by golly, he will command his children as a fulfillment of God’s purpose (as the Septuagint scholars are probably thinking of it).

The Hebrew goes on to say that the result of Abraham’s commanding his children and household will be for them “to do righteousness and justice.” In other words, the purpose of Abraham’s commands will be that his descendants obey God—as they should. The Septuagint says the same thing. Finally, God says that that the purpose of Abraham’s descendants’ obeying Him will be so that He may fulfill His promises to them. Again, the Septuagint says the same thing.

Therefore, God is declaring in His musings that there will be a particular sequence of events that will definitely occur, because they will each one constitute an important part of His fulfillment to Abraham of His promises. The first event is that Abraham will command his “children,” his physical descendants, i.e., Isaac, who in turn will command his “children,” i.e., Jacob, etc. to obey God. The result will be that they will consider God’s commandments important and valuable, and they will observe and obey them properly. The purpose of their doing so will be in order that they do what is right before God on the basis of hearts that have been changed by Him. Finally, the purpose of their obedience will be in order that God may fulfill His spoken promises to Abraham. Each step along the way is vital to the process, and each step builds upon the previous step or steps.

We see that, while God has guaranteed that He will fulfill His promises to Abraham, Abraham’s and his descendants’ choices are relevant to the steps by which God does so. It is as though God will not fulfill His promises without Abraham and his human descendants’ playing their roles and making the choices that they must make in order for the whole process to occur. Nevertheless, the bottom line is still the bottom line. *God ultimately has the responsibility for making sure that each step occurs, and He guarantees that He will fulfill His responsibility.* We also see that God will hold the Israelites accountable for their choices and affirm them when they do make good choices and discipline them when they make evil choices. In addition, their evil choices will not prevent Him from causing them (eventually) to make the good choice of belief as a nation and from bringing about the completion of His promises that He made to Abraham. With these verses, God articulates the dynamic that exists between His choices and the Jews’ choices, and, therefore, between His choices and ours—as paradoxical as the dynamic may appear to us because of God’s holding people accountable for choices that He ultimately causes.



### ***The Fourth Promise of the Abrahamic Covenant***

In regard to the fourth promise in Genesis 12:1-3, I would lump together the five statements of Genesis 12:2b-3 to form this last promise that God makes to Abraham, “And I will make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing, and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (NAS95). God is saying that He will bless with eternal Life anyone who properly associates with Abraham. The person who recognizes how great a man was Abraham will be treated by God in the same way that He treated Abraham—by granting him *dikaioSunay* and eternal Life. Notice that I say that this will happen to anyone who *properly* associates with Abraham, because there are many people of different religions, even Christians, who think that they are properly associating with Abraham, but they are not. The apostle Paul makes clear in two important passages what the Bible means by this notion of associating with Abraham properly. They are Galatians 3:1-9 and Romans 4:9-17. We will consider only the first passage –

**Gal. 3:1** You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

**Gal. 3:2** This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

**Gal. 3:3** Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

**Gal. 3:4** Did you suffer so many things in vain — if indeed it was in vain?

**Gal. 3:5** So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

**Gal. 3:6** Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS [Genesis 15:6].

**Gal. 3:7** Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.

**Gal. 3:8** The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU” <Genesis 12:3>.

**Gal. 3:9** So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. (NAS95)

The problem that Paul is addressing in Galatians is that certain Jews are aggressively promoting the idea among the Gentiles that only people who are believing in Jesus as the Messiah, circumcised (males obviously), and meticulously obeying all the commandments of the Mosaic Covenant (both men and women), thus living like Jews, will gain eternal Life. These Jewish teachers are, in effect, denying that salvation is a gracious inward work of the Spirit of God that manifests itself in belief. It is not that they are denying that belief in Jesus the Messiah is important and vital, but they are adding to this belief the obedience of the Mosaic Covenant and are of the perspective that human beings perform belief in and of themselves apart from God’s gracious inward work.

Paul uses Abraham as an example of genuine, biblical belief and quotes Genesis 15:6, which we examined above. He then draws the conclusion that it is people who associate with Abraham simply by having the same kind of belief that he had who can be called “sons of Abraham.” Consequently, Paul’s description of a “son of Abraham” is in contrast to that of the Jewish false teachers, who are insisting and even intimidating

people into believing that only those who live like Jews according to the Mosaic Covenant can truly be called “sons of Abraham.” We notice that Paul says it twice, “Those who are of faith [belief brought about by grace] are “sons of Abraham” and are “blessed with Abraham, the believer.” In other words, only by exercising the same kind of belief that comes about by the miraculous work of God in a person’s heart can a person obtain the blessing of eternal Life from God. Simply being a physical descendant of Abraham (as all Jews are), or saying that Abraham is an important man in one’s religion (as other people do), or seeking to conform one’s behavior to the Mosaic Covenant (as the Jews in Galatians are doing) is not enough to associate with Abraham *properly*. What is required is the miraculous and gracious inner work of God that results in authentic belief and eventually in belief in Jesus as the Messiah once a person hears the message about him.

Such authentic belief in many different people around the world and throughout history constitutes the fourth promise by God to Abraham, that “in [him] all the families of the earth will be blessed.” God will grant eternal Life not just to the Jews, but He will grant it to all peoples of the earth. In Galatians 3:8 above, the NAS95 translates the Greek words τὰ ἔθνη (*ta ethnay*) as “Gentiles.” I would translate them even more generically as “nations,” because I think that Paul is including the Jews. God has promised in Genesis 12:3, has guaranteed by the covenantal ceremony in Genesis 15, and has sworn in Genesis 22:16-18 that all ethnic groups will be included in the blessing of Abraham. Therefore, people from all nations, Jews and Gentiles, will obtain eternal Life by virtue of God’s miraculously changing their fundamental desires and commitments, so that they relate to their ideas with authentic belief and seek to obey God as best they know how.

In Galatians 3:16, Paul goes on to describe as “Abraham and his seed” the whole group of people who receive this fourth promise –

**Gal. 3:16** Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but rather to one, “And to your seed,” that is, Christ. (NAS95)

At this point in Paul’s argument in Galatians, he is talking about two different people groups. He identifies the first by the plural word “seeds,” which is the people group who do not receive eternal Life as promised to Abraham. He identifies the second by the singular word “seed,” which is the people group who do receive eternal Life. Paul is saying that God did not make this promise to Abraham’s “seeds,” i.e., to many people groups. Instead, He made it to his “seed,” which is only one people group. And then Paul labels this people group with the word “Christ.” Thus, he categorizes this group as those who associate with Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, by virtue of their belief in him, which does not contradict what Paul has explained in Romans 1 & 2, that the fundamental issue for immoral human beings is their coming to grips with their moral depravity and God’s mercy. It only means that anyone who deals with his immoral condition properly has captured the basic message of Jesus’ death and resurrection even if he has never heard about Jesus. This basic message is that he deserves God’s judgment and will graciously be granted Life, if he appeals to God for mercy from a broken heart that has been changed by the Spirit of God. Thus, Jesus as the Christ and Messiah, who was raised from the dead by God, becomes the leader of the people group to whom God has promised eternal Life. Paul’s point is that this group includes both Jews and Gentiles and does not involve or require living like a Jew according to the Mosaic Covenant. It simply requires authentic belief, indeed belief in the truth of Jesus as the Messiah—once a person hears this message.

Another part of Abraham's story that helps us understand what Paul means by this singular people group is in Genesis 16 and 17. Here, Sarah, Abraham's wife, after living for ten years in the land of Canaan, is becoming increasingly frustrated with God's lack of fulfilling His second promise of giving them a child whereby He can make of Abraham's descendants a great nation (cf. Genesis 12:2). She then talks Abraham into fathering a child through Hagar, her Egyptian servant. Approximately thirteen years later, in Genesis 17:1-22 God speaks directly to Abraham and renews His covenant with him with an added stipulation, that all male members of his descendants and household must be circumcised as a sign of the covenant –

**Gen. 17:1** Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD [Yahweh] appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless.

**Gen. 17:2** "I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly."

**Gen. 17:3** Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,

**Gen. 17:4** "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.

**Gen. 17:5** "No longer shall your name be called Abram, But your name shall be Abraham; For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.

**Gen. 17:6** "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you.

**Gen. 17:7** "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

**Gen. 17:8** "I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

**Gen. 17:9** God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

**Gen. 17:10** "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.

**Gen. 17:11** "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

**Gen. 17:12** "And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.

**Gen. 17:13** "A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

**Gen. 17:14** "But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

**Gen. 17:15** Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

**Gen. 17:16** "I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

**Gen. 17:17** Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

**Gen. 17:18** And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before You!”

**Gen. 17:19** But God said, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

**Gen. 17:20** “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

**Gen. 17:21** “But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.”

**Gen. 17:22** When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. (NAS95)

The first thing God does in renewing His covenant with Abraham is to command him to “walk before” Him and “be blameless.” Are these two separate commandments or one? I think they are basically one—that God is requiring that Abraham live his life in light of who God is as his Creator and Judge. This means that he should live a complete life, a life of facing into his immoral condition, seeking God’s eternal and unmerited mercy, and pursuing morality, even though he can never become morally perfect in the present realm. Our word blameless would seem to imply moral perfection, but God does not mean this. Moses uses the Hebrew word תָּמִים (*tameem*), and the LXX translates it with ἀμεμπτος (*amemptos*). While both words can refer to perfection, they can also denote completeness. But completeness in the current realm for a human being who is always plagued by moral depravity is not moral perfection *per se*. Instead Abraham must be a man of genuine belief who also acknowledges his inward evil and pursues moral obedience to God in the midst of his inherent wickedness. Thus, he will continue to be a man to whom God has granted *dikaio sunay* and as a result stands to gain eternal salvation and Life.

In Genesis 6:9 Noah is described as תָּמִים (*tameem*). While the LXX does not translate this word with ἀμεμπτος (*amemptos*), the meaning is nevertheless the same as in Genesis 17:1—that Noah was a man who lived a biblically complete life before God, facing into his moral depravity and pursuing obedience to God. In the New Testament, the Greek word ἀμεμπτος (*amemptos*) is used in Luke 1 to describe the priest Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth –

**Luke 1:5** In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

**Luke 1:6** They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly (ἀμεμπτοι (*amemptoi*)) in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. (NAS95)

The word translated “righteous” in v. 6 is the adjectival form of *dikaio sunay*, *dikaioy*. While “righteous” also could mean morally perfect, Luke is describing Zacharias and Elizabeth as having been granted *dikaio sunay* by God. Why has God done so? Because they were “walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord,” which does not denote their living morally perfect lives, but their being people of

miraculously changed hearts, who understand the value of morality and the problem of their own internal evil before a merciful God. Such understanding is also what God is commanding Abraham to have in Genesis 17:1 and what God will cause Abraham to have, because He has guaranteed it through the split-animal ceremony in Genesis 15. Therefore, we could translate *tameem* and *amemptos* as “uncondemned.” Zacharias and Elizabeth were uncondemned by God as they pursued obedience to Him with changed hearts, and God wanted Abraham to be the same.

Next, God declares in Genesis 17:2-5 that He will multiply Abraham exceedingly and make him “the father of a multitude of nations.” God means the same thing as in Genesis 12:3, that “in Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed.” All ethnic groups will share in the blessing of eternal Life by virtue of the miraculous inward change that God will produce in people whereby they associate properly with Abraham by having genuine, biblical faith, and there will be many of them. As a result, God changes Abraham’s name from Abram, meaning “Exalted Father,” to Abraham, meaning “Father of Many.”<sup>24</sup>

In v. 6, God changes the subject briefly and tells Abraham that He will make him “exceedingly fruitful” and make “nations” of him so that “kings will come forth from” him. Here, God is speaking of only Abraham’s *physical* descendants—that they will be numerous so that nations (plural, i.e., more than one people group) will come from him. God is referring to the descendants of both Abraham’s sons—Isaac, who has not yet been born, and Ishmael, who was born of Hagar in Genesis 16. The Jews as a “nation” have come through Isaac, and the Arabs as a “nation” and even “nations” have come through Ishmael. In addition, kings and rulers over these nations have also descended from Abraham. Both these people groups and their leaders will figure prominently in the story that God creates as He fulfills the purposes of His project.

Then, in verses 7-8, God says that He is making this covenant with Abraham and his descendants so that He will give them the land of Canaan, while, in response, they must keep His covenant by circumcising all males on the eighth day after their birth. Other ancient Near Eastern people practiced circumcision already, but God is requiring it as a sign to indicate that the Jews, Abraham’s physical descendants, are His chosen people.

If we look at all of God’s promises in Genesis 12 (land, great nation, and eternal Life for him and those properly associated with him) as though they are inextricably tied together, then we see why the Jews conclude that anyone who desires to relate to God appropriately and gain His blessing of eternal Life must live like a Jew and be circumcised. However, we will learn in the next chapter that the Mosaic Covenant is an extension of the Abrahamic Covenant for only the Jews, and, while male Jews must obey the commandment of circumcision, which is also a part of the Mosaic Covenant, all Jews, male and female, must obey its 613 commandments.

We also see that God says in Genesis 17:14 that an uncircumcised male within the nation of Israel has broken God’s covenant, indeed the Abrahamic Covenant. Thus, it seems easy and natural to tie together the Abrahamic Covenant and Mosaic Covenant, so that breaking one constitutes breaking the other. Subsequently, if a Gentile becomes a follower of the *Jewish* Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and an heir of the Abrahamic promise of eternal Life, fellow followers who are Jewish could easily connect the Mosaic Covenant to the Abrahamic for the Gentiles and conclude that Gentile believers must also become circumcised and obey the Mosaic Covenant in order to be *bona fide* disciples of Jesus. Their perspective would be that to break the Mosaic Covenant by not

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<sup>24</sup> Or even “Exalted Father of Many.” The translation of Abraham is disputed; certainly within the context it has something to do with Abraham’s being the father of a multitude of nations (אֲבִי הָאֲמֵנוֹת *av hamon goyeem*) (πατέρα πολλῶν ἔθνων *patera pollon ethnon*) – LXX) that God mentions right afterwards in v. 5.

being circumcised, whether a person is a Jew or a Gentile, would be to break the Abrahamic Covenant, therefore disqualifying a person from obtaining the blessing of eternal Life that God promised to the Jew Abraham.

While this interpretation certainly seems plausible, we will find from our examination of the Mosaic Covenant, which also includes circumcision as a requirement, that it is not correct. In addition, neither Jesus nor the biblical authors believed that all human beings are obligated to keep the Mosaic Covenant in order to gain eternal Life. Instead, there is a *physical* level of the Abrahamic Covenant that God will fulfill among the *physical* descendants of Abraham, the Jews, and there is a *spiritual* level of the covenant that God fulfills among all ethnic groups, which is the same as saying that there are two major promises that God makes to Abraham. The first promise is to make of his *physical* descendants a great nation. The second promise is to grant eternal Life to all those who have the same kind of belief that Abraham has. The fulfillment of both promises will mean that the Jews play an important historical role in the present realm, while both Jews and Gentiles play an important eternal role in the present realm and the next.

Before we leave Genesis 17 and the Abrahamic Covenant, we should notice that, after God tells Abraham in v. 16 that He will give him a son through his wife, Sarah (whose name He changed from Sarai), Abraham requests that this covenant be kept through Ishmael, his son by Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maid (cf. Genesis 16). However, God states unequivocally in vs. 19-21 that Ishmael and his descendants are outside the covenant and promise of the land of Canaan –

**Gen. 17:19** But God said, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

**Gen. 17:20** “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

**Gen. 17:21** “But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.” (NAS95)

In these verses, we see that not only are Ishmael and his descendants, who will become a “great nation” on the earth, outside the Abrahamic Covenant, but also Isaac and his descendants, the Jews, are truly God's chosen people within the covenant—in regard to both its physical/temporal promises of land and descendants and its spiritual/eternal promise of Life in eternity. In other words, God will fulfill His promises of land and descendants to the Jews, and He will fulfill His promise of eternal Life to them since they are included in “all the families of the earth,” who will be blessed with Abraham by having their hearts miraculously changed by God (cf. Genesis 12:3). We need to realize, however, that even though God says that Ishmael and his descendants are outside the covenant (so to speak), that He will include some of them in “all the families of the earth” who will be blessed with eternal Life in association with Abraham. The important point that God is making here is that He will definitely treat the Jews differently from all other ethnic groups, including Ishmael's descendants, *in the temporal realm*, which He will demonstrate by changing the hearts of an entire generation of Jews at some time in the future.

In addition, Ishmael's being outside the covenant in this respect is confirmed by both Sarah and God in Genesis 21 after she gives birth to her own son, Isaac, and she complains about Ishmael's treatment of him –



**Gen. 21:9** Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking [Isaac].

**Gen. 21:10** Therefore she said to Abraham, “Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.”

**Gen. 21:11** The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son.

**Gen. 21:12** But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named.

**Gen. 21:13** “And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant.” (NAS95)

First, we observe in v. 10 that Sarah will not allow Ishmael to share in the inheritance of the land of Canaan with Isaac, but then we also see in v. 12 that God confirms her stance when He tells Abraham that “through Isaac your descendants shall be named.” It is only the physical descendants who have come into existence by God’s miracle through Sarah who will share in the physical promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. In other words, it is only the Jews who can lay claim to the land of Canaan, now called the land of Israel. No other ethnic group can claim this land. It is God’s gift to the Jews and to no one else. Nevertheless, the Jews have a moral obligation to obey God properly in order to participate in this promise, which means that they must obtain changed hearts and be people of authentic belief in order to do so. In addition, of course, God must miraculously change their hearts, *all* the hearts of an entire generation. And it is clear from Jewish history that He has not done so yet. Nevertheless, the time of this miracle is coming.

Let me now go into more detail about the Jews’ properly associating with Abraham through belief as it pertains to the second, third, and fourth promises that God makes to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. These are the promises that God will make of him a great nation (the Jews), that He will bless him (with eternal Life), and that He will bless all the families of the earth who are in association with him—by giving them eternal Life through His miraculous work of changing them inwardly by means of the Holy Spirit and causing them to have the same kind of belief as Abraham. While the Jews are those who are promised to become a “great nation” as physical descendants of Abraham in the current, temporal realm, ultimately all the eternal descendants of Abraham are the “seed” of Galatians 3:16. These are the people group who are associated with Jesus as the Messiah because of their inwardness and being “blameless” before God, and they demonstrate their inwardness by genuine remorse for their immoral condition and by appealing to God for His eternal mercy (cf. Genesis 17:1). However, because the Messiah is a Jew, there must be an Isaac and, therefore, *physical* descendants of Abraham culminating in the most important Jew of all time, Jesus of Nazareth, as the Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of David, and the eternal King of both the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of God. We can understand, therefore, why Matthew begins his gospel –

**Matt. 1:1** The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:

**Matt. 1:2** Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. (NAS95)

Obviously, without Abraham and Isaac, there could be no *Jewish* genealogy of Jesus the Messiah. But God’s promise to Abraham to turn his physical descendants into a “great nation” also means that God has guaranteed that, at some time in human history,



a time that is still future to us, He will cause an entire generation of Jews to become authentic believers by changing them inwardly through the work of His Holy Spirit. Paul makes the same point in Romans 11, especially vs. 25-29 –

**Rom. 11:25** For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery — so that you will not be wise in your own estimation — that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

**Rom. 11:26** and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.”

**Rom. 11:27** “THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”

**Rom. 11:28** From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;

**Rom. 11:29** for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. (NAS95)

Notice Paul says that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” God has called the Jews to be His people through the promise to Abraham, so that they play a special role for Him in the present realm. Even though the Jews have never all fully believed and obeyed God the way that they should, one day they will. Thus, “all Israel will be saved,” which is to say that the generation in whom God miraculously works will all believe properly the ideas that God has been communicating to them for thousands of years, because God will change their hearts. Therefore, they will all meet the condition that God has required for any immoral person’s being saved and gaining eternal Life—a “circumcised heart” (cf. Deuteronomy 10:16; Romans 2:28,29). Thus, also, “ungodliness,” i.e., hardened and stubborn hearts, God will remove from “Jacob,” the nation of Israel who are Jacob’s namesake after God changed his name in Genesis 32:28.

The apostle Paul implies in also Romans 9 that God will change the hearts of an entire generation of Jews. In this chapter, Paul is responding to the objection that he knows unbelieving Jews will have to his message. Jews will think that Paul is saying that God has abandoned the Jews because Gentiles are not required to keep the Mosaic Covenant. They will also think that Paul is saying that God has abandoned the Jews because not all Jews who pursue obedience to the Mosaic Covenant will be saved. Consequently, God has forsaken His promises to the Jews and become unfaithful toward them as His chosen people.

Paul’s response to these objections is to argue that God never intended for all the Jews to become authentic believers, even though they constitute His chosen people, physically speaking. In addition, God is in complete control of who believes properly and who does not. Nevertheless, God holds accountable any unbelieving Jew and will judge him accordingly for his unbelief. Is it fair for God to hold people accountable whose choices He controls, Paul asks? Absolutely! Because God is the potter, and the Jews are His clay –

**Rom. 9:19** You will say to me then, “Why does He [God] still find fault? For who resists His will?”

**Rom. 9:20** On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it?

**Rom. 9:21** Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

**Rom. 9:22** What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

**Rom. 9:23** And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,

**Rom. 9:24** even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. (NAS95)

The objector asks why God holds any Jew accountable when God is the one who sovereignly chooses whether or not the Jew will authentically believe. Paul responds, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" While we could interpret him as rebuking the objector for even asking the question, the rest of the passage indicates that Paul simply wants his objector to answer his question honestly, "Who are you?" The objector should answer, "I am but a piece of clay in the hands of a potter, my Creator, the transcendent God."

Paul is providing a very important analogy for our understanding how the dynamic exists between God and us. God is the potter, and the Jews (indeed all human beings) are lumps of clay on His potter's wheel. Just as a potter has complete control over the shape of the clay and, therefore, determines its purpose and use (will it be a vase to hold flowers, or will it be a chamber pot?), so also God sovereignly controls the choices and lives of the Jews and their purposes for His own sake. I do not think that it is taking the analogy too far to say that God transcends the creation and creates all things within the creation, including human beings and the choices they make. As I asked earlier, how can reality make sense otherwise if the Creator does not create all aspects of the creation? How can something uncreated exist within the creation? In addition, how can anything exist except for the actions of the Potter's hands as He shapes the lumps of clay.

In this case, Paul is saying that God creates certain Jews (vessels of wrath) to make choices of only rebellion against Him, and then He destroys them after the final judgment. Additionally, God creates other Jews (vessels of mercy) to make choices that initially are rebellious toward Him but then later are characterized by a new and fundamental desire to escape His judgment and gain mercy and goodness in eternity. Therefore, God is remaining faithful to the Jews, but, as we learn from Romans 11, there will be only a "remnant" of them who will actually obtain eternal Life –

**Rom. 11:1** I [Paul] say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.

**Rom. 11:2** God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?

**Rom. 11:3** "Lord, THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE."

**Rom. 11:4** But what is the divine response to him? "I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL."

[Rom. 11:5](#) In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.

[Rom. 11:6](#) But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. (NAS95)

Paul has claimed in Romans 10 that the Jews have committed themselves to the Mosaic Covenant, but without authentic belief. Therefore, even though the Jews are God's chosen people according to His promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation, it appears as though God has rejected them, because, for the most part, they are a stubborn and obstinate people. Is it really all the Jews who have been so hard-hearted, Paul asks here in Romans 11? No. Paul, himself, is a clear example that God is still being faithful to the Jews "whom He foreknew," i.e., whom He chose beforehand that He would change their hearts and cause them to become authentic believers. Besides, God had done the same thing in the days of Elijah, who thought that he was the only Jew who was being truly obedient to Him. God always has a "remnant" of Jews who believe, because He has graciously chosen them the same way that He has graciously chosen certain Gentiles.

Again, the idea of changing people's hearts implies the very definition of grace, that ultimately God is responsible for whose heart He sovereignly and graciously changes and who genuinely believes the truth and obeys Him. Plus, the point still remains from both Romans 9 and 11, that God will always remain faithful to the Jews and, therefore, will one day change the hearts of an entire generation as the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation. I demonstrated this earlier by quoting from one passage in Ezekiel. Here are two others that confirm the same point and include the fact that the Jews also have an historical obligation to the Mosaic Covenant that they will fulfill appropriately at some time in the future –

[Ezek. 36:22](#) "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went.

[Ezek. 36:23](#) "I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD [Yahweh]," declares the Lord GOD, "when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight.

[Ezek. 36:24](#) "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land.

[Ezek. 36:25](#) "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

[Ezek. 36:26](#) **"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.**

[Ezek. 36:27](#) **"I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.**

[Ezek. 36:28](#) "You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.

[Ezek. 36:29](#) "Moreover, I will save you from all your uncleanness; and I will call for the grain and multiply it, and I will not bring a famine on you.

[Ezek. 36:30](#) "I will multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field, so that you will not receive again the disgrace of famine among the nations.

**Ezek. 36:31** “Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and **you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations.**”” (NAS95; emphasis mine)

**Ezek. 37:21** “Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land;

**Ezek. 37:22** and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms.

**Ezek. 37:23** “They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God.

**Ezek. 37:24** “**My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them.**

**Ezek. 37:25** “**They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons’ sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever.**

**Ezek. 37:26** “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever.

**Ezek. 37:27** “My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people.

**Ezek. 37:28** “And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.”” (NAS95; emphasis mine)

These passages are describing a mass revival that will take place among the Jews, when God will gather them from all the nations where He has scattered them since the Assyrian and Babylonian Captivities of around 700 B.C. and 600 B.C., respectively, as well as from the dispersion after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70 and 132. God will bring them back into the land of Israel where they will live without having to fear any hostile actions from other peoples. Thus, God will fulfill His promise regarding the physical descendants of Abraham by circumcising the hearts of the Jews (cf. Deut. 30) and, thereby, causing them to believe the truth of Jesus as the Messiah, indeed *their* very Jewish Messiah. They will, in turn, have the same kind of genuine belief as Abraham, and they will also properly obey the Mosaic Covenant as God has required of them since its inception around 1500 B.C. Then, Jesus, as the final and unique descendant of David, will be their “king” and “prince.” He will rule over them on the land in the Kingdom of Israel before God sets up the eternal Kingdom of Heaven. In the latter kingdom, Jesus will rule over both Jews and Gentiles in a new heavens and on a new earth. We will explore these two kingdoms more when we consider the Davidic Covenant in the discussion below of John 5 in Part III, but these kingdoms become the fulfillment of the four promises that God made to Abraham. In other words, we can boil down these four promises into two—1) God has promised to make of the physical descendants of Abraham a great nation on the land of Israel, and 2) God has promised to bless with eternal Life Abraham and those who associate with him by having the same kind of belief in God as his.

By incorporating the Davidic Covenant into our understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant, we will see that the first promise will eventually result in what the Bible calls “the kingdom of Israel” (1 Samuel 15:28; 24:20), i.e., an earthly kingdom made up of only the Jews with Jesus’ ruling over them on the land of Israel in the present realm before God creates a new heavens and a new earth according to 2 Peter 3:10-13. Also, by incorporating the Davidic Covenant into our understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant, we will see that the second promise will eventually result in what the Bible calls the “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 3:2, etc.), i.e., another kingdom made up of both Jews and Gentiles with Jesus’ ruling over them for all eternity in the new heavens and on the new earth. It is these two promises and their fulfillment that provide the framework for what the rest of the Bible speaks of in regard to God’s project. His project is to create an entire generation of one ethnic group, the Jews, as a “great nation” with changed hearts and with the Son of God, the Messiah, who is Jesus, ruling over them on the land that He promised to Abraham and his physical descendants. His project is also to create a group of people made up of both Jews and Gentiles who, in the current realm, have changed hearts, and, in the eternal realm, submit to the Son of God, the Messiah, who is Jesus, as their ruler. In other words, Jesus becomes the king of two kingdoms, one of this temporal realm on the land of Israel, and one in the eternal realm, in a new creation. These kingdoms are what God has in mind when He makes His promises to Abraham in the Abrahamic Covenant.

### ***Summary of the Abrahamic Covenant***

In this chapter, we have looked at the four promises that God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 –

**Gen. 12:1** Now the LORD [Yahweh] said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you;

**Gen. 12:2** And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing;

**Gen. 12:3** And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”  
(NAS95)

These are the four promises –

1. The Land of Canaan, i.e., the Land of Israel, that stretches from the Nile River to the Euphrates River.
2. Descendants that come through Isaac and Jacob, and to make of them “a great nation.”
3. The “blessing” of eternal Life in the eternal Kingdom of God.
4. The blessing of eternal Life for all people who properly associate with Abraham by having the same kind of believe in truth that he has had.

These promises constitute a covenant, a contract, that God made with Abraham, whereby He guaranteed in the split-animal ceremony of Genesis 15 that He would fulfill these promises, even to the point of miraculously and inwardly changing all those whom He would choose so that they believe Him for the truth that He presents them, either through the Bible *per se* or through some other element of the creation. In Genesis 22, God also swore an oath to the effect that He would keep His promises that He had made

in chapter 12 and guaranteed in chapter 15. Consequently, an understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant puts us well on the road to learning about God's project of eventually creating a future realm that will endure for all eternity and that will be ruled by Him as Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate God, Messiah, King, and High-Priest of morally depraved human beings, for whom he appeals to God the Father for mercy at the final judgment.

In concluding this chapter on the Abrahamic Covenant, let me add what the Old Testament prophet Micah says of God and his fellow Jews –

**Mic. 7:18** Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love (חֶסֶד (*hesed*)) (ἐλέους (*eleos*)) – LXX).

**Mic. 7:19** He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea.

**Mic. 7:20** You will give truth to Jacob And unchanging love (חֶסֶד (*hesed*)) (ἐλεον (*eleon*)) – LXX) to Abraham, Which You swore to our forefathers From the days of old. (NAS95)

Micah is living in a time of Israel's history (circa 705-600 B.C.) when the Jews' lack of authentic belief and obedience to God is truly obvious, and God is about to bring destruction upon them and expel them from their land. In this passage, Micah speaks confidently of God's remaining faithful to His promises to Abraham—that there will eventually be a remnant of his physical descendants who possess changed hearts and who believe and obey God properly. The Hebrew word that gets translated “unchanging love”, *hesed*, is the key word here. This word is used almost 250 times in the Old Testament and mostly refers to God's rigid and steadfast commitment to His promises and to His people, the Jews. Thus, God will eventually take an entire generation of Abraham's physical descendants and miraculously make them authentic believers like Abraham, thereby granting them *dikaionay* in the present realm and forming them into a “great nation” and kingdom on the land of Israel with their Messiah and King, Jesus, ruling over them. God will also grant them eternal Life in the next realm. Thus, God's fulfilling this promise to Abraham's physical descendants, the Jews, is still future to us.

For Gentiles, this passage in Micah and others like it in the Old Testament prophets are relevant in a similar way. To the extent that the Old Testament prophets declare that God will be faithful to the Jews according to His promise to Abraham, to the same extent God will be faithful to both Jews and Gentiles whom He has foreknown and chosen in eternity past. In both cases, God will change people's hearts, causing them to believe in Him as Abraham did, which will result in their obtaining the same promise of the blessing of eternal Life. Thus, God will involve all ethnic groups, i.e., both Jews and Gentiles, in His fourth promise such that anyone who associates with Abraham by having the same kind of authentic, biblical belief will obtain eternal Life. As God says to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”



## Chapter 6

### The Mosaic and New Covenants

After looking at the Abrahamic Covenant in the previous chapter, we now need to deal with the Mosaic Covenant and its relationship to circumcision that God mentioned to Abraham in Genesis 17. We also need to bring the New Covenant into our discussion and understand its relationship to both the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant. Approximately five hundred years after Abraham immigrated to the land of Canaan and four hundred years after his descendants moved from this land to Egypt because of a famine, God made another covenant with the Israelites—the Mosaic Covenant, so called because it was mediated through Moses after he led the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt to Mt. Sinai (Horeb) in the Sinai desert. The Bible indicates this covenant was a continuation of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant as they pertained to the physical descendants of Abraham, the Jews—no more and no less—which we can see by the way God describes the relationship between the Mosaic and Abrahamic Covenants in Jeremiah 11 –

**Jer. 11:1** The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD [Yahweh], saying,

**Jer. 11:2** “Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem;

**Jer. 11:3** and say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, “Cursed is the man who does not heed the words of this covenant

**Jer. 11:4** which I commanded your forefathers in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, ‘Listen to My voice, and do according to all which I command you; so you shall be My people, and I will be your God,’

**Jer. 11:5** in order to confirm the oath which I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as it is this day.’” Then I said, “Amen, O LORD.” (NAS95)

Jeremiah lived a thousand years after Moses, and God is pointing out in this passage that the Mosaic Covenant’s purpose was for the Israelites to obey it and thereby “confirm” that they are the *physical* and *national* people of God to whom He has promised the land of Israel. However, it did not change the other aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant. For example, the Mosaic Covenant did not change God’s intentions to bless with eternal Life Abraham and other people from all the nations of the earth. Neither did it change the fundamental method by which He would do this. God was still committed to bless all the ethnic groups on the earth by changing them inwardly according to His own sovereign choice and grace. Thus, they could never earn His blessing, no matter how well they performed morally and religiously. Nevertheless, the New Testament documents demonstrate that the Jews misinterpreted these assumed aspects, along with the relationship between the two covenants and their individual purposes. The Jews concluded that the Mosaic Covenant is the key to *anyone’s* obtaining the promises and blessings of Abraham. They believed that if any human being, whether Jew or Gentile, desired eternal Life, then this person was obligated to keep the Mosaic Covenant and all of its 613 commandments. Even worse, they misinterpreted and, therefore, rejected the idea of “promise” (and its associated concept of grace) by believing that a person could make himself worthy of the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant.



The Jews' misinterpretation of the nature of God's promises is not unlike Christians who create various systems of religious rituals, such as church membership and attendance, confession, prayer, fasting, and the sacraments that include baptism and the "Lord's Supper," as the key to a person's relationship with God. Then, without necessarily stating explicitly, they adopt a perspective that people can make themselves worthy of God's favor and blessings by performing these rituals. If Christians perform these rituals, then their lives will go well. If they do not, then God will withhold His earthly blessings from them. As I have said already, this mentality is the essence of legalism, a mindset that morally depraved human beings naturally adopt. Therefore, properly understanding the Mosaic Covenant and its connection to the Abrahamic Covenant along with the Jews' misinterpretation of the Mosaic Covenant is vital for helping Christians avoid the pitfall of legalism—if God graciously allows them to grasp what the Bible teaches on these subjects.

In fact, I would suggest that getting these issues wrong, particularly the nature and definition of grace, is potentially more problematic than misunderstanding other doctrines that Christians consider essential, such as the trinity, the atonement of Christ, etc. Christians place so much emphasis on getting right the divine nature of Jesus as the Son of God and the purpose of the atonement along with other "essential" doctrines that they consider these key to a person's obtaining eternal Life. As I said earlier, thus they tend to define a cult according to the religious group's perspective on Jesus' divine and human qualities. If the group believes anything less than that Jesus is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity who is ontologically both completely divine and human, then the group is a cult.

However, the Bible indicates that the more problematic issue is the group's perspective on God's promises and grace. If the group believes anything less than God's sovereign, complete, unmerited, and unprompted inward work in morally depraved human beings as that which is necessary for salvation and eternal Life, then this is what categorizes them as a cult. Or, if the leadership of a group—the priests, pastors, ministers, seminary professors, et al.—explicitly or implicitly position themselves intellectually and doctrinally between the Bible and the group's participants, then the group has become a cult. In this latter situation, the leadership has taken on the role of being apostles to their followers, which is biblically illegal, because only the apostles of Jesus in his day could claim to lead people authoritatively. In addition, the followers in this cult of "apostolic" leaders have handed over their minds to the leaders, which is biblically irresponsible. It would also not surprise me if most of evangelical Christianity falls into this category. Certainly, it is entirely possible to be strong on doctrine and weak on grasping the profundity of God's grace that should result in extending it to other morally depraved human beings. It is also typical for weak-minded "sheep" to follow blindly their head-strong "shepherds." Both of these characteristics of a cult existed among the Jews and their leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, in Jesus' day, which is why Jesus spoke so critically of them in Matthew 23 –

**Matt. 23:27** "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

**Matt. 23:28** "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (NAS95)

Getting back to the Mosaic Covenant, the complete account of God's giving it to the Jews covers four books of the Bible—Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. At the beginning of Exodus, the Pharaoh of Egypt has enslaved the Israelites, and they cry

out to God, their God, for help. God responds by commissioning Moses to lead His people out of Egypt, but it takes ten major plagues that devastate Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to let God's people go. Pharaoh's refusal to obey God shows how stubborn and almost indomitable is the pride of man. Sometimes, not even economic, social, and moral disaster can convince a political leader, or anyone else for that matter, that he is morally depraved and deserves God's judgment. Eventually, however, Pharaoh relents and permits the Israelites to leave. Yet, he changes his mind and chases after them. Then, they cross the Red Sea on dry ground through the miracle of God, who causes a strong wind to blow all night and sweep the water back so that a dry corridor opens up on which the Israelites walk. After they have reached the other side, God causes the waters of the Red Sea to return, and the Egyptians, who are chasing them, drown in the sea. This event takes place around 1500 B.C., and the Jews soon arrive at Mt. Sinai in the southern part of the Sinai desert (although there is some dispute about its exact location). It is here that their God, Yahweh, appears to them to renew His covenant that He made with their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to add to the stipulation of circumcision that He placed on Abraham to demonstrate his devotion to Him. Instead of the one commandment of circumcision, the Jews will now have 612 others to obey in order to demonstrate their loyalty to God and that they are His people. However, the term "His people" here refers to only the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. Thus, they are separate, physically speaking, from all the other ethnic groups on earth, during the history of the present realm up to the time of the final judgment that is still future to us.

God begins conveying the Mosaic Covenant to the Israelites through Moses in Exodus 19 –

**Ex. 19:1** In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.

**Ex. 19:2** When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain.

**Ex. 19:3** Moses went up to God, and the LORD [Yahweh] called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel:

**Ex. 19:4** 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself.

**Ex. 19:5** 'Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine;

**Ex. 19:6** and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." (NAS95)

We notice that God is making this covenant with "the house of Jacob" whom He also calls "the sons of Israel." In other words, God is not making the covenant with anyone else—not with the Egyptians, the Babylonians, or Gentile Christians (even though the last group are followers of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus). Some Gentile Christians go so far as to obligate themselves to the Mosaic Covenant, as though it were intended to define every person's relationship with God for the sake of eternal Life, whether Jew or Gentile, whether pre-Christ or post-Christ. As we have seen, such focus on the Mosaic Covenant is like the perspective of the Jewish false teachers whom Paul is writing against in Galatians. Yet, God is very specific here in Exodus 19, and the Bible is quite specific in other places, that the Jews, and the Jews alone, are obligated to this

covenant, and then only in regard to their unique and special role within human history and in the current realm. Obedience to the Mosaic Covenant *per se* is not what qualifies someone, Jew or Gentile, to obtain eternal Life, which I have already demonstrated in my discussion on the Abrahamic Covenant—that the requirement that God has placed on all human beings to obtain His mercy and eternal salvation is an inward change of heart whereby a person relates to his own knowledge and understanding of reality with authentic belief. Granted, only the knowledge and understanding of Jesus and the biblical authors were completely accurate. Therefore, all the rest of us will not necessarily be relating to and dealing with perfect truth, even if we have authentic belief. However, a changed heart will lead us to pursuing truth, especially that of the only authoritative and inerrant source available to us human beings, the Bible.

In addition, a changed heart will also eventually lead a person to feeling genuine humility and remorse for his sinfulness so that he appeals to God for mercy. This appeal will also be in the midst of believing whatever other truth has been communicated to him in his particular circumstances, along with pursuing goodness from a fundamental desire for morality in his heart. Nevertheless, the Bible shows us that, down through history, both Jews and Christians have misunderstood the purpose of the Mosaic Covenant and what God requires in order for them to receive the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant.

We also notice that God places a condition on the Israelites in order for them to be His “own possession among all the peoples.” In other words, they are not His people, and they are not a “holy nation” simply because they are physical descendants of Abraham. God requires of them that they “obey [His] voice and keep [His] covenant.” One way to interpret these words is to think that God wants them to be morally perfect and perform all 613 commandments of the Mosaic Covenant perfectly, which is to say that God is requiring them to transcend their inherent sinfulness and make themselves good people, indeed perfectly good people. However, the Bible indicates otherwise. If we compare the language that God uses here with what He says to Isaac about his father, Abraham, in Genesis 26:5, we will see that keeping the covenant involves an inward commitment in the midst of continued sinfulness –

**Gen. 26:1** Now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines.

**Gen. 26:2** The LORD [Yahweh] appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you.

**Gen. 26:3** “Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham.

**Gen. 26:4** “I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed;

**Gen. 26:5** because (עָקַב [ayqev]) Abraham obeyed (שָׁמַע [shama]) Me and kept (וַיִּשְׁמֹר [vayyishmor]) My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.” (NAS95)

In this passage, God is affirming and reiterating to Isaac the covenant that He made with Abraham. While Isaac is tempted to leave Canaan in search of food because of a famine, God commands him to stay. As a result, God will bless him and his descendants by taking care of them, and He will always be mindful that they are His *physical* people in the present realm. The result of God’s relationship with the Jews will be that

there will always be a remnant of authentic believers down through history, and eventually at the end of history a whole generation of Jew will obtain eternal Life (cf. discussion above in the chapter on the Abrahamic Covenant). There is in implicit assumption in what God says in v. 5. On the one hand, God will remain faithful to His promises to Abraham, that He guaranteed to Abraham through the split-animal ceremony in Genesis 15. On the other hand, God's faithfulness to His promises will be "because Abraham obeyed [Him] and kept [His] charge, [His] commandments, [His] statutes and [His] laws." As we saw before in Genesis 22 where God used the same word "because" (בְּכֵן [ayqev], it can seem to imply that God's promise and guarantee were and still are dependent on Abraham's choices *apart from God's choices*. However, the truth was and still is that Abraham's, Isaac's, and any human being's choices that result in their obtaining God's blessings are ultimately dependent on God's choices, not man's. Man's choices that result in his receiving God's promises to Abraham are entirely dependent upon God's choices to fulfill His sovereign promises to Abraham. Nevertheless, in this passage God is speaking to Isaac and, by extrapolation, to all human beings about the importance and relevance of human choices to the whole story that is unfolding within the creation. The story involves God's two-fold project of making of the Jews a "great nation" and of calling a group of people from among both the Jews and Gentiles to Himself to whom He will grant salvation and eternal Life.

We also notice that God uses the same terminology in Genesis 26 to talk about Abraham's obedience as He does in Exodus 19 to talk about the Israelites' obedience. God says of Abraham in Genesis 26 that he "obeyed [Him]" (שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי... [shama' b<sup>e</sup>qolee] – lit. heard [His] voice) (ὑπήκουσεν... τῆς ἐμῆς φωνῆς – LXX) and "kept [His]...commandments" (וַיִּשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתַי מִשְׁמַרְתֵּי מִצְוֹתַי [vayyishmor mishmartee mitzotay] – lit. guarded/observed/kept [His] commandments) (ἐφύλαξεν τὰ προστάγματά μου καὶ τὰς ἐντολάς μου – LXX). Similarly, in Exodus 19:5 God says to the Israelites that if they will obey [His] voice" (שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי [shamo'a tishm<sup>e</sup>'oo b<sup>e</sup>qolee] – lit. [they] will surely hear [His] voice) (ἀκοῆ ἀκούσητε τῆς ἐμῆς φωνῆς – LXX) and "keep [His] covenant" (וַיִּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי [ooshmartem eth b<sup>e</sup>reethee] – lit. [they] will guard/observe/keep [His] covenant) (φυλάξητε τὴν διαθήκην μου – LXX), then they will be His people.

Because language is flexible, God certainly could mean something different in the two passages of Genesis 26 and Exodus 19. He could be saying that Abraham was a true man of faith and felt genuine remorse over his sins while pursuing obedience to God. In contrast, God could be saying to the Israelites that He wants them to be morally perfect. However, the biblical explanation of the Mosaic Covenant indicates that God has required of the whole nation of Israel what He required of Abraham.

In the Mosaic Covenant, God lays out for the Israelites three kinds of commandments:

1. Moral commandments – such as "You shall not murder"
2. Ritual commandments – such as the sacrifice of bulls and goats
3. Civil commandments – such as not moving a neighbor's boundary marker

While the moral commandments and the civil commandments can imply that God is requiring the Israelites to be morally perfect, certainly the ritual commandments indicate that He is not. For example, God prescribes a sin offering in Leviticus 6:1-7 –

[Lev. 6:1](#) Then the LORD [Yahweh] spoke to Moses, saying,

**Lev. 6:2** “When a person sins and acts unfaithfully against the LORD, and deceives his companion in regard to a deposit or a security entrusted to him, or through robbery, or if he has extorted from his companion, **Lev. 6:3** or has found what was lost and lied about it and sworn falsely, so that he sins in regard to any one of the things a man may do; **Lev. 6:4** then it shall be, when he sins and becomes guilty, that he shall restore what he took by robbery or what he got by extortion, or the deposit which was entrusted to him or the lost thing which he found, **Lev. 6:5** or anything about which he swore falsely; he shall make restitution for it in full and add to it one-fifth more. He shall give it to the one to whom it belongs on the day he presents his guilt offering. **Lev. 6:6** “Then he shall bring to the priest his guilt offering to the LORD, a ram without defect from the flock, according to your valuation, for a guilt offering, **Lev. 6:7** and the priest shall make atonement for him before the LORD, and he will be forgiven for any one of the things which he may have done to incur guilt.” (NAS95)

We see that God is providing forgiveness to the Israelites whenever they do not obey the commandments of the Mosaic Covenant. Therefore, this covenant overall is not requiring that they be morally perfect. If Jews sin, then they can seek God’s forgiveness and obtain it by making a guilt offering of a ram. Thus, through the ritual commandments of sacrifice, the Mosaic Covenant provides for the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, God assumes and expects that the Israelites will continue to sin in the midst of obeying Him and keeping His commandments. Consequently, God is not requiring that the Israelites be morally perfect under the covenant, but, instead, that they have the same kind of heart and belief that Abraham had. Therefore, they can and will sin while still not breaking the Mosaic Covenant—as long as they are making sin offerings to God with proper remorse in their hearts. As a result, the Israelites’ obeying God’s voice and keeping His covenant mean the same thing as Abraham’s obeying God’s voice and keeping His commandments. Their obedience is to be from the heart, indeed a changed heart, like Abraham’s. Yet, we have already seen that only God can change a person’s heart through the miraculous work of His Holy Spirit.

Besides, if God were requiring the Israelites to be morally perfect, then He would be asking them as morally depraved human beings to do something impossible. Does it make sense that He would do so? Well, what about His requiring that they be people of changed hearts in the midst of their immoral condition? The fact is that He is still asking them to do the impossible, which is exactly the point. That which appears to be paradoxical, as we saw regarding God’s promise and Abraham’s satisfying the required condition under the Abrahamic Covenant, is the dynamic that God has chosen for His own sovereign purposes to exist between Himself and human beings. God wants the Israelites to demonstrate to the world that they are His peculiar and wise people by obeying all 613 commandments of the Mosaic Covenant, but to do so only after they have acquired changed hearts. In turn, their new inwardness will inevitably lead them to discover their inherent, deep immorality. This self-knowledge will result in their becoming genuinely remorseful and contrite, which, in turn, will move them to appeal with authentic belief to God for His eternal mercy.

Certainly, there is a paradox here. While the above will all happen only if God causes it to happen through the miraculous inward work of His Holy Spirit, God still commands the Israelites to perform that which is impossible apart from His transcendent causation. In addition, God will even affirm the Israelites for their genuine belief and obedience, just



as He affirmed Abraham when he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. On the other hand, God will also condemn them if they do not obey Him with authentic inwardness, i.e., if He does not change their hearts and they do not appropriately obey Him in line with what we saw in the previous chapter regarding what the apostle Paul says in Romans 9. God responds to vessels of mercy whom He has created to be such by condemning them. This is the very nature of the reality that God has caused to exist, and it simply cannot be otherwise, because nothing can exist, not even human choices, if the transcendent Creator does not cause it to exist.

The book of Deuteronomy, which is mostly a sermon by Moses to the Israelites after he has led them out of Egypt and through the Sinai desert for forty years, is helpful for demonstrating this paradox and these truths. We can start with Deuteronomy 4:1-8 when Moses speaks to the Jews on the eve of their crossing the Jordan River and entering into the land of Canaan after wandering the Sinai desert for 40 years –

**Deut. 4:1** “Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD [Yahweh], the God of your fathers, is giving you.

**Deut. 4:2** “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

**Deut. 4:3** “Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you.

**Deut. 4:4** “But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you.

**Deut. 4:5** “See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it.

**Deut. 4:6** “So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’

**Deut. 4:7** “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him?

**Deut. 4:8** “Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?  
(NAS95)

This passage indicates that God’s purpose for the Mosaic Covenant with all its 613 commandments, some of which are quite strange (such as what the Israelites were to eat and how they were to wear their hair – cf. Leviticus 11 and 19:27 respectively), is to show off the Israelites to the rest of the world as a wise and understanding people and as a “great nation.” This latter phrase is the very one that God used when He made the promise to Abraham regarding his physical descendants, that He would eventually make of them a “great nation.” Consequently, their wisdom comes from God, and all other people should notice and be curious enough about their wisdom to want to know the one true God also—especially for the sake of their own eternal salvation.

Deuteronomy 4 also uses the same language that we saw in Genesis 26 in regard to Abraham and in Exodus 19 when God first articulated the Mosaic Covenant to the Israelites. I am referring specifically to Deut. 4:6 where Moses commands them, “So

keep (וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם [ooshmartem]) and do [God's commandments], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples..." Just as God did with Abraham, He is requiring that the Israelites obey Him on the basis of a miraculously changed heart, that is, a heart of genuine belief. Moses is also saying in v. 4 that most of them have been appropriately obedient, because the current generation that is crossing over the Jordan River into the land of Canaan has "held fast to the LORD [their] God," which is why they "are alive today." While not all of them have hearts of authentic belief, it would seem that most of them (a "remnant" – cf. above) do, and God is keeping all of them alive as they cross the Jordan River into the land of Canaan.

Therefore, the Israelites' obedience of the Mosaic Covenant is supposed to be fundamentally internal as also shown by Deuteronomy 10:12-16 –

**Deut. 10:12** "Now, Israel, what does the LORD [Yahweh] your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,

**Deut. 10:13** and to keep the LORD'S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?

**Deut. 10:14** "Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it.

**Deut. 10:15** "Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day.

**Deut. 10:16** "So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer. (NAS95)

Here, we see that the Israelites are to conduct themselves according to the ways that God is teaching them in the Mosaic Covenant and to love Him with all their heart and soul. But notice all the language referring to what should be happening within them internally, along with the same words as in Genesis 26, Exodus, 19, and Deuteronomy 4—that they must "keep the LORD'S commandments and His statutes." How can they do this? Moses says, if they "circumcise [their] heart," i.e., by becoming fundamentally different inwardly so that their basic commitments and desires line up with God's in the midst of their continued sinfulness until He transforms them into morally perfect people in eternity. Therefore, we see one of God's purposes for giving the Mosaic Covenant to the Israelites is to specify explicitly that, in the midst of their depravity as inherently immoral human beings, they are to change inwardly and become committed in the desires of their hearts to goodness and God's mercy. This is what it means to love and serve God with all their heart and soul. It does not mean to be morally perfect, but to be inwardly changed people in the midst of their moral depravity so that their fundamental desires are to pursue moral obedience to God.

Nevertheless, there is another purpose for the Mosaic Covenant that becomes clear in certain New Testament passages as well as at the end of Deuteronomy. The apostle Paul states in Galatians 3 and Romans 7 that the covenant is intended to reveal the depth of moral depravity to the Jews and to the rest of the world, which, in turn, should lead people to cry out to God for mercy and thereby receive eternal Life. As I have already mentioned, in his letter to the Galatians Paul is dealing with the problem of certain Jewish "Christians" who are saying that they believe all the major tenets of Christianity—that Jesus is the Messiah who died for our rebellion against God, that God is a gracious and merciful God, and that we gain eternal Life and forgiveness by our



belief in His grace and in Jesus as the Messiah. However, these Jews are acting in a way that is contrary to their stated beliefs. They are actively and aggressively promoting the idea that all Christians must also obey all of the Mosaic Covenant and live like Jews in order to be bona fide disciples of Jesus. In other words, they are adding something unnecessary and inappropriate to the New Testament message. Plus, by their unwillingness to associate with anyone who disagrees with them, they are also communicating that only they stand to gain eternal Life by virtue of their obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. They are thus trying to intimidate people into changing their minds by ostracizing them from their “in-group.” Paul explains that this attitude is completely antithetical to the message of God’s grace, because it denies that God is the one who changes peoples’ hearts, and that doctrinal error and even immorality cannot prevent God from being gracious toward those whom He has chosen to grant *dikaio sunay* and eternal Life. Thus, these Jewish “Christians” completely misunderstand God’s grace, and their attitude and actions betray a perspective that is like that of the Pharisees. In essence, they believe that a person must make himself worthy of salvation by his religious performance that includes circumcision, i.e., by his belief in Jesus as the Messiah and his adding a religious system to his belief, even the the God-given religious system of the Mosaic Covenant.

In chapter 3 of Galatians, Paul argues that the Spirit of God does not work among people because they have first obeyed the Mosaic Covenant. With the example of Abraham, he teaches his readers that God promised to save both Jews and Gentiles by belief, as substantiated by the prophet Habakkuk who writes, “The righteous man shall live by faith,” i.e., by belief (NAS95). Paul then goes on to say in vs. 15-22, and I will use my own translation –

3:15 Brothers, let me speak about what we humans do. This is to say that no one disallows or adds to a human contract after it has been put into effect.

3:16 Now, the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many seeds, but as referring to one seed, “And to your seed,” who is the Messiah.

3:17 And I am saying this—the Covenant that occurred 430 years later does not nullify the contract which had been put into effect earlier by God with the result that it nullifies the promise.

3:18 If the inheritance is based on the Mosaic Covenant, it is no longer based on the promise. But God has graced it to Abraham through the promise.

3:19 So why the Covenant? It was set forth because of transgressions up to the time that the “seed” to whom the promise had been made arrived on the scene, having been ordained through divine theophanies by the hand of a mediator.

3:20 And the mediator is not there for the one, but, God is one.

3:21 Is therefore the Covenant outside the promises of God? Absolutely not! Consider this—if the Covenant were given that is able to bring about Life, then indeed forgiveness and moral perfection would be granted in accordance with the Covenant.

3:22 Instead, the scripture has imprisoned everyone in the prison of moral depravity with the result that the promise is given to those who believe in accordance with belief in the Messiah Jesus.

Paul states here that the Mosaic Covenant was “set forth” or added to the Abrahamic Covenant, which implies, he says, that it does not change the timing of the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant is a covenant of promises given to Abraham before the Mosaic Covenant. God promised to give to Abraham the land of Canaan, descendants, the blessing of eternal Life, and fellow recipients of eternal Life from every nation on earth, who associate with Abraham by having the same kind of miraculously produced inwardness and belief. None of these promises originally involved the Mosaic Covenant and living like a Jew. As Paul says in v. 18, “If the inheritance is based on the Mosaic Covenant, it is no longer based on the promise. But God has graced it to Abraham through the promise [that came before the Mosaic Covenant].” Therefore, while the Mosaic Covenant was made only with the Jews, it does not change or invalidate the previous promise to both Jews and Gentiles that God made to Abraham. The Mosaic Covenant does not all of a sudden make eternal Life dependent on performing it and living like a Jew. The promise to Abraham before and apart from the covenant still remains, “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).

As I also described above, Paul says that God spoke the Abrahamic Covenant to Abraham and to his “seed” (singular), not to “seeds” (plural). “Seed” refers to people groups, and Paul is saying that God made His promise of eternal Life to only one people group. Ultimately, this “seed” are all those who associate with Abraham via genuine belief, belief that is just like Abraham’s. Thus, God chose only one line of descendants to whom He would fulfill His promises. The irony is that the Jews, against whom Paul is writing, would agree that the promise of eternal Life belongs to only one people group. However, they would say that the people group to whom God made this promise are the Jews—and any Gentile who lives like a Jew according to the Mosaic Covenant! Instead, Paul is arguing to the contrary. Just as God chose Isaac and not Ishmael, God chose only one “seed,” one people group, who is ultimately Christ, the Messiah. What does it mean to call the Messiah a people group? It means that the promise is given to those who have “belief in the Messiah Jesus” (v. 22)—both Jews and Gentiles, and also apart from the Mosaic Covenant. Therefore, anyone who associates with Jesus strictly through miraculously produced belief in him receives the promise of the blessing of Abraham, the blessing of eternal Life.

Consequently, what is the reason why God made the Mosaic Covenant with the Jews? Paul says here that it was “set forth because of transgressions” (v. 19). It was tacked on to the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant in light of the fact that “the scripture has imprisoned everyone in the prison of moral depravity” (v. 22). In other words, one of the Mosaic Covenant’s purposes for the Jews is to reveal their profound immoral condition to them by extensively describing what God requires of the Jews that constitutes obedience to Him. Yet, even though God made the covenant with only the Jews, because it contains moral commandments (in addition to the ritual and civil commandments), and because it includes even the commandment to circumcise one’s heart (Deut. 10:16), it reveals man’s moral depravity also to the Gentiles when they consider what it is saying to the Jews. Thus, it serves a very beneficial purpose for the whole world.

Our conclusion is, the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant implies grace, because human beings cannot bring about the necessary inward change in order to meet God’s conditions for eternal Life. However, grace, by definition, also means that no one can earn God’s favor and salvation. Legalism and promise are antithetical to one another. Legalism implies that human beings have the ability, in and of themselves, to be good and make themselves worthy of God’s blessing of the inheritance of eternal Life. Grace

implies the opposite, that God must change people inwardly first before they believe the truth and become fundamentally desirous of salvation and eternal Life, thus satisfying God's requirement of authentic belief. Therefore, an important purpose of the Mosaic Covenant is to reveal people's immoral condition to them in order that they cry out to God for mercy.

Paul says the same thing in several passages in Romans –

**Rom. 3:19** Now we know that whatever the Law [Mosaic Covenant] says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;

**Rom. 3:20** because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. (NAS95)

**Rom. 7:4** Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law [Mosaic Covenant] through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

**Rom. 7:5** For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused [revealed/exposed] by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

**Rom. 7:6** But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

**Rom. 7:7** What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET."

**Rom. 7:8** But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.

**Rom. 7:9** I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died;

**Rom. 7:10** and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;

**Rom. 7:11** for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

**Rom. 7:12** So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

**Rom. 7:13** Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful. (NAS95)

As a full-fledged Pharisee and leader of the Jewish people, the apostle Paul had convinced himself that he could adequately perform the commandments of the Mosaic Covenant and make himself pleasing to God and worthy of His blessing of grace and eternal Life. Then, the Spirit of God changed his heart and opened his eyes to the depth of the problem of his immorality condition. Subsequently, he recognized that this problem is humanly insoluble. The more Paul attempted to obey the moral commandments of the Mosaic Covenant, especially the last of the Ten Commandments, "You shall not covet," i.e., you shall not desire things in an evil and selfish way, the more he discovered that his desires were fundamentally evil and that he could not stop himself from desiring

them. Paul realized that he was thoroughly wicked and evil in the fabric of his being and could not become a good person. He is implying also in Romans 7 that he could not even circumcise his own heart, as God required in Deuteronomy 10:16. Instead, God revealed his moral depravity to him through the Mosaic Covenant, and he found that he was stuck in his own wickedness. Paul is saying that such is God's purpose for the Mosaic Covenant, in addition to its prescribing how the Jews should demonstrate historically that they are God's people in the present realm.

Of course, God knew that the covenant would produce this effect. He knew that it could not bring about eternal salvation simply by the Jews' attempting to obey it on their own. His purpose for the Mosaic Covenant was to show them the profundity of their immorality. While most Jews down through history believed that they could inherently do what is good and make themselves deserving of God's promises, God knew that they could not. Thus, even when God was commanding the Jews to circumcise their hearts in Deuteronomy 10:16, He knew that He would have to do it for them, which is what Moses reveals near the end of his sermon in Deuteronomy 29 and 30 –

**Deut. 29:1** These are the words of the covenant which the LORD [Yahweh] commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb [Mt. Sinai].

**Deut. 29:2** And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, "You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and all his land;

**Deut. 29:3** the great trials which your eyes have seen, those great signs and wonders.

**Deut. 29:4** "Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear. (NAS95)

Moses admits that while God has required that the Israelites perform the covenant appropriately, God has not changed their hearts so that they all can do so. He has not given all of them a heart to grasp the full implications of the covenant and the truth. Nevertheless, Moses goes on to say –

**Deut. 29:9** "So keep the words of this covenant to do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. (NAS95)

In spite of the fact that God and God alone can change the Israelites' hearts so that they are able to obey the covenant properly, i.e., with circumcised hearts, God still commands them to obey Him as they should. In other words, their moral and spiritual inability to obey the covenant does not release them from their accountability to obey the covenant properly before God. If they do not obey the covenant as they should (even though they cannot), God will still judge them for their disobedience.

God's judgment of people who cannot change their hearts is a difficult concept to accept because of the paradox. It seems unfair to us and even contradictory. However, we reject this paradox only if we fail to understand the interrelation between God as the transcendent Creator and us as His creatures. We believe that God has made us with free will, i.e., with choice-making mechanisms that are completely free and independent of Him. The problem with this perspective is that it would put us on a level of reality that is no different from God. Our view of reality is usually that it is a continuum, so that while the extreme ends of reality, God as the Creator and we as His creatures, are certainly distinct, nevertheless there is not all that much difference between us, especially when it

comes to our ability to make choices. We think that, while God is on the highest rung of the ladder of the continuum of reality and we are near the bottom rung of this ladder, God has created us with the ability to make choices that are completely independent of Him.

What we fail to realize is that God is not even on the ladder. Or, to say it differently, He is the sole person on His own ladder, of which there is only one rung, His, and we are on a completely different ladder, i.e., a created ladder. God is the Creator of everything within the creation, and, by definition, is uncreated, which means that there is an unbridgeable gap of reality between God and us. He is so far above the ladder of our reality that we reside in a realm that He has created in a similar manner to how an author is outside and above the story that he is writing. God transcends the creation in the same manner that an author transcends his novel and the characters in the story. If a novelist holds his characters accountable for their actions within his story, then, of course, he has the right to do so. In fact, we would consider him immoral if he did not—even though he is in control of the characters' choices. The characters' choices are free from those of the other characters within the story, but they are not free from the author.

In the same way, God, the uncreated Creator, transcends the creation and is the author of every aspect of the creation. Therefore, it would be immoral if God did not hold the Israelites accountable for their obedience to the Mosaic Covenant, even though He sovereignly controls their choices and they are incapable of obeying Him properly because of their inherent rebellion against God. Nevertheless, Moses goes on to say in Deuteronomy 30 that God will eventually make them all capable. I will quote only the first six verses from the NAS95, because I think that the translators did a rather poor job throughout this whole chapter –

**Deut. 30:1** “So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you [in Deut. 28:15-68], and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD [Yahweh] your God has banished you,

**Deut. 30:2** and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons,

**Deut. 30:3** then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.

**Deut. 30:4** “If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back.

**Deut. 30:5** “The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers.

**Deut. 30:6** “Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

**Deut. 30:7** “The LORD your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you. (NAS95)

The way the NAS95 translates this passage, it sounds as though God will “circumcise” the hearts of the Jews (v. 6) after they “return” to Yahweh and “obey Him with all [their] heart and soul” (v. 2). In other words, God will miraculously change their inner commitments after they have changed their inner commitments. However, in the light of what God taught Abraham in Genesis 12-22 and what the rest of the Bible

teaches, Moses means something different. What is more coherent with the Abrahamic Covenant and God's promises that include the working of His grace within human beings is that all of these will take place because of God's miraculous activity within the Jews.

One of the keys to interpreting this passage (as it is with just about any passage in the Hebrew Bible) is to determine what the author means by one Hebrew letter, the *vav* (or *waw* as it is written in formal textbooks). This letter is written ם and is attached to the beginning of words. It basically means "and" but certainly can be translated with many other English connective words such as "but," "when," "while," etc. For example the NAS95 translates it "So" at the beginning of v. 1 and "then" at the beginning of v. 3. Another Hebrew word that is very flexible in its meaning is *kee* (which is the easiest way to transliterate it), written ׀ in the text. It can mean "that," "because," "when," etc. The NAS95 translates it "when" in v. 1, i.e., "when all these things have come upon you." My point is that after Moses has said in chapter 29 that God has not given all the Israelites hearts to know, understand, and really obey Him the way that He requires (29:4), he says in chapter 30 that God will do so in the future (and which will occur after they experience the curses with which He threatened them in Deuteronomy 28).

Therefore, the more coherent way theologically and logically to translate this passage is –

**Deut. 30:1** And it will happen that all these things will come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have presented before you, and you will change with respect to your heart among all the nations where Yahweh your God has banished you,  
2 and you will return to Yahweh your God, and you will obey His voice with all your heart and with all your soul according to all which I am commanding you today, you and your sons,  
3 and Yahweh your God will restore you from captivity, and He will have mercy on you, and He will turn and gather you from all the peoples where Yahweh your God scattered you—  
4 (if those of you who were banished are at the end of the heavens, from there Yahweh your God will gather you and from there He will take you)—  
5 and Yahweh your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you will possess it, and He will cause good to happen to you, and He will cause you to be more numerous than your fathers,  
6 and Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants in order to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live.  
7 And Yahweh your God will place all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you who persecuted you.

The difference in my translation is that Moses is primarily making a statement about what God is going to do to the Israelites at some time in the future, without reference to the exact chronological order in which the events will occur. Certainly, the net result will be the same—that the Israelites will obey Him properly and live securely on the land that He has promised them through Abraham. While there is some chronological order to what Moses is saying, not everything he mentions has to be in chronological order. In fact, some of what is going to happen could be very much simultaneous. For example, God will change their hearts, and they will obey God from their hearts. Also, God will bring them back into the land, and God will punish their enemies. The overall point is that God will cause all these things to happen, because He ultimately is the only one

who can bring about the necessary inward change. The Israelites are so morally depraved that they cannot solve the problem of their innate hostility toward God as rebellious human beings. The upshot of all of these events is that God will fulfill His promises to Abraham's physical descendants and cause an entire generation of them to obey Him by miraculously changing their fundamental desires and commitments through the work of His Holy Spirit (as I already showed above in my explanation of the Abrahamic Covenant).

Therefore, after making a covenant with Abraham and promising him four things—land, descendants who will be a great nation, eternal Life, and a whole group of people who will join him in eternal Life by associating with him through their own similar belief—five hundred years later God made another extensive covenant with Abraham's physical descendants, the Jews. This covenant changed nothing about the Abrahamic Covenant. Indeed, it hitchhiked off God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation and further required that his physical descendants merely demonstrate that they belong to Him by following 613 commandments, some of which are rather peculiar (such as the dietary laws which forbid them to eat certain foods). Nevertheless, these descendants, the Israelites (or Jews as we call them today), still needed to be people of changed hearts, who demonstrated authentic belief and who eventually would become contrite about their immoral condition and desirous of moral goodness—exactly like Abraham (cf. Genesis 15:6; 17:1). By becoming people of changed hearts, the Jews would be a “great nation” and legitimately keep the Mosaic Covenant as Moses writes in Leviticus 18:1-5 –

**Lev. 18:1** Then the LORD [Yahweh] spoke to Moses, saying,

**Lev. 18:2** “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘I am the LORD your God.

**Lev. 18:3** ‘You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes.

**Lev. 18:4** ‘You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God.

**Lev. 18:5** ‘So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD. (NAS95)

God states unequivocally in v. 5 that “life” comes from keeping the statutes and commandments of the Mosaic Covenant. Is God talking about physical life or eternal Life in this context. I think that it is the former. The whole book of Leviticus and the Mosaic Covenant *per se* is about the Israelites' living their lives before God in a manner that keeps them from incurring His punishment with many of them dying and the rest being expelled from the land that God has promised them through Abraham. Consider God's encouragements and warnings in Leviticus 26 –

**Lev. 26:3** ‘If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out,

**Lev. 26:4** then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit.

**Lev. 26:5** ‘Indeed, your threshing will last for you until grape gathering, and grape gathering will last until sowing time. You will thus eat your food to the full and live securely in your land.

**Lev. 26:6** ‘I shall also grant peace in the land, so that you may lie down with no one making [you] tremble. I shall also eliminate harmful beasts from the land, and no sword will pass through your land...



**Lev. 26:14** 'But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments,

**Lev. 26:15** if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant,

**Lev. 26:16** I, in turn, will do this to you: I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption and fever that will waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you will sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies will eat it up.

**Lev. 26:17** 'I will set My face against you so that you will be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee when no one is pursuing you...

**Lev. 26:31** 'I will lay waste your cities as well and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your soothing aromas.

**Lev. 26:32** 'I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it will be appalled over it.

**Lev. 26:33** 'You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste. (NAS95)

In this context of Leviticus, God is saying that, if the Israelites “keep” the Mosaic Covenant properly, then they will live well on the land that God has given them through Abraham. Nevertheless, the only way that a Jew can keep the covenant is if God has circumcised his heart and changed his fundamental desires so that he humbly wants God’s mercy and pursues morality under God’s grace. We notice, though, that wanting mercy and pursuing morality satisfy the same condition that is required in order to obtain eternal Life. Therefore, the relevance of the statement in Leviticus 18:5, that a man may “live” if he keeps the Mosaic Covenant is that this same man will also obtain eternal Life through doing so—but not because keeping the Mosaic Covenant in and of itself is necessary for eternal salvation and Life. Instead, it is because, if a Jew is properly keeping the Mosaic Covenant, he must be doing so as a result of God’s having miraculously changed his heart and his fundamental desires. Thus, the Jew, because he relates to the ideas in his own mind with authentic, biblical belief, has become contrite toward his moral depravity and longs for forgiveness and moral perfection from God. All these characteristics, including true contrition and a desire for eternal forgiveness, can come only from a heart that has been miraculously changed by God, and a changed heart is the bottom line in regard to both the Jew’s living well on the land of Israel and his obtaining eternal Life. Consequently, either a Jew or a Gentile can have a changed heart and not be paying attention to the Mosaic Covenant and still obtain eternal Life. And a Jew or a Gentile can have a changed heart and be paying attention to the Mosaic Covenant and obtain eternal Life. The issue is the heart, not the Mosaic Covenant *per se*.

Nevertheless, the Jews are still required to keep all the commandments of the Mosaic Covenant for historical purposes. The Jews whose hearts God has changed will eventually recognize their historical obligation to the covenant and seek to obey it, even if, at first, they are not aware of the importance of the covenant (for example, Jews who grew up in a strictly secular environment). It is also true that these Jews who keep the Mosaic Covenant for historical purposes are not counting on their keeping it to be the ultimate basis for their obtaining eternal Life. They, like the Gentiles, are still counting on God’s mercy and their broken and contrite hearts that He has brought about. In line with this, the apostle Paul writes in Romans 2:25-29 –

**Rom. 2:25** For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

**Rom. 2:26** So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

**Rom. 2:27** And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

**Rom. 2:28** For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

**Rom. 2:29** But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (NAS95)

Notice that Paul says that circumcision does have value, but only if the circumcised Jew “practice[s] the Law.” If he is properly obeying the Mosaic Covenant, then the Jew stands to gain eternal Life. Thus, “practice” means that he has a changed heart, properly relates to truth with authentic belief, and, in this context, is appealing to God for mercy in the light of his insolvable problem of sin. On the other hand, if the circumcised Jew is a “transgressor of the Law,” then Paul is saying that his circumcision has no value. In other words, circumcision has no inherent value in and of itself. It must be accompanied by a changed heart, if it is going to have value. Therefore, the “transgressor of the Law” is a Jew who has no such changed heart, and all his efforts to obey God’s commandments are essentially rebellion against God. They are his religious means of expressing his hostility toward God, as opposed to the pagan idolater who expresses his hostility by more conventional methods such as idol worship, adultery, and other blatant immorality (cf. Romans 1:18ff.).

Then, Paul says that if the Gentile, who is uncircumcised, “keeps the requirements of the Law,” then he is more obedient than the Jew who has no changed heart and yet who is circumcised, because the Gentile’s “keeping” of the Law comes from a changed heart. The Gentile fundamentally desires to be a good person, and he, if he were to hear about the Mosaic Covenant, would acknowledge that its moral commandments accurately describe the kind of person that he wants to be. God has obviously changed the heart of the Gentile, so that he has faced into his immoral condition and appealed to God for mercy. He also longs to be good according to his innate and God-given understanding of morality, that matches the moral commandments of the Mosaic Covenant.

Paul finishes this passage by saying that the true Jew is the one who is such “inwardly.” God, through His Spirit, has circumcised the Jew’s heart, and thus, he stands to gain eternal Life. The following Old Testament verses are alluding to the same thing within the context of the Mosaic Covenant and living well on the land of Israel –

**Lev. 18:5** ‘So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD [Yahweh]. (NAS95)

**Deut. 10:16** “So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer. (NAS95)

**Deut. 29:4** “Yet to this day the LORD [Yahweh] has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear. (NAS95)

Deut. 30:6 and Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants in order to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live. (my translation)

As a result, we find that a second and very important purpose for God's giving the Mosaic Covenant to the Israelites was so that it would reveal to them (and any others who would examine the details of this covenant or just its moral commandments that God had implanted in their minds) the depth and inescapable nature of their immorality. Such a discovery, by God's grace, would push them into despair as they consider God's judgment so that they would appeal to Him for mercy. The result would be that they would authentically believe the truth of both God's justice and His forgiveness, and God would grant them *dikaioSunay* and eternal Life. Thus, an important purpose for the Mosaic Covenant was to drive human beings to lament their moral depravity, as Paul does in Romans 7 –

**Rom. 7:21** I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.

**Rom. 7:22** For I joyfully concur with the law of God [Mosaic Covenant] in the inner man,

**Rom. 7:23** but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

**Rom. 7:24** Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (NAS95)

Then, God's purpose for the covenant, after the first coming of Jesus as the Messiah, was to have people arrive at the same conclusion as Paul right after he made the above statements –

**Rom. 7:25** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (NAS95)

God grants mercy to those who discover the depth of their moral depravity through the Mosaic Covenant and who then realize that belief in Jesus as the Messiah brings them eternal salvation. On the one hand, they see the evil within them and realize that they are still immoral in the very fabric of their being, their "flesh." At this level, they are still succumbing to the "law of sin." On the other hand, they properly see the value of morality and goodness, and, at the level of their fundamental desires, they are pursuing obedience to the moral "law of God," because God has changed their hearts.

To summarize, five hundred years after the Abrahamic Covenant, God gave the Mosaic Covenant to a specific group of people, the Jews, who are physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. His purpose was twofold. First, it was to establish how the Jews historically would demonstrate to the world their loyalty to God, both internally and externally, so that the world could clearly see that God is serious about all human beings' obeying Him. We remember that God made two major promises to Abraham, one, that He would make of Abraham's physical descendants a "great nation," and two, that He would bless Abraham and people like him of genuine belief with eternal Life. Part of what it will mean for God to fulfill the first promise is that the Jews will all eventually obey the Mosaic Covenant with circumcised and changed hearts, thus demonstrating that they are a wise and "great nation." The second purpose for the

Mosaic Covenant was to reveal to the whole world the depth of the problem of their evil and moral depravity in order that, if God chose to change their hearts miraculously, they might cry out to God for His eternal mercy.

Therefore, we must realize that God never intended the Jews, nor anyone else, to be morally perfect in their obedience to this covenant. Nor did He ever intend this covenant to be the ultimate means by which people, even the Jews, were to obtain eternal Life. We could say that the Mosaic Covenant was for demonstration purposes only—the demonstration of God through the Jews and the demonstration of both morality and immorality through its commandments.

Eventually, there will come a day when an entire generation of Jews will properly obey it on the land of Israel because of God's miraculous work within them, as I have already shown with the following passage from Ezekiel 11 –

**Ezek. 11:17** “Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “I will gather you [the Israelites, the Jews] from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.””

**Ezek. 11:18** “When they come there, they will remove all its detestable things and all its abominations from it.

**Ezek. 11:19** “**And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,**

**Ezek. 11:20** **that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances [of the Mosaic Covenant] and do them.** Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God. (NAS95; emphasis mine)

This passage alludes to a New Covenant that God will make with the Jews. Because of their disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant and their inability to match the belief that their forefather Abraham displayed, God will fulfill the promise that He made to them through Moses in Deuteronomy that I also quoted above –

**Deut. 30:1** And it will happen that all these things will come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have presented before you, and you will change with respect to your heart among all the nations where Yahweh your God has banished you,

2 and you will return to Yahweh your God, and you will obey His voice with all your heart and with all your soul according to all which I am commanding you today, you and your sons...

**6 and Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants** in order to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live. [My translation with emphasis]

The most explicit statement of this predicted and future action by God as a new covenant is in Jeremiah 31:31-34 –

**Jer. 31:31** “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD [Yahweh], “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,

**Jer. 31:32** not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My

covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

[Jer. 31:33](#) “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

[Jer. 31:34](#) “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

When God made the Mosaic Covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai around 1500 B.C., even though this covenant was an extension of the Abrahamic Covenant with its promises, it still required a future action on the part of God for all the Jews to obey it. In other words, the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant to make of Abraham’s physical descendants, the Jews, a “great nation” was still intact when the Mosaic Covenant was made. Nevertheless, the Mosaic Covenant’s purpose was to demonstrate further just how rebellious the Jews would be toward God—just like all other morally depraved human beings. This demonstration of immorality was not only through the myriad of animal sacrifices by the Levitical priests on behalf of the people that would take place down through history, but also through the Jews’ unwillingness to obey God with circumcised and changed hearts. It is this latter issue that God will finally and completely address with the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31.

Eventually, God will grant new inwardness and authentic belief to all the Jews living at some time in the future. And He will gather them back into the promised land of Israel, and they will worship Him in a new temple with renewed animal sacrifices. Thus, He will “put [His] law within them and on their heart [He] will write it,” so that He finally and completely “will be their God, and they shall be [His] people,” i.e., His people not just in name and promise, but in inwardness and authentic belief—all of them.

The author of Hebrews makes it clear that this New Covenant will include the fact that this inwardly vitalized generation of Jews will also embrace Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, indeed, *their* Messiah, who will advocate on their behalf at the final judgment and lead them as their King in the eternal kingdom of God. In other words, their genuine belief will entail belief in the New Testament message that most Jews have rejected up to this point in history.

It is to this New Covenant and this passage in Jeremiah that Jesus alludes when he speaks to his disciples at the Last Supper –

[Luke 22:14](#) When the hour had come, He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him.

[Luke 22:15](#) And He said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer;

[Luke 22:16](#) for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”

[Luke 22:17](#) And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, “Take this and share it among yourselves;

[Luke 22:18](#) for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.”

[Luke 22:19](#) And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”

[Luke 22:20](#) And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is **the new covenant** in My blood. (NAS95, emphasis mine)

Jesus is saying that the New Covenant of Jeremiah is centered in him and in his death and resurrection. Ultimately, the forgiveness of the Jews by God, for the sake of their living in the temporary Kingdom of Israel on earth and in the eternal Kingdom of God on the new earth, finds its actuality in Jesus, just as the forgiveness of Gentiles for the sake of their living in the eternal Kingdom of God finds its fulfillment in him. Thus, the only way that it makes sense for the Jews to become a “great nation” according to the Abrahamic promise—now that Jesus the Messiah has come, suffered, risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven—is for them to be changed inwardly by God. Clearly, the purpose of this inward change of the Jews is not only so that they have genuine belief in God *per se*, i.e., the transcendent Creator who has made the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants with them, but also so that they have authentic belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. And, indeed, they will do both. This is what God is saying that He will cause to happen when He puts His “law” within them and writes it on their heart (cf. Jeremiah 31:33).

Consequently, while there is so much that is happening in the world in our present day that seems newsworthy, the real news is, first, whatever God is currently doing among the Jews with respect to their inwardness and, second, whatever God is currently doing among the Gentiles with respect to their inwardness. In addition, the really important news of our day, geographically speaking, is not what is happening in Moscow, Beijing, Tokyo, London, Berlin, or Washington, D.C. But it is what is happening in Jerusalem. In other words, if we really want to keep up with the most important news of history and our future, watch Jerusalem, because, eventually, it will become the capital of not only the earthly Kingdom of Israel, but also of the world when the Messiah returns to rule over the Jews on their land.

We will continue to examine the New Covenant throughout the remaining chapters, but this introduction to it is intended to demonstrate how it will be a major avenue by which God ultimately fulfills His promises to the Jews, as well as how Judeo-centric have been and will be God’s activities throughout biblical history. This is all why the apostle Paul says in Romans –

[Rom. 1:16](#) For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first and also to the Greek**. (NAS95, emphasis mine)



## Part III

### Chapter 7

#### John 5:1-9 – The Miraculous Sign That Sets Up A Confrontation With The Jews

Now we shall dive into our discussion of John 5. At the beginning of each chapter covering John 5, I will provide my own translation of the Greek text as I do here –

1 After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

2 And there was among the Jerusalemites by the sheep gate a pool which is called in Hebrew Bethzatha, and it has a five column porch, 3 among which were lying down a large group of people who were sick—the blind, the crippled, the withered—waiting for the moving of the waters.

4 For an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water. Whoever then, after the stirring up of the water, first stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.

5 And there was a certain man there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

6 When Jesus saw this man lying down and realized that he had already spent a lot of time in this condition, he said to him, “Do you want to get well?”

7 The man who was ill answered him, “Sir, I have no one that can put me into the pool whenever the water is stirred up. Before I make a move, another goes down before me.”

8 Jesus said to him, “Rise up, pick up your bedroll, and walk.”

9 And immediately the man became well, and he picked up his bedroll and was walking.

The story is straightforward. Jesus is strolling through Jerusalem and walks into a group of invalids, who are together in the shade of a porch whose roof is supported by five columns. This porch is next to a pool of water near the “sheep gate” called Bethzatha in the temple area. The last part of verse three and all of verse four are not in many ancient manuscripts, so that scholars are unsure if they were originally written by John. But, even if they were not, they probably provide a correct explanation of why these people are waiting by the pool. The explanation also coincides with the man’s response to Jesus, that the people believe that God occasionally stirs the water so that the first person to enter into it at this very moment is healed by God. We can only wonder what really has happened at different times in the past such that these diseased and handicapped people end up hoping for a miraculous healing by God through the stirring of the water. Nevertheless, we note that they are indeed waiting for such. Little do they know who is walking among them—the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

As Jesus is strolling through the porch, he finds out that a particular man is there who has been lame for thirty-eight years. Then, he walks up to him. How does Jesus learn that the man has been in this condition for so long? Maybe God the Father communicated it to him miraculously. Maybe he just asked the man. Later in the chapter,

we will see Jesus allude to how God speaks and works through him. In the meantime, having become aware that the man has been in his condition for quite a long time, Jesus asks him, “Do you want to get well?”

In other stories of Jesus’ healing people (e.g., Matthew 8 & 9), they seek him out and initiate an interaction with him, because they know who he is and understand that he can heal them. Here in John 5, the man does not know or recognize who is asking him this question. He simply tells Jesus that he has no one who can move him into the pool first when the water is stirred. If he really knew who it was who was asking him, we would expect him to say, “Yes, Jesus, Son of David, and I believe and want you to heal me” (cf. Matt. 9:27, “As Jesus went from there, two blind men followed him, crying out, ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David’”). We can, therefore, assume that God’s purpose for Jesus’ healing this particular person was not only to show that Jesus is the Messiah by the miraculous sign (as was the case with all other miracles) but also to set Jesus up for a confrontation with the Jews, which becomes clear from the rest of the story in John 5.

In verse 8, Jesus commands the man to stand up, pick up his bedroll, and walk. Thus, immediately, God heals the man and he follows Jesus’ directions exactly. However, we will find out in the next verses that such an action puts the man at odds with the rest of the Jews, because they consider carrying one’s bedroll on the Sabbath to be a violation of the sabbatical commandment in the Mosaic Covenant. This particular commandment is the fourth of the Ten Commandments that together form the foundation for the Mosaic Covenant –

[Ex. 20:8](#) “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

[Ex. 20:9](#) “Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

[Ex. 20:10](#) but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD [Yahweh] your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.

[Ex. 20:11](#) “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy (NAS95)

As I said in the previous chapter on the Mosaic Covenant, God gave this covenant to the Jews as an addition to the Abrahamic Covenant and as a way for them, and them only, to demonstrate for historical purposes their authentic obedience to God. Instead, the Jews turned the Mosaic Covenant into a means to earn the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant and believed that it was required of everyone—both Jews and Gentiles. With this mentality, they also set parameters for every aspect of people’s lives and policed their fellow Jews in order to make sure everyone was obeying God according to their definition of obedience. Therefore, it is no small thing that this man is going to find himself in a position of acting contrary to the religious leaders of Judaism.

We also wonder if the man even knows that carrying his bedroll is considered by his fellow Jews to be a violation of the Sabbath. If so, then why does he follow Jesus’ instructions? My guess is that his excitement at being healed after thirty-eight years of not walking overwhelms his sense of abiding by the religion of his contemporary Judaism and the Sabbath commandment as he has been taught it—which is exactly the point. God never intended the Mosaic Covenant and obedience to it to be what makes or breaks an individual’s relationship with Him regarding eternal Life. Yes, indeed, God required the nation of Israel to obey the covenant in order for them to gain and hold on to the land of Canaan (the land of Israel) and in order to obtain His protection from their earthly enemies such as the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians. As a result, the

Israelites' disobedience of the Mosaic Covenant was truly significant, so that the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, et al.) were constantly indicting them. For example, approximately nine hundred years after Mt. Sinai and the inception of the Mosaic Covenant, Jeremiah wrote –

**Jer. 11:1** The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD [Yahweh], saying,  
**Jer. 11:2** “Hear the words of this covenant [i.e., the Mosaic Covenant], and speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem;  
**Jer. 11:3** and say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, “Cursed is the man who does not heed the words of this covenant,  
**Jer. 11:4** which I commanded your forefathers in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, ‘Listen to My voice, and do according to all which I command you; so you shall be My people, and I will be your God,’  
**Jer. 11:5** in order to confirm the oath which I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as it is this day.’” Then I said, “Amen, O LORD.”  
**Jer. 11:6** And the LORD said to me, “Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Hear the words of this covenant and do them.  
**Jer. 11:7** ‘For I solemnly warned your fathers in the day that I brought them up from the land of Egypt, even to this day, warning persistently, saying, “Listen to My voice.”  
**Jer. 11:8** ‘Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked, each one, in the stubbornness of his evil heart; therefore I brought on them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not.’” (NAS95)

God is saying through Jeremiah around 600 B.C. that He requires that the people of Israel obey the Mosaic Covenant just as much as He required obedience of their forefathers with whom He made the covenant around 1500 B.C. We notice also that God confirms that the purpose of this covenant is for the Israelites to demonstrate their commitment to the Abrahamic Covenant and its promises that include the land of Israel. However, the Israelites of Jeremiah's day are not obeying the Mosaic Covenant. Instead they are stubborn and hardhearted, and Jeremiah has already spelled out in chapter 5 what the consequences are going to be, just as God spelled them out in Deuteronomy 28 –

**Jer. 5:14** Therefore, thus says the LORD [Yahweh], the God of hosts, “Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making My words in your mouth fire and this people wood, and it will consume them.  
**Jer. 5:15** “Behold, I am bringing a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel,” declares the LORD. “It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say.  
**Jer. 5:16** “Their quiver is like an open grave; all of them are mighty men.  
**Jer. 5:17** “They will devour your harvest and your food; they will devour your sons and your daughters; they will devour your flocks and your herds; they will devour your vines and your fig trees; they will demolish with the sword your fortified cities in which you trust.” (NAS95)

God is telling the Jews that He is making good His threats in Deuteronomy 28 nine hundred years earlier when He promised to expel the Jews from the land He has given them if they disobey the Mosaic Covenant. An “ancient nation,” in this case the Babylonians, are going to sweep down on them from the north and destroy or take captive everything—their food, their children, their vineyards, and their cities, which is exactly what happens over the course of several years resulting in both the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C.

Yet, there was hope even back then. God goes on to say in Jeremiah 5 –

**Jer. 5:18** “Yet even in those days,” declares the LORD [Yahweh], “I will not make you a complete destruction.

**Jer. 5:19** “It shall come about when they say, ‘Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?’ then you shall say to them, ‘As you have forsaken Me and served foreign gods in your land, so you will serve strangers in a land that is not yours.’” (NAS95)

God declares to these rebellious Jews that He will not completely destroy the nation of Israel. Nevertheless, because they worshiped strange and foreign gods in their own land, God will scatter them into foreign lands where they will have to submit to and serve strangers, in this case, the Babylonians. Yet, He will never forsake them because of His promise to Abraham to make of him and his descendants a great nation (Gen. 12:2). Thus, Jeremiah eventually writes –

**Jer. 23:1** “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD [Yahweh].

**Jer. 23:2** Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the LORD.

**Jer. 23:3** “Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply.

**Jer. 23:4** “I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD.

**Jer. 23:5** “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land.

**Jer. 23:6** “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The LORD our righteousness.’

**Jer. 23:7** “Therefore behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when they will no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt,’

**Jer. 23:8** but, ‘As the LORD lives, who brought up and led back the descendants of the household of Israel from the north land and from all the countries where I had driven them.’ Then they will live on their own soil.” (NAS95)

God curses the leaders of Israel in Jeremiah's day, but He promises to raise up leaders for them in the future when He gathers His people and brings them back into the land of Israel after He has dispersed them into foreign lands. Just as God rescued Israel from Egypt and brought them into the land of Israel, God will rescue His people from "all the countries where [He has] driven them" and bring them back into the land of Israel. Then, the Jews will live in peace on their land and not have to fear any of their enemies. This message of hope to the Jews in Jeremiah's day includes the fact that God will provide one leader in particular, the "righteous Branch" from the line of David, who will rule over the Jews and cause them to live securely on their land. The "righteous Branch" of David is the Messiah, the very one for whom the Jews of Jesus' day are waiting in order that he may release them from the oppression of the Romans. We will address the issue of the Messiah in more detail when we get to John 5:17,18. But, for the time being, we can take note that the Jews would love for Jesus to be the Messiah—if he would only exhibit the right characteristics. However, Jesus is going in the exact opposite direction from the one they think he ought to go in order to be their promised leader. They believe that all Jews should at all times meticulously obey all 613 commandments of the Mosaic Covenant *as the Jewish leaders have interpreted these commandments, including the Sabbath commandment and not carrying one's bedroll on the Sabbath*. In other words, the Jews of Jesus day believed that the Messiah would acknowledge the morality of the Jewish leaders and the rightness of their traditions. Instead, Jesus will shun the leaders and condemn them for their traditions that were leading people away from the authority of Moses and his message, not unlike how Jesus would shun Church leaders during the last two thousand years and condemn them for their traditions that lead people away from the authority and message of the apostles in the New Testament.

So why is this man whom Jesus has healed so willing to violate the Sabbath? Because his excitement at walking for the first time in thirty-eight years is trumping his religious and "moral" scruples. But, as I said, this is the point. A person's emotional response to what God is doing or not doing in one area of his life allows him to "violate" the ceremonial commandments of the Mosaic Covenant in another area of his life.

We can compare this story in John 5 with the one that Jesus cites in Matthew 12:1-8 of David's taking the showbread from the altar in order to feed his men –

**Matt. 12:1** At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat.

**Matt. 12:2** But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath."

**Matt. 12:3** But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions,

**Matt. 12:4** how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?

**Matt. 12:5** "Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?

**Matt. 12:6** "But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.

**Matt. 12:7** "But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

**Matt. 12:8** "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." (NAS95)

As David was fleeing from King Saul in 1 Samuel 21, his men and he became hungry, but God was not miraculously producing food for him and his needy men. So what was David to do? Fortunately, he understood that in the midst of a basic, human need he had the right to “violate” the Mosaic Covenant in order to meet this need. It is similar for the man whom Jesus has just healed of a thirty-eight year physical infirmity. The man’s excitement because of God’s meeting his “need” by healing his legs is rightly leading him to “violate” the ceremonial Sabbath commandment that prohibited working on this day. He is basically saying, “Forget whether or not I am working and breaking the commandment; look at what God has done for me by healing me, and I am going to celebrate by picking up my bedroll, carrying it, and walking around!”

There is also the question of whether carrying a bedroll should be considered “work” and a violation of the sabbatical commandment? Perhaps the Jews are being a bit too scrupulous in their application of this commandment, similar to what Jesus says in Matthew 12:11, “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out?” In either case, a person’s excitement toward God by declaring, even while carrying his bedroll, that God is good trumps any external obedience to the ceremonial commandments of the Mosaic Covenant.

The same reasoning can be applied to the various religious practices that Christians devise as a means to demonstrate their devotion to God. They use these practices not only to show their devotion but also as the means by which they can gain what they perceive to be God’s temporal blessings—such as financial success, good health, and feelings of peace and intimacy with God. However, religious practices are nothing in comparison to genuine inward contrition for our moral depravity in addition to longing for eternal mercy and moral perfection from God. A person’s excitement and gratitude for God’s eternal mercy trumps all religious practices and efforts. In other words, there is really no justification for religious practices in Christianity because of the promise of eternity. All that God requires to obtain eternal Life is genuine inwardness that He produces by the miraculous work of His Holy Spirit. The requirement of authentic inwardness is why our excitement toward God in His granting us eternal mercy under the New Covenant through Jesus trumps any justification people might give for religious actions in our demonstrating as Christians our obedience to God. Nevertheless, like the Jews, who erroneously believed that their meticulous observance of all the Mosaic Covenant commandments was the basis for their relationship with God, Christians also mistakenly think that their scrupulous religious practices are the basis for their relationship with God. But Jesus begs to differ.



## Chapter 8

### John 5:10-13 – The Jews Confront The Healed Man About His Breaking The Sabbath

Now it was the Sabbath on that day.

10 Therefore the Jews were saying to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to pick up your bedroll.”

11 But he answered them, “The one who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your bedroll and walk.’”

12 They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Pick up and walk?’”

13 But the one who had been healed did not know who it was because Jesus had slipped away from the crowd that was in that place without being noticed.

These next words of John lead the reader to say, “Uh, oh,” because here comes a confrontation that could cost someone his life if things go the way they did in the story in Numbers 15:32-36, when an Israelite gathered wood on the Sabbath and was stoned to death for violating the sabbatical commandment in the Mosaic Covenant –

**Num. 15:32** Now while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the sabbath day.

**Num. 15:33** Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation;

**Num. 15:34** and they put him in custody because it had not been declared what should be done to him.

**Num. 15:35** Then the LORD [Yahweh] said to Moses, “The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.”

**Num. 15:36** So all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, just as the LORD had commanded Moses. (NAS95)

No wonder the Jews of Jesus’ day believed that carrying a bedroll is a violation of the Sabbath—if gathering wood was too. There is actually nothing in the Mosaic Covenant that says specifically that a person is not permitted to carry his bedroll on the Sabbath, but Exodus 35 does say that it is illegal to make a fire on the Sabbath –

**Ex. 35:1** Then Moses assembled all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and said to them, “These are the things that the LORD [Yahweh] has commanded you to do:

**Ex. 35:2** “For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy day, a sabbath of complete rest to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.

**Ex. 35:3** “You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the sabbath day.” (NAS95)

In this passage, God through Moses unequivocally states that doing any work on the Sabbath deserves the death penalty, which includes even making a fire. We can see, therefore, why it is basically a no-brainer in Numbers 15 when the people are waiting to figure out what will happen to the man who was gathering firewood on the Sabbath. Of course he has to die. If making a fire deserves the death penalty, then collecting firewood in order to make a fire must also deserve the same punishment.

So what about the man who is carrying his bedroll on the Sabbath after Jesus had healed him? What does he deserve? Previous Jewish scholars must have come up with a list of sabbatical prohibitions that they considered equal to kindling a fire and gathering wood for a fire. These prohibitions constituted practical ways that people could keep themselves from stepping outside the bounds of what God intended by the commandment to do no work on the Sabbath. If the man in Numbers 15 deserved death for gathering firewood, certainly it is reasonable to assume that the man in John 5 who is carrying his bedroll deserves death, too. Right?

Thus, certain Jews, who clearly understand all the prohibitions derived from the Mosaic Covenant, confront the healed man who is carrying his bedroll, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to pick up your bedroll." We can also probably hear them say under their breath, "And you deserve to die like the guy who gathered wood in Numbers 15." In other words, carrying a bedroll on the Sabbath is no small issue for them. It is one of life and death.

The man answers that ultimately he cannot be blamed for what he is doing. He is simply following directions given him by another, indeed, the one who healed him. And one would think that a person who performs a miraculous healing must carry some clout. He is the one who said, "Pick up your bedroll and walk." The Jews' response is startling. Rather than say, "Wow, you've been miraculously healed! How long were you lame? Thirty-eight years! No kidding. That is fantastic. Praise God, and we share your excitement and therefore understand why you feel that is ok to break the Sabbath and carry your bedroll. No problem, man. We're with you!" Instead, they say nothing about his being healed. They completely gloss over this important piece of information that the man is giving them and demand, "Who told you to pick up your bedroll and walk around with it?" In other words, all they care about are their religious scruples and who had the gall to command this man to violate the Mosaic Covenant in such an obvious and blatant way that is opposition to their traditions. Certainly, whoever told him to violate the Sabbath deserves to die, too!

These Jews cannot appreciate what God has miraculously done in this man's life. They are so focused on obeying the external details of the Mosaic Covenant that God and His activity are actually out of their purview, no matter how much they believe that they are obeying God and no matter how much that profess their loyalty to God. And here is an important lesson—that it is possible to be students of the Bible, God's instructions, and claim to be all about obeying God for the sake of obtaining His blessing, even eternal Life, and yet not be interested in God at all. In other words, it is possible for us to be convinced that we are doing the right thing *for God* when we are actually doing the wrong thing *against God*—no matter how much we believe that we are doing the right thing, no matter how much we profess to be loyal to God, no matter how many songs we sing to Jesus, no matter how involved in church we are, no matter how many missions trips we go on, and no matter how often we engage in spiritual disciplines and fast and pray. We all have the potential to deceive ourselves in this manner because of our innate moral depravity. It is also why Jesus did not trust the belief that he saw come into existence in the people in Jerusalem who observed him perform certain miraculous signs (cf. the discussion on John 2:23-25 in Chapter 4).

Similarly, I think that the Israelites, after apprehending the man who was gathering firewood in violation of the Sabbath commandment, pause in Numbers 15, because they want God to reveal this man's inner motivation. Was he gathering wood from a heart that was fully committed to goodness and repentance because God had previously changed his heart? Or was he intentionally rebelling against God from a stubborn and hard heart? I think that if it had been the former, God would have said, "Let him make a sin offering to me and humble himself before me that I might forgive him." Instead, it must have been the latter, that his heart was stubborn and hard. Therefore, God is saying, "He truly deserves death, even eternal death, and, therefore, he must be executed." In other words, God is making a statement not just about the man's actions, which are clearly in violation of the Mosaic Covenant, but also about the man's heart, which is fundamentally hostile toward God. Otherwise, God would show mercy, and the man would also readily manifest his awareness of the profundity of even his inner immorality and need for God's mercy. Who knows, maybe the man even tried to justify his actions, saying, "I know that Moses commanded us in Exodus 35 not to make a fire, but I was only gathering firewood; I was not making a fire." This kind of rationalization is typical of a hostile religious mentality that misses the point of authentic inwardness.

Even though a person's external actions are important, we know that they are not going to be perfect. We know that people, even Christians, mess up all the time. However, the question still remains, what is going on in their hearts? What is the condition of their inwardness, because it is inwardness that God mostly cares about? Yet, we cannot know accurately and completely the condition of other people's hearts. While we may know our own heart, only God sees into the innermost being of other people. Therefore, we must leave it up to Him to do so. God will sort out all the injustices in the present world at the end, at the final judgment. God knows who is an authentic believer and who is not. In addition, God is forgiving toward those who genuinely appeal to Him for mercy, regardless of how much evil they commit before the final judgment. Such profound mercy from God is not an excuse for anyone to persist in doing evil. It is only a caution to all of us against judging and condemning people when they are clearly acting in an immoral and evil way. Ultimately, it is God's responsibility, and God's responsibility alone, to condemn. Ours is to be concerned primarily about our own eternal salvation and watch how God sorts out all the injustices in the end at the final judgment—without our help.

Getting back to our story in John 5, the healed man honestly cannot tell these Jews who it was who performed this wonderful miracle and commanded him to carry his bedroll. He does not know Jesus' name or identity as the Messiah, and Jesus has melted into the crowd around the pool and left the area.

## Chapter 9

### John 5:14 – Jesus Meets The Man In The Temple

14 After these things Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “Behold, you have become well. Do not disobey God any longer so that nothing worse happens to you.”

The temple is the religious center of the Jews. Certainly, it would be appropriate for the Messiah to hang out there. Likewise, it would be appropriate for someone whom God has miraculously healed of a thirty-eight year infirmity to go and worship God there in gratitude and thanksgiving. Therefore, Jesus may have simply followed this man to the temple to give him his next set of instructions. What more fitting place than the earthly dwelling of the eternal, merciful God who has designed human beings for morality and Life for Jesus to say to him, “Do not disobey God any longer so that nothing worse happens to you.”

What exactly does Jesus mean by this command? One possibility is that he is telling him to eliminate any known immoral action in his life to prevent any other bad thing from occurring in this present realm—much like what modern Christianity says, when it views bad things that happen to Christians as God’s way of communicating to them that there is disobedience in their lives. Then, if they get rid of their immorality, He will bless them with good things in their lives. Such an interpretation even seems to fit with how the story has proceeded so far, that Jesus has healed the man of a physical ailment. Why not then think that Jesus is referring to worse physical ailments occurring if this man willfully continues to rebel against God?

However, the rest of the story, specifically the conversation with the Jews, (and even the rest of the Gospel of John and the New Testament overall) warrants a different interpretation. Instead of warning the man to avoid other earthly suffering that would occur because of future immoral actions, Jesus is instructing him to commit himself inwardly to goodness in order to avoid something a lot worse, i.e., eternal condemnation.

## Chapter 10

### John 5:15-16 – The Healed Man Reports Back To The Jews Who Now Persecute Jesus

15 The man went away and reported to the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

16 And as a result of this the Jews were harassing Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.

Why did the healed man tell the Jews who it was who had made him well? I think that he is feeling the heat of being accused of violating the Sabbath, and he wants to deflect the attention off him onto Jesus—even if he has acquired authentic inwardness and belief through Jesus' healing him. Yes, he is excited about God's having healed him, and perhaps he is genuinely grateful for it, too. Nevertheless, persecution is still persecution—even in the midst of watching and experiencing God's grace and miraculous work. Plus, persecution can lead even an authentic believer to buckle under and be intimidated by those who are harassing him—if only in the heat of the situation itself. We can only wonder if the man is feeling intimidated so that he cannot help himself right now and feels compelled to identify the one who healed him. In any event, he informs the Jews that it was Jesus who healed him.

What is the result? The Jews now focus their harassment on Jesus, "because he was doing these things on the Sabbath." What things was he doing? Healing and instructing the man to carry his bedroll, both of which in their minds are violations of the Sabbath and the Mosaic Covenant. We can compare this story with Matthew 12:9-14 when Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath –

**Matt. 12:9** Departing from there, [Jesus] went into their [the Pharisees'] synagogue.

**Matt. 12:10** And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—so that they might accuse Him.

**Matt. 12:11** And He said to them, "What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out?"

**Matt. 12:12** "How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

**Matt. 12:13** Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other.

**Matt. 12:14** But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. (NAS95)

Would the Pharisees really have answered, "Yes," to Jesus' question? Would they rescue their sheep from a pit? Probably they would, because the sheep means either food or income for them. However, do they approve of healing another human being on the Sabbath? Absolutely not. This is truly shocking, if we do not appreciate the depth of our own immoral condition. How can they have such a perspective? What is going on inside a person's mind and heart that his thinking becomes so twisted that he believes that healing another human being's physical infirmity is evil and disobedient toward God, indeed, a violation of a ritual commandment such as keeping the Sabbath—a ritual commandment given by God? What drives a person to think that God is more interested

in his not making a fire on the Sabbath than He is in caring for the physical needs of another human being—even though Exodus 35:3, as quoted above, appears to make such a claim? The answer is our innate hostility and rebellion toward God. We are driven by our own depravity to elevate ritual above morality. Such perversion of morality is what characterizes us as human beings. In other words, these Jews, who are exhibiting such irrational thinking and behavior in the presence of love and goodness, are not alone. As many passages indicate, all human beings are inherently evil. And apart from the work of God's grace within us, we all prefer ritual to morality, traditions to goodness, spiritual disciplines to authentic charity and love.

For one thing, rituals, traditions, and spiritual disciplines are all easier than morality. It is easier to go to church every Sunday and sing interminable songs to Jesus than to go out and love someone who is hard to love, especially someone who has hurt me by treating me harshly, cruelly, or unfairly. It is easier to say that church councils and the traditional doctrines that they started are true than studying the biblical documents myself and discovering what the apostolic message really is. It is easier and more satisfying to complete a regimen of fasting than exercise patience and kindness toward annoying people. Therefore, no wonder that even Christians choose to define Christianity by religious practices, rituals, and traditional doctrines. Certainly, feeding the poor is good, but we convince ourselves that fasting and praying are the best ways to demonstrate our love for God, and woe to the person who gets in the way of my scheduled quiet time. And woe to the person who questions traditional church doctrines such as the trinity after 1700 years of well-meaning Christians who have affirmed that the Council of Nicaea was led by the Holy Spirit—an affirmation and claim that has absolutely no biblical basis. And woe to the person who suggests that spiritual disciplines are merely another man-made means to control people within church organizations and keep them loyal to the organization and not to God.

Consequently, we Christians emphasize rituals, religious disciplines, and traditions just as the Jews did in Jesus' day—to whom Jesus eventually said, "Go to hell" (cf. Matthew 23). We even adopt the Jews' perspective that we can earn God's temporal blessings by performing our rituals for Him—even though we dare not say explicitly that we earn them. Nevertheless, if someone were to watch our behavior and attitude, they could not mistake that we believe that we make ourselves worthy of God's love, because we become so disappointed when life does not turn out the way we expect it to after our being so diligent in our fasting and praying. We think that maybe we have not performed enough for God, and, because of our poor performance, He is holding back His blessings from us. Therefore, what we need to do is increase the intensity and the frequency of our religious practices, and then He will approve of us sufficiently to bless us.

Yet, such is the mentality of the Jews who are constantly clashing with Jesus, because they completely misunderstand God's grace and that He cares about inwardness, love, and morality, not ritual, traditions, and disciplines. In addition, the Jews fail to recognize the depth of their inherent evil and that at no time can any human being (other than Jesus) earn God's goodness and grace (even though Jesus did not need God's grace, because he was not morally depraved as the rest of mankind).

If the Jews in John 5 are thinking similarly to the Pharisees in Matthew 12, and most likely they are, then, in their minds, Jesus, like the man who is illegally carrying his bedroll, deserves to die for violating the Mosaic Covenant by healing on the Sabbath and for commanding this man to carry his bedroll. Thus, the important conflict begins that will give Jesus the opportunity to declare his true identity to these pharisaical and unbelieving Jews.



## Chapter 11

### John 5:17-18 – Jesus States That He Is The Fulfillment Of The Davidic Covenant

This is the longest chapter in my book, but it also explains the most important information in the Bible regarding the Messiah and his being the Son of God, the Son of David, the Son of Man, and the king of Israel and of the eternal Kingdom of God. We will want to answer three important questions, and we will use five main Old Testament passages in order to do so. But first, John 5:17-18 –

17 But Jesus responded to them, “My Father is active until now and I am active.”

18 Therefore, as a result, the Jews were seeking to kill him all the more, because he was not only violating the Sabbath, but he was also calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God.

There are two important elements in Jesus’ response in v. 17 to the Jews’ initial persecution. First, he calls God “my Father.” Second, he connects his earthly activity to God’s, the transcendent Father’s, activity within the created realm. Jesus is experiencing persecution from the Jews for supposedly violating the Sabbath commandment of the Mosaic Covenant by healing the lame man on the Sabbath and telling him to carry his bedroll. However, the first element of his response, calling God his “Father,” gets him in even more trouble with them in v. 18. In this chapter, we will deal with this element of his response, and, then, in the next chapter, we will look at the second element when he connects his activity to God the Father’s.

Why does Jesus call God “my Father?” We really need this whole chapter to answer the question completely, but I will state the answer at the outset so that you know where we are going with our discussion. Jesus calls God his “Father” because of the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7. He is identifying himself as the final, unique descendant of David, such that he is the eternal king of the Kingdom of God. We will take a careful look at 2 Samuel 7, especially vs. 12-16, and we will also use in our discussion Psalms 2, 8, 89, and 45, that reveal more details about the Davidic Covenant. The bottom line is that Jesus is claiming to be the person whom the Bible calls the Christ, or the Messiah.

Additionally, notice how the Jews respond to Jesus’ declaration. They want to kill him all the more, because not only is he violating the Sabbath by healing the lame man and telling him to carry his bedroll, but he is also “making himself equal to God” by calling God his own Father.

I used to interpret the Jews’ response as their being upset because a man is claiming to be God, so that the main problem with the Jews’ perspective on Christianity from the time of Jesus until now has been that they do not believe in the trinity—in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, who are all three coeternal persons of the Godhead. In other words, I assumed that the Jews have *always* incorrectly believed that the Messiah would be only an ordinary human being, and, therefore, they are objecting in John 5 and later in Christian history to Jesus’ claim and Christians’ claims that he, a man, is God. Thus, along with Christians who hold to the traditional doctrine of the trinity, I have read this assumption about the Jews into the rest of the New Testament, concluding that the biblical authors are mostly concerned about proving that Jesus was and is God, indeed the coeternal second person of the trinity and that this concept is essential to believe for any human being who desires to receive God’s mercy and obtain eternal Life.

However, as we consider the Jews' response to Jesus' words "my Father" and then study the origin and history of this concept in the Old Testament, we realize that they have no problem with someone's using this phrase and thus "making himself equal with God." They simply are not willing to allow Jesus to make himself equal with God. In other words, their objection to Jesus' making himself equal with God is not that a man is claiming to be equal with God, but that *this* man is claiming to be equal with God, specifically a man both who is disobeying the Mosaic Covenant by violating the Sabbath and who looks so ordinary. Jesus has healed a man on the Sabbath and then immediately commanded him to carry his bedroll, and he looks like any other normal, everyday Jew who is walking the streets of Jerusalem. How can someone who claims to be equal to God violate the very covenant that God made with the Jews? And how can a man who calls God his "Father" not be a superordinary, charismatic individual who obviously is the Messiah? In other words, many of the Jews were expecting the Messiah to follow the traditions of the established Judaism of their day, including not healing or carrying a bedroll on the Sabbath, and they were expecting the Messiah to be so special looking, even beyond that of any other human being who had ever lived, that his identity as the Messiah would immediately be obvious to everyone.

According to these Jews in John 5, Jesus cannot be who he claims to be. Consequently, the problem as they see it is not that he is asserting that some wild and crazy heretical idea is true, i.e., that he, a man, is equal to God, but that he is claiming that two obviously contradictory ideas are consistent and true—that he can "violate" the Mosaic Covenant while also being an ordinary human being who is equal with God. Of course, Jesus does not think that he is violating the Mosaic Covenant. Instead, he wants the Jews to realize that *they have misinterpreted* the Mosaic Covenant, which, subsequently, is contributing to their being blinded to his actual identity as the Messiah. They are also misunderstanding what the Old Testament says about the nature of the Christ, of the Messiah, that he will look like and be just an ordinary human being—albeit the very incarnation of God. In other words, the Messiah will definitely interpret the Mosaic Covenant as it was supposed to be interpreted, and the Messiah will not be some superman with a superordinary charismatic personality that will make it obvious just by looking at him that he is the Christ.

### ***Three Important Questions***

As we approach our study of various Old Testament passages to understand exactly what is going in John 5, there are three questions that we need to answer regarding what Jesus is saying and what the Jews are thinking –

1. What does Jesus mean when he calls God "my Father?" (Also, what do the Jews think that he means?)
2. Why do the Jews think that, by Jesus calling God "my Father," he is claiming to be "equal with God?"
3. What do the Jews mean by the phrase "equal with God?"

### ***Answering The First Question About "my Father" – 2 Samuel 7***

We can answer the first question by considering 2 Samuel 7:1-17, where we find a conversation taking place around 1000 B.C. between David, the King of Israel, Nathan, a prophet of God, and God Himself. David has been thinking of building a permanent "house" for God, a temple to replace the portable tabernacle, but God tells Nathan to

inform David that, rather than his building Him a “house,” God is going to build a “house” for David –

**2Sam. 7:1** Now it came about when the king lived in his house, and the LORD [*Yahweh*] had given him rest on every side from all his enemies,  
**2Sam. 7:2** that the king said to Nathan the prophet, “See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells within tent curtains.”

**2Sam. 7:3** Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that is in your mind, for the LORD is with you.”

**2Sam. 7:4** But in the same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying,

**2Sam. 7:5** “Go and say to My servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Are you the one who should build Me a house to dwell in?”

**2Sam. 7:6** “For I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt, even to this day; but I have been moving about in a tent, even in a tabernacle.

**2Sam. 7:7** “Wherever I have gone with all the sons of Israel, did I speak a word with one of the tribes of Israel, which I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?’”

**2Sam. 7:8** “Now therefore, thus you shall say to My servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts [*Yahweh Tz<sup>e</sup>va<sup>o</sup>th*], “I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel.

**2Sam. 7:9** “I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth.

**2Sam. 7:10** “I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly,

**2Sam. 7:11** even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD also declares to you that the LORD will make a house for you.

**2Sam. 7:12** “When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom.

**2Sam. 7:13** “He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

**2Sam. 7:14** “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men,

**2Sam. 7:15** but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.

**2Sam. 7:16** “Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.”

**2Sam. 7:17** In accordance with all these words and all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David. (NAS95)

This passage constitutes the Davidic Covenant, the commitment that God makes to David and his descendants, starting with his son Solomon, who will be God’s Son, i.e., the Son of God. And Solomon will be able to call God his “Father,” and he can know that his kingdom will last “forever.” God begins by saying to David, “That was a good idea for you to build a ‘house’ for Me, but notice that I have never asked for a permanent

dwelling on earth all the days that the temporary tabernacle has existed among My people, the Jews (vs. 5-7). I did take you and place you as ruler over My people, and I will give you a great reputation in future generations and protect you from all your enemies (vs. 8-9). I will also give my people, the Jews, a permanent land here on the land of Israel (vs. 10-11a). However, instead of your building Me a ‘house,’ I am going to build you a ‘house.’ Instead of your building Me a temple, I am going to build you a permanent and eternal dynasty. And your first descendant who will be the continuation of this dynasty, your son Solomon, will build My temple, and I will be his ‘Father’ and he will be my ‘Son’ so that, when he steps out of line, I will discipline him. It is absolutely true, though, that Solomon will genuinely be able to call Me ‘my Father,’ and I will genuinely call him ‘My Son.’ He will be the very human, created, and ordinary Son of God, and I will be the very transcendent and uncreated God, the Father of the Son of God. In addition, because I will make sure that your kingdom never ends, all of your descendants who rule over Israel will all be able to call Me ‘my Father,’ and I will call each one of them ‘My Son,’ so that each one will be called the Son of God (vs. 11b-16).”

Another question that arises out of this passage is, how will God perpetuate David’s kingdom and his descendants who will sit on his throne “forever.” One possible answer is that God will cause David’s descendants to continue generation after generation *ad infinitum* throughout all eternity, so that each successive Son becomes the King of Israel after his earthly father dies. Another possibility is that God will eventually bring about one final Davidic descendant, who will live forever and thus always function as the King of the Jews throughout all eternity. We find in the New Testament that the second option is the correct one. Jesus of Nazareth, living two thousand years ago, is the once and final “Son of David,” the last and permanent King of Israel who will rule over the eternal Kingdom of God, which is why Jesus calls God “my Father.” Just as Solomon as the son of David was the Son of God who could call God “my Father,” so also Jesus, as the final son of David and the final Son of God, calls God “my Father.” Indeed, David and all his descendants who ruled over Israel/Judah during the monarchical period of Israel’s history (approximately 1000-600 B.C.) called God “my Father.” Thus, also, Jesus is saying that he is the end of the line of the kings of Israel. He is the final king, who will rule over the eternal kingdom, not just over the temporary kingdom of the present realm. Jesus is claiming to be the ultimate fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. He is saying that he is the eternal Davidic king of the eternal Kingdom of God.

#### Another Old Testament Passage About the Davidic Covenant – Psalm 89

If we look at Old Testament history between the Davidic Covenant (approximately 1000 B.C.) and the time of Jesus, we can follow the development and confirmation of the concepts of this covenant in several biblical passages after its inception in 2 Samuel 7. For example, in Psalm 89, a “Maskil [song] of Ethan the Ezrahite,” the psalmist extols God’s lovingkindness (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*’emunah*) that is forever (*’olam*) –

**Psa. 89:1** I will sing of the lovingkindness [*hesed*] of the LORD (יהוה) (חסדו) [Yahweh] forever (עולם) [*’olam*]; to all generations I will make known Your faithfulness (אמונתך) [*’emunah*] with my mouth.

**Psa. 89:2** For I have said, “Lovingkindness (חסדך) [*hesed*] will be built up forever (עולם) [*’olam*]; In the heavens You will establish Your faithfulness (אמונתך) [*’emunah*].” (NAS95)

The psalmist also mentions that God has sworn a covenant with King David to make his kingdom (“throne”) continue “forever” –

**Psa. 89:3** “I have made a covenant with My chosen; I have sworn to David My servant,

**Psa. 89:4** ‘I will establish your seed forever (עַד-עוֹלָם) [*ad ‘olam*] and build up your throne to all generations.” (NAS95)

Later in the psalm, Ethan the Ezrahite quotes God who speaks specifically of David –

**Psa. 89:19** Once You spoke in vision to Your godly ones, and said, “I have given help to one who is mighty; I have exalted one chosen from the people.

**Psa. 89:20** “I have found David My servant; with My holy oil I have anointed him (מִשְׁחַתֵּיבֵי; *m<sup>e</sup>shachteev*) (ἔχρισσα αὐτόν).” (NAS95)

Ethan does not explicitly say when God spoke these words in a vision, but the ideas in Psalm 89:19-37 are parallel to those presented by Nathan to David in 2 Samuel 7:5-16. Thus, it could be that Ethan is simply interpreting and explaining what God said through Nathan in 2 Samuel 7, or he is conveying a new statement by God of the same information. Either way, in Psalm 89, God is speaking of someone whom He has *exalted* (הִפְּסִיחַ; *hupsoo* – LXX), a *chosen one* (“one chosen (ἐκλεκτὸν; *eklekton* – LXX)) from the people”), and then He names him, *David*. Plus, God has *anointed* (מִשְׁחַתֵּיבֵי; *m<sup>e</sup>shakteev*) (ἔχρισσα; *echrisa* – LXX) him with His holy oil.

In the previous paragraph, I have transliterated the dictionary forms of certain words that are used in the Hebrew text and the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament called the Septuagint (LXX). It is important to note that we get our English word “Messiah” from the Hebrew word for anoint. To coin a term, God messiahed the ordinary man David and exalted him as His chosen one. We also get the English word Christ from the Greek translation (*christos*) of the Hebrew word for Messiah (*masheek*). Therefore, we could also say that God christed the ordinary man David. Thus, it is obvious that the psalmist’s explanation of the Davidic Covenant in Psalm 89 uses language that reappears in the New Testament with respect to Jesus as the final Anointed One, the final Christ and Messiah.

For example, after speaking in Philippians 2 of Jesus’ willingness to humble himself and not demand that people worship him, the apostle Paul goes on to say that, as a result, God exalted him –

**Phil. 2:8** Being found in appearance as a man, He [Jesus] humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

**Phil. 2:9** For this reason also, God highly exalted [*hyperhupsoo*] Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,

**Phil. 2:10** so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

**Phil. 2:11** and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ [*christos*] is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (NAS95)

Also, when Jesus is hanging on the cross, the Jewish leaders mock him for not being able to save himself, and they call him God’s “Chosen One” (*eklektos*) –

**Luke 23:35** And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ [*christos*] of God, His Chosen One [*eklektos*].” (NAS95)

In addition, when God’s voice sounds from heaven on the Mt. of Transfiguration and He speaks of Jesus in Luke 9:35, he calls him His “Chosen One,” using the verb form of *eklektos* -

**Luke 9:35** Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My Son, My Chosen One [*ho eklelegmenos*]; listen to Him!” (NAS95)

Then, of course, many times in the New Testament Jesus is called the Christ (*christos*), i.e., the Messiah, the Anointed One. For example, in Acts 4 after Peter and John are released from prison and return to Jesus’ other disciples, they all pray and include the idea that God has anointed Jesus to be His holy servant –

**Acts 4:27** “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed [*ἐχριστας* (*echrisas*)], both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,  
**Acts 4:28** to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. (NAS95)

After a casual glance at these New Testament passages, the question still basically remains, are there going to be more descendants of David after Jesus? Or is Jesus claiming and do the Jews understand him to mean that he is the *final* descendant and there will be no more? Is he the final Anointed One who, like David, Solomon, and the other Davidic kings of Israel, can legitimately call himself the Christ, the Messiah, and the Son of God? In other words, is he the ultimate Son of God as an ordinary human being, albeit morally perfect and the incarnation of God? All the evidence in the New Testament (and Old Testament for that matter) indicates that Jesus is the last Son of God. Take, for example, Peter’s sermon to the Jews in Acts 2:29-36 –

**Acts 2:29** “Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.

**Acts 2:30** “And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath so seat one of his descendants on his throne,  
**Acts 2:31** he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ [*christos*], that he was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay.

**Acts 2:32** “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.

**Acts 2:33** “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.

**Acts 2:34** “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘The LORD [Yahweh in Psalm 110:1 (*kurios* here in the New Testament Greek text)] said to my Lord [*Adonee* in Psalm 110:1 (*kurios* here in the New Testament Greek text)], “Sit at my right hand,  
**Acts 2:35** until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”



**Acts 2:36** “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord [*kurios*] and Christ [Messiah, *christos*]*—*this Jesus whom you crucified.” (NAS95)

Peter is saying that the striking feature of Jesus’ being God’s “Son” in contrast to all previous descendants of David and even David himself is that God raised Jesus from the dead and that afterwards God exalted him so that he ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God in order to rule over God’s creation and the eternal Kingdom of God. In other words, resurrection and ascension into heaven has happened to no other Son of God and descendant of David, not even to David himself. Jesus is truly unique as the only resurrected king of Israel and the only king who has ascended to the right hand of God. Therefore, there is no need for any descendant of David to take his place after him, especially since he has “ascended to the right hand of God.” Regarding this statement, Peter quotes Psalm 110 where David refers to his “Lord” who sits at the right hand of God –

**Psa. 110:1** The LORD [Yahweh] says to my Lord [*Adonee*]: “Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” (NAS95)

The English word “LORD” in the NAS95 is the Hebrew word יהוה־יְיָ which, as explained in Chapter 3 above, is God’s name and can be transliterated Yahweh. This name, Yahweh, refers to the transcendent Creator, the one we know as God the Father. The other English words in Ps. 110:1, “my Lord”, are the one Hebrew word אֲדֹנָי (*Adonee*). It comes from the Hebrew אָדֹן (*Adon*) and has a suffix attached which means “my.” We perhaps are more familiar with the word *Adonai*, which also means “my Lord.” However, in this psalm David as king of Israel and in the light of the covenant that God has made with him in 2 Samuel 7 recognizes that eventually one of his descendants will be the last and final king who will rule from the position of being at the right hand of God. In other words, King David realizes that one of his descendants will be his own eternal king—in the eternal Kingdom of God. Therefore, this once and future king will be David’s “Lord” even though David is legitimately called the “Son of God” (see below regarding Psalm 89) and was the ruler of Israel. David is saying that the final “Lord” will have an even greater status than he has, because he will be even David’s “Lord.”

Later, we will consider if this descendant, whom David calls his “Lord,” literally sits at the right hand of God who transcends the creation, or if we should take this statement metaphorically. However, for the time being, it is clear that David believes that his line of descendants will *not* go on forever as the method by which God will fulfill His covenant to him. Instead, the line will stop, and one descendant (and we know his name to be Jesus of Nazareth) will be the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant.

The culmination of the Davidic line in one final king correlates with the prophetic passage in Jeremiah that I mentioned in Chapter 7 –

**Jer. 23:5** “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD [Yahweh], “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land.

**Jer. 23:6** “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The LORD [Yahweh] our righteousness.’” (NAS95)

Through Jeremiah, God is speaking of one individual who will be a descendant of David, indeed the final descendant of David, who will “reign as king” over the Jews and will bring about all the promises that God has made to the Jews going all the way back to Abraham in Genesis 12, specifically that Abraham’s physical descendants will obtain a land and will live securely on this land. God is saying that the final descendant of David as King of Israel, the one whom David calls “my Lord,” who will ascend into heaven and sit at the right hand of God (Psalm 110:1), will be the instrument by which He fulfills this promise. This king will also “do justice and righteousness in the land” (Jeremiah 23:5). Thus, we find out that, when God promised Abraham to make of his physical descendants a “great nation,” that He already had in mind that their greatness would include their comprising a kingdom with the person who is the final fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, Jesus, as their king. What about the other promises to Abraham, that God would bless him and those associated with him with eternal Life? What would be the relationship between them and this king who is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant? Is he also their king? Yes, as Peter makes clear in his second letter. After exhorting his readers to a life of morality, Peter says –

**2Pet. 1:10** Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about [God’s] calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;

**2Pet. 1:11** for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you. (NAS95)

Certainly, it is possible that Peter is referring to the Kingdom of Israel where the Jews will live securely on the land of Israel without threat from their enemies, so that it is this kingdom that is eternal. However, the Old Testament passages, such as the ones that I mentioned in chapters 5 and 6 regarding the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants along with ones in the New Testament that address the issue of Gentile Christians’ relationship to the Mosaic Covenant, indicate that the eternal Kingdom of God is separate from the temporary Kingdom of Israel. In the Old Testament prophetic passages, God promises the Jews that they will live on their land securely and they will fulfill His requirement of properly obeying the Mosaic Covenant on the basis of their changed hearts. In the New Testament, the authors argue that the Gentiles are not obligated to obey the Mosaic Covenant, thus alluding to their being excluded from the Kingdom of Israel. Consequently, Jesus plays a dual role as the final Anointed One. He is king of the Jews in the temporary Kingdom of Israel in the present realm, and he is king of both Jews and Gentiles in the Kingdom of God that will exist in the eternal realm.

Therefore, Psalm 89 is not referring to the eternal kingdom, even though our English Bibles translate the Hebrew word *’olam* as “forever.” As I explained in a footnote in chapter 5 regarding the Abrahamic Covenant, *’olam* can mean simply “into perpetuity” or “as long as God wants something to last in this temporary realm.” Psalm 89 is clearly about the Jews and their living in obedience to God on the promised land, so that David’s throne “shall be established forever like the moon” (v. 37). Yet, the moon does not last into eternity, which is Peter’s point in 2 Peter 3:10-13 when he states that God is going to make a whole new creation after destroying the present one. Therefore, if Jesus is going to be a truly *eternal* king, then he must be the king of even another kingdom after the Kingdom of Israel on the current earth. Nevertheless, whether we are talking about the temporary Kingdom of Israel or the eternal Kingdom of God, Jesus is still the final king in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7.

It is also interesting to note that God says in the above passage in Jeremiah that the king’s name will be “The LORD [Yahweh] our righteousness.” But how can this be if

Yahweh is God the Father? Why is the king, i.e., Jesus, being called by the same name as the Father, especially if it were true that Jesus is not the Father but the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, the Son? Should we, then, not identify Jesus as Yahweh as at least one Bible teacher does?<sup>25</sup> No, but we must wait to consider this issue more when we seek to answer the other two questions I posed at the beginning of this chapter.

In the meantime, we continue with Psalm 89. Later in the psalm, in verses 26 and 27, Ethan the Ezrahite quotes God as saying that David can call God *My Father* (אֱלֹהֵי) (πατήρ μου; *patayr mou* – LXX) and that he will make David his *firstborn* (בְּכֹרֶת) (πρωτότοκον; *prototokon* – LXX) –

**Psa. 89:20** “I have found David My servant; with My holy oil I have anointed him,

**Psa. 89:21** with whom My hand will be established; My arm also will strengthen him.

**Psa. 89:22** “The enemy will not deceive him, nor the son of wickedness afflict him.

**Psa. 89:23** “But I shall crush his adversaries before him, and strike those who hate him.

**Psa. 89:24** “My faithfulness and My lovingkindness will be with him, and in My name his horn will be exalted.

**Psa. 89:25** “I shall also set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers.

**Psa. 89:26** “He will cry to Me, ‘You are my Father (אֱלֹהֵי) (πατήρ μου; *patayr mou* – LXX), My God, and the rock of my salvation.’

**Psa. 89:27** “I also shall make him My firstborn (בְּכֹרֶת) (πρωτότοκον; *prototokon* – LXX), the highest of the kings of the earth.

**Psa. 89:28** “My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever (לְעֹלָם; *ʿolam*], and My covenant shall be confirmed to him.

**Psa. 89:29** “So I will establish his descendants forever and his throne as the days of heaven.” (NAS95)

God is saying that, from the beginning of the Davidic Covenant, David and his descendants who became kings over the nation of Israel could call God “my Father” (*patayr mou* – LXX). The reason they could was because they were unique among all human beings in their relationship with God. God was their “Father” while each of them was God’s “Son,” indeed the “Son of God.” Therefore, Jesus calls God “my Father” in John 5:17 because he is the ultimate fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. In other words, his use of these words do not come from his being the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity who was “begotten” by God in eternity past as the Son of God. He calls God “my Father” because of what the Old Testament says about David and his kingly descendants. Jesus is the King of Israel in the line of David, indeed the final descendant of David within the Davidic Covenant, the final King of Israel, who was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. Thus, he calls God “my Father.”

Indeed, such a statement by Jesus correlates with all the other terms that we have encountered and that are being used in Psalm 89 to refer to David. For example, David was the Son of God, exalted by God, the chosen one, and anointed by God. Therefore, when applied to Jesus, none of these terms in and of themselves, along with Jesus’

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. *The Forgotten Trinity* by James White, Bethany House Publishers, 1998

experience of being resurrected, refers to anything other than Jesus' being the very human and unique, final king of Israel.

However, perhaps Jesus' "ascending to the right hand of God" means that he returned to his transcendent position as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. In other words, while other terms and phrases that refer to Jesus' being the ultimate fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant as the king of Israel and of the eternal Kingdom of God do not allude to him as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, this phrase does. If God the Father is eternal and transcends the creation, then it could (or even should) be assumed that anyone who "sits at His right hand" would similarly have to be eternal and transcend the creation. Thus, Jesus uniquely takes a position that David, Solomon, and other descendants before Jesus could not take. In addition, it could possibly be said that this is the position that he had before he descended from the Father. Therefore, he basically retakes the position that he had from eternity past, so that he returns to this position after his death and resurrection. In other words, Jesus earns the right to regain his position in heaven as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity alongside the Father in His transcendent position.

I will go into this issue also in more detail before the end of the current chapter, but, for the time being, I would suggest that the biblical authors do not mean that Jesus is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity and that there is nothing in the Old Testament passages that we have looked at that require that we interpret these words and phrases in this way. Indeed, it makes more sense to follow the Old Testament and permit these words to refer to Jesus' being a human being in the line of David, who is the Davidic King of Israel according to the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. In addition, it makes more sense to interpret in this way the New Testament authors who quote these Old Testament passages, rather than making up a doctrine, i.e., the trinity, that the Bible does not teach.

For example, we can consider the word "firstborn" that God uses to refer to David in Psalm 89:27, "I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." Notice that God draws a parallel between the term "firstborn" and "the highest of the kings of the earth." In other words, "firstborn" does not refer to the divine preexistence of this king from eternity past, especially since God is talking about David. However, if God also has Jesus in mind when He uses the term "firstborn," then He could be alluding to his divine nature and preexistence—as much as a stretch as this would be to interpret God here as speaking of both David and Jesus. However, because in Psalm 89:27 this "firstborn" is the "highest" in comparison to the *kings of the earth*, then it makes sense to take these two words—"firstborn" and "highest"—as referring to this person's status as a human king among other human kings. Therefore, David is God's "firstborn," because he is the most important human king of the whole earth. Will Jesus be the same? Yes, but not because of his eternal preexistence, as we will see in a moment.

#### **Another Old Testament Passage About the Davidic Covenant – Psalm 2**

David's status as "the highest of the kings of the earth" is right in line with Ancient Near Eastern thought concerning sons. The firstborn son in the Ancient Near East held a position of primacy in status and favor with the father, such that, for example, the firstborn would receive a larger share of the inheritance from his father—a double portion in comparison to all the other sons. In Psalm 89, God is borrowing this ANE idea of primacy of status and favor by referring to His making David His "firstborn." David holds a primary position of status above all other human beings. In addition, David inherits God's "land," because he is the King of Israel and, therefore, rules the whole earth, God's "land," on behalf of God. As unrealistic and impractical as this sounds regarding

David, who, practically speaking, was king over only a relatively small portion of the Middle East, it is clear from Psalm 2 that David had the right to rule over the entire earth.

According to the apostles in their prayer in Acts 4:25,26, David himself wrote Psalm 2, probably as a hymn to be sung at the coronation of Solomon, his son and the next King of Israel. Down through the years after Solomon's coronation, the Israelites would have sung this psalm at the coronation of the successive kings of Israel, i.e., of the southern kingdom of Judah. As a result, they would have been repeating God's announcement of the high status and the extensive inheritance that each king received, as well as the intimate relationship to God of each king as the Son of God. In other words, when David wrote Psalm 2, he had in mind the covenant that God had made with him in 2 Samuel 7 –

**Psa. 2:1** Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing?

**Psa. 2:2** The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD [Yahweh] and against His Anointed (מָשִׁיחַ, His *masheek*, i.e., Messiah) (χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ, His *Christos* - LXX), saying,

**Psa. 2:3** “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!”

**Psa. 2:4** He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.

**Psa. 2:5** Then He will speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury, saying,

**Psa. 2:6** “But as for Me, I have installed My King Upon Zion, My holy mountain.”

**Psa. 2:7** “I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You (יְהִי לִּי בְנוֹן) (γεγέννηκά σε – LXX).

**Psa. 2:8** ‘Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession.

**Psa. 2:9** ‘You shall break them with a rod of iron; you shall shatter them like earthenware.’”

**Psa. 2:10** Now therefore, O kings, show discernment; take warning, O judges of the earth.

**Psa. 2:11** Worship the LORD with reverence and rejoice with trembling.

**Psa. 2:12** Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him! (NAS95)

We notice first that David says in vs. 1-3 that the Gentile rulers of the nations surrounding Israel are antagonistic toward God and His Messiah. This hostility corresponds to what we have already seen regarding the general immoral condition of all mankind—that people are fundamentally rebellious toward God, whether they are in positions of authority or being ruled by others. Therefore, if God sets up a kingdom on earth with His own divinely appointed king, then people will naturally be hostile toward this king and the power that he rightly assumes from God.

We also notice that David calls the king whom God has commissioned the “Anointed,” i.e., the Messiah (v. 2). Thus, Solomon, the new King of Israel following David, is the *masheek* just like David—the Messiah, the Christ. In other words, the

coronation ceremony will probably involve the pouring of olive oil over Solomon's head to indicate that God is setting him apart for a special role within the created reality, specifically the role of the King of Israel, who rules over God's land. This is in line with what we saw God say about David in Psalm 89:20, that "I have found David My servant; with holy oil I have anointed him." Consequently, David's son, Solomon, is just as much one who has been anointed with holy oil by God as David was. Just as David was the Messiah of God, the *masheek*, so also Solomon is the Messiah of God.

We also notice in vs. 4-6 that God considers the hostility of the Gentile rulers to be inconsequential and just laughs at them (v. 4). However, not only can He laugh at them, but so also can God's Messiah, the King of Israel, i.e., Solomon. God says that He has installed His king on "Zion," on His "holy mountain (v. 6)." Zion is Jerusalem at the heart of the land of Israel, from which not only does Solomon rule as his father David did, but also where the very tabernacle of God, where God dwells on earth, is located. It is also where God has told David in His covenant that Solomon will build Him a "house," i.e., a temple.

In addition, in vs. 7-9 Solomon speaks out and declares that God has issued a decree that cannot be changed. First, he, Solomon, is God's Son (v. 7). Second, God has "begotten" him (v. 7). Third, God grants to him the inheritance of "the nations" and "the ends of the earth" (v. 8). Fourth, God states unequivocally that Solomon will crush his Gentile enemies (v. 9). Of course, it would be easy to think that David as the author of Psalm 2 is speaking directly of Jesus since these ideas relate ultimately to him, i.e., that this is a messianic psalm in the sense that it explicitly prophesizes the future role that Jesus plays in the creation. Thus, our interpretation of Psalm 2 could simply proceed in the direction of interpreting the word "begotten" as referring to Jesus—that God the Father begat (gave birth to, became the origin of) the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, God the Son, in eternity past in line with how many commentators' understand John 1:18

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**John 1:18** No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (NAS95)

We could think that the phrase "only begotten God" in John 1:18 (or "only begotten Son" as some ancient manuscripts say instead) refers to the fact that God the Father brought into existence the Son of God, the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. Nevertheless, commentators will also claim that the Son of God is no less eternal than the Father, which supposedly is part of the "mystery" of the trinity, because this does not make sense. Even though the Son originates from the Father, so that it would seem that the Father is "older" than the Son, the Son is nevertheless just as eternal as the Father.

Then, in order to remain consistent, it is not a very big jump to interpret David in Psalm 2, when he quotes the Son in v. 7, "He [God the Father] said to me [the Son], today I have begotten you," as referring to the same idea as in John 1:18. In other words, in Psalm 2 the Son of God, Jesus, is saying that his origin is in God the Father, and, therefore, he is the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity and yet also coeternal with the Father. It could be said, then, that even though God the Father was the origin of the Son, the Son of God, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, is no less eternal than the Father. Thus, the Son has existed for as long as the Father has, i.e., eternally, even though the Son came from the Father.

However, in Psalm 2 David is speaking of Solomon's coronation as the King of Israel with the idea in mind that Solomon has become the Son of God according to the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7. Notice in verse 6 that God says,



**Psa. 2:6** “But as for Me, I have installed My King Upon Zion, My holy mountain.” (NAS95)

This is to say that God has installed Solomon (and, thus, all future descendants of David, including Jesus, who rule over Israel from Jerusalem) as King of Israel according to the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. Then, Solomon, the newly coronated king, says,

**Psa. 2:7** “I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You (יְהוָה יָלֵדָה לִּי) (γεγέννηκά σε – LXX). (NAS95)

Is Solomon talking about his origin as a human being, that God has given birth to him through his mother Bathsheba? No. Within the context of the Davidic Covenant and this Psalm, Solomon is saying that he became the Son of God when he was crowned King of Israel. Thus, this is a kind of birth, because before the event of the coronation, he did not have the status of Son of God. God has commissioned Solomon to be king and the one who currently fulfills the Davidic Covenant in which God had said that David’s son would be His son. Thus, God has made Solomon His Son, i.e., the Son of God, by making him King of Israel. As He did with David by anointing him with His holy oil (cf. Psalm 89:20), God is birthing Solomon as His Son by anointing him with His holy oil. As a result, Solomon is acquiring the status and favor from God of being His Son, with all the rights and privileges that go with this position. Therefore, even if we want John 1:18, which certainly is speaking of Jesus as the Messiah, to correlate with Psalm 2, then we should see it as referring to God’s installing Jesus as the King of Israel at some point in his existence here on earth and not to his being brought into existence by God the Father in eternity past.

In addition, the interpretation of John 1:18 as referring to God’s have brought Jesus into existence in eternity past is incorrect because of the very word that John uses in the Greek text that gets translated “only begotten.” These two English words translate the single Greek word μονογενής (*monogenēs*). However, a better translation of this word is “unique.” John is not talking about Jesus’ origin but his role within history. Even a commentary such as the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* and a lexicon such as *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG) both argue for the meaning “unique” for this word in this verse. In other words, especially if the textual variant “son” is correct, John is saying,

18 No one has ever seen God. The unique Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, has explained Him. [my translation]

Therefore, John’s point is that Jesus has accurately explained God the Father, precisely because he is the unique, final Son of David and, therefore, the ultimate fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. Plus, the reason that Jesus can do this is because he “was in the bosom of the Father,” which is to say that God had Jesus in mind and in heart to fulfill the role of the final Davidic King and Messiah. For Jesus to have been in God’s bosom is for God to have planned for Jesus to be the King of Israel and, therefore, the Son of God like David and Solomon. However, Jesus’ role as King and Son will last into eternity.

We should also ask, does John mean that Jesus “has explained” God in the sense of talking about Him or in the sense of demonstrating who God is by his very life, which of course would include his words? It could be strictly the former, but I think that, based

upon even John's statement in chapter 20 that his purpose for writing his gospel is to describe Jesus' miraculous signs and to prove that he is the Anointed One of God, that John is referring to the latter. In other words, John is saying nothing in v. 18 about Jesus' being the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. He is arguing for Jesus' being the final Davidic King of Israel whose role and behavior perfectly explain God and His project of bringing about an eternal Kingdom of God. In addition, because Jesus' role as a human being is to be God in the story of the created reality that the transcendent God is "writing," he demonstrates who God is and that God's ultimate purpose for the creation is to make him the ruler over His creation. He thus demonstrates God, because, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, he is the permanent human being who is God in the flesh. Plus, he lives his life exactly as he should in conjunction with the activities of the Father, as Jesus will go on to explain in John 5. Certainly his demonstrating God to the world by virtue of his role includes the words that he speaks.

It is also not necessary or accurate to interpret Psalm 2:7 as referring specifically to Jesus and his origin in the Father in eternity past if we take into account all the language and concepts included in the Davidic Covenant starting with 2 Samuel 7. Even two commentaries, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, both describe Psalm 2 as a royal psalm that was used by the Davidic kings at the time of their coronations. As the apostles intimate in their prayer in Acts 4, this psalm really refers to Solomon and can be applied to each and every one of David's descendants as the kings of Israel.

We also notice in verse 8 of Psalm 2 that Solomon knows that all he has to do is ask of God and He will grant him the "nations as [his] inheritance" and the "ends of the earth as [his] possession." To say it another way, Solomon knows that, as the Son of God, he has the right to rule over the entire earth. Consequently, even David and any descendant after him who was King of Israel could claim to rule over the nations and the earth. This responsibility was not reserved only for the final king, Jesus, even though he carries out the responsibility to its greatest practical extent.

#### **Another Old Testament Passage About the Davidic Covenant – Psalm 8**

The notion that Israel's king rules over the nations and the earth is right in line with what David says of himself as the "Son of Man" and King of Israel in Psalm 8. Even though this psalm is most often interpreted as referring to only Genesis 1:28 where God gives to mankind in general the responsibility to rule over the earth, it makes more sense to see at it as David's response to God's having made the Davidic Covenant with him in 2 Samuel 7. Hence, in this psalm, David is clearly referring to himself specifically as the Son of God and Messiah and, therefore, to the other Davidic kings who will follow him, culminating in the final king, whom we know to be Jesus of Nazareth. We will consider more carefully the actual phrase "Son of Man" when we look at John 5:27.

First, here is the entirety of Psalm 8 –

**Psa. 8:1** O LORD, our Lord,

How majestic is Your name in all the earth,  
Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!

**Psa. 8:2** From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have  
established strength because of Your adversaries,  
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.

**Psa. 8:3** When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;

**Psa. 8:4** What is man that You take thought of him,

And the son of man that You care for him?  
**Psa. 8:5** Yet You have made him a little lower than God,  
And You crown him with glory and majesty!  
**Psa. 8:6** You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;  
You have put all things under his feet,  
**Psa. 8:7** All sheep and oxen, And also the beasts of the field,  
**Psa. 8:8** The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,  
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.  
**Psa. 8:9** O LORD, our Lord,  
How majestic is Your name in all the earth! (NAS95)

Certainly, verses 6-8 sound a lot like Genesis 1:28 in the creation account where Moses writes –

**Gen. 1:28** God blessed them [Adam and Eve]; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (NAS95)

In this passage, God is giving instructions to Adam and Eve to become the ancestors of many people who all have the responsibility to govern the earth. The implication also is that mankind should rule justly and carefully, knowing that he is tending the product of his Creator God. In other words, man should govern the earth wisely. In Psalm 8, is David referring to Genesis 1:28 and this universal mandate that God has given mankind? Perhaps to a degree, but not entirely. The way that we know this is by looking at David’s prayer right after God makes the Davidic Covenant with him.

We recall in 2 Samuel 7:12-16 that God says to David –

**2Sam. 7:12** “When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom.  
**2Sam. 7:13** “He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.  
**2Sam. 7:14** “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men,  
**2Sam. 7:15** but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.  
**2Sam. 7:16** “Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.”

We have already interpreted this passage as God’s promising to make David’s son, Solomon, His own Son, i.e., the Son of God, and to make David’s line of descendants with their kingdom last into perpetuity. We are now interested in the rest of 2 Samuel 7 where David expresses how overwhelmed he is with the honor and privilege that God is giving to him and to his descendants. It is a long prayer but worth quoting in its entirety for our purposes –

**2Sam. 7:18** Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD, and he said, “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?

**2Sam. 7:19** “And yet this was insignificant in Your eyes, O Lord GOD, for You have spoken also of the house of Your servant concerning the distant future. And this is the custom of man, O Lord GOD.

**2Sam. 7:20** “Again what more can David say to You? For You know Your servant, O Lord GOD!

**2Sam. 7:21** “For the sake of Your word, and according to Your own heart, You have done all this greatness to let Your servant know.

**2Sam. 7:22** “For this reason You are great, O Lord GOD; for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears.

**2Sam. 7:23** “And what one nation on the earth is like Your people Israel, whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself, and to do a great thing for You and awesome things for Your land, before Your people whom You have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, from nations and their gods?

**2Sam. 7:24** “For You have established for Yourself Your people Israel as Your own people forever, and You, O LORD, have become their God.

**2Sam. 7:25** “Now therefore, O LORD God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and his house, confirm it forever, and do as You have spoken,

**2Sam. 7:26** that Your name may be magnified forever, by saying, ‘The LORD of hosts is God over Israel’; and may the house of Your servant David be established before You.

**2Sam. 7:27** “For You, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made a revelation to Your servant, saying, ‘I will build you a house’; therefore Your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to You.

**2Sam. 7:28** “Now, O Lord GOD, You are God, and Your words are truth, and You have promised this good thing to Your servant.

**2Sam. 7:29** “Now therefore, may it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue forever before You. For You, O Lord GOD, have spoken; and with Your blessing may the house of Your servant be blessed forever.”

We can hear in this prayer both David’s humility and his surprise that God has not only chosen Abraham’s descendants through Isaac and Jacob, the Jews, to be His people to live on the land of Israel, but also chosen David and his descendants, his “house,” to rule over God’s people. David says, “Who am I, Lord, and what is my house, that You have brought me his far? This sounds like David’s words in Psalm 8 –

**Psa. 8:4** What is man that You take thought of him,  
And the son of man that You care for him? (NAS95)

The *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* interprets the phrase “son of man” in Psalm 8 as referring to mankind’s earthiness and frailty in contrast to God’s heavenliness and omnipotent strength, as though David is referring to all of humanity and to Genesis 1:28. However, if we take into account that God has made a covenant with David whereby David and his descendants will rule over Israel and that David expresses in 2 Samuel 7 his awe and surprise at such a gift from God, then it makes more sense to interpret David in Psalm 8:4 as calling the Son of God the Son of Man. He does so because he wants to emphasize the humanity of the person to whom God grants the authority to rule over the creation. In other words, Son of Man means the Son of God who comes from

mankind. We recall from Psalm 89 and Psalm 2 that not only is David the Son of God, but so also are Solomon and the rest of David's descendants who become kings over God's people, the Jews. Consequently, each of these kings is a Son of Man. Indeed, each man is also the Anointed One of God, the Messiah, the Christ, and David is commenting that each one is a frail human being. The Son of God, i.e, the Son of Man, is a man, subject to all the vicissitudes and dangers of human existence, including death. And yet, God has granted this Son of God, who is frail and weak, the responsibility of governing God's creation, a notion that we will explore in more detail in the next section when we consider the answers to the second and third questions posed above. However, a shorthand explanation is that God owns the whole earth, because He is the Creator of it, and He is commissioning the King of Israel to govern it. It is this same idea to which the apostle Paul is referring when he says in Colossians 1:15 that Jesus is the "firstborn of all creation" –

**Col. 1:15** He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (NAS95)

We have already explored this idea of the firstborn in Psalm 89 above. God referred to David as His firstborn as a way to indicate that David is "the highest of the kings of the earth" (v. 27). By calling Jesus "the firstborn of all creation," the apostle Paul means that Jesus not only holds the primary position and status of all human beings within the creation by being the final king of the Davidic Covenant, but also that he "inherits" the creation from God the Father and rules over it as this king. While, on a practical level, David and the other kings of Israel did not rule over the creation and, yet, had the right to do so as God's anointed ones of Israel, Jesus does rule over the whole creation as the final Davidic king. We will see how Jesus uses the phrase "Son of Man" to refer to himself in John 5:27, and we will see how it works, practically speaking, for Jesus to inherit the actual rule over the entirety of God's creation, while it did not for David and the other kings of Israel.

Before we conclude our search for the answer to the first question above about what Jesus means by calling God "my Father," let us think about what Paul means in Colossians 1:15 when he says that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God." The Greek word that Paul uses for "image" is εἰκὼν (*eikon*) from which we get our word icon. In Paul's day, the word meant portrait, likeness, or form, appearance. Is Jesus the portrait of God, or is Jesus the form or appearance of God? Which did Paul mean? If I am correct that the analogy of the author and book works to describe God as the transcendent Creator of the story in which we are living, then it makes sense that Paul is saying that Jesus is the appearance of God in the story. Jesus is the permanent, eternal, and human copy of God in creation history, unlike any other human being. This means that, if you see Jesus, then you see God—at least as much as the transcendent God can be seen within the novel that He is writing. Also, if you hear Jesus speaking, then you are hearing God as He speaks in the form of a human being named Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, Paul is saying not only that Jesus has the status of firstborn with respect to the Father, God, and that he inherits God's land of the creation and the eternal Kingdom of God, but He is also saying that Jesus is the very appearance and copy of God within the creation. In other words, Jesus is God.

In addition, the appearance of God as the man, Jesus, is obviously different from any other human being whom God says in Genesis 1:26 is made in the "image" and "likeness" of God –



**Gen. 1:26** Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”<sup>26</sup> (NAS95)

The Hebrew words **צֶלֶם** (*tselem*) and **דְמוּת** (*d<sup>e</sup>muth*) are translated “image” and “likeness” respectively in the NAS95. The Septuagint translates these words as **εἰκὼν** (*eikon*) and **ὁμοίωσις** (*homoiosis*). While the same word *eikon* is used to describe both mankind in general in Genesis 1:26 and Jesus in Colossians 1:15, it should be obvious that the meaning is different in the two verses. In Genesis, God is saying that all human beings have the potential to rule over the creation like Him, because He has endowed mankind with rational and moral capabilities. Nevertheless, human beings are not God in the creation. Yet, in Colossians 1:15, Paul is definitely saying that Jesus is God in the creation. God has written all sorts of human characters into His story, and these characters play the roles of strictly human beings. But God has written one permanent (cf. the discussion of Genesis 18 above) human character into the story, who plays the role of God in the story. This man is Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, the rest of mankind are each a “copy” of God in a very limited sense. Each human being has the same kind of ability to govern other things as God. However, Jesus is the only permanent and full “copy” of God who can actually call himself God and who rules the creation as the Son of God according to the Davidic Covenant.

Notice, however, that I interpret Genesis 1:26, when it says that human beings are made in the image of God, as meaning that they have the potential to rule. Sometimes, Bible teachers interpret being made in the image of God here as referring to man’s moral and rational capability, but let us look more closely at the whole context –

**Gen. 1:26** Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

**Gen. 1:27** God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

**Gen. 1:28** God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (NAS95)

We see in v. 28 that God commanded man to procreate extensively and fill the earth. Then, He also commanded man to subdue and rule over the “fish of the sea” and “birds of the sky” and “over every living thing that moves on the earth.” It certainly may

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<sup>26</sup> Many commentators interpret the “Us” in this verse as the trinity, indeed proof for the existence of the trinity. Other suggestions have been—1) that God is speaking to the heavenly court as in Gen. 3:22; 11:7, and Isaiah 6:8 (e.g., Dr. Bruce Waltke), 2) that God is encouraging Himself to complete this action (Cassuto), and 3) that God is using the royal “we” (?). Because of the scarcity of data, I think that the context lends itself best to the royal “we.” While all interpretations involve reading something into a text in the midst of reading out of the text the correct meaning, the other interpretations require reading more into the text than this one does. It also seems to fit best with the use of the plural word **אֱלֹהִים** (*Eloheem*) for God, i.e., as referring not to a plurality of persons within the Godhead, but to the majesty of God as the transcendent Creator. In any event, it seems to me to be utter foolishness to base one’s belief in the trinity on this verse and such scanty data—as some Christians are prone to do—and then to go on to read into the rest of the Bible a completely nonsensical notion, as though this substantiates the idea of the trinity.



not be a coincidence that David uses the same kind of language in Psalm 8 to refer to the authority that God is granting him as the king of Israel –

**Psa. 8:6** You make him [the Son of Man as king of the Jews, i.e., the Son of God who comes from mankind] to rule over the works of Your hands;  
You have put all things under his feet,

**Psa. 8:7** all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

**Psa. 8:8** the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, whatever passes through the paths of the seas. (NAS95)

God indeed made mankind to rule, and David already knew this. He had read it in Genesis 1. Plus, the fact that God made man in His image and according to His likeness means that He gave man the *capability* to exercise authority over the creation. And what characteristics are specifically required to rule well over anything? Rationality and morality. These God bestowed upon man. Now, though, having looked at the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7, we can see that ultimately God had in mind that He would endow one man in particular with these characteristics—Jesus of Nazareth, who would be not only the very human, final Davidic king according to the Davidic Covenant, but also God Himself within the story that He is writing.

We also see in v. 5 of Psalm 8 that there is more to this idea of man's ruling over creation. David says to God about the king of Israel –

**Psa. 8:5** Yet You have made him a little lower than God (אֱלֹהִים, 'eloheem) (LXX – ἀγγέλους, *angelous*, i.e., "angels"),  
And You crown him with glory and majesty!

The Hebrew text here and the Greek text of the LXX are confusing. On the one hand, the Hebrew text clearly says that God has made the king of Israel, i.e., the Son of God, a little lower than "God," while the LXX says that He has made him a little lower than "angels." Are these two versions of the Old Testaments saying different things? No. And the reason is because the Greek translators interpreted 'eloheem as *manifestations of God*. Without going into a long explanation, the author of Hebrews helps make this clear in chapters 1 & 2 when he quotes Psalm 8:5 as part of his argument that the Messiah is not a superordinary being like the "angels of Yahweh" in the Old Testament. In Hebrews 1, "angels" is typically interpreted as created, spiritual beings such as the angel Gabriel, who appeared to Zacharias and Mary in Luke 1. However, the author's argument leads to its making more sense to interpret "angels" as the "angels of Yahweh," who were manifestations of Yahweh in the Old Testament. For example, Exodus 3:2 refers to the burning bush as the "angel of Yahweh," i.e., the messenger of God, indeed the transcendent God and Creator Himself, appearing within the created reality to Moses to speak to him and to commission him to lead His people out of slavery from Egypt.

The issue in Hebrews is that some Jews had been expecting the Messiah to be a superordinary human being just as the burning bush was a superordinary bush. In other words, they expected God to manifest Himself as the Messiah, but the manifestation would be of a spectacular nature like the burning bush, so that the Messiah would be as easily recognizable and impossible to destroy as the burning bush. If a nuclear bomb had dropped on the burning bush, which would have been the more powerful—the bomb or the bush? Obviously, the answer is the bush, because it was God manifesting Himself within the creation. The Jews to whom the author of Hebrews is writing are thinking that Jesus cannot be the Messiah because he was not indestructible as a human being.

Indeed, he was crucified and died on a cross. Surely, a superordinary manifestation of God would not suffer and die. However, the author of Hebrews argues in chapters 1 and 2 that the Messiah had to be a normal human being ontologically in order to fulfill his role that required that he suffer and die. In order to help him in his argument, the author quotes David's response in Psalm 8 to God's making his son Solomon the king of Israel

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**Heb. 2:6** ... "WHAT IS MAN, THAT YOU REMEMBER HIM? OR THE SON OF MAN, THAT YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT HIM?"

**Heb. 2:7** "YOU HAVE MADE HIM FOR A LITTLE WHILE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS; YOU HAVE CROWNED HIM WITH GLORY AND HONOR, AND HAVE APPOINTED HIM OVER THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS;

**Heb. 2:8** YOU HAVE PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET." (NAS95)

Notice that v. 7 gets translated in the NAS95 as "You have made [the king of Israel] *for a little while* lower than the angels" (emphasis mine), while the Hebrew text of Psalm 8 says quite clearly, "Yet you made him a little lower than God." In other words, the translators of the NAS95 make the Greek word  $\beta\rho\alpha\chi\acute{\upsilon}$  (*brakoo*) of Hebrews 2:7 refer to time, while they make the Hebrew word of Psalm 8:5 מַעַלְמַת (*m<sup>e</sup>'at*) refer to status. We should note that the LXX also uses  $\beta\rho\alpha\chi\acute{\upsilon}$  (*brakoo*). In fact, the verse in Hebrews 2:7 is a direct quote from the LXX. Nevertheless, the argument of the author of Hebrews leads to its making sense that  $\beta\rho\alpha\chi\acute{\upsilon}$  (*brakoo*) refers to status and not time. Indeed, the NAS95 offers this possibility in the reference column. Therefore, it also makes sense that the LXX translators were interpreting the Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים (*'eloheem*) as manifestations of God, such as as the burning bush. Their thinking must have been that David was saying that God has made the king of Israel as the Son of God who comes from mankind just a little lower in status than Him, even a little lower in status than the manifestations of God within the creation, i.e., than the "angels of Yahweh," such as the burning bush.

Indeed, the translators' notion was entirely correct. The burning bush was God. In fact, one could say that the burning bush was the Creator and Ruler of the universe—the transcendent God who was manifesting Himself within the creation. Therefore, to make a human being the Son of God and grant him the responsibility to rule over the universe with the same authority as God is to make this human being "a little lower than God" and even "a little lower than the angels of Yahweh, the manifestations of God." So whether David was thinking precisely of God in His transcendence only or of God as a manifestation within the creation, the LXX translators were correct. God has "made [the Son of God, the king of Israel, even Solomon] a little lower in status and authority than God Himself, even the manifestations of God," and this is what is humbling David to no end.

We now have enough information from the Davidic Covenant to answer the first question posed above, "What does Jesus mean when he calls God 'my Father?'" The answer is that Jesus is claiming to be the final descendant of David who will rule forever over the eternal Kingdom of God, i.e., the Kingdom of David that lasts into perpetuity as promised by God in the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. The king of Israel is the Son of God, and God is his Father. While, on a practical level, David and his descendants did not rule over the whole earth with all its human inhabitants, much less its birds and fish, nevertheless they all had the right to exercise authority over the whole earth as the Son

of God, because they were ruling on behalf of God who Himself reigns as King over the entire creation, which leads us to the second and third questions posed above –

2. Why do the Jews think that by Jesus' calling God 'my Father' that he is claiming to be "equal with God?"
3. What did the Jews mean by the phrase "equal with God?"

### ***Answering The Second And Third Questions About Being "equal with God" – Leaders In The Ancient World***

Now that we have answered the first question by having taken a look at the Davidic Covenant, we can rephrase the second question in this way, "Why do the Jews think that by Jesus' saying that he is the final Davidic king that he is claiming to be 'equal with God'?" As I asked above, is it because they object to any human being's claiming to be equal with God? No. As I will explain in a moment, all the kings of the Ancient Near East claimed to be equal with their chief god, and the king of Israel was no exception. These Jews are not objecting to a man's claiming to equal to God. They are objecting to this particular man's doing such. They object to the fact that it is Jesus who is claiming to be equal with God, precisely because he is acting like a God-hater. In their opinion, he has broken the Mosaic Covenant by healing on the Sabbath and telling the man to carry his bedroll on the Sabbath. Such a person must hate God and, therefore, certainly has no right to claim to be equal with God.

In other words, the Jews have properly understood the Old Testament in the context of the Ancient Near East where all the peoples of that area believed that their kings were "equal" with their chief gods.<sup>27</sup> For example, the Pharaoh of Egypt was the "Son of Re," the sun god, and as such he was considered responsible to act as Re's agent and deputy on earth in order to preserve the divinely ordained order, the *ma'at* of Re. *Ma'at* meant well-being, stability, fertility, prosperity, and security for the people of Egypt. Thus, the Pharaoh as an ordinary human being ruled over the earth and the forces of nature with the same authority as Re, the sun god who ruled over the earth and the forces of nature. Psalm 47, where Yahweh is declared the "King over all the earth," uses the same logic and demonstrates the thinking of the Old Testament authors –

[Psa. 47:1](#) O clap your hands, all peoples; shout to God with the voice of joy.

[Psa. 47:2](#) For the LORD Most High [Yahweh Elyon] is to be feared, a great King over all the earth.

[Psa. 47:3](#) He subdues peoples under us and nations under our feet.

[Psa. 47:4](#) He chooses our inheritance for us, the glory of Jacob whom He loves.

[Psa. 47:5](#) God has ascended with a shout, the LORD, with the sound of a trumpet.

[Psa. 47:6](#) Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.

[Psa. 47:7](#) For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a skillful psalm.

[Psa. 47:8](#) God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the article labeled "King and Kingship" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* as well as the books *King and Messiah as Son of God* (2008) by Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, and *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (1997) by Othmar Keel.

**Psa. 47:9** The princes of the people have assembled themselves as the people of the God of Abraham, for the shields of the earth belong to God; He is highly exalted. (NAS95)

Here the psalmist declares that God, Yahweh, is the “King of all the earth.” He rules the nations and has complete authority over them, which is exactly why He can grant to His Son, the king of Israel (David and all his descendants) the right and responsibility to rule over all the earth also. God has borrowed a concept and practice from the other Ancient Near Eastern peoples that He has sovereignly brought about. In other words, because God determines the entirety of human history, He caused the other Ancient Near Eastern peoples to adopt the perspective that their kings were their chief god’s representative on earth and consequently ruled over their land with the same authority as their gods. God, then, uses this same perspective in His relationship with His people, Israel, and grants their king, His Son, to rule likewise. Therefore, God has borrowed what He has sovereignly caused. However, in God’s case, not only are His authority and rule truly real because God is the only one, true, real God, but also both the authority and the rule that He grants to the king of Israel are also truly real.

Still, if Pharaoh was considered Re’s agent on earth with the same authority as Re, then this authority made him “equal” with Re and “Lord of *ma’at*,” i.e., Lord of the divinely ordained order of Re. The word *ma’at* in Egyptian literature is often translated with the English word “justice” and corresponds to the Hebrew *mishpat*, which is also translated in our English Bibles as “justice,” because it comes from the Hebrew word שָׁפַט (*shaphat*), whose basic meaning is to rule or judge.

### ***An Excursus Into the Various Leaders of Israel***

Before proceeding with the notion of the Pharaoh’s “equality” with the sun god Re, we should consider the important concept of leadership within the ancient societies that will help us understand Jesus’ position and role within Israel and all of humanity as the one who is “equal” to God. There are at least six Hebrew words that refer to leaders and that we can look at –

1. שֹׁפְטִים (*shophteem*) – usually translated “judges” in our English Bibles; comes from the verb שָׁפַט (*shaphat*) that is also usually translated “judge” but, as I will show, really means more “rule, lead, teach, guide, mentor” (LXX – δικαστᾶι (*dikastai*) or κριτᾶι (*kritai*))
2. שְׁטָרִים (*shotreem*) – translated “officers” in the NAS95; the verb שָׁטַר (*shatar*) is not used in the Old Testament but comes from the Akkadian word for “write” (In the LXX the word is γραμματεὺς (*grammateus*), which means “scribe” and is the same word used in the New Testament in phrases such as “the scribes and Pharisees” (cf. John 8:3))
3. זְקֵנִים (*z<sup>e</sup>qayneem*) – translated “elders;” comes from the verb זָקַן (*zaqayn*) meaning to be old (LXX – πρεσβυτέρου (*presbuteroi*), from which we get our words Presbyterian and presbyter)
4. רִאשִׁים (*ra’sheem*) – translated “heads;” comes from the noun רֵאשִׁית meaning beginning (LXX – ἀρχηγοὶ (*archaygoi*), ἀρχαὶ (*archai*), or ἀρχοντες (*archontes*), from which we get the prefix “arch” as in archbishop)

5. נְשִׂיאִים (*n<sup>e</sup>see'eem*) – translated “leaders,” “rulers,” “princes,” “officials” in the NAS95; comes from the verb נָסָא (*nasa'*) meaning “carry, lift up” (LXX – ἄρχοντες (*archontes*), again, from which we get our word archbishop)
6. שָׂרִים (*sareem*) – translated as “officials,” “princes,” “commanders” in the NAS95; (LXX – ἄρχοντες, ἐπιστάτοι, etc.)

We hear the word “judge,” and we think of judgment and perhaps of God’s judgment of mankind, i.e., His evaluating the spiritual and moral decisions of human beings and either praising them if they are good or condemning them if they are evil. Thus, the following passage of God’s speaking in Joel sounds like what we would expect regarding the use of this word –

**Joel 3:1** “For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem,  
**Joel 3:2** I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat (יְהוֹשָׁפָט – lit. “Yahweh judges”). Then I will enter into judgment (נִשְׁפָּטֶה) (*v<sup>e</sup>nishpattee*) with them there on behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations; and they have divided up My land. (NAS95)

The entire book of Joel reads like a fantastical Hollywood script—the devastation of the land of Israel by swarming locusts, the ensuing starvation of the people, who are enveloped in darkness and gloom with thick clouds, along with fire burning and consuming the land, while the stars of heaven grow dim, and the moon turns to blood. Yet, God promises His people, Israel, deliverance and salvation, and He also promises that He will “judge” the nations who have rejected Him and mistreated His people. He will bring these nations into the valley of “*Yahweh Shaphat*,” lit. Yahweh judges, and there He will tread the wine press of judgment. Thus, God will destroy these nations, which is exactly what we expect by the use of the word “judge” as further supported by Isaiah –

**Is. 66:16** For the LORD [Yahweh] will execute judgment (נִשְׁפָּט) (*nishpat*) by fire and by His sword on all flesh, and those slain by the LORD will be many. (NAS95)

Next, we consider a passage in Joshua after the Israelites have entered into the promised land at the conclusion of their journey from Egypt when God had rescued them from slavery (cf. Exodus and Numbers). In this passage, four of the six terms above are used in one verse –

**Josh. 23:1** Now it came about after many days, when the LORD [Yahweh] had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side, and Joshua was old, advanced in years,  
**Josh. 23:2** that Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders (זְקֵנִים) (*z<sup>e</sup>qayneem*) and their heads (רָאשִׁים) (*ra'sheem*) and their judges (שֹׁפְטִים) (*shophteem*) and their officers (שְׂטָרִים) (*shotreem*), and said to them, “I am old, advanced in years.

**Josh. 23:3** “And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the LORD your God is He who has been fighting for you.

**Josh. 23:4** “See, I have apportioned to you these nations which remain as an inheritance for your tribes, with all the nations which I have cut off, from the Jordan even to the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun.

**Josh. 23:5** “The LORD your God, He will thrust them out from before you and drive them from before you; and you will possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you.

**Josh. 23:6** “Be very firm, then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left,

**Josh. 23:7** so that you will not associate with these nations, these which remain among you, or mention the name of their gods, or make anyone swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them. (NAS95)

Sometime around the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C., after the Israelites have entered into the land of Israel that God had promised them through Abraham, Joshua is coming to the end of his life and he is transferring the leadership of the people to a group of men. It could be that the words in v. 2, “elders,” “heads,” “judges,” and “officers,” are synonymous, but, as we will see, I think each term refers to a different group of men. Nevertheless, together they constitute the current leadership of the Jews under Joshua. However, Joshua will soon be gone, and this group of men will be responsible for leading Israel. What will be their primary purpose? We see in v. 26 that it is “to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses,” i.e., to obey the Mosaic Covenant with hearts that are truly oriented toward God. Then, as leaders, their responsibility will be to guide the people in doing exactly the same thing. In what form will their guidance take place? Consider the use of the term “judge” in Exodus 18 where we read about Moses, who has led the people of Israel out of Egypt, so that they are now dwelling in the Sinai Desert. This passage also describes Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, a Midianite, who has heard what Moses has done and brings to him his wife and children. Moses had left them behind in the land of Midian when God ordered him to return to Egypt from the Sinai desert and lead the Israelites out from their slavery –

**Ex. 18:13** It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge (שֹׁפֵט) (*sh<sup>e</sup>phot*) the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening.

**Ex. 18:14** Now when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?”

**Ex. 18:15** Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God.

**Ex. 18:16** “When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.” (NAS95)

We learn from this passage that “judge” means to “make known the statutes of God and His laws” in situations where there is a “dispute...between a man and his neighbor.” In other words, the people view Moses, the “judge,” as the interpreter, teacher, and



guide in regard to the Mosaic Covenant. His responsibility is to mentor the Israelites when they “inquire of God” and want to know what He, God, thinks that they ought to do in obedience to the covenant. The word “dispute” is literally the Hebrew word for thing or word, i.e., דָּבָר (*davar*). In the context of Exodus 18, “dispute” seems to fit, because Moses says that he judges “between a man and his neighbor.” However, we see that this is really only one aspect of his judging. The overall leadership that Moses is providing in regard to the Mosaic Covenant is instructing the Israelites in how they should behave in order to obey it. Therefore, someone could come to him and present a situation that does not involve a conflict with another Israelite. He is just not sure exactly how to behave in a particular situation, perhaps in order to prevent a conflict that has not yet occurred. Consequently, Moses is a moral mentor, a guide in how to live a good and moral life within Jewish society under the authority of God and the Mosaic Covenant. Moses is the people’s rabbi. Therefore, “judge” is not the best translation of the word שָׁפֵט (*sh<sup>e</sup>phot*) in v. 13. Certainly, “lead, teach, guide, or interpret [the Mosaic Covenant]” all are better.

Notice that Jethro asks Moses why he is performing his task alone, because he is concerned for Moses as the passage goes on to show –

**Ex. 18:17** Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good.

**Ex. 18:18** “You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.

**Ex. 18:19** “Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people’s representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God,

**Ex. 18:20** then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do.

**Ex. 18:21** “Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders (שָׂרִים) (*sareem*) of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.

**Ex. 18:22** “Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.

**Ex. 18:23** “If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.” (NAS95)

First, we see that Jethro recognizes the important individual role that Moses is playing in Israelite society, and he encourages Moses to continue playing this role. Moses is “the people’s representative before God.” The word “representative” is not actually in the Hebrew text. There is only a prepositional phrase, מוֹלֵל הָאֱלֹהִים (*mool ha’eloheem*), which means “opposite God.” Thus, Moses stands opposite, or before, God on behalf of both God and the people. He learns from God via the Mosaic Covenant the wisdom that he needs to convey to the people regarding how they should obey God, and he learns from the people what issues they have in regard to their desires to obey God.

In addition, Jethro is suggesting that Moses delegate the responsibility of “judging,” i.e., guiding, the people in how they should live according to the Mosaic Covenant. Certainly, Moses knows the covenant best, because he is the one who has written it down that it may be read to future generations, in order that they will know how to obey God. In the meantime, Moses will continue to be “the people’s representative before God,” who brings “the disputes to God” and “teach[es] them the statute and the laws” for how they should obey God. But he should also select a few good men to be “leaders” (שָׂרִים) (*sareem*) over smaller groups within society, in order that they can share the burden with him. Moses takes Jethro’s advice as the text goes on to say –

**Ex. 18:24** So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said.

**Ex. 18:25** Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads (רָאשִׁים) (*rasheem*) over the people, leaders (שָׂרִים) (*sareem*) of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.

**Ex. 18:26** They judged (שָׁפְטוּ) (*shophtoo*) the people at all times; the difficult dispute (דָּבָר) (*davar*) they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute (דָּבָר) (*davar*) they themselves would judge (יִשְׁפְּטוּ) (*yishpootoo*).

**Ex. 18:27** Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way into his own land. (NAS95)

In following his father-in-law’s advice, Moses appoints “heads” (רָאשִׁים) (*ra’sheem*) and “leaders” (שָׂרִים) (*sareem*) who have the same responsibility that he has, to “judge” (שָׁפְטוּ) (*shophtoo*) the people regarding every difficult “dispute,” literally “thing,” דָּבָר (*davar*). Therefore, in Exodus 18:13-27, three of our six words above are used to describe the same basic idea of interpreting the Mosaic Covenant along with teaching, leading, guiding, and mentoring the people of Israel in how they should obey it and live good, moral lives before God.

Later, in the story of the Israelites’ journey across the Sinai Desert to the land of Israel, they complain about the food that God is providing them. They remember the meat, fish, and home-grown vegetables that were plentiful in Egypt. Now all they have is the manna that drops from the sky, and they are tired of it. God responds to their complaining by setting fire to the outskirts of their camp. However, the people continue to weep over the lack of better tasting food. In the midst of the people’s criticisms, Moses feels the burden of leading such a whiney group of people, and he complains to God –

**Num. 11:11** So Moses said to the LORD [Yahweh], “Why have You been so hard on Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me?”

**Num. 11:12** “Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers’?”

**Num. 11:13** “Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, ‘Give us meat that we may eat!’”

**Num. 11:14** “I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me.”

**Num. 11:15** “So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness.” (NAS95)

Speaking of whining, but God graciously answers Moses –

**Num. 11:16** The LORD [Yahweh] therefore said to Moses, “Gather for Me seventy men from the elders (זִקְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל) (*z<sup>e</sup>qayneem*) of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers (שְׂטָרִים) (*shotreem*) and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you.

**Num. 11:17** “Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not bear [it] all alone.

We notice that God speaks of the “elders of Israel,” but this is not the first use of the word “elders” in the Old Testament. In Genesis 50, Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, has died, and Joseph, who is vice-pharaoh of Egypt decides to fulfill his father’s request and bury him in the land of Canaan. Moses writes –

**Gen. 50:7** So Joseph went up to bury his father, and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders (זִקְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל) (*z<sup>e</sup>qayneem*) of his household and all the elders (זִקְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל) (*z<sup>e</sup>qayneem*) of the land of Egypt,

**Gen. 50:8** and all the household of Joseph and his brothers and his father’s household; they left only their little ones and their flocks and their herds in the land of Goshen. (NAS95)

In Genesis 50, we see that “elders” is a term used in not only Israelite society but also in the Egyptian social structure, and, therefore, probably throughout all Ancient Near Eastern peoples. What is the function of these elders? In light of the passage from Joshua 23 that we considered above where four of the above words are used in the same verse, the “elders” probably are the wise, respected older men in a society who have gained their wisdom through various experiences of the long years of life. In addition, they know and understand the laws of the land and can interpret them properly for the people who come to them for advice on how to live well in their society.

In the case of Numbers 11:16, where God tells Moses to gather together seventy “elders” who will help him lead the people, Moses surely would include the twelve leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. God speaks of them at the beginning of the book of Numbers in the passage from which the book derives its English name –

**Num. 1:1** Then the LORD [Yahweh] spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying,

**Num. 1:2** “Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head

**Num. 1:3** from twenty years old and upward, whoever is able to go out to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies.

Num. 1:4 “With you, moreover, there shall be a man of each tribe, each one head (רֹשׁ) (*rosh*) of his father’s household.

Num. 1:5 “These then are the names of the men who shall stand with you: of Reuben, Elizur the son of Shedeur;

Num. 1:6 of Simeon, Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai;

Num. 1:7 of Judah, Nahshon the son of Amminadab;

Num. 1:8 of Issachar, Nethanel the son of Zuar;

Num. 1:9 of Zebulun, Eliab the son of Helon;

Num. 1:10 of the sons of Joseph: of Ephraim, Elishama the son of Ammihud; of Manasseh, Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur;

Num. 1:11 of Benjamin, Abidan the son of Gideoni;

Num. 1:12 of Dan, Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai;

Num. 1:13 of Asher, Pagiel the son of Ocran;

Num. 1:14 of Gad, Eliasaph the son of Deuel;

Num. 1:15 of Naphtali, Ahira the son of Enan.

Num. 1:16 “These are they who were called of the congregation, the leaders (נְשִׂימָיִם) (*n<sup>e</sup>see’eem*) of their fathers’ tribes; they were the heads (רֹאשֵׁימָהֵם) (*ra’sheem*) of divisions of Israel.” (NAS95)

In the last verse of this passage, God calls these twelve men the “leaders” (נְשִׂימָיִם) (*n<sup>e</sup>see’eem*) and “heads” (רֹאשֵׁימָהֵם) (*ra’sheem*) of their tribes. As such, their responsibility would be the same as any leader of the people—to guide and mentor them in their daily obedience to God according to the Mosaic Covenant. Subsequently, a thousand years later in Israel’s history, God uses the same word נְשִׂימָיִם (*n<sup>e</sup>see’eem*) in Ezekiel to refer to all the leaders of Israel –

Ezek. 21:12 “Cry out and wail, son of man [Ezekiel]; for it is against My people, it is against all the officials (נְשִׂימָיִם) (*n<sup>e</sup>see’eem*) of Israel. They are delivered over to the sword with My people, therefore strike your thigh.” (NAS95)

Here, God is pronouncing to the whole nation that He is going to destroy them for their disobedience, and He explicitly mentions all their leaders (נְשִׂימָיִם) (*n<sup>e</sup>see’eem*), who should have been guiding them better in obeying the Mosaic Covenant, but they are not.

We also notice that God’s answer to Moses in Numbers 11:16 includes not only the “elders” of Israel but also their “officers.” The Hebrew word for “officers” (שְׂטָרִים) (*shotreem*) apparently comes from the Akkadian word “to write,”<sup>28</sup> which must be why the LXX translates it with γραμματεῖς (*grammateys*). This last word is used in the New Testament and is typically translated “scribes.” We can surmise that these are the men who write down the issues that the elders have to deal with among the people. We do not know exactly what their writing materials are, and it is certainly suspect whether they had much in the desert. However, even if they did not write things down as Moses did, for example, when he wrote the first five books of the Bible, we can assume that they are responsible for at least remembering what the issues are and who is involved in them.

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<sup>28</sup> See the article on שָׂטַר (*shtr*) in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, 2000

Thus, God wants Moses to assemble both the “elders” and “their scribes.” The “elders” help Moses guide the people in their living out the Mosaic Covenant, and the “scribes” help the “elders” keep everything organized in regard to the commandments of the covenant and the issues that the people are concerned about. Both these groups of men will share Moses’ burden of leading the Israelites, who are bored with eating only manna and have become such a difficult group of people.

Finally, the book of Judges makes it clear that this office of top leadership among the Israelites includes the responsibility of leading Israel against their enemies –

**Judg. 2:16** Then the LORD [Yahweh] raised up judges (שֹׁפְטִים) (*shophtheem*) who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them.

**Judg. 2:17** Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers.

**Judg. 2:18** When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them.

**Judg. 2:19** But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways.

The above passage describes the cycle that Israel went through for many years. They would obey God and live securely on the land of Israel. Then, they would disobey Him, and God would bring their enemies upon them to oppress them. Soon, the Israelites would cry out to God for deliverance, and He would raise up a judge (שֹׁפֵט) (*shophayt*) to lead them against their enemies, defeat them, and then lead the Israelites in obeying the Mosaic Covenant. However, after each judge died, the people would return to their rebellious ways, and the cycle would repeat. We see from this passage that the “judge,” i.e., the leader/mentor of the people, is also the military leader in the field of battle against their foreign enemies. Then, once the enemies are defeated, his main responsibility is to guide the Israelites in obeying the Mosaic Covenant, which is exactly what will keep them secure, because God subjects them to the oppression of their enemies only when they have been unfaithful to the covenant.

The concept of military leader as “judge” was also true among the surrounding nations, because it becomes the basis for the Israelites’ eventually asking for a king during the time that Samuel was judge, indeed the final “judge” *per se* of Israel –

**1Sam. 8:1** And it came about when Samuel was old that he appointed his sons judges (שֹׁפְטִים) (*shopteem*) over Israel.

**1Sam. 8:2** Now the name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judging in Beersheba.

**1Sam. 8:5** and they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us (לְשֹׁפֵטֵנוּ) (*shophstaynoo*) like all the nations.”

**1Sam. 8:6** But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD [Yahweh].

**1Sam. 8:7** The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them.

**1Sam. 8:8** “Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day — in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods — so they are doing to you also.

**1Sam. 8:9** “Now then, listen to their voice; however, you shall solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will reign over them.”

**1Sam. 8:10** So Samuel spoke all the words of the LORD to the people who had asked of him a king.

**1Sam. 8:11** He said, “This will be the procedure of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and place them for himself in his chariots and among his horsemen and they will run before his chariots.

**1Sam. 8:12** “He will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and of fifties, and some to do his plowing and to reap his harvest and to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots.

**1Sam. 8:13** “He will also take your daughters for perfumers and cooks and bakers.

**1Sam. 8:14** “He will take the best of your fields and your vineyards and your olive groves and give them to his servants.

**1Sam. 8:15** “He will take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards and give to his officers and to his servants.

**1Sam. 8:16** “He will also take your male servants and your female servants and your best young men and your donkeys and use them for his work.

**1Sam. 8:17** “He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his servants.

**1Sam. 8:18** “Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

**1Sam. 8:19** Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, and they said, “No, but there shall be a king over us,

**1Sam. 8:20** that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us (וְשִׁפְטָנוּ) (*oosh<sup>e</sup>phatanoo*) and go out before us and fight our battles.” (NAS95)

Certainly, the Israelites are not asking for someone to guide them morally and lead them in battle against their enemies as though no one currently exists in Israel with this responsibility. In fact, Samuel is this very person. However, he is getting older and probably less agile with a sword and shield. In addition, the people point out that his sons, whom he has appointed to succeed him, are not ethically qualified. They are not walking in the ways of their father and of God. So the Israelites come up with what appears to be the novel idea of having a king “like all the nations” who surround them. Again, the problem is not with their wanting someone to lead them morally and militarily. The kings of the other nations are also considered “judges” as the parallelism of Psalm 2:10 shows –



**Psa. 2:10** Now therefore, O kings, show discernment; take warning, O judges (שֹׁפְטֵי־אֲדָמָה) (*shophteem*) of the earth. (NAS95)

Therefore, it would appear as though the problem with the Israelites' request is that they want a human being who possesses the label "king," because God goes on to say in 1 Samuel 8:7-8 that He is supposed to be their only "King." Thus, at least for the time being, God wants the leaders of the Israelites to be called only "judges," "elders," "leaders," "officers," and "scribes," even though they function in the same way as a king would. And the reason why the Israelites' leaders are restricted to these titles is because God is their King. About three hundred years later around 700 B.C., Isaiah proclaims the same idea about God –

**Is. 33:22** For the LORD [Yahweh] is our judge (שֹׁפְטָנוּ) (*shophtaynoo*), the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; He will save us. (NAS95)

Notice the parallel ideas here. God is "judge," "lawgiver," and "king." He has given the Israelites the definition of morality in the Mosaic Covenant. Therefore, He is the ultimate teacher and guide of morality through the "elders" of Israel and other leaders. He is also their ultimate military leader. Why, then, is God opposed to the Israelites' having a king who leads them morally and militarily when He has endorsed their elders, judges, officers, and leaders to do the same thing? What is it about a king that is different from these other leaders? We know that a king, in the people's eyes, would share equally with God the authority to rule over the creation, the nations, and the Israelites due to this cultural norm in the Ancient Near East. Is God saying that He does not want to share His authority in this way with a human being? No, because God does end up sharing it with David and his descendants, especially Jesus, via the Davidic Covenant.

Therefore, the issue in 1 Samuel 8 is actually one of timing and the condition of the Israelites' hearts. Consider what God said five hundred years earlier through Moses in Deuteronomy –

**Deut. 17:14** "When you enter the land which the LORD [Yahweh] your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,'

**Deut. 17:15** you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman.

**Deut. 17:16** "Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.'

**Deut. 17:17** "He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.

**Deut. 17:18** "Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law [the Mosaic Covenant] on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests.

**Deut. 17:19** "It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes,

[Deut. 17:20](#) that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel.” (NAS95)

The question is whether this passage is predicting exactly what happens in 1 Samuel 8 when the Israelites demand of Samuel to give them a king, or is it referring to something God was planning to do anyway? The language in Deuteronomy 17:14, “and you say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,’” certainly sounds like the 1 Samuel 8 event. However, on the basis of all that the Bible is teaching about Jesus’ purpose and destiny to rule over the entire creation in the eternal Kingdom of God, we can say that God is telling the Israelites in Deuteronomy that, at the right time, it will be appropriate for the Israelites to request a human king to lead them. Indeed, this is God’s project from eternity past into eternity future. And what will also make the Israelite’s request an appropriate one is that they will ask God for a human king from hearts of genuine belief, acknowledging God as their ultimate King. The problem, therefore, in 1 Samuel 8 is that it is not the right time and the people are not asking from a position of genuine belief. Their request is coming from rejection of God, not from belief in God, which is why God likens them to their ancestors and previous generations who for five hundred years since about 1500 B.C. have worshiped false gods instead of Him.

Eventually, God was going to give the Israelites a king in order that He could make a covenant with him and declare him and his descendants to be His “Son” while He would be their “Father.” Such a relationship between a human being and God comes about through the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. However, the Israelites are jumping the gun. If they waited and made their request with genuine belief, then God would gladly and willingly give them a king. By waiting for God to bring about the monarchy in Israel in His own good time, they would still be acknowledging God to be their ultimate “King” with the human king as His proxy and representative who had the right to rule over the universe. However, they want a king now! Therefore, as God says, they are rejecting God as their King who would have eventually given them a human king. Now they are becoming their own “king” by demanding a king apart from God’s initiating the idea in their society. Perhaps it is because of the Israelites’ impatience that God picks the first king, Saul, but never calls him His “Son.” It is as though God is saying, “Ok, I will provide you with what I was planning to give you anyway, but I refuse to view the first king as you do, as someone who shares equally my authority to rule over the creation. However, later, in fact during the reign of the second king, I will institute My covenant which will invoke this idea, and it will endure into eternity.”

In addition, because the Israelites are currently rejecting God in 1 Samuel 8, their kings, at least until the last one who will be Jesus, will abuse their authority over the people. They will take their sons and daughters and force them to serve them in undesirable ways. Nevertheless, the story continues with God’s granting the people their request by Saul’s becoming the first king and David’s succeeding him. We now know, though, that God makes a covenant with David, not with Saul, and states that his kingdom will endure into eternity. Thus, God eventually adopts the Ancient Near Eastern idea of a “Son of God” who rules with equal authority to Him, and Jesus becomes the final and eternal human king of Israel.

When we get to John 5:19-30 and Jesus speaks about the Father’s having granted “all judgment” to him as the “Son,” we will draw further from this discussion on Israel’s leaders.

### ***End of Excursus Into the Various Leaders of Israel***

Before we draw further on the discussion of the various leaders of Israel, let us continue our exploration of the issue of Pharaoh's being considered the sun god Re's agent on earth with the same authority as Re. I stated above that having such authority made him "equal" with Re and "Lord of *ma'at*," i.e., Lord of the divinely ordained order of Re. While the word *ma'at* in Egyptian literature is often translated with the English word "justice," it also corresponds to the Hebrew *mishpat*, which is also translated in our English Bibles as "justice." *Mishpat* comes from the Hebrew word מִשְׁפָּט (*shaphat*), whose basic meaning is to mentor, lead, rule, and judge. For example, Solomon, a Davidic king himself, requests of God in Psalm 72 that He grant the king *mishpateem*, "judgments" (or "justices" if we would want to translate it as such) –

**Psa. 72:1** Give the king Your judgments (מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ (*mishpateem*)), O God, and Your righteousness to the king's son.

**Psa. 72:2** May he judge (יִדְרֹךְ (*yadeen*)) Your people with righteousness and Your afflicted with justice (בְּמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ (*b<sup>e</sup>mishpateem*)).

**Psa. 72:3** Let the mountains bring peace (שְׁלוֹמִים (*shalom*)) to the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

**Psa. 72:4** May he vindicate the afflicted of the people, save the children of the needy and crush the oppressor.

**Psa. 72:5** Let them fear You while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

**Psa. 72:6** May he come down like rain upon the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

**Psa. 72:7** In his days may the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace (שְׁלוֹמִים (*shalom*)) till the moon is no more.

**Psa. 72:8** May he also rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

**Psa. 72:9** Let the nomads of the desert bow before him, and his enemies lick the dust.

**Psa. 72:10** Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts.

**Psa. 72:11** And let all kings bow down before him, all nations serve him.

**Psa. 72:12** For he will deliver the needy when he cries for help, the afflicted also, and him who has no helper.

**Psa. 72:13** He will have compassion on the poor and needy, and the lives of the needy he will save.

**Psa. 72:14** He will rescue their life from oppression and violence, and their blood will be precious in his sight;

**Psa. 72:15** So may he live, and may the gold of Sheba be given to him; and let them pray for him continually; let them bless him all day long.

**Psa. 72:16** May there be abundance of grain in the earth on top of the mountains; its fruit will wave like the cedars of Lebanon; and may those from the city flourish like vegetation of the earth.

**Psa. 72:17** May his name endure forever; may his name increase as long as the sun shines; and let men bless themselves by him; let all nations call him blessed.

**Psa. 72:18** Blessed be the LORD God [Yahweh Eloheem], the God of Israel, who alone works wonders.

**Psa. 72:19** And blessed be His glorious name forever; and may the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen, and Amen. (NAS95)

In this psalm, Solomon asks God to give *mishpateem* to him and his sons, who will be kings of Israel after him. It is also clear that this gift from God will allow the kings to rule with righteousness and morality, as well as bring about deliverance from oppression for the needy and poor. These well-ruling kings will also provide the whole nation of Israel with “peace,” i.e., *shalom* (well-being). In addition, there will be an abundance of food for all the people. Plus, the divinely-given *mishpateem* will allow the kings to receive the respect of all other kings and rulers on earth. Notice in v. 11 that Solomon says, “Let all kings bow down before [the king].” Solomon is asking that God lead the kings of all the Gentile nations to show their deepest respect to him and his descendants who will succeed him as king. The Hebrew word “bow down” is *קָוָה* (*kavah*) and is translated in the LXX with *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*). Both words can mean worship in the sense of worshiping God, i.e., ascribing to Him worth, value, and majesty that is due only God. But notice that Solomon is talking about himself and other ordinary, even sinful, human beings. Therefore, when he speaks of other kings “worshiping” him, he does not mean worship in the same sense as worshiping God. He means only respect and obedience by the kings of the earth toward Yahweh’s king of Israel, even Solomon himself. Why should the other kings respect and obey God’s earthly king? Because God’s king, whether Solomon or one of his descendants, is “equal with God” in his authority and rule over God’s creation. Consequently, by virtue of Solomon’s office and role as God’s human representative and deputy who rules over the earth, he and all future Davidic kings deserve this level of respect and obedience from other human kings and, of course, their subjects.

Christians usually assume that in John 5 Jesus is claiming to be “equal with God” because of his ontology—because he is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity and part of his nature and being is divine. Therefore, they assume that, even though Jesus is fully human, he has the same divine essence as the Father, the 1<sup>st</sup> person of the trinity. They also believe that Jesus’ preexistence and divine ontology are the main reason why human beings should bow down before him. In other words, we should respect Jesus partly because of his role as king over the eternal Kingdom of God, but mostly because his divine essence which makes him ontologically God at the same time that he is ontologically a human being. Thus, while we should certainly *show respect* to a human king, we should *worship* Jesus, who is God.

However, we need to consider two things. The first is that, in Psalm 72 above, Solomon predicts in v. 11 that the kings of the earth will bow down (*προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*) in the LXX) before him and his descendants who are all ordinary, sinful human beings, simply because of the role that they are performing as God’s kings and representatives on earth. In other words, it is not because of Solomon’s divine essence that others will respect him, but because of his status and the responsibility which God has given to him to maintain God’s divinely ordained order on earth. Therefore, Solomon is “equal with God” because God has assigned him the responsibility to rule over His creation with the same authority as God. In the same way, because Jesus and the Jews are most likely following the line of reasoning of the Old Testament, including that found in Psalm 72, then they are connecting the phrase “my Father” to the phrase “equal with God” and interpreting both of them as referring to the Messiah’s *role* and not to his *ontological nature or essence*. For Jesus to call God “my Father” and for the Jews to

think that he is saying that he is “equal with God” is to understand Jesus to be claiming to be the Davidic king whose responsibility is to rule over the creation with the same authority as God—just like David, Solomon, Rehoboam, et al. Nevertheless, in this case, the Davidic king happens to God Himself within the story of creation.

The second thing to consider is that the notion of two persons of the Godhead who have existed from eternity past is simply logically untenable, which, I realize, does not bother most Christians.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it becomes the very reason why they believe the trinity is true. For example, I heard a Christian radio talk show host claim that the whole idea of the trinity is illogical and that this is the very reason why we should believe that it is true. Then, the co-host of the show, his wife, sung his praises after he said such nonsense (the World English Dictionary defines nonsense as “something that has or makes no sense”<sup>30</sup>), because she considered him so wise in his understanding of God.<sup>31</sup>

But does it really make sense to believe what does not make sense? Even this question is self-refuting. No one would claim that it is appropriate to believe something that does not make sense in the ordinary world. Why do Christians feel that it is

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<sup>29</sup> In his book, *Making Sense of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 2000), Millard Erickson claims that this was the case for Søren Kierkegaard, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher and theologian, who stated that the Christian faith is “inherently paradoxical...because it offends the rational intellect” (pg. 44). However, Erickson is misunderstanding Kierkegaard. The reason why the biblical message is paradoxical for Kierkegaard is not because it offends the “rational intellect,” but because it offends the rebellious and hostile intellect that is inherent in all human beings. I know that Kierkegaard’s own take on rationality is a controversial issue, but he certainly upholds rationality while acknowledging mankind’s natural rebellion toward rationality in his lengthy and difficult explanation in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.

<sup>30</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nonsense>

<sup>31</sup> A classic example of how confused and yet confident people can be on this issue is Anselm of Canterbury, who wrote in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In one of his treatises, *Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man)*, he argues that God cannot extend mercy to sinners without His justice being satisfied, and the death of Christ provides such justice. The treatise is in the form of a dialogue between himself and a hypothetical interlocutor, Boso. Boso asks the questions and Anselm answers them. Yet, on occasion, Anselm asks Boso if he understands what he has just said, and Boso basically replies quite often either, “What you say is logical” or, “I cannot object to your reasoning” (cf. Chapter 12 of Book 1). In other words, the author of the treatise, Anselm, is assuming that the truth of why God became a man is logical and rational. Anselm even introduces his dialogue with the explicit statement, “Many of our holy Fathers and teachers, following the Apostles, speak frequently and on a grand scale about the logical principles of our faith. Their aim is to confute un wisdom, to shatter the rigid resistance of unbelievers and to nourish those who, with cleansed hearts, already take delight in this same logic of the faith, for which, once we have reached certitude about it, we ought to hunger” (emphasis mine). Notice that Anselm confidently proclaims that certainty of faith is found in the logic of the message of the gospel. But then, in another treatise entitled *On The Incarnation Of The Word*, where Anselm “argues” that the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity became a man, he says, “And before I discuss [this issue], I shall make a prefatory comment. I do so to curb the presumption of those who, since they are unable to understand intellectually [because they call into question the logic and rationality of] things the Christian faith professes, and with foolish pride think that there cannot in any way be things that they cannot understand [or at least are illogical], with unspeakable rashness dare to argue against such things rather than with humble wisdom admit their possibility. Indeed, *no Christian ought to argue how things that the Catholic Church sincerely believes and verbally professes are so*, but always adhering to the same faith without hesitation, but loving it, and by humbly living according to it, a Christian ought to argue how they are, inasmuch as one can look for reasons. If one can understand, one should thank God; if one cannot, one should bow one’s head in veneration rather than sound off trumpets” (emphasis mine). I have no problem admitting that some biblical truths are hard to understand and that I do not understand them very well at all. But notice that Anselm basically says, “If the intellectual heavies within the Church, e.g., theologians, creeds, seminary professors, senior pastors, et al., claim that something is true, regardless of how much nonsense it is, shut up and believe it!” I have at least one question here. Why on the one hand does Anselm extol logic as the means to understand why God became a man while suppressing logic as a means to understand the trinity? Does the Bible really allow us to pick and choose when logic and rationality are applicable in understanding God and reality and when they are not? As the wife of the radio talk show host seemed to think, indeed it does. I do not agree, and I have not been able to find anyone who can convincingly demonstrate otherwise, except by classing me as a heretic and trying to intimidate me into changing my mind by claiming that I am unwelcome in “orthodox” churches—churches that teach the gospel of grace, which is God’s undeserved mercy, which apparently I do not deserve to hear, because I am too undeserving to receive God’s undeserved mercy.

necessary to think that it makes sense to believe something that does not make sense in the divine world? Because some biblical scholar, or church leader, or church council, or centuries of tradition are saying so? Should I really believe that a biblical scholar is making sense when he tells me that it makes sense for him to tell me to believe what does not make sense, especially because centuries of Christians have chosen to believe what does not make sense? And why do Christians even think that the Bible teaches such nonsense? Perhaps because of passages such as Isaiah 55:6-9 –

[Is. 55:6](#) Seek the LORD [Yahweh] while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.

[Is. 55:7](#) Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

[Is. 55:8](#) “For My thoughts are not your thoughts; nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD.

[Is. 55:9](#) “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.” (NAS95)

God is clearly saying in this passage that His thoughts are different from those of all human beings. And we usually jump to the conclusion that He means that all His thoughts are logically and rationally different from the thoughts of all human beings, i.e., that human beings cannot understand God’s thoughts because His thoughts involve a different logic from ours. However, the context (vs. 6 & 7) is referring to the wicked. It is referring to people who are behaving in evil, wicked, and rebellious ways toward God. These people are the ones whose thoughts are different from God’s. Therefore, by saying that His thoughts and ways are not those of the wicked and that His thoughts and ways are higher than those of the wicked, is God claiming that His thoughts are illogical and do not make sense, and that such nonsense should especially include any thoughts regarding God as a trinity of coeternal persons? Is God claiming that it is acceptable for the truth to be that God the Father brought about the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, and yet the latter has no beginning, because he is coeternal with God the Father—as traditional trinitarians claim by saying that the Son is eternally begotten (birthed, caused) by the Father?<sup>32</sup> Is God claiming that it is acceptable to believe that the coeternal, transcendent 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity became a human being while continuing to transcend the creation, i.e., that Jesus is made of divine, uncreated “material” while he is also made of created material—as traditional trinitarians claim by saying that Jesus is the hypostatic union of the human and the divine?<sup>33</sup> Or is God even saying that He is

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<sup>32</sup> cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 88-89, “There is a certain order in the ontological Trinity. In personal subsistence the Father first, the Son second, and the Holy Spirit third. It need hardly be said that this order does not pertain to any priority of time or of essential dignity, but only to the logical order of derivation. The Father is neither begotten by, nor proceeds from any other person; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son from all eternity.”

<sup>33</sup> cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 321, “In the year 451 A.D. the Council of Chalcedon met and formulated the faith of the Church respecting the person of Christ, and declared Him ‘to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably;’” 324, “The union of the two natures in one person is a mystery which we cannot grasp, and which for that very reason is often denied.” Is it not interesting that Berkhof constantly offers “Scriptural proof” of the points that he makes in his systematic theology, because, as he says, “Scripture [is] the inspired Word of God” (pg. 21) and therefore is our sole authority for what we believe. But then Berkhof changes his mind and says that “the Council of Chalcedon met and formulated the faith of the Church.” In other words, non-biblical authors supposedly formulated my faith for me which, whether Berkhof and others are willing to admit it or not, means that I do not need the Bible as my authority. Instead, my authority is councils like that at Chalcedon and those who adhere to the teachings of these councils. Thus, they eviscerate the Bible of its authority and dare anyone to challenge them on doing so. But the Bible is our sole authority, and we should take



incomprehensible while also being illogical—as traditional trinitarians claim?<sup>34</sup> I do not think so.

If we look at the context of Isaiah 55, God is claiming that the wicked do not think like Him in terms of His high thoughts of goodness and morality. In other words, the wicked do not behave in ways that are God's ways. Instead, these wicked people think evil thoughts, and their ways are just as wicked and evil as their thoughts. Therefore, God's thoughts are higher because they are moral, not because they are illogical and make no sense. In fact, would not God want us to make sense of this passage precisely because He does not want us to think illogical thoughts? In other words, why even suggest that the truth of this passage makes sense if the truth about God does not make sense and is illogical—especially if the passage is about morality and goodness!? Do we really want to claim that morality does not make sense?

Someone may say that truth does make sense, but only up to a point, and then it does not make sense—for example, when we are talking about God, that the Son was birthed or caused by the Father but has no beginning and that Jesus transcends the creation or at least is made of transcendent “stuff” while also being a human being within the creation. In other words, God does not make sense, because He is God and we are finite human beings, so that the trinity is the primary evidence of nonsense. But then I say, where does the Bible make such a claim—first, that the trinity is absolutely the direct and explicit teaching of the Bible and, second, that God and it are illogical and yet still ought to be believed as true? I showed above that Isaiah 55 does not mean that God's thoughts and ways are illogical. Then, someone may respond that the Bible simply implies the illogical nature of God when it teaches the trinity. However, does the Bible *explicitly* teach the trinity, or do we, like anyone who studies the Bible, read certain assumptions into it and derive particular meanings from passages such as John 1 that subsequently allow us to conclude that the trinity is true?

Take the fact (and one that traditional trinitarians are probably tired of hearing about) that no biblical passage explicitly teaches the concept of the trinity as it has been articulated by Bible students from at least the time of the Nicene Council and its creed in A.D. 325. Consider also the fact that all Bible study is not purely objective. Everyone approaches any written text or spoken communication with certain presuppositions, because this is just the way human communication works. Therefore, we actually have to read the trinity into the passages that we claim teach it, because we are simply doing

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seriously our responsibility to study it for ourselves while understanding that no one other than the biblical authors has ever had his theology correct. Nevertheless, we are not saved by our theology *per se*. We are saved by God's grace and mercy as we struggle to understand the Bible in the midst of our appealing to Him for mercy. Therefore, Berkhof is right that the Council of Chalcedon “formulated the faith of the Church,” of those who are wedded to tradition and not to the Bible, but the council certainly did not formulate the faith of authentic Christians, those who consider the Bible our sole and inerrant authority.

<sup>34</sup> cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 89, “The Trinity is a mystery, not merely in the Biblical sense that it is a truth, which was formerly hidden but is now revealed; but in the sense that man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible. It is intelligible in some of its relations and modes of manifestations, but unintelligible in its essential nature. The many efforts that were made to explain the mystery were speculative rather than theological... [The Church] has never tried to explain the mystery of the Trinity, but only sought to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in such a manner that the errors which endangered it were warded off.” These statements have some interesting language in them. For example, Berkhof states that earlier efforts to explain the trinity were speculative. A typical definition of “speculative” is trying to explain something on the basis of incomplete information. Would Berkhof claim that the “theological” explanation of the trinity from the Bible is based on *complete* information? He also states that the Church has never “tried to explain” the mystery of the Trinity. Exactly how is this different from the 18 pages where he has “tried to explain” it in his systematic theology? And even if God is incomprehensible, which I agree he is, how can we evaluate our interpretations of the Bible unless we do so with our logic and rationality and assume that the biblical authors sought to communicate in a logical and rational manner too? See my continuing discussion.

what any Bible student has to do—read something into a passage before he can determine if his interpretation is correct. In addition, all the passages that trinitarians parade in front of their audiences to prove the existence of the trinity do not present a detailed, explicit explanation of it. Does it make sense to believe and declare as an essential truth something that neither the Bible explicitly teaches nor makes sense?

And I still have another question. Why say that it makes sense to read what does not make sense into what, I think, are passages where the biblical authors are seeking to communicate in a way that does make sense, just as all human beings seek to make sense when they truly want to convey their ideas to others *in an understandable way*? Or, if someone would prefer I ask the question this way, why claim that it is logical that we have come to the correct interpretation of a biblical passage by concluding that it means something that is illogical and does not make sense—while also boldly claiming that God is illogical? In the final analysis, are not my logic and the rational nature of my mind the only tools that I have to evaluate my interpretations of the Bible, as to whether or not I have arrived at the correct interpretation? Furthermore, if the ideas that I think that I have derived from the Bible do not make sense and are illogical, how can I even declare that the biblical author has *intentionally* chosen to communicate ideas that are illogical and do not make sense?

If a person such as a biblical author does not want to make sense when he is communicating, then fine, let him speak nonsense. However, let him make it clear (how ironic) that he is speaking or writing nonsense so that we know that we should not even try to make sense of what he is saying. But, then, why even try to understand or claim to understand that we have understood what cannot be understood because it does not make sense, and then afterwards pat ourselves on the back because we believe that it is so noble and spiritual to say that truth must be true precisely because it is illogical and does not make sense? And why have Christians allowed themselves for 1700 years or more to convince one another that the biblical authors fully intended to communicate nonsense and that we all should embrace nonsense, while we snub and even burn at the stake those who would like to suggest that there must be a way to understand the Bible's presentation of God that actually does make sense, and while ignoring the fact that making sense is how *good* communication takes place?

Certainly, if there are those in history who would want to communicate well, it would be God and the biblical authors whom He inspired to write the inerrant word of God, the Bible. Nevertheless, it is a given that we will not interpret the Bible with 100% accuracy, because we are not apostles. Still, a person who is honestly working on interpreting correctly the inerrant Bible and is interested in the truth that honors God and describes Him as accurately as possible must be thinking more in line with how God desires us to approach the biblical message than someone who champions the theology of 1700 years of tradition and of errant councils, right?

For example, let us consider the notion found in the traditional view of the trinity that Jesus is more than created, that as a created human being he is also uncreated (because he is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity while he is also a human being). How is it possible that anyone or anything within the creation is uncreated? Yes, the uncreated God is creating the creation and, therefore, in some sense is “within” the creation, because no aspect of the creation would exist if He were not causing it to do so. But how can we say that any created human being, even Jesus, is also uncreated? The only way even to approach trying to make this claim is by placing God on a continuum of reality with us, i.e., to say that God is the most real being at the top of the ladder of reality while we are simply less real beings at the bottom of the ladder of reality. And yet it is all one ladder. However, the Bible is saying that God is not even on the same ladder as we are. He is not of the same reality as we are. God is an eternal

Being who does not depend upon anyone else for His eternity. Therefore, by definition, He is uncreated. No one made God. He did not even make Himself. He simply always has been—with no beginning and no end. Therefore, how can the *uncreated* God be on the same continuum of reality with *created* beings? He cannot.

He is not even on the same continuum as angels, because He has created them, too. Therefore, He is not on the same ladder of reality as either angels or human beings or stars or rocks. He is on His own continuum of which there is only one Being—God. Because He has created angels and human beings and stars and rocks, God transcends, i.e., He is outside, the continuum of reality that these other things occupy. However, here is the real catch. If everything within the creation is logically on a different continuum of reality from God, i.e., a created continuum and not an uncreated continuum, then not even Jesus can be an uncreated being within the creation. Jesus cannot be both uncreated and created at the same time and in the same respect, i.e., ontologically and according to his personal nature and essence—precisely because he exists as a human being within the creation.

But Christians usually think of reality as though it were a three story house—with human beings on the ground floor, angels on the second floor, and God on the third and highest floor. Therefore, Jesus as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity simply had to walk down two flights of stairs to reach earth. However, again, God transcends the created reality. He, therefore, transcends the house and is outside the house. He created the house, and only created things and beings are in the house. Therefore, sometimes when the Bible speaks of God's being in heaven, or it just refers to heaven, it is referring to God and that realm that He inhabits that is outside the created reality, because He is the very Creator of the creation. For example, I think that this is the correct way to interpret Jesus' question to the Jewish leaders in Matthew 21 –

[Matt. 21:23](#) When He [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"

[Matt. 21:24](#) Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

[Matt. 21:25](#) "The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?" And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?'

[Matt. 21:26](#) "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet."

[Matt. 21:27](#) And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know." He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."  
(NAS95)

The Jewish leaders want to hear straight from Jesus' mouth who it is that has sanctioned his teaching. They basically want to know if he claims to be speaking on behalf of God as a *bona fide* prophet of God—like Isaiah, Jeremiah, et al. If Jesus says that God has sanctioned him, then they can accuse him of blasphemy and condemn him to death, because he obviously (at least in their eyes) is not sanctioned by God. Before Jesus answers their question, he wants to know what they think of John the Baptist. Who sanctioned him—God in heaven or some human authority on earth? But the fact of the matter is that God transcends the whole creation. Therefore, when Jesus uses the word heaven here, he must mean some "location" outside the invisible place where we usually think that God and His angels dwell, i.e., the upper two levels of the three story

house. In other words, Jesus is thinking of a completely different reality from the created realm. He is thinking of the reality of the uncreated God in contrast to the created reality of men (and of angels) as the origin of John the Baptist's being sanctioned to baptize people.

On the other hand, there are places in the Bible that describe one of two situations. Either the biblical text is describing a heavenly scene that is just a vision and is intended to teach a particular truth about God and His creation. Or the text is describing an actual event that takes place in an actual realm within the creation. However, in this latter case, the transcendent God is still only manifesting Himself to created beings within the creation. They are not seeing God in His transcendence, because it is impossible, both theologically and logically impossible, for any created being to see the uncreated God outside the creation. For example, in Isaiah 6 the prophet sees God sitting on His throne

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**Is. 6:1** In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord [*Adonai*] sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

**Is. 6:2** Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

**Is. 6:3** And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts [*Yahweh Tzevaoth*]; the whole earth is full of His glory."

**Is. 6:4** And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. (NAS95)

Isaiah says in this passage that he is seeing God. But is he seeing the transcendent God who dwells outside the creation, so that Isaiah himself is outside the creation? No, because it does not make sense for Isaiah to transcend the creation the way that only the *uncreated* God can. In other words, how can a human being, who, by definition, exists only within the creation, approach or see God, who, by definition, exists outside the creation? He cannot. Therefore, Isaiah is seeing God only in his mind, or he is seeing God as He manifests himself within the creation. In either case, this heavenly scene takes place at a "location" within the creation, and, therefore, if we were to use the word heaven to refer to this location, it would have a different meaning from Jesus' use of the word in Matthew 21. In Matthew 21, heaven meant outside the creation. In Isaiah 6, it means inside the creation.

The apostle Paul in Romans 9 provides us with a helpful analogy for understanding the relationship between God who transcends the creation and human beings who exist within the creation. He is explaining that God has the prerogative to make two different kinds of Jews—those who believe the truth and obtain eternal Life and those who reject the truth and suffer eternal judgment. Paul writes –

**Rom. 9:15** For He [God] says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

**Rom. 9:16** So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

**Rom. 9:17** For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH."

**Rom. 9:18** So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

**Rom. 9:19** You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?”

**Rom. 9:20** On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it?

**Rom. 9:21** Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

**Rom. 9:22** What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

**Rom. 9:23** And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,

**Rom. 9:24** even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. (NAS95)

Paul is dialoguing with an imaginary Jew who objects to Paul's saying that God chooses to grant mercy to Jews independently of them. In fact, God uses all people, even evil people such as Pharaoh, for His own sovereign purposes. Such treatment of people by God does not sound very fair to the Jew, and he wonders why God can hold people accountable for evil choices that God causes them to make. Paul's response is to use the analogy of the potter and the clay. In v. 20, it sounds as though Paul may be saying that a human being does not have the right to ask God why He made him the way He did. Instead, Paul is merely saying that it does not make sense for a piece of clay to object to the way the potter is shaping it. The clay has the right to ask the question of why the potter is shaping it the way he is, but, in the final analysis, the clay is just clay, so that the potter has the prerogative to make whatever kind of pot he desires from the clay. If the potter wants to make a beautiful vase, then this is his right. If the potter wants to make an ash tray, then this also is his right. Similarly, God has the right to bring into existence some Jews who will experience His wrath and eternal condemnation, and God has the right to bring into existence other Jews who will obtain His mercy and eternal Life. Ultimately, it is up to God, the potter, to determine what kind of Jew a person is going to be and also what will be his eternal destiny. By extrapolation, God has the right to make any human being, Jew or Gentile, the kind of person He wants him to be.

Another helpful way to think of God along the lines of the potter/clay analogy is to view God as the author of a novel who is creating the story of the novel and, therefore, is outside the novel. However, even this analogy breaks down somewhat, because we can imagine an author and his novel only within the continuum of the creation. In contrast, God transcends His novel, i.e., the story of the creation, even more than a human novelist transcends his novel, by virtue of the fact that God is uncreated and His whole novel is created by Him, which is just another way of saying that God is not on the same continuum of our reality.

In addition, if we avoid this logical conclusion by placing God on the same ladder of reality as we are, so that Jesus merely walks down a couple flights of stairs, and by holding to the illogical idea of the trinity, then we are thinking similarly to how the ancient pagan peoples thought of their gods. The ancient peoples considered their gods to be the deification of forces and elements within the creation, such as the sun, moon, weather, and the earth. For example, the Egyptians' chief god was Re, the sun god. Therefore, to think that God transcends the physical realm only by His existing as the trinity on the third floor of the same house as us human beings, instead of His being the

one and only God who is outside the house and who is the Creator of the whole house, is like worshiping the sun, moon, weather, and the earth within the house. Indeed, belief in the trinity has greater kinship with paganism than with the biblical message.

Therefore, rather than there being a coeternal person who “transcends” the creation with God the Father, i.e., the Son of God, and who walks down two flights of stairs to become a human being, the Bible is saying that the one and only God, Yahweh, created a human being, Jesus, who is God within the creation. In other words, Jesus is God in his role and function, but he is only a human being in his ontology. It is logically impossible for him to be otherwise. Within the creation, Jesus cannot be in his ontological nature the uncreated, transcendent God outside the house that the uncreated God has made and, by definition, transcends—unless we want to go back to the proposal that truth does not make sense and is therefore nonsense. Instead, Jesus is the one and only permanent human being (see discussion of Genesis 18 in Chapter 3), who as a created human being (there is no other kind) is God in the story of the creation and functions as God. The transcendent God has chosen for Jesus to function as God within the creation and also as the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. Jesus is, therefore, the final Son of God and Anointed One of Israel—the Messiah, Christ, and King of Israel. No other human being is what Jesus is—God within the story of the creation. No other human being functions as Jesus does—as God within the story of creation. No other human being is the final Davidic King of the Davidic Covenant.

What, though, makes Jesus different from the man in Genesis 18 who appeared to Abraham as Yahweh? The difference is that Jesus has his own personal identity. Even though created by Yahweh, Jesus is a *person* who is distinct from Yahweh, whereas the man in Genesis 18 was the same *person* as Yahweh. Jesus has his own mind, will, and relationships with other persons—including his relationship with God the Father, Yahweh—that are *personally* separate from the mind, will, and relationships with other persons that the Father has. The man in Genesis 18, who was the manifestation of Yahweh, could not say that he was not Yahweh. Indeed, he was Yahweh in the flesh. In contrast, Jesus speaks in such a way and even prays in such a way that he is a distinct person from Yahweh. But here is the catch. Yahweh has created Jesus and continues to create him now—as God in the flesh. In addition, there is only one God of whom Jesus can be God in the flesh—Yahweh. Therefore, while Jesus is a distinct *person* who prays to Yahweh, by virtue of Yahweh’s being the one who is writing him into His story, so-to-speak, Jesus is also Yahweh in the flesh. In other words, Jesus has a distinct *personal* identity separate from Yahweh, but he also has another identity, that of the transcendent God—in fact, Yahweh. However, this other identity that Jesus has is a different kind of identity from that of his *personal* identity. This other identity is that which pertains to his role as a human being who is God within the creation.

Therefore, if there is any “mystery” in this arrangement of Jesus’ being God in the creation, it is this—his dual identity as the *person* of Jesus and the *assignment* of Yahweh in the flesh. However, I would maintain that his dual identity is not illogical if we allow the analogy of author and novel to be true. How can the author write himself into his story in such a way that the character in the novel is a distinct person who speaks to and relates to the novelist without in some sense this character’s being the novelist himself? He cannot. Thus, it is perfectly logical that God writes Himself into His story, and the human being, Jesus, is God in the story.

Now back to the questions at hand. What are reasonable answers, based upon the Old Testament and logic, to the second and third questions posed above –

2. Why do the Jews think that by Jesus’ saying that he is the final Davidic king that he is claiming to be “equal with God?” ?



### 3. What did even the Jews mean by the phrase “equal with God?”

A reasonable and logical answer to question #2 is—because all the Davidic kings were considered “equal with God” by virtue of their being granted by Yahweh the role and responsibility to represent Him on earth as the ruler of Israel. Such an arrangement was similar to the kings and gods of other ancient peoples. However, the difference was that Yahweh is not just the chief god of a pagan pantheon, but the one and only God, who is in complete contrast to the gods of the pagan Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites, et al.

Therefore, the answer to question #3 is that the Jews are rightly interpreting the Old Testament. They understand that all the descendants of David, even the very evil kings of the Israelite Old Testament monarchy, were the human representatives of God on earth and could claim to rule with the same authority as the transcendent God—the same notion that was shared by other Ancient Near Eastern peoples—that their king was the authoritative representative of their chief god, indeed the Son of their chief god. Thus, Jesus is claiming to be “equal with God” by calling God “my Father,” and the Jews understand that the phrase “equal with God” means equal in authority and responsibility to God by ruling over His creation from within the creation—as all the Davidic kings of Israel had the right to do.

Such is the way that Jesus understands the phrase “equal with God”—even in light of Isaiah 9:6-7 –

**Is. 9:6** For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

**Is. 9:7** There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this. (NAS95)

If we follow the traditional trinitarian view, then we would interpret this passage as referring to the future Messiah and that he is going to be divine in his very essence, so that his name would be called “Mighty God” and “Eternal Father.” However, in light of the rest of the Old Testament passages that spell out the purpose and results of the Davidic Covenant, it is instead correct to interpret this passage as referring to the final Davidic king, Jesus, in such a way that he will be named Mighty God and Eternal Father, simply because he, like David and all his other descendants who were human kings of Israel, will rule over the earth with the same authority as God. God, as the uncreated, transcendent God, granted His authority to all the Davidic kings. Thus, Jesus is God’s proxy on earth, and his name “Eternal Father” reflects the authority that the transcendent God has given him. Nevertheless, Jesus is different from all the other Davidic kings because he actually is God in the flesh within the creation.

#### **Another Old Testament Passage About the Davidic Covenant – Psalm 45**

We should follow the same reasoning in interpreting Psalm 45. This psalm is labeled “A Maskil [song] of the sons of Korah,” where they address the king of Israel who is getting married. As the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says, “Applicable to any descendant of David, [Psalm 45] extols the privileged position of his people and sets forth God’s expectations of his appointed vassal on earth,” i.e., the king of Israel.

Here is the psalm in its entirety –

- Psa. 45:1** My heart overflows with a good theme;  
I address my verses to the King;  
My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.
- Psa. 45:2** You are fairer than the sons of men;  
Grace is poured upon Your lips;  
Therefore God has blessed You forever.
- Psa. 45:3** Gird Your sword on Your thigh, O Mighty One (גִּבּוֹר) (LXX – δυνατέ),  
In Your splendor and Your majesty!
- Psa. 45:4** And in Your majesty ride on victoriously,  
For the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness;  
Let Your right hand teach You awesome things.
- Psa. 45:5** Your arrows are sharp;  
The peoples fall under You;  
Your arrows are in the heart of the King's enemies.
- Psa. 45:6** Your throne, O God, is forever and ever;  
A scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom.
- Psa. 45:7** You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;  
Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You  
With the oil of joy above Your fellows.
- Psa. 45:8** All Your garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia;  
Out of ivory palaces stringed instruments have made You glad.
- Psa. 45:9** Kings' daughters are among Your noble ladies;  
At Your right hand stands the queen in gold from Ophir.
- Psa. 45:10** Listen, O daughter, give attention and incline your ear:  
Forget your people and your father's house;
- Psa. 45:11** Then the King will desire your beauty.  
Because He is your Lord, bow down to Him.
- Psa. 45:12** The daughter of Tyre will come with a gift;  
The rich among the people will seek your favor.
- Psa. 45:13** The King's daughter is all glorious within;  
Her clothing is interwoven with gold.
- Psa. 45:14** She will be led to the King in embroidered work;  
The virgins, her companions who follow her,  
Will be brought to You.
- Psa. 45:15** They will be led forth with gladness and rejoicing;  
They will enter into the King's palace.
- Psa. 45:16** In place of your fathers will be your sons;  
You shall make them princes in all the earth.
- Psa. 45:17** I will cause Your name to be remembered in all generations;  
Therefore the peoples will give You thanks forever and ever.  
(NAS95)

The sons of Korah begin in verses 1 & 2 by addressing their words to the king of Israel and state that God has blessed him. They go on in v. 3 to call the king "O Mighty One," which is one Hebrew word, גִּבּוֹר (*gibbor*). This word is used in Isaiah 9:5 along with the common Hebrew word for God, אֱלֹהִים (*'ayl*) to say that the coming Messiah will be called "Mighty God," (אֱלֹהֵי גִבּוֹר) (*'ayl gibbor*). The authors of Psalm 45 have no problem addressing their human king with the divine title "O Mighty One" because of the Davidic

Covenant and because God has granted him to rule the creation with the same authority as God. Not surprisingly, they later in v. 6 actually call this human king “God” –

**Psa. 45:6** Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom.

**Psa. 45:7** You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of joy above Your fellows. (NAS95)

In fact, the psalmists call the king “God” in both verses 6 & 7. In v. 6, they claim that the king’s kingdom will go on “forever and ever,” which is exactly what God told David about his kingdom in 2 Samuel 7. Then, in v. 7, they first address the king as “God” and proclaim that his “God” has anointed him with the oil of joy above his fellow Jews. The word that is used for “God” in all three instances in these two verses is the common Hebrew word for God אֱלֹהִים (*‘eloheem*), the same word that we find in Genesis 1:1 –

**Gen. 1:1** In the beginning God (אֱלֹהִים) (*‘eloheem*) created the heavens and the earth. (NAS95)

In Psalm 45:6 & 7, why do the Psalmists call the human king “God?” Because he is God and “created the heavens and the earth?” No. Solomon was not God. His son Rehoboam was not God, etc. Nevertheless, the sons of Korah call Solomon and his descendants “God,” because, as the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says, God had “expectations of his appointed vassal [the king] on earth”—that he would rule over the earth with God’s authority and with His *mishpateem*, “judgments” (cf. Psalm 72) and thereby preserve the divinely ordained order. For this reason, the authors of this psalm go on to say, “God [i.e., king of Israel], you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore your God, the transcendent Creator of all of reality, has anointed you with the oil of joy above your fellow Jews.”

In other words, the king is the Anointed One, i.e., the Messiah or Christ of Israel, not only because he is king, but also because he has loved righteousness—which is referring to what God expected of all of David’s morally depraved descendants as kings, even though many of them certainly did not live up to God’s expectations. Therefore, it is theoretically possible that Jesus, as the final and eternal king of Israel, would be simply a morally perfect man who would perfectly and completely live up to God’s expectations. However, he would not necessarily be God in the story (as he actually is), which would also accord with the passage in Jeremiah that I have already mentioned –

**Jer. 23:5** “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD [Yahweh], “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land.

**Jer. 23:6** “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The LORD [Yahweh] our righteousness.’” (NAS95)

In this passage, the LORD, Yahweh, is talking about the final king from the line of David who will bring everlasting security and prosperity, i.e., *mishpat* like the Egyptian *ma’at*, to Israel. However, theoretically speaking, any plain, ordinary human descendant of David could have brought such good fortune to Israel if the novelist, God, had so chosen to create him for the purpose of his always making morally perfect choices and

living eternally. Then, like all the other kings, even immoral kings, this king could be called, “Yahweh, our Righteousness,” because all the Davidic kings were God’s representative on earth and ruled with the same authority as God. Yet, we know from the rest of the Bible that Jesus is different from an *ordinary* human being. He is an ordinary human being ontologically (because it is logically impossible for him to be uncreated and made of transcendent God stuff within the creation), but he is also God in the story as God had planned and purposed from eternity past.

Therefore, perhaps the Jews in John 5 are rightly interpreting Jesus, who is calling God “my Father” and thus “making himself equal with God,” that, by identifying himself as the final Davidic king, he is not only the human representative of God on earth ruling with the same authority as the transcendent God (like David and all the other morally depraved Davidic kings), but, in his case, he is also the very embodiment of God within the creation, i.e., God in the flesh in the story of the creation that God is writing. In other words, Jesus understood that, while he could be called “God” because of his status within the Davidic Covenant as the Son of God and God’s proxy on earth (like David, Solomon, et al.), he also could be called “God” because of his role as the very embodiment of God within the creation. In fact, he probably had both of these aspects of his identity in mind whenever he spoke of himself. He was both the final Davidic king and the incarnate God.

Again, we can ask if the Jews are interpreting Jesus to be claiming that he is “equal with God” as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, so that they are refusing to believe this notion, because the whole idea of a man’s being God is abhorrent to them to their eternal damnation and destruction—as we have been taught within traditional Christianity? But our study of the Old Testament passages in this chapter that pertain to the Davidic Covenant demonstrate otherwise. In addition, the trinity is not even taught in the Bible and, obviously, does not make sense. Therefore, the trinity was not even considered an option by the Jews or by Jesus, which leaves only two reasonable alternatives to what they think being “equal with God” means.

First, the Jews could understand Jesus to mean that he is a morally depraved (or even morally perfect) human being like David, who has been called by God to be His final royal representative on earth and rule over the Jews, but he is not God—as we have seen any Davidic king could claim. Or, second, the Jews could understand Jesus to mean that he is not only the final Davidic king who will rule over the eternal kingdom of God, but that he is also God in the flesh, God in the story of creation, a claim which only he can uniquely make permanently—as mentioned just above.

It appears that at least some of the Jews are going so far as to think the latter—that Jesus is claiming to be not only God’s representative as the Davidic king, but also the incarnate God. As in the case of many Christian doctrines among Christians, there has never been complete uniformity among the Jews regarding many of their doctrines, including the nature and composition of the Messiah. Therefore, disagreement among the Jews probably existed even in Jesus’ day, so that some Jews believed that the Messiah would be a sinful human being like David, while others believed that he would be a morally perfect human being, and then still others believed that he would actually be the morally perfect God in the flesh. Consequently, it is likely that some of these Jews are correctly expecting the Messiah, who appropriately can call God “my Father” because of the Davidic Covenant, to be God incarnate, the very embodiment of God. The reason I think this is threefold. First, John, the author of this gospel, says in chapter 1, verse 14 –

**John 1:14** And the Word [*Logos*] became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten [unique one] from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NAS95)

In this statement, John declares that God, whom he identifies as the *Logos* in John 1:1, became a man. John's manner of speaking appears to me that he is not surprised by the incarnation of God, because he offers no long explanation as to why such a marvelous event had to take place. If the idea of God's becoming a man was such a novelty, then it seems to me that John would have gone into a lot more detail on how and why it had to happen, specifically in the case of the final Davidic king. As I discussed above regarding the Abrahamic Covenant, John and the Jews had the example of the theophany in Genesis 18 when Yahweh became a man. So, if God's becoming a man was no surprise to John, then I would assume that it would be no surprise to some of his fellow Jews either, even those who rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Therefore, the issue in John's gospel is not that God (the *Logos*) became a man. Indeed, some of the Jews are expecting the final Messiah to be God in the flesh when he appears. However, the issue in John's gospel is that *Jesus of Nazareth* is the man who God became, because obviously the Jews reject him by crucifying him on a cross. The Jews are supposedly waiting anxiously for their Messiah. Can a man whom they reject actually be the Messiah, especially when they execute him on a cross? Can the Jews be so wrong in their assessment of Jesus after all their diligent study of the Old Testament and in the light of their apparent enthusiasm for their coming king who will rescue them from the oppression of the Romans? Yes, which is why John writes about all the miraculous signs that Jesus performs and then near the end of his gospel says,

**John 20:30** Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

**John 20:31** but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (NAS95)

In other words, is John describing the miracles of Jesus in order to prove that he is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity? No, because Moses and other ordinary human beings performed miracles. The miracles prove simply that God has given this man Jesus a special role in salvation history—albeit in this case, the role of the final Davidic king, because Jesus is a physical descendant of David and claims to be the Messiah. Or, another way to ask the question, are the Jews objecting to a man's claiming that he is God? It seems to me that the trinitarians interpret John's gospel (and other New Testament statements about Jesus' deity) in light of the answer to this question being yes—that the main issue in John is that God became a man, and it is this concept that is so abhorrent to the Jews. Then, the trinitarians go even further and interpret John as claiming that Jesus is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, and that this concept is even doubly abhorrent to the Jews, so that trinitarians feel justified in claiming that a person has to believe in the trinity in order to be an authentic Christian, or suffer the punishment of eternal hell.

However, we can see that the main issue in John is not that God became a man, or, to put it another way, that a man is claiming to be God. The issue in the gospel of John is that this particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, is claiming to be God and the Messiah. At least some of the Jews are expecting the Messiah to be not only the human representative of God who will rule with the same authority as God (the notion discussed above that was popular among all the peoples of the Ancient Near East), but who will

also be the very embodiment of God, God in the flesh in visible, human form—in God’s story that He is “writing.” However, the Jews refuse to believe that Jesus is this person, which leads me to the second reason why I think that some of the Jews partly mean “God in the flesh” by the phrase “equal with God.”

In chapter 6 of John, verses 41 and 42 we read that the Jews’ are grumbling because Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah –

**John 6:41** Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, “I am the bread that came down out of heaven.”

**John 6:42** They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, ‘I have come down out of heaven?’” (NAS95)

Again, we notice that it is not that the Jews are critical of a man’s claiming to “come down out of heaven,” (or to be “sent from God,” which, in this case, would mean that he is the Messiah and not a regular prophet like Joseph, Moses, or even John the Baptist) but that this particular man, Jesus, is claiming to be the one who has “come down out of heaven.” Why are they critical of Jesus’ claim? Because he is just “Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother [they] know.” It is reasonable to understand them to mean that whoever is going to “come down out of heaven” and be the Messiah is going to be someone who is not just an ordinary looking human being—like Jesus. He is going to be superordinary in some sense—at least with respect to his appearance and charisma.

A current Jewish rabbi whom I know has described the Messiah in similar terms, that it will be obvious to everyone on earth that *this man* is the Messiah. Therefore, the Jews in Jesus’ day are correct to notice that *ontologically* Jesus is just an ordinary human being—the son of Joseph and Mary (although we know that he is really not Joseph’s son but the miraculous creation of God in Mary’s womb). Consequently, Jesus is no more impressive in his appearance and charisma than any other Jew living in his day. However, what the Jews are failing to realize is that God can choose to create even an ordinary looking person to *be* Himself in the created reality! As the transcendent Author of His novel, where the end goal of the story is that God create an eternal kingdom with Himself ruling over it in the form of a man named Jesus of Nazareth, God can write Himself into His novel as an ordinary human being and fulfill all His goals. Ultimately, it is not Jesus’ ontology that gives him the ability to fulfill these goals of God the Father. It is God the Father’s ontology, i.e., His transcendence, that is required for God to fulfill His goals through His use of Jesus within His story. Nevertheless, for these particular Jews in John 6, it is Jesus’ humble and common ordinariness that is preventing them from believing in him as the Messiah.

Nonetheless, their having surmised that the Messiah will be in some way more than ordinary, indeed an impressive, striking, and remarkable human being, makes sense *if they believe that the Messiah will be God in the flesh and not just a sinful (or even morally perfect) human representative of God*. David, Solomon, Rehoboam, et al. were *ordinary looking* representatives of God according to the Davidic Covenant. Plus, they were morally depraved human beings. Some of the Jews in Jesus’ day are expecting the Messiah to be a *more than ordinary looking, i.e., impressive and imposing*, representative of God—and not just a morally perfect man. Instead, they think that the Messiah will be so remarkable looking and special, which will be obvious to all, that he will be God Himself—God incarnate, God in the flesh, God’s avatar. Therefore, everyone else will immediately recognize him as the Messiah, which is why some of the Jews are critical of Jesus who is claiming that God is his Father and, therefore, that he is “equal



with God”—because he looks so ordinary (cf. John 6:42) AND he is violating the Sabbath, thus breaking the Mosaic Covenant that was given to them by God (cf. John 5:18). In their minds, how can a man who claims to be the Messiah and God appear to be only a man AND violate God’s covenant with the Jews? Certainly he cannot. Therefore, obviously, Jesus is not who he claims to be, which leads me to the third reason why I think that some of the Jews partly mean “God in the flesh” by the phrase “equal with God.”

In John 10, Jesus has another encounter with the Jews where the issue of his relationship with the Father arises –

**John 10:22** At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem;

**John 10:23** it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon.

**John 10:24** The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

**John 10:25** Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these testify of Me.

**John 10:26** “But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep.

**John 10:27** “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;

**John 10:28** and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.

**John 10:29** “My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.

**John 10:30** “I and the Father are one (ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατήρ ἓν ἐσμεν).”

**John 10:31** The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him.

**John 10:32** Jesus answered them, “I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?”

**John 10:33** The Jews answered Him, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God (ὅτι σὺ ἄνθρωπος ὧν ποιεῖς σεαυτὸν θεόν).” (NAS95)

We notice in this passage that the Jews ask Jesus if he is the “Christ.” In other words, they are asking if Jesus is the last king who will fulfill the Davidic Covenant and reign eternally as God’s representative over Israel and with the same authority as God. Drawing upon our discussion above of the Father/Son relationship within the Davidic Covenant, Jesus’ answer is an unequivocal yes since he calls God “My Father.” Then, Jesus states, “I and the Father are one.” What does he mean by this?

The trinitarians interpret Jesus’ oneness with the Father as the “unity of [their] nature” and ontology, so that Jesus is saying that he is made of the same divine, transcendent stuff as the transcendent Father.<sup>35</sup> However, Jesus is not referring to his ontology and his beingness. For one thing, as we saw above, Jesus’ being a created being in his essence at the same time as he is an uncreated being in his essence is nonsense, and it is nonsense to believe nonsense. When God appeared to Moses as the burning bush, was the bush made of both created stuff and uncreated stuff? Did the bush have a dual ontology and a dual essence? Was the bush made of both created bushness and uncreated Godness? No, it was not, because it is nonsense to believe

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* and its comment on John 10:30.

such a notion. Therefore, neither was Jesus made of both created humanness and uncreated Godness, even though he was God in the flesh.

For another thing, Jesus uses the neuter form of the number “one,” i.e., ἓν (*hen*), which trinitarians claim makes it obvious that Jesus is referring to his nature. Really? Can we be absolutely certain that this is what Jesus means, or do we need to read our theology of the trinity into the passage in order to make him mean such? Besides, if Jesus were referring to his ontological makeup and claiming that the Father and he are of the same substance, indeed the same eternal substance, then could we not expect him to use the masculine εἷς (*hays*) instead of the neuter ἓν (*hen*)? For example, if Jesus had used εἷς (*hays*), then we would probably have at least as strong if not stronger argument for his referring to his beingness, because he is using a word that correlates with his being a person, i.e., someone who actually exists and *is*—indeed, a masculine man who *is*. Thus, by using the masculine εἷς (*hays*), Jesus could have meant, “I and the Father are of the same divine, eternal essence,” although we know that he would have been speaking nonsense. And the last person whom we would expect to speak nonsense is Jesus, because, as God in the flesh, he is the most rational of all beings within the created reality. Instead, Jesus uses the neuter ἓν (*hen*), and, because it would be nonsense anyway, he is not saying that he is made of divine stuff like the Father, i.e., that he is transcendent.

A more logical and biblical possibility for interpreting Jesus is that he is saying that he and the Father have the same *purpose* within the created reality. Not only does this interpretation make better sense of the neuter form of one, ἓν (*hen*), it also is in line with what God expects from the Davidic king—that he behave and eventually rule the creation with God’s instructions in mind. Thus, Jesus means that the Father and he are one in their purposes and goals—to bring about the eternal Kingdom of God with Jesus as the king and ruler of this kingdom. However, look at how the Jews respond in vs. 31 and 33 to Jesus’ statement. They want to execute him by stoning him to death, because they believe that Jesus, being a man, is making the bold claim to be God, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God (ὅτι σὺ ἄνθρωπος ὢν ποιεῖς σεαυτὸν θεόν).”

In the past, I have thought that the Jews are offended by any human being who would assert that he is God in the flesh. However, as I explained above regarding John 5, this is not what they are objecting to. Instead, they are rejecting the notion that *this* man, Jesus of Nazareth, is claiming to be God. He breaks the Sabbath and thus violates the Mosaic Covenant. He is just Joseph’s and Mary’s son and looks so ordinary (cf. John 6:41,42). Certainly, Jesus is not the Messiah, and certainly he is not God in the flesh. Yet, if these Jews are objecting merely to the claim that *this* particular man, Jesus, is God, nevertheless they are open to the idea that the Messiah will be God in the flesh, i.e., God in the story that God is writing and creating. They would have learned from their study of the Old Testament that God appeared as a man to Abraham in Genesis 18. Certainly, if God could do that temporarily, then He as the Creator of the universe could do so permanently as the Messiah.

Therefore, while there is probably no one uniform view among the Jews of how to describe the coming Messiah, at least these Jews in John 10 understand that Jesus is claiming to be God in the flesh, and they believe that this is a legitimate claim for the actual Messiah to make. Their big problem is that Jesus simply does not fit their description of the Messiah and, therefore, God in the flesh, which also allows us to conclude that, ultimately, Jesus does mean in this context that he is God when he says, “I and the Father are one.” Even though he uses the neuter form of one, ἓν (*hen*), these Jews (and therefore Jesus also, I would suggest) understand that the Old Testament is teaching that the final Davidic king will not only have the same purpose as God, but he

will also be God in the flesh—not because he is made of divine, eternal substance and material or is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, but because he is the human character in God’s story who actually plays the role of God.

Hence, going back to Isaiah 9:6,7, why did Isaiah name the future child Mighty God and Eternal Father? Perhaps, not only because the final Messiah, Jesus, would be “God” as God’s representative and king like all the other Davidic kings (cf. Psalm 45), but also because when Yahweh permanently wrote Himself into the story as the morally perfect human being Jesus, He would map Himself onto Jesus so that he is God in the flesh, which logically is the only way the novelist can write himself into His story as another distinct person. Thus, God made Jesus a separate person with his own personal identity who relates to and even prays to Yahweh. Nevertheless, God has created him to live out the existence of an ordinary, morally perfect human being who is also truly God in the story.

Therefore, at least some of these Jews are expecting the Messiah to be God. They have no problem with a man who claims to be the God-Messiah. They have a problem with *Jesus* who claims to be the God-Messiah. Again, the reason why John writes his gospel is not to focus on the fact that God became a man and to claim that it would be perfectly legitimate for a man to claim to be God, but to focus on the fact that *Jesus* is this man who is God and the Messiah by virtue of the miraculous signs that he performs. We can conclude, also, that somewhere along the path of history in the last two thousand years there was a shift in some of the Jews’ perspective on the nature of the Messiah. They went from believing in Jesus’ day that he would be an impressive and remarkable looking human being who would also be God in the flesh to believing that he would be strictly an impressive looking ordinary man and not God in the flesh. Therefore, we modern Christians have wrongly assumed that the Jews have never believed that the Messiah would be God incarnate. We have also concluded that the biblical authors are arguing for something that they are not. Instead of trying to prove that Jesus is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, the biblical authors are demonstrating that Jesus is an ordinary man who is both the Messiah and God in the flesh, the latter being something that at least some of the Jews in Jesus’ day were expecting anyway.

Before I conclude by summarizing the answers to the three questions, let me go back to the issue of Jesus’ “ascending to the right hand of the Father” as stated by Peter in his sermon in Acts 2 when he quotes Psalm 110:1 –

[Acts 2:32](#) “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.

[Acts 2:33](#) “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.

[Acts 2:34](#) “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘THE LORD [Yahweh in Psalm 110:1 (*kurios* here in the New Testament Greek text)] SAID TO MY LORD [Adonee in Psalm 110:1 (*kurios* here in the New Testament Greek text)], “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND,

[Acts 2:35](#) UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET.”

[Acts 2:36](#) “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord [*kurios*] and Christ [Messiah, *christos*]*—*this Jesus whom you crucified.” (NAS95)

[Psa. 110:1](#) The LORD [Yahweh] says to my Lord [*Adonee*]: “Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” (NAS95)

Does Peter mean that Jesus literally sits at God's right hand, i.e., as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, the position that he held before his incarnation? In other words, has Jesus left the created realm and returned to the transcendent, uncreated realm to take his seat beside God the Father on His throne? Or does Peter mean, now that Jesus has fulfilled his role as the God-Messiah who lived, suffered, died on a cross, and rose from the dead, that Jesus has ascended to some "place" (and we are not actually told exactly where this place is), whereby he is ruling over the creation and the eternal Kingdom of Heaven in anticipation of God's bringing an end to the present realm so that only an eternal realm remains according to Peter's words in his second letter?

**2Pet. 3:7** But by [God's] word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men...

**2Pet. 3:10** But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

**2Pet. 3:11** Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,

**2Pet. 3:12** looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!

**2Pet. 3:13** But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwell. (NAS95)

As we ponder how to answer to these questions, we could also consider a verse such as John 6:62 that makes it sound as though Jesus pre-existed the creation as the eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Godhead. In the context of this verse, Jesus has said that his disciples must "eat his flesh" and "drink his blood" in order to follow him in a *bona fide* way. They understandably grumble at such an apparently outrageous claim, and the story continues with Jesus' response –

**John 6:61** But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble?"

**John 6:62** "What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before (ἐὰν οὖν θεωρῆτε τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀναβαίνοντα ὅπου ἦν τὸ πρότερον)?"

**John 6:63** "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.

**John 6:64** "But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him.

**John 6:65** And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." (NAS95)

We should notice first that Jesus' concern is with his disciples' "stumbling," i.e., being so offended by his statements that they choose to believe in him no longer and abandon being his disciples. The entire paragraph reiterates a concept that Jesus has mentioned several times already in John 6 (see above in Chapter 4 of this book), that God the Father alone determines who genuinely believes in him as the Messiah and who does

not. Then, we remember also that John’s purpose in his gospel is to describe Jesus’ miracles in order to demonstrate that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, sent by the Father to rule over Israel and the eternal Kingdom of God as the final Davidic king and the embodiment of God. John’s purpose also helps us make sense of why Jesus says in John 6:62 above, “Therefore if you see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before.” Normally, when a person begins a sentence with “If...”, we expect him to finish the sentence with “then...” But Jesus provides his listeners with no “then...” The NAS95 adds the word “What” at the beginning of Jesus “statement” as a way to propose that Jesus is actually asking a question with this half a sentence. In other words, Jesus’ meaning is to ask his disciples, “In the light of your thinking that I am crazy by saying that you must eat my flesh and drink my blood, *if you therefore see the Son of Man (i.e., ME!) ascending to where I was formerly, what are you going to do then—are you still going to be offended by these statements after I have provided you with such a dramatic and miraculous demonstration of my being the Messiah?*” Therefore, right within the context of continuing to assert that people will believe in him as the Christ only if God the Father causes them to do so, Jesus throws in a reference to his future ascension to the right hand of the Father as a sort of *coup de grace* to kill their unbelief.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, because the traditional trinity is not the correct view of Jesus as God the Son, then Jesus is not speaking of his returning to his pre-existent position alongside the transcendent Father. He is not even talking about his returning to a place that is completely outside the creation. He is also not referring to his going to merely the 3<sup>rd</sup> and highest story of the house of reality. Instead, Jesus means that his ascension “to where he was before” will be his proceeding to where God, the storyteller, had previously planned for him to be—as the eternal king of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus’ being the eternal king is also what he means when he speaks to Mary Magdalene in the Garden of Gethsemane after his resurrection –

**John 20:17** Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’” (NAS95)

God says similarly to Jeremiah –

**Jer. 1:4** Now the word of the LORD [Yahweh] came to me saying,

**Jer. 1:5** “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you (יָדַעְתִּיךָ) (ἐπίσταμαι σε – LXX), and before you were born I consecrated you (קִדְּשֵׁנִי) (ἡγίακά σε – LXX); I have appointed you (נָתַתִּיךָ) (τέθεικά σε – LXX) a prophet to the nations.” (NAS95)

Did God “know”, “consecrate,” and “appoint” Jeremiah before He created him in his mother’s womb because Jeremiah already existed? No. Therefore, God’s knowing and appointing a human being, even a human being who is God in the creation, does not have to involve this human being’s existing before he enters into the world. God’s knowing this human being before He creates him need involve only His thinking of the person and deciding exactly what role he is going to play in human history—all according to God’s sovereign will and planning. Then, at the appropriate time, God

<sup>36</sup>Jesus could be referring to another kind of ascension that I have covered in Chapter 4 in reference to Deuteronomy 30:11-14 and Romans 10:6,7, i.e., going up to God to get the message of His truth to then bring it down to human beings and explain it to them clearly, so that they can believe it. However, because of the phrase “to where He was before” (NAS95), Jesus means his ascension to the right hand of God as in Psalm 110:1.

brings this human being into existence, whether through the natural process of human sexual intercourse and conception as in the case of Jeremiah, or through the miraculous and supernatural process of creating a zygote in the virgin Mary's womb as in the case of Jesus of Nazareth.

Therefore, just as Jesus ascends "to where he was formerly," in the same way, each of us believers will "ascend to where we were before." In other words, God will transform us into morally perfect beings after the judgment and transfer us into the new realm that He creates to replace the present one—according to God's having known, consecrated, and appointed us in His mind. Therefore, each of us occupies now the "place" and role that God has planned for us from eternity past when He first developed His story, and each of us will do the same in the eternal realm. Jesus, however, as the "firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15), will occupy the foremost "place," role, and responsibility as the only permanent human being who is both God and the final Davidic king. Only Jesus is God's proxy. None of the rest of us is. Thus, Jesus will rule over God's creation with the very authority of God, not only because he is the final Davidic Son of God and king of Israel, but because he is God in the creation.

In conclusion, how should we answer the three questions posed above –

1. What does Jesus mean when he calls God "my Father?"
2. Why do the Jews think that by Jesus calling God "My Father" that he is claiming to be "equal with God?"
3. What did the Jews mean by the phrase "equal with God?"

By calling God "my Father," Jesus is claiming to be the final king of Israel according to the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. He is also claiming to be "equal with God," because God had granted to David and all the previous Davidic kings the authority and responsibility to rule over His creation. Except, in this case, Jesus is implicitly adding a notion that no other Israelite king or human being could claim, and this is that he is God incarnate, the very embodiment and visible form of Yahweh even though he is a distinct person from Yahweh. God is the ultimate storyteller and has written Jesus into His novel to be God in the story and to interact with Him from within the story.

In addition, the Jews have done their homework in the Old Testament. Some of them believe only that Jesus is claiming to be God's human proxy on earth as the Davidic king, so that he is claiming to have equal authority with the transcendent God. Then, some of them believe that Jesus is both God's proxy with the same authority and, indeed, God in the flesh with the same identity as God—just in created form. In either case, these Jews are not impressed with Jesus' claim, because he is violating the very covenant that God made with the Jews at Mt. Sinai through Moses and who looks so ordinary, just like a carpenter's son. Therefore, they think that they have biblical grounds on which to get rid of him, even to execute him as a criminal and blasphemer against Yahweh, the sovereign God.



## Chapter 12

### John 5:19-30 – Jesus Explains The Authority That God the Father Has Granted Him At The Judgment

19 Therefore Jesus responded and was saying to them, “Truly, truly I say to you, the Son cannot do anything by himself except what he sees the Father doing. For whatever He does, the Son also does these things likewise.

20 “For the Father loves the Son and shows everything to him that He Himself is doing, and He will show him greater works than these so that you may be amazed.

21 “For just as the Father raises the dead and grants them Life, so also the Son grants Life to whom he wishes.

22 “For the Father judges no one, but He has given all judgment to the Son,

23 “so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.

24 “Truly, truly I say to you that he who hears my message and believes Him who sent me has eternal Life and does not come under condemnation, but he has moved on out of Death into Life.

25 “Truly, truly I say to you that an hour is coming and now is when the Dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will Live.

26 “For just as the Father has Life in association with Himself, so also He has given to the Son to have Life in association with himself,

27 “and He has given him the authority to carry out judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

28 “Do not be amazed at this, because an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice,

29 “and those who did good things will come out into a resurrection of Life, and those who did evil things into a resurrection of condemnation.

30 “I cannot do anything by myself. Just as I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my desire but the desire of Him who sent me.”

In the first verse of this paragraph, verse 19, Jesus says three things. The first is that he, the Son, “cannot do anything by himself.” The word “cannot” is two Greek words οὐ δύναται (*ou dunatai* – literally “he is not able”). The dictionary form of *dunatai* is *dunamai* from which we get our word dynamite. Jesus could be saying that he does not have the *authority* to do anything on his own even though he has the *power* to do anything he wants. Or he could be saying that he does not have the *power* to do anything on his own even though he has the *authority* to do anything he wants. Or he could be saying *both*, that he has neither the *authority* nor the *power* to do anything he wants. I think he means this last option, that he has neither the authority nor the power *in and of himself* to do what the Father wants him to do. In other words, as the Messiah who is a created being and even God in the flesh, he is so dependent on God the Father as he carries out his role in this created realm that he ought not act upon his own and cannot do anything without both the Father’s official permission and power working in and through him. In other words, Jesus is using the fact that he is a created human being to describe his relationship to the transcendent God—that he is the Son of God, the Davidic king, who has been called by God to obey Him explicitly. Jesus will go on to

use this description to explain that his role at the final judgment will be both judge and advocate for morally depraved human beings. If Jesus acts strictly as a judge, then a person will experience God's eternal condemnation and destruction. If Jesus acts as both judge and advocate, then a person will experience God's eternal mercy and Life.

Traditional commentators interpret Jesus to mean that he has the *power* to do whatever he wants, because he has the same divine nature as God the Father. Nevertheless, he does not have the *authority* to do so, because he always submits his will to the Father. However, as I have already shown in previous chapters, it is logically and theologically impossible for Jesus to have a transcendent, divine nature while also being a creature within the creation. He has only a created ontological nature, even though he is God in the story of the creation. No other human being is permanently God within the creation (cf. Genesis 18 and the "angel of Yahweh" who appears to Abraham). Only Jesus is permanently God, but he is not transcendent. Therefore, Jesus is dependent on the Father for both the *authority* and the *power* to act according to the Father's wishes.

The second thing that Jesus says in v. 19 is that he cannot do anything "except what he sees the Father doing." To what activity of the Father is Jesus referring? While God is "doing" everything to cause the whole of the created reality to exist, from the smallest and nearest atom to the farthest and largest galaxy, Jesus must be referring specifically to what the Father wants him to do *in conjunction with the Father and in line with Jesus' role as the Messiah regarding God's overall project of eternally saving a group of people from this earth and bringing them into the eternal Kingdom of God*. This seems clear by what Jesus says in the next sentence that whatever the Father does, he does "likewise." Jesus is in effect copying the transcendent Father and Creator of all reality in what He is doing that is specific to Jesus' own role within the creation as the Messiah.

The third thing that Jesus says in v. 19 is that he "sees" what God the Father is doing. However, how does Jesus actually "see" what the Father is doing? Does he have x-ray vision like Superman? Or does he just somehow and somehow sense what God wants him to do, and then he does it? Jesus never explicitly explains the manner in which the Father communicates what He is doing and what He wants Jesus to do likewise. However, we can imagine an author who is writing himself into his story as a distinct person and what it would be like for the character in the story to "sense" what the author wants him to do in line with a specific function that the character is carrying out in the story. Somehow the author communicates his wishes and desires to the character in the story, so that the character is perfectly clear on what he is supposed to do.

From a biblical standpoint, Jesus' seeing what the Father is doing and then following the Father's lead is probably not too different from the Old Testament prophets who likewise were tutored by God to speak and act on His behalf. In addition, the Old Testament prophets spoke for God, because they had specific roles within salvation history that God wanted them to fulfill, and they did so, even as morally depraved human beings who needed God's eternal mercy just like all other human beings. Jesus certainly is a cut above, way above, the Old Testament prophets, because he is God in visible form and the eternal king of the Kingdom of God. In addition, he is morally perfect, indeed, the only morally perfect human being born of a woman who has existed in history. Yet, Jesus is still an ordinary human being in his essence. Therefore, we know that Jesus always perfectly obeys the Father and acts according to His desires and wishes as he carries out his role as the Messiah. Nevertheless, we should take the word "see" that Jesus uses in a rather metaphorical (or author/character in the story) way. Jesus does definitely perceive and understand what God the Father wants him to do, and then he does it.

As I have indicated already, an important concept that Jesus is communicating to the Jews in this passage is that, in his ontology, he is not a superordinary human being. Yet, in his role he does have a unique and powerful function within the creation and human history. He is made of created stuff, but the way he relates to God the Father is truly out of the ordinary in comparison to all other human beings who have ever lived and who will live in the creation. Therefore, it is not his ontology and his essence that makes him God and all-powerful like the Father. It is his function as God's proxy on earth within the creation. If the Father wants Jesus to do something miraculous and superordinary in someone's life, then he will do so out of obedience to the Father and in line with his role as the one who acts as God on earth. However, the miracle does not come from Jesus *per se*, because he is a created being. The miracle comes from the Father. Jesus has no authority or power in and of himself to do anything for anyone. He is a creature like all other creatures. God has created him and written him into His story just as God has created all other human beings and written them into His story. Yet, God grants Jesus more authority and power than any other creature within the creation—indeed the authority and power of God.

Nevertheless, Jesus' authority and power are *derived* authority and power. They are not inherent and intrinsic authority and power as traditional commentators think. Jesus is saying that whenever he acts, he acts only as God the Father directs him to act. He is also saying that when he powerfully performs a miracle, he does so only as God the Father directs him to perform it, so that the power comes ultimately from the transcendent Creator God, the Father, not from Jesus who is His created representative and "image" within the creation (cf. Colossians 1:15).

The picture that Jesus is giving the Jews in this passage is far different from the one we hear within Christendom. We are taught to pray to Jesus because he is the omnipotent, transcendent Creator of all reality. The popular view of Jesus today is that he is the stand-alone-transcendent God, who is all powerful and capable of affecting our lives directly. Therefore, we hear Christians address all their prayers to Jesus, "Jesus, I pray that you will heal my mother, provide me with a job, help me do well on my exam, give me courage, etc." Consequently, God the Father has disappeared from Christianity. Yet, is this Jesus' view of reality as described here in John 5? Not at all. Jesus is saying that he is utterly dependent on the Father, implying that it is God the Father who is omnipotent and affecting our lives directly. While Jesus is the embodiment of God within the creation, he is not the transcendent God who is the all powerful author of the story. He is saying in v. 19 that only God the Father is the all powerful author of the story of creation. Jesus is His proxy, and, therefore, Jesus attributes his miracles to the Father and not to his own divine nature, because he has no intrinsic divine nature. He has only intrinsic human nature as a created human being.

If Jesus were the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, we would expect him to be saying that, even though he has the ability and power to do anything that the Father can do, nevertheless he always submits to the Father and does only what he is permitted to do and what the Father asks him to do. Certainly, this is how traditional commentators interpret him. Instead, it makes more sense to understand Jesus as saying that he "cannot do anything by himself except what he sees the Father doing," because he is a created being who is God in the creation while the Father is uncreated and transcends the creation. Therefore, Jesus as God derives his existence within the creation from God who is outside creation. While Jesus may hear our prayers, even he would say that he is not the one to whom we should be praying. It is to the Father that we should address our prayers, and it is the Father whom we should think of as our source of help in time of need, indeed the source of our very existence, which is why Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount says to his disciples in the presence of the crowds –

[Matt. 6:9](#) “Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.

[Matt. 6:10](#) ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven... (NAS95)

Jesus did not instruct people to pray, “Our Lord Jesus, hallowed by your name...” Even he gave all credit to the Father as the ultimate source of all created reality, which is also how the apostles pray after Peter and John have been released from prison in Acts 4:23-31 –

[Acts 4:23](#) When they [Peter and John] had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

[Acts 4:24](#) And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM,

[Acts 4:25](#) “who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, ‘WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS?

[Acts 4:26](#) ‘THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.’

[Acts 4:27](#) “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,

[Acts 4:28](#) “to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

[Acts 4:29](#) “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence,

[Acts 4:30](#) “while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”

[Acts 4:31](#) And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness. (NAS95)

In this passage, the apostles make a distinction between God the Creator and His servant Jesus, the Anointed. Logically, we should understand them to be saying that the Creator is God the Father and that Jesus is the Messiah and God the Son. They explicitly say that God the Father is the one who “made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them.” The Father, not Jesus, is the transcendent Creator of all reality. Jesus is His servant on earth who is the “Christ,” against whom all the peoples have raged and taken their stand (as quoted from Psalm 2). Therefore, it makes sense to the apostles to pray to the transcendent Creator God, whose holy servant is Jesus, whom He anointed, that is, whom He made the Messiah and King of Israel and who dwells within the creation as a creature himself. Thus, we can infer that it does not make sense to the apostles to pray to Jesus. Consequently, neither should we. Instead we should direct all our communication to the transcendent God just as Jesus instructed his disciples and as they did in following Jesus’ instructions.

In John 5:20, Jesus presents the flip side of the coin to his doing what he sees the Father doing and adds the fact that the “Father loves the Son.” This statement is

reminiscent of several times when God audibly speaks from His transcendence about Jesus. For example, in Matthew 3 when Jesus comes to John the Baptist to be baptized

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[Matt. 3:13](#) Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him.

[Matt. 3:14](#) But John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?”

[Matt. 3:15](#) But Jesus answering said to him, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he permitted Him.

[Matt. 3:16](#) After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him,

[Matt. 3:17](#) and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” (NAS95)

In this passage, the transcendent God speaks into the creation and declares that Jesus is the Son whom He loves. However, the love that God has for His Son Jesus is far different from His love for us rebellious human beings. God’s love for Jesus is a love that the Father exhibits to Jesus such that Jesus clearly sees what the Father is doing in His project of using him as the Messiah and saving morally depraved people so that they will dwell in the eternal Kingdom of God. Therefore, by speaking of the Father’s love for the Son, Jesus is saying that he is the one human being who is the God-man and Messiah for whom God has a very special role to play in human history. As a result of God’s love for him like this, the Father “shows” Jesus what He is doing. Again, we do not know exactly how such “showing” actually takes place. We just know that it does.

Then Jesus goes on to say that at some point in the future the Father will show him “greater works” that he is to perform, and the Jews will be amazed at them. Jesus could be speaking of miracles on earth that are greater than the ones that he has performed so far. Thus, he would mean that he will perform greater wonders than turning water into wine (John 2) and healing the lame man (here in John 5). Or Jesus could be referring to his resurrection and the activities that will take place in a realm beyond this merely earthly one. In the context, he is referring to the latter and attempting to get these Jews, who are standing there condemning him for supposedly violating the Mosaic Covenant, to come to grips with this man whom they are inappropriately judging. He is trying to get them to realize that he is the one who will die, rise from the dead, and have the authority to judge them at the final judgment either by appealing to the Father for mercy on their behalf or by withholding an appeal while the Father condemns them. These, then, will be the “greater works” that will “amaze” them, and it would obviously be to their eternal benefit if they faced into this fact now and repented of their treatment of Jesus who is their Messiah and judge.

In verse 21, Jesus continues this thread of thought. The Father “raises the dead.” God will take those who have died before the time of the final judgment and cause them to rise from physical death. Then they will stand before Him and have it determined whether they receive judgment and eternal Death or forgiveness and eternal Life. Thus, Jesus says that God is the one who “grants them Life,” these people whom He has raised from physical death. I capitalize the letters “D” and “L” in Death and Life because Jesus is talking about *eternal* Death and *eternal* Life. God will condemn and require that certain people pay the penalty of destruction and eternal Death that they owe His justice. God will grant other people eternal Life by being merciful to them. Certainly, everyone

will be raised from physical death, but then some will move on through the judgment into eternal Death and destruction, while others will move on into eternal Life and the Kingdom of God.

Jesus also says that his future actions will be similar to the Father's. Yet, the similarity will not be in the raising of the dead, but rather in the granting of eternal Life. Jesus will grant eternal Life to whom he wishes at the judgment. In other words, Jesus will play a very important role at the judgment, so important that people will get eternal Life only if Jesus desires them to, just as people will get eternal Life only if the Father desires them to. Jesus and the Father will work in conjunction with one another at the judgment. We will learn more about such cooperation by them in a moment. Notice, though, that Jesus does not say that, like the Father, he will raise the dead. He says only that "the Son grants Life to whom he wishes." Jesus could be implying that he will raise people from physical death, but his omitting a reference to this actually means that he does not participate in raising people from physical death, which will become important in interpreting verse 27.

In verse 22, Jesus makes even more explicit than he did in v. 21 concerning the role that the Father has given him at the judgment. While God the Father is truly the ultimate Judge, He gives Jesus the role of looking like the ultimate judge. Jesus says that "the Father judges no one." In the context, he means that the Father does not overtly judge people apart from the role that Jesus plays in the judgment, which actually makes Jesus appear quite central to the whole process. Therefore, it is not that the Father does not actually judge people, but it is that, for all intents and purposes, Jesus will appear to be people's final judge, which is why he says that God the Father "has given all judgment to the Son."

On the basis of our discussion in the previous chapter of leaders in Israel who had several labels—"judges," "elders," "officers," etc.—it should not surprise us that God the Father grants Jesus the authority to "judge" people at the final judgment. Just as Moses stood before (lit. opposite) God in Exodus 18, so also Jesus stands before God and assesses people's choices. Jesus, however, may also be hinting that God is granting him the authority to do more than just evaluate the moral propriety of people's choices. Indeed, Jesus is the ultimate human "elder," "leader," interpreter of the biblical message, teacher, guide, and mentor. Some Christians talk about WWJD, what would Jesus do? Here Jesus may be talking about WWJS, what would Jesus say, i.e., what moral counsel would he give a person who is struggling with figuring out how to behave properly before God and obey Him? No one is a wiser counselor than Jesus, which is most likely what the apostle Paul means in Colossians –

[Col. 1:18](#) He [Jesus] is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything...

[Col. 2:10](#) and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; (NAS95)

Paul is basically saying that Jesus is the wisest human being in existence. If you want to know how to think about reality correctly and how to live life well, then listen to Jesus and only to Jesus. No one is a greater "head," "elder," "judge," "officer," "leader," or "scribe." No one understands God better than Jesus, because he is the very "image of the invisible God," the embodiment of God, on earth and has learned perfectly from God the Father all that is necessary to know about the reality that the transcendent Creator has made (cf. Colossians 1:15).



In John 5:23, Jesus goes on to state the purpose for why God has assigned such an important role to him. It is “so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” God the Father wants people whom Jesus judges and to whom he grants eternal Life to pay tribute to Jesus just as much as they revere God, the Creator, who is bringing all this about—especially their salvation through His granting them mercy through Jesus. No one should think of worshiping Jesus any less than they worship the Father, which is clearly another reference to Jesus’ being God in the story of salvation and judgment. Jesus is a human being, but he is playing the role of God in history on into eternity. Therefore, just as any human being should worship the transcendent Creator, God the Father, so also any human being should worship Jesus, who is God in the creation. Those who receive mercy and, therefore, eternal Life through Jesus’ actions at the judgment will worship Jesus, because they will recognize and value not only the role that Jesus is playing but also his identity as God in visible, human form.

Then in this same verse Jesus fires a shot across his listening Jews’ bow, that anyone who *currently* does not properly honor him, Jesus, because he is the Son of God, is not *currently* revering God properly, *regardless of how fervently he thinks he is obeying the Mosaic Covenant and being a good Jew*. In other words, while the Jews are claiming that there is no way that Jesus can be the Messiah because he is violating the Sabbath, he is saying that there is no way that they can be good Jews, because they are refusing to believe in him and honor him as the Messiah—the one who will have the final say with respect to the eternal outcomes of their lives at the final judgment.

Jesus also describes God the Father as the one “who sent him.” It would be easy, as many commentators do, to think that Jesus means by these words that God has sent Jesus to earth from his transcendent position as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity to be a man and the Messiah. Thus, Jesus would mean something different about God’s sending him from God’s sending John the Baptist, which is mentioned in John 1:6, “There came a man sent from God, whose name was John” (NAS95). If indeed the traditional view of the trinity is correct, then these constitute different meanings to the word “sent.” God sent Jesus from his eternal and transcendent position as God the Son, while God sent John the Baptist merely by creating another morally depraved human being who would play a special role in salvation history. However, if Jesus perceives himself as a man who has come into existence to play the role of God Himself in the story of human history, then there is not as much difference as commentators claim between these two uses of the word “sent.” For God to “send” a man, whether the fundamentally rebellious John the Baptist or the morally perfect God-man Jesus, is for Him to assign to such a person a special role in the history of the eternal salvation of God’s people. Another example of this kind of sending is seen in Joseph’s response in Genesis 45 to his brothers who had sold him into slavery –

[Gen. 45:4](#) Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come closer to me.” And they came closer. And he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

[Gen.45:5](#) “Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me (שְׁלַחְנִי אֱלֹהִים) (ἀπέστειλέν με ὁ θεὸς – LXX) before you to preserve life.

[Gen. 45:6](#) “For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting.

[Gen. 45:7](#) “God sent me (אֶלְיָנִי אֱלֹהִים) (ἀπέστειλεν γάρ με ὁ θεός – LXX) before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

[Gen. 45:8](#) “Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.” (NAS95)

It is true that Joseph is not talking about God’s bringing him into existence. Instead, he is referring to God’s orchestrating the events in his life and the lives of his brothers, so that Joseph ends up in Egypt and leads the Egyptians by having them store up grain in preparation for the coming famine. Nevertheless, it is still God who assigns to Joseph a special role in the salvation of His people by providing physical food for them in Egypt in the midst of the famine. Similarly, God “sent” Moses in Exodus 3 to the Israelites in order to lead them out of slavery from Egypt –

[Ex. 3:7](#) The LORD [Yahweh] said, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings.

[Ex. 3:8](#) “So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.

[Ex. 3:9](#) “Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them.

[Ex. 3:10](#) “Therefore, come now, and I will send you (אֶשְׁלַחְךָ) (ἀποστείλω σε – LXX) to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.” (NAS95)

Like Genesis 45 with respect to Joseph, this passage is not referring to God’s bringing Moses into existence within the creation. Yet, we can see that God “sends” people whom He uses in specific and special ways. In the case of John 5 (and the whole New Testament), Jesus is the most important human being ever created and sent by God. He is the very embodiment of God in the story of mankind and will fulfill the role of dying for God’s people and ruling over them for all eternity. Joseph and Moses did not and will not do this. Only Jesus will. Nevertheless, like Jesus, Joseph and Moses were “sent by God” to fulfill truly notable and important roles in human history. For someone to honor the Father properly, he must recognize that God has sent Joseph and Moses to play their significant roles in history. For someone to honor the Father properly, he must recognize even more that God has sent Jesus to play the most important role in human history. Consequently, a person will similarly honor Jesus as the Son of God and the visible form of God within the creation.

In verse 24, Jesus states his point clearly, “He who hears my message and believes Him who sent me has eternal Life and does not come under condemnation.” We could interpret Jesus as referring to the *necessity* of someone’s *physically* hearing his message, i.e., if anyone in history since the coming of Christ does not *physically* hear the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and believe it, then this person cannot acquire eternal salvation. This interpretation would give us the reason why evangelistic programs in churches are necessary, or at least why Christians say that they are

necessary. However, it is better to interpret Jesus in the light of the Jews to whom he is speaking. The problem with the Jews from the time that God gave them the Mosaic Covenant is that they have been unwilling to “hear” God properly—to listen to His voice and obey Him. We recall from the discussion on the Mosaic Covenant that God said to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai –

[Ex. 19:5](#) ‘Now then, if you will indeed obey (שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ) (*shamoa’ tishm<sup>e</sup>’oo*)) My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine.’ (NAS95)

In this verse, the word translated “obey” is actually two Hebrew words, both of which are forms of the word that means “hear,” the Hebrew word שָׁמַע (*shama’*). This is the word that Moses uses in the famous verses in Deuteronomy that constitute the most important commandment of the Mosaic Covenant and is called the *Shema* because it is the first word of these verses –

[Deut. 6:4](#) “Hear (שָׁמַע) (*sh<sup>e</sup>ma’*)), O Israel! The LORD [Yahweh] is our God, the LORD is one!

[Deut. 6:5](#) “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (NAS95)

The first word of verse 4 is שָׁמַע (*sh<sup>e</sup>ma’*). Notice that the NAS95 translates it as “Hear,” which is its basic meaning. Yet, as the translation of Exodus 19:5 above shows, the word can denote more than just physically hearing a sound or someone’s voice. It can also include grasping what someone is saying in such a way that a person responds to it with obedience—especially when we are talking about “hearing” God, His “voice,” and His commandments. Therefore, it can be synonymous with “believe,” which also can include the willful act to obey. For example, we saw in the discussion about the Mosaic Covenant that when God promised to Isaac in Genesis 26 that He would fulfill the promises that He had made to Abraham, He said that it was because Abraham “obeyed Me.” (cf. Gen. 26:5; NAS95). The word translated “obeyed” is also שָׁמַע (*shama’*), i.e., “heard.” Genesis 15 had told us that Abraham was an authentic believer. Genesis 26 tells us that Abraham was also an authentic “hearer” and “obeyer” of God. Then, in Exodus 19 God is saying that if the Israelites hear, believe, and obey what He is saying in the Mosaic Covenant, then they will be His physical people on the earth, because they will be responding properly to Him spiritually. And, as we saw above in the discussion on the Abrahamic Covenant, such obedience can happen only if God miraculously changes their hearts.

Therefore, in John 5:25, Jesus is speaking along the same lines to the Jews standing in front of him. With both the words “hears” and “believes,” he means “responds with obedience that comes from a miraculously changed heart.” In other words, because the Jews have witnessed God’s working miraculously through Jesus by healing the lame man and they are privy to Jesus’ statements that he is the Messiah, then anyone who really “listens” to the data that are going into his ears and eyes and comprehends it properly so that he believes the truth that Jesus is presenting, which includes that the Father has sent him, is the person who gains eternal Life and escapes eternal Death. This is the Jew who “has moved on out of Death into Life”—albeit not yet completely, because he is still living in the present world comprised of rebellion against God, except for Jesus. Nevertheless, the believer in Jesus as the Messiah has moved on from where

he was (he stood to experience God's judgment and condemnation) to where he is now (he stands to gain eternal mercy and Life from God).

Verse 25 is a bit tricky. First, Jesus says that "an hour is coming *and now is*" (emphasis mine). This whole statement implies that something will happen in the future—at or near the judgment according to the context—and indeed it is happening now. To what is this statement referring? The "Dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will Live." Jesus could mean that the physically dead who have believed in him in the present life will rise from the dead when he calls them to do so, and then they will acquire eternal Life as a result. However, if this is the correct way to interpret Jesus statement, then what do the words "and now is" mean? In other words, how is it that the physically dead will rise from the dead in the future at the judgment and acquire eternal Life and the physically dead are rising now from the dead and acquiring eternal Life? This interpretation makes sense. Likewise, the flip side of the coin would be that those who will not rise from physical death to acquire eternal Life in the future when Jesus calls because they rejected him in the present realm are not rising now from physical death to acquire eternal Life. This interpretation makes no sense either.

Nevertheless, if the words "and now is" indicate that whatever happens in the future truly is also what is happening now, then there must be some other meaning that fits with the rest of Jesus' statement. In the context, what connects this verse to the previous one, v. 24, is that a time in the future is coming when "the Dead," those Jews who have stood to receive judgment from God, will "hear" Jesus' voice so to speak when God changes the hearts of the final generation of Jews, and they will respond properly to the truth, so that they transition from a position where they stood to experience disapproval to a position where they stand to obtain eternal Life. We saw in the discussion on the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants that this is how God will fulfill His promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation. Jesus is saying in John 5:25 that similarly "the Dead," i.e., certain Jews who have stood to receive God's judgment, are *now* "hearing" Jesus' voice, because God is changing their hearts and causing them to believe properly that Jesus is the Messiah. Thus, God is now granting a "remnant" of Jews (cf. the discussion of the Abrahamic Covenant) the promise of eternal Life. In other words, some Jews are becoming authentic believers *now* and some Jews, in fact an entire generation, will become authentic believers in the future.

Then, in verse 26, Jesus speaks again of God the Father's sharing something important with him, the Son of God, "Just as the Father has Life in himself, so also He has given to the Son to have Life in himself." We saw in v. 22 that the Father has shared with the Son the authority to judge and determine the eternal destiny of all human beings at the final judgment. Is Jesus saying something different here? For example, he could mean that just as God the Father is made of eternal stuff, so also He has shared His eternal stuff with Jesus—both as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity before the Son of God became a man, and now also as God incarnate. Therefore, Jesus is ontologically the same as the transcendent Father (as he has always been) while he is also now ontologically the same as other human beings (except for their moral depravity). Thus, Jesus would be both fully God and fully man, because he is made of the same eternal stuff as the Father and the same material stuff as human beings. As the traditionalists like to say, he is the hypostatic union of divine beingness and human beingness.

Another possibility is that Jesus means that just as God the Father has the power to infuse substances with eternal Life, He has given the same power and ability to the Son. Jesus can cause a rock to become eternal just as easily as the Father can do so, and Jesus can work powerfully in people's lives just as the Father can, which would justify our praying to him and not to the Father.

However, in the context, Jesus is saying the same thing that he said in v. 22, that he has been given the authority to judge people at the final judgment. He is just saying it in a slightly different way. We can see that this is the correct interpretation because of the next verse, v. 27, which is an explanation and not an addition to v. 26. In verse 27, Jesus says that God “has given him the authority to carry out judgment because he is the Son of Man.” Also, this is no different from verse 22, “For the Father judges no one, but he has given all judgment to the Son...” Therefore, the fact that “the Father has Life in Himself” refers to His authority to determine who gets eternal Life and who gets eternal Death. The Father has the authority to grant eternal Life to those who are in association with Him, i.e., those who believe the truth and are fundamentally committed to it. In other words, for the Father to have “Life in Himself” is for Him to have the authority to give eternal Life to anyone who is in association with Him through genuine belief and commitment to the truth and salvation. Therefore, the fact that “[God the Father] has given to the Son to have Life in himself” refers to the authority that God has given to Jesus to grant Life to those who associate with *him* through genuine belief in the truth of his being the Messiah. Thus, Jesus determines who gets eternal Life and who gets eternal Death just as the transcendent Father does, and it is dependent, humanly speaking, on whether or not people are willing to associate with ultimately God the Father through His Son, Jesus, in the proper way—by means of authentic belief. We need to remember that the whole context is about the judgment. Jesus is not making statements about his ontology but about his authority and role as the embodiment of God, Messiah, and judge.

We notice also that Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. Most commentators who hold to the traditional belief in the trinity interpret this phrase as Jesus’ referring to his humanity as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. In other words, the title Son of God emphasizes Jesus’ deity, while the title Son of Man emphasizes his humanity. However, as with the phrase Son of God, if we examine the Old Testament, we come to a different conclusion about the title Son of Man. Usually, most commentators begin their explanation of Son of Man by referring to the heavenly vision in Daniel 7:9-14 –

[Dan. 7:9](#) “I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were a burning fire.

[Dan. 7:10](#) “A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; the court sat, and the books were opened.

[Dan. 7:11](#) “Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire.

[Dan. 7:12](#) “As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time.

[Dan. 7:13](#) “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him.

[Dan. 7:14](#) “And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.” (NAS95)

What catches our eye are vs. 13 and 14 –

[Dan. 7:13](#) “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him.

[Dan. 7:14](#) “And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.” (NAS95)

This means that God, “the Ancient of Days,” gives the person described as “One like a Son of Man” a kingdom that is everlasting. Certainly this vision is about Jesus, the final Davidic king. Indeed it is, but it is not this passage from which Jesus borrows his title Son of Man in order to use it to refer to his humanity in the midst of his deity. This is in spite of Jesus’ own reference to Daniel 7 in Matthew 26:64 when he responds at his trial before the Sanhedrin to the high priest’s question about his identity –

[Matt. 26:62](#) The high priest stood up and said to Him, “Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?”

[Matt. 26:63](#) But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.”

[Matt. 26:64](#) Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.”

[Matt. 26:65](#) Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy;

[Matt. 26:66](#) what do you think?” They answered, “He deserves death!”

[Matt. 26:67](#) Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him,

[Matt. 26:68](#) and said, “Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?” (NAS95)

In his response to the high priest, Jesus quotes both Psalm 110 and Daniel 7. He says that they will see “the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power,” which refers to Psalm 110:1 where David hears God tell the Messiah, David’s “Lord,” to sit at His right hand. Then, Jesus says that they will see “the Son of Man...coming on the clouds of heaven,” which refers to Daniel 7:13 where Daniel observes that “One like a Son of Man was coming.” Because Jesus ties these two Old Testament passages together in the way that he does, clearly Daniel 7 is about the Christ, the Messiah, the final Davidic king of Israel, who receives his eternal kingdom over which he rules as God’s proxy and deputy. Yet, the question is, does Jesus pull from this second passage to refer to himself as the Son of Man? Notice that Daniel 7:13 says, “One *like* a Son of Man.” The word “like” is important. The verse does not say, “The Son of Man,” because, if it did, then this would be a good passage to help understand the *title* Son of Man. Instead, the passage says, “One like a Son of Man,” *k<sup>e</sup>var ’enash* (כְּבָר אֱנָשׁ) in the Aramaic. Therefore, this is not a reference to a title but to a category of being, i.e., the category of human being. As



a result, the text is telling us that a person who was like a human being, indeed a human being, approached God, the Ancient of Days, and received an eternal kingdom. But this is all the text is telling us. It is not giving us a name or title for the human being who comes before God. In addition, the text is especially not identifying this human being (“of Man”) as the one who is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity (“Son”).

Considering this further, we find in the Bible that the phrase Son of Man has at least three different meanings:

1. Son of Man is the same as a personal pronoun such as “I” or “you” when used to refer to a particular human being.
2. Son of Man means “a human being.”
3. Son of Man means the Davidic king who comes from the human race.

An example of the first meaning is actually a very unlikely one at first glance. In Matthew 16, Jesus is basically asking his disciples if the people believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, but it is interesting how he poses the question –

[Matt. 16:13](#) Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

[Matt. 16:14](#) And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.”

[Matt. 16:15](#) He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

[Matt. 16:16](#) Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

[Matt. 16:17](#) And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” (NAS95)

While it is certainly possible that Jesus is asking in v. 13, “Who do people say that the Messiah is?” it is more natural to interpret him as saying, “Who do people say that I am?” This corresponds with the same question in v. 15. In both cases, the question is the same, “Who do people say that I am?” It is just that in the first case Jesus uses the phrase Son of Man as a substitute for the first personal pronoun “I,” which also makes sense in the light of Peter’s answer after Jesus asks his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter could have simply said, “Well, Jesus, you just told us—the Son of Man (i.e., the Christ).” Instead, Peter’s answer is a new statement and a true revelation. It is not just a repetition of Jesus’ own declaration that he is the Messiah in v. 13. Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Notice, also, that Jesus tells him that it was the Father who revealed this truth to him, not Jesus himself in how he stated the question. Therefore, Jesus uses the phrase “Son of Man” in v. 13 as a substitute for the first personal pronoun “I.” Thus, Jesus is asking, “Who do people say that I, this particular human being, am?” By the way, this statement is another clear example where “heaven” means outside the creation when Jesus describes God as “My Father who is in heaven.”

Another example where Son of Man is a substitute for a personal pronoun is in the Old Testament passage, Ezekiel 2:1-4, which says –

[Ezek. 2:1](#) Then He [Yahweh] said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you!”

[Ezek. 2:2](#) As He spoke to me the Spirit entered me and set me on my feet; and I heard Him speaking to me.

[Ezek. 2:3](#) Then He said to me, “Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day.

[Ezek. 2:4](#) “I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD [Adonai Yahweh].’” (NAS95)

God is addressing the prophet Ezekiel in this passage. The question is, what does God mean by the phrase son of man when He uses it to address the prophet. Certainly, He does not mean that Ezekiel is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. Yet, as some scholars believe, maybe he wants to be clear that he is addressing a mere frail human being, a simple man, whom He desires to be utterly dependent upon Him, who is the transcendent God? Perhaps, but, in the context, God is emphasizing that it is to Ezekiel that He is speaking. Therefore, all that He means by “Son of man” is “Hey you,” and he wants Ezekiel to listen up, because He, the transcendent God, is speaking to him about an important role that He wants him to play in the history of His people, the Israelites. In other words, in v. 1 Yahweh says to Ezekiel, “Hey you, the particular human being whom I am addressing, stand on your feet” so that “Son of man” is replacing the vocative 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun “You.”

An example of the second meaning, when Son of Man means “human being,” is when the prophet Balaam speaks to Balak, king of the Midianites, in Numbers 23:16-20

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[Num. 23:16](#) Then the LORD [Yahweh] met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, “Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.”

[Num. 23:17](#) He came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the leaders of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, “What has the LORD spoken?”

[Num. 23:18](#) Then he took up his discourse and said, “Arise, O Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor!

[Num. 23:19](#) “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”

[Num. 23:20](#) “Behold, I have received a command to bless; when He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it.” (NAS95)

Balak, king of the Moabites, has commissioned the pagan prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. In vs. 19 and 20, Balaam says that what God has commanded him to do, he will do, because he cannot oppose God’s sovereignty. Therefore, Balaam will bless the Jews because God will bless the Jews. Then, part of the way that Balaam communicates to Balak God’s sovereign faithfulness toward the Israelites is in two statements. The first is, “God is not a man that He should lie,” and the second is, “Nor a son of man that He should repent.” It makes sense to see these two statements as being simply parallel to one another. Therefore, “son of man” in the second statement means the same thing as “man” in the first statement, which is to say that it means a plain ol’ fickle human being. God is not a human being who lies and changes His mind.

An example of the third meaning of Son of Man, that it refers to a Davidic king who comes from the human race, is in the Old Testament passage where Son of Man is a title. It also makes sense that, in John 5:27, Jesus draws from this passage to refer to himself with the same title, Son of Man. The Old Testament passage is Psalm 8, a psalm of David, which he must have written soon after God made the Davidic Covenant with

him. As I explained in the previous chapter, it was in this covenant that God promised to extend David's kingdom into eternity and that he and his descendants as kings of Israel were each a Son of God, thus granting them the authority to rule as God over the earth and His creation. Before turning to Psalm 8, it is helpful for understanding what is going on in this psalm to look at the passage in 2 Samuel 7:18-29 right after the prophet Nathan comes to David and spells out the Davidic Covenant –

[2Sam. 7:18](#) Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD [Yahweh], and he said, “Who am I, O Lord GOD [Adonai Yahweh], and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?”

[2Sam. 7:19](#) “And yet this was insignificant in Your eyes, O Lord GOD, for You have spoken also of the house of Your servant concerning the distant future. And this is the custom of man, O Lord GOD.

[2Sam. 7:20](#) “Again what more can David say to You? For You know Your servant, O Lord GOD!

[2Sam. 7:21](#) “For the sake of Your word, and according to Your own heart, You have done all this greatness to let Your servant know.

[2Sam. 7:22](#) “For this reason You are great, O Lord GOD; for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears.

[2Sam. 7:23](#) “And what one nation on the earth is like Your people Israel, whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself, and to do a great thing for You and awesome things for Your land, before Your people whom You have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, from nations and their gods?

[2Sam. 7:24](#) “For You have established for Yourself Your people Israel as Your own people forever, and You, O LORD, have become their God.

[2Sam. 7:25](#) “Now therefore, O LORD God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and his house, confirm it forever, and do as You have spoken,

[2Sam. 7:26](#) that Your name may be magnified forever, by saying, ‘The LORD of hosts is God over Israel’; and may the house of Your servant David be established before You.

[2Sam. 7:27](#) “For You, O LORD of hosts [Yahweh Tzevaoth], the God of Israel, have made a revelation to Your servant, saying, ‘I will build you a house’; therefore Your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to You.

[2Sam. 7:28](#) “Now, O Lord GOD, You are God, and Your words are truth, and You have promised this good thing to Your servant.

[2Sam. 7:29](#) “Now therefore, may it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue forever before You. For You, O Lord GOD, have spoken; and with Your blessing may the house of Your servant be blessed forever.” (NAS95)

In this passage, David prays to God regarding the covenant He has just made with him—that God will build a “house,” a dynasty, for David that will last into eternity. However, we can see that the tenor of the prayer is one of almost shock and certainly extreme humility. It is one thing for the pagan nations to believe that their kings are the representatives and agents of their chief gods and that they rule over the earth with the same authority as their gods, because the pagan gods are really not gods at all. Therefore, the pagan kings do not rule with any actual superior divine authority.

However, it is a whole other thing when the one true God and Creator of the universe borrows this notion from the pagan nations and tells David, a morally depraved man who deserves God's judgment, that he is going to rule over Israel and the earth with the same authority as God Himself. Wow! And David can hardly believe his ears. "What, me?" he says to God. "And my rebellious descendants besides?" This is almost more than David can handle. David goes on to say in his prayer that if this is what God decrees, then let it be, and may God be eternally faithful to His promise to David. We should note that sometime after the initial shock wears off, David figures out that eventually the complete fulfillment of the covenant will be by God Himself as a human being and this is why he writes in Psalm 110:1, "Yahweh said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'" (see above in the previous chapter in the discussion of why Jesus calls God "my Father").

Right after God makes the covenant, David can only express his humble gratitude to God and how he looks forward to God's being faithful to His promise. Now we can look at Psalm 8 where David basically says the same thing as in his prayer in 2 Samuel 7, and, therefore, he most likely wrote the psalm soon after the events of 2 Samuel 7 –

[Psa. 8:1](#) O LORD [Yahweh], our Lord [Adonaynu], How majestic is Your name in all the earth, who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!

[Psa. 8:2](#) From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength because of Your adversaries, to make the enemy and the revengeful cease.

[Psa. 8:3](#) When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained;

[Psa. 8:4](#) What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?

[Psa. 8:5](#) Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty!

[Psa. 8:6](#) You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet,

[Psa. 8:7](#) all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

[Psa. 8:8](#) the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

[Psa. 8:9](#) O LORD [Yahweh], our Lord [Adonaynu], how majestic is Your name in all the earth! (NAS95)

This psalm expresses the same wonderment and humility as David's prayer in 2 Samuel 7:18-29. Most logically therefore, it is addressing the same point—that God has chosen David and his descendants to rule over Israel with the same authority as God Himself. As a result, David is God's Son, and each of David's descendants who ascend to his throne is God's Son. David says that each king, starting with David, has been "made a little lower than God" in that God has crowned each one with glory and majesty by granting him the authority to rule as God's proxy over the same reality over which God rules—the creation, "the works of [God's] hands." Thus, God is exalting David and his descendants to a position that is altogether remarkable—just "a little lower than God."

We also see in v. 4 the same kind of question that David asks in the prayer of 2 Samuel 7. David asks here in Psalm 8:4, "What is man that You have thought of him...?" In 2 Samuel 7:18 he had asked, "Who am I, O Lord God, that you have brought me this far?" David goes on to say in Psalm 8:4, "and the son of man that You care for him?"

Because of typical Hebrew parallelism in the psalms, in this context it is best to interpret the words “man” and “son of man” in this verse as referring to human beings and then one specific human being, him whom God has called Son, i.e., David, and then his descendants after him, too.

In other words, David is asking God how it can be that God would take a man, a human being, and make him His proxy as king of Israel and of the whole earth by calling him His Son, as the other ancient Near Eastern peoples think of their kings. This action by God is both shocking and humbling to David. David can hardly believe that God has done this toward little ol’ him. Therefore, the “of Man” of the phrase Son of Man is referring to the source from which God’s proxy comes. He comes from humanity. It is startling to David that the Son of God is an ordinary human being. One would think, perhaps, that God would choose for His representative to be some sort of superman—more handsome, more powerful, more charismatic, more athletic, and higher in his ontological nature than any other person on earth. Thus, it would be more obvious that God had chosen this superman to rule with the same authority that He does. Instead, God’s Son, the king of Israel and God’s agent who rules over His creation, is David—a quite ordinary (and in this case morally depraved) human being. This is what David means by the phrase Son of Man. He is referring to the Son of the Davidic Covenant who comes from mankind. Thus, David is saying that this Son comes from the human race, no matter when we are talking about the Son of God.

Whether we are talking about David and his descendants up to the time of Jesus, who were *fundamentally rebellious* human beings, or we are talking about Jesus, who is *fundamentally morally perfect and God incarnate*, the king of Israel comes from the human race and is an ordinary human being in his ontology. Therefore, the “Son” of God who has God as his “Father” according to the Davidic covenant is a created human being. Thus, even though the Son of God ultimately derives his attributes—his authority, his power, his intellect, the color of his eyes—from God, nevertheless, he is the Son of Man, the Davidic king who is an ordinary human being. David is truly humbled by God’s choosing him and his descendants to be this Son of God and Son of Man according to the Davidic Covenant.

We can see that David’s use in Psalm 8 of the phrase Son of Man is the place from which Jesus draws the *title* Son of Man to refer to himself as the final Davidic king who comes from the human race. Therefore, it does refer to his humanity, but not in contrast to his deity as though the title Son of God refers to the deity of the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, while the title Son of Man refers to the humanity of the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the title Son of God is referring, at its most basic level, to the king of Israel who rules the Jews and has authority over God’s creation as God’s proxy according to the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. In addition, this title, Son of God, can refer to any of David’s descendants who ruled as kings of Israel and Judah. Eventually, though, the final Son of God is truly God in the flesh, God in visible form as a human being. Yet, even this Son of God comes into existence when God chooses to write him into His story in order that he perform the function of crucified and risen Messiah who rules over the eternal Kingdom of God.

Getting back to John 5:27, “and He [God the Father] gave Him [Jesus] authority to execute judgment, because He [Jesus] is the Son of Man,” we conclude that Jesus is directly referring to Psalm 8:4 and stating that he is the “Son” as mentioned in the Davidic Covenant who has God as his Father. Thus, Jesus has the authority to rule over the entirety of God’s creation, and Jesus is now saying that God has also granted him the authority to execute judgment on the day of judgment for all human beings. In addition, because he is the “Son of Man,” a created, ordinary, human being who is the embodiment of God, he derives his authority from the Creator God, not from himself. By

extrapolation, Jesus would also say, as he already did in v. 19, that he derives all his attributes—his authority, his power, his intellect, etc.—from the uncreated God, the Father, not from his own divine nature, because he has no actual divine “nature.” What he has is a divine *function* and *role*. He is living the human life of God in human history, which is what makes him divine, because it is logically and theologically impossible for his being God to be any other way.

Still, the fact of the matter in v. 27 is that God has granted Jesus the authority to judge all human beings at the final judgment, and he is saying that this is what the Jews need to face into and realize. They are judging him and accusing him of violating the Mosaic Covenant because he has healed a lame man on the Sabbath and told him to carry his bedroll. On this basis, the Jews are rejecting his claim as the Messiah, but he is telling them that he will be the last person they see before they enter into eternal destruction if they keep up their rebellion against God, because the Father has granted him the authority to judge and condemn them.

In verse 28, Jesus encourages the Jews who are listening to him not to be amazed at all this. What the Father has done, He has done. If God has granted Jesus the authority to judge people at the final judgment, then these Jews need to get on board with this or suffer the eternal consequences if they continue in their state of hostility toward him. He then goes on to explain in the rest of the verse and also verse 29 that their lack of amazement should be based upon the fact that “an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and those who did good things will come out into a resurrection of Life, and those who did evil things into a resurrection of condemnation.” A problematic word is “His” at the end of verse 28. Is Jesus referring to himself? Assuming “tombs” means literal enclosures of dead bodies, i.e., graves, will it be Jesus who commands the physically dead to rise and come to judgment? No, on the basis of v. 21 when Jesus indicated that it is the Father who raises the dead and Jesus who will grant eternal Life to whom he desires. Therefore, the word “His” in v. 28 is referring back to the Father in vs. 26 & 27. God the Father has granted to Jesus the authority to give eternal Life at the judgment to whom he wishes, which will become obvious after He, the Father, calls to the physically dead in their tombs and brings them back to life. It will then be clear at the judgment that some people are coming out of their tombs to acquire eternal salvation and Life through Jesus’ judgment and the Father’s mercy. Jesus describes these people as “those who did good things” during their earthly lives. He does not mean that they performed morally perfectly or that they in their natural born moral depravity pursued a life of morality and thereby earned eternal Life. Instead, he means the same thing that the apostle Paul does in Romans 2:7, that “those who by perseverance in doing good” will receive eternal Life. Their doing goodness comes from a heart that both has been changed by God and is committed to goodness in the midst of continued rebellion against God while never achieving moral perfection in the present life or even the ability to earn God’s blessing.

It will also be clear at the judgment that some people are coming out of their tombs who will receive eternal destruction through Jesus’ and the Father’s judgment. Jesus describes these people as “those who did evil things” during their earthly lives. He does not mean that they failed to perform morally perfectly or to earn eternal Life by their natural born moral depravity. Instead, he means the same thing that the apostle Paul does in Romans 2:8, that “those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth” will incur God’s judgment. Their doing evil things comes from a heart that is hostile toward God and His truth and that has not been changed by God. They will rise from the dead “into a resurrection of condemnation.” As Paul also says in Romans 2:8,9, eternal wrath and destruction await everyone “who does evil” from a heart that both has not been changed by God and remains committed to evil and immorality in the current



realm, while glory, honor, peace, and eternal Life await everyone “who does good” from a heart that has been changed by God.

In verse 30, Jesus wraps up this section and repeats, “I cannot do anything by myself.” He has neither the authority nor the ability to act on his own apart from the Father and what He tells him to do. Jesus continues, “Just as I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just because I do not seek my desire but the desire of Him who sent me.” Once again he indicates that the whole point of these comments is that he will play the key role at the future judgment. He will listen for God the Father’s instructions. If the Father tells him that the person standing before him at the judgment has a contrite heart, then Jesus will himself detect this and speak up on behalf of this person, appealing to God for His mercy, and God will grant it eternally. Thus, Jesus affirms that his goal is to be in complete submission to the Father. The Father’s wishes and desires trump all others’, including his own as the Messiah. Yet, he is warning these Jews who are accusing him of breaking the Mosaic Covenant that he will have the final say in their existences as human beings up to the final judgment. If, at the judgment, they lack authentic contrition, which is the case so far in this story because they are rejecting him as the Messiah and Davidic king, then his only choice will be to call attention to their hard heartedness by doing nothing as they stand before God and watch as the Father condemns them to eternal destruction. He will not appeal to the Father for mercy on their behalf like those who “did good things,” because they have chosen to live their lives in rebellion against God and are displaying this rebellion even at the judgment.

## Chapter 13

### John 5:31-32 – Jesus Admits The Lack Of Validity Of His Own Witness But Refers To The Father Whose Witness Is Valid

31 “If I bear witness concerning myself, my witness is not valid.

32 “There is another who bears witness concerning me, and you know that the witness that He bears concerning me is valid.”

Why does Jesus bring up this issue here? Most likely because the Jews have a highly developed sense of how to evaluate evidence as valid or not. What has led them to be able to do this? For one thing, their scriptures given to them by God. Also, it is something that all human beings do to some extent. We all look for proper and adequate evidence in order to believe things. If someone tells me that little green men have invaded the earth, I will probably say, “Oh yeh; prove it.” Then, it will still be difficult to believe him regardless of what data he supplies me, because little green men from another planet is something totally unexpected. However, if somebody tells me something that I am waiting for and expecting and that I have become convinced will actually happen, then the evidence they present will be much easier to accept. For example, if someone tells me that I am a day older today than I was yesterday, then I will believe him right away. Of course I am older. This is what I have been expecting, and the evidence is right within my own mind and part of my human experience.

For all human beings, evidence that substantiates an idea is a good thing. Therefore, the Jews are right to be suspicious of Jesus’ claims that he is the Messiah. What they are not right to do, as we will see in v. 40, is to be completely unwilling to believe his claims after there has been plenty of good data and evidence to substantiate them.

Later in the book of John, there is a brief interchange between Jesus and the Jewish leaders regarding the concept of bearing witness about oneself –

[John 8:12](#) Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”

[John 8:13](#) So the Pharisees said to Him, “You are testifying about Yourself; Your testimony is not true.”

[John 8:14](#) Jesus answered and said to them, “Even if I testify about Myself, My testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.

[John 8:15](#) “You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone.

[John 8:16](#) “But even if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone in it, but I and the Father who sent Me.

[John 8:17](#) “Even in your law it has been written that the testimony of two men is true.

[John 8:18](#) “I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me.” (NAS95)

Here we see that the Jews are very concerned about, or at least using as an excuse, the fact that Jesus seems to be bearing witness to himself by himself. Notice that Jesus does not deny that this is a reasonable objection to his claims. Indeed, Jesus admits this in our passage here in John 5:31, ““If I bear witness concerning myself, my witness is not valid.” Nevertheless, in John 8 Jesus still claims that he is telling the truth by saying that his “testimony is true,” because he knows where he came from and where he is

going. A traditional interpretation of this passage would claim that Jesus means that he knows that he came from his transcendent position as the pre-existing coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity and that he will return to this position after his ascension. However, as I have shown in my discussion in previous chapters, the traditional view of the trinity does not make any sense and is a false view of God. Therefore, Jesus simply means here that he knows what his existence as a human being within God's created reality is all about. He has an accurate handle on his identity and role as God in the flesh and the final Davidic king of Israel within the Creator's, i.e., God the Father's, story of salvation for His people. Therefore, even if the Jews take into account only his witness, they would still discover the truth—and this is what is most important anyway for the sake of their eternal destinies. In spite of this, Jesus points to the validity and importance of a second witness, and, in his case, there is no better person to whom to point than God the Father Himself.

Scripturally, the concept of bearing witness on behalf of someone is introduced in Exodus, when God speaks to Moses about convincing the people of Israel that He has sent Moses to rescue them from slavery in Egypt –

[Ex. 4:8](#) “If they [the Jews] will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign [with the staff], they may believe the witness of the last sign [with your hand].” (NAS95)

God has already mentioned that Moses' staff will turn into a snake and his hand will become leprous. Thus, God validates the idea that a miraculous sign by Him is to provide people with adequate evidence of His existence, actions, and intent. These relatively small miracles of a staff that turns into a snake and God's causing Moses' hand to become leprous are intended to be adequate evidence to the Israelites that God is at work to rescue them from slavery in Egypt. Why should these miracles be sufficient evidence to prove that God is acting as Moses claims He is? Because God as the transcendent Creator of all reality is the only one who *ultimately* can cause anything to happen in the creation. He might work through human beings such as Moses when God commanded him to lift up his staff and stretch out his hand over the Red Sea in order to part it –

[Ex. 14:21](#) Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD [Yahweh] swept the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, so the waters were divided. (NAS95)

God might also perform some sort of miraculous sign strictly on His own without using a human intermediary, such as when He created a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night to guide the Israelites in their journey from Egypt through the Sinai desert –

[Ex. 13:21](#) The LORD [Yahweh] was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. (NAS95)

It is clear in these passages that all miracles are intended to provide evidence not only of God's existence but also of His activity within the creation. The Jews of Jesus' day realize this and understand the value of good evidence for believing something to be true, especially the truth of God's working on their behalf through the Messiah. These

Old Testament passages and the conclusions one should derive from them must have aided the Jews in developing a proper sense of the value of evidence.

In addition to the importance of miracles, one of the Ten Commandments in the Mosaic Covenant reads,

[Ex. 20:16](#) “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.  
(NAS95)

This text has made it clear to the Jews that God is very serious about people not telling lies about others. Thus, God goes on to say in Deuteronomy,

[Deut. 17:6](#) “On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.” (NAS95)

If, in the Mosaic Covenant, someone is not allowed to be put to death on the basis of only one witness, can we assume that the flip side of the coin is true, too—that someone should not be believed on the basis of one witness, i.e., himself, but only if someone else can corroborate his testimony? It seems like a safe assumption along with thinking that God is just as serious about a person’s not telling a lie about himself as He is about a person’s telling a lie about someone else. In other words, there is just as much of a risk of someone’s telling a lie about himself and thus bearing false witness about himself as there is of someone’s telling a lie about someone else and bearing false witness about him. Therefore, a person can reduce the risk of believing something false about someone else by having at least one more witness who corroborates the information. These passages in the Old Testament help us assume that the Jews of Jesus’ day do have a highly developed sense of how to evaluate evidence as being valid or not.

In John 5:31 & 32, Jesus anticipates the Jews’ appropriate concern about this issue, but he has an appropriate response to any objections that they have about not only what he is saying but also how he is saying it, i.e., that he is saying it alone. First, he admits, “If I bear witness concerning myself, my witness is not valid.” He beats them to the punch and agrees with them. Does this then end the conversation? Has Jesus raised an objection that even he cannot overcome? Not in the least. He goes on to say in v. 32, “There is another who bears witness concerning me, and you know that the witness that he bears concerning me is valid.”

All the English translations that I looked at translate the last part of v. 32, “and *I know* [emphasis mine] that the testimony that he gives about me is true [valid].” In other words they believe that the Greek verb that John is using is οἶδα (*oida*), which means “I know.” And indeed, the majority of the extant Greek texts contain this verb. However, there are a few texts that have the verb οἶδατε (*oidate*), which means “you (pl.) know.” I think it makes more sense that Jesus is using this verb. How would it be useful in his argument for him to say, “I know that the witness that he bears concerning me is valid” when he has just said that his witness alone is invalid? Certainly, later in John 8:14, Jesus says, ““Even if I testify about Myself, My testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going.” Yet, he is willing to concede that his testimony alone is not valid. So what good does it do at this point to tell the Jews that *he* knows that the witness that someone important is bearing concerning him is valid? Is it not more useful that he tell, or rather remind, the Jews that *they* know that someone else’s witness of him is valid, because they seem to be trying to find every possible excuse to reject him as the Messiah? This seems all the more to be the right way to understand the text when Jesus

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goes on to say that the person whom *they* know whose witness is valid concerning him is God the Father.

How do they know that God's witness is valid? Because they have studied the scriptures (v. 39) and learned all the stories about God's miraculous signs in the past such as the ones in Exodus that I mentioned above. They have also studied all the prophetic passages that state the fact that the Messiah will perform miraculous signs to substantiate his identity. This is why Jesus will be able to say in v. 40, "You are unwilling to come to me in order that you may have Life." They know that God the Father's witness is valid, and yet they are unwilling to embrace His witness.

## Chapter 14

### John 5:33-35 – Jesus Admits The Validity Of John The Baptist’s Witness But Respectfully Declines Using Only It

33 “You sent to John, and he has born witness to the truth.

34 “Nevertheless I do not embrace the testimony that is from man. But I am saying these things so that you may be saved.

35 “He was the lamp that was burning and shining, and you were willing to rejoice for an hour because of his light.”

In verse 33, Jesus states that the Jews have sent emissaries, and maybe some of them even went themselves, to John the Baptist to find out what was going on with him. We already know that John did bear witness to the truth of Jesus as the Messiah, as it says in John 1:19-36 –

[John 1:19](#) This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”

[John 1:20](#) And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”

[John 1:21](#) They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.”

[John 1:22](#) Then they said to him, “Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”

[John 1:23](#) He said, “I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.”

[John 1:24](#) Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

[John 1:25](#) They asked him, and said to him, “Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

[John 1:26](#) John answered them saying, “I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know.

[John 1:27](#) “It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

[John 1:28](#) These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

[John 1:29](#) The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

[John 1:30](#) “This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’

[John 1:31](#) “I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.”

[John 1:32](#) John testified saying, “I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him.

[John 1:33](#) “I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’

[John 1:34](#) “I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

[John 1:35](#) Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples,



[John 1:36](#) and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” (NAS95)

Indeed, John the Baptist can be considered to be a valid witness to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. Therefore, on the basis of Jesus’ own statements and John’s proclamation of the truth, the Jews have enough evidence to substantiate Jesus’ claims, especially when John, like Jesus, claims that God has actually communicated to him about what is happening in regard to Jesus as the Messiah. Such witnesses, Jesus and John, would be in line with the Mosaic Covenant, which called for two or three witnesses to corroborate information.

However, in John 5:34, Jesus respectfully declines having such a standard be the basis for the Jews’ believing in him. He says, “I do not embrace the testimony that is from man.” As I mentioned in Chapter 4, the gospel author tells his readers in John 2:23-25 that Jesus does not trust people’s testimony because of man’s sinfulness and fickleness –

[John 2:23](#) Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.

[John 2:24](#) But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men,

[John 2:25](#) and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. (NAS95)

Is Jesus similarly invalidating John the Baptist’s testimony, because he does not trust John the Baptist? Not at all. Here in John 5 his reason is different. He declines John the Baptist’s testimony, because he does not want people to believe in him ultimately or only because of what other human beings say about him. He wants people to believe in him ultimately because of God the Father, and, therefore, they will believe not only in Jesus but also in God, the transcendent Creator. Such are the ingredients of “true” belief, when it is belief in God because a person recognizes what God is doing, even if He is working through other people. Jesus is hinting at a human tendency to believe religious ideas without believing in God. Because someone we respect and admire is religious and speaks of theological ideas, we all can tend to embrace these ideas but without actually embracing the ultimate source of the ideas—God! We claim that we are believing in God. However, we are not actually believing in God. We are believing in the people who have spoken about God. Instead, we must complete the journey when we start investigating theological ideas and not stop short of believing in, talking about, and even living in obedience to God when really all we are doing is believing in and living in obedience to people who talk about God.

Jesus tells the Jews that his purpose in respectfully declining John’s witness is so that they may be saved. He wants them to get beyond John, even to get beyond himself, to God the Father, the transcendent Creator, because it is belief in Him ultimately that any human being must have in order to be saved from God’s judgment. In verse 35, Jesus admits that John was certainly right on the money. He was a lamp shining in the spiritual darkness of Judaism. In addition, interestingly enough, these very Jews were willing to embrace his message—for a while. Yet, the message did not stick. They eventually gave up on it. Why? We are not told exactly, but their hardness of heart eventually led them away from the truth that John the Baptist declared so that now they are moving away from Jesus instead of toward him—to their eternal detriment and destruction.

## Chapter 15

### John 5:36-40 – Jesus Discloses His Greatest Witness, The Father, And The Jews' Unbelief In Him

36 "But I have a witness who is greater than John because the actions which the Father has given me so that I accomplish them, these same actions which I am performing bear witness of me that the Father has sent me.

37 "In fact, the Father who sent me, He has born witness concerning me, and you have never heard His voice nor seen His image.

38 "Indeed, you do not have His message abiding in you because, regarding Him whom He has sent, you do not believe this.

39 "You carefully learn the scriptures because you think that you have eternal Life because of them, and they are what bear witness concerning me.

40 "But you are unwilling to come to me in order that you may have Life."

In verse 36, Jesus discloses who this witness is to whom the Jews should be paying attention. It is God the Father who has given to him all that he has done, is doing, and will do in order for him to fulfill his role as the Messiah. It is especially the miraculous signs that he is performing that bear witness to who he is. Who else can heal a man who has been lame for thirty-eight years? Only God, the Creator. Therefore, if God is miraculously healing people when Jesus simply says the words, "Rise up, pick up your bedroll, and walk," then *obviously* Jesus has been "sent" by the Father. He is playing a very special role in human history and salvation history. Indeed, he is the Messiah, the king of Israel from the line of David. And the Jews know that his miracles are demonstrating that he is the Messiah. Or they know at the very least that he is playing some sort of special role within history, which, as I pointed out in Chapter 3, is clear from the statement of one of their leaders, Nicodemus –

[John 3:1](#) Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;

[John 3:2](#) this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." (NAS95)

Then, in John 5:37 Jesus repeats his point that the Father has testified to his identity as the Messiah by the miraculous signs He is performing through him. Afterwards, Jesus mentions this issue of "hearing" and "seeing" again (cf. 5:19,24, etc.). This time it is the fact that these Jews standing in front of him and confronting him on his having violated the Sabbath and the Mosaic Covenant "have never heard [the Father's] voice nor seen his image." There are several options as to what Jesus means:

1. He may mean that he concedes that they have never literally heard God's audible voice bear witness to him such as what happened at his baptism when God spoke out of heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Thus, Jesus understands that the Jews do not have this kind of witness to substantiate his claims to be the Messiah while having only his miracles to do so. Then, what does he mean by the fact that they have not "seen his image?" It would have to be that they have not seen God's

physical form, which, if they had (and it is possible to do so if God were only to reveal Himself physically), they would also have sufficient evidence to substantiate his claims.

2. Jesus may mean that he concedes that they have never literally heard God's audible voice such as what occurred at Mt. Sinai nor seen a theophany such as the cloud by day and the pillar of fire at night that led the Israelites through the wilderness after their escape from Egypt, so that he understands that they do not have this kind of witness to substantiate his claims to be the Messiah. In other words, they have only his miracles to do so.
3. Jesus may mean that they literally have never heard God or seen Him in His transcendence the way he, the Son of God as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, has been able to do.
4. Jesus may mean that they have not metaphorically "heard" or "seen" God, because these Jews neither embrace the fact that he, as the Davidic king, is the voice of God to them and, therefore, the voice of truth to them, nor have they recognized that he, as the Davidic king, is God's human image, i.e., the icon of God, within the creation.
5. Jesus may mean that they have not metaphorically "heard" or "seen" God, because it is clear by their rejection of him as the Davidic king that they have *never* obeyed God appropriately. This means that, in spite of their claims to the contrary, they have never kept the Mosaic Covenant the way they should—from a circumcised and changed heart.

The context supports #5 and perhaps even a broader #5 that includes portions of the other options except #3. Jesus' point is that these Jews, in the midst of their *apparent* strict obedience to the Mosaic Covenant, have never truly obeyed what God has said nor embraced how He has manifested Himself to them as Jews, whether through the stories of the Old Testament or even now through Jesus as the very living image of the transcendent God as a human being. They have not really "heard" God nor "seen" God the way they should. Similarly, Jesus will say in John 6:46 –

[John 6:46](#) "Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father." (NAS95)

While it is certainly tempting in John 6:46 for traditional trinitarians to think that Jesus is talking about himself as the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, we will see that the context does not support this interpretation. Indeed, Jesus is saying the same thing as he is here in John 5:37, that the Jews have not really perceived God the way they should in order to be authentic worshipers and followers of the one true God. Their obedience is faithless legalism where they think that they are obeying the Mosaic Covenant and making themselves worthy of God's blessing of eternal Life. Yet, Jesus begs to differ. They have never really "heard" God's voice nor "seen" His image, i.e., what God is doing in the world, from a genuine heart of true belief. In other words, they have never really known God. Otherwise, they would believe in Jesus and embrace him as their Messiah and the embodiment of God within the creation.

In verse 38, Jesus goes on to say that these Jews do not have God's message abiding in them, i.e., that they are not embracing God's message of the Old Testament, because they are not embracing him as the one sent by God to be the Messiah. This idea fits with interpreting verse 37 as referring to their not really hearing and seeing God properly. Jesus confirms this in vs. 39 and 40 by acknowledging that while they are the most diligent Bible students in order that they might learn how to obtain eternal Life,

nevertheless they are missing the fact that the Old Testament speaks of him and how he will substantiate his claims as the Messiah. Indeed, they are actually hostile to this truth that they are reading in the Old Testament. They are rejecting the very ideas that they have studied, learned, and now claim to believe and embrace, because they are completely unwilling to accept him for who he is. Such a response to him is because of the twisted nature of the human heart and mind. We can study and learn the truth and then go on to claim to believe the truth while at the same time rejecting the very same truth that we claim to believe. In addition, Jesus has already lovingly told these Jews who are in this condition that he is telling them these things so that they may be saved—if they will only stop twisting the scriptures (cf. 5:34).

Notice that Jesus also says that the Jews want eternal Life. “You carefully learn the scriptures because you think that you have eternal Life because of them.” Obviously, eternal Life is a viable and important concept to the Jews of Jesus’ day. They are not looking simply for the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham of giving his descendants the land of Israel as a permanent home in the present realm. They are also looking to God for the other promise to Abraham of being blessed, which is eternal Life after an earthly existence. Such a perspective on reality is helpful to us in the light of the fact that many Jews today have given up on the concept of eternal Life.

In addition, Jesus is pointing out that the problem with his contemporary Jews is not that they do not have enough information to draw the right conclusion about his identity and believe that he was the Messiah. The problem is their hearts, their inward commitments. They are entrenched in their natural born moral depravity and, therefore, are antagonistic toward the truth. They are simply unwilling to believe that he is the Messiah in spite of all the evidence and information that is available to them. They are experiencing the same “ugly great ditch” of the German philosopher G.E. Lessing (1729-1781)—having adequate information while also thinking that they still do not have enough information in order to make the “leap” to believe the information. To possess sufficient evidence to believe the truth while claiming that one lacks enough evidence to believe the truth is a natural effect of man’s moral depravity that results in a person’s being unwilling to believe the truth—regardless of how compelling is the evidence.

## Chapter 16

### John 5:41-44 – Jesus Further Explains the Jews’ Problem Of Desiring To Be Honored By Man Instead Of By God

41 “I do not embrace the glory that is from men.

42 “Instead I have come to know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves.

43 “I have come in the name of my Father, and you do not embrace me. If another person comes in his own name, you will embrace him.

44 “How are you able to believe when you embrace glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the only God?”

In verse 41 Jesus states the issue plainly by saying that he has no interest in finding the validation for his being the Messiah in what morally depraved people think about him. Why not? He intimates that the only validation worth having is that from the transcendent God. First, in verse 42 Jesus claims that he knows what is going on inside these Jews who are critical of him. They do not love God even though they believe they do and would state that they do. The reason why their lack of love is so obvious to him is because he has come as the representative and very embodiment of God to be the Messiah, sent by God for this very purpose, and yet they are not embracing him as such (v. 43). How can any human being love God and then reject God’s most important emissary in human history at the same time? It is impossible because of the contradiction.

Second, these Jews are perfectly willing to listen to and believe someone who approaches them with impressive, earthly credentials (because this person “comes in his own name” – v. 43). And they not only grant honor to this person, but this person mutually grants honor to them—for granting honor to him! What a wonderful arrangement among morally depraved and selfish human beings. They have a mutual admiration club going on. It is like a Bible teacher who is a seminary professor with a Ph.D. who speaks to a church and even tacitly claims that his teaching position and degree give him the right and authority to teach them. And the church heartily agrees with him. Then, they applaud one another for being so wise, because they listen to this learned Bible teach while he provides them with his authoritative knowledge and understanding. The problem is that, like the Jews, the church is more concerned about the Ph.D.’s impressive credentials, and he is more concerned about the church’s listening to him than either of them is concerned about the truth. Thus, the Jews (and the church and the scholarly Bible teacher) blind themselves to the truth and care nothing for the honor to be received from God for embracing His truth—the honor of being granted eternal salvation from God. The Jews (and the church and the professor with the Ph.D.) would rather have each other’s mutual respect than God’s mercy and the gift of eternal Life—even while claiming to want God’s mercy and gift of eternal Life. How treacherous is the rebellious human heart!

Ultimately, the issue boils down to the fact that, even if no one else believes the truth and as a result everyone rejects us because we do believe it, we need to be comfortable with having God be the only one who honors us for our embracing His truth. Such a condition, obviously, is a lonely place to be, but also the right place to be, especially eternally speaking. In addition, it is the right way to understand the importance of our being individuals who will eventually stand alone before God and give account of ourselves at the judgment. God is not going to ask us if we believed such and such a Bible teacher and embraced his scholarly message. He is not going to ask us if we

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followed the traditions initiated by a church council and upheld by over a thousand years of church history. He is not even going to ask us if we regularly attended a church where a teacher with *bona fide* human credentials taught. He is going to ask us if we believed Him, God, by wrestling with the ideas of the truth that we were seeking to learn from the Bible, regardless of what any Bible teacher, Christian scholar, or church council said through oral speech or print. Thus, we properly “seek the glory that is from the only God” and not the glory of man (v. 44).



## Chapter 17

### **John 5:45-47 – Jesus Shocks The Jews With The News That Their Favorite Teacher, Moses, Will Be The One Who Verifies That They Should Incur God’s Judgment**

45 “Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father. The one who accuses you is Moses in whom you have hoped.

46 “For if you believed Moses, you would believe me because he wrote concerning me.

47 “But if you do not believe his writings, then how will you believe my words?”

While Jesus as the Messiah will have every right at the judgment to condemn these Jews who are critical of him, nevertheless, the one who will actually do so will be the very person on whom they are relying for the basis of their receiving God’s mercy—Moses. Jesus does not mean Moses *per se* as though he will walk up at the moment each one of them is being judged by God and talk about them. He is referring to what Moses wrote in the Bible, on which the Jews are relying through their diligent study. However, they are also willfully misinterpreting the Bible, which is evident because they are refusing to embrace what the scriptures say about him. For example, Moses wrote –

[Deut. 18:15](#) “The LORD [Yahweh] your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.

[Deut. 18:16](#) “This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.’

[Deut. 18:17](#) “The LORD said to me, ‘They have spoken well.

[Deut. 18:18](#) ‘I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

[Deut. 18:19](#) ‘It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.’” (NAS95)

Jesus is saying that he is the prophet about whom Moses is writing in this passage. Thus, the texts that the Jews believe to be the source of their knowledge for the sake of eternal salvation will become the very instrument of God’s condemning them. As Jesus says in verse 46, “If you [really] believed Moses, you would believe me because he wrote about me.” But obviously they do not believe Moses and the Bible in spite of how much they study them and say that they believe them. In like manner, if they do not believe the truth of the Bible about Jesus, how can they believe the truth that Jesus himself is proclaiming about his being the Messiah, the Davidic king who will rule over the eternal Kingdom of God? Plus, how can they believe the truth that God the Father is communicating about him through the miracles that He is performing through him? They cannot believe, because inwardly they refuse to believe. They are simply unwilling to take the evidence that is in their scriptures and in the very words that Jesus is speaking and embrace them as the truth. They are intentionally hostile to the truth and, therefore, have to make up a lousy excuse to reject him—that, by compassionately healing on the Sabbath and telling a man who was lame for thirty-eight years and now is well that he

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should carry his bedroll, Jesus is violating the Mosaic Covenant. How absurd! And yet how great and constant are all of our human and rebellious absurdities—if God does not change our hearts!!

## Part IV

### Chapter 18

#### Conclusion

I have covered a lot a material in this book. The bottom line is that God, the transcendent Creator, has a specific project that He is working on. His project is to write a story, which is His creation, where the main character within the story is God Himself—as the man, Jesus of Nazareth. God’s plan is for this man Jesus to rule over the entire creation from within the creation, not only as God’s proxy and, therefore, with the same authority as God, but also as God Himself. In addition, God will continue the story into eternity after He enacts a final judgment on all human beings at the end of the present realm. Thus, human beings, who have genuinely appealed to Him for mercy with a divinely changed inner being during their lives and sought to understand God while pursuing goodness and morality, will find that Jesus, the final judge, will ask God the Father for forgiveness on their behalf, which will result in their receiving it. They will also obtain an existence in the eternal Kingdom of God where Jesus will rule over them as the final, Davidic king of the Davidic Covenant. On the other hand, human beings, who have continued to rebel against God during their lives, will receive eternal condemnation and destruction as a result of the final judgment.

God’s project has involved his originally choosing one man, Abraham, through whom He has worked out His purposes by making with him the Abrahamic Covenant with its four promises—the promise of the land of Israel, the promise of the nation of Israel, i.e., the Jews, the promise of eternal Life, and the promise of a group of people from all nations of the earth who will live with Abraham in the eternal Kingdom of God, because they have believed in the truth of God and pursued goodness, morality, and mercy as Abraham did. However, both Abraham’s belief and anyone else’s belief exist only because God miraculously has changed their hearts, so that their fundamental desires are no longer hostile toward God, but, instead, they acknowledge the insoluble problem of their moral depravity and appeal to God for mercy while pursuing a life of goodness, morality, and continued repentance for their immorality.

In addition, God made the Mosaic Covenant specifically and only with Abraham’s physical descendants, the Jews. Thus, He added to the Abrahamic Covenant with regard to His promise of making Abraham’s physical descendants, the Jews, a great nation. Their obedience within the whole span of earthly history is intended to demonstrate God’s seriousness about morality and the issue of moral depravity within all human beings.

God also made the Davidic Covenant with the Israelite king David whereby He promised that his descendants (and David, too, actually) would rule over not only Israel and the Jews, but also over the entire creation. In addition, God called Himself the king’s Father, and He called the king His Son according to common Ancient Near Eastern practice whereby the Son of God the Father ruled over the Father’s territory as the Father’s proxy and with the same authority as the Father. God also promised that, eventually, one of David’s descendants would be the final king of the earthly Kingdom of Israel coming at the end of the present realm as well as the eternal king of the eternal Kingdom of God in a new and future realm.

Therefore, the Jews remain the center of God’s story and history in the present realm, while they await the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham to make of them a great nation, first, by changing the heart of every Jew alive on the earth, second, by

gathering them back into the land of Israel where they will genuinely obey the Mosaic Covenant with proper inwardness, third, by crushing their enemies, and fourth, by ruling over them through Jesus as their Davidic king—all also according to the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31. Gentiles who acknowledge God's purposes for the Jews and who believe in Jesus as the Jewish king and their intercessor before God at the final judgment will appreciate what God is doing with the Jews. However, Gentiles do not have a direct involvement in *the Jew's* Kingdom of Israel in the present realm. Instead, Gentiles will participate with all believing Jews, going back as far as Abraham, in the *eternal* Kingdom of God in the next realm. Thus, Jesus is primarily the king of the believing Jews and secondarily the king of the believing gentiles.

I suggested at the beginning of the book that there are four important questions that arise out of John 20:30,31 where John states the purpose for his writing his "gospel" –

[John 20:30](#) Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;  
[John 20:31](#) but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (NAS95)

1. What is the "life" that John says that a person can have by believing in Jesus' name?
2. What are "signs" such that Jesus "performed" them and how does his performing them relate to his identity as the "Christ" and the "Son of God"?
3. What do the words "Christ" and "Son of God" mean that obviously refer to Jesus' identity, and are these two separate concepts or the same?
4. What does it mean to believe "in His name?"

We can now answer these questions. 1. The "life" that John says that a person can have by believing in Jesus' name is eternal Life, i.e., an existence that goes on forever without end in the eternal Kingdom of God in the next, future realm that God will create after the final judgment and destruction of the present realm. Eternal Life will be characterized by perfect moral goodness, i.e., moral perfection, without any possibility that any human being will ever commit evil or harm toward God, others, or himself again.

2. The "signs" that Jesus performed were miracles that God the Father caused to happen through him and that the Old Testament predicted and, therefore, the Jews expected the final, Davidic king to perform as a way to indicate that he is the Messiah.

3. The words "Christ" and "Son of God" refer not only to a person who plays a special role within God's story because this person is "anointed" (Christ and Messiah come from the Greek and Hebrew respectively referring to having oil poured over one's head and thus being anointed), but also to the descendant of David who fulfills the Davidic Covenant by being king of Israel and king of the eternal Kingdom of God with the authority to rule over the creation as the transcendent God and Creator rules over it. Therefore, David, Solomon, and David's other royal descendants who sat on the throne of Israel in Jerusalem held the title "Christ" and "Son of God." Jesus is the final and eternal "Christ" and "Son of God," who not only is the king of Israel and of the Kingdom of God, but also is God in the flesh in the created realm.

4. To believe "in His name" is to believe all that it means of Jesus to be the Son of God and final, eternal Davidic king as it would be to believe in the "name" of God by acknowledging all that God is as the author of the story that reveals His project of creating an eternal realm where He will rule within the creation as Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man and final, Davidic king.

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While traditional commentators understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant because he is the coeternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, I have shown not only that this concept is nonsensical, but also that it is unbiblical. Certainly Jesus is God in the flesh, but he is just an ordinary human being whom God, as the novelist of all the created reality, wrote into His story when He created the zygote in Mary's womb and whom He will cause to rule over the eternal Kingdom of God that is the next, future realm.

In addition, we have seen that the Jews of Jesus' day had converted the Mosaic Covenant into a legalistic means to earn God's promises and blessings, so that when God showed up in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus declared that he was the final Davidic king whom they should embrace as their God, judge, king, and Messiah, the Jews refused to do so. This is not unlike what gentiles have done down through church history by converting Christianity into a set of religious practices and traditional man-made doctrines whereby they think that they can gain God's favor and blessings through performing these spiritual practices and disciplines and holding to these doctrines.

As I mentioned above, God the Father also bore witness to Jesus' identity and role as the Messiah by performing miracles through him, which the Jews were unwilling to acknowledge. It, therefore, still remains for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham of making the Jews a great nation by changing the hearts of an entire generation who will obey the Mosaic Covenant properly and embrace Jesus as their Messiah and High Priest, who will be their advocate at the final judgment.

Thus, the bottom line for all of us is to realize that the task of a human being is to prepare himself for the judgment. In addition, if you want to remain aware of what God is doing within the present, created realm, watch Jerusalem.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Logos and John 1

When I became a Christian at Stanford University in 1973, the Jesus Movement was still in full swing. There were Bible studies in every dorm and fraternity, and many of us were attending Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto where we heard great Bible teachers such as Ray Stedman, Ron Ritchie, and Dave Roper. I would have classified myself as a theological junkie. I simply could not get enough information about God and the Bible to satisfy me. Whether it was Bible study during the week, church on Sunday morning, or the Body Life service at PBC on Sunday evening, I never missed an opportunity to learn more from the Bible. I honestly cannot remember where or when I first heard about the trinity, but I can definitely say that it made sense as part of the wonder of the Christian God—three co-eternal persons who loved one another, worked with one another, and deserved our worship as the one true God. Perhaps, it was the new found “family” of the body of Christ that I had entered, but something resonated about the relational aspect of the trinity as I experienced the fellowship and closeness of being with my fellow Christians.

Seven years later, after a wonderful three-year stint at Hewlett Packard as a member of their instrumentation sales force, I went through Scribe School at PBC where I received two years of Greek and two years of Hebrew and began to grasp more fully just how thoughtful Bible study needs to be. This was also after a year of being mentored by Ron Ritchie, who was the first to introduce me to the inductive Bible study method where I learned the basics of proper principles of interpretation, including taking into account the immediate context of a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph. Eventually, I realized that the goal of Bible study is to discover and draw out of the text the original author’s meaning and intent. Such a process is rightly called exegesis—literally leading out of the text the author’s meaning—as opposed to eisegesis—reading into the text whatever one wants the text to mean. Thirty years later, I am still trying to exegete the Bible, and it has been a long, arduous, and yet fruitful endeavor. The Bible provides information about the one true God and His project of expressing His justice and mercy toward human beings, His creatures who are made in His image. There is nothing more important for us to learn than who our God is and how to be rightly related to Him.

As I mentioned, one of the first major ideas that I encountered in Christianity was the trinity, that God is a triune being comprised of three persons, all equally God and thus all equally eternal. I was also told that God the Father “begat” God the Son, and, even though such an idea seems inconsistent with the two persons’ being co-eternal, I did not let it bother me, because I was in awe of God and His mercy toward me. Therefore, if God the Father was the beginning of God the Son, I was willing to accept that the Son’s beginning was eternal, just as the Father was eternal. In addition, I was taught that John 1:1 is perhaps the clearest statement about these two members of the trinity –

[John 1:1](#) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [NAS95]

It seemed as clear as a bell to me that the “Word” is Jesus, the co-eternal Son of God and 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, and that the first mention of “God” refers to God the Father, so that Jesus was always and eternally with the Father in harmonious and



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intimate fellowship. Thus, “in the beginning” of the creation (echoing Genesis 1:1), John says that Jesus was there with God the Father. In addition, the third statement in this verse indicates that Jesus, the Word, was in fact God—not less than God, but equally God with the Father.

Why did John call Jesus the “Word?” Because he was an integral part of the creation process as John goes on to say –

[John 1:2](#) He was in the beginning with God.

[John 1:3](#) All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. [NAS95]

John is saying, apparently, that Jesus played an important role in bringing into existence the creation. “All things came into being through Him.” In fact, “apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” Just as the author of Proverbs says of “wisdom” –

[Prov. 3:19](#) The LORD by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens. [NAS95]

And he goes on to say –

[Prov. 8:12](#) I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion. [NAS95]

Thus, the author of Proverbs personifies wisdom and claims that God used wisdom, indeed the very person who is wisdom, to found the earth and establish the heavens. Who is this person of wisdom that was used in such a way by God? The apostle John answers the question for us in the first verse of his gospel. It was Jesus, the “Word,” i.e., the speech of God. Likewise, Moses writes in Genesis 1 –

[Gen. 1:3](#) Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. [NAS95]

Perhaps Moses did not know exactly how the trinity worked, but, if we combine his statement with John’s, we discover that the very speech of God was Jesus, the Word, “through” whom “all things came into being.” In other words, God the Father used the Son as His instrument of speaking the creation into existence. How exactly did the Father speak with Jesus as His Word? We are not told, but it does not matter. We can consider this to be part of the mystery of the trinity. Finally, we are granted a morsel of reference to the trinity in Genesis 1 when Moses quotes God in regard to His creation of mankind –

[Gen. 1:26](#) Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

Obviously, the plural reference “Us” is to the trinity, especially when we take into account the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse of the Bible –

[Gen. 1:2](#) The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.

Not only do we encounter the Father and the Son in Genesis 1, but we are also introduced to the Holy Spirit who was “moving over the surface of the waters” like a mother hen caring for her chicks. Therefore, with the help of John 1 and Proverbs, we can confidently say, Voila – the trinity! Plus, I can attest that all this made absolutely perfect sense to me for twenty years. What also helped convince me that I was right was Walter Martin’s book, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, that makes it clear that the only people who are *bona fide* Christians are those who believe in the trinity. Combine his book with the fact that Christians assume and insist that God the Holy Spirit led the men at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. to formulate the Nicene Creed that spells out the doctrine of the trinity, and add to this that for 1700 years “real” Christians have held to this tradition in order to avoid the fire of hell, and, well, I had a strong incentive to believe and teach the truth of the trinity. In other words, stop believing in the trinity and a person will be ostracized by traditional Christians who, for the most part, will believe that he is going to hell, which is obviously a very powerful way to keep people in line within the institution of the church.

Then, I did a dumb thing. I read Søren Kierkegaard, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher, who describes the danger of the institutionalized church becoming an “established order” that demands Christians within it stay in line by bowing to its authority, thus squashing authentic individual pursuit of the truth of the Bible. The “established order” considers it arrogance and hubris that individuals would dare to think that a total of 1900 years of Christian scholarship has not *completely* exegeted the entire Bible properly. In other words, who am I compared to the giants of theology, such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Warfield, et al., who all basically agreed with one another on the important doctrines of Christianity, especially the trinity? Nevertheless, Kierkegaard challenges this authoritarian and totalitarian mentality of the church, and, the more I studied the Bible, the more I realized that he is right. My salvation is not dependent on my submitting to the traditions of the church. It is dependent on God’s changing my heart so that I submit to Him, fundamentally desirous of His mercy and seeking to understand Him as best as I can from my own study of the Bible, which is *my only inerrant authority*. The church is not my authority. The Bible is. Church elders are not my authority. The Bible is. Church councils are not my authority. The Bible is. Seminary professors are not my authority. The Bible is. Tradition is not my authority. The Bible is. Thus, a healthy combination of the Bible and Kierkegaard has set me free to look at John 1 and ask if the traditional, trinitarian interpretation is correct. I have realized that it is not and, thus, would offer the following as what the apostle John means.

[John 1:1](#) Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος

The first question that I want to ask is, “What is the point of the entire gospel of John?” John answers this question at the end of the gospel –

[John 20:30](#) Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

[John 20:31](#) but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. [NAS95]

John calls his account a “book” (Gk – βιβλίον (*biblion*)), and he says that he has written about “signs” that Jesus performed, so that a person could read about these signs and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John does not simply list the signs. He describes them as events in his gospel. In other words, his “book” is a series of stories that describe Jesus’ miraculous actions that prove that he is the Christ. Thus, we get a good hint at what John means by λόγος (*logos*) in John 1:1. John has written an account of important events in Jesus’ life, and he is saying in the first verse of his gospel that God has written, so to speak, an “account,” a story (*logos*), as well. Certainly, “word” is a perfectly good translation of *logos*. However, *logos* has a broad variety of meanings, among which are message, testimony, speech, account, etc. (cf. John 4:39; Acts 1:1).

The important question is always, “What does the biblical author mean by his use of a word, and what in the immediate context helps us discover his meaning?” I would suggest that John is interested in communicating the whole point of God’s creation, which God Himself has brought into existence as a story that He is writing. If we look again at John 1:1 in the context of vs. 2-5, John’s point in this prologue is quite elegant. He is saying that “in the beginning” of the creation, there was a story (*logos*), and this story was “with” God. By the latter, he could mean that the story was *about* God or *intimately connected with* God. If he means the latter, then he goes on to say that, “indeed, God was the author of the story,” thus nuancing the meaning of *logos* to indicate who is the writer of the story of creation. Clearly, the author is God. Even if John means in the second statement that the story is *about* God, nevertheless, in the third statement, he is saying in a very straightforward manner that the transcendent God is the author of the story of creation.

[John 1:2](#) οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν

Next, in v. 2, John goes back to the first and second ideas in v. 1, that “this” (*houtos*) was “in the beginning with/about God.” Since “this” (*houtos*) is referring to the story (*logos*), v. 2 is saying that the story is now John’s focus, not the author of the story.

[John 1:3](#) πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ γέγονεν

Therefore, in v. 3, John tells us that “all things came into existence” *dia* it, that is, *dia* the story (*logos*). In my first year Greek class, I learned that *dia* with the genitive indicates instrument or means. Therefore, I would naturally interpret John to mean that the story was the very instrument of God’s bringing all things into existence. This interpretation makes sense, that, just as I would think of a story that I had first formulated in my head as a novelist, or, at least, the outline of the story, that I would use the imagined story or outline as the basis for my writing the novel and bringing the story into existence with a word processor or just paper and pen. However, this interpretation also reveals that *dia* could mean simply “in view of” or “in light of.” In other words, John is saying that “all things came into existence in view of the story” that “was in the beginning” and was “with (about) God.” It is not as though the story was a true instrument of God the same way that a hammer is in driving a nail, but it certainly was the pattern for God’s writing out His story so that He always kept it in mind and continues

to keep it in mind during the production process. In other words, in view of the story that God had formulated in His mind, everything within the creation came into existence. This is to say that God brought everything into existence according to the story that He had made up in His mind.

John finishes this verse by saying that “apart from it,” the story (*logos*), “nothing has come into existence that has come into existence,” which is to say that every detail of the story matches what God had previously envisioned the story to be. It is not as though God wrote something and then went “oops!, that was not part of the story that I had previously planned to write.” Plus, just as nothing in the past has been written by God that was not supposed to be part of the story, so also nothing in the present or future is part of the story that God did not intend. Every detail of the creation and its history is exactly the God originally thought of it and planned it. Therefore, ultimately, not one aspect of the creation and its history is out of order.

[John 1:4](#) ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων

Continuing in v. 4, John tells us that the story contained something precious and valuable. It contained “life” in the sense that “in it,” in the story and at the very center of its purpose for mankind, was true, biblical, and eternal life. In addition, this “life” was “the light of men,” which is to say that the experience of truly living as God wants us to live was that which enlightened men and made them wise and understanding of what human existence is all about. In other words, the meaning of human existence is found in this concept of life that God has purposed for man. The meaning of my existence as a human being is not found in wealth, health, or anything else that I can acquire and possess in the world. It is found in my being granted eternal life by God. Plus, when we human beings recognize the ultimate importance of eternal life and embrace it for what it is, that which God would have us understand and obtain, we become fully enlightened human beings. We become wise, and no other definition of wisdom suffices. We can become wise in regard to business principles that bring about success and wealth in this field, but this is not true wisdom. We can become wise in regard to athletic performance that brings about success in this field, but this is not true wisdom. We can become wise in regard to health practices and principles that bring about a vibrant experience physically, but this is not true wisdom. We can become wise in regard to politics and government policies that bring about freedom and prosperity for a country, but this is not true wisdom. Only the concept of eternal life and a fundamental desire for it in the manner by which God brings it about for morally depraved human beings constitutes authentic wisdom.

[John 1:5](#) καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

Finally, in v. 5 and the last verse of this brief introduction, John writes that this concept of life that God has purposed for mankind “shines in the darkness” of man’s moral depravity and rebellion against God. This is to say that, even in the midst of man’s hostility toward God and abject moral rebellion, God’s purpose for human existence, eternal life, manifests itself and makes itself known so that “the darkness did not extinguish it.” Like quicksand swallowing up whomever or whatever ventures into it, the darkness of man’s immorality could have swallowed up the light of God’s intentions of eternal life for him. However, it did not, and it does not. Rather than darkness extinguishing the light, the light of the wisdom of eternal life continues to shine in even the most unlikely places, and God brings about His divine and transcendent purposes.

The result is that certain people continue to embrace real and eternal life as their destiny while all around them moral depravity and evil run amuck.

Then, John continues his prologue by mentioning a person who testified about the ultimate bearer of the message of light that makes men wise –

[John 1:6](#) Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης·

[John 1:7](#) οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ.

[John 1:8](#) οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός.

[John 1:9](#) Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον.

In v. 6, “a man came into existence, sent from God, whose name was John.” This was John the Baptist. “This man came as a witness in order to testify concerning the light, so that all could believe through him,” i.e., through the person who is also the light (v. 7). This is to say that the word “light” now means the proclaimer of the message of light, just as the third use of *logos* in v. 1 meant “author” instead of “story.” John emphasizes in v. 8 that “that man [John the Baptist] was not the light,” i.e., the proclaimer of the message that makes men wise, “but he existed in order to bear witness concerning the person who is the light.” This latter person “was the true light, which comes into the world and enlightens every man” (v. 9).

[John 1:10](#) ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω.

[John 1:11](#) εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον.

[John 1:12](#) ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ,

[John 1:13](#) οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.

The apostle John says in v. 10 that the one who enlightens every man “was in the world,” and “the world came into existence *dia* him.” Again, my first year Greek teacher would say that *dia* indicates instrumentation with the genitive case. However, we saw above that God brought the creation into existence *in view of (dia)* the story that he had formulated. Here, we see that John tells us that the transcendent God brought the world into existence *in view of (dia)* the one who “enlightens every man.” In other words, while “life” is the goal and purpose of human existence, a person who plays the central role in the creation is the one who “enlightens every man” and proclaims the message of life. Thus, God brought the world into existence with him primarily in mind. In fact, the Bible makes it clear that main purpose of God’s creating all of the created reality is so that this person, the main proclaimer of eternal life, could rule over the creation for all of eternity.

However, “the world did not recognize him” (v. 10c). This central figure, the one person who could make every man wise with his message about eternal life, came into the world, and the world did not recognize him as being such an important person. He even “came to his own people,” the Jews, and “his own people did not embrace him” as their primary teacher (v. 11). “However, whoever did embrace him, he gave to them the right to become children of God, to those who believed in his name,” i.e., to those who believed that he lived up to his title and purpose given to him by the Creator God (v. 12). But what is his title? We will find out.

“Nevertheless,” John tells us in v. 13, “those” who believed in him “were not born of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God,” which is to say that authentic, biblical belief arises within people by a miracle of God. It cannot come into existence simply by the independent will of man. It takes God to create authentic belief in man miraculously. And so He does for those whom He chooses, and nothing can stop Him from accomplishing His purposes in this regard.

[John 1:14](#) Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.

Now, in v. 14, John introduces the most startling idea—that “the *Logos*,” the author of the story, “became flesh and dwelt among us.” In other words, God decided to write Himself into the story as a human being. Before this, He had appeared as a burning bush, a cloud, a pillar of fire, and even in human form as an “angel of the Lord” (cf. Exodus 3,13; Genesis 18, etc.). Subsequently, this passage and the rest of the New Testament tells us that two thousand years ago God appeared as a real, human being, born of the virgin Mary. He then lived in Israel, died on a cross in Jerusalem, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and will return to conquer his enemies and rule over the eternal kingdom of God as the most important person within the creation—the Jewish Messiah. Plus, we know this person to be Jesus of Nazareth.

The apostle John goes on to say in this verse that “we” apostles and disciples “beheld his glory, glory as the unique one from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Even though Jesus was a man, nevertheless, he exuded the glory of God, especially through his words and his miracles. He was the unique human being who was not just temporarily God, like the man in Genesis 18 who appeared to Abraham, but who would go on to live for all eternity within the creation as the king of the Kingdom of God. In addition, his whole being and life were characterized by grace and truth. God is gracious to morally depraved human beings who deserve His eternal condemnation. And Jesus, no less than the Father, was gracious to them. He also spoke only the truth in order that people would believe it and upon which they could base their lives, trusting that God would grant them even eternal life.

[John 1:15](#) Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων· οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον· ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν.

In v. 15, we find out that John the Baptist spoke in confirmation of Jesus’ identity. John had said that there was one “coming who was greater than” him (ἔμπροσθέν μου). In addition, Jesus was “first in comparison to” John (πρῶτός μου), meaning that the transcendent God thought of Jesus as a person within the story of creation before He thought of John the Baptist. Indeed, it can be said that God thought of Jesus, who would be God in the story, before He thought of any other human being, because Jesus plays the central role within the story. God originally thought of Jesus, the very embodiment of God and the Jewish Messiah, and then He built His story around Jesus. Thus, God has always intended that Jesus be the central figure in the story of the creation.

[John 1:16](#) ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος·

[John 1:17](#) ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο.



John, the gospel writer, goes on to say in vs. 16 & 17 that the effect of Jesus' playing the primary role in the creation is that "we all have received something from his fullness," i.e., from his being God in the story and all that this means. What have we received? John says that it is "indeed grace upon grace." God has chosen to be gracious and merciful toward rebellious human beings like us, and Jesus brings the most complete message of God's grace since he plays such a vital role in God's dispensing it. Then, John says that "the Torah was given through Moses," which certainly was a good thing. It instructed the Jews in how they are to obey God and demonstrate that they are His chosen people within human history. However, "grace and truth really came into existence through Jesus the Messiah." It is not that God was never gracious to the Jews under the Mosaic Covenant. Indeed, He has been faithful to them and to His promises to Abraham to make of them a great nation in spite of their disobedience. Nevertheless, God's eternal mercy has no greater demonstration than Jesus, who offered himself through death in order to resolve the problem of morally depraved human beings' deserving God's condemnation. Jesus has qualified to be people's advocate at the final judgment and gain God's mercy for them if they fundamentally desire His mercy more than anything else within the created reality. While a Jew can certainly manifest his obedience to God through following the commandments of the Mosaic Covenant, the even greater way of manifesting such obedience is through following Jesus as the Messiah. To do the latter is to understand most clearly and profoundly what God's grace and truth are really all about—that they include a man who is both God and Messiah and who appeals to God for mercy on their behalf, even more so than the Levitical priests who were assigned this same kind of role by God under the Mosaic Covenant.

[John 1:18](#) Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς υἱὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.

John ends his prologue by saying in v. 18 that "no one has ever seen God," meaning that no human being has ever observed God in His transcendence. This makes perfect sense if we imagine the creation to be a box and, within it, is only created material. Outside the box is uncreated "material." However, there is only one uncreated "thing" that exists and can exist outside the box, and this is God who transcends the box. No created being can even go outside the box and become uncreated, not even Jesus. Therefore, not even Jesus, who is God within the box, has seen God in His transcendence outside the box. Nevertheless, John says that Jesus, as the unique Son (not unique God as our English translations suppose), i.e., the regal descendant of David who truly will rule over the creation for all eternity, "has explained God" more clearly than any other human being—obviously, because he is God in the story. This was and is Jesus' title. He is the final Son of God and Davidic king who is assigned the responsibility to rule over the creation as God's proxy within the creation.

Plus, Jesus "was in the bosom of the Father," meaning that the Father had a special place in His heart for this person about whom He would write in His story. Jesus is more special and more important to God than any other created human being, because, with Jesus, God was writing Himself into the story and creating the king of the eternal Kingdom of God.

In conclusion, John 1:1-18 is teaching that Jesus is definitely God, not because he is the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, but because he plays the unique and only permanent role of God in His own story, and he brings the full and complete message that God wants to communicate about Himself in relation to us rebellious human beings whereby we receive His grace and mercy through Jesus' life, death, resurrection,

ascension, and advocacy at the final judgment. In addition, some day Jesus will return to earth in order to set up the temporary Kingdom of Israel with Jerusalem as its capital and then rule over the eternal Kingdom of God, whenever God brings into existence a new creation. Is the *Logos* Jesus? Yes, but in the sense that the author (the *Logos* – v. 1) writes Himself into the story (the *logos* – v. 1) and manifests His characteristics through Him (the *Logos* become flesh – v. 14).

### **My Translation of John 1:1-18**

- 1 In the beginning was the account of the story, and the account of the story was with God. Indeed, God was the author of the account of the story.
- 2 This [account] was in the beginning with God.
- 3 All things came into existence in view of the account of the story, and apart from it, nothing which has come into existence has come into existence.
- 4 In it was life, and life was the light of men.
- 5 In addition, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not extinguish it.
  
- 6 There came along a man, sent from God, whose name was John.
- 7 This man came as a witness in order to bear witness concerning the light so that all could believe through him.
- 8 He was not the light, but [he came along] so that he could bear witness concerning the light.
- 9 There was the true light, who comes into the world and enlightens every man.
- 10 He was in the world, and the world came into existence in view of him, but the world did not recognize him.
- 11 He came to his own people, and his own people did not embrace him.
- 12 However, whoever did embrace him, he gave to them the right to become children of God, to those who believed in his name.
- 13 Nevertheless, they were not born of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.
  
- 14 Now, the author of the account of the story became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as the unique one from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- 15 John bore witness of him and has cried out saying, “This is he of whom I said, ‘The coming one is greater than me, because he was first in comparison to me.’”
- 16 Therefore, we all have received something from his fullness, indeed grace upon grace,
- 17 because the Torah was given through Moses. Grace and truth have come through Jesus the Messiah.
- 18 No one has ever seen God. The unique Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, has explained [him].

## Appendix B

### “I am” in the Gospel of John

The purpose of this appendix is to examine if Jesus' statements in the gospel of John when he uses the phrase, “I am...,” are a reference to God's statements to Moses in Exodus 3:14, “I am who I am,” and, therefore, are intended by Jesus to identify himself as God, indeed the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. It has become standard and traditional practice for Christian Bible teachers to claim that John's purpose in his gospel is to demonstrate that Jesus has of both divine and human nature, because he is the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, and that Christians must believe this in order for them to obtain eternal life. It is also standard practice for Bible teachers to claim that Jesus is identifying himself as God in the Gospel of John whenever he says, “I am...,” especially in John 8:58 and John 18:5,6 as quoted below from the Updated New American Standard Bible (NAS95)<sup>37</sup> –

[John 8:58](#) Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” (NAS95)

[John 18:5](#) They answered Him, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He said to them, “I am [He].” And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them.

[John 18:6](#) So when He said to them, “I am [He],” they drew back and fell to the ground. (NAS95)

However, I will show that in all of the passages in John where Jesus says, “I am...,” he never alludes to God's statements to Moses in Exodus 3. Instead, Jesus is referring to something that someone else has mentioned in the context of these passages in John—for example, in John 8:58 that he is greater than Abraham and that in John 18:6 that he is Jesus the Nazarene. In fact, it does not make sense in these passages to interpret Jesus as referring to his ontological nature, i.e., his being both God, indeed the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, and man—even though Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh, and the very embodiment of God. However, in John's gospel, Jesus is concerned about people believing what is true about his role and status as the Messiah, which makes him the very centerpiece of human history. He is not concerned about communicating that his ontological nature is both divine and human, which all becomes clear when we examine the context of the passages where Jesus uses the phrase, “I am.”

Let me begin by pointing out that in John 8:23,24 Jesus is once again trying to convince the Jewish leaders of his day that he is the Messiah –

[John 8:23](#) And He was saying to them, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.

[John 8:24](#) “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am [He], you will die in your sins.” (NAS95)

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. this statement in the Introduction to John in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, “The Gospel [of John] gives an initial impression of discontinuity. Many of its episodes have little direct chronological or logical connection with one another. Nevertheless, they show a remarkable unity built on the one purpose of convincing the reader that Jesus was supernatural in his origin, powers, and goal. He was the *Logos* who had come into the world from another sphere (1:14).”

The Updated New American Standard Bible (NAS95) has a note in the reference column regarding the words “I am” in v. 24, “Most authorities associate this with Ex. 3:14, *I AM WHO I AM.*” So let us examine this latter passage. In the third chapter of Exodus, God meets Moses in the wilderness of Midian in order to commission him to return to Egypt, lead the Israelites out of slavery, and take them to the land of Canaan. Moses asks God to provide him with His name so that he can tell the Israelites when he returns to Egypt, and the conversation continues in v. 14 –

[Ex. 3:14](#) God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (NAS95)

The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), translates the first “I AM,” which is the Hebrew אֲנִי־אֵלֹהִים (*‘eyeh* = I am, or I will be), with ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi* = I am). It is this exact same Greek phrase that John has Jesus use in John 8:24, ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*), although Jesus probably used Aramaic and not Greek, but that is a discussion for another time. Consequently, many Christians have interpreted Jesus as referring to God’s Exodus 3:14 statement to Moses so that they understand him to be claiming to be Yahweh, the God of Moses. They base their interpretation on the assumption that the Gospel of John is mainly teaching that the human Jesus is the Son of God, which means that he has existed from eternity past and is, therefore, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity who is co-eternal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Therefore, while Jesus is definitely fully human, he is also fully God in his essence and thereby has a unique divine and human nature as the incarnate God.

Christians who interpret John 8:24 this way start by assuming that John is claiming that there is a 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the eternal Godhead in the first verse of his gospel –

[John 1:1](#) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (NAS95)

The traditional interpretation of this verse is that the “Word” is the Son of God, who existed not only at the “beginning” of the creation but also in eternity past “with God,” the Father, because, indeed, the “Word was God,” the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. They also assume that John communicates in verse 14 that this eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Godhead became a *bona fide* human being –

[John 1:14](#) And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NAS95)

According to the traditional interpretation, this “Word” who “became flesh” is specifically the eternal Son of God who is named Jesus as a human being but who now is comprised of both divine and human essence in order that he might always be both God and man. Christians also assume that John states near the end of his account that his purpose for writing it is so that his readers will conclude that Jesus has both a divine and human nature –

[John 20:30](#) Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

[John 20:31](#) but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (NAS95)

In other words, the phrase “Son of God” is Jesus’ title as the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, not only who was “begat” (cf. John 1:14,18) by God the Father as God the Son in eternity past, but also who became a man, the Christ, who rules over the eternal Kingdom of God. Thus, the *necessary* “truth” that human beings must believe in order to escape God’s eternal condemnation and obtain eternal life is that the earthly Jesus is both divine and human in his essence, because he has existed as the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity from eternity past and humbly became a man through the virgin birth.

In addition, Christians also understand Jesus to be claiming to be God, indeed Yahweh, in John 8:58 –

[John 8:58](#) Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” (NAS95)

They assume that Jesus is answering a question that the Jews pose to him in v. 57 –

[John 8:57](#) So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” (NAS95)

In response, Jesus says, “Before God brought Abraham into existence on this earth, I already existed as the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, because I am (*ego eimi*) the ‘I am’ (*ego eimi*) of Exodus 3:14, i.e., God who is Yahweh.” However, I will show in this appendix that the traditional interpretations of John 8:24 and 58 are incorrect, because the immediate context surrounding these verses leads to a different interpretation. I will also show that this is true of all the other uses by Jesus of the Greek phrase ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi* = I am) in the Gospel of John.

Before we dive into John, let us look at Exodus 3:14 and the statement of interest by God, “I am who I am... Thus you [Moses] shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” The Hebrew word in all three cases of “I am” in this verse is the same, אֲנִי אֲנִי (‘*eyeh* = “I am,” or perhaps “I will be”). While the LXX translates the first “I am” with ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*), it translates the second and third with ὁ ὢν (*ho own*), which could be translated literally, “the one who is.” For a reason that is not altogether clear to me, scholars typically associate the translation of the first אֲנִי אֲנִי (‘*eyeh*), ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*), with God’s name. However, notice that when God states His name by saying to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you,’” the LXX translates the אֲנִי אֲנִי (‘*eyeh* = I am) with ὁ ὢν (*ho own*). Consequently, the Greek phrase for the name of God is not ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi* = I am) but ὁ ὢν (*ho own* = the one who is). We can also conclude that in the first phrase of Exodus 3:14, “I AM WHO I AM (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν) (*ego eimi ho own*),” ἐγώ (*ego*) is the subject of the sentence, εἰμι (*eimi*) is the verb, and ὁ ὢν (*ho own*) is the predicate nominative. Thus, God is saying, “I am the one who is.” To repeat, according to the LXX the Greek name for God is ὁ ὢν (*ho own* = the one who is) and not ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi* = I am).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> In contrast, consider this statement regarding John 8:58 in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “‘I am’ implies continuous existence, including existence when Abraham appeared. Jesus was, therefore, asserting that at the time of Abraham’s birth, he existed. Furthermore, I AM was recognized by the Jews as a title of deity. When God commissioned Moses to demand from Pharaoh the release of the Israelites, he said, ‘This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you’ (Exod 3:14). Stauffer states that ‘the phrase harbors within itself the most

Similarly, it is important to look at the next verse in Exodus 3 –

**Ex. 3:15** God, furthermore, said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘The LORD (יהוה) [Yahweh] (κύριος (*kurios* = lord), LXX), the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations. (NAS95)

What is interesting here is that God indicates that His “name forever” is not the Hebrew אֲנִי־יְהוָה (*‘eyeh* = I am) (ὁ ὢν (*ho own* = the one who is) in the LXX) of v. 14, but it is יהוה (Yahweh) which the LXX translates as κύριος (*kurios*). First, we should consider what is the actual translation of יהוה. Hebrew reads from right to left, and the first letter, ך (yod), indicates that the word could be a verb and the third person singular masculine (“he” in English). Except for the slight difference of the third letter, ם (*vav*), the rest of the word looks like the last three letters of “the one who is” (אֲנִי־יְהוָה) (*‘eyeh* = I am) of v. 14, which has a yod as the third letter instead of a vav. However, in Hebrew, yods and vavs are relatively interchangeable. Therefore, God’s name in v. 15, יהוה (Yahweh), may very well mean “he is” in comparison to His name in v. 14, “the one who is” (אֲנִי־יְהוָה) (*‘eyeh*), in which case God’s “name” is really not all that different in the two verses. What makes sense to me is that God changes the word in v. 15 so that when the Israelites pray to Him and use His name, instead of praying to “I am,” which could sound as though they are praying to themselves, they will be praying to “He is,” which indicates that they are clearly addressing someone else, in fact the “the one who is,” who is the eternal, transcendent God and Creator of all reality.

We should also consider that the NAS95 translates the Hebrew word יהוה as LORD, i.e., Lord in all capital letters. The reason it does so is because the Jews stopped pronouncing the word יהוה many centuries ago in their desire to obey the commandment, “You shall not take the name of the LORD (יהוה) your God in vain, for the LORD (יהוה) will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Exodus 20:7). The Old Testament uses the Hebrew word יהוה as the name of God 6,828 times, and the Jews believed that even mispronouncing this word would be to take the name of God in vain. Therefore, out of respect for the Jews, the English translators have chosen not to use any word that would approach the way יהוה might normally be pronounced (I say “might,” because it has been so long that not even the Jews know how their

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authentic, the most audacious, and the most profound affirmation by Jesus of who he was’ (p. 174). The same use of ‘I am’ appears also in the theistic proclamations of the second half of Isaiah: ‘I, the Lord—with the first of them and with the last—I am he’ (Isa 41:4; cf. 43:11-13; 44:6; 45:6, 18, 21; 48:17). The title became part of the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles, the time when this controversy recorded in John occurred. The phrase occurs in Jesus’ response to the challenge of the high priest at his final hearing. When asked, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus replied, ‘I am ... and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven’ (Mark 14:61-62). The violent reaction of the high priest in Mark 14:63 indicates that he regarded the use of the title as a blasphemous claim on Jesus’ part to possess the quality of deity.” However, despite what the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* claims, the question still remains, why should we think that *ego eimi* (ἐγώ εἰμι), which means “I am,” is the title of deity, and not *ho own* (ὁ ὢν), which means “the one who is” and which God stated was his name according the LXX in Exodus 3:14? In addition, is it not more reasonable to conclude that the Jesus is merely answering the high priest’s question by saying, “Yes, I am the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One,” so that the words “I am” are merely subject and verb preceding a predicate nominative?



ancestors originally pronounced this word in Old Testament times). Instead, the NAS95 translates יהוה as either LORD or GOD.<sup>39</sup>

The small symbols under the first and third letters of the Hebrew word יהוה were borrowed from another word, אדוני, (*Adonai*), meaning “my Lord.” Since the time that the Jews stopped pronouncing יהוה, they have said *Adonai* whenever they read יהוה in their Bibles. This is why the LXX translates יהוה with κύριος (*kurios*), which means lord or master in Greek. In other words, like English translations the LXX does not provide a transliteration of the Hebrew word, apparently in order to avoid leading someone into mispronouncing God’s name. Instead, the LXX “translates” יהוה with κύριος (*kurios*). However, κύριος (*kurios*) is not really God’s “name.” It is a translation of אדוני (*Adonai*), which means “my lord.” This is also why our English versions of the Bible use “LORD” to translate the Hebrew יהוה.

Many Christian scholars, meaning no disrespect toward the Jews, go ahead and translate יהוה as it perhaps was pronounced, Yahweh (*Yahway*). The King James Version translates the word as Jehovah in four places in the Old Testament (Ex. 6:3; Ps. 83:18; Is. 12:2 and 26:4), which more accurately takes into account the symbols underneath. However, the word is God’s name which He gives Himself in Exodus 3:15 when He commissions Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

We notice that, while God says in v. 14 that יהוה (*ho own*) is His name, in v. 15, He says that יהוה (*kurios*) is His name. The question obviously is, which is it? Or are both His name? I have suggested above that the third person singular verb, “He is,” makes sense as the change from “I am” if we think about the Israelites’ praying to God, but the main point for our discussion is that if Jesus were referring to God’s Greek name in the LXX in order to identify himself as God in the Gospel of John, he would have used either ὁ ὢν (*ho own*) or κύριος (*kurios*),<sup>40</sup> but probably not ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*). I say probably because it is plausible that Jesus would use the subject and verb of the sentence, “I am who I am,” to refer to the predicate nominative of the sentence, i.e., “who I am.” However, this seems unlikely when it would be so much clearer for him to say “who I am” (*ho own*), i.e., “the one who is,” and not “I am” (*ego eimi*) if he wanted to identify himself as God by His “name.”

Therefore, Bible interpreters’ assumption that *ego eimi* is God’s name is completely wrong in the first place. Then, to go on and understand Jesus to be referring to God’s “name” in Exodus 3:14 is wrong also. Consequently, the interpretation that Jesus is claiming to be God and to have the divine nature of God when he says, “I am,” starts off on the wrong foot. As I will show besides, it also ends on the wrong foot, because the contexts of the passages do not support this interpretation.

Now let us focus on “I am” in the Gospel of John. The Greek phrase ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi* = I am) is used 24 times in this gospel account. These verses from the NAS95 are as follows –

<sup>39</sup> For example, the NAS95 translates יהוה as GOD in Ezekiel 14:21, “For thus says the Lord GOD, “How much more when I send My four severe judgments against Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts and plague to cut off man and beast from it!” In this verse, “Lord GOD” is the Hebrew phrase יהוה אדוני (*Adonai Yahway*), which the LXX translates with just one word, κύριος (*kurios*) (see the continuing discussion regarding *Adonai* and *Yahway*).

<sup>40</sup> There are many times in the gospel of John (and other books of the New Testament) where Jesus is referred to as “Lord” (κύριος (*kurios*)), but I do not think that these have to mean “God.” In fact, Jesus will call himself “Lord” in the context of one of the “I am” verses in John (13:13 and 13:19 respectively), but I will argue that Jesus does not mean “God” by his use of the word “Lord.”

[John 4:26](#) Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am [He]."

[John 6:20](#) But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."

[John 6:35](#) Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.

[John 6:41](#) Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, "I am the bread that came down out of heaven."

[John 6:48](#) "I am the bread of life."

[John 6:51](#) "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."

[John 8:12](#) Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."

[John 8:18](#) "I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me."

[John 8:24](#) "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am [He], you will die in your sins."

[John 8:28](#) So Jesus said, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [He], and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me."

[John 8:58](#) Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am."

[John 9:9](#) Others were saying, "This is he," [still] others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one."

[John 10:7](#) So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep."

[John 10:9](#) "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

[John 10:11](#) "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

[John 10:14](#) "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me,"

[John 11:25](#) Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,"

[John 13:19](#) "From now on I am telling you before [it] comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am [He]."

[John 14:6](#) Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

[John 15:1](#) "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser."

[John 15:5](#) "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

[John 18:5](#) They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I am [He]." And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them.

[John 18:6](#) So when He said to them, "I am [He]," they drew back and fell to the ground.

[John 18:8](#) Jesus answered, "I told you that I am [He]; so if you seek Me, let these go their way,"

We will begin with the first one, John 4:26. In the fourth chapter, Jesus' disciples have gone to buy food and left him sitting by Jacob's well in the city of Sychar in Samaria. Therefore, he is alone and speaking to a Samaritan women. Jesus broaches the topic of worshiping God and tells the woman that "the Father seeks" people who are "true worshipers" and who "will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (v. 23). Then –

[John 4:25](#) The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us."

The next verse reads –

[John 4:26](#) Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am [He] (ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ λαλῶν σοι) (*ego eimi ho lalown soi*)."

The verse literally says, "I am (ἐγὼ εἰμι [*ego eimi*]) the one who is speaking to you." What exactly is Jesus saying here? Is he referring to Exodus 3:14 and claiming to be Yahweh, the very God whom he has just said that the woman should worship "in spirit and truth"? The context does not support this interpretation. The woman has just stated that she believes that the Jewish Messiah is coming.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the better way to take the phrase, "I am," is that Jesus is merely saying, "The Messiah whom you are expecting to come, it is I." In other words, all he wants to say to her is that she is conversing with and staring straight into the eyes of the Jewish king, the Messiah. Thus, *ego* (= I) is the subject, *eimi* (= am) is the verb, and Jesus expects the woman to add the predicate nominative, the Messiah and Christ. Consequently, the NAS95 is correct to translate Jesus' whole statement as "I who speak to you am He," i.e., "I who speak to you am the Messiah." This also means that Jesus is not making a statement about his divine essence. He is not saying that he is both God and man who is made up of both divine substance and human substance. He is talking about his *role* and *function* as the Messiah who, according to the woman, "will declare all things" to people, i.e., all things regarding God and His eternal plans and purposes. As a result, it makes no sense to interpret Jesus as talking about his ontology and essence, which many Bible teachers assume is the main point of the Gospel of John and Jesus' point here.

Now consider the context of John 6:20. Jesus' disciples have left him on a mountain near the south shore of the Sea of Galilee, and they have departed in a boat for Capernaum to the north. Later that night, while the disciples are struggling against a strong wind to reach Capernaum, Jesus catches up to them by walking on the water. Their response is fear. The next verse reads –

[John 6:20](#) But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid (ἐγὼ εἰμι μὴ φοβεῖσθε) (*ego eimi may phobaysthe*)."

Jesus' statement literally reads, "I am (ἐγὼ εἰμι [*ego eimi*]) do not be afraid". Again, does it make sense to understand Jesus as saying, "I am Yahweh, the God of Exodus 3:14 who appeared to Moses"? Perhaps, but on what basis within the immediate context could we justify such an interpretation? None that I can tell unless we read into the

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<sup>41</sup> We cannot tell from the context exactly what this woman means by Messiah, but see Ryan Carroll's paper, "The Davidic Covenant," and Chapter 11 of this book, *God's Project: Through the Window of John 5*, where we both argue that the titles Son of God and Messiah/Christ ultimately refer to the human king of Israel who rules with the same right and authority as the transcendent creator, God, so that even David and Solomon held these titles. I also argue in Chapter 11 that Jesus is God as the embodiment of God on earth as a human being.

passage the assumption that not only is Jesus the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, but also that such an idea is *always* what he wanted to communicate to everyone with whom he conversed, especially every time he said, “*ego eimi*.” However, it is more logical that all that Jesus is saying in this context is, “Do not be afraid as though this figure which you are seeing walking on the water is just a ghost; instead, I assure you that it is I, Jesus, the real live human being who is your Messiah and rabbi.” In other words, what would any normal human being think who is in a boat on a large lake on a dark, stormy night and who sees a human figure walking on the water? He thinks that it is either a ghost or some other frightening kind of being. As a result, Jesus comforts his terrified disciples, “It is only I, Jesus, with whom you are very familiar.” As a consequence, because they believe Jesus, the next verse logically reads –

[John 6:21](#) So they were willing to receive Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. (NAS95)

Granted, the statement in this last verse indicates that a miracle takes place by virtue of their immediately reaching Capernaum, and perhaps the miracle happened at the word of Jesus like others of his miracles. However, it is more reasonable that God the Father simply wanted to demonstrate the specialness of Jesus as the Messiah and centerpiece of all of creation history. Either way, Jesus has already explained that these miracles ultimately belong to the Father who either works through Jesus, the man (cf. John 5:19ff.; also 9:1ff.) or chooses to act even apart from Jesus’ words (cf. the Holy Spirit who causes people to become “born again” in John 3).

Therefore, we have here another use of ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*) where all Jesus means is, “It is I.” To the Samaritan woman he was saying, “It is I, the Messiah.” Here to his disciples he is saying, “It is I, Jesus.” Consequently, it does not make sense to interpret Jesus as saying that he is the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity in reference to both his identity and his essence. He is just saying, “It is I, your rabbi and Messiah, who is walking on the water.”

Now consider the context of John 6:35. Jesus has miraculously fed the Jews the previous day with “five barley loaves and two fish” (v. 9). As a result, they come looking for him in Capernaum, and Jesus encourages them to “believe in Him whom He [God] has sent” (v. 29).<sup>42</sup> The Jews respond –

[John 6:30](#) So they said to Him, “What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform?”

[John 6:31](#) “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT.’” (NAS95)

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<sup>42</sup> This concept of being “sent from God” is also worth exploring in the Gospel of John. For example, John writes that John the Baptist was “a man sent from God” (1:6). Jesus speaks many times of his being “sent” from the Father. Certain Jews state that they were “sent” by the Pharisees to question John the Baptist as to who he was (1:22,24). Indeed the word “sent” appears 55 times in the NAS95 version of the Gospel of John. I have concluded that all that it means is that someone has been caused in some way to go on a mission on behalf of someone else. However, when God sends people, He creates them to fulfill a particular role and purpose in His story of the creation. When the Pharisees send emissaries to question John the Baptist, they are ordering these fellow human beings to do so. In other words, the word “send” indicates what kind of causation is being used to do the sending. God creates as His means of causation, and the Pharisees order as their means of causation. Therefore, when the word “sent” is used of Jesus’ being “sent from God,” it in no way refers to Jesus’ ontological nature and does not refer to his being the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. Even as God incarnate, he was still an ordinary human being who was created by God.

The Jews obviously want proof that Jesus has been “sent from God.” In addition, the proof they want is that he perform a miracle as Moses did when God miraculously fed their ancestors with manna that dropped from the sky as he was leading the Israelites through the Sinai desert on their way to the land of Canaan. Nevertheless, to ask Jesus to do a miracle is remarkable in itself, because the previous day these same Jews had watched Jesus perform the miracle of feeding a total of five thousand of them with five loaves of bread and two fish. However, human beings are human beings and often fail to appreciate the significance of what God is doing, because they are focusing on their earthly needs. Thus, after the Jews had asked Jesus when he arrived in Capernaum (v. 25), John records –

[John 6:26](#) Jesus answered them and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.” (NAS95)

The miracle of feeding five thousand Jews and the fullness of its significance, i.e., that Jesus is the Messiah, was lost on the them. They were too focused on their earthly needs to grasp the miracle’s meaning. Therefore, now, in verse 31, they ask Jesus for another miracle to prove that he has been “sent from God.” The next two verses read –

[John 6:32](#) Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven.

[John 6:33](#) “For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.”

Why does Jesus say that it was not Moses who performed the miracle but God the Father who did? Is not this obvious, that human beings do not themselves cause miracles to occur, but God, the Creator, does? Yet, Jesus realizes that the Jews are asking him if he is as great or greater than Moses, and they want him to demonstrate his greatness by showing them a miracle (even though he has already miraculously fed them). Jesus answers that God is “My Father.” By calling God “My Father,” Jesus is stating that not only is he greater than Moses, but indeed he is the Messiah in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant and, therefore, the very centerpiece of all of creation history. Thus, he can go on to say in these verses that he is the more important “bread” that they should be seeking from God, because there is a “bread of God” that “comes down out of heaven and gives life [i.e., eternal life!!] to the world.” And he is this bread!

Of course, the Jews ask Jesus to give them this bread, because they think that he is talking about physical sustenance (v. 34). Their minds are still stuck on strictly their earthly needs and cannot grasp who this man really is. The next verse reads –

[John 6:35](#) Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life (ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς) (*ego eimi ho artos tays zoways*); he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.” (NAS95)

We see that Jesus says, “ἐγὼ εἰμι (*ego eimi*) the bread of life.” Is this statement a claim by him to the effect that he is God according to the use of the phrase *ego eimi* in Exodus 3:14? On what basis would the context lead to this interpretation? Certainly Jesus has described the bread as “the bread of God” which “comes down out of heaven.” Does the bread’s coming down out of heaven have to mean in this context that the bread is God who comes down out of heaven, and, even more, that he as a man is

the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity both in identity and essence? This is highly unlikely when in v. 32 Jesus describes the manna that God provided the Israelites as being like him, “out of heaven.” Was the manna God? Was the manna a co-eternal person of the Godhead? Did the manna even exist with God in the transcendent realm? No, the manna was a physical substance. Therefore, the fact that God gave it to the Israelites “out of heaven” means that He created it specifically for them as a means to sustain their physical lives.

Thus, Jesus goes on to identify himself as the “the true bread out of heaven,” i.e., as a material human being whom God has created specifically to “sustain” the Jews’ human existences into eternity. We know that this is how God uses Jesus, because he goes on to say of himself in this context, “If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever,” and “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life” (vs. 51,54). The context also indicates that the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood is *believing* that he is the Messiah, the “One who is from God,” i.e., sent by God as a human being to be the very instrument by which God grants eternal life to people when they believe in him (vs. 46,47). Thus, Jesus says –

[John 6:47](#) “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”  
(NAS95)

Jesus also implies the same thing in two other verses in John 6 where he uses the phrase “I am” –

[John 6:48](#) “I am the bread of life (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς) (*ego eimi ho artos tays zoways*).”

[John 6:51](#) “I am the living bread (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς ὁ ζῶν) (*ego eimi ho artos tays zoways ho zown*) that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

Therefore, *ego eimi* (“I am”) in this entire chapter of John 6 never refers to Exodus 3:14 nor to Jesus’ ontological nature as God and his being the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of trinity. *Ego* is the subject, *eimi* is the verb, and “bread of life” or “living bread” is the predicate nominative and metaphor for what the Father’s intentions are for Jesus in his role as the Messiah and what benefit he is to the Jews if they will but grasp that he is their Messiah.

We can see that, similarly, the following verses in our list of “I am” statements by Jesus point to the Father’s intentions for Jesus in his role as the Messiah and to some benefit that he is for his listeners and the Gospel of John’s readers –

[John 8:12](#) Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”

[John 8:18](#) “I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me.”

[John 10:7](#) So Jesus said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

[John 10:9](#) “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.”



[John 10:11](#) “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”

[John 10:14](#) “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me,”

[John 11:25](#) Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,”

[John 14:6](#) Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

[John 15:1](#) “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.”

[John 15:5](#) “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” (NAS95)

In each case, ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi* = I am) is the subject and verb and then is followed by a predicate nominative such as “the Light of the world” (8:12) and “the door” (10:9). Therefore, these are further examples of Jesus’ use of the phrase ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*) as a standard linguistic tool to connect himself with a predicate nominative in the sentence. He is not referring to the LXX’s use of this phrase in Exodus 3:14, and he is not claiming to be God. Therefore, it does not make sense to interpret Jesus in these verses as saying that he in essence and identity is the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity who has always been co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

We will come back to John 8, but let us first consider the context of John 9:9. Jesus has healed a blind man in Jerusalem. People who had seen this man begging before he was healed were questioning whether or not this was the same man (v. 8). The next verse reads –

[John 9:9](#) Others were saying, “This is he,” still others were saying, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the one (ἐγώ εἰμι) (*ego eimi*).” (NAS95)

In the last statement of the verse, the healed man literally says, “ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi* = I am),” and these two words are all that he says. Is he blaspheming by claiming to be Yahweh, the God of Moses, who identified Himself by using this phrase as part of His response to Moses (at least as translated in the Greek LXX)? No, of course not. He is simply answering the questions that other people are asking about him. Is he or is he not the blind man who has now been healed? He answers, “It is I” (ἐγώ εἰμι [*ego eimi*]). We also notice that the NAS95 interprets the *ego eimi* as subject and verb and then adds a predicate nominative, “the one,” i.e., “I am the one.” Thus, we see once again that this phrase merely means, “I am the person of whom you are thinking, or just mentioned; yes, I am that person with whatever quality you have been talking about, such as I used to be blind, but now I see.” In addition, it is the context that allows us to add the appropriate predicate nominative.

If such a meaning is permitted of the blind man who has been healed, should we not permit it in regard to Jesus? Or do we need Jesus to be using the phrase *ego eimi* differently, because we are absolutely convinced that the Gospel of John is proving that Jesus is the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity, and, therefore, every time he says, “*ego eimi*,” he is saying that he is God? We are discovering that the contexts in which Jesus uses this phrase do not at all support this interpretation. Jesus is using *ego eimi* the same way that other people would use it in his day, and they are not making any claim to being God. Does this mean that Jesus is not God in the flesh? Absolutely not. He is God in the flesh. Nevertheless, his deity is not what he means when he says, “*ego eimi*.”

The context of John 13:19 bears this out also. It is the night of the Last Supper, and Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet. Then, he says to them –

[John 13:13](#) “You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am.” (NAS95)

Interestingly enough, the “I am” in this verse is not ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*). It is only εἰμι (*eimi*). Yet, we can easily see that the meaning is the same. Jesus is saying, “I am your teacher and Lord.” Then, a few verses later he tells his disciples –

[John 13:19](#) “From now on I am telling you before [it] comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am [He].” (NAS95)

At the end of the verse, Jesus literally says, “you may believe that ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*).” Is he referring to Exodus 3:14 and claiming to be Yahweh, the God of Moses? Again, what in the context would convince us that such a meaning is the case? Perhaps his asserting that the disciples are correct in calling him “Lord” (κύριος (*kurios*)) (v. 13). Does Jesus mean God by “Lord” because he is referring to the LXX's translation of Yahweh (יהוה) in Exodus 3:15, “God, furthermore, said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “The LORD (יהוה) [Yahweh] (κύριος (*kurios*), LXX), the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you?’”

If we consider the context of John 13, it was Peter who first used this title of “Lord” to refer to Jesus –

[John 13:6](#) So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, “Lord (κύριε (*kurie*)), do You wash my feet?” (NAS95)

Peter initially did not want Jesus to wash his feet. Why not? Let me speculate. First, untying a person's sandals and washing his feet was not only culturally necessary whenever guests entered another person's home (cf. Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32, etc.), but it was also the responsibility of the lowest of servants in a household.<sup>43</sup> This is what John the Baptist is implying when he says –

[John 1:27](#) “It is He [Jesus] who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” (NAS95)

John the Baptist is saying that he is not worthy of being even the lowest of servants to Jesus. However, what probably happened in John 13 is that Jesus and his disciples had entered into the upper room of a home that belonged to some other person (Matthew, Mark, and Luke call him merely “the owner”) in order to celebrate the Passover together.<sup>44</sup> As Jesus and his disciples entered, one of the owner's servants would have washed their feet, or perhaps, Jesus dismisses the servant, and he washes their feet, performing the task of the lowly servant. In verse 6, Peter feels some kind of embarrassment at this display of condescension by his rabbi and Messiah and challenges Jesus, “Lord, do you wash my feet?”

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, John 13:3-5. In this case, the commentary may actually be right.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew 26:17-20; Mark 14:12-17; Luke 22:7-14

Is Peter calling Jesus “God” by his use of the word “Lord?” No. The context indicates that he means simply “Master” as the one whom he serves and follows. Before we look at the immediate context, there are 717 uses of the Greek word κύριος (*kurios*) in the New Testament and several different meanings denoted by the word. For example, in the story of Jesus’ birth in Matthew –

[Matt. 1:18](#) Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

[Matt. 1:19](#) And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

[Matt. 1:20](#) But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

[Matt. 1:21](#) “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

[Matt. 1:22](#) Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

[Matt. 1:23](#) “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.” (NAS95)

Matthew mentions “the angel of the Lord” and “what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.” In both cases, the word for Lord is κύριος (*kurios*) and refers to the transcendent God who is the Creator of all reality. Thus, Matthew writes that God manifested Himself in a dream to Joseph and conveyed His message to Israel through the prophet Isaiah. Later in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says –

[Matt. 6:24](#) “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (NAS95)

The NAS95 correctly translates the plural of κύριος (*kurios*) as “masters” since Jesus is speaking about the person or things whom people serve, either God or material wealth. Thus, κύριος (*kurios*) simply refers to that to which a person grants his allegiance and loyalty as someone or something he is drawn to obey. An additional meaning is found in Galatians 4 when Paul talks about someone who owns property –

[Gal. 4:1](#) Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything,

[Gal. 4:2](#) but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. (NAS95)

Before a son’s father dies, even though he is heir to his father’s property and, therefore, the “owner (κύριος (*kurios*)) of everything,” he is like a slave, because he has not yet taken possession of his inheritance. And finally, κύριος (*kurios*) can mean simply “Sir” as the NAS95 correctly translates it when the woman at the well in John 4 politely addresses Jesus before she knows anything about his role and identity as the Messiah –

[John 4:7](#) There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give Me a drink.”

[John 4:8](#) For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

[John 4:9](#) Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, “How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

[John 4:10](#) Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”

[John 4:11](#) She said to Him, “Sir (κύριε (*kurie*)), You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water?” (NAS95)

The meaning “Sir” also makes the most sense even in John 6. Here, Jesus encourages the unbelieving Jews to consider the “bread of life” that “comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world” (v.33). The next verse reads –

[John 6:34](#) Then they said to Him, “Lord (κύριε (*kurie*)), always give us this bread.” (NAS95)

As I mentioned above in my discussion of this passage, these are unbelieving Jews, and yet they call Jesus, “Lord.” Certainly they do not mean “God” by this title. In addition, they had just called him “Rabbi,” which means teacher (v. 25). Therefore it, is more likely that the word “Lord” was a common way to address someone with respect and civility. It would be like our English “Sir.” “Sir, always give us this bread,” the Jews would be saying. Then, combined with the notion of rabbi, it includes someone who is worth learning from and following as a master and teacher while the person was a kind of servant to him.

Along these lines, Jesus, later during the Last Supper, says to his disciples in John 13:13, “You call me Teacher (ὁ διδάσκαλος (*ho didaskalos* = teacher, rabbi) and Lord (κύριος [*kurios* = lord, master]); and you are right” (v. 13). Therefore, Jesus is affirming his disciples in their learning from him as their teacher and following and serving him as their master.

In addition, after v. 13 Jesus goes on to say –

[John 13:14](#) “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.

[John 13:15](#) “For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

[John 13:16](#) “Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor [is] one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.

[John 13:17](#) “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” (NAS95)

It is not obvious from the NAS95, but the word “master” in v. 16 is the same word as “Lord” in v. 14, κύριος (*kurios*). Therefore, Jesus himself provides the idea that Peter and he have in mind here for the use of “Lord.” They are talking about a master/slave relationship, i.e., a Lord/slave relationship, and he is affirming them that if they truly embrace this concept for how to describe their association with him, then they are “blessed” if they carry it out. In other words, they stand to gain eternal life from God in contrast to Judas, the one who will betray him, as Jesus goes on to mention in v. 18 –

[John 13:18](#) “I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but [it is] that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘HE WHO EATS MY BREAD HAS LIFTED UP HIS HEEL AGAINST ME.’” (NAS95)

Therefore, out of all the above choices for the meaning of κύριος (*kurios*)—God, owner, master, Sir—it makes the most sense to understand Peter to mean “Master” when he says in John 13:6, “κύριε (*kurie*), do you wash my feet?” In other words, Peter is identifying himself as a student and follower of Jesus by calling him “Lord.” Thus, Jesus goes on to say in vs. 13-18, “You are right to learn from and follow me; I am your Rabbi and Master while you are my students and servants.”<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, the context also leads us to understand Jesus to be saying the same thing in v. 19 –

[John 13:19](#) “From now on I am telling you before [it] comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am [He] (ἐγώ εἰμι [*ego eimi*]).” (NAS95)

By saying *ego eimi*, Jesus is not claiming to be the God of Exodus 3:14. He is simply saying, “I am predicting what is going to happen so that when all the things I predict do happen, you may believe that I am your teacher and Lord, i.e., the one whom you should follow, serve, and have instruct you in the ways of God, because I am the Messiah and final descendant of David as the king of Israel.”

Now consider the context of John 18:5,6, & 8. Jesus is in the valley of the Kidron after the Last Supper, and Judas is leading the Jewish, temple soldiers there to arrest him. When they arrive Jesus asks them in verse 4, “Whom do you seek?” The next verse reads –

[John 18:5](#) They answered Him, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He said to them, “I am [He].” And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. (NAS95)

Jesus’ response to their answer is none other than ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*). Is Jesus here referring to Exodus 3:14 and claiming to be God? No. If we appropriately take into account the context, he is merely responding to their answer to his question and saying,

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<sup>45</sup> In addition, after the resurrection, the apostle Thomas wants more evidence than just the other apostles’ word that they have seen the risen Jesus. Eight days afterwards, when Thomas does finally see the resurrected Jesus, he exclaims, “My Lord and my God (ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου) (*ho kurios mou kai ho theos mou*)!” (John 20:28). Is Thomas basically saying only one thing, that Jesus is God—first by calling Jesus “Lord,” i.e., “Yahweh,” according to the LXX’s use of *kurios* in the Old Testament and then explicitly identifying him as God? No. Just as Jesus was saying two things in John 13:13, Thomas is calling Jesus his “Master” whom he will serve and follow, and then he is also identifying him as the embodiment of God, God incarnate. Thus, it makes sense that, in John 13:6, Peter is calling Jesus only “Master” by using the Greek word *kurie* to address him, and Jesus means the same thing when he also uses *kurios*. In addition, even though Psalm 110 is not germane to Jesus’ and Peter’s exchange in John 13, it does demonstrate that, in spite of the fact that the LXX translated (יהוה) [Yahweh] in the Old Testament with κύριος (*kurios* = Lord), nevertheless there was an ambiguity in this Greek word even in the Old Testament. In Psalm 110:1 David looks ahead to his Messiah and the ultimate king of Israel and says, “The LORD says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for you feet’” (NAS95). The first “LORD” is (יהוה) [Yahweh], and the second “Lord” is אֲדֹנָי (*Adonai* = my master), but the LXX translates them both as κύριος (*kurios* = Lord). By the way, here is also a clear indication that the Messiah is not Yahweh but a different person, as further explained by the author of Hebrews in chapters 5-10.

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“I am Jesus the Nazarene, the person whom you are seeking.” Then, the next verse reads –

[John 18:6](#) So when He said to them, “I am [He],” they drew back and fell to the ground. (NAS95)

In other words, when Jesus said ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*), Judas and the soldiers took a step back and collapsed to the earth. At least one commentary wants to head in the direction of interpreting their actions as the rightful response to Jesus’ claim to deity when he uses the statement, “I am” –

“Jesus’ reply startled the arresting party by its openness and readiness and possibly because it was like the claim he had made previously: ‘I am’ (8:24, 28, 58). If it were intended as an assertion of deity, his calm demeanor and commanding presence temporarily unnerved his captors.”<sup>46</sup>

Thus, the above commentator believes that there is a strong possibility that Jesus is claiming to be God by his saying, “I am.” However, the commentator is not willing to commit himself wholeheartedly to this interpretation. The same is true in another commentary –

“His [Jesus’] words **I am He** (*lit.*, ‘I Am’) startled them and **they . . . fell backward to the ground**, struck no doubt by the majesty of His words (*cf.* [7:45-46](#)). The phrase **I am** is ambiguous and could refer to Jesus’ deity (*Ex.* [3:14](#); *John* [8:58](#)). Or it may simply have been Jesus’ way of identifying Himself (as in [9:9](#)).<sup>47</sup>

Besides equivocating on his interpretation of Jesus’ statement, “I am,” this second commentator refers to John 7:45-46 as another example of “the majesty of” Jesus’ words. In John 7, the Jewish people are arguing over the exact identity of Jesus. Is he “the Prophet” or “the Christ?” The Pharisees and chief priests, after hearing the crowd muttering these kinds of things, have sent “officers” (NAS95; “temple guards” – NIV) to arrest Jesus. John 7:45-46 reads –

[John 7:45](#) The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, “Why did you not bring Him?”

[John 7:46](#) The officers answered, “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.” (NAS95)

Then, the Pharisees rebuke the officers for being led astray by Jesus like the “accursed” crowd. The Greek word for “officers” in John 7, ὑπηρέται (*hupayretai*), is the same as the word in John 18:3 –

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<sup>46</sup> *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, John 18:6. By saying “if,” at least the commentary is open to the possibility that Jesus is not making a claim to deity by using the phrase “I am.”

<sup>47</sup> Walvoord, J. F. (1983-c1985). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* : An exposition of the scriptures (Jn 18:5). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.



[John 18:3](#) Judas then, having received the [Roman] cohort and officers (ὀπηρέτας [*hupayretas*]) from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. (NAS95)

The NAS95 inserts the word “Roman” before “cohort,” but this is probably not correct. If both “cohort” and “officers” refer simply to the Jewish temple guard, which seems more likely, then we can assume that the officers in both situations of John 7 and John 18 are mostly the same people. Therefore, the awe that they felt in John 7 is magnified in John 18, because they are about to arrest someone who, in their opinion, does not deserve to be arrested. In other words, they sense something majestic about Jesus and the way he speaks, even if they cannot quite put their finger on what makes him such. Yet, we do have Judas among them, and it is he along with all the rest of them who draw back and fall to the ground. What would make even a man like Judas, a deceitful and evil betrayer of Jesus, fall to the ground? Most likely, it was a supernatural act by God the Father to demonstrate once again that this is his Son, the Messiah, and that He is in control of what happens to him. No one is going to arrest Jesus and put him on trial unless the Father causes it. Therefore, this event is another time that the Father glorifies the Son by creating an obvious miracle. We remember that after Jesus identified himself to his disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and dispelled their fears that he was a ghost, that “immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going” (John 6:13). As Jesus claims in John 5, he does not produce his miracles; the Father does. Thus, the Father unexpectedly and miraculously caused the boat to reach Capernaum, and He also unexpectedly and miraculously causes these people around Jesus to fall to the ground as they come out to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yes, their response is also very human in that they are genuinely awed by the whole event. But even unbelievers can find circumstances to be highly awesome when they are not willing to embrace in a positive way the complete significance of the circumstances.

After everyone falls to the ground and probably gets back up, Jesus once again asks them whom they seek, and they respond, “Jesus the Nazarene” (v. 7). The next verse reads –

[John 18:8](#) Jesus answered, “I told you that I am [He]; so if you seek Me, let these go their way,” (NAS95)

Jesus’ response to their answer is once again, “ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi* = I am).” We can see that the context leads us to understand him to be saying, “I am Jesus the Nazarene whom you are seeking.” Making Jesus say anything more than this would be to read something into the passage that simply is not there. Therefore, it does not make any sense in this passage to understand Jesus to be making a claim to deity, nor to be referring to his essence as both divine and human as the incarnate 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. The trinity is not at all on Jesus’ mind here. What is on his mind is that he is the human being who is identified as “Jesus the Nazarene.” He has asked the “cohort and officers” whom they seek. They responded, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He then simply says, “I am he.”

Now let us turn our attention to John 8:24,28, & 58 and consider the context of these verses that commentators find so convincing that Jesus is making a claim to deity. Jesus states that he is the “Light of the world,” and the Pharisees complain that he is testifying about himself which they consider to be inappropriate (vs. 12,13). Jesus responds that he knows that his testimony is true, and, besides, “the Father testifies about” him, obviously referring to God the Father (vs. 14,18). The Pharisees then ask who is his father? Jesus simply answers that they recognize neither him nor his father (v. 19).

Then, he tells them that he is going away, and that the Jews cannot follow him (v. 21). The Jews wonder if he is speaking of committing suicide (v. 22). The next verse reads –

[John 8:23](#) And He was saying to them, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.” (NAS95)

The English Bible here includes two instances of “I am.” Neither one is an actual ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*). Instead, the first one separates the *ego* from the *eimi* and reads literally, “I from the above am.” Yet, the sense of this statement is straightforward—while the Jews are “from below” and worldly in their perspective on reality, Jesus is “from above” and understands reality correctly, i.e., the same way that God does. Therefore, the *ego...eimi* is what we have observed is common in the Gospel of John, whereby it constitutes the subject and verb that is followed (in English) by a predicate nominative. In this case, the predicate nominative is the prepositional phrase “from above.”

The second “I am” in this verse includes the negative word “not.” Jesus literally says, “I not am of this world,” where the *ego* and *eimi* are separated by the word “not.” Again the sense is straightforward, that Jesus is simply saying the same thing about himself that he has already said with the phrase, “I am from above,” but by using the negative, “I am not of this world.”<sup>48</sup> Once again we have a subject, verb, and prepositional phrase as a predicate nominative. In other words, in Jesus’ statements here there are no allusions to Exodus 3:14 and a claim to deity. The next verse reads –

[John 8:24](#) “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am [He], you will die in your sins.” (NAS95)

Jesus is definitely calling for the Jews to exercise genuine belief in him, but what is he asking them to believe? He says literally, “that ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*),” i.e., “that I am.” Is his statement a reference to Exodus 3:14 and, therefore, a claim by Jesus that he is God, so that he is warning the Jews that unless they believe that he is God, they will “die in their sins,” which I would understand him to mean that they will incur God’s eternal condemnation? On what basis would we say that the context calls for us to interpret Jesus to be referring to Exodus 3:14? There is no reasonable basis. We would have to read this into the passage. Instead, in the previous verse, Jesus has just said, “I am from above,” and “I am not of this world.” Does not the context, therefore, lead us to conclude that Jesus is saying in v. 24, “Unless you believe that I am from above and not of this world, which is to say that I understand reality correctly while you Jews do not, because you are of this world, you will incur God’s eternal condemnation?”

In other words, Jesus’ saying that he is “from above” cannot be a reference to his identity as the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. We notice that he tells the Jews in v. 23 that they “are from below” and “of this world.” Is he telling them that they are not God and that he is God? It makes no sense to interpret him this way. Why would he have to state that the Jews are not God? Are they actually believing that they are God? Clearly, they are not. Therefore, Jesus’ being “from above” and “not of this world” is not a reference to his deity but to his perspective and understanding of reality. He understands reality correctly, because he is the Messiah who “will declare all things to us” as the woman at the well said about the Christ in John 4.

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<sup>48</sup> The construction of Jesus’ response is the same as that of John the Baptist to the question put to him by emissaries from the Pharisees, “Who are you” (John 1:19)? The next verse reads – [John 1:20](#) And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ (ἐγώ οὐκ εἰμι ὁ χριστός (*ego ouk eimi ho christos*)).”

In addition, Jesus is not referring to his essence as both divine and human as the incarnate co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity. We would have to understand that the Jews are claiming to be of divine and human essence since Jesus tells them that they “are from below” in contrast to his being “from above.” It is much more reasonable to conclude that the Jews believe that they understand God and reality correctly while Jesus does not. Jesus is telling them that they have it all wrong while he has it all right. Therefore, the NAS95’s statement in the reference column about the “I am” in v. 24, that “Most authorities associate this with Ex 3:14, *I AM WHO I AM*,” is superfluous. There is no good reason in the context to associate this “I am” with Exodus 3:14 and therefore with a claim to deity by Jesus. Jesus is not talking about his essence but about his understanding.

After v. 24, the Pharisees ask Jesus directly, “Who are you?” Jesus responds that he has been telling them who he is. Simply by calling God his Father, Jesus is claiming to be the Son of God, i.e., the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant and the final king of Israel. However, the Jews are spiritually blind and unwilling to embrace this truth (v. 27). The next verse reads –

[John 8:28](#) So Jesus said, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [He], and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.” (NAS95)

Here Jesus is telling the Jews that when they “lift up the Son of Man,” then they will know literally “that ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*),” i.e., “that I am.” Is his statement a reference to Exodus 3:14 as though Jesus is saying that the Jews will know that he is the “I am,” i.e., God, or does Jesus expect his listeners to add a predicate nominative to the subject and verb combination? The context leads us to conclude that it is the latter and that the predicate nominative is “the Son of Man” from the first part of the verse and “the Davidic king who is the Son of God” from what Jesus has been implying by calling God his Father. In other words, Jesus is simply saying, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the Son of Man, i.e., the Davidic king of Israel as David speaks of himself in Psalm 8, and the Son of God as the Davidic king as I have been referring to myself by calling God my Father.” Therefore, if we use the context appropriately and completely, there is no reason to interpret Jesus as referring to Exodus 3:14 and as making a claim to deity in v. 28 either.

What does Jesus mean by “lift up?” This verb (ὑψόω [*hupso’ow*]) can mean either lift up physically or exalt, i.e., honor. It makes more sense that Jesus means the former and is referring to his crucifixion.<sup>49</sup> When the Jews put to death the Psalm 8 king of Israel, then they will know by virtue of how God the Father responds to his death that he is the Messiah. For example, when Jesus is raised from the dead and when he ascends into heaven, then the Jews will really be able to tell that he has fulfilled his role as the final Davidic king whom they have been expecting. This is all that he is saying in v. 28 with the phrase, “I am.” Therefore, for “Most authorities [to] associate [John 8:23-28] with Ex. 3:14, *I AM WHO I AM*,” as the NAS95 states, is not legitimate.

Still, what about John 8:58? While every other use of “I am” by Jesus is not a reference to Exodus 3:14, certainly this situation seems different. Let us look at the context. After v. 28, “many came to believe in Him” (v. 30), and Jesus tells these

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<sup>49</sup> For Jesus to be saying, “When you exalt the Messiah, then you will know that I am the Messiah” seems too simplistic and does not contribute as much to his argument about what is really happening with these Jews, especially that they are seeking to kill him as he goes on to explain. He could be implying, “When you are willing to exalt the Messiah correctly, then you will know that I am that Messiah whom you are exalting.” However, this interpretation, too, seems like a stretch and too simplistic.

believing Jews that knowing the truth by being his disciples will make them free (vs. 31,32). They respond that they are Abraham's descendants and have never been enslaved, at least not in the traditional sense. How is it that they will become free by means of knowing the truth (v. 33)? Jesus responds that they will be set free from sin, but the fact that they desire to kill him means that they are not truly Abraham's descendants. He adds that he speaks the things that he receives from his Father while they do the things of their father (vs. 34-38). The next three verses read –

[John 8:39](#) They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.”

Jesus said to them, “If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham.

[John 8:40](#) “But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do.

[John 8:41](#) “You are doing the deeds of your father.” They said to Him, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God.” (NAS95)

As physical descendants of Abraham, the Jews believe that they can call Abraham their father. Jesus basically says, “Fine, then do what Abraham would do in this situation, which would be not to kill someone who told him authentic, biblical truth the way that I, Jesus, have.” An important interpretative issue here is how exactly to understand Jesus' words in v. 40, “this Abraham did not do,” i.e., Abraham did not kill me, Jesus, a man who has told you the truth. The verb “did not do” is past tense (aorist in Greek). Certainly, we can read in the story of Abraham in Genesis 12-25 that he did not kill someone who told him the truth. In addition, Abraham did not kill Jesus. Therefore, is Jesus simply claiming that Abraham did not kill him? This does not make sense. Instead, Jesus is driving home his point to the Jews that they are not like their “father” Abraham. Consequently, it makes more sense to conclude that Jesus means, “Abraham neither killed anyone who told him good, biblical truth, and nor *would* Abraham do so if he were here and coming to grips with who I am.”

The Koine Greek of the New Testament does not contain a modal mood of the verb, i.e., a mood that is automatically translated with the words *would*, *should*, *may*, or *might*. The subjunctive mood could be translated with some of these words, but not necessarily with the word *would*. Thus, in this context, Jesus is using the indicative mood with the modal sense *would* as he describes the difference between Abraham and the Jews with whom he is speaking. His conclusion is that while Abraham their “father” *would* not do what they are doing, i.e., seek to kill him, they are doing what their actual “father” does. Nevertheless, they assert that they “were not born of fornication” and that God is their ultimate father. By “fornication (πορνεία (porneia)), the Jews are referring to the sexual intercourse and results of gentiles, whom they consider to outside the family of God and, therefore, cannot call God their “Father.” Instead, they, the Jews, are the chosen people of God are the chosen people of God, and merely by their being physical descendants of Abraham, God is their “Father.”

Jesus begs to differ and responds that if God were their Father, they would love him, because he is the Messiah who has been sent by God to provide them with eternal salvation. But, as it is, they are following their father, the devil, who has been a murderer and a liar from the beginning of creation. Plus, because they are not “of God,” they cannot “hear” what God has to say through him, Jesus (vs. 42-47). This strikes the Jews as crazy, because they claim that God and Abraham are their fathers and, therefore, they are listening to what God has to say through the Old Testament. Consequently, they accuse Jesus of being demon possessed, i.e., suitable for being admitted to an insane asylum (v. 48). Jesus answers that he is honoring the Father, God, and that if

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anyone “keeps Jesus’ word,” i.e., embraces and guards his message in his heart and mind, “he will never see death,” eternal condemnation from God (vs. 49-51). The next two verses read –

[John 8:52](#) The Jews said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets [also]; and You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.’”

[John 8:53](#) “Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out [to be]?” (NAS95)

Now the Jews think that Jesus is even crazier, because, on the one hand, he is claiming that Abraham would have followed him, Jesus, and, on the other hand, someone who follows Jesus will not “see death.” And yet, Abraham died. So Jesus is contradicting himself—because they think that he is talking about physical death. Then, they ask him two questions, “Are you greater than Abraham?” and, “Who are you?” The next three verses read –

[John 8:54](#) Jesus answered, “If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God’;

[John 8:55](#) and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word.

[John 8:56](#) “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw [it] and was glad.” (NAS95)

Jesus begins his answers to the above two questions by admitting that his telling the Jews that he is the Messiah is nothing in comparison to the Father’s saying it. Indeed, if God the Father announces through Jesus’ miracles and even what will be happening through the crucifixion and resurrection that he is the Messiah and thus glorifies him, then the Jews need to take notice and listen to what the Father is saying. Therefore, if they do not like what is being “said” about him through his miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection, then they need to take it up with the Father.

In addition, he tells them, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw [it] and was glad.” We could interpret Jesus as saying that either he lived in Abraham’s day or Abraham is living in his day. In their spiritual dullness and arrogance, the former is how the Jews take Jesus’ statement about Abraham, because they go on to ask a smart-alecky question in v. 57, “You are not fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Yet, if we more reasonably interpret Jesus as using the words “rejoiced,” “saw,” and “was” with a modal sense, then all he is saying is, “Abraham was a man of true belief, and he would have rejoiced to see me standing here as the Messiah, and he would have seen me and would be darn glad to do so.” However, the Jews are so hostile toward God and Jesus that in v. 57 they put a completely unreasonable and stupid spin on his words. The next verse reads –

[John 8:58](#) Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” (NAS95)

Jesus’ response to the Jews is, “before Abraham was born, ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*).” We have seen in all the other instances of this phrase, *ego eimi*, that it is important to look at the context to determine exactly what the speaker means when he says this about

himself. In other words, the speaker uses the phrase “I am” in such a way that he presumes the listener/reader will add a predicate nominative. For example, we saw in John 9:9 that after the man who had been blind hears people arguing about whether or not he is the one who really used to be blind, he says, “*ego eimi*.” Therefore, the NAS95 adds the predicate nominative by translating this, “I am the one.” We saw another example in John 18:5 when Jesus asks the soldiers who have come to arrest him whom they are seeking. They answer, “Jesus the Nazarene,” and again the NAS95 translates Jesus’ response of *ego eimi* by adding a predicate nominative, “I am He.”

Therefore, is there a concept or phrase in the context of John 8:58 that makes sense for us to add as a predicate nominative to Jesus’ *ego eimi*? Yes, there is back in verses 53 & 54. In v. 53, the Jews ask, “Are you *greater than our father Abraham*, who died;” and in v. 54, Jesus responds, “It is my Father who *glorifies me*” (emphasis mine). As a result, Jesus is basically saying, “Before Abraham came into existence, I am the one who was already greater than Abraham, because God had in mind to glorify me.” In what sense was Jesus already greater and slated to be glorified by God? Was it because he is the co-eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the trinity and Jesus is referring to Exodus 3:14 where God says to Moses, “I am who I am?” There are no clues in the context to suggest that Jesus is referring to Exodus 3:14, and as I demonstrate in the rest of this book, Jesus came into existence as the Son of God and final king of the Davidic Covenant when God “wrote” him into His story with the miraculous conception in his mother Mary.

Consequently, Jesus is the one who was already greater than Abraham by the time Abraham appeared in God’s story, because Jesus is the driving force intellectually and teleologically behind all that God is doing within the creation. There is not one sub-atomic particle that does not exist for the express purpose of God’s showcasing Himself within His story through Jesus of Nazareth, the king over all creation and the very embodiment and incarnation of God. Jesus is the one and only centerpiece of the entirety of cosmic history. Thus, when the Jews ask in v. 53, “Surely you are not greater than our father Abraham, who died,” Jesus responds, “Yes I am; indeed, before Abraham came into existence, there I am in God the Father’s mind as the one who was slated to be the very reason why God created not only Abraham but the entire universe and the eternal Kingdom of God. Now that’s glory!!”

In this way, Jesus answers the Jews’ smart-alecky question in v. 57 and also goes back to their previous question in v. 53. In summary, he says, “God, the author of the story of creation, planned to create me, the human being named Jesus, so that I would be the very embodiment of Himself and rule over the creation as His proxy and representative for all eternity.” Consequently, of course Jesus is greater than Abraham and, for these Jews, more necessary to follow than Abraham.

Then, the Jews pick up stones to kill him (v. 59). So he is right. They do want to kill him, because they believe that he is blaspheming against God by claiming to be not only the king of Israel since God is his “Father” (cf. 2 Samuel 7:14) but also greater than their “father” Abraham. In their opinion, such distortion of the biblical message deserves death (not unlike what Christians have thought during church history of those who challenge the traditional view of the trinity).

In conclusion, the phrase “I am” (ἐγώ εἰμι [*ego eimi*]) in the Gospel of John always refers to something that has been mentioned in the immediate context. In addition, Jesus does not use it to refer to Exodus 3:14,15 where Yahweh, God, gives Moses His name, “the One who is” and “He is.” Therefore, also, Jesus never uses this phrase to claim to be God even though he is the incarnation and embodiment of God in human flesh, because the *Logos*, who is God, wrote Himself into the story of creation and “became flesh” (John 1:1,14).