

Who Is the Godhead?

Richard C. Trench, in his classic *Synonyms of the New Testament*, held that the only New Testament word expressing Deity in the absolute is *theotes* (Colossians 2:9),¹ translated “Godhead” (AV; ASV) and “Deity” (NASB; NIV; RSV), derived from *theos*, “God,” “the implored one.” How much is embodied in the term “Godhead” no human knows. Zophar challenged Job, “Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?” (Job 11:7). Paul wrote that no one can dispute the fact that “great is the mystery of godliness” (1 Timothy 3:16). He gave up on ever understanding the fullness of God in this life: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Romans 11:33).

¹Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London: N.p., 1880; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 7.

On a practical basis, though, God expects us to come to know Him. Only if we do so can we enter heaven. "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). A God of love does not require the impossible, and His demands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). The wayfaring man, though simple, can come to a saving knowledge of God (Isaiah 35:8). "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:17).

THE WORD "ELOHIM"

If the Greek word *theos* signifies an "implored one," there is a similar thought in the Hebrew word *elohim*, meaning "feared one" or "revered one."² Thus the form *elohim* comes to mean a being to be worshiped. However, the word is grammatically plural and literally is translated "gods," as in Exodus 20:3: "You shall have no other gods [*elohim*] before Me." Exactly the same form appears in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God [*elohim*] created the heavens and the earth." Because of this plural form, some have sought to fault the Bible by asserting that it teaches polytheism. Accordingly, they would translate Genesis 1:1 this way: "In the beginning the gods created the heavens and the earth." Since other Bible passages show emphatically that there is only one true God (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:6), no scholar ever translated Genesis 1:1 with the word "gods." If Genesis 1:1 does not teach the doctrine of many gods, then why is the word *elohim* plural? Archaeology

²William Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson, ed. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 43.

has shown that the ancients used a majestic plural, or plural of honor, in addition to a numerical plural. This plural of honor is also in Genesis 42:30, where Joseph's brothers literally said, "The man, the lords of the land, spoke roughly with us." As written by Moses, the word "lords" is plural but in the context can only refer to one person, that is, Joseph. Consequently, translators change the plural to a singular, translating the phrase "the lord of the land."

Very seldom does the singular word for God (*eloah*) appear in the Scriptures, but the plural form occurs 2,570 times. It is clear, then, why translators uniformly render the form as singular in Genesis 1:1 and capitalize the word "God." No Bible student considers just any god or many gods to be creators of the universe.

THE TRINITY

The plural form *elohim* may have another significance. Though the biblical Godhead is a unit (*ehad* in Deuteronomy 6:4; *heis* in 1 Corinthians 8:6), He is also a Triune Being, a Trinity. In Genesis 1:26 God said, "Let Us make man in Our image." The second verse of the Bible mentions the Spirit of God as being part of the creative work. We know from other verses (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16) that Jesus had a part in creation. Clearly, then, the Godhead is a threefold Being. How three can be one and one can be three are not revealed matters (Deuteronomy 29:29), but the biblical fact is indisputable.

GOD THE FATHER

Unsurrenderable items of faith, more precious than the unity of brothers in the bond of peace, are "one

Spirit, . . . one Lord, . . . [and] one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:4–6). Jesus did not claim to be the Father. (The prediction in Isaiah 9:6 of His being the "Eternal Father" is just as accurate if rendered "Father of Eternity," reflecting His timelessness.) The one called "Father" in Jesus' understanding was a Being separate from Himself, on whom He depended, and to whom He prayed. His petitions began with "Father" (as in John 17:1), and His sermons pointed listeners to "your Father" and "your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:45, 48). He taught His disciples to address the God of the universe as "our Father" (Matthew 6:9). In the Bethany cemetery "Jesus raised His eyes, and said, 'Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; . . .'" (John 11:41, 42).

As Jesus approached the agony of the cross, He was nervous: "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name" (John 12:27, 28a). The false notion that Jesus is the whole Godhead is vividly refuted by a voice answering Jesus' prayer—a voice which came out of the heavens: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again" (John 12:28b). Some bystanders thought they had heard thunder, while others thought an angel was speaking to Jesus. The whole incident shows communication between two members of the Godhead.

Some have attempted to find a feeling of intimacy and unusual closeness in the term *Abba*, the Aramaic word for father. However, the form *Abba* has precisely the same meaning in the Aramaic language as does *pater* in Greek and as does "father" in English. Apparently, Jesus used both the Aramaic and the Greek

forms in His Gethsemane prayer (Mark 14:36). He was praying to a Being separate from Himself whom He regarded as having power over life and death. He also believed that the Being whom He called "Father" had the power to forgive sins; He prayed from the cross on behalf of His killers, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Clearly, there is a Supreme Being called "God the Father," who is different from "God the Son" and different from "God the Holy Spirit."

GOD THE SON

God the Son was involved in creation when God the Father said, "Let Us make man" (Genesis 1:26). Many commentators believe that the second person of the Godhead is known in the Old Testament as "the angel of the LORD." (See Genesis 16:7; 22:15, 16; 31:11, 13; Exodus 3:2-4.) However, if the Lord's angel were God the Son, He would not have refused to be worshiped (Judges 13:16). In regard to Jesus, the Father commanded, "Let all the angels of God worship Him" (Hebrews 1:6). The angel of the Lord was an important being, but he was not the second person of the Godhead.

In the King James Version, the rendering of Nebuchadnezzar's words about the four men in the furnace (" . . . the form of the fourth is like the Son of God"; Daniel 3:25) has caused some to think that Jesus was the one with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Likely, He was; but the words more literally are "the form of the fourth is like a son of the gods." This translation fits better from what is known of Nebuchadnezzar: It is not likely that the pagan king knew about the second member of the

Godhead, the Son of God.

That the second member of the Godhead was active in the days of the Old Testament, however, is clear. Not only was He the Creator, but later He was present with the Israelites in the wilderness, being represented as the spiritual rock from which they drank (1 Corinthians 10:4).

In one sense, all human beings are sons of God (see Luke 3:38), and angels are sons of God (Job 1:6; 2:1); but there is a sense in which Jesus is the only Son of God (Psalm 2:7; John 1:18). He is the only One of His kind, a unique One. Physically, He was begotten of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), but the thrilling prediction of an excited Father ("Today I have begotten You"; Psalm 2:7) had no reference to the Bethlehem birth. It has to be a figurative expression of heaven's joy (comparable to the happiness of a birth announcement in a home) regarding Jesus' resurrection and His being crowned as king and anointed as priest (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5).

As the second member of the Godhead, He was never literally begotten. A begotten son can never be as old as his father. If Jesus were begotten, He could not be first (Revelation 1:17). He was not the beginning of what God created, but He was the Beginner of it (Revelation 3:14). He Himself was the beginning (Revelation 22:13). Nothing preceded Him, for He is timeless (Micah 5:2; Revelation 1:17). Therefore, only in a figurative sense may Jesus be called the Son of God. In the sense in which He is the Son of God, He is far superior to all human beings, superior to the angels, and no less than Deity. He is no less divine than God the Father and God the Spirit.

In another thrilling predictive utterance, God the

Father wrote what He would say on His Son's day of coronation on Pentecost in A.D. 30: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever" (Psalm 45:6). The Father was describing Jesus as God, which is corroborated by the writer of Hebrews: "Of the Son He says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, . . .'" (Hebrews 1:8). It is sad that the Revised Standard Version in its rendition of Psalm 45:6 completely removes the Father's calling Jesus "God": "Your divine throne endures for ever and ever." The RSV gives Jesus a divine throne but removes His deity.

Another prediction about the coming Christ (that He would be the Son of a virgin; Isaiah 7:14) is requisite to His deity; for if not virgin-born, He was no more divine than the rest of us. The same verse of prophecy gives Him the name "Immanuel," which in His case reflects deity: "God [is] with us" (Matthew 1:23). Other titles of Jesus inappropriate for any mere mortal would be "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6, 7).

Another prophecy of the coming of Deity in the flesh was given by Micah. He envisioned One born in Bethlehem who did not originate there, but whose goings forth were from of old, even from everlasting (Micah 5:2).

Already, the vivid but figurative description of Jesus as God's Son has been cited (Psalm 2:7). The same title was used audibly by the Father when Jesus was immersed, and again on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). In the same special sense of Deity, the disciples proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God after they saw Him walk on water (Matthew 14:33). Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi likewise attributed deity to the Nazarene carpenter

(Matthew 16:16).

In a passage where the Jehovah's Witnesses have reduced Jesus to "a god" (John 1:1), accurate translation by biblical scholars shows Jesus to be "God." In the misguided attempt to avoid the concept of the Trinity, the Jehovah's Witnesses have become polytheists. In their reduction of Jesus from "God" to "a god" (according to the original Greek, they say), they fail to carry through in John 1:6; for they dare not translate that John the Baptist was a man sent from "a god" (where the Greek has not changed). Further, in John 20:28, they are not bold enough to make Thomas say to Jesus, "My Lord and a god" (where the Greek stays the same). They believe that Jesus was only "a god," but they do not claim that Thomas thought so.

Jesus' enemies objected to anyone's making Him equal to God (John 5:18), but Paul affirmed that the nature of Christ is such that for Him it is not robbery to claim equality with God (Philippians 2:6). In this sense, Jesus would say that He and the Father are one (John 10:30). They were not one in being one person, but one in that Jesus partook of the divine nature just as did His Father.

Jesus' claim of being one with the Father was clearly understood by those who wanted to stone Him, for they understood Him to be saying that He was "God" (John 10:33). As an earthly son is of the same flesh and blood as His father, so Jesus is of the same nature (*charakter tes hupostaseos autou*; Hebrews 1:3) as His Father—the exact duplicate of His substance.

Arius in the fourth century argued that Jesus was "like" (*homoios*) His Father, but Athanasius held that He was "the same" (*homnos*) in substance as

His Father.³ Jesus lacked nothing of the fullness of Deity, for all of the Godhead dwelled in Him bodily (Colossians 2:9).

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

Not only did God the Father and God the Son participate in the physical creation, but also a Being called the Spirit of God (Genesis 1:2) was hovering upon the waters covering the earth. This Being took part in the creation of life (Psalm 104:30; Job 33:4). The Holy Spirit lived in the midst of Israel, inspiring judges and prophets (Numbers 11:17, 25, 29; 2 Samuel 23:2; Haggai 2:5), but Israel rebelled and grieved the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 63:10, 11). David prayed that the Holy Spirit would not leave him (Psalm 51:11).

This Being, in the form of a dove, descended upon Jesus on the day He was immersed (Matthew 3:16); thus Jesus Christ possessed the Spirit in complete fullness (John 3:34). His sermons and His deeds of mercy were possible in part because, as He said, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon Me" (Luke 4:18; see Acts 10:38).

Jesus, anticipating His leaving the earth, promised the Holy Spirit to His apostles, describing Him as the Spirit of truth and a Comforter whom the world could not receive (John 14:16, 17; see the KJV). He would teach the apostles all the truth, perfecting their memory of what Jesus had taught them, and He would reveal the future (John 14:26; 16:13). The coming of the Spirit upon them would be called an

³Arius and Athanasius were church fathers who disagreed on the eternal nature of Christ. In A.D. 325 the Council of Nicea officially condemned the Arian idea that Christ was a subordinate, created being who did not share God's eternal and divine nature.

immersion (baptism; see Acts 1:5b), and from Him they would receive power (Acts 1:8). His working through the apostles would be called “the ministration of the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:8). To blaspheme Him is unforgivable (Matthew 12:32). In some sense different from the Spirit’s indwelling in David, New Testament church members received the Spirit (John 7:39; Acts 2:38; 5:32; Galatians 4:6).

A spirit has no flesh and bones (Luke 24:39), yet the Holy Spirit has a mind separate from the other two members of the Godhead (Romans 8:27). He knows all things (1 Corinthians 2:11). He can hear, speak, and pray (John 16:13; Romans 8:26). He can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30). He is timeless (Hebrews 9:14). To lie to Him is to lie to God (Acts 5:3, 4). Since He is no less deity than the other members of the Godhead, Jesus specified that water baptism be solemnized by calling upon the Spirit’s name also:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20).

THE RELATIONSHIP

What is the relationship between the three members of the Godhead? Though the Father and the Son and the Spirit are all one in nature—that is, in being Deity, in being God—they are not one in authority. Now, in the New Testament Dispensation, Christ fills all things (Ephesians 1:23) and is all in all (Colossians 3:11). To dishonor Him is to dishonor the Father (John

5:23); yet Christ belongs to the Father (1 Corinthians 3:23), and the Father is His head (1 Corinthians 11:3). God is greater than Jesus (John 14:28); He is greater than all (John 10:29) and is above all (Ephesians 4:6). In heaven Christ Himself will be subject to Him who placed all things under His authority (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Both the Father and Christ sent the Spirit into the world (John 14:16; 15:26), and all that He does is to glorify Jesus (John 16:14). Prayers to the Holy Spirit, then, are improper. Today, by God's will, everything is to focus on the Son. The Father has supreme command; but it is His will temporarily, in the Christian Age, to exalt His Son even above Himself. This situation continues even through the Judgment, for the Father Himself judges no man, but the Son does (John 5:22). Then, when time again gives way to timelessness, the divine arrangement of authority (the Father number one, the Son number two, and the Spirit number three) again will be operative.