

JESUS IN THE TRINITY

Robert W. Jenson

I

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The first great such struggle I will adduce lasted some two hundred years, from around 150 until the confession of Nicea and Constantinople.

In the Bible, there is and can be only one Lord. So if Jesus is Lord, what then? It looks like Bible-readers are committed to say that he is that Lord, that he is somehow or other to be identified with the God of Israel, with the very one he called Father and taught us to call so.

But surely, said most of the church's intellectuals from the first "apologists" to Athanasius' majority opponents, that cannot be. For Jesus

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inhabits our temporal world, and it is -- as surely everyone of course knows! -- the very definition of deity that it is immune to the temporal world's contaminations, to time's challenges and problems. Jesus has, for the decisive points, a mother and an executioner, and moreover he hangs around with mortals. Whereas *God* does not and indeed cannot -- and now I must cite a great Christian, the martyr Justin -- "speak to anyone, or be seen by anyone, or appear in any particular part of earth,"¹ never mind inhabiting a womb or hanging on a cross. So Mediterranean antiquity had taught Justin to honor deity, and so we epigones of that civilization still think. God is -- obviously! -- "immovable," "impassible," "invisible," "unchangeable," "unplaceable," "immaterial,"² and in short everything that Mary's boy and the victim on the cross is not.

Or as we might now state the same objection, God is obviously beyond and above any of the temporal stories the particular Jewish and Christian communities tell of him. Surely God is not bound to one stretch of history or one community or one religion, but lies beyond all such mundanities. Surely we have to be more widely inclusive and dialogic than that. And surely God does not actually speak to us, but must, as my denomination once officially declared, be glimpsed only in bits and pieces, as our metaphorical exertions strain through the distances of his metaphysical purity. In short, also deteriorated modernism thinks, surely God is everything that Mary's boy and the victim on the cross is not. To suit us late-comers of Mediterranean religion also, "Jesus is Lord" requires major qualifications.

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II

In that first round in the ancient church, the search for an escape from the gospel's plain consequence was channeled by a basic phenomenon of the faith, which is obtrusive in Scripture, built into the church's worship from the start, and too prominent in both to be disregarded. I have elsewhere described this phenomenon as "primary trinitarianism," the trinitarian pattern or logic of all original Christian discourse. Here I will merely point it out.

The New Testament cannot speak of God at all without somehow, as it were, touching the three bases: Father, Son and Spirit. For example at random, "For through him [Christ], we...have access in one Spirit to the Father."³ "But it is God who establishes us...in Christ...; [and] has...given us his Spirit."⁴ And so on every page of the epistles and

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1. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, p. 127.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Ephesians 2:18.

4. II Corinthians 1:21-22.

Jesus notoriously addressed the God of Israel as "Father" and referred to him as "my Father," just thereby making himself out to be God's Son, and that in a way more personal and essential than the Messianic title had usually been thought to have.

other writings. And baptismal and eucharistic invocation of the triune name, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," and prayer in the defining Christian pattern, to the Father with the Son in the Spirit, were the substance of the church's worship from the beginning.

This logic did not appear from nowhere. It distilled the plot of God's whole history with Israel, as the first believers read it in their Scripture and as they had experienced its denouement in the Resurrection and Pentecost.

Jesus notoriously addressed the God of Israel as "Father" and referred to him as "my Father," just thereby making himself out to be God's Son, and that in a way more personal and essential than the Messianic title had usually been thought to have. Perhaps what was most deeply offensive in this, even when the exact nature of the offense remained mostly subliminal, was that he thereby claimed the role of *Israel* for himself, claimed to be in his singular person a sort of Israel for Israel.

For the primary trinitarian sense of "the Son" is a pattern established in the Old Testament, if not usually with that label. The trinitarian Son is an other by whom God identifies himself, and with whom God is thereby identified, so that what God does to and for this other he does to and for himself, in a way to which the relation between parent and child is a created analogy, and so that God knows himself as the one who is related to this other in this way. And quite apart from occasional appearances of Father/Son language in the Old Testament, this is the very relation we see there between God and Israel.

Thus the old rabbis, to adduce a much cited passage, could look back on the whole of Israel's Bible and history and say: "Israel (can even say) to God, 'You have redeemed yourself....' For wherever Israel was exiled, the *Shekinah* [that is, the inner-Israelite identity of God] went with them into exile...; and when at the end of days they return, the *Shekinah* will return with them."⁵ What the Lord does to Israel he does to himself, in that the *Shekinah* shares Israel's lot and the Lord's being.

As for the Spirit, he had always been there in Israel's story with God, and in the same way as he was now experienced in the church.

So back to Justin and his successors. The trinitarian logic of their Scripture and worship channeled their search for a way to interpret the identification of Jesus with the Lord: he had to be understood as the Son of the Father, and *so* to be Lord. And so far so very good. But at the same time this situation seemed to indicate a way of escape from the unwelcome implications of "Jesus is Lord." For "the Son" of primary trinitarianism appears in the New Testament under another title also, "the Word." And the one with this title they thought they recognized.

5. *Mekhila* Y to Exodus 12;41.

The notion of the divine "Word" or Logos was a chief item of late Mediterranean antiquity's general construal of the world, and so of the intellectual and religious apparatus which gentile converts, and indeed some Hellenized Jews, brought with them. And in that construal, the Logos functioned exactly to bridge the gap between antiquity's immovable, impassible and silent deity and the temporal world in which this deity cannot itself be implicated. The Logos is on the one side the sense, the rationally comprehensible order, which the temporal world, despite its chaotic foundations, does exhibit. And since the world with its order derives from the divine, the Logos is on the other side the divine conception of the world; if a personal or semi-personal God is contemplated, the Logos is its rationality. Thus the Logos is on the one hand divine but on the other hand informs our temporal world. As the Logos has its origin in God, it does have an origin and so is not absolutely eternal. Yet as the sense and order of the changing world, the Logos must be itself unchanging. And so the Logos is halfway between absolute eternity and sheer temporality. Which is just what the Christian elites wanted.

The Logos, said Justin and Theophilus and their successors, is an "other God," "the next Power *after* the Father of all, a sort of Offspring." This entity, in his relative deity and relative temporality, can, if it comes to that, speak to mortals and appear to them.

So they had their escape. The Logos, they said, is that Son named in the trinitarian rhetoric and naming. In Jesus, this Logos has come to inhabit the world of which he is the eternal meaning. He has become "incarnate" in Jesus, so that in converse with Jesus we may finally be rescued from ignorance of God's truth. And so far, their proposition is a permanent contribution to Christian thinking. But in it they found a way in which Jesus can be said to be identified with the one Lord without -- impossibly, of course! -- saying that God has a mother or a cross: Jesus is the incarnation of an entity who is a mini-step down from God, yet so little down, so little different from real God, that from our perspective it makes no difference.

This will not do, and in the not too long run that was perceived. For it was the center of the revelation to Israel that the Lord is a ferociously jealous God, that he brooks no almost-gods, no "next" powers "after" the Father of all. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God," is the first creed of the church also. In the Bible there is the Lord, the Creator of all things, and there are his creatures, and there is nothing in between; there is no ontological overlap, no pantheon of not-quite-gods or divine creatures.

So which is the Logos, Creator or creature? For such Bible-readers as were the ancient churchmen, the question could not be ignored, but it could be long suppressed. Until finally poor Arius pressed it so urgently that it had to be faced, whereupon the church blew apart.

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The outcome is familiar. A few thinkers took up Arius' challenge and faced the church with the stark alternative: either stop worshipping the Son because he is a creature and Christians do not worship creatures, or acknowledge that the Son is Creator, God Almighty. For a time such radicals were a minority, yet with this stern biblical reasoning they eventually bullied the church, kicking and screaming, into the confession of Nicea and Constantinople, that the Son who is *from* God is nevertheless, or rather just so, himself *true* God, that in the case of *this* God, being from God is not incompatible with being 100% God.

The thought was achieved which has since enabled all specifically Christian thought, on any subject: that to *be* God the Father is first to be the Father, of this Son, and just and only so to be God; that to *be* God the Son is first to be the Son, of this Father, and just and only so to be God; and that to *be* God the Spirit is first to be the Spirit of this Father resting upon this Son, and just and only so to be God; so that only in their mutuality *is* there God at all. God -- if I may use my own jargon -- is what happens between Jesus and the one he called Father, as they are freed for each other by their Spirit.

So Jesus is the Son, who is of one being with the Father, either of whom can be called the Lord and neither of whom can be called the Lord without the other. From 381 AD on, that has been the dogma of the holy catholic church. The matter is surely settled -- except that it was not settled at all.

III

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For the old pagan dogma of our civilization, that God -- obviously! -- is impassible, inaccessible, immovable, etc., remained unbroken on its own turf, as the definition of deity. If it was now Christian dogma that God the Son is 100% God, does not that have to mean that *he*, God the Son, is impassible, inaccessible, immovable, etc.? That is, everything that Mary's crucified child is not?

Jesus is the Son and the Son is God. The compound sentence contains two instances of "is." If it has become dogma that the "is" in "the Son is God" is not to be tampered with, then escape from the compound sentence's unwelcome implications must be sought in mitigating the other "is," in "Jesus is the Son." Within the great church, this "is" was never so denied as by the gnostics, but in many quarters it was badly weakened. The argument was in full swing before the ink was dry at Constantinople: the second hypostasis of God, God the Son and Logos, surely cannot in his own identity have a mother and a cross; therefore Jesus, who has both, must be one and the Son another.

And in our time we go from their recoilings to some of our own. Surely the second hypostasis of God, God the Son and Logos, cannot have an ethnic identity, particularly not Jewish – though this one is now a bit out of fashion, having been tested in practical politics. Surely the second hypostasis of God, God the Logos, cannot have a gender, or anyway not male. Surely the second hypostasis of God cannot indeed be identified with *any* particular historical personage, however stipulated. As a well-known and currently practicing theologian of my denomination once wrote, defending newly invented baptismal formulas, “Surely not even Jenson would want to *identify* Jesus with the Son of God.”

What happened was that after Constantinople the search for an escape from the consequences of “Jesus is Lord” simply shifted a notch. If the “is” in “The Son is God” must be left alone, the one in “Jesus is the Son” can be the target. The new move was so to mitigate the “is” between the Son and Jesus that temporality’s suffering can be left to Jesus and eternity’s glory to the Son.

Again we can easily translate to our own apostasies: surely we must leave the masculinity to Jesus and the androgyny to the Son, the particularity to Jesus and the universality to the Son, the victimhood to Jesus and the righteous self-acceptance to the Son - and so on again.

Perhaps, it was after Constantinople put forward, we may say that the Son so “inhabits” Jesus that the man Jesus is a temple wholly transparent to his presence; or that the Son is so personally “conjoined” with Jesus that from our point of view they cannot be told apart; or that they two will be in fact one person at the End, after the suffering is over.

Perhaps, as we would now put it, we may say that Jesus is so perfect a metaphor or avatar of the Son that from our point of view they are indistinguishable – though from, e.g., an Indian or pagan Norwegian or inner-city point of view they can easily be. Or that “the Christ,” who is the energy of everyone’s religious aspiration, is incarnate in Jesus’ teaching and example. Or that....

Whether Nestorius was a Nestorian or not – or whether or not there *were* any Nestorians – “Nestorianism” is of course our grab-bag label for this kind of thinking. Notoriously, Nestorianism was ruled out by a great council at Chalcedon in 451, as one extreme, and an almost entirely fictional heresy, fathered on a poor innocent named Eutyches, was ruled out as an opposite extreme. The Son, said Chalcedon, is as “one and the same” born of God and born of Mary; so much for Nestorianism. Yet, said the council, the two “natures” of divinity and humanity are intact in him, with each its characters and capacities; so much for Eutyches. And, so far, I suppose, so good.

And that is where my seminary education stopped -- of course I was luckier than some seminarians now, who are not even introduced to

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the subject. Christology was taken care of, it was supposed, and we went on to other matters. Or if we lingered, it was to discuss whether something called "Chalcedonian orthodoxy" was still viable, many having declared it was not. The sad part is: at Chalcedon the history of Christology had just gotten to the interesting bits.

In fact, Chalcedon settled almost nothing. The actual subject of discussion in the period just before the council and at the council was the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria. Adulation of his theology by some and worries about it by others made up the actual matter at hand; those we call Nestorians were already a lost cause. And the council fathers fudged it.

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Cyril's great concern was that the story told in the Gospels, of the doings and sufferings of the one named Jesus, in all its parts and aspects, be understood as the story of God the Son. His concern was for what we would now call the *narrative* content of "Jesus is Lord." The story told in the Gospels is at once a story of majesty and victimization, of divine authority and human suffering. It is a story of the birth of Immanuel from the blood and serum of a womb, of exaltation to the Father by being hung on a cross. Not all Cyril's formulations could be fortunate; for language fails us here. But his concern was steadfast: this whole story is the true story of God the Son. Jesus, the life told by the story the Gospels tell, is the Lord.

The formulas of Chalcedon do not really meet Cyril's concern, as his more percipient disciples quickly saw. The fathers of Chalcedon did attach some of Cyril's writings to their decrees, as a legitimate interpretation. But they attached a letter of the then pope also, the so-called "Tome of Leo," in spite of its saying the exact opposite. According to Leo, "Each nature is the agent of what is proper to it, working in fellowship with the other: the Word doing what is appropriate to the Word and the flesh what is appropriate to the flesh. The one shines forth in the miracles; the other submits to the injuries." If this is not Nestorianism, it is something rather worse. The Son does the saving, the man Jesus does the suffering. The Son does the self-affirming, Jesus does the victim part.

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With this intervention the West mostly drops out of the christological story. The enormous analytical energy which Latin theology would develop in its middle centuries, insofar as it was concerned for Christology, tended to be devoted to refining and polishing Christology of Leo's type. And that is to say, at the heart of the theology Western Christians have inherited there is a retreat from the most primitive consequences of the gospel, a palpable mitigation of the confession that Jesus is Lord.

Indeed it must be said: the facility with which contemporary American and European academic and church-bureaucratic theology can separate "the Christ" or "the Logos" from Jesus, is simply the coming home

to roost of chickens long incubated in Western theology. The Word does his business and the man Jesus his: the one “shines forth in the miracles, the other submits to the injuries.” So Jesus is male, but never mind, “the Christ” is whatever sexuality we prefer. Jesus is Jewish, but the Logos is ethnically malleable. Jesus is voluntarily poor, but the Christ can even represent our aspirations to be rich.

Or we can run it the other way around. We can represent *Jesus* to suit us, whether as an early version of Trotsky or as a beach-boy guru or as the archetypal social worker or as whatever turns us on, while claiming at the same time to remain perfectly orthodox and biblical in our thinking about the Son.

IV

It was in the East that the interesting discussion continued. That is, it went on in a history to which my seminary education -- and for that matter, except by accident, my graduate education — devoted no attention at all. It was all, we gathered, a succession of “controversies” — monophysitic, theopaschite, monergistic, monothelitic and iconoclastic — with little relevance to us.

And then there was the matter of the “neo-Chalcedonians” within the post-Chalcedon imperial church — including, as I found out only a few years ago, the Emperor Justinian himself — who labored to make Chalcedon say what in their view it should have. A few months ago, at a conference, I identified myself as a neo-Chalcedonian, and shocked a colleague, who said she had never heard anyone admit such a thing.

Having mentioned myself, I may further confess that I began teaching in a seminary still with the obscure impression that this history, which stretched from, let us say, 450 to 775, a 325-year history of passionate spiritual and conceptual argument, merely marked the beginning sad decline of the Eastern churches, of their captivity to scholastic hair-splitting and imperial religious politics. I had early come upon Werner Elert’s wonderful book on the monophysites, and had acquired great respect for them. But then came something about “three chapters” and the monergites and the monothelites and the folks who destroyed so much art and so what?

The monophysites themselves were and are simply the most stubborn of Cyril’s disciples, and having described Cyril’s concern we have described theirs. They alone of the contending parties could say without equivocation such things as that when Jesus cried “My God, my God, why have you forsake me?” this was “spoken ... by the incarnate Logos of God himself,” or that “the holy, almighty, immortal God was cruci-

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fied for us and died....” But even they frightened themselves when they did.

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The “monergistic” controversy of the early seventh century may well have been so entangled in its own language as to be the fight about language we have been told it was. Neo-Chalcedonians within the imperial church tried to throw a bridge to the monophysites by proposing that though there were two natures in Christ -- Chalcedon had settled that -- these had but one “action” between them. After a relatively brief period of total confusion, the Emperor in 638 forbade further theological use of the language.

But the suppression of the monergistic controversy only triggered the “monotheletic” controversy. Only partly daunted by their previous failure, Neo-Chalcedonian theologians proposed, for the wooing of the monophysites, that although there are two natures in Christ there is only one *will*. And *that* touched a genuine religious nerve, and started a great man and theologian into furious thought, Maximus called Confessor.

Such recorded petitionary prayers of Jesus as “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done,” had always been a problem. How could the Son want something different than does the Father? Theologians had been tempted to explain such passages away, even sometimes saying Jesus was play-acting to provide example for us. But when the monothelete proposal called these prayers freshly to Maximus’ consideration, he refused to dodge their plain sense. What occurred in Gethsemane and elsewhere, he said, was obviously Jesus’ human decision, indeed a decision made in suffering, to defer his will to the divine will. But that locates this act of choice in his “human nature;” and that means that as there are two natures in Christ, divine and human, there must be two wills in Christ, divine and human.

After a struggle in the course of which Maximus was tortured, to earn his title “Confessor,” the sixth ecumenical council condemned monotheletism and affirmed Maximus’ “dyothelitism.” All of which seems routine and formulaic enough, except that a remarkable dialectic had occurred in Maximus’ thinking. It is hard enough to see how there can be one person who is two natures, divine and human, but how can there be a one person who has two *wills*?

I must brutally abbreviate one of the most elegant and subtle discussions in intellectual history. Maximus’ analysis runs somewhat as follows.

As the Son is the human Jesus, he decides to obey the Father’s will for him, decisively the Father’s command that he suffer for his fellows. He assents to the Father’s command, in Gethsemane and otherwise, and this assent is a true act of his humanity, a painful human decision achieved with struggle. The man Jesus has willed our salvation by being obedient to the Father even to death.

But in the Son's divine nature, as he is the second trinitarian hypostasis, he does not have individual decisions to make, for the divine nature is what he and the Father and the Spirit are *mutually*. The Son's divine will is simply his participation in the triune life, which is in one of its aspects a single great act of decision.

Thus the Son's individual act of suffering decision, to die for our salvation, is his *human* decision, which however *occurs* as an event in the triune life. "Thus his act of willing is, as a describable act, exactly like ours; but its ontological location transcends ours and is divine."⁶ Jesus' "Let it be so" in the Garden and elsewhere is a proper human decision, but one that only occurs as God the Son's actuality in the triune life.

That is, pushing a bit but I think not too much: Jesus' painful human choice is what happens in God as the actuality of the Son. At any rate, finally Maximus can say it: the Son is the "Suffering God."⁷

And so finally enough of the history recitation. Maximus has said what had eventually to be said, and in the West has not yet been fully acknowledged: the man Jesus, exactly as his personhood is defined by the life-story told in the Gospels, is the one called the Son, the second identity of God. *Jesus* is the Son, with no qualifications.

And that is: the other by whom the Father identifies himself and with whom the Father is thus identified, is Mary's boy and the victim on the cross. If we can think of God asking, "Who am I?" we must know that he answers himself, "Who I am is the Begetter of that man. Who I am is the one who sent him to the cross. Who I am is the one who raised him from the dead."

Or put it so: the story told by the Gospels, as the denouement of the story told in the Old Testament, is the story of God's determining who and what sort of God he is. And that finally is why so much rides on who this man Jesus is.

The Father has defined his deity itself by the appeal of that man, "Father, forgive them...": to be God *is* to be the one who says "Yes" in that exchange. That is why there is hope of salvation. The Father has defined his deity itself by that man's hospitality to publicans and sinners: to be God *is* to justify the ungodly. That is why *we* have hope of salvation. It is because the Father has defined deity by that man's permission to piggyback our prayers on his, sharing his address to "Father," that we can pray with certainty of hearing. Shifting for a moment to metaphysics, it is because the Father has defined being by Jesus' promise to be with us, that a loaf and cup here and now can *be* his body and blood. And so forth through as much of the Gospels' story as needed for any homiletic or confessional occasion.

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6. *Opuscula*, 91:60C.

7. *Ambigua*, 91:1037B. Maximus is quoting Gregory, but out of context.

*One of the Trinity
is a Palestinian
Jew, who came
eating and drinking
and forgave sin and
prophesied
implausible glory.
Jesus saves.*

What if Jesus were in fact a sort of male Shirley Maclain? And *he* were risen to be the Son? Then that is the kind of God there would be: Almighty Boopsie in heaven. What if Jesus were in fact a liberal politician? And *he* were risen to be the Son? Then standard Protestantism would be *true*. What if Jesus were in fact an unconditionally accepting therapist? One can only set one's nightmares in order.

Mary is the Mother of God. *Unus ex Trinitate mortuus est pro nobis*. One of the Trinity is a Palestinian Jew, who came eating and drinking and forgave sin and prophesied implausible glory. Jesus saves. These and more sentences like them are the great metaphysical truth of the gospel, without which it is all religious palaver and wish fulfillment and metaphorical projection. Jesus really is Lord, because he is one of the Trinity; and that is our salvation. □



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