

There are two basic categories on this topic: is orthodox trinitarian theism logically coherent (or even moreso, exclusively true)? And, do the canonical scriptures testify to ortho-trin (or even moreso, do they do so exclusively)?

My book Sword to the Heart argues a metaphysical case arriving at orthodox trinitarian theism, including an expectation of the two-natures Incarnation of the 2nd Person of the Trinity. For the Evangelical Universalism Forum, I wrote a Trinitarian Digest of scriptural data pointing toward ortho-trin as well (although it still needs significant additions and updating, even at this date 9/29/11.)

The positive argument of the Digest didn't usually cover critiques of trinitarian theism using scriptural data, however. So I took the opportunity of a vocal critic on the board to staple together a set of such critiques (expanded somewhat subsequently afterward) and addressed them.

This text collects those critiques and replies for future reference in one document. (A different text will cover the set of metaphysical critiques I also compiled and addressed at that time.) Not all the critiques and replies are included, however, since some of them were from a particular person who seems to have made up objections out of thin air.

In one way, addressing scriptural-based complaints is tougher than addressing metaphysics-based complaints, because there's a lot more scriptural data than metaphysical analysis! But in another way it can be easier because often the scriptural data can be handled on a case-by-case contextual basis (or even in terms of the immediate shape of the data). Even so, any exegetical theology ought to be trying to include a deep and broad witness across all the canon; and if numerous points are being made, then it can still get rather complicated.

(This presupposes that the thorny question of what counts as canon and why it counts has been settled already; but that's another discussion. One with connections to historical-orthodoxy debates, though.)

TEN GENERAL SCRIPTURAL OBJECTIONS

My first ten comments will involve some generally common scripturally-based criticisms of orthodox trinitarian theism (where "orthodox" is only meant as a group label for classification purposes, NOT as a question-begging statement of true over-against false doctrine). Although common these are also quite trivial and not particularly technical.

Objection 1.) The term "trinity" is not found in scripture.

The "omni-" characteristics of God are not found by those terms in the canonical scriptures either. ("Omnipotence", "Omnipresence", "Omniscience"--to which some though not all Christians would add "Omnibenevolence".) Practically all Christians, though, accept that the scriptures are testifying to these attributes in some real and meaningful way.

Again, the term "supernaturalistic theism" (or its 1st c. Greek equivalent) never occurs in scripture, whether Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic. But anyone who understands the scriptures to be testifying that there is one ultimate fact, Who is actively personal, and upon Whom all other entities depend for their existence, including the evident system of Nature, which is not to be considered this ultimate Fact--will, by all this, be affirming what theologians have later called "supernaturalistic theism".

Examples of this fallacy could be multiplied at great length; but to give another colorful one: the terms 'mitochondria' and 'psychology' are found nowhere in the scriptures either, yet this doesn't slow down anyone from inferring from the textual record that Jesus was fully human and so possessed mitochondria and what we would now call a psychology.

The presence of the particular term is not necessary. The presence of the idea, expressed in whatever ways, is what is important. Appealing to the lack of a technical term, developed later as a descriptive tag for the results of collating the scriptural data (be that collation right or wrong), is pointless.

Objection 2.) Where does God the Father say that there is a "Trinity"?

This is a more specific version of Ob(1). Aside from having the same answer as Ob(1), the question can also be answered on its own level by asking in return, where does God the Father ever declare Himself to be God in the NT? The answer is: nowhere! From which a few groups try to argue either that the "Father" in the NT isn't God, or that at least He is not the God of the Old Testament. (The Marcionites are the most famous group who have tried the latter tactic in early Christian history, although I understand that some Mormons do so in their own way, too; their idea being that only the Son is being testified to and talked about in the OT, with "the Father" being newly revealed by "the Son" in the NT.)

Most Christian groups (and even non-Christians) understand, however, that the mere lack of an explicit declaration by “the Father” on this topic means very little when there are significant (indeed massive) amounts of data in the NT treating the Father as the God of the NT, including statements by persons other than the Father (per se) calling Him God in contexts linking back to OT usage and concepts.

The real question, then, is not whether a divine Person ever testifies to the existence of the orthodox “Trinity” in that term, but whether there are significant amounts of scriptural data treating three distinct persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) as the one and only ultimate God, with one of those Persons (the Son) being incarnated as a fully human and also fully divine Christ. (Note that the gauge “significant” may be different for different evaluators, to be fair.)

Objection 3.) There are only a few verses here and there (and only in the NT) which can be easily disposed of anyway, from which trinitarians build their scriptural case (such as it is).

My Digest is sufficient answer to the extent of the content from which trinitarians derive their case scripturally. Whether enough of that material can be disposed of (easily or otherwise) is another question, but would have to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Even a small amount of data might be sufficient, in the estimate of some people, to establish the case as being a scriptural doctrine--such as in the ultimate case against slavery; or in favor of observing the Lord’s Supper as a continuing ritual (the latter of which has been rarely denied by any Christian group, ortho-trin or not, despite being witnessed to by only around seven sets of NT verses, at most, in the whole Bible). But as it happens, there is very much more data toward the doctrinal set of orthodox trinitarianism than most critics, or even most proponents, are aware of. (And rather than drop a whole book’s worth of data on people, apologists tend to concentrate on a few cases anyway, even when they themselves might know of more data to be used. This can give the impression that only a few bits of data are available to be used, especially when the same few bits of data are commonly repeated.)

Objection 4.) The fact that the NT authors tend to call Jesus “Lord” is of no consequence, since “lord” can be applied as an honored title to people less than God, especially in Greek.

Trinitarian scholars are well aware of this; what impresses us is how the term is used for Jesus in the NT. When St. Paul emphasizes that we are not to worship lesser lords or gods even though they exist, and then goes on immediately to contrast those lesser lords or gods with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in terms of a Shema unity and sharing the same ultimate creative deed, then the contextual result is that Jesus Christ must not be considered one of those lesser lords but rather (in whatever way) as the Lord

Creator, the one God YHWH ADNY of Judaism. Similarly, when the title usage of “Lord” for Jesus is combined (as it regularly is) with OT refs where the term being translated into Greek as “lord” is YHWH or ADNY, then we’re no longer talking about some merely human (or even angelic) lesser “lord”.

This is discussed deeply and broadly in my Digest along with a few other considerations in how the NT authors are using “lord” in regard to Jesus across the whole canon. But the point is that competent trinitarian exegetes are not simply saying, “See? Jesus is being called ‘Lord’ in the NT, therefore...”

Objection 5.) The NT texts clearly state, across the Gospels and Epistles both, that Jesus Christ was (and is) human.

This may be an objection to modalism and some forms of Arianism and tri-theism and several other positions; but it is no objection to ortho-trin, because orthodox trinitarianism stresses the full humanity of Jesus. Indeed, the majority of Christological controversies, as a historical matter, involved the orthodox party trying to stress the full humanity of Christ (sometimes against other trinitarian theists, even ones who nominally agreed on the humanity of Christ).

Objection 6.) The NT texts broadly and consistently treat Jesus Christ (the Son) as a different person than “the Father”.

This is only an objection to modalism. It is not an objection to orthodox trinitarianism which (along with various other Christian theisms) affirms the same thing, and strenuously so. Trinitarian theologians affirm this in a way differently than other Christians affirm it (such as Mormons, to give the most prevalent modern example), but we do affirm it.

Objection 7.) The NT texts (and the OT canon, too) testify broadly and consistently that there is only one ultimate God upon Whom all other things in existence depend for their existence, including all other supernatural entities; and this is the one God we should be worshiping.

Objection 7.1.) There are many OT texts where the grammar (including the name) in reference to God is singular.

This is an objection to cosmological dualists or tri-theists (who claim that there are multiple ultimate Gods), or in a somewhat different way against polytheists who treat the Father, Son and/or Holy Spirit as all being derivative creatures (dependent for their existence on something else more fundamentally real than they are). It is not an objection to orthodox trinitarian theism (or to some other kinds of Christianity either, such as Arians or modalists), which emphatically affirms there is only one ultimate God upon

Whom all other things in existence depend for their existence.

Trinitarians also note that there are numerous times in the OT when the grammar and name-title for God is singular. Just as we note that there are numerous times in the OT when even the grammar as well as the name-title for God is plural. It is incorrect to state that YHWH uses nothing but singular references to Himself in the OT.

Objection 8.) The “Holy Spirit” is identified in the NT as the Spirit of the Father.

This may be an objection to some other kinds of Christianity; but it is not an objection to orthodox trinitarianism, which affirms this.

Objection 9.) The “Holy Spirit” is identified in the NT as the spirit of Christ.

This may be an objection to some other kinds of Christianity; but it is not an objection to orthodox trinitarianism, which affirms this.

(In fact, we note that the HS is identified both as the Spirit of “Christ” and as the Spirit of “God”, while yet being personally distinct from either the Son or the Father! Be that as it may.)

Objection 10.) Jesus himself calls the Father his God, and even the one true God.

10.1.) Jesus emphasizes that he was (and is) sent by the Father.

10.2.) Jesus emphasizes that He does as the Father does, and does nothing of himself.

Trinitarians include this data as part of their overall case, which is one of many scriptural reasons for why trinitarians are not modalists. (And one of many reasons why the “orthodox” party among trinitarians, predating the split between Eastern and Western Orthodoxy, affirmed the two-natures doctrine of Christ, against a few smaller trinitarian groups who thought the deity of Christ was being too imperiled thereby.)

The previous six ‘objections’, by the way, are examples of the principle that there is no point launching an ‘objection’ against something that one’s opponents actually agree with. Much anti-trinitarian apologetic, however, depends on exactly this kind of ‘objection’. Scriptures adduced ‘against’ trinitarians on this topic are exactly the same scriptures trinitarians themselves use when arguing scripturally against various other Christian groups: they are in fact part of the total trinitarian scriptural case.

Consequently, while those scriptural witnesses are not to be ignored (far from it), the short and proper answer to attempts at proof-texting against trinitarians by such means, is

“yeah, us too!”. Trinitarians do in fact positively affirm what all those scriptural verses teach. (Whether it's logically coherent to do so, or whether it's impossible to consistently do so, are somewhat different questions. It must be admitted that even trinitarian scholars sometimes slip up in consistently affirming the doctrinal set.)

Subsequent

•• The term “AeLoHYM” (or Elohim afterward) is often applied to pagan gods, not only to YHWH; therefore is no evidence of God’s multiplicity. ••

Actually, “elohim” is rarely applied to lesser high-ranking entities (be those pagan/rebel deities or whatever), and practically never in the Patriarchial period (so far as I can find anyway, with one special case exception). “Elohim” is much more often applied as a name for God, indeed as the most common name for God in the Hebrew Bible. But that is beside the point, since relatively rare usage should not be simply discounted.

The real point, which this objection rather sidesteps, is that Elohim is a plural term being used for a single entity in the case of God. This usage is absolutely unique across the OT (including in Deuteronomy where Moses and Aaron are made to be elohim to Pharaoh)--except in one special case (or perhaps a very few such, more debateably) where the Messiah appears to be in view (i.e. Psalm 45). But the Messiah is the very person under debate, among Christians, as to whether “Elohim” in the fully divine sense should apply to him. (See the digest for more discussion of this.)

•• The term ADNY doesn’t have to mean Adonai. It could also mean Adonei, which is used of human men. ••

This is typically raised in objection to trinitarian use of Psalm 110:1; and will be the topic of my first planned expansion to the scriptural digest. The point which this kind of objection is usually (always?) granting, though, is that ADNY in its plural usage always refers to God in the OT--and in fact is voweled the same way (as Adonai) in modern Hebrew Bibles, during the few times when even non-trinitarian Jews agree that “my Lord” is definitely being used in reference to God by context. This is important when noting that some references to the OT, applied to Jesus in the NT, involve references to Adonai and no merely human adonei.

In lieu of a full discussion of the riddle of Psalm 110, allow me to note that insofar as trinitarianism (and perhaps some non-trinitarian) theology goes, we affirm Christ to be Adonai and adonei both: fully God and fully man. And the key scriptural issue is to check how various authors and characters in the NT (up to and including Jesus) are using their references to that verse. One way? The other way? Or both ways?

•• Elohim and/or Adonai could refer to multiple modes of a single-person God. ••

The short scriptural answer to this is: maybe they could, but they never do. Modal descriptions of God exist in the Hebrew scriptures--trinitarians recognize that as firmly as anyone--but modal descriptions aren’t contextually linked to plural descriptions and grammar of God. Far more importantly, positive indications of at least two (and in a couple of rare cases three) distinct persons identified as YHWH, are what give us ground

for synching the compound-plural names and grammar of God in the OT (not even counting the NT) with distinctly operating persons (not merely modal operations of a single person. Which would be odd anyway, to speak of God as King, Judge and Husband, for example, as though multiple persons are in view but not as meaning multiple persons!)

•• God as “the Father” is mentioned only a few times in the OT; and the referent relationship is to Israel or maybe to all mankind or to creation or whatever. ••

It’s true that God as “the Father” is mentioned only a few times in the OT; and at least some of those times this is certainly in reference to Israel. The question is whether other times, when a son of God is mentioned (sometimes without specific reference to God as “the Father” per se), the descriptions are far more appropriate to a deity-level entity. The Digest has some discussion on this.

•• The Bible says Christ was tempted; but God is not supposed to be tempted. ••

Trinitarians agree that the Bible says Christ was tempted, and that it’s a sin to try to tempt God, and that no one is going to succeed in tempting God. Since trinitarians aren’t disagreeing with any of that, merely calling notice to these factors in scripture is no argument against orthodox trinitarianism. Metaphysical complaints along the same line will be addressed in the sister post to this one, in another forum category.

•• The Father abandoned Jesus on the cross, which for trinitarianism would be tantamount to schism. Therefore... ••

The first answer to this, which is primarily a metaphysical complaint anyway, is given in the sister thread addressing metaphysical complaints. Suffice to say here that if God had really abandoned Jesus to die a cursed death on the cross, there would have been no resurrection.

What, then, can the “lama sabachthani” really mean? (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34)

Here it is helpful to keep in mind that among rabbis, when a teacher wishes to rebuke a student with scripture, the rabbi will sometimes quote one part of a set of verses, leaving the rebuke to be inferred from the other parts. If the student is competent enough to figure out the rebuke, then at least he has that to be said in his favor.

Other scriptures indicate that Jesus was acknowledged to be (and claimed to be) a rabbi-teacher, including to other rabbis--indeed, to all other rabbis, in principle! (For example Matt 23:8.) That would include chief priests, scribes and elders (though not all rabbis would be priests, elders or scribes); who are at hand for the crucifixion, making comments and challenges that inadvertently echo Psalm 22:8. (Matt 27:41-43 is clearest

about this.) Moreover, other portions of the incident seem to be echoing Psalm 22 as well.

In response to this, Jesus quotes the opening line of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?!” But the point to the Psalm as a whole is that God, despite all appearances, hasn't forsaken the speaker: not King David, and therefore not the son of David either. The Psalmist, against despair, trusts that God has not in fact despised and abandoned him, but rather that God will so completely reverse this apparently hopeless situation against the enemies of the Psalmist that all the world for generations to come will seek and worship God.

Even non-trinitarian Christians agree that this is exactly what happened, though not without the death of Christ first. But the point is that scripturally, the declaration of Christ on the cross is not an affirmation that God has abandoned Him, but rather a reference to the hope in apparent hopelessness of Psalm 22 being fulfilled around and in Him at that time. It would also serve as just the kind of rabbinic in-house rebuke from teacher to student mentioned earlier, that the chief priests etc. would be expected to pick up on: they have put themselves in the place of the enemies of David. (Plus it succinctly serves these purposes without having to waste breath breathing in an excruciating situation!)

Obviously, this is no problem for non-trinitarian Christianity. Just as obviously, though, this is no problem for trinitarian Christianity either. (Despite trinitarians often being inept enough to miss the connotations, too!)

•• 1 John 5:7 is a late addition to the manuscripts and so should not be used as any evidence toward trinitarianism. ••

Which trinitarian scholars are well aware of, and have been for nearly 200 years now. (And in fact were aware of at the time the first text-critical translations from Greek were being attempted, though the sentence ended up being included at first anyway.)

What happens to be adduced among uninformed or desperate people on the internet is not my concern. But it would be better to save that objection for times when someone is actually adducing that verse as scriptural testimony, rather than assuming beforehand that someone is going to.

•• God says at the end of Isaiah 44 that He alone is our redeemer, and the Maker of all by Himself. Therefore there cannot be multiple Gods. ••

Trinitarians agree that there are not multiple powers in heaven, including from this verse. Trinitarians also take note, however, that this declaration of YHWH Elohim ADNY is typically applied to Jesus Christ, personally, across the New Testament, including in places where the Son is distinguished personally from God the Father. One power in heaven, but multiple persons. (See the digest for discussion of some of the NT uses of Isaiah 44.)

Incidentally, about 10 chapters later, God, the husband and redeemer of Israel, is described as her Makers, plural. (54:5) English translations typically render it “Maker” because the other titles are singular, in order to avoid confusion. But it’s a good example of how the normal choice to avoid translating multiple grammar in English can lead to readers thinking that no multiple grammar is there in the Hebrew.

Isaiah happens to contain one of the famous places where the plural grammar of God is retained along with the singular, though, in practically any English translation: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send; and who shall go for Us?’” (6:8.) Gen 1:26-27 (where God’s plurality and singularity are emphasized in the creation of mankind), and Gen 11:7 (where God confuses the speech of men during the building of the tower of Babel) are two other famous places even in most English translations.

•• Name one verse that names YHWH as having experienced death. ••

Heb 2:9, of course, states that Jesus has tasted death for everyone. This same Jesus is identified by OT refs just one chapter earlier, though, as YHWH by name.

Trying to get around this by asserting that references to “Son of God” mean only a reference to the power of God Who is not Jesus, doesn’t do justice to the character of the actual scriptural references, which (including in Heb 1) treat the Son of God as a distinct person compared to the Father. Not as the Father acting within the Son of Man (though that is affirmed as well in scripture).

•• Jesus states that he is not the One Who is Good in Matt 19:17; Mark 10:10; Luke 18:19. ••

In none of these three reports of the same incident, does Jesus declare that he is not the One Who is good.

Jesus does ask the man why the man, who had called Him ‘good teacher’, is calling Him ‘good’, and affirms that there is One Who is good, God. (A variation of the Shema. Which in Hebrew, though not in Greek, is an affirmation of a compound unity, AeCHaD.) While this could be read as some kind of correction to the man (himself a young religious expert and leader) about Jesus’ own identity, it can also be read as a rabbinic double-meaning tease, leading the man toward acknowledging Jesus as God.

Is there contextual evidence toward this view rather than the other? Yes there is: when the young ruler professes that he has kept the commandments in regard to other people (the so-called second tablet of the ten commandments), Jesus recommends that he should set aside what he loves most (his money) to follow Himself, in order to be complete in following the commandments. But the other commandments (the so-called first tablet) are about following God! Jesus, in all three Synoptic accounts, is making an

identification claim with being the God Whom faithful Jews should be following. It would be blasphemously presumptuous for any mere human, even a Jewish rabbi (who of all people would be least likely to do this), or even a high-ranking cosmic being, to point toward following himself as a parallel to following God in the ten commandments. (Indeed, any high-ranking cosmic being who tried this, who wasn't God, would be identifying himself as a Satanic-level rebel instead.)

This objection, consequently, suffers from ignoring the rest of the story being referenced.

•• The three cognate terms often translated “Godhead” in English Bibles, do not have connotations of multiplicity. But trinitarian theologians say that “Godhead” does have connotations of multiplicity. ••

Those same NT theologians don't rely on any of the three appearances of that Greek term, in itself, in the NT, as scriptural evidence for trinitarianism, though. At least, competent trinitarian scholars do not. (What ignorant or desperate trinitarians do on the internet is their problem, not mine.) Merely connecting the English term “Godhead” with the concept of the Trinity, is not the same as using the three cognates in the NT (sometimes translated as “Godhead”) as evidence in themselves for the Trinity.

In fact, the original translation of the term into English meant what we would call “Godhood” today, with “Godhead” being an archaic English way of saying the same thing.

Trinitarian scholars note that there are at least two Persons in NT Scripture (the Father and the Son) Who are credited with the original and continuing creation/existence of all derivative reality; and so we sometimes speak of this original divinity as the Godhead in a different archaic English sense, going back to Greek: God as the arche, or source, of existence. The two term uses became conflated later.

That being said, the use of ‘theotes’ in Col 2:9 is often agreed even by non-trinitarians to mean the total and ultimate divinity. When trinitarian scholars appeal to this as part of their exegetical case, though, it's because of the wider contexts of Col 1-2, not because ‘theotes’ has some intrinsic meaning of multiplicity. (As AeCHaD does, for example!) See the Digest for further discussion on the first chapters of Colossians.

•• Thomas in John 20:27-28 was only saying that Jesus was his supreme godly leader. ••

Certainly that isn't being read out of the relevant scripture. It's an attempt to try to come up with some other meaning that will fit another kind of theology.

In principle this might not be a bad thing; although speaking as an avowed monotheist I would rather not address someone less than God Supreme as my “supreme godly” leader!

Be that as it may. Thomas in the Greek text is not addressing Jesus as (or vocatively declaring Jesus to be) a god. He is addressing Jesus as, and/or vocatively declaring Jesus to be, the god of himself: literally the phrase is “the god of me”.

More discussion of this passage can be found in the scriptural digest document. To briefly report here: in both Hebrew and Greek the eternal self-existent God is implied with 100% certainty elsewhere in the Bible with the form “the lord of me and the god of me”.

•• The true self-existent divinity can only be 100% implied by the use of ‘kurios theos’. There are zero examples of the Messiah ever being referred to as ‘kurios theos’ anywhere in the Bible, except in Jude 1:4 where the same term means a lesser title than “Lord God”. ••

The worth of this argument, as it stands, hardly needs more comment.

But for whatever solace it may be worth to the one who tried this argument: Jude 1:4 doesn't use ‘kurios theos’ as that phrase in regard to anything or anyone. “Lord” and “Owner” are applied to Jesus Christ (as our only lord and master), and “our God” is used just previously nearby, but even trinitarians are typically willing to accept that use of ‘theos’ in regard to the Father. (A lot more can be said about Jude 1:1-5, including in textual transmission, though; see the digest for details.)

Interestingly, this complaint was launched by someone who accepts a secondary textual reading of “the only Lord God” (using 'despot' not 'kurios') at Jude 1:4, which one might have supposed would inoculate against identification with “our Lord Jesus Christ” afterward in favor of identification with "our God" a moment earlier in the text; yet this critic wants to strenuously emphasize that “the only despote_n God” is a lesser god than “our God” just earlier in the same verse.

{Despote_s} is certainly used for the God Who makes heaven and earth and all that is in them, in Acts 4:24; and is apparently the God being addressed by Simeon in prayer in the Temple upon seeing the baby Jesus. Possibly this critic does not acknowledge YHWH as the creator of heaven and earth; but more likely he is trying to avoid having to recognize the Angel of the Presence as being both YHWH Himself and also a distinct Person in comparison to the invisible YHWH (treating the Angel as only God's proxy instead, as this critic tends to do in his paper.)

It is the late textual emendations of Jude 1:4, however, some of which were gathered together for the so-called Textus Receptus, which read “denying the only Lord {despot} God and our Lord {kurios} Jesus Christ”. The earlier Greek texts (not used for the TR) read “denying the only Master and Lord of us Jesus Christ”: kai ton monon despote_n kai kurion he_mo_n Ie_soun Xriston arnoumeni. (The verb at the end is “denying”.)

The Textus Receptus reading can still be translated from Greek as “and denying the only

Owner, God, even our Lord Jesus Christ”; which, if I had to guess, is probably the main reason why the critic wishes to identify this as a lesser “lord” or “master”.

•• AeLoHYM in the Old Testament, when used by itself, only refers to magistrates of God. Consequently, if Jesus is referred to in NT texts, in ways which identify him with an AeLoHYM of the OT, this cannot mean he is being identified as the Lord God. ••

The famous Psalm 45 reference to Jesus as the AeLoHYM whose God is AeLoHYM, is enough to dispose of the principle of this attempt: the reference of the first Elohim is to some kind of single entity, not to plural magistrates--which in itself is practically unique in the OT outside of reference to God--and this single “magistrates” is supposed to have multiple magistrates of God (multiple gods, not God Himself) as his gods?? (Therefore Elohim, the Elohim of you [i.e. of the single Elohim whose throne shall be forever and ever], has anointed you with the oil of joy above your fellows.)

I suppose it’s a good thing this critic emphasizes elsewhere that he does not promote the use of the word ‘god’ and ‘gods’ to indicate those who serve God or to indicate those who are children of God, “as this borders on pagan polytheism”!

•• Some rabbis translate Isaiah 9:5 as meaning that the Messiah shall be called “wonderful counselor of the mighty God”. ••

This would work better if there was a consonant in that sentence designating a prepositional phrase. But there isn’t. (Notably the critic who tries this, first attempts to treat the remaining two titles as prepositional phrases, too; and then tries a “middle way” where the second two phrases are not prepositional phrases.)

It’s the same title used by Isaiah in 10:21, where no one (to my knowledge) bothers to translate it as anything other than AL NBWR. (Though interestingly, the AL or El is doubled in the title at 10:21.) The Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh vowel-points the two instances a little differently, but even they agree the phrase is not itself the object of a preposition in English translation.

(They make the preceding term out to mean something different than “Wonderful Counselor” or “Wonder of One Counseling” instead, specifically so that the whole phrase would read “the God of Might is planning grace”. Probably this is to avoid associating the term PLA (not to be confused with our English ‘plan’, by the way) with the name of the Angel of YHWH from Judges 13:17-18. I have yet to see even a literal translation of PLAYW/RSh that would indicate the subsequent noun is planning something; but as this goes beyond my competency I’ll cede the possibility to those who know better.)

The term itself could be translated “God of Might” (and thus at Is 10:21, “God, God of Might”). But that is of no help for this oppositional attempt.

•• Other “sons of Elohim” existed at the creation of the world (Job 38:7), so the pre-existence of Jesus Christ as a son of God doesn’t necessarily mean anything. ••

I note that this objection contravenes the same critic from trying to insist elsewhere that “son of God” does not refer to Jesus himself but to the power of the Father working in Jesus. But be that as it may; not every critic tries both tactics, and this one is probably more popular.

Strictly speaking, this criticism is correct: the mere existence of Jesus at the time of creation (so to speak) does not in itself indicate that Jesus is somehow the maximal creator deity (along with the Father). Sharing in the task of creation, both originally and ongoing, in language reserved for the highest possible God, would however be scriptural evidence toward being the maximal creator deity--especially if that creation included the making of those other sons of Elohim over there as ministering servants. (See the digest for details on what kind of pre-existence of Christ is being talked about in the NT.)

The main point is that trinitarians, along with some but not all other Christian groups, acknowledge that Christ is a pre-existent entity of some kind. What kind of pre-existent entity depends on textual evidence other than that of just pre-existing this natural system. The case isn’t shut in favor of trinitarianism by noting pre-existence, but it would be shut against trinitarianism (along with many other kinds of Christianity, those which profess the deity of Christ and even some which don’t like classical Arianism) if pre-existence was denied in the scriptures.

•• Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and into the eon. (Heb 13:8) Therefore, he cannot be in any way the God Who is the only other entity in scripture spoken of in similar terms. ••

This argument speaks for itself.

But, even if I granted that Christ is not ever presented elsewhere (such as, for example, Heb 1:10-12) as being the same YHWH Who is described this way in scripture, this would still be an extremely odd thing to declare about Christ in the middle of a scriptural paragraph where, to say the least, it is not being affirmed that Christ was not in His own nature God. Still, if it could be established that the Son was not in very nature YHWH God, a verse of this sort would indicate that He never became God either nor ever will in the future.

•• John 10:34ff, referencing Ps 82, means that Jesus is only the same kind of lesser “god” as the ones called “gods” in the Psalm. ••

The short answer to this, is that there is a lot more going on in John 10, including in this scene, than Jesus simply calling himself a son of God. Jesus isn’t only making claims

proper to being a lesser son of God (like the rebel judges in Psalm 82, whom Elohim is taking His stand among in the congregation of Elohim. There is certainly no indication there that this is some lesser singular entity with the plural name-title of Elohim.) See the Digest for much more discussion on this topic.

•• Could the two natures of Christ not be that of the human Son and that of (only) the divine Father? ••

Metaphysically, that isn't impossible. Scripturally, though, the evidence is constant that the Son is speaking as the Son, personally, in regard to Himself, in relation to the Father.

If the scriptural evidence was more sporadic, then the identity of the Son personally as also being YHWH (not only the Father personally as such) might not be evident. The evidence in total, though, points toward the Son, Christ, also being YHWH personally. (See the Digest for cumulative details.)

•• In John 14:6, Jesus is speaking of Himself as the only Way to Truth and Life. It is an assumptive addition to what is said in these verses to make them out to mean anything else. ••

Ironically, the assumptive addition is being made by this critic, in his alteration of the flat statement (in the Greek of GosJohn anyway) "I am the way and the truth and the life" into prepositional phrases for the latter two terms. The text here does not read that Jesus declared Himself to be the way to truth and life.

The alteration is interesting because, of course, it is God alone Who should be the way and the truth and the life. No not-God person should be declaring that about himself. This critic's alteration keeps Jesus from making that claim. Which in a backhanded sort of way shows what the strength of the actual claim would be, if admitted into the total evidence.

I'm willing to charitably grant that creative reinterpretation of the text might be the best option, in principle (though that would have to be massively strongly established elsewhere). But then, so much for this critic's complaint about assumptive additions making the text out to mean anything else.

•• In John 14:26, the Helper, the Holy Spirit, cannot be a different person than the Father or the Son, because the word "person" does not even appear in that verse, including in regard to the Father and the Son. ••

The logic of this rebuttal needs no further comment. Ditto for the same criticism being applied to John 15:26 and 16:7. (Though perhaps this kind of rationale is what stands behind this critic's occasional attempts to have "the Son of God" mean "the Father" and not Jesus personally?)

•• The Spirit that proceeds from YHWH in John 15:6 is YHWH. Therefore the Spirit cannot be a different person from either the Father or the Son. ••

Obviously, no orthodox trinitarian is denying that the Spirit is YHWH; despite the fact that the Spirit is not named as YHWH in this verse. (Though the critic seems to think this is happening.) Neither is the Comforter, i.e. the Spirit of truth, being named as the Father, which might have been what the critic meant instead, but which still isn't happening in this verse.

{Note: I'm decapping the divine pronoun references to Jesus in the following paragraph, which is fairly complex; I don't want to use a mere appearance as implicit weight in my favor here.}

What is happening in this verse is that Jesus (one person) is saying that he will send the Spirit (not personally Jesus himself, as even this critic is acknowledging) from the Father. Are the Spirit/Comforter and the Father the same person? If so, then it is very peculiar that the Greek designates the Spirit with His (or its) own pronoun: "which is going out beside/from the Father". This kind of usage tends to indicate that the Spirit and the Father are somehow distinct. But the "para" usage, in monotheism, would tend to indicate that the Spirit is YHWH, too. (This critic certainly acknowledges that the Spirit is YHWH, very emphatically.)

Perhaps the Spirit isn't personal? The pronoun referents here are neutral, admittedly (back at 14:26, too)--which serves, incidentally, to distinguish the Spirit from the Father again! But this same Spirit is spoken of in personal terms, with personal pronouns, and behaves in personal ways elsewhere. (The digest summarizes a lot of data on this.)

The upshot, though, linguistically, is that the Spirit of John 15:6 (and John 14:26) is not the Father, and not the Son.

•• The "comforter" at John 16:7 is none other than YHWH. ••

Obviously, trinitarians don't disagree with that.

•• The "comforter" at John 16:7 is the Father because Christ is speaking as the Father here, i.e. as YHWH, the Son of God. ••

Aside from the incoherence of trying to make "the Son of God" out to be same person as "the Father", there is certainly no indication in this verse or elsewhere that a different person than Jesus is speaking through Jesus. That's an inference read into the text as a way of trying to explain how Jesus could be sending the Spirit if the Spirit is supposed to be the same person as the Father.

The problem with all this is that the pronoun trail from verses 5-10 doesn't fit this notion at all.

5. "But now I am going to Him Who sent Me, and none of you are asking Me, 'Where are You going?'" -- Is the Father stating that He is going away from the apostles to the One Who sent Him!? No, duh, Jesus is stating this in relation to the Father. Two persons so far.

6. "But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart." -- still Jesus speaking, by all grammatic and logical appearances.

7a. "But I tell you the truth: it is expedient for you that I may be going [or coming] away." -- Who is going away? It was Jesus a moment ago. No indication that some other person is going away.

7b. "For if I do not go away, the consoler will not be coming to you." -- No indication yet that some other person than Jesus is going away. The consoler coming to the disciples, by contrast, must not be the same person as the one who is going away.

7c. "But if I go, I will send him to you." -- so, wait, all of a sudden the speaker switches over unannounced to the person of the Father?!?

Even if that was true, the comforter is being personally distinguished (with personal pronouns this time) from the one who is going! The person being sent is not the one who is speaking, be that the Father or the Son or whatever.

The sudden switch to the person of the Father as an expedient to keep the one being sent from being some other person than the Father, fails anyway as of 15:26; since there the Comforter is being sent from the Father by the Speaker to bear witness of the Speaker. It would be pointless of the Father to be speaking of Himself in such a roundabout way: "when I personally come, Whom I will send to you from Me, that is the Spirit of truth which proceeds from Me, I will bear witness of Me."

And the sudden switch to the person of the Father as the speaker in 7c fails again afterward, since this comforter (with personal pronouns in reference now) convicts the world of various things concerning the speaker (v.9) because the Speaker (v.10) is going to the Father. (This distinction keeps going out through verse 15.)

This comforting spirit is, consequently, not the Father; and apparently not Jesus (the Son), either.

•• Christ named himself son of Man and son of God, therefore was not two different persons. ••

Obviously trinitarians don't disagree with that. (Or maybe one small trinitarian group,

historically, during the Christological controversies after the 3rd century; but not the “orthodox” party.) But when this same critic tries to make the “son of God” “portion” be the same person as the Father, then, well--orthodox trinitarians would answer by saying just what this critic says above.

•• Jesus never says “The Father is greater than I with regard to my humanity”. He makes no qualification whatever. He simply says, “The Father is greater than I.” ••

He says a number of other things, too, however (as do the canonical authors), which involve sharing a Shema unity with the Father as the ultimate God. The “orthodox” party who came up with the “Athanasius Creed” are trying to keep both sets of scriptural data: that Jesus is fully human (and thus less than the Father in that sense) and also fully God (and so of the same nature as the Father, thus “equal to” the Father in that sense).

•• In Phil 2:6 St. Paul affirms that although Jesus was in the form of God He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. This means that He wasn’t already equal with God, or there would have been no question of Him grasping after such equality. ••

Actually, the Greek of the Phil 2 hymn grammatically stresses that because He was already and continuing in {morphe_} as God (the concept of a form that properly expresses the essence, in Greek of that time), He did not consider equality with God a thing to be seized/grasped/achieved (depending on how that verb is translated, any of which are appropriate enough), but made himself human, pouring himself out. The reason there was no question of Him grasping after such equality, was because He already had it. Had He not been already (and continuing to be) essentially God, there might have been some question of Him attaining to deity; but that would have been answered sufficiently by stressing that he didn't grasp after it (whether he was awarded it or not). There would have been no need to answer by stressing that He was already essentially God.

•• In Phil 2, St. Paul states that Jesus poured Himself out. This means He gave up the divine attributes He already had and so couldn’t be God anymore; thus had only one nature, human. ••

Whatever “poured himself out” means, the Greek verb of being which is connected to {morphe_} means that Jesus was not only already God but continued being God even during the kenotic “pouring out” of the Incarnation. Where, not-incidentally, He not only had the {schemeti} or outward appearance of a man but also the {morphe_} of a man.

So, two {morphe_} natures: one that He already and continued to have, and one that He took upon Himself during the kenosis. The term "trinity" may not be found in the NT, but the two-natures doctrine of Christ is being directly spoken about right here.

•• Christ relied on His Father for everything. All of the miracles were accomplished by the Father THROUGH Him. This means that Christ had no divine nature but only a human nature. ••

Trinitarian theologians (those who are being careful enough anyway) also accept that Christ relied on His Father for everything and that all the miracles were accomplished by the Father through Him.

However, even non-trinitarians (those who accept the personal pre-existence of the Son with the Father anyway) typically agree with strict trinitarians that the Son's complete reliance on the Father Who works through the Son, was true about the Son from before the incarnation as well. Trinitarians don't believe that the Son was independently active apart from the Father with His own intrinsic divine power and nature. That would be polytheism or cosmological bi-theism (depending on how ontologically high up the two deities were supposed to be.)

That being said, trinitarians (and some other Christian groups) also notice that in the scriptures the Son personally works the miracles--up to and including His own resurrection! It isn't only the Father working through the Son; although the Son couldn't (and wouldn't try to) work them without the Father. The Son's divine nature continues on during the Incarnation.

••The Father was causally prior to the Son, but not temporally prior. The early Christians taught that the Father begat His Son "as the first of His acts of old", and that He begat Him "before all ages". Consequently, the Son is not eternally begotten but was begotten at a particular natural time, specifically as the first event of natural time. ••

Obviously trinitarians agree (with some non-trinitarian groups) that the Father is causally and not temporally prior to the Son. This might mean that the Son is the first created entity, or it might mean that the Son is eternally generated at the level of God's own existence. Aside from metaphysical arguments either way, do the scriptures teach that Christ was begotten at only one natural time (as the start of natural time for example)?

St. Paul, in a sermon reported in Acts 13, teaches (at v33) that the raising up of Jesus by God fulfills the word of Psalm 2 where God states "You are My son; today I have begotten you!" This verse is, in fact, commonly adduced by some non-trinitarians to argue against the notion that Christ was always the only begotten son of God but became the begotten Son upon His resurrection. Yet in Hebrews 1, where the Hebraist is teaching the pre-existence of the Son (and identifying Him with the eternal YHWH of the Jewish Scriptures), the begetting of the Son "today" is taught as well; and again in Hebrews 5 along with the doctrine of being a priest of the order of Melchizedek forever, though this seems to be in regard to the Ascension of Christ in glory after the Resurrection.

The begetting of the Son, consequently, is not to be considered to occur at any one time, even the beginning of time; otherwise it could not be rightly said to apply to the

Resurrection and/or to the Ascension. The scriptural data, on the contrary, indicates both that the begotten Son is Himself eternally YHWH God (in a Shema unity with the Father, not disparate Gods but one compound unity God) and also that the Res and/or the Ascension is somehow deeply connected to the begetting of the Son by the Father. How that can both be true is a metaphysical question.

•• In GosJohn, Jesus' opponents complain that he is only bearing witness of himself; Jesus replies that the Father and/or the Spirit also bear witness to him. Thus Jesus and the Father and/or the Spirit must be distinct persons. ••

Actually, trinitarians agree with that, too, over against modalists, who would have more serious problems trying to work around why the Son would be pretending that the Father and/or the Spirit can witness for Him, specifically stating that this meets the two (or three?!) witness rule of Jewish testimony.

The objection is actually very interesting in that the topic of Christ's identity is connected (by Christ Himself) to the Jewish legal notion of multiple testimony; which in its strictest observance makes testimony against a defendant nearly impossible by requiring that the multiple witnesses be exactly identical in their verbal testimony about what the defendant said for incrimination purposes. Note that three persons are in view one way or another, all of whom must collude precisely.

What makes this especially interesting from a Christological perspective, is that in the Old Testament YHWH frequently swears important oaths upon Himself and even calls Himself to witness. This would not make much sense unless YHWH was at least two distinct persons!

It should be noted in connection that God, consequently, would be the only entity Who can legitimately speak as witness on His own behalf in religious matters (which yet implies multiple Persons in the Godhead); and that, more importantly, someone who speaks directly on religious matters without ultimately recouring to the authority of God in Judaism is running a serious risk of claiming religious identification as (or maybe worse on par with) God.

The complaint quoted above tacitly assumes that if Jesus was God Himself then He could answer that, yes, in point of fact He can call Himself to witness because that's what God alone is able to do (particularly on religious topics). It could be replied that doing so would goad them too far into a mob assassination attempt--such as what indeed happens at the end of this chapter of GosJohn! (8:52-59)

The more direct answer, though, is that Jesus does testify in precisely this dispute with His opponents (to which the current complaint is referring) that, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true" (v.14) and even more strongly "I am He Who bears witness of Myself" (v.18). This latter statement is a strong divinity claim--and echoes various hard "I am" statements being given by Jesus throughout the chapter including in

this same conversation (“unless you believe that I AM, you shall be dying in your sins” v.24; “When you lift up the Son of Man, the you will know that I AM” v.28; “Before Abraham was born, I AM”, v.58. For less direct “I am” statements in the same chapter which are nevertheless strongly connected to divinity claims proper to YHWH, “I am the light of the world”, v.12; “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world”, v.23; see also Jesus’ answer to the rather nervous question “Who are you?” after one of His hard “I AM” statements, “That which I have been saying to you: from the beginning!”, v.25.)

The Evangelist has to explain, in verse 20, that the reason no one seized Him (i.e. for saying such things) was because His time had not yet come. (As an aside, the author’s location of this scene in “the treasury” means that we’re certainly looking at a behind-the-scenes discussion with leading members of the Sanhedrin, whom we know from extra-biblical sources had moved their quarters to be near both the treasury and the Court of the Gentiles which the Annas/Sadducean faction had usurped for their own profit.) I think a more direct explanation for why the stoning attempt didn’t start sooner is because along with all these statements Jesus is still talking about the Father (meaning God) as a distinct Person; which could lead to a charitable interpretation that He wasn’t really claiming identity as YHWH but was only doing something like Hillel’s scandalous declaration in the Temple two generations earlier (similar to what Jesus does in 7:37-38) albeit far more emphatically so.

The point, though, is that when hard ultimate-divinity statements and claims are being made by Jesus personally (not speaking as “the Father” at any time) throughout this chapter in several fashions connecting back to the OT, while also constantly referring to “the Father” as a distinct person; then the exegetical result is: identity with and as the One God YHWH, but distinction of Person.

That’s “orthodox” binitarianism at least, being testified to all throughout GosJohn 8.

•• Where is the concept of a self-begetting God anywhere in scripture? ••

The term ‘self-begetting’ is, of course, built later of doctrines compiled from a number of concepts given in scriptural testimony. Trinitarian theism is very much a combinational doctrine set (which, from the scriptural side of things, is the main reason for its complexity.)

That God is actively self-existent, though, is pretty commonly testified to in the description of Him as “the Living God” or “the Living One”. This is a verb of action; God’s inherent life isn’t that of static existence. God is actively alive throughout His eternal totality. Not coincidentally, this description sometimes occurs in conjunction with proclamation from God, or about God, being “the First and the Last”, “He Who was and is and is to come”, “the Alpha and the Omega”. (Also not coincidentally, this is how Jesus is described, too, in RevJohn! 😊 “I am the First and the Last, the Living One!”)

That's active self-existence; which in philosophical terms is active self-generation or positive (not privative) aseity.

The 'begotten' terminology per se is borrowed from scriptural descriptions of Christ, particularly in GosJohn 1:18 where Jesus Christ is distinguished from "God never seen by anyone" as "the only-begotten God Who is in (or into) the bosom of the Father", the one "revealing" or "unfolding" the God Whom no one has ever seen. (Which in turn is a direct reference, as are many other things in the New Testament, especially in the Johannine Prologue, to the Visible Presence of YHWH acting as the Angel of YHWH; known especially in the pre-Christian Targums as the Memra/Logos of God and identified specifically as God Himself--most especially in Targumic references to Genesis 1:1 where "In the beginning the Memra of God creates the heavens and the earth". Compare with Jn 1:1ff.)

Theologians (especially trinitarian ones) typically prefer to keep a distinction between being begotten and being created, in the sense that (as C. S. Lewis once put it) that which a person makes which is not of the same kind as himself is 'created'. That which is made of the same kind as himself is 'begotten'. A man creates a statue, but he begets a man. What God creates is not God; what God begets is God. So is the 'only-begotten' of the Father, the "only-begotten God" (as GosJohn very emphatically puts it).

••• Christ is referred to as the firstborn of all creation; some translations even say the firstborn of all creatures. •••

(This has some topical relation to previous entries, of course; but I thought it was well-put enough in such a way that it deserved its own entry.)

There are several ways that Jews (among other Near Middle Eastern cultures) can use the reference term 'firstborn'. It can have a literal meaning, of course, but it can also be used as a metaphorical reference to the chief inheritor. In the New Testament, it also occasionally involves a reference to Christ's resurrection compared to everyone else's.

The two terms in the New Testament used for these concepts are {pro_totokon} (most-before-brought-forth) and {aparche} (from-origin-er). The former term is the one most connected to 'firstborn'; the latter term is usually connected to the Jewish tradition of first-fruits being offered to God in gratitude for the promise of fulfillment of the harvest later.

'Prototokon' is used in the sense of a firstborn child at Luke 2:7, where Christ is the firstborn of Miriam (Mary). Heb 11:28 references the "exterminator" of the firstborn of Egypt, which is probably also the sense of a firstborn child. After that, things get fuzzier.

At the other end of the scale, Heb 12:23 talks about the congregation of the "firstborn". This may be being used as a title (referring to Christ as the firstborn), but it's far more likely that it's being used in the sense of the church as inheritors, considering that the

subsequent phrase (“registered in the heavens”) is grammatically linked to “the ecclesia of the firstborn”. Nor is the term being used in reference to a sequentially prior group (probably), because the surrounding terms are used in an absolute and/or cosmic fashion: Zion, the city of the Living God; celestial Jerusalem; the ten thousand angels; a universal convocation (which is the immediately preceding phrase); God, the judge of all; the spirits of the just perfected; Jesus, the mediator of a fresh covenant; the sprinkling of blood which is better than Abel’s. (The immediately subsequent verses are also about accepting an inheritance.)

Rev 1:5 has Jesus having the title of “firstborn from the dead” (or even “of the dead”). This is certainly a sequential event reference, and doesn’t necessarily indicate inheritorship status. (The preceding phrase is an honorific, “the Faithful Witness”; the subsequent phrase is authority scope, “Suzerein of the kings of the earth”.)

Heb 1:6 ends up being an inheritor-authority reference, though; not least because the scripture being referenced by the author (“Now, whenever He [the Father] may be leading the Firstborn into the inhabitation again, He is saying, ‘Now worship Him, all the messengers of God!’) is Psalm 97:6, where the only one in view to be worshiped (by previously rebel god/angels, by the way!) is YHWH ADNY. (Both divine names are used for God in this Psalm.) The Psalm looks forward to the day of the coming of YHWH; the Hebraist is doing the same thing, as part of his demonstration to his reader of how much greater than angels the Son is: the One coming again to the dwelling place (probably meaning the return of the Shekinah to the Temple/tabernacle) being Jesus Christ.

(The first chapter of Hebrews has a lot of important high Christology statements, and is discussed in detail many places in the 76-page digest; along with other testimony from Hebrews to the full humanity and even the creation of Christ. See the introductory comment of this thread for a link.)

Rom 8:28 talks about those “who are called in accord to the purpose that, whom God foreknew, He designates beforehand also, to be conformed to the image of His Son, into Him, to be the firstborn among many brethren.” It’s actually grammatically unclear here whether “the firstborn” means the ones called to be conformed to the image of His Son into Him, or whether the sentence means that these were called to be conformed to the image of God’s Son in order for Him to be Firstborn among many brethren. The former meaning could be a sequential event reference, comparing the first Christians to those who will come later (as St. Paul sometimes does, including elsewhere in EpistRom); but the latter meaning would pretty much void a sequential reference, since trying to apply it here would result in these Christians first being called so that eventually Christ would first exist among them all. (Wha??) Once again, the ref (if it’s to Christ) has to do with authority and inheritorship, not to sequentially coming into existence.

Col 1 has the final two places this word is used in the New Testament (whether in regard to Christ or anyone else). The first usage, at 1:15, could at first glance seem to mean Christ comes into existence sequentially first; but the language used immediately afterward for this “firstborn of every creature” is language nominally used only for

YHWH ADNY--in fact, if anything, it goes emphatically beyond the normal reference use! "For in Him is the-all created, that in the heavens and that in the earth, th visible and the invisible, whether thrones, or lordships, or sovereignties, or authorities: the-all is created through Him and for (or into) Him, and He is before all, and the-all has its cohesion in Him." These are statements only proper to the grounding fact of all reality, God; but they're being used of Jesus Christ, "Who is the image of the invisible God" and "firstborn of every creature".

That this term is being used for authoritative Sonship, not as a question of sequential coming-to-exist, is strengthened by the next paragraph, where variations on this same language are used in regard to "the Head of the body, the ecclesia, Who is Sovereign... for in Him the total fullness delights to dwell, and through Him to reconcile the all to Him whether things on the earth or things in the heavens." In conjunction with the preceding paragraph, concerning maximal divinity language normally applied to YHWH ADNY ELHM, this is more of the same--except that, just as in the previous paragraph, there is more than one person in view. In this case, "the Firstborn of the dead, that in all He may be becoming first." But this is the same person of whom the traditionally maximum phrases of creational Divinity are being used. (2:8-15 has similar topical links and emphases.)

The 'firstfruit' references often concern, or could concern, some kind of sequential ordering, though more typically the concept is about quality: saints have a firstfruit of the Spirit in Rom 8:23; Judaism, even the Judaism of the ones who have cast away Christ (for the conciliation of the world so who are expected to be redeemed eventually, too!) is considered a holy firstfruit and root in Rom 11:16 (not sequentially prior to paganism, but sequentially prior to the Christianity of the Gentiles--and qualitatively prior to paganism); Epanetus is called firstfruit in Rom 16:5 (although this may be more about a compliment of quality than sequential ordering); ditto the house of Stephanas and Fortunatus of Achaea in 1 Cor 16:15 (which again may be more about a compliment of quality than sequential ordering of occurrence). Ja 1:18 says that, by God's intention, God teems us forth by the Word of truth (a reference to the Memra of God, Who is God Himself) into us (or for us), to be some (or any) firstfruit of the creatures of Himself.

Christ is called the Firstfruit of the reposing ones (i.e. among the dead) at 1 Cor 15:20; but the concept of sequential ordering, though far from absent in this portion, may be overshadowed by the concept of superior quality and importance: "For since, in fact, through a man came death, through a man also the resurrection of the dead; etc."

The upshot is that the terms describing Christ as "firstborn" are not necessarily speaking of Christ being a first creation of God (like an Arian super-angel) and on the contrary sometimes (as in Hebrews and Colossians) also contain very strong maximal-deity language typically used for God Most High as the creator and sustainer of all things. Just as importantly, it is emphatically Jesus Who is being described this way in these places,

personally distinct from the person of “the Father”--Who is usually referred to in Greek, for purposes of personally distinguishing Him from Jesus (at the very least), as “God”.

••• It says in 1 Timothy that there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ. •••

I've been meaning to post up a discussion of this somewhere for a while--but I kept thinking I had done it already! (I thought it was already in this thread, for example, the last time it was recently mentioned as a problem. Then I thought, ah, no, it's in the digest... nope, not there either. Although some important and more directly positive pieces of scriptural data from the epistles to Timothy are adduced.) So, at long last, I've finally put it somewhere other than my private notesheet. 😊

1 Tim 2:5-7 (which St. Paul calls, in verse 4, the recognition of the truth): “For one God and one mediator of God and mankind, (the) (hu)man Christ Jesus, he (or this one) is giving himself as a ransom for all: the testimony (or martyrdom), in its own times, into which I was appointed a herald and an apostle--I am telling the truth, I am not lying!--a teacher of the nations in knowledge and truth.”

There are many interesting issues about the passage. So get comfortable, this is going to take a while!

First (and least): the passage does not say, “For there is one God the Father and there is one mediator the man Christ Jesus.” (I have seen at least one professional unitarian apologist paraphrase it this way, which is why I am mentioning it here.) The grammar is not nearly as particular as that, and there is no reference to “the Father” in the transmission of this text (even in variants).

Second: the grammar is not entirely easy to parse out here. I've given an idea of the grammatic difficulty above in my translation: there is no verb at all before “he is giving himself”, for example. Even orthodox translators commonly read one or two silent “is”-es (and one or two silent “there”s) into the phrase, of course; which by the way shows that there are many ways of translating the phrase that are perfectly acceptable to orthodox theology.

Third: the first part of the opening phrase (heis gar theos) mirrors the second part of the opening phrase (heis kai mesite_s) in its construction, with the {gar} and the {kai} serving as connecting conjunctions (“for” and “and” respectively). While it need not be ironclad, this construction lends strong weight to the notion that the two subjects of the opening phrase should be translated in similarly identical construction-patterns in English. If you put a silent “there” and “is” in one place, you should probably do it in the other place, too. But then the question becomes, why use that kind of particularity in the

verse?

Fourth: as noted a minute ago, even if the verse is translated “For there is one God, and there is one mediator of God and man, the man Christ Jesus”, this is not necessarily a translation that threatens orthodoxy, as we agree that the one God serves as mediator between God and man in the man Christ Jesus. Even a modalist might not have a problem with that; but we’d have even less of a problem because (considering scripture as a whole) we find two (or three, rather) Persons of the One God in operation, with the Son and the Spirit serving in somewhat related ways as access to the Person of the Father.

Fifth: it isn’t necessary to include any “there”s in the English translation. In fact, the first part of the opening phrase would thus become a version of the Shema: “For God is one” or “For one is God”. This would mean the next phrase would most likely be translated, “and one is a mediator” or “and a mediator is one”.

If the opening phrase is to be translated as a Shema declaration in the sense that there is only one ultimate God, then the next phrase would be most likely translated in the sense that there is only one ultimate mediator between man and God, the man Christ Jesus: which again is not necessarily a counter-‘orthodox’ statement. (Orthodoxy or Unitarianism could be read into the meaning either way, and the statement doesn’t conflict with either full position as, hopefully, developed from the full contexts of scriptural witness exegetically.)

If the opening phrase is to be translated as “God is only one person”, as I have seen attempted by unitarians trying to force the issue, then this is at least anachronistic as a doctrinal statement: they treat the notion of a singular unity of persons in deity as being a late innovation (from polytheism, apparently) that the original Shema declaration would not have been opposing per se. But then the matter could be clarified by checking to see how the word AeCHaD is used in Hebrew (where it is in fact commonly used in reference to a compound singularity or composite unity) and then checking to see if there are ever indications of YHWH being testified to in that fashion in other regards. (Which the orthodox have long been doing, along with some other Christian groups.) In any case “For God is only one person” would then be most likely be followed by the parallel proclamation “and the Mediator is only one person” in the sense that he isn’t multiple persons in a compound singularity--which would be even more anachronistic (and useless) for the text to be testifying to.

If the opening phrase is to be translated, not as a Shema proclamation (though perhaps as a nod to it), but simply in the sense that “For one (of these) is God, and (another) one is a/the mediator of God and man”, which would be another legitimate option (though the parenthetical portions would be tacit), then the next thing would be to check to see if Paul is thus explaining what roles and/or identities two entities possess.

The previous paragraph leading into this statement, is about entreating Paul's congregation to pray and give thanksgiving for all mankind, including kings and superiors, so that the congregation may be living a quiet and peaceful and devoted and well-anchored life; for this is ideal and welcome in the sight of our Savior, God, who wills all mankind to be saved and to come to a recognition of the truth. Which is... that one of these entities is God and one of these entities is only a mediator between God and man...? um... wait. Paul wasn't talking about the identity and/or roles of two entities (or even two persons) leading into this!

Consequently, treating the phrases as having this meaning would be totally un-contextual. At most, it would be evidence of something being interpolated into the text!

Sixth: if, as may also be legitimately done, the phrase is translated as I have given in my main translation above, "For one God and one Mediator..." then Paul will be saying that one God, acting as mediator between God and man, identified as the Man Christ Jesus (with 'man' being the words for humankind and human), is giving Himself as correspondent ransom for all. Obviously this has some advantages as an orthodox translation: it identifies the man Jesus as God but also as a mediator between God and man. How well does it fit contextually, though?

One obvious fit is that just previously Paul was talking about their savior, God, Who wills all mankind to be saved. That's a singular subject; and this continuation would be an important (if difficult, but also poetically constructed) truth about that singular subject, which truth Paul would be teaching the nations (thus including all mankind) as an appointed apostle. It also comports well with Jesus being the Savior (which is certainly testified to elsewhere) by giving Himself for all. (I am deferring a debate about what "ransom" is supposed to mean, as it has no immediate importance for this discussion.)

The title of "savior", aside from having its own importance within Jewish religious history, is, of course, a direct counter to a title given to various Imperial officials. Jews (and Christians) would declare: our Savior is God. Christians would also declare: our Savior is Jesus Christ. Not this or that general or emperor; this is whom we owe our ultimate allegiance to. The question has to be raised, though, how reverent Jews would be owing their religious allegiance to someone as Savior who isn't God, especially in a larger social context where various pagan officials (some of them claiming some kind of deity themselves!) are presenting that as a loyalty-title claim, too. Certainly the conflict this would generate among Jews would go a long way toward explaining the violent revulsion given by some Jews (especially among the religious class) to Christ and to Christians in the New Testament texts. If Jesus was only making human-level claims about himself, and if his first followers were for a long time (through the composition of the canon) only making similar human-level claims about him, of a sort that unitarians (and some other critics) insist a pious Jew would have no problem with: then why were pious Jews having seriously severe problems with it? (Enough so that even Jesus' supporters in the Sanhedrin ended up voting for his death on charges of blasphemy, minus two abstaining yea or nay.)

Seventh: to this might be appended the observation that pious Jews, already living in a larger surrounding environment where officials among their enemies (some of them claiming deity themselves) are giving themselves the title of “Lord”, are less likely thereby to give the same title to another mere sovereign, when that title is used of God in their scriptures, while treating this merely human person as having not only divine levels of authority but of being worthy to pray to as their Lord. One might at least be excusably forgiven for thinking, that when such Jews profess and proclaim Jesus as “our Lord” in the same breath that they profess God as “our Father”--the same God Whom they have previously been in the habit of calling “Lord” as an acceptable substitution for the Divine Name--then somehow those Jews are not simply talking about a human sovereign who is merely appointed lots of authority by the real Lord. What translation best coheres with this observation, then?

Eighth: it might also be noted that while the words “in Christ Jesus” are missing from Paul’s oath (sworn in verse 7) in many old texts across many textual families of this epistle, they do show up in a wide family of later texts. Either they were original but somehow dropped out (admittedly extremely doubtful), or scribes were piously replacing what they thought was a dropped term. Why would they do that?

‘Because by then they were largely trinitarian, duh!’ True, by then they were, and I do not doubt that that is a key part of the explanation. But a unitarian (or similar critic) had better be careful making that charge, because it requires admitting that Paul wouldn’t swear (in effect) the Oath of the Testimony in the name of Christ unless he thought Christ was somehow YHWH Himself.

But this is exactly what Paul is doing in Rom 9:1! Which, from the identical use of the oath ({ale_theian lego_ ou pseudomai} {ale_theian lego_ ou pseudomai}) and the mirror topic (salvation of those whom Paul’s heart is concerned about, Jews in the first text, Gentiles here), would also go a long way toward explaining why pious scribes might think the phrase had somehow accidentally dropped out: because the Romans epistle shows that when Paul is taking the Oath of the Testimony, he swears by Jesus Christ. (Who himself warned not to avoid the seriousness of an oath by swearing by anything less than God, even when those lesser things are religiously important in relation to God. “Let your word be yes, yes!--no, no! And anything more than this is of the Evil One.”)

Ninth: as previously mentioned, there are other statements in the Timothy Epistles regarding how Jesus Christ is to be religiously identified.

Jesus is spoken of with a kerygmatic hymn in 1 Tim 3:16 (the "common confession: great is the mystery of godliness") as "[He who] was revealed in the flesh, was justified by (or in) the spirit, beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world,

taken up in glory." The elements "beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world" are things that would normally be said about God Most High. And indeed, the nearest name who matches the "Who" (or the "this one" rather) is "the living God, the pillar and base of the truth"! Christ Jesus is mentioned a little earlier, too, (with another mention of God between, in relation to "God's house" where the congregation of "the living God" meets); where it says that those who serve ideally are procuring for themselves an ideal rank and much boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Speaking as a devout monotheist who believes in God and places my ultimate faith in God, I would be extremely edgy about putting my religious faith in a man who was only a human man (even if a divinely authorized one). I don't put my religious faith in Moses, for example.

Meanwhile the very first verse of this epistle, 1 Tim 1:1, St. Paul calls God "our Savior" and then immediately calls Jesus Christ "our hope". In the Psalms, however, these terms (our hope and our salvation) are typically combined together when speaking of YHWH (Ps 14:6; 61:2; 62:7; 71:5; 91:9; 142:5.) This is one example of a common Pauline motif, of taking OT statements referring to God and splitting up their references between "God" and "Jesus" (and/or between "the Father" and "the Son".)

2 Tim is even more emphatic in some ways: 4:18 -- "The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed and will bring me safely to His kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen!" Context in chapter 4 shows the only Lord in view is Jesus; but this is a recognizable doxological form of worship of God alone; Whom we are strenuously warned by St. Paul we should worship alone, and not any angel or lesser being (Col 2:18). Indeed, one of his lamentations about pagans who have done just this, is itself a similar doxology to God the Father!--Rom 1:25: "for they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, Who is blessed forever. Amen!"

At 2:19, St. Paul declares, "Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal: 'the Lord knows those who are His' and 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness'." These sayings are typical OT statements about God (and indeed the verse opens with a reference to a declaration of the YHWH ELHM concerning a cornerstone, or 'son' by Hebrew pun, which He will set as a stumbling stone for Israel-- a stone certainly identified by Paul elsewhere as Christ.) But St. Paul personally distinguishes between Christ Jesus "our Lord" and "God the Father" in verse 1:2. This personal distinction doesn't keep him from speaking of "the Lord" throughout his epistle in terms typically reserved for God alone (including at 2:19).

These examples (which could be multiplied further in both of the Timothean Epistles-- which is the main reason why some scholars insist on dating them as pseudonymous works composed long after the death of St. Paul, due to their "high Christology") show at the very least no hard distinction being made by Paul between God and Christ, other than

a personal distinction between "the Father" and "the Son". This adds weight to the notion that 1 Tim 2:5-7 should be interpreted in a similar fashion.

••• Why, in John 17:3 in his reference to eonian life, does Jesus make a distinction between knowing the **only true God** (Father) and Himself, the Son, by using the qualifier "and"? It would seem that it would've been simpler to say that eonian life is knowing **us**, the only true God, if that was really what he meant.

vs. 5 is interesting in that it includes references to both Jesus' pre-existence, and yet a distinction in glorifying himself (Jesus) with glorifying the Father. Again, in vs. 8, Jesus makes the statement that he came out from the Father, while still maintaining the distinction in identity. Now I know that trinitarians will say that Jesus would obviously make a distinction between himself and the Father since they aren't the same person, yet these types of statements, particularly in vs. 3, would appear to further indicate that they are truly distinct in kind, even though Jesus makes clear statements about his own pre-existence with the Father, as well as his coming out from the Father. •••

The first thing to keep in mind is that orthodox trinitarians actually do marshal verses 1 through 8 (and related verses throughout this chapter, this discourse, this Gospel, and the New Testament) as part of our overall case. As you noted, there is certainly a distinction of the persons being evidenced here; orthodox trinitarians positively affirm this over against the modalists. Again, the Father is declared by Jesus to be the only (or maybe the one) true God; orthodox trinitarians positively affirm this over against various Christian groups who would deny in various ways that the Father is the one true God.

The personal pre-existence of Christ is affirmed by the orthodox, of course--which is sometimes denied by various Christian minority groups, who would at most consider Christ to be some kind of plan or concept prior to his birth. Moreover, Jesus claims to have been sharing the glory with the Father before the kosmos came into existence. In a Jewish context, this would be a ridiculously elevated thing to say: the glory of God is the eternal shekinah, itself tantamount to the very presence of God. It is one thing for God to share the shekinah with derivative creatures within time--such as what God reportedly did in the tabernacle and the temple during OT times before the Diaspora, or such as what Jesus promises toward the end of John 17 (and elsewhere). It is quite another thing for a person to declare that he has been sharing the shekinah with the Father before the kosmos came into existence. That kind of declaration isn't about recusing to a prior time-before-time, but a shared ontological existence transcendent to the totality of creation at all. (Admittedly, someone could claim this about an entity, or about themselves, and try to be meaning something less than sharing corporate existence at the level of God's own self-existence. But insofar as Judaism is concerned, they would be making a pretty damned daring, or maybe incompetent, hyperbole by doing so.)

It should also be pointed out that Jesus (and/or maybe the Evangelist, who likes to insert commentary asides) claims that eonian life (zoe eonian) consists not only of knowing the Father, but also in knowing the Son. In other words, I am personally receiving life from

God when I am in personal fellowship with God--which is straightforward enough--but then if Jesus isn't God, it makes no sense for the reception of God's own life to be dependent on my fellowship with Jesus. (And even less sense for Jesus to be claiming to be the Life!--as he does elsewhere at least twice in GosJohn.)

Jesus is at least being treated (by the author and/or by his own testimony) as co-source, with the Father, of ultimate life: the Prince or even the Author of Life, as St. Peter puts it in his famous first sermon (Acts 3:15). This makes sense if they are somehow both YHWH, the self-existent Who gives life to derivative creation. It doesn't make sense if Jesus is only a super-angel (Arianism), much less a super-Moses (neo-Arianism).

So, in John 17, we have Jesus affirming, as a distinct person, that the Father is the only true God; and affirming that he himself was pre-existent with the Father sharing the Father's glory; and affirming (or being affirmed by GosJohn author commentary) that zoe eonian comes through fellowship with himself as well as through fellowship with the Father; while emphasizing that the name of the Father (YHWH) be kept in highest honor: a name that he says the Father has also given to him, the Son.

This comports very well with other material in the Final Discourse which points in the direction of the Son sharing an ontologically primal Shema unity with the Father (as noted in various ways earlier in my comments for this thread), even though the Final Discourse chapters do tend to emphasize the personal distinction of the Son compared to the Father in at least a hierarchical subordination of the Son to the Father. Ditto GosJohn more broadly (as also illustrated in various ways in my previous comments for this thread.)

As a comparison in two different strands of epistolary material: In 1 Cor 8, St. Paul affirms the Shema (there is no God but One--keeping in mind that in Hebrew the word for One would be a compound unity); affirms that there are in fact lesser lords-and-gods than YHWH; absolutely distinguishes between God the Father and those lords-and-gods; absolutely distinguishes between Jesus Christ and those lords-and-gods; affirms that God the Father (the one God compared to those lesser lords-and-gods) is the creator and sustainer of all things; affirms that Jesus Christ (the one Lord compared to those lesser lords-and-gods) is the creator and sustainer of all things; and tacitly affirms (by shifting the application of the one-Lord-title, previously professed of YHWH, to Jesus) that Jesus is a person distinct from God the Father.

The Epistle of Jude treats Jesus Christ as a person distinct from the Father; and affirms him to be our only Lord and Master; while also (in close proximity to both claims) referring to the "Lord" Who saved Israel from Egypt. (Unless standard text-crit principles are actually correct here, in which case the text of Jude most likely originally read that "Jesus" saved Israel from Egypt!)

The basic themes are the same in each strand of canonical tradition, though expressed rather differently.

How important is it that Jesus claims the Father to be the only true God? It would be far more problematic for ortho-trin if Jesus was overtly denying to be the only true God! It would not be strictly a problem for ortho-trin, on the other hand, if Jesus testified that the Father was his only true God. (Which Jesus is not reported saying. That the Father is his God, yes. His only true God, no.)

If that one statement (“it is eonian life that they know Thee, the only true God”) was all we had to go on (not counting other material even in 17:1-8ff), then (by tautology) we would have nothing indicating Jesus claiming (and canonical authors claiming about Jesus) an identity tantamount to also being the one true God. But, to say the very least, we do have other material, including in 17:1-8ff. But also including Johannine material such as 1 John, where Jesus (certainly at 1:2 and arguably at 5:20) is referred to as “Eternal Life”--and thus also “the true God” per v.20! 1 John 5:11-12, relatedly, states that to have Jesus in one’s heart is to have life eonian. Again, the Father is called “the True” at least once in 5:20 (a long verse with a lot of interesting claims), and by grammatic context so is Jesus Christ the Son in the same verse. (Jesus is called “the True” again by the author of RevJohn 3:7.) Indeed, in John 14:6 (earlier in the Final Discourse), Jesus proclaims himself to be the Truth, as well as the Life--while distinguishing himself personally compared to the Father.

So the statement from Jesus in the opening verses of John 17 can be best understood as exemplifying (if less obviously than some other material) the Son, as a distinct Person compared to and subordinate to the Father, sharing the attributes and authority unique (per monotheism) to YHWH alone. And the opening verses fit in well enough with the same exegetical testimony found elsewhere in GosJohn, in Johannine materials, and in other strands of NT testimony (Pauline and "other". {g}) But particularly in Johannine material, insofar as some particular thematic thrusts are concerned.