

What About Trinity "Proof Texts"?

IT IS said that some Bible texts offer proof in support of the Trinity. However, when reading such texts, we should keep in mind that the Biblical and historical evidence does not support the Trinity.

Any Bible reference offered as proof must be understood in the context of the consistent teaching of the entire Bible. Very often the true meaning of such a text is clarified by the context of surrounding verses.

Three in One

THE New Catholic Encyclopedia offers three such "proof texts" but also admits: "The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not taught in the O[ld] T[estament]. In the N[ew] T[estament] the oldest evidence is in the Pauline epistles, especially 2 Cor 13.13 [verse 14 in some Bibles], and 1 Cor 12.4-6. In the Gospels evidence of the Trinity is found explicitly only in the baptismal formula of Mt 28.19."

In those verses the three "persons" are listed as follows in The New Jerusalem Bible. Second Corinthians 13:13 (14) puts the three together in this way: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." First Corinthians 12:4-6 says: "There are many different gifts, but it is always the same Spirit; there are many different ways of serving, but it is always the same Lord. There are many different forms of activity, but in everybody it is the same God who is at work in them all." And Matthew 28:19 reads: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Do those verses say that God, Christ, and the holy spirit constitute a Trinitarian Godhead, that the three are equal in substance, power, and eternity? No, they do not, no more than listing three people, such as Tom, Dick, and Harry, means that they are three in one.

This type of reference, admits McClintock and Strong's Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, "proves only that there are the three subjects named, . . . but it does not prove, by itself, that all the three belong necessarily to the divine nature, and possess equal divine honor."

Although a supporter of the Trinity, that source says of 2 Corinthians 13:13 (14): "We could not justly infer that they possessed equal authority, or the same nature." And of Matthew 28:18-20 it says: "This text, however, taken by itself, would not prove decisively either the personality of the three subjects mentioned, or their equality or divinity."

When Jesus was baptized, God, Jesus, and the holy spirit were also mentioned in the same context. Jesus "saw descending like a dove God's spirit coming upon him." (Matthew 3:16) This, however, does not say that the three are one. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are mentioned together numerous times, but that does not make them one. Peter, James, and John are named together, but that does not make them one either. Furthermore, God's spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, showing that Jesus was not anointed by spirit until that time. This being so, how could he be part of a Trinity where he had always been one with the holy spirit?

Another reference that speaks of the three together is found in some older Bible translations at 1 John 5:7. Scholars acknowledge, however, that these words were not originally in the Bible but were added much later. Most modern translations rightly omit this spurious verse.

Other "proof texts" deal only with the relationship between two-the Father and Jesus. Let us consider some of them.

Jesus showed the Jews that he was not equal to God, saying that he could 'do nothing by himself but only what he saw the Father doing'

Jesus prayed to God that his disciples might "all be one," just as he and his Father "are one"

"I and the Father Are One"

THAT text, at John 10:30, is often cited to support the Trinity, even though no third person is mentioned there. But Jesus himself showed what he meant by his being "one" with the Father. At John 17:21, 22, he prayed to God that his disciples "may all be one, just as you, Father, are in union with me and I am in union with you, that they also may be in union with us, . . . that they may be one just as we are one." Was Jesus praying that all his disciples would become a single entity? No, obviously Jesus was praying that they would be united in thought and purpose, as he and God were.-See also 1 Corinthians 1:10.

At 1 Corinthians 3:6, 8, Paul says: "I planted, Apollos watered . . . He that plants and he that waters are one." Paul did not mean that he and Apollos were two persons in one; he meant that they were unified in purpose. The Greek word that Paul used here for "one" (hen) is neuter, literally "one (thing)," indicating oneness in cooperation. It is the same word that Jesus used at John 10:30 to describe his relationship with his Father. It is also the same word that Jesus used at John 17:21, 22. So when he used the word "one" (hen) in these cases, he was talking about unity of thought and purpose.

Regarding John 10:30, John Calvin (who was a Trinitarian) said in the book *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*: "The ancients made a wrong use of this passage to prove that Christ is . . . of the same essence with the Father. For Christ does not argue about the unity of substance, but about the agreement which he has with the Father."

Right in the context of the verses after John 10:30, Jesus forcefully argued that his words were not a claim to be God. He asked the Jews who wrongly drew that conclusion and wanted to stone him: "Why do you charge me with blasphemy because I, consecrated and sent into the world by the Father, said, 'I am God's son'?" (John 10:31-36, NE) No, Jesus claimed that he was, not God the Son, but the Son of God.

Jesus has a position far higher than angels, imperfect men, or Satan. Since these are referred to as "gods," mighty ones, surely Jesus can be and is "a god." Because of his unique position in relation to YHWH, Jesus is a "Mighty God."-John 1:1; Isaiah 9:6.

But does not "Mighty God" with its capital letters indicate that Jesus is in some way equal to YHWH God? Not at all. Isaiah merely prophesied this to be one of four names that Jesus would be called, and in the English language such names are capitalized. Still, even though Jesus was called "Mighty," there can be only one who is "Almighty." To call YHWH God "Almighty" would have little significance unless there existed others who were also called gods but who occupied a lesser or inferior position.

The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library in England notes that according to Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, while the 'os' is used in scriptures such as John 1:1 in reference to Christ, "in none of these instances is 'theos' used in such a manner as to identify Jesus with him who elsewhere in the New Testament figures as 'ho Theos,' that is, the Supreme God." And the Bulletin adds: "If the New Testament writers believed it vital that the faithful should confess Jesus as 'God', is the almost complete absence of just this form of confession in the New Testament explicable?"

But what about the apostle Thomas' saying, "My Lord and my God!" to Jesus at John 20:28? To Thomas, Jesus was like "a god," especially in the miraculous circumstances that prompted his exclamation. Some scholars suggest that Thomas may simply have made an emotional exclamation of astonishment, spoken to Jesus but directed to God. In either case, Thomas did not think that Jesus was Almighty God, for he and all the other apostles knew that Jesus never claimed to be God but taught that YHWH alone is "the only true God."-John 17:3.

Again, the context helps us to understand this. A few days earlier the resurrected Jesus had told Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father and to my God and your God." (John 20:17) Even though Jesus was already resurrected as a mighty spirit, YHWH was still his God. And Jesus continued to refer to Him as such even in the last book of the Bible, after he was glorified.-Revelation 1:5, 6; 3:2, 12.

Just three verses after Thomas' exclamation, at John 20:31, the Bible further clarifies the matter by stating: "These have been written down that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God," not that he was Almighty God. And it meant "Son" in a literal way, as with a natural father and son, not as some mysterious part of a Trinity Godhead.

Must Harmonize With the Bible

IT IS claimed that several other scriptures support the Trinity. But these are similar to those discussed above in that, when carefully examined, they offer no actual support. Such texts only illustrate that when considering any claimed support for the Trinity, one must ask: Does the interpretation harmonize with the consistent teaching of the entire Bible-that YHWH God alone is Supreme? If not, then the interpretation must be in error.

We also need to keep in mind that not even so much as one "proof text" says that God, Jesus, and the holy spirit are one in some mysterious Godhead. Not one scripture anywhere in the Bible says that all three are the same in substance, power, and eternity. The Bible is consistent in revealing Almighty God, YHWH, as alone Supreme, Jesus as his created Son, and the holy spirit as God's spirit.

"The ancients made a wrong use of [John 10:30] to prove that Christ is . . .of the same essence with the Father." -Commentary on the Gospel According to John, by John Calvin

"Making Himself Equal to God"?

ANOTHER scripture offered as support for the Trinity is John 5:18. It says that the Jews (as at John 10:31-36) wanted to kill Jesus because "he was also calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God."

But who said that Jesus was making himself equal to God? Not Jesus. He defended himself against this false charge in the very next verse (19): "To this accusation Jesus replied: . . . 'the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing.'" -JB.

By this, Jesus showed the Jews that he was not equal to God and therefore could not act on his own initiative. Can we imagine someone equal to Almighty God saying that he could "do nothing by himself"? (Compare Daniel 4:34, 35.) Interestingly, the context of both John 5:18 and 10:30 shows that Jesus defended himself against false charges from Jews who, like the Trinitarians, were drawing wrong conclusions!

"Equal With God"?

AT PHILIPPIANS 2:6 the Catholic Douay Version (Dy) of 1609 says of Jesus: "Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God." The King James Version (KJ) of 1611 reads much the same. A number of such versions are still used by some to support the idea that Jesus was equal to God. But note how other translations render this verse:

1869: "who, being in the form of God, did not regard it as a thing to be grasped at to be on an equality with God." The New Testament, by G. R. Noyes.

1965: "He-truly of divine nature!-never self-confidently made himself equal to God." Das Neue Testament, revised edition, by Friedrich Pfäfflin.

1968: "who, although being in the form of God, did not consider being equal to God a thing to greedily make his own." La Bibbia Concordata.

1976: "He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God." Today's English Version.

1985: "Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped." The New Jerusalem Bible.

In this regard, Ralph Martin, in The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians, says of the original Greek: "It is questionable, however, whether the sense of the verb can glide from its real meaning of 'to seize', 'to snatch violently' to that of 'to hold fast.'" The Expositor's Greek Testament also says: "We cannot find any passage where [har- pa'zo] or any of its derivatives has the sense of 'holding in possession,' 'retaining'. It seems invariably to mean 'seize,' 'snatch violently'. Thus it is not permissible to glide from the true sense 'grasp at' into one which is totally different, 'hold fast.'"

From the foregoing it is apparent that the translators of versions such as the Douay and the King James are bending the rules to support Trinitarian ends. Far from saying that Jesus thought it was appropriate to be equal to God, the Greek of Philippians 2:6, when read objectively, shows just the opposite, that Jesus did not think it was appropriate.

The context of the surrounding verses (3-5, 7, 8, Dy) makes it clear how verse 6 is to be understood. The Philippians were urged: "In humility, let each esteem others better than themselves." Then Paul uses Christ as the outstanding example of this attitude: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." What "mind"? To 'think it not robbery to be equal with God'? No, that would be just the opposite of the point being made! Rather, Jesus, who 'esteemed God as better than himself,' would never 'grasp for equality with God,' but instead he "humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death."

Surely, that cannot be talking about any part of Almighty God. It was talking about Jesus Christ, who perfectly illustrated Paul's point here-namely the importance of humility and obedience to one's Superior and Creator, YHWH God.

"I Am"

AT JOHN 8:58 a number of translations, for instance The Jerusalem Bible, have Jesus saying: "Before Abraham ever was, I Am." Was Jesus there teaching, as Trinitarians assert, that he was known by the title "I Am"? And, as they claim, does this mean that he was YHWH of the Hebrew Scriptures, since the King James Version at Exodus 3:14 states: "God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM"?

At Exodus 3:14 (KJ) the phrase "I AM" is used as a title for God to indicate that he really existed and would do what he promised. The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, edited by Dr. J. H. Hertz, says of the phrase: "To the Israelites in bondage, the meaning would be, 'Although He has not yet displayed His power towards you, He will do so; He is eternal and will certainly redeem you.' Most moderns follow Rashi [a French Bible and Talmud commentator] in rendering [Exodus 3:14] 'I will be what I will be.'"

The expression at John 8:58 is quite different from the one used at Exodus 3:14. Jesus did not use it as a name or a title but as a means of explaining his prehuman existence. Hence, note how some other Bible versions render John 8:58

1869: "From before Abraham was, I have been." The New Testament, by G. R. Noyes.

1935: "I existed before Abraham was born!" The Bible-An American Translation, by J. M. P. Smith and E. J. Goodspeed.

1965: "Before Abraham was born, I was already the one that I am." Das Neue Testament, by Jörg Zink.

1981: "I was alive before Abraham was born!" The Simple English Bible.

Thus, the real thought of the Greek used here is that God's created "firstborn," Jesus, had existed long before Abraham was born.- Colossians 1:15; Proverbs 8:22, 23, 30; Revelation 3:14.

Again, the context shows this to be the correct understanding. This time the Jews wanted to stone Jesus for claiming to "have seen Abraham" although, as they said, he was not yet 50 years old. (Verse 57) Jesus' natural response was to tell the truth about his age. So he naturally told them that he "was alive before Abraham was born!"-The Simple English Bible.

"The Word Was God"

AT JOHN 1:1 the King James Version reads: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Trinitarians claim that this means that "the Word" (Greek, ho lo'gos) who came to earth as Jesus Christ was Almighty God himself.

Note, however, that here again the context lays the groundwork for accurate understanding. Even the King James Version says, "The Word was with God." (Italics ours.) Someone who is "with" another person cannot be the same as that other person. In agreement with this, the Journal of Biblical Literature, edited by Jesuit Joseph A. Fitzmyer, notes that if the latter part of John 1:1 were interpreted to mean "the" God, this "would then contradict the preceding clause," which says that the Word was with God.

Notice, too, how other translations render this part of the verse:

1808: "and the word was a god." The New Testament in an Improved Version, Upon the Basis of Archbishop Newcome's New Translation: With a Corrected Text.

1864: "and a god was the word." The Emphatic Diaglott, interlinear reading, by Benjamin Wilson.

1928: "and the Word was a divine being." La Bible du Centenaire, L'Evangile selon Jean, by Maurice Goguel.

1935: "and the Word was divine." The Bible-An American Translation, by J. M. P. Smith and E. J. Goodspeed.

1946: "and of a divine kind was the Word." Das Neue Testament, by Ludwig Thimme.

1958: "and the Word was a God." The New Testament, by James L. Tomanek.

1975: "and a god (or, of a divine kind) was the Word." Das Evangelium nach Johannes, by Siegfried Schulz.

1978: "and godlike kind was the Logos." Das Evangelium nach Johannes, by Johannes Schneider.

At John 1:1 there are two occurrences of the Greek noun the·os' (god). The first occurrence refers to Almighty God, with whom the Word was ("and the Word [lo'gos] was with God [a form of the·os']"). This first the·os' is preceded by the word ton (the), a form of the Greek definite article that points to a distinct identity, in this case Almighty God ("and the Word was with [the] God").

On the other hand, there is no article before the second the·os' at John 1:1. So a literal translation would read, "and god was the Word." Yet we have seen that many translations render this second the·os' (a predicate noun) as "divine," "godlike," or "a god." On what authority do they do this?

The Koine Greek language had a definite article ("the"), but it did not have an indefinite article ("a" or "an"). So when a predicate noun is not preceded by the definite article, it may be indefinite, depending on the context.

The Journal of Biblical Literature says that expressions "with an anarthrous [no article] predicate preceding the verb, are primarily qualitative in meaning." As the Journal notes, this indicates that the lo'gos can be likened to a god. It also says of John 1:1: "The qualitative force of the predicate is so prominent that the noun [the·os'] cannot be regarded as definite."

So John 1:1 highlights the quality of the Word, that he was "divine," "godlike," "a god," but not Almighty God. This harmonizes with the rest of the Bible, which shows that Jesus, here called "the Word" in his role as God's Spokesman, was an obedient subordinate sent to earth by his Superior, Almighty God.

There are many other Bible verses in which almost all translators in other languages consistently insert the article "a" when translating Greek sentences with the same structure. For example, at Mark 6:49, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on water, the King James Version says: "They supposed it had been a spirit." In the Koine Greek, there is no "a" before "spirit." But almost all translations in other languages add an "a" in order to make the rendering fit the context. In the same way, since John 1:1 shows that the Word was with God, he could not be God but was "a god," or "divine."

Joseph Henry Thayer, a theologian and scholar who worked on the American Standard Version, stated simply: "The Logos was divine, not the divine Being himself." And Jesuit John L. McKenzie wrote in his Dictionary of the Bible: "Jn 1:1 should rigorously be translated . . . 'the word was a divine being.'"

Violating a Rule?

SOME claim, however, that such renderings violate a rule of Koine Greek grammar published by Greek scholar E. C. Colwell back in 1933. He asserted that in Greek a predicate noun "has the [definite] article when it follows the verb; it does not have the [definite] article when it precedes the verb." By this he meant that a predicate noun preceding the verb should be understood as though it did have the definite article ("the") in front of it. At John 1:1 the second noun (the·os'), the predicate, precedes the verb-"and [the·os'] was the Word." So, Colwell claimed, John 1:1 should read "and [the] God was the Word."

But consider just two examples found at John 8:44. There Jesus says of the Devil: "That one was a manslayer" and "he is a liar." Just as at John 1:1, the predicate nouns ("manslayer" and "liar") precede the verbs ("was" and "is") in the Greek. There is no indefinite article in front of either noun because there was no indefinite article in Koine Greek. But most translations insert the word "a" because Greek grammar and the context require it.-See also Mark 11:32; John 4:19; 6:70; 9:17; 10:1; 12:6.

Colwell had to acknowledge this regarding the predicate noun, for he said: "It is indefinite ["a" or "an"] in this position only when the context demands it." So even he admits that when the context requires it, translators may insert an indefinite article in front of the noun in this type of sentence structure.

Does the context require an indefinite article at John 1:1? Yes, for the testimony of the entire Bible is that Jesus is not Almighty God. Thus, not Colwell's questionable rule of grammar, but context should guide the translator in such cases. And it is apparent from the many translations that insert the indefinite article "a" at John 1:1 and in other places that many scholars disagree with such an artificial rule, and so does God's Word.

No Conflict

DOES saying that Jesus Christ is "a god" conflict with the Bible's teaching that there is only one God? No, for at times the Bible employs that term to refer to mighty creatures. Psalm 8:5 reads: "You also proceeded to make him [man] a little less than godlike ones [Hebrew, 'elo·him']," that is, angels. In Jesus' defense against the charge of the Jews, that he claimed to be God, he noted that "the Law uses the word gods of those to whom the word of God was addressed," that is, human judges. (John 10:34, 35, JB; Psalm 82:1-6) Even Satan is called "the god of this system of things" at 2 Corinthians 4:4.

Since the Bible calls humans, angels, even Satan, "gods," or powerful ones, the superior Jesus in heaven can properly be called "a god".

"The Logos was divine, not the divine Being himself."-Joseph Henry Thayer, Bible scholar

Someone who is "with" another person cannot also BE that other person.

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