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Psalm 2:7 and the concept of περιχώρησις

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Abstract

This article takes as its springboard the well-known text of Psalm 2:7, in which the Psalmist – presumably David, king of Israel – refers to himself as a 'begotten' son of God by virtue of his Lord's decree. The article first explores various linguistic and theological options as to the identity of the 'son' to whom the passage refers; and analyses the relationship between that son and the one who is stated to have begotten him. In this context, the article addresses ways in which the passage more generally sheds light on the relationship between God and Israel, including through analysis of a number of fluctuating usages of singular and plural terms in the Old Testament to describe that relationship. Second, and against that background, the article examines texts in the New Testament which quote or refer to Psalm 2:7 to see whether they provide a better understanding of the nature of the relationship between the father and the son described in the Psalm; and further to see whether any enhanced understanding of that relationship reciprocally sheds light on the relationship of God the Father to God the Son as revealed in the New Testament. The article then seeks to determine whether these passages, taken as a whole, provide explicit, implicit, or proto-Trinitarian concepts in anticipation of those given fuller expression in orthodox Church doctrine. Finally, the article explores the concept of circumincession, or coinherence, John of Damascus' highly abstracted and nearly poetic effort at the close of the Patristic era to provide an extra-biblical explanation of the relationship between the Father and the Son as well as the relationship among the three members of the Trinity. The article concludes by finding that his attempted articulation, and quite possibly all such efforts, will ultimately fail, leaving intact the mystery of the Trinity as one escaping, or rather surpassing, conceptual analysis.

Keywords: Begotten, circumincession, John of Damascus, perichoresis, Sonship, Trinity.

Preface

This article addresses the question whether the relationship described in Psalm 2:7 between a father and his begotten son supports, or is in tension with, the concept of περιχώρησις (variously referred to in English as circumincession or coinherence), as articulated by John of Damascus. We first examine the text of the Psalm in an effort to identify the 'son' of whom

it speaks and to understand his relationship to the one who has begotten him. Second we examine the Psalm's usage in the New Testament as relevant to understanding the Sonship of Jesus. And finally we address the concept of circumincession as articulated by John of Damascus as a proposed means of understanding the nature of the relationship among the members of the Trinity in order to determine whether the relationship between the begotten son and the one who begot him, as described in Psalm 2:7 and further revealed in the New Testament, is in fact well explained by John as one of circumincession.

Psalm 2:7

Psalm 2 squarely presents us with a conflict between earthly and heavenly rule. According to the Psalmist, the 'kings of the earth' have united against the Lord and the king whom He has anointed (v. 2).[1] The earthly rulers' purpose is to free themselves from 'their bands' and 'cords' (v. 3); by referring to 'their' bands, the rulers perceive an identity of some sort between the Lord and his anointed. We then learn in verse 7 that the anointed one is also the Lord's 'begotten Son'.[2] The question thus arises, what is the relationship between the Lord and his Son? There are three broad options: the Psalm refers to King David, clearly an anointed king of the Lord's based on 1 Sam 16:13; or to an earthly king in the Davidic line, consistent with the Davidic covenant set out in 2 Sam 7:14; or to a future king in the Davidic line, whose throne is 'forever' under the same covenant promise.

While the three are not mutually exclusive – that is, the Psalm may refer to conflicts between David or his son Solomon and rulers of the nations during their lifetimes, while *also* referring to the future establishment of the Lord's rule on earth through a messianic or anointed king in the Davidic line – the language of the Psalm points most strongly in the latter direction. In particular, Nathan prophesied to David in 2 Sam 7:14 that the relationship of the Lord to David's future 'seed' would be as that of a father towards his son. So also the Psalmist writes of the Lord's anointed king as his Son. Yet the anointed Son and king of Psalm 2:7 cannot be limited to Solomon,

[1] The Hebrew term for 'anointed' in Psalm 2:2 is מָשִׁיחַ, hence 'Messiah'.

[2] Psalm 2:7 (ESV): 'I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."' The Septuagint translation of the verse will become important later: διαγγέλλων τὸ πρόσταγμα κυρίου κύριος εἶπεν πρός με υἱός μου εἶ σύ ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε. There is a possible additional reference to the anointed king in verse 11, sometimes translated as 'Kiss the Son' and sometimes as 'Arm yourselves with purity'. Compare Anon, 'Objections to 2nd and 22nd Psalm', available at http://www.truthnet.org/TheMessiah/12_Messiah_Objections_Psalms_2_22/ with Anon, 'The Son of God', available at http://www.shalom.org.uk/library/SonofGod.html.

even though Nathan's prophecy does encompass Solomon as the builder of a 'house' for God. One reason is that the kingdom promised to David was to be 'forever', whereas every earthly kingdom has an end. More importantly, the anointed king of verse 7 is in verse 8 given the 'ends of the earth' for his inheritance – or נַחֲלָה – whereas the inheritance of the people of Israel was the particularised land of Canaan.[3]

In short, the anointed king referred to in verse 7 plainly appears to have a special status. The further question is whether that status may be found in the particular nature of his sonship. The concept of a sonship relationship with God is of course not uniquely found in Psalm 2:7 among Old Testament sources. Rather, the Old Testament suggests three principal kinds of 'sonship' relationships: (1) 'sons of God' as some form of subordinate created beings; (2) the king as 'God's son'; and (3) the people of Israel corporately as 'God's son', and individually as His 'children'.[4]

First, with respect to the term 'sons of God', the angelic (or more likely the fallen angelic) beings described as having mated with the 'daughters of men' in Gen 6:2, as well as the 'sons of God' who appeared before the Lord in Job 1:6, are never referred to as sons of יהוה, but rather as sons of אֱלֹהִים.[5] Nor are they said to be 'begotten' of God. In Psalm 2:7, however, it is יהוה who speaks and calls the anointed 'my Son' whom he has 'begotten'. This does not of course completely solve the problem, since אֱלֹהִים is certainly one of God's names; but it does show that a distinction is being made between the 'son of God' of Psalm 2:7 and other 'sons of God' referred to in different portions of the scriptures.

The question remains, however, whether the relationship between the Lord on the one hand as father and the son on the other as his anointed is one of like or different kind (*i.e.*, both being divine; or one being divine but the other not); or of like or different rank (*i.e.*, both of equal rank as

[3] See, *e.g.*, Num 26:53 (using the same Hebrew term נַחֲלָה to describe the 12 Tribes' allotted portions). David's promised inheritance of all the nations has been called 'astonishing in its singularity' in the context of the Old Testament, which otherwise focuses on the inherited land of Canaan. J. Mays, '"In a Vision": The Portrayal of the Messiah in the Psalms,' *Ex Auditu* 7 (1991). See also F. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament* (R. Keith, trans.) (Alexandria, D.C.: William M. Morrison, 1836), Vol. I, p. 81.

[4] A complete discussion of 'sonship' in the Bible is beyond the scope of this article. For a number of possible approaches, however, see, *e.g.*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds), Vol. VIII, pp. 334 ff. (υἱός) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972) (*TDNT*).

[5] *Idem.*, p. 347; see also U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1961), Part I, pp. 291–95; G.F. Moore, *Judaism* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997) (reprinted ed.), Vol. II, pp. 202 ff.

divinities; or both being divine but one superior in rank to the other). A more theological way of expressing the question might be whether Psalm 2:7 and any related texts tell us whether the Lord (יהוה) and his Son are of the same 'substance'; and whether, even if of the same substance, the latter is subordinate to the former. But the text itself does not elaborate on the nature of the relationship: it simply states it as a fact that the son is 'begotten' of the Lord. The Hebrew word for 'begotten' here is יְלִדְתִּיךָ, a form of the verb יָלַד. It may mean 'beget' in the sense of impregnate (as does a father), or 'bear' (as does a mother); and it may also mean 'to appoint'.[6] Moreover, while the LXX use of the Greek γεννάω can similarly refer either to the father's or the mother's role in procreation, it also has a more general meaning of 'to cause to come into being', including 'to engender from oneself'.[7] And even assuming, for the sake of argument, that the choice of the English term 'begotten' was an inspired translation of the Hebrew and/or Greek, it does not of itself shed much more light on the question. Certainly the English word 'beget' conveys the distinct sense of a father causing a child to come into existence by physical procreation;[8] but because the word is also used to describe the virgin-born Jesus,[9] it simply begs the question as to its meaning in that context.

Second, with respect to the Psalm's descriptions of the king as God's son, we have seen that Solomon may well be embraced within Nathan's prophecy of the Davidic line of succession. In addition, the theme of an eternal throne inherited by David's 'seed' appears in Psalm 89:26, where the Psalmist describes a father/son relationship between the kin who will sit upon that throne and the Lord: 'He will call out to me, "You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Saviour"'.[10] The additional element of 'salvation'

[6] W. Gesenius, *A Hebrew-English Lexicon* (28th ed.) (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1888) (Gesenius), s.v. יָלַד.

[7] H.G. Liddell, R. Scott and H.S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed.) (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940) (*LS&J*), s.v. γεννάω; W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) (*BAGD*), s.v. γεννάω. Whether such engendering is strictly causal, and whether there is a necessary time element involved (*i.e.*, a time when the begotten one did not exist), remains unclear in these lexical materials.

[8] See *Oxford English Dictionary* (2d ed.) (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1989) (*OED*), s.v. 'begotten' (citing sources referring to natural procreation).

[9] *Idem.* (citing as its earliest appearance Wyclif's translation of John 1:14: 'the glorie as of the oon bigetun of the fadir').

[10] Psalm 89:26 (*NIV*). While the *ESV* translates the latter part of the verse as 'the rock of my salvation', the *NIV* brings out more of a messianic reference in the verse to Jesus with its non-genitival translation of the Hebrew word יְשׁוּעָתִי.

seems to take the relationship described in Psalm 2:7, 2 Sam 7:14 and Psalm 89:26 beyond a common enthronement or 'appointment' ceremony, as it has been sometimes described.[11]

Third, another level of complexity arises when the father/son image is applied to the nation Israel, where the image is applied corporately to the nation as God's 'son' but also to individual Israelites as his 'children'. Israel the nation is thus sometimes described corporately as God's firstborn son;[12] and God is likewise called the nation's father.[13] Yet at other times, the Israelites are severally referred to as his children.[14] And both uses can even occur in closely linked passages.[15]

Moreover, God is said to have engendered his people Israel: 'You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.'[16] There is a significant parallelism between these words as used in Deuteronomy 32:18 and those of Psalm 2:7. In the former, when the Lord says that he 'bore' Israel the word used is יְלָדֶךָ and in the latter when the Lord says that he has 'begotten' his son the word is יְלִדְתִּיךָ . Both are forms of the same verb יָלַד, principally meaning (as noted above), to bear or to beget.[17] The same key term – beget – is thus applied in these verses *both* to the anointed king *and* to the people over whom he rules. The texts thereby establish some form of link. While the exact nature of the link is not elaborated in these verses alone, there is an implicit suggestion that God stands, or perhaps will stand, in a relationship with his people *both* corporately *and* as individuals, the latter being parallel to the relationship between God and his anointed king, that is to say, the Messiah.[18]

Indeed, the Hebrew mind frequently brought the 'one' and the 'many' together in social contexts, where 'the individual [Israelite] as a . . . centre of

[11] See *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6, s.v. 'Son of God', pp. 128–29 (New York: Doubleday, 1992). Hence the alternative meaning of יָלַד, 'to appoint', may add a nuance to our understanding, but standing alone seems inadequate to convey the full sense of the father/son relationship described in Psalm 2:7.

[12] E.g., Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9.

[13] E.g., Deut 32:6; Jer 3:4.

[14] E.g., Deut 14:1; 32:5; Psalm 103:13.

[15] *TDNT*, p. 352, citing Deut 32:5–6 and 18–19.

[16] Deut 32:18.

[17] Gesenius, s.v. יָלַד. The *LXX* similarly uses words from the same Greek verb γεννάω: γεννήσαντά, in Deut 32:18 and γεγέννηκά, in Psalm 2:7.

[18] This may have implications for a New Testament understanding of the relationships between Christ and the Church on the one hand and between Christ and individual believers on the other. Stated very broadly, to the extent that the former is over-emphasised, personal faith and piety may suffer; while to the extent that the latter is over-emphasised, corporate order, discipline and worship may suffer.

power capable of indefinite extension, is never a mere isolated unit; he lives in constant reaction towards others'.[19] Israel is often viewed as a single corporate personality even in passages that refer to the many individuals making up the nation. Thus the Israelites in the wilderness voice their impatience by saying 'our soul[20] loatheth this light bread'. And when David appealed for the loyalty of the people of Judah as his kin, we are told that 'he swayed the heart[21] of all the men of Judah as one man . . . '.[22]

There are, admittedly, uncertainties as to the meaning of these passages and perforce those using plural nouns for God.[23] The point, however, is not to lock down a full-blown Trinitarian portrayal of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Old Testament,[24] so much as to confirm that the Old Testament writers appear to have been fully comfortable using language of plurality alongside that of unity when describing God (as in Genesis 1 - 3); or the people of Israel (as in Numbers 20); or the family unity which inheres in God's relationship with his people (as in Deuteronomy 32:8).[25] In that context, there is room for notions of equality both of substance and stature between the Lord and his anointed, such as I have suggested might be inferred from the 'begotten son' language of Psalm 2:7.

[19] A.R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (2nd ed.) (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961), p. 7.

[20] Num 21:4 (*KJV*). The Hebrew uses the singular form, וְנַפְשֵׁנוּ.

[21] 2 Sam 19:14 (*ESV*). Again the Hebrew uses the singular form, לֵבָב for 'heart'.

[22] 'One man' is כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד , using the Hebrew word אֶחָד to express such unity.

[23] See G. Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 140.

[24] The arguments of some of the early Church Fathers to the effect that theophanies such as that in Genesis 18 are in fact revelations of God's Trinitarian nature are therefore also unpersuasive. *Idem.*; see also A.W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), p. 18. Imputing such status runs the risk of confusing the messengers with the one who sent them. See P. Miller, Jr., 'A Strange Kind of Monotheism', *Theology Today* 54 (2004), p. 295.

[25] While it is occasionally suggested that the plural in these contexts is simply a form of the 'royal we', that explanation does not appear to hold up as a grammatical matter. See Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 32 n.1 (citing Gesenius). Among other things, a singular verb is not invariably used with Elohim, see, *e.g.*, Gen. 20:13 ('God caused me to wander . . . ') (הִתְעוּ אֹתִי אֱלֹהִים), 35:7 ('God appeared to him . . . ') (נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים); and plural adjectives are at times used to describe him, see, *e.g.*, Deut 4:7 ('God is near . . . ') (אֱלֹהִים קְרֹבִים) and Joshua 24:19 ('God is holy . . . ') (אֱלֹהִים קְדֹשִׁים). Again, the point is *not* to establish 'unity' over and against 'singularity,' but rather to show that both are found, even in the same context. For example, in the Joshua 24:19 passage cited above, immediately following the use of the plural 'Elohim is holy', Joshua states in the singular that 'He is a jealous El' (הוּא אֵל־קַנּוֹא).

Psalm 2:7 in the New Testament

Taken as a whole, the most common use of the term 'son of God' in the Old Testament seems to have been its collective application to Israel; during the Inter-Testamental era, however, the Messiah began to be referred to as 'God's Son'.[26] Psalm 2:7 itself is quoted or paraphrased directly at least eight times in the New Testament. As will be discussed in this section, the New Testament writers clearly understood Psalm 2:7 to refer to Jesus as God's begotten Son. The question still to be addressed, however, is whether the New Testament provides any further understanding as to the *nature* of the relationship between the Father and the Son, either as to their common divinity, or their 'equality' of stature within the Godhead.

First, in both Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22, the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism says: 'Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. While this is not a precise quotation from Psalm 2:7, there is such a great overlap in language[27] that it is difficult to think that the connection was lost on those standing by. Moreover, the statement must also have called to mind God's testing of Abraham: 'Take your son, your only son . . . '.[28] As such, the Gospels present us at the very outset with the view that Jesus is 'uniquely' God's Son; and that the relationship between the two partakes of some form of the complex unity discussed above.

Second, as recorded by Matthew, Mark and Peter, a voice from heaven on the Mount of Transfiguration also speaks in a paraphrase of Psalm 2:7: 'This is my beloved Son . . . '.[29] These New Testament texts thus again stress both Jesus' uniqueness and his 'oneness' with the Father.

[26] See generally E. Huntress, '"Son of God" in Jewish Writings Prior to the Christian Era', *J. of Biblical Lit.* 54 (1935), p. 117, citing *inter alia* Wisdom 2:16 and 5:4–5 as a 1st century B.C. illustration; see also *TDNT*, pp. 360–61 (noting that the term 'Son of God' was used with reference to Messianic promises such as those in Psalm 2:7, but was not a general synonym for Messiah); Moore, *op. cit.*, pp. 323 ff. (examining the expressions 'son of David' and 'son of man' in pre-Christian era); *but cf.* Wainwright, *op. cit.*, p. 174 (expressing the view that 'there is no sure evidence of the identification [of the Messiah as the "Son of God"] before the time of Christ').

[27] Thus, Psalm 2:7 in the *LXX* reads in relevant part υἱός μου εἶ σύ, while Mark 1:11 reads Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου and Luke 3:22 reads σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός. And one would expect some reordering in shifting from the indirect grammar of the Psalm to the direct speech in the Gospels.

[28] Gen. 22:2 (*ESV*). As noted, the relevant words in the *LXX* are: τὸν υἱόν σου τὸν ἀγαπητόν.

[29] Matthew 17:5 (*ESV*) (οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός); Mark 9:7 (*ESV*) (Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός); 2 Pet 1:17 (*ESV*) (ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός μου οὗτος ἐστιν). Again, the further reference to Abraham's proferred sacrifice on Mount Moriah is unmistakable.

Third, in Acts 13:32-33, we find Paul preaching in the synagogue at Antioch and seeking to persuade his fellow Jews that 'the promise which was made unto the fathers' had been fulfilled, 'in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second Psalm, "Thou are my Son, this day have I begotten thee"'. What plainly appears is that Paul reads the words 'this day have I begotten thee' to refer to the resurrection.[30] Psalm 2:7 therefore cannot simply be limited to the earthly rule of any of David's descendants.[31]

Fourth, in contrasting the Son with the angels, the writer to the Hebrews states: 'For unto which of the angels said he at any time, "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?" And again, "I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?"'[32] Hebrews thus combines in a single verse quotations from Psalm 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14. Here the anointed king of Psalm 2:7 is not merely David or his son Solomon, but a promised king who will rule not just Israel, but also the Gentiles.

Finally, again in Hebrews, the writer stresses that Christ's priesthood, though now surpassing Aaron's, did not arise from self-appointment. Rather, 'Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, "Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee."'[33] The superiority of Christ's priesthood, moreover, arises *precisely* from his being begotten in an eternal, not human sense, for the writer to the Hebrews immediately turns to the confirming words of Psalm 110:4: 'Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchisedek.'[34] The significance of the reference to Melchisedek is that Melchisedek was not bound by a natural genealogy. Rather, 'He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but *resembling the Son of God* he continues a priest forever'.[35] The writer to the Hebrews thereby sheds critical light on the meaning of the term 'begotten' in Psalm 2:7. The term cannot refer to earthly procreation, because

[30] See Henstenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

[31] See, *e.g.*, *TDNT*, p. 350.

[32] Heb 1:5. The writer's quotation from the *LXX* is exact – Υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε – thus supporting the view that it was the Greek and not the Hebrew OT text with which the early Church was most familiar. Jesus similarly quotes the Sh'ma precisely from the *LXX* in Mark 12:29 when he is asked to name the first and greatest commandment.

[33] Heb 5:5 (*KJV*). The quotation from the *LXX* for Psalm 2:7 is exact and thus it is difficult to impute the nuance of 'appointment' found in the Hebrew into the Greek word γεννάω, which otherwise is not defined to include that meaning. Nevertheless, the context plainly suggests that the appointment arises out of the Son's status as begotten, thus combining the two thoughts.

[34] Heb 5:6 (*KJV*). Again, the quotation from the *LXX* is exact: σὺ εἶ ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισεδέκ.

[35] Heb 7:3 (*ESV*) (emphasis added).

that would suggest a 'beginning of days'. Indeed, the phrase 'this day . . . ' itself appears to refer to no precise moment in time. It thus applies to events as varied as the arguably immediate events of David's and Solomon's rule; to Jesus' baptism; to the resurrection; and to the ascension and presentation in Heaven of Jesus' eternal and perfect sacrifice.[36] Moreover, because Jesus – with respect to his eternal priesthood – is 'without father or mother', the writer to the Hebrews confirms the correctness of the broader reading of γεννάω suggested above. As such, it becomes clearer, through the revelation of Jesus, that the sonship relationship between the Lord and his anointed described in Psalm 2 has an eternal element which includes, but in no way is limited to, a divine appointment to the task of subduing and ruling the nations.

We thus have in the New Testament several direct quotations and paraphrases of the 'begotten Son' language of Psalm 2:7. Yet each is applied in a different setting and for different theological purposes: one to confer the authority of God on Jesus' ministry; one to demonstrate the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets in Jesus; one to argue that the resurrection of Jesus was in fulfilment of the Davidic covenant; one to demonstrate Jesus' superiority over all created beings in the heavens; and one to confirm the supersession of Aaron's priesthood by Jesus as eternal priest after the order of Melchizedek.[37] How, then, do these specific references further inform our reading of Psalm 2:7 in terms of the nature of the relationship between the Lord and the Son, either as to their common divinity or their 'equality' of stature within the Godhead? The answer seems to be that they are suggestive, but not conclusive, at least not by the use of theological categories.

First, the voice coming from Heaven – not to mention the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove – demonstrates a uniqueness in the relationship between God and Jesus and confirms Jesus as the promised anointed one. Yet the fact that the voice came from heaven while Jesus was on Earth does not resolve how Jesus could remain separated in time and space from God and yet *be* God. Second, Paul's focus on the resurrection suggests Jesus' divinity, but does not expressly confirm it. Third, while the writer to Hebrews undermines any claim that Jesus is an angelic creature, and while he suggests that Jesus was not created but rather 'begotten' of God, he does

[36] See also Hengstenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 78 ('The word הַיּוֹם, *day*, has been taken as the designation of eternity, in which there is neither past nor future, and which may therefore most fitly be expressed by an image of the present.').

[37] These several occurrences have led to a debate whether the Apostles only viewed Jesus as a man who was 'adopted' as God's Son at one or another point in time or as otherwise 'subordinate'. For a rejection of this view, see generally Wainwright, *op. cit.*, pp. 181–95.

not address whether Jesus has a subordinate status within the Godhead, even if uncreated. Finally, while Hebrews confirms that Jesus' ministry in Heaven is alone sufficient to reconcile us to God, and reveals an eternal aspect as to who Jesus is, it neither addresses Jesus' own nature nor his status within the Godhead.

Circumincession/Coinherence/περιχώρησις

The questions we had at the outset therefore still remain as to the nature of the Son's relationship with the Father and of any relationships among the members of the Godhead. But does any extra-biblical analysis shed light? It is a given that the doctrinal struggles in the early Church, leading to the formulations through creedal statements and in theological writings, were perceived as necessary in order to establish the truths about Jesus' divinity in the face of incipient heresies. Having established Jesus' divinity, a number of such formulations then sought to explain the nature of the relationships among the members of the Trinity using terms that went beyond the language used in the Old or New Testaments themselves. In this section, we examine the efforts of one writer, John of Damascus,[38] to formulate as part of the doctrine of the Trinity the equality within the Godhead which he perceived in Jesus' statement in John 14:10 that Jesus was 'in' the Father and the Father was 'in' him.

Born in Damascus in 676 and dying somewhere between 754 and 787, he is sometimes known as the 'last of the Greek Fathers', and sometimes as the 'first of the Scholastics'. Although much of his life was spent in efforts to oppose the iconoclasts – thus leading to his condemnation by Emperor Leo III and his posthumous rehabilitation by the Council of Hieria – his greatest work was as a systematiser of doctrine. His masterpiece is considered to be *The Fountain of Wisdom*, a Greek work in three parts: a theological study of Aristotle's categories; a history of heresies; and a formal exposition of the Christian faith, separately titled *De Fide Orthodoxa*. John himself denied that his doctrinal formulations were original; rather, his goal was to sum up the work that had preceded him. Hence his exposition is sometimes viewed as the first *summa theologica* of the Church. Whether wholly original or not, John's clarity of expression of the doctrinal points he addressed earned him the accolade 'chrysorrhoas', or gold-pouring.

By the time John wrote, the Council of Nicea had resolved disputes concerning Jesus' nature: Jesus was not a created being but was rather

[38] Also known as John Damascene; additionally as a Saint of the Catholic Church, with a Feast Day on December 4. For background, see generally A. Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

divine, 'of one substance' with the Father. The Holy Spirit was also soon held to share the same divine substance (setting aside for this purpose whether he 'proceeded' only from the Father or from both the Father and the Son).[39] While the formulation that the members of the Trinity were 'of one substance' resolved the immediate heresy at hand – the assertion attributed to Arius that Jesus was a created being and thus subordinate to God – it effectively gave rise to additional questions, such as how the three members of the Godhead were related to one another. For example, if the three are of one substance, how do we articulate any distinctions between or among the three, either in the nature of their being or in their operations in the world? Are 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit' simply three 'modes' by which God in simplicity of substance manifests himself, now in the one aspect, now in another? Or are they three distinct 'persons', all divine but operating individually while still sharing one essence and somehow joined together? How, on the one hand, does a Christian avoid 'confusing' the persons with one another while on the other hand avoiding a form of tritheism?[40]

As relevant here, in a section of *De Fide Orthodoxa* dealing with the Trinity, John attempted to set out a cohesive explanation of the nature of the relationships between and among the three members of the Godhead. In doing so, John synthesized the views of the so-called Cappadocian Fathers – Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, three contemporaries writing in the 4th century – who had themselves stressed a form of primacy of the Father as the unbegotten one who generated, or begot, the Son and from whom, alone, the Holy Spirit proceeds. The Cappadocians rejected, at the same time, any notion that the generation of the Son or the procession of the Holy Spirit occurred *in time*, or that the Son and the Holy Spirit were merely 'emanations' from or of the Father, insisting instead that all three exist from and in eternity. They held that each such 'person' – or rather, each such 'hypostasis', the preferred term used by

[39] It is of course beyond the scope of this article to address the continuing acrimony between the Eastern and Western Church over the addition of the word *filioque* to the Chalcedonian Decree.

[40] Such questions arguably shifted the Church's focus and thinking away from what seems to be its initial focus on the immanent and experiential relationship, mystery though it might be, between an individual believer and God the Father, mediated by the Son and enabled by the Holy Spirit, to contemplation of the internal, or 'economic,' relations among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is not to suggest that the early Fathers were unaware of a risk of losing the Church's initial focus. It was indeed perhaps precisely to justify and maintain the individual believer's relationship with God that Augustine stressed a love relationship inhering among the members of the Trinity with that same love being manifested to Christians in the person of Jesus. See generally Bray, *op. cit.*

theologians working in Greek – further manifests the nature and being of the Father in fullness, because God's essence also cannot be divided.[41] But it was still unclear how one maintains the hierarchy of Father as eternal 'cause' of the Son without falling into some form of Arianism, that is to say, without suggesting that the Son and/or the Holy Spirit are subordinate deities.

According to John of Damascus, the answer simply lay in a proper reading of the scriptures. John approaches the question of relationships within the Godhead first by distinguishing them from our perceptions of human relationships, which can never be more than a metaphor for those of the Trinity. He thus begins with a citation to John 1:18: 'No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him'.[42] John's point is that without revelation, the 'God-head . . . is ineffable and incomprehensible'.[43] He takes as his starting point an *ex ante* article of faith, that God is both 'without beginning and without end' and also 'one, that is to say, one substance . . . in three Persons'.[44] John's key insight was that the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost 'are one in all things *save in the being unbegotten, the being begotten, and the procession*'.[45]

By framing any distinctions among the members of the Trinity as a matter of begetting, begottenness and procession, John does retain the Cappadocians' insistence on the Father's primacy and thus their inherently causal framework. John must therefore deal with what appears to be an implicit time element in any causational structure, such that if the Father, as admittedly un-caused and un-begotten, begot the Son; and if the Holy Spirit

[41] See generally E.R. Hardy (ed.), *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). This so-called 'Cappadocian Settlement' is formulated in shorthand as 'one ousia and three hypostases'. See G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: S.P.C.K., 1959), pp. 233 ff. (distinguishing this view from the 'Latin view, according to which God is one Object and three Subjects (*una substantia, tres personae*)'.); see also K. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 212–35; J.T. Leinhard, '*Ousia* and Hypostasis: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of "One Hypostasis"', in *The Trinity: an Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (S.T. David, D. Kendall, G. O'Collins, eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 99–100; R.A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1985), s.v. Trinitas; L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), pp. 89–90.

[42] 'An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith', in *Saint John of Damascus: Writings* (F.H. Chase, trans.) (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), p. 165. It is relevant to this study that the description of Jesus in this verse as only-begotten is the same as in John 1:14: μονογενής.

[43] *Idem.*

[44] *Idem.*, p. 167.

[45] *Idem.* (emphasis added).

proceeded from the Father and then rested on the Son; then both the Son and the Holy Spirit might *seem* to be dependent on the Father for their existence, because conceivably they at some time did not exist, *i.e.*, before the time the one was begotten or the other proceeded.

John's solution is to assert 'that the begetting of the Son is *of* the Father, that is to say, of his nature' and that because his nature is unchangeable, it cannot be 'that He once was not Father, but became Father later'.[46] His position is that the key word 'begetting' is *not* a form of 'creation', by which he means 'the bringing into being [of something] from the outside and not from the substance of the creator'.[47] Rather, 'begetting means producing *of* the substance of the begetter an offspring similar in substance to the begetter'.[48] Because his necessary premise is that God is eternal, John concludes that the Father's begetting of the Son is also 'without beginning and eternal'.[49] John recognises at the same time that any such formulations suffer from certain built-in limitations arising out of our physical and temporal natures, confining the scope of our thoughts, imagery and language; thus while we might at least approach an understanding of our own nature and being, we are not fully able to articulate let alone grasp such non-physical and atemporal concepts as the Father's being unbegotten, the Son's being begotten, or the Holy Spirit's procession.[50]

Having posited the eternal nature of the Father's begetting of the Son (as well as the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit), John nevertheless uses nature-based imagery to suggest that 'the Father is . . . the cause of the Son [in the way that] the light comes from the fire'.[51] He maintains that the Son is not of a different substance from the Father any more than light is a different substance from fire.[52] John thus distinguishes the 'subsistence' of each of the three members of the Trinity from their common substance,

[46] Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 178 (emphasis added).

[47] *Idem.*, pp. 178–79.

[48] *Idem.*, p. 178 (emphasis added).

[49] *Idem.*, p. 179.

[50] *Idem.*, pp. 179–80. See also A. Louth, *St. John Damascene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 111 (noting John's dependence on Basil of Caesarea for this line of reasoning). To the extent this reflects a general theory of knowledge, it is consistent with Eccl 3:11 (*KJV*): '[H]e hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end'; and with 1 Cor 13:9 (*KJV*): 'For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.'

[51] Chase, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–83.

[52] Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 181. The fire and light image seems to me somewhat confusing, but John freely admits, as noted, that 'it is impossible to find in creation any image which exactly portrays the manner of the Holy Trinity in Itself'. *Idem.*, p. 183. Indeed, that is in many respects his point.

stating that they differ from one another only by virtue of their 'personal properties'.[53] He emphasizes this latter point to avoid any suggestion that there is a blending or 'composition'[54] of the persons within God, which would thus lead to 'disintegration' of the persons.[55]

Thus far, John maintains the delicate balancing between unity and plurality that any discussion of the Trinity requires. But he then expands on the discussion, in what may be his most important contribution to the doctrine, when he addresses our inherent difficulty in grasping how *distinct* persons/subsistences/hypostases can nevertheless be 'one'. Consistent with his general method, John distinguishes human from divine realities. He notes that while we perceive a certain 'commonality' among men in that they share a human nature, we also recognise a physical separation that cannot be disputed. As John says, 'individual persons do not exist in one another at all, but each one is separate and by itself . . . in time, judgment, strength, form, [etc.] . . . '.[56] While this may be true of *created* beings, he says, 'it is quite the contrary in the case of the . . . Trinity', where the *only* distinctions are non-physical, arising instead out of each person's 'manner of existing'.[57]

Hence, because the Godhead is 'uncircumscribed' by any physical limitations, the three members of the Trinity have *no* 'difference in place' with respect to one another, but instead 'exist *in one another*, not so as to be confused, but so as to adhere closely together, as expressed in the words of the Lord when He said: "I in the Father and the Father in me"'.[58] This is not, he emphasises, 'the coalescence of Sabellius'.[59] Instead, it is a

> *circumincession*, one in another without any blending or mingling and without change or division in substance such as is the division held by

[53] *Idem.*, p. 184 (*i.e.*, 'the being unbegotten, the begetting, and the procession').

[54] John's language sometimes fails him in explaining what is 'compound' and what is not. Thus John argues that 'Christ has a compound nature', by which he means that Christ is a 'composite Person' in which the two natures – human and divine – preserve their essential differences intact; yet at the same time he denies that the natures are 'compound[ed]' in the sense used by Eutyches and other monophysites, whereby the natures are 'mixed[ed]' or 'blend[ed]'. *Idem.*, pp. 275, 282.

[55] *Idem.*, p. 185.

[56] *Idem.*, p. 186. See the explanation of what is therefore a 'mind/body' distinction in John's writings in Louth, *op. cit.*, p. 12 ('In created reality, individual *hypostases* are just that: individual units separated from one another in reality. Any communion, any union with one another, is [therefore] perceived *only conceptually*'.) (emphasis added).

[57] Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 186. Again, this 'manner of existing' is 'begetting', 'being begotten' and 'proceeding'. See also Bray, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

[58] Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 187 (emphasis added) (quoting John 14:11).

[59] *Idem.*

> Arius. Thus, must one put it concisely, the Godhead is undivided in things divided, just as in three suns joined together without any intervening interval there is one blending and the union of the light.[60]

What then does John mean by the term 'circumincession'?[61] And however we understand the term, does John thereby add anything to our understanding of Jesus' statements in the Gospel of John, or does he simply create more problems? The original Greek term περιχώρησις apparently exists only in Patristic usage, being unknown prior to its appearance in works by Marcarius of Egypt and Gregory of Nazianzus.[62] As a verb, it means to 'pass into reciprocally' or to 'interpenetrate', although G.W. Lampe, in his definitive Patristic lexicon, is frank to say that 'it is often difficult to distinguish whether [the word] is used in one sense or the other'.[63]

Perhaps because of the abstractness of the term, it has been suggested that circumincession reduces to saying that 'each divine person *is* the other persons'.[64] This would, of course, thus equate oneness of substance with oneness of persons – precisely the monophysite heresy that John of Damascus claimed he sought to avoid. Yet others have suggested, paradoxically, that by insisting on a 'causal' relationship between the Father and the only begotten Son, John of Damascus verges on tritheism.[65] It may simply be that once

[60] *Idem*. (emphasis added).

[61] 'Circumincession' is from the Latin *circumincessio*, itself a translation of the original Greek περιχώρησις, a term rendered in English either as circumincession or 'coinherence'.

[62] Neither, however, used the term in a Trinitarian context. Prestige, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

[63] G.W. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), s.v. περιχώρησις. The noun form has the same essential meanings: reciprocity and interpenetration. *Idem*. The word does, at the same time, resonate with the sense of reciprocity that may be inferred from Jesus' use of ἐν in John 14:11 to refer *both* to the Father *and* to the Son: ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἐν ἐμοί.

[64] See M. Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 209 (emphasis in original). It has been suggested that such confusion of persons may be avoided by focusing instead on the 'inseparable operations' of the members of the Trinity, such that 'whatever action is performed by [the Trinity] must be thought to be performed at the same time by the Father and by the Son and by the Holy Spirit . . . '. B.A. Strawn, *And These Three Are One: A Trinitarian Critique of Christological Approaches to the Old Testament*, Perspectives in Religious Studies, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2004), p. 203 (quoting from Augustine, *Epistle* 11.2). While certainly all three members of the Trinity are involved, for example, in the work of redemption, only Jesus was crucified; and it is unclear whether the concept of 'inseparable operations' adds anything further to our basic understanding of what otherwise appear in the scriptures to be separable tasks. See, *e.g.*, D.T. Williams, 'The Spirit in Creation,' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 67, Issue 1 (Feb 2014), 1–14.

[65] See W.P. Alston, 'Substance and the Trinity' in *The Trinity: an Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, *op. cit.*, pp. 183–84. John was fully aware of such risks and therefore argues against both Sabellius and Arius.

John jettisons metaphors and comparisons from the natural world, he is hard pressed to replace them with any words at all. And to the extent John does go beyond common usage or metaphor, the admitted elegance of the concept of circumincession necessarily remains in tension with the vividly historical nature of the human and the divine father/son relationships that pervade the scriptures. Absent the particularity already found in the scriptures of father/son relationships, John's unmoored image thus runs the risk of being an abstraction from nothing, and thus possibly meaningless.[66]

It is therefore difficult to see 'circumincession' as any more fully expressive of the *relationship* between and among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit than Jesus' own statement that he is 'in' the Father and the Father is 'in' him. In other words, circumincession, perhaps because of its very abstractness, comes across as somewhat impersonal – an odd result for an effort to justify the distinctiveness of the divine persons. John is nevertheless at pains to escape the scriptures' concrete use of father/son terminology. Such a relationship is, to be sure, physically grounded in time and space; and, as John reminds us, it therefore cannot be fully adequate when applied to God. And yet, as discussed above, certain essential aspects of the human father/son relationship are progressively revealed in the scriptures in ways which can convey underlying spiritual truths: that the son is engendered by, and is thus of the same kind as, the father; that the father has appointed the son to inherit all that the father has; that because of the father's love for the son, there is a unique bond of unity between them; that despite being two persons, they are 'in' one another; and that the father and the son are 'one' in the multivalent sense of the words אֶחָד and ἑἷς.

Nor do the scriptures suggest that Christians are bereft of the ability to apply such understandings to the relationship between the heavenly Father and his Son. Thus Paul writes 'because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying "Abba, Father"'.[67] The suggestion is that believers themselves experience a sonship relationship with the Father, thereby obtaining more than a glimpse of what Jesus meant in the very passages from the Gospel of John that undergird the doctrine of circumincession.

[66] In fairness, however, it must be pointed out that the genius of Greek Patristic thought, crystallised by John of Damascus, may well have been precisely to remove the doctrine of the Trinity from the realm of particulars. Prestige, *op. cit.*, p. 236. Prestige therefore concludes that the doctrine is 'a monument of inspired Christian rationalism'. *Idem.*, p. 299. And cf. A. Ginsberg, "Wales Visitation," *Planet News* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1968), p. 142 ('What did I notice? Particulars! The vision of the great One is myriad – ').

[67] Gal 4:6 (*KJV*).

In sum, John of Damascus provided an elegant theological expression descriptive not only of the mutual existence of distinct yet equal members of the Godhead, but also of believers' own relationships with one another. F.F. Bruce, for example, has adopted the corresponding English term coinherence to describe relations among believers through the Holy Spirit.[68] Yet the fact that Bruce uses the term *outside* a strictly Trinitarian context suggests the ultimate need to rely on a more personal and relational perspective in our understanding of the Trinity itself. As such, it may well be impossible to provide an articulable theological category for a relationship that, for its reality, depends on faith perceptions. It is, in short, by faith that Christians perceive and experience a foretaste of the unity of the Father with the Son through their own unity with Christ, through their unity with one another in Christ, and through the unity of Christ with the Church.[69]

[68] F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 112: 'The mutual coinherence of God and His children is the Spirit's work, as is also the outflowing of the love of God through them to others'.

[69] See, *e.g.*, Romans 12:2; I Cor 2:16; Eph 4:13–16.