

The Trinity—Part 4

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Attacks on the Trinity—Muslim misunderstanding (con't)

David's Son and David's Lord. In Matthew 22:43, citing Psalm 110, Jesus said, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord' [Messiah]?" According to Dawud, "By his expression that the 'Lord,' or the 'Adon,' could not be a son of David, Jesus excludes himself from that title" (89).

However, a careful look at the context shows that Jesus is saying just the opposite. Jesus stumped his skeptical Jewish questioners by presenting them with a dilemma that blew their own neat calculations about the Messiah out of the sky. How could David call the Messiah "Lord" (as he did in Ps. 110:1), when the Scriptures also say the Messiah would be the "Son of David" (which they do in 2 Sam. 7:12f.)? The only answer is that the Messiah must be both a man (David's son or offspring) and God (David's Lord.) Jesus is claiming to be both God and human. The Islamic mind should have no more difficulty understanding how Jesus can unite in one person both divine and human natures than their own belief that human beings combine both spirit and flesh, the enduring and the transient in one person (sura 89:27-30; cf. 3:185). Even according to Muslim belief, whatever Almighty God, the Creator and Ruler of all things, wills in his infinite wisdom he is also able to accomplish for "He is the irresistible" (sura 6:61).

God only good. Many Islamic scholars claim that Jesus denied being God when he rebuked the rich young ruler, saying, "Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone" (Mark 10:18). A careful look at this text in its context reveals that Jesus was not denying his deity. He was rather warning the young man to consider the implications of his careless appellation. Jesus does not say, "I am not God, as you claim" or "I am not good." Indeed, both the Bible and Qur'an teach that Jesus is sinless (cf. John 8:46; Heb. 4:14). Rather, Jesus challenged him to examine what he was really saying when he called Jesus "Good Master." In essence, Jesus was saying, "Do you realize what you are saying when you call Me 'Good Master'? Only God is good. Are you calling me God?" The fact that the young ruler refused to do what Jesus said, proves that he did not really consider Jesus his Master. But nowhere did Jesus deny that he was either the Master or God of the rich young ruler. Indeed, elsewhere Jesus freely claimed to be both Lord and Master of all (Matt. 7:21-27; 28:18; John 12:40).

The greater Father. Jesus' assertion that "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) is also misunderstood by Muslims. It is taken out of its actual context to mean that the Father is greater in nature, but Jesus meant only that the Father is greater in *office*. This is evident from the fact that in this same Gospel (of John) Jesus claimed to be the "I Am" or Yahweh of the Old Testament (Exod. 3:14). He also claimed to be "equal with God" (John 10:30, 33). In addition, he received worship on numerous occasions (John 9:38; cf. Matt. 2:11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52). He also said, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (John 5:23).

Further, when Jesus spoke of the Father being "greater" it was in the context of his "going to the Father" (John 14:28). Only a few chapters later Jesus speaks to the Father, saying, "I have completed the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4). But this functional difference of his role as Son in the very next verse reveals that it was not to be used to

diminish the fact that Jesus was equal to the Father in nature and glory. For Jesus said, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory which I had with you before the world began" (John 17:5).

Misunderstood Philosophical Concepts. Islamic scholars also offer philosophical objections to the doctrine of the Trinity. These too must be cleared away before they will be able to understand the biblical teaching about a plurality of persons within the unity of God.

Emphasis on the Oneness of God is fundamental to Islam. One Muslim scholar said, "In fact, Islam, like other religions before it in their original clarity and purity, is nothing other than the declaration of the Unity of God, and its message is a call to testify to this Unity" (Mahud, 20). Another author adds, "The Unity of Allah is the distinguishing characteristic of Islam. This is the purest form of monotheism, i.e., the worship of Allah Who was neither begotten nor beget nor had any associates with Him in his Godhead. Islam teaches this in the most unequivocal terms" (Ajjola, 55).

Because of this uncompromising emphasis on God's absolute unity, in Islam the greatest of all sins is the sin of *shirk*, or assigning partners to God. The *Qur'an* sternly declares "God forgiveth not (The sin of) joining other gods With Him; but He forgiveth Whom He pleaseth other sins Than this: one who joins Other gods with God, Hath strayed far, far away (From the Right)" (sura 4:116). However, this misunderstands the unity of God.

The Trinity and heresy. There are two primary heresies from which the Trinity is to be distinguished: modalism and tritheism. The heresy of modalism, also called Sabellianism, denies there are three distinct eternal persons in the Godhead. It believes that the so-called "persons" of the Trinity are modes of God substance, not distinct persons. Like water with its three states (liquid, solid, and gaseous), the Trinity is said to be only three different modes of the same essence. Unlike modalists, trinitarians believe there are three distinct persons (not just modes) in the one substance of God.

Both Islam and Christianity proclaim that God is one in essence. What is in dispute is whether there can be any plurality of persons in this unity of nature. The inadequacies in the Muslims' view of God arise in part out of their misunderstanding of Christian monotheism. Many Muslims misconstrue the Christian view of God as tritheism rather than as monotheism. The opposite error of tritheism affirms that there are three separate gods. Few, if any, Christian theologians or philosophers have held this view, but it often has been attributed to trinitarians. Unlike tritheists, trinitarians do not affirm a god with three different substances; they confess that God is three distinct persons in one substance.

The Bible declares emphatically: "The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). Both Jesus (Mark 12:29) and the apostles repeat this formula in the New Testament (1 Cor. 8:4, 6). And early Christian creeds speak of Christ being one in "substance" or "essence" with God. The Athanasian Creed reads: "We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor divining the Substance (Essence)." So Christianity is a form of monotheism, believing in one and only one God.

(concludes next week)