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## ONCE MORE THE LOGOS ASARKOS

Robert W. Jenson

In what sense, if any, was there a *Logos asarkos*? A “pre-existent” second identity of the Trinity who was “not yet” the creature<sup>1</sup> Jesus? My attempt to answer that question seems to be known mostly for its negations - nor do I intend now to depart from these. But the pressure of the discussion and my own continued reflection - the two intertwined of course - have led to some further thoughts, which the following will sketch. The technical difficulties which readers may encounter in the concluding proposals are perhaps due to my still only partial digestion character of those thoughts. The essay is hardly a retraction, but it does attempt to ameliorate an inadequacy of my previous discussion.

Certain maxims have governed my thinking on the matter, and I continue to insist on them. I will give a paragraph to each of four.

One. The very earliest christologians had it right. Jesus is the Son/*Logos* of God by his relation to the Father, not by a relation to a coordinated reality, “*the Son/Logos*”. The Apologists’ creation of the “*Logos Christology*”, which presumes the *Logos* as a religious/metaphysical entity and then asserts its

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1. *sarx* in this usage simply means creatureliness.

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3  
4 union with Jesus, was an historic mistake, if perhaps an inevitable one. Great genius has subsequently  
5  
6 been devoted to the task of conceptually pasting together God the Son/*Logos* and Jesus the Son/*Logos* of  
7  
8 God, and we may be thankful for many of the ideas posted along the way. But the task itself is wrongly  
9  
10 set and finally hopeless.

11  
12 Two. In whatever way the Son may antecede his conception by Mary, we must not posit the  
13  
14 Son's antecedent subsistence in such fashion as to make the Incarnation the addition of the human Jesus  
15  
16 to a Son who was himself without him. By the dogma, Mary is the mother of God the Son, she is  
17  
18 *Theotokos*, and not of a man who is united with God the Son, however firmly. Thus the church confesses  
19  
20 that God the Son was himself conceived when Mary became pregnant - even if theology often labors to  
21  
22 evade this confession's more alarming entailments. That Mary is *Theotokos* indeed disrupts the linear  
23  
24 time line or pseudo-time line on which we westerners automatically - and usually subliminally - locate  
25  
26 every event, even the birth of God the Son; but that disruption is all to the theological good.

27  
28 Three. The sentence "How would the Trinity have been the Trinity if God had not created a  
29  
30 world, and there had therefore been no creature Jesus to be the Son, or had let the fallen creation go, with  
31  
32 the same result?" is often taken for a real question. And here I do have a retraction to make. In the past I  
33  
34 have sometimes responded to the supposed question, saying that God would presumably have somehow  
35  
36 been the same triune God that he is, but that we can say nothing further about that "somehow". I now  
37  
38 think that even this response concedes too much to our unbaptized notion of time, by supposing that the  
39  
40 collection of words quoted at the beginning of this paragraph actually makes a question which one can  
41  
42 answer, however sparingly. It has now dawned on me that the putative question is nonsense, and so  
43  
44 therefore is my previous attempt to respond to it.

45  
46 Four. Occam's razor is a liberating and necessary tool. Indeed thou shalt not posit metaphysical  
47  
48 entities beyond necessity. The ground of this commandment is theological. In Christian theology the  
49  
50 warrants of ontological necessity must finally be scriptural, and we are not allowed to proceed past what  
51  
52 they can support. In the present case, belief that there is the Son is indeed mandated by Scripture. But  
53  
54 what mandates belief in an intrinsically disembodied metaphysical entity that is "the" *Logos*? The  
55  
56 passage often cited is the Prologue of John. But *O\* Logos* there is God's creative utterance from Genesis  
57  
58  
59  
60

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4 1, which John glosses; even if middle Platonism's deity of that name lies somehow behind John's usage,  
5  
6 it is the text and not its possible background that is to be read.  
7

8         So much for my characteristic maxims. But then there is a maxim of a different and even  
9  
10 overriding sort, that is also not negotiable: the eternity of the Son/*Logos*. In whatever sense "was" and  
11  
12 "when" obtain within the life of God, there indeed never was when the Son was not; and it is vital to  
13  
14 remember that in the "pre-" folk worry about about there is nothing *but* the life of God. Some critics have  
15  
16 seized on my insistence that the *Theotokos* means what it says, to claim that I am a crypto-Arian; they  
17  
18 have forgotten that point.  
19

20         The problem is how to unite these two sets of non-negotiables. In the traditional language, how  
21  
22 are we to conceive the "pre-existence" of the Son who Jesus is? How are we to read the Prologue of  
23  
24 John's Gospel *and* the narrative it introduces as a coherent whole? Or indeed read the Prologue itself as a  
25  
26 coherent whole?  
27

28         In my *Systematic Theology*<sup>2</sup> I advanced three more or less related proposals. I continue to think  
29  
30 that what I wrote on those pages is true. But the proposals are insufficient to one part of their joint task,  
31  
32 and my language was intended to show that I suspected as much. I should have explicitly said so. A  
33  
34 quick look at each of the proposals follows, differently ordered than in the *Systematic Theology*.  
35  
36

37         My exploitation of Romans 1:3-4 is - I dare to suggest - a necessary and significant corrective to  
38  
39 the tradition's usual way of thinking about the Son's divinity. These two artful verses - whether they  
40  
41 were devised by Paul or found as an existent confessional formula - are perhaps the New Testament's  
42  
43 closest approach to a "two-natures" doctrine. The Son is, "according to the flesh," that is, as a creature,  
44  
45 constituted as such by human descent, and indeed by specific descent from David. So far so easily read  
46  
47 within the standard tradition. But then note what is paired with this! He is "determined"<sup>3</sup> to be "the  
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53 2. 1:141-144.  
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56  
57 3. Not "declared" as in NRSV, ready as always to blunt Scripture's more offensive statements.  
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powerful<sup>4</sup> Son of God” by action of the Spirit; and so not by divine origin as the christological tradition might make us expect, but rather by the Resurrection, the supreme act of the Spirit who is “Giver of Life”.

Within the mystery of the triune God’s specific eternity, the Son’s subsistence must therefore be as much from the Spirit as *telos* as from the Father as *arche*. Or anyway, so the Scriptures’ pervasive eschatological-pneumatological orientation suggests - an orientation scrupulously ignored by traditional doctrine of the Son’s divinity. Thus attending to Romans 1:3-4 is in itself a much needed move. The only thing is: the passage is not about the Son’s *pre*-existence, which is what people are worried about.

The second proposal is more directly about pre-existence, and is in my judgment again a needed observation and corrective. For the most obvious pre-existence of Christ attested by Scripture is his active presence in old Israel: as the Glory of the Lord, the Angel of the Lord, and the Word of the Lord.<sup>5</sup> These appearances were recognized by the rabbis as one reality, God’s *Shekinah*, God as his own “dwelling” among his people, as one who is other than God yet is the same God. Patristic exegetes even recognized in the Glory’s “appearance” to Ezekiel<sup>6</sup> as “a man” the actual man who would again appear in God’s Glory on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Without fully exploiting the fact of Christ’s active and identifiable presence in Israel, and the scriptural testimony to the presence, doctrines of his pre-existence will always be biblically rootless. We must not merely note that Christ is present in the Old Testament; we must shape our understanding of his

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4. The phrase often translated “with power”, as if there was or could have been the divine Son of God without power, is adjectival and should be translated that way. Just as “Spirit of holiness” is in the diction of this confession equivalent to “Holy Spirit”.

5. And as other, more structural, phenomena.

6. In the call vision, to which see my commentary on Ezekiel, ad loc.

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3  
4 person and work to his life there. Still, we do indeed have to account ontologically for this presence. It  
5  
6 would appear that a pre-existence of the Old Testament pre-existence is called for.  
7

8 Here is where my third previous proposal fits - and fails. In the *Systematic Theology* I suggest a  
9  
10 “pattern of movement” within the divine life. The problem is not that the suggestion is merely false, but  
11  
12 that it is - as has several times been pointed out - hopelessly vague. It either gets us nowhere, or if it does  
13  
14 may get us to a wrong place - though insistence that it *must* mislead is not quite warranted. So what to  
15  
16 do? Here goes.  
17

18 It is not as an individual instance of humanity as such, not as one among many who have the  
19  
20 same human nature<sup>7</sup>, that Jesus is the second hypostasis of the Trinity. According to Aquinas - and to me  
21  
22 - a divine hypostasis is “a subsisting relation”, that is, a relation that is its own term, and so is not an  
23  
24 *instance* of anything at all<sup>8</sup>. If then we obey my opening maxims, particularly the first, we will say that it  
25  
26 is Jesus’ *relation to* the Father - and not Jesus as a specimen of humanity - which is the second hypostasis  
27  
28 of Trinity. The Father’s sending and Jesus’ obedience *are* the second hypostasis in God.  
29

30  
31 Next step: *this relation itself* can indeed subsist “before” Mary’s conception, in whatever sense of  
32  
33 “before” obtains in the Trinity’s immanent life. For that life is constituted in nothing but the web of such  
34  
35 relations, which as terms we are told to call Father, Son and Spirit. In the divine life there is therefore no  
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37 line on which the relation describable as God’s sending and Jesus’ obedience could occupy a position  
38  
39 “after” anything. And again we must remember that antecedent to God’s life, there is no realm in which  
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41 the Son/Logos might “pre”-exist, or not.<sup>9</sup>  
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48 7. Whatever “human nature” is.  
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50  
51 8. Except, I suppose, the class of subsisting relations - which is a small class, with three members.  
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53  
54 9. Some of my critics seem not to have gotten it altogether into their thinking, that time is created.  
55

56 Admittedly, it is a hard thing to do.  
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4 What in the triune life has ontological *pre*-cedence to the Son as subsistent relation, is the  
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6 “monarchy” of the Father: his relation to Jesus is the condition of the possibility of Jesus’ relation to him.  
7  
8 Yet the Father himself does not subsist otherwise than as a relation to the Son - the circle is the very  
9  
10 point. Therefore, since there is no way in which anything could be precedent to the Father, there is  
11  
12 nothing precedent to the Son as subsistent relation.  
13

14 I am not sure whether or not this analysis fits what folk have in mind as the “pre-existence of the  
15  
16 *Logos*. But then, I have never been sure what anyone who is not an antecedently convinced neo-Platonist  
17  
18 can actually have in mind under that rubric. I continue to regard *Logos asarkos* , used for something  
19  
20 “before” the Incarnation on any sort of line, as a *Vorstellung* in futile search of a *Begriff*.  
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