

# One God

## Jesus Has A Beginning

by Sean Finnegan

This time of year, we are saturated with songs about the birth of Christ. However, there is disagreement about what exactly happened at his birth. What you believe about the birth of Christ depends on your belief about when he began. There are several models of understanding Christ. Some believe that Christ had no beginning—that he was never created. Others believe that he was brought into existence at a set point in time. Some place his beginning just before creation, and others regard Christ as having come into existence for the first time when he was born of Mary.

—Trinitarian— The Son has no beginning; he has always existed
—Arian— The Son has a beginning; he was created before the universe
—Unitarian— The Son was brought into existence in Mary's womb

The first question that needs an answer is: "Does Jesus have a beginning?" The majority of Christians believe that Jesus has always existed. In order to tackle this question, consider the

following quote from the Nicene Creed of 325AD.<sup>1</sup>

"We believe in one God the Father...and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, the only-begotten, **begotten from the Father**, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, **begotten not made**, consubstantial with the Father...And those who say "**there once was when he was not**," and "**before he was begotten he was not**," and that he came to be from things that were not, or from another hypostasis or substance, affirming that the son of God is subject to change or alteration these the catholic and apostolic church **anathematizes** [bans/curses/excommunicates]."<sup>2</sup>

At the center of the controversy surrounding the issue of beginnings, is the term "begotten." According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, "begotten" means to procreate as the father. The word "procreate" is comprised of two words, "pro" meaning forth and "create" meaning to bring into existence. Putting this all together yields the following definition for "begotten"—to bring forth into existence as the father. Let me say that again: **to be begotten means that you have been brought into existence by your father**. It is easy to see why this little word could cause so much trouble for those who believe Jesus has always existed.<sup>3</sup>

The creed quoted above defines Jesus specifically as "only-begotten, begotten from the Father," but later it goes on to excommunicate anyone who says, "before he was begotten he was not." This seems very confusing. Was Jesus begotten? Yes, the creed has already stated this. Then that means that he was brought into existence by a father. Thus, if he was brought into existence, there was a time when he did not exist. But if someone says, "there was when he was not," that person is excommunicated. I find this very confusing. Thankfully, the Scriptures are our standard for truth and not the creeds of men.

What does the Bible say about the beginning of Jesus?

Hebrews 1:5

For to which of the angels did He ever say, "YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE **BEGOTTEN**<sup>4</sup> YOU"? And again, "**I WILL BE A FATHER TO HIM AND HE SHALL BE A SON TO ME**"?

This section is talking about the superiority of Jesus to the angels. None of the angels was called God's son. Nevertheless, why is Jesus called the Son? This is because "today" God begot him. I repeat, Jesus is the Son of God because God begot him on a certain day. There is a day when the Son came into existence. Otherwise, the Father could not say, "today I have begotten you" (see Psalms 2:7; Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5). If this verse is true, then **there was a time before the Son was begotten**.

We have already seen that "begotten" means to come into existence; thus, there was a time before the Son came into existence. It is impossible for someone to exist before he comes into existence. Furthermore, the second half of this verse applies the prophecy found in II Samuel 7:14 to Jesus. There was a time when God became the Father of Jesus. Otherwise said, God was not the Father of Jesus until He became his Father. This prophecy was given by Nathan to David in approximately 1,000BC. As of this date, God was speaking about the Son in the future tense—"I will be his father." Thus, either the Son did not exist at this time, or, if he did exist, he did not enjoy a father-son relationship with God.

When did God become the Father of the Son? I believe that this text brings these two Old Testament quotes together in such a way that answers this question. **God became the Father of the Son when the Son came into existence** through the Father's begetting. This seems to be the plain reading of this verse (Hebrews 1:5). In fact, this is confirmed in what Gabriel said to Mary:

Luke 1:35

The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and **for that reason** the holy child shall be called the Son of God."

How did God accomplish the act of begetting His Son? It was done when the holy spirit (power of God) overshadowed Mary. As a

direct result of this virginal conception, Jesus is called the Son of God. This makes perfect sense! What Hebrews 1:5 alludes to, Gabriel states plainly—**Jesus is the Son of God because his origin is through a special creation of God in the womb of his mother.** In order for Jesus to exist before he was born, there must be a distance wedged between this event and the begetting of the Son. Yet, here they are linked together.

There is another man who was specially created by God (i.e., he did not come into existence through the normal process of two parents). Adam was formed from the dust of the earth by God. Thus, if our understanding is correct, Adam would also be called the son of God.

Luke 3:23, 38

When He began his ministry, Jesus himself was about thirty years of age, being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph, the son of Eli...the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, **the son of God.**

As Adam was the son of God, so is Jesus the Son of God. In fact, Paul refers to Jesus as the second Adam because their origins and functions are so similar (I Corinthians 15:21-23; Romans 5:12,ff). Now, has anyone suggested that Adam existed before he was born? Certainly not; this is foolish. So why is it entertained when the discussion moves to the second Adam, Jesus?

Galatians 4:4

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, **born**<sup>5</sup> of a woman, **born**<sup>6</sup> under the Law,

When it was finally the right time, God sent (commissioned) His Son. The Son was born (brought into existence) of (out from) a woman. The word translated "born" literally means, to come into existence; to be created, exist by creation. The word translated "of" in the phrase "born of a woman" literally means: of, from, out of, denoting origin or source. Putting this all together explains that **the origin (beginning point) of Jesus' life was when he was brought into existence out from a woman.** He was also born (brought into existence) under the Law—he was alive before the Law had been fulfilled. This statement about the origin of the Messiah is marvelous. (Compare this verse to Romans 1:3 where the same word "born" and the same word "of" are used in this way).

All of these texts and others (John 1:14,18; 3:16,18; Romans 1:3; I John 4:9; 5:1,18) make clear that Jesus was begotten/born and that he did, in fact, have a beginning. If Jesus had a beginning, then he cannot be God; but there is still more to determine....

The second question that needs to be answered is: "When did that beginning occur?" The Arian position states that God the Father alone is eternal, that **Christ was created** out of nothing as the first, and greatest, of all creatures,

and that he in turn created the universe."<sup>7</sup> This is what six and a half million Jehovah's Witnesses believe.

In order to answer this second question, consider the following Scriptures.

Matthew 1:18

Now the **birth**<sup>8</sup> of Jesus Christ was as follows: when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word for "birth" is the same as the English word "genesis." "Genesis" means beginning, which is why it is the name of the first book of the Bible. Thus, this verse tells us that the beginning of Jesus Christ was a result of his mother being "with child by the holy spirit." This is absolutely essential to understand—**Jesus has a genesis (beginning), and it was related to the miracle in the womb of Mary** (remember Luke 1:35).

Matthew 1:20

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the child who has been **conceived**<sup>9</sup> in her is of the holy spirit."

Most translations say "the child who has been **conceived** in her" instead of "the child who has been **begotten** in her." This is the only time in the NASB when this Greek word is translated "conceived!"

Why would they not translate the word "begotten" as they do in the other places that this word is used? I believe the answer is that this is a clear statement that Jesus was begotten (brought into existence by his Father) in Mary through the holy spirit. That is the whole package in one verse! Jesus, the Son, was brought into existence (begotten), and that beginning was in Mary as a result of the creative power of the holy spirit. How simple, how elegant is this understanding! There is no confusion about being begotten twice. Words can be taken at their plain meaning rather than hiding them through interpretive translating tricks.<sup>10</sup> Besides, if Jesus was not a human like Adam, then why should it matter that he lived perfectly? If he is really the second Adam, then he **could** have sinned. He **could** have messed up, but he **did not**. What an example for us to emulate!

Acts 1:1

"The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that **Jesus began to do and teach,**"

Luke wrote the books of both Luke and Acts to Theophilus. Here in Acts (the second volume), Luke makes reference to his first volume (the book of Luke). He says that in the former volume, he told about what Jesus began to do and teach. If Jesus began to "do and teach" in the book of Luke (which starts with his birth in the first chapter; remember Luke 1:35?), then **Jesus could not have done**

**anything or taught anything before he was born!**

Hebrews 1:1 and 2

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world [ages].

If the Son were there in the Old Testament times, what was he doing? This text tells us that **only in these last days has God spoken through His Son**. This makes a lot of sense if His Son did not exist before. But it sure would be boring to have existed for millennia without being permitted to speak or participate in the project of God's creation.

Jesus had a beginning, and if he had a beginning, then he cannot be God. There was a time before the Son existed! The Son came into existence within the womb of Mary by a direct act of God Himself. Jesus is the Son of God, not because he was begotten before the creation of the universe, but because he was begotten in Mary. And this is what is so special about the birth of Christ.

It kind of makes me feel like singing....

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Footnotes:

1 This creed is universally accepted by the Catholic church and all Orthodox Christian churches.

2 Translation taken from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, see [www.piar.hu/councils/](http://www.piar.hu/councils/)

- 3 This is probably why most modern translations have changed the phrase "only begotten" to "one and only" (see NIV/HCSB/NLT/NRSV/BBE on John 3:16).
- 4 gegennka = 1<sup>st</sup> person singular perfect indicative active of gennaw (to beget)
- 5 genouenon = accusative singular masculine of aorist 2 of ginouai (to come into existence)
- 6 Same exact word as above (footnote 4)
- 7 Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology by Harrison, Bromiley, and Henry, p63
- 8 gennhsiv = genesis, birth, what has come into being
- 9 gennhyen = nominative singular neuter participle aorist 1, passive gennaw (to beget)
- 10 For further discussion on the bias of the translators especially in reference to the subject of Christ, see *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* by Bart Ehrman or *Truth in Translation* by Jason BeDuhn.