

**"THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST DELINEATED
IN TWO ESSAYS"**

by
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Essay I

**"Christ's Own Account of His Person,
and of
The Nature of His Kingdom as Set Forth at His Two Trials"**

Sections 1 through 9

1. What is meant by *the kingdom of heaven*? What is the personal character of its founder and the nature of that kingdom? To know the answers, the natural course would seem to appeal to the Founder himself, Jesus the Messiah, and consider what account he gave of his own character and that of his kingdom. For to believe him sent from God is to believe him incapable of either deceiving or being deceived as to these particulars. He must have understood both his own personal nature and the principles of the religion he was divinely commissioned to introduce.

Having, therefore, a full reliance both on his unerring knowledge and his perfect veracity, our first inquiry should be into the accounts he gave on various occasions, and most especially on the great and final occasion of his trial and condemnation to death.

The sacred historians tell us that Jesus underwent two trials before two distinct tribunals, and on charges totally different. On the first occasion before the Jewish Council, he was found guilty. On the second occasion before Pilate, he was acquitted. But the final result was that Jesus was put to death under the authority of Pilate in his second trial in compliance with the condemnation which had been pronounced by the Jewish Council in the first.

Jesus was tried first before the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council) for *blasphemy* and pronounced guilty of death. He was tried again before the Roman governor, Pilate, for rebellion in setting up pretensions subversive to the existing government and was pronounced not guilty. The Jewish ruler had the will but not the power to inflict capital punishment on Christ. Pilate had the power but not the will. However, though he "found no fault in Him,"

he was ultimately prevailed upon by the Jews to inflict *their* sentence of death. "We¹ have a law," they urged, "and by our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God."

Many persons have somewhat indistinct and confused notions on this most interesting and important portion of the sacred narrative. This is due partly from the brevity, scantiness, and indeed incompleteness of each of the four narratives when taken alone, for each evangelist has recorded, it may be supposed, such circumstances as he was the most struck by or had seen and heard the most of. This indistinctness may be easily cleared away by attentively studying and comparing all four accounts.

2. When the Jewish rulers and people were clamorously demanding the death of Jesus under sentence of the Roman authorities, and Pilate in answer declared that before his Roman tribunal no crime had been proved, saying, "*You take Him and judge Him according to your law*" (John 18:31), his intention evidently was that no heavier penalty should be inflicted than the scourging which was the utmost that the Jews were permitted to inflict. But they replied that the crime of which they had convicted him was a *capital* one by their law, but they were restricted by the Romans from inflicting capital punishment. On this ground they called on the Governor to execute the capital sentence of their court.

Their clamors prevailed because Pilate was apprehensive of a tumult and thus incurring suspicions of disloyalty toward the Emperor, which had been awakened when the people had cried out, "*If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar*" (John 19:12). But this was only brought forward as a plea to influence Pilate. The trial before the Jewish Council had nothing to do with the Roman Emperor; its only focus was "blasphemy," because Jesus "made Himself the Son of God."

It is important now to inquire in what sense the phrase *Son of God* was understood by those who based the sentence of death upon it.

In a certain sense all mankind may be called children of God: ". . . *for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'* Being then the children of God . . ." (Acts 17:28,29, NASB). In a higher sense, those are often called his children whom God has from time to time chosen to be his "peculiar people." Such were the Israelites of old: "*Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says Yahweh: Israel is My son, My firstborn'*" (Ex. 4:22). Even those patriarchs and prophets to whom God revealed himself and made the means of communication between himself and other men might conceivably have the title of sons of God applied to them, distinguishing them from uninspired men. And those who walk in the light are spoken of as the sons of God: "*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God*" (Rom. 8:14).

1 Ἡμεῖς is expressed in the original.

Now we emphatically apply the title "*the Son of God*" to Jesus. Let us determine if a different and higher sense is involved.

3. First, that Jesus is spoken of in Scripture as the Son of God in some different sense from any other person is evident at once from the title "*the only-begotten Son*" (John 3). I need not multiply the citations of passages that must be familiar to everyone even tolerably well-read in the New Testament. Second, on the mount of transfiguration a voice is heard by Peter, James, and John, saying, "*This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*" (Matt. 17:5). At the time of Christ's baptism, the same words were used (Matt. 3:17).

4. No one can doubt that those who believed in Jesus at all must have believed him to be the Son of God in a far different and superior sense than any other. But what was the sense in which they understood the title? Waiving all enigmatic dissertations on the ideas conveyed by "consubstantiality," "personality," "hypostatic-union" and "eternal filiation," let us confine ourselves to such views as we may presume the Apostles laid before the converts they were instructing. Most of them were plain unlearned persons to whom such abstruse disquisition would have been utterly unintelligible. The great practical point to be considered is whether there is that divine character in the Lord Jesus which entitles those who would worship none but the one God to worship him too, thereby honoring the Son even as they honor the Father.

Now there is a maxim relative to the right interpretation of any passage of Scripture that is so obvious when stated it seems strange it should be so often overlooked, and that is *to consider in what sense the words were understood by the persons to whom they were addressed*. We must keep in mind that the presumption is in favor of *that* as the true sense unless reasons to the contrary shall appear. In other words, what was the sense the very hearers of Christ and his Apostles actually attached to their words? For we may be sure that if this was a *mistaken* sense, a correction of it will be found in some part of the Sacred Writings. Whatever other sense the phrase "Son of God" may seem to mean to us, the sense which Jesus and his Apostles meant to convey was that which they *knew their hearers understood them to mean*.

This meaning, then, may be settled by the testimony of his adversaries alone, that is, the sense in which *they* understood him. Now we know that not only at his trial but on many other occasions they charged Christ with blasphemy, as "making Himself God," "making Himself equal with God." They threatened to stone him according to the law of Moses, understanding that blasphemy comprehended the crime of enticing the Jewish people to worship another god besides the one true God, Yahweh.

Now if they had misunderstood his words and had supposed Jesus' language to imply a claim to such divine honor as he did not really mean to claim, then we may be sure that Jesus would immediately have corrected the mistaken impression and explained his real meaning. Any man of common integrity would have done so. Can you imagine a Christian

minister today using an expression misinterpreted by friends or foes to imply he is worthy of divine worship and not hastening to disclaim it?

5. On one occasion Jesus healed a cripple at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, commanding him immediately to *"Rise, take up your bed and walk,"* a work prohibited by the Jewish law. He vindicates himself against his enemies by saying, *"My Father has been working until now, and I have been working"* (John 5:17). The evangelist then tells us, *"Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His [proper]² Father, making Himself equal with God"* (v. 18).

On another occasion (John 10:33), when Jesus said *"I and the Father are one,"* the Jews took up stones to stone him for blasphemy, *"because,"* they said, *"You, being a man, make Yourself God."* Jesus defends himself by alleging a passage of their Scriptures in which the title of "God" is applied to those *"to whom the word of God came"* (v. 35), implying at the same time a *distinction* between himself and those persons, and his own superiority to them: *"Do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"* However, *this* did not necessarily imply anything more than superiority and divine mission, and accordingly we find the Jews enduring it. But when Jesus goes on to say, *"that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him,"* we find them immediately seeking to seize him. But Jesus escapes out of their hands.

But the most important record by far in respect to the point now before us, is that which I originally proposed to notice--the account of our Lord's trial and condemnation before the Jewish Council.

6. If one does not carefully study and compare the accounts of the different evangelists concerning the trial of Jesus, he is apt to take for granted that the crime for which our Lord was condemned was that of falsely pretending to be the Messiah or Christ. However, whatever the Jews may have thought of *that* crime, they certainly could neither have found it mentioned nor death denounced against it in the Law of Moses. At the very least, it could have been no crime unless it were proved to be a false pretension, which they did not even attempt. Nor could they have brought that offense, even if proved, under the head of blasphemy unless they had been accustomed to expect the Messiah as a divine person, for then the claim of being the Messiah and the claim of divine honor would have amounted to the same thing.

But the Jews were so far from having this expectation that they were completely at a loss to answer our Lord's question, *"If David then calls him 'Lord,' how is He his son?"* (Matt. 22:45).

² Our version, it is important to observe, does not give the full force of the passage as it stands in the original. It should be rendered, *"that God was his own proper (or peculiar) Father"* (πατέρα ἰδίου). This it seems was the sense in which (according to John) Jesus was understood by his hearers to call God his Father, and Himself "the Son of God."

This was a question they would have answered without a moment's hesitation if they had expected that the Christ, though the Son of David after the flesh, should yet be the Son of God in such a sense as to make him a Divine Being also. Whatever good reasons, then, they might have found in prophecy for such an expectation, it seems plain they did not embrace them.

The Jewish Council could not, it appears, convict our Lord for a capital offense merely for professing, even though falsely, to be the Christ; and accordingly we may observe that they did not even seek for any proof that his pretension was false. But as soon as he acknowledged himself to be the "Son of the living God," they immediately pronounced him "guilty of death" for blasphemy--that is, for seeking to lead the Jewish nation to pay divine honor to another besides the true God (Deut. 13). They therefore convict Jesus on his own testimony: "*We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God*" (John 19:7).

7. No candid reader can doubt, then, that the Jews understood Jesus to claim a divine character; and he himself must have *known* that they so understood him. Therefore, it can little be doubted that they must have *rightly* understood him; for if Jesus, condemned as he was on the evidence of his own words, had known that those words were understood differently from his real meaning and yet had not corrected the mistake, he would have been himself bearing false witness against himself. In regard to speaking truthfully, there is no difference between a man saying what is untrue in *every* sense and saying what may be true in a *certain* sense yet false in the sense in which he knows it to be understood.

It is a mere waste of labor, learning, and ingenuity to ask what meaning such-and-such an expression is *capable* of bearing in a case where we know, as we do here, what was the sense which was *actually* conveyed to the hearers and the sense which the speaker must have been aware it *did* convey to them.

Therefore, Jesus did truly acknowledge the fact alleged against him--that of claiming to be the Son of God in such a sense as to incur the penalty of death for blaspheming according to the law. Thus the whole question of his being rightly or wrongfully condemned turns on the justness of that claim, that is, on his actually having or not having that divine character which the Jews understood him to assume. For if he were *not* himself the Son of God and yet called himself so, knowing in what sense they understood the title, I really am at a loss to see on what ground we can find fault with the sentence they pronounced.

It appears to me, therefore, that the whole question of Christ's divine mission, and consequently the truth of Christianity, turns on the claim he so plainly appears to have made: that of divine honor for himself.

8. This conclusion arises out of the mere consideration of the title "Son of God" or "only-begotten Son of God" as applied to Jesus Christ, without taking into account any of the

confirmations of the same conclusion--and there are very many--which may be drawn from other parts of the Sacred Writings.

Now there is indeed not one of these recorded actions and expressions of the Evangelists and Apostles that an ingenious critic may not explain away, proceeding much like a legal advocate who examines every possible sense in which some law or precedent argues against his client and coming up with the one that best suits his purpose. But to do so violates the maxim laid down above, namely, that we should not consider any interpretation whatever that such words can bear, but only that which they must have been known to convey to the hearers at that time.

Unless we can conceive of Christ and his Apostles knowingly promoting idolatry, and unless we can consider Jesus himself as either an insane fanatic or a deliberate impostor, we must assign to him that divine character which he and his Apostles so distinctly claimed for him and acknowledge that God truly *"was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself"* (2 Cor. 5:19).

9. Not less important are the lessons to be drawn from the second trial, that before Pilate. The Jewish Council, having found Jesus guilty of a capital crime but not being permitted under the Romans laws to inflict capital punishment, immediately bring him before Pilate on a new and perfectly different charge. *"Then the whole multitude of them arose and led Him to Pilate. And they began to accuse Him, saying, 'We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King'"* (Luke 23:1,2).

The crime of which Jesus had been convicted by the Jewish Council, *that of blasphemy*, was no crime at all in the court of the Roman Governor, and the crime alleged in this latter court before Pilate, *treason against the Roman emperor*, was no crime at all under the law of Moses. So how does Jesus defend himself when charged before Pilate of "speaking against Caesar" and "making Himself a King"? By drawing the line between secular and spiritual government. Referring back to a former occasion when his Jewish adversaries sought to trap him into committing the offense of interfering with the secular government of Caesar, we read:

So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, that they might seize on His words, in order to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor. . . . "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But He perceived their craftiness, and said to them, "Why do you test Me? Show Me a denarius. Whose image and inscription does it have?" They answered and said, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:20-25).

So now let us compare his reply to Pilate:

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (John 18:36-37).

The result was that Pilate acquitted Jesus, declaring publicly that he "found no fault at all in Him." It is plain, therefore, that Pilate must have believed, or at least professed to believe, that the declarations of Jesus were true and that they amounted to a total disavowal of all interference with the secular government by himself or his followers.

Much ingenuity has been expended, indeed wasted, in making our Lord's expressions bear every sense that the words can possibly carry. Yet a man of little or no ingenuity but of plain good sense and sincerity of purpose can hardly fail to know the meaning if he simply keeps in mind the *occasion* on which Jesus was speaking and the sense in which he must have known his language would have been understood.

The occasion was his trial for *treason* before a Roman governor, a design to subvert or interfere with the established government. Pilate clearly understood Jesus to plead "not guilty" to this charge, and he accepted it. Therefore, Pilate must have taken Christ's declaration, "My kingdom is not of this world," as amounting to a renunciation of all secular coercion, a renunciation of all forcible measures in behalf of his religion. And we cannot suppose Jesus to have really meant anything different from the sense in which he knew his words would be understood without imputing to him a fraudulent evasion. The ingenuity wasted in trying to explain our Lord's words in some other way is a means to escape some of the consequences that follow from taking them in their simple and obvious sense. In other words, it is a means to escape the logical consequences that do not suit their own purposes.

"Christ's Own Account of His Person, and of The Nature of His Kingdom as Set Forth at His Two Trials" by Richard Whately, *The Kingdom of Christ Delineated in Two Essays* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854). This essay has been condensed and moderately rephrased for clarity.