

G L O S S A

The Trinity and the Prepositions

The writers of the New Testament use a number of different prepositions to describe the relationships among the persons of the Trinity. In this context, an understanding of Greek prepositions can help us to better understand the biblical revelation of the Trinity, especially in three important aspects: in Himself in His eternal existence, in His economy, and in our experience. In this issue we will look at the first of these three aspects, the Triune God in Himself in His eternal existence, leaving the other two aspects for later issues of *Affirmation & Critique*.

Different Approaches to the Significance of Prepositions in Biblical Texts

Before considering the use of prepositions in relation to the eternal existence of the Triune God, it must first be acknowledged that the study of the use of prepositions at this level of distinction has both scholarly proponents and detractors. In this article we are particularly interested in focusing on the prepositions *eis*, *en*, *pros*, and *para*. These prepositions in particular have also been mentioned by some grammarians who deny any real distinction between *eis* and *en* and between *pros* and *para*. Blass and Debrunner in *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* and Moulton and Turner in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* dismiss this approach as reading too much into the subtle nuances of the language. Both grammars pay particular attention to the historical development of the Greek language. For example, Turner speaks of the use of *eis* instead of *en* in a local sense, holding that the distinction between motion and rest is obscured in Hellenistic Greek. He makes a similar point when discussing *pros* and *para*, stating that the distinction between *pros* with the accusative and *para* with the dative has been obscured (3:254). While New Testament Greek does reflect many of the transitions that occurred in the language as it developed from classical Attic Greek to Hellenistic Greek, perhaps we should not so readily ascribe to the writers of the New Testament a lack of concern for the distinctions in meaning of the prepositions. Instead, we should be more willing to accede to them a careful use of these prepositions, especially when they were writing about a subject as crucial as the Divine Trinity. The very use of prepositions in ways that depart from the norms of the language in statements concerning the Trinity is an indication that the writers were attempting to say something particular and precise. Turner states

that John does not often confuse *en* and *eis* and that, except for Matthew, has fewer examples of *eis* = *en* than any New Testament author. The main example cited by Turner and by Blass and Debrunner of this confusion of prepositional uses in John's writings is John 1:18. Turner says, "There is nothing very profound here concerning mutual motion between Father and Son" (254). In contrast, we argue below that John was very purposeful in his use of the preposition *eis* in this verse.

Although Maximilian Zerwick gives credence to the argument that the Hellenistic use of prepositions has blurred their distinctions in the New Testament, he points out that a special sense of *eis* in John 1:18 and *pros* in 1:1 cannot easily be excluded. "The fourth gospel offers scarcely any other example to suggest a neglect of the distinction between *eis* and *en*" (34). Regarding the distinction between *pros* and the other prepositions rendered 'with' Zerwick says, "Elsewhere in John *pros* seems always (about 100 times!) to be used in a dynamic sense, (which in our case may be understood as one of personal relationship) while the sense 'with someone' is always rendered by *para* with the dative, or by *meta* and the genitive" (34).

There is also scarcely any other example in the Gospel of John, other than 1:18, that suggests a neglect of the distinction between *eis* and *en*. John uses *en* in the expression "on Jesus' bosom" in John 13:23 (*en tō kolpō*) compared to (*eis ton kolpon*) in 1:18. This lends support to the thought that John knew of the distinction between *eis* and *en* and that he was not using these prepositions as some form of interchangeable variations of language, devoid of specific meaning. E. A. Abbott in his book *Johannine Grammar* states, "There can be no doubt that *eis ton kolpon*...is intended to mean something different from 13:23" (240). Elsewhere he says, "The peculiarity and the importance of 1:18 *ho ōn eis ton kolpon* are in danger of being obscured by vague affirmations that *eis* is used for *en* in Byzantine and modern Greek, and that the same use is to be found in N.T. generally and in John elsewhere, e.g. 11:7" (546).

W. R. Coxwell Rogers, in his article "The Preposition EIS," argues against the approach of Turner and Blass and Debrunner:

Is it correct to say that "one preposition is put for another?"

If so, it seems strange that the inspired writers especially should have passed over the preposition which was the proper one to have expressed their meaning, and should have selected another one in its place, which was not the proper one, and have used it in its stead.

It is very clear that some prepositions have acquired meaning that more or less deviates from their distinctive and peculiar meanings, from the usages of language; but surely prepositions ought to have their own meanings attached to them, whenever the sense of the sentences will bear it. If this is the fact, how ought it to guide us and operate upon us in the interpretation of Scripture? As all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God; as it embraces within its limits vital doctrines; and as the inner meaning and very essence of these doctrines is sometimes wrapped up in the deep significance of a small preposition, how cautious ought we to be, as interpreters of the Word of God, to adhere closely to the simple, natural and forcible meaning of a preposition, and not allow it to be changed or twisted into a meaning strictly speaking not its own, except where rigid necessity requires it. How frequently is the richness and forcibleness of some great gospel truth lost sight of, by not attending to this rule of interpretation (419).

Others have also argued for the distinctive use of the prepositions and that *eis* in 1:18 and *pros* in 1:1-2 are used in a dynamic sense rather than being merely equivalent to prepositions of location such as *en* and *para* with the dative case respectively. These writers include I. de la Potterie, L. Devillers, and Francis J. Moloney. A consideration of the natural meaning of the preposition in the contexts of relationships in the Trinity is not beyond the linguistic or even logical boundaries of the use of language. By granting the notion that the author may have been trying to make a point in the specific use of prepositions, some light can be shed on the biblical revelation of the Divine Trinity.

The Triune God in Himself in His Eternal Existence

Four prepositions convey information about the Triune God in His eternal existence: *pros*, *eis*, *para*, and *en*. The use of these prepositions in statements regarding the Trinity, especially concerning the Father and the Son, reveals aspects of the eternal distinction between and the interrelationship within the Trinity.

In the Gospel of John the Son is with (*pros*) the Father, or more specifically the Word (Logos) is with (*pros*) God. The radical meaning of the preposition *pros* is 'facing.' *Pros* typically means 'towards' when it is used with verbs of motion and is followed by a noun in the accusative case. However, according to John 1:1, the Word was with (*pros*) God in the beginning, i.e., in eternity past. Also, in speaking of the Son as the eternal life, John says the Son was *pros* the Father

(1 John 1:2). The use of *pros* in these instances is unusual. A stative verb (*to be*) is united with *pros*, a preposition of motion. In a few places in the New Testament, *pros* is used with a stative verb (such as the verb *to be*) and carries with it the idea of active communication and interrelationship between two parties. According to Marvin Vincent, this distinctive juxtaposition of a stative verb with a preposition of motion indicates that the divine Word not only abides with the Father from all eternity but is in a living, active relation of communion with Him, which means that the Word is not only co-eternal with God in respect to *being* but is eternally *in active communion* with Him (2:34, 35). This active communion or fellowship which transpires between the Father and the Son is enlarged in the New Testament to include the apostles and the believers: "That which we have seen and heard we report also to you that you also may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). So now "through Him we both have access in one Spirit unto (*pros*) the Father" (Eph. 2:18; cf. John 14:6). In addition, the use of *pros* can be seen to express the direction, the tendency, and the moral movement of the Being called the Word; His aspiration tends toward God (Godet, 1:245).

Most translate *pros* in John 1:1 and 1 John 1:2 as *with*. There are three other prepositions in Greek—*meta*, *sun*, and *para*—that are frequently translated *with*, all of which carry slightly different nuances of meaning. According to Godet, if John had used *meta*, the sense would have been 'in the society of'; if he had used *sun* (or *en*), the sense would have been 'in union with,' and if he had used *para*, the sense would have been 'near to' (245). Without the use of *pros*, the sense of both being and active communion would have been lost.

Another example where a preposition of motion is combined with a stative verb is in John 1:18. As the only begotten Son (or "only begotten God" in the best manuscripts), He is *eis* (lit., *into*) the bosom of the Father. John uses the present participle of the verb *to be* with the preposition *eis*. *Eis* implies motion into and like *pros* governs a noun in the accusative case. He does not just abide *in* the bosom of the Father, but according to Godet, "He ever presses anew with an equal intimacy into the bosom of the Father, who reveals Himself to Him in a manner suitable to His position and work at every moment. The use of *eis* instead of *en* expresses precisely this active and living relation" (282). The use of the present participle implies that this being *into* the Father's bosom is timeless. It refers to the Son's eternal condition as well as His life on earth as God's tabernacle among men.

The next preposition *para* occurs in John 1:14. In this verse the use of *para* with the genitive case conveys a twofold sense. The incarnated Word is also the only Begotten from (*para*) the Father. The genitive case is the case of

separation, and it is used with prepositions indicating motion from, such as *apo*, meaning ‘from,’ and *ek*, meaning ‘out of.’ The radical meaning of *para* is ‘alongside’ or ‘beside’ and hence ‘with.’ So with the genitive case *para* carries the force of ‘from beside’ or ‘from with.’ In the New Testament, particularly in the writings of John, it is used to indicate the distinction, not separation of the Father and the Son. (cf. Vincent, on John 6:46 “from with the idea of association with: *from with* God,” 152). John 1:14 indicates the Son’s eternal begottenness; He stands eternally in the relationship of a begotten Son of the Father. Not only is He *from* the Father as His source, but also in His begotten condition the Father is *with* Him. In 6:46 Jesus refers to Himself as He who is from (*para*) God. John uses the present participle with the preposition *para* (as he did in 1:18 with *eis*) which carries the force of timeless duration. In 7:29 Jesus says, “I know Him, because I am from (*para*) Him.” In this verse John employs the present indicative *eimi* with the preposition *para*. The use of the present tense in these verses speaks not only of the historical Jesus in His relationship with God but also of a relationship that permanently transcends time and space (Moloney, 67). As a result, when the Son came forth in the process of time, He came *from with* the Father (John 16:28; cf. 8:16, 29; 16:32). Therefore, He could say that whoever has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:9). (This point will be covered in later articles in this series.)

The preposition *para* is also used with reference to the Spirit in John 15:26. The Spirit is described as the Spirit of reality who proceeds from (*para*) the Father. In this verse the verb *proceeds* is a present indicative which can also carry the sense of timeless duration mentioned above. This verse can have both an economical sense as well as an essential sense. The first part of the verse, “the Comforter,...whom I will send to you from (*para*) the Father” is parallel with the second part of the verse, “the Spirit of reality, who proceeds from (*para*) the Father.” The procession from the Father is the sending by the Son. Yet, Alford (quoting Stier in his book *Die Reden des Herrn Jesu*) says that this verse can also be taken essentially:

The first clause he regards as spoken economically, of the Spirit in His office as Paraclete, sent from the Father by the glorified Son (or, by the Father in the Son’s name, 14:26), and bringing in the dispensation of the Spirit; the second ontologically, of the essential nature of the Spirit Himself, that He proceeds forth from the Father. (And if from the Father, from the Son also,—see 16:15 and those passages where the Spirit is said to be His Spirit, Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:11; also Rev. 22:1). Perhaps however it is better to take the whole economically... whom I send from the Father is parallel with who proceeds from the Father, and the procession from the Father is the sending by the Son (Alford, 863).

The preposition which is used with stative verbs and indicates location is *en*. It is equivalent to the English preposition ‘in.’ of rest *En* is used to show the coinherence of the Son and the Father and indicates that, although there is a distinction between the Father and the Son, they are never separate. This is particularly clear in John 14, where the union of the Son and the Father is stressed. He who has seen the Son has seen the Father. How can this be? Because the Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son (vv. 10-11; 10:38; 17:21). Paul also spoke of the oneness in the Triune God in Colossians 2:9. In (*en*) Christ all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily. He embodies all the fullness of what makes God God, that is, His very “Godness,” all that the Triune God is. However, this union is not a static union but a very active one, as the use of the three other prepositions—*pros*, *eis*, and *para*—indicates.

The Son is constantly proceeding *para* the Father, and He is constantly in motion, fellowship, and communion *pros* the Father and *eis* the Father’s bosom. In His eternal existence with the Father, there is a proceeding forth and a receiving back. This is a characteristic of His eternal being and also a characteristic of His working in His economy. “Because out from (*ek*) Him and through (*dia*) Him and to (*eis*) Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

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