

# Notes on John 8:42

## Did Jesus Literally "Proceed Forth" From the Father?

Our understanding of the nature of the Godhead is constructed as with any biblical doctrine: we take the preponderance of evidence from the Scriptures, line upon line, precept upon precept, comparing Scripture with Scripture. When it comes to ambiguous or less clear passages, we explain these through the clearer passages.

It's by this hermeneutical principle that we interpret texts that talk about everlasting fire and the smoke of torment that rises up forever and ever. We gather all of the texts that talk about hellfire and the ultimately fate of the wicked and we establish our doctrine based on the weight of the evidence, allowing clearer passages to interpret the less clear.

Suppose that we come across the word "begotten" in reference to Christ and we assume that this must mean that Christ was generated from the substance of the Father at some point in the distant past.

Or suppose that we read the phrase "only true God" and we conclude that this must mean only the Father is God, and that while Christ is Lord He is not God in the same sense of the Father.

Or suppose we assume that when Jesus said that He proceeded forth and came from God that this must mean that He literally came out of the Father, like a clone would come out of a parent cell.

If we arrive at these interpretations without carefully examining the context, studying the meaning of words in their original language, comparing Scripture with Scripture, then aren't we allowing human interpretation to supersede Scripture in authority? Wouldn't we be making the same mistake as those who "prove" everlasting hellfire and Sunday sacredness by a superficial reading of Scripture? And yet this is exactly what anti-Trinitarians have done in reading interpretations into Scripture without abiding by the above hermeneutical principles.

Let's take the last example above, where in the anti-Trinitarian view, Jesus "proceeded out" of the Father's essential being prior to any divine act of creation.

A key text that is used to support this view is John 8:42:

Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I **proceeded forth** and **came from** God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me.

The two relevant phrases, highlighted in the above text, are:

"proceeded forth" (Greek *exerchomai*)

"came from" (Greek *ek*)

Do these phrases prove that, back in eternity, Jesus very literally came out of the Father's being?

According to Greek grammars, though *ek* has varying nuances, the core meaning is driven by the idea of separation from something. This word can connote either coming out from inside something (like exiting a city) but more often expresses separation, increasing the distance between one thing and another.

The context of John 8 provides several reasons for rejecting the anti-Trinitarian interpretation of verse 42.

John 8 opens with the confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders over the woman caught in adultery (vss 1-11). The rest of the chapter involves a debate that appears to have been launched by the incident with the adulteress.

Note the following key points:

- Jesus claims to be the light of the world (vs. 12)
- The Pharisees allege that the only evidence which Jesus had was his own assertion, and therefore could not be entitled to belief (vs 13)
- Jesus challenges the Pharisees that they do not know where He came from or where He is going (vs. 14)
- Jesus reiterates and expands this point in vss. 16-28:
  - He was "sent" by the Father (vss. 16,18,26) (the Greek is *pempō*, meaning "dispatched")
  - Jesus claims that His own witness is backed up by that of His heavenly Father (vs. 19)
  - He will go where the Jewish leaders cannot go (vss. 21-22)
  - He is from above while they are from the world below (vs. 23)
  - Jesus claims to be the Messiah, an absolute divine being (vs. 24, 28; literally "I Am" as in John 8:58).
- Jesus' comments thus far in John 8 are in reference to His mission to save the lost world (i.e. He was sent from heaven by the Father as the light of the world, and if the Pharisees had known the true character of the Father, they would have been able to discern the work of the Son sent in their behalf).
  - Being sent by the Father controls the understanding of what Christ is describing here.
  - The Greek word *pempō* means to be dispatched on a temporary errand, and in this context implies being sent on some kind of mission.
  - Thus, Jesus' comments are not about His origin, but about His earthly mission.
  - The statement in vs. 42 about coming "from God" seems best understood as a further comment about that mission.
  - Hence, it is not describing an event prior to Earth's creation, but is describing Christ's entrance into this world through the incarnation.

Validity for this exegesis of John 8:42 is further borne out by the following:

- The Greek word *exerchomai* translated "proceeded forth" appears in John 13:3: "Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come [*exerchomai*] from God, and went to God"
  - Jesus understands that after accomplishing His mission on earth He would soon return to His Father from whom He came.
  - If we understand *exerchomai* to mean that Jesus was at some point "created" by the Father, then logically we must assume that when He returned ("went") to the Father that He would be returning to the state from whence He was created (i.e. no longer existing as a separate entity).

- Knowing that this cannot be true, we must conclude that Jesus' message to the Pharisees in John 8:42 is not speaking about His origin as the Son of God, but about His mission to this earth.
  - In John 6:38, Jesus states that He came down from (*apo*) heaven. Three verses later, "The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from [*ek*] heaven." (vs. 41) and they repeat this phrasing again in verse 42.
    - Jesus uses spatial language describing His spatial separation from heaven in order to come to earth.
    - By rephrasing *apo* with *ek*, the Jewish leaders show that *ek* is being used in the same way, namely geographic movement and distancing from something. Jesus clearly ties His separation from the Father to His coming to this earth.
    - As in John 8, this passage makes no statement about some kind of emergence from the Father's being prior to the creation of the universe.
  - In John 16:27,28, Jesus twice says He came (*exerchomai*) from (*para*) God and from (*para*) the Father.
    - *Para* fundamentally points to being spatially beside something or someone (Strong: "near, from beside, at (or in) the vicinity of, to the proximity with"; Thayer: "from, of at, by, besides, near")
    - *Exerchomai* is to leave or depart a place.
    - Thus, in this passage, Christ uses spatial language to describe His coming from the Father to earth in His incarnational form.
    - Jesus creates a parallelism to the *ek* clause in John 8:42:
      - 16:27: "I came out [*exerchomai*] from [*para*] God"
      - 16:28: "I came forth [*exercoma*] from [*para*] the Father"
      - 8:42: "I proceeded forth [*exerchomai*] and came from [*ek*] God"
    - Robertson's Word Pictures (16:28): "came out from the Father (*exēlthon ek tou patros*). Definite act (aorist), the Incarnation, with repetition of *ek* (out of), while in John 16:27 we have (*para tou patros exēlthon*) with no practical distinction between *ek* and *para* in resultant idea."
    - The fact that Jesus mentions coming from the Father to the world, while announcing an imminent departure from the earth to return to His Father (16:28) clinches the point. Jesus is not describing a primordial event back in eternity.
  - There is one use of *exerchomai* that is clearly related to begetting:
    - Heb 7:5 And verily they that are of the sons of Levi, who receive the office of the priesthood, have a commandment to take tithes of the people according to the law, that is, of their brethren, though they come [*exerchomai*] out of the loins of Abraham.
    - This text clearly uses *exerchomai* in a genealogical context, which is shown by its attachment to "loins": the Levites come out of the loins of Abraham.
    - But John 6, 8, and 16 give no such evidence of genealogical intent or use. Rather, multiple evidences point, not to a genealogical context, but to a spatial motif. Jesus relocates from heaven and God to earth and humankind, eventually to return to heaven and God.

Thus, there is no evidence in John 8 or its context to support the idea that Jesus was begotten back in eternity. John's record addresses only the earthly mission of Jesus and His coming from the Father to us in the incarnation.