

Christology, Atonement, and Theosis in *The Urantia Book*

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Christology

1. *Levels of Divinity*

In talking about *Urantia Book* Christology, we must say something about Trinity and divinity in the *Urantia Book*. The *UB* posits the Paradise Trinity, composed of three eternal spiritual beings—the Universal Father, the Eternal Son, and the Infinite Spirit—who are the source of all reality. The persons of the Trinity give origin to three kinds of divine beings called Paradise Sons. The order called the Michael Sons originate in the First and Second persons of the Trinity. The Michaels are also called Creator Sons, since they create what are called local universes, groups of stars with surrounding planets, many of which become inhabited worlds, or evolutionary worlds. Each local universe, when fully developed, will have ten million inhabited worlds.

Jesus, also called Christ Michael, is the creator and administrator of our local universe, Nebadon. Thus, Jesus is not the Eternal Son of Paradise, the second person of the Trinity, but is, rather, a divine Son of direct origin in the First and Second persons of the Trinity, sent to create and rule a local universe.

I initially found this a bit alarming, to hear that Jesus was not the Eternal Son who has existed for all eternity, but now I am happy to recognize Jesus as the divine Son overseeing a vast realm of space, the God-revealer and Savior to this realm of space, even though he does not oversee the *entirety* of creation. An important passage points out that what is crucial here are the fundamental spiritual relationships involved. A Melchizedek author writes, "Though the Christian concept of the Trinity erred in fact, it was practically true with respect to spiritual relationships" (104:1.13 [1145.1]).¹ Christianity erred, in that our local universe Son (Jesus) is not the same person as the Eternal Son, but it got the spiritual relationships *right* in that our Son *does* represent and even *embody* the Eternal Son, revealing the nature of divinity to the entire local universe. On the local universe level, Jesus *is* the Son and the Father, spiritually. But Jesus is not *factually* identical with the Eternal Son. Our Michael Son is the father and creator of a local universe, but he is not past-eternal, as is the Eternal Son.

And so: Is Jesus God? *Technically*, no. *Spiritually* and in his role as revealer of the Father to the local universe, *yes*. Paper 7 says "The Father comes down to you as a personality only through the divine Sons of the Eternal Son" (7:7.4 [89.3]). Therefore was Jesus correctly able to say "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. . . no man goes to the Father except through me . . . he who has seen me has seen the Father" (180:3.7, 9 [1947.6, 8]; John 14:4, 9).

The Urantia Book affirms that Jesus is the divine Savior, and that the way to the Father is through the Son. "Jesus is the spiritual lens in human likeness which makes visible to the material creature Him who is invisible." 169:4.13 (1857.4).

2. A Christology More Athanasian than Arian

Standard Christology was formulated at the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. At Nicea the emphasis was on the co-eternity and co-divinity of Father and Son. In *Urantia Book* terms, they were thinking of the Universal Father and the Eternal Son. At Chalcedon they more directly

¹ This means *Urantia Book* Paper 104, section 1, paragraph 13, which, in the Urantia Foundation edition, this occurs on page 1145, paragraph 1.

addressed Jesus in his roles as Creator Son and as human being, emphasizing his full divinity and full humanity.

Although *The Urantia Book* pictures Jesus as a divine son who is not co-eternal with the Father, it goes out of its way to affirm Athanasius, the key shaper of Nicaean Christology, saying: "It was a Greek, from Egypt, who so bravely stood up at Nicaea and so fearlessly challenged this assembly that it dared not so obscure the concept of the nature of Jesus that the real truth of his bestowal might have been in danger of being lost to the world. This Greek's name was Athanasius, and but for the eloquence and the logic of this believer, the persuasions of Arius would have triumphed" (195:0.18 [2070.14]). What was crucial was that the essential spiritual status of Jesus as divine Son and Savior be preserved. The authors care less about technical details than about these essential spiritual truths. The spiritual role of Jesus as divine Son and revealer of God to the local universe was of supreme importance, and they see Athanasius as preserving that insight.

Inasmuch as the Michaels are depicted as having an origin in time, someone could choose to call the *UB*'s Christology "Arian," yet the label is misleading, and is rejected by *The Urantia Book* itself. Many scholars have, in fact, hastily applied this and other misleading labels to *The Urantia Book*. In terms of the truth about God, Jesus, and divinity, the *UB* is more Athanasian than Arian. They saw Arius as a threat to "the real truth" (195:0.18) that Jesus was the Incarnation of Divinity.

One author writes: "The finite can never hope to comprehend the Infinite except as the Infinite was focalized in the time-space personality of the finite experience of the human life of Jesus of Nazareth" (169:4.3 [1856.1]). Further, Jesus is part of a Trinity, although not of the Paradise Trinity. As a member of the group called the Supreme Creators, Jesus is a member of the Ultimate Trinity (106:8.10 [1171.3]), which is "now evolving" (0:12.6 [16.3]) in connection with the spiritual evolution of the entire finite universe. They have a lot to say about this process of spiritual evolution and perfecting, which they call Supreme evolution, but that lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Atonement

1. *The Doctrine of Atonement*

The authors of the *UB* express regret that the Pauline doctrine of atonement became dominant in the Christian tradition. Actually, I think it is the Augustinian and Calvinist formulations of Pauline theology, more than Pauline theology itself, that the Book repudiates. The authors reject the notion that God required the death of his Son to pay for human sin; Jesus was not sent to earth to be a sacrifice. They correct the Markan and Matthean passage that says "to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28), changing it to "to bestow his life as the gift for all" (157:6.9 [1750.3]). Aside from that correction, they are eager to agree with biblical Christology, as regards his being "the divine representative of the eternal Father" (157:6.5 [1749.4]).

The Melchizedek authors take a fairly sophisticated approach to the subject of atonement. A Melchizedek author cannot affirm the atonement saying in 2 Cor 5:21 ("For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin"), but he *does* vigorously affirm 2 Cor 5:19, and quotes it, because that passage rejects any notion of persuading "an angry god . . . Even the great advocate of the atonement doctrine realized something of this truth, for he declared that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'" (98:7.1 [1083.6]). The Melchizedek goes out of his way to affirm this aspect of Paul's teaching that emphasizes God taking the initiative to save people, since this idea does not involve God being persuaded or manipulated in any way.

There are even some biblical passages that work against the notion of the death of Christ as an appeasement. In the parable in Mark 12, a vineyard owner sends his Son to some tenant farmers in order "to collect from them his share of the produce" (Mark 12:2), not in order to have him be sacrificed. The owner wants only *growth* in his vineyard, and is horrified when his Son is killed. This parable is totally inconsistent with the idea that the Son was sent in order to be offered up as a payment for human sin. In John, Jesus says "for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (John 18:37), not mentioning his death at all. There are other such passages,

but they all tend to get overwhelmed under the weight of Augustinian and Calvinist atonement theology, which builds on and intensifies Pauline passages that have Jesus dying for our sins (1 Cor 15:3), and God giving "him up for all of us" (Rom 8:32).

I hear an attack on Calvinist ideas in a quote such as this: "The Son of Man did not offer himself as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of God. . . these ideas of atonement and propitiation are erroneous" (188:4.1 [2016.6]).

One of the principal reasons for the authors' rejection of atonement is that it presumes disunity within Deity between God's righteousness and God's love (2:6.5 [41.3]), God's righteousness demanding a victim, but God's love wanting to offer salvation. However, it does not "require a mediator to secure the Father's favor or forgiveness" (2:6.6 [41.4]).

I have mentioned Melchizedek authors, and I would add a brief word of explanation. The Michael Son created the Melchizedek order of sonship. One member of this order came on an emergency mission in the time of Abraham, whom he instructed in the ways of "El Elyon, the Most High, the one and only God" (93:2.1 [1015.1]). The spiritual work of this Melchizedek Son was to prepare the way for the Incarnation of the Michael Son. The teachings of this Melchizedek were revived centuries later by Moses (93:9.1 [1022.4]), and became the core of the Israelite religion. The *UB* says quite a bit about the work of this Melchizedek regarding the evolution of religion on our world.

2. *Sacrificial Theology*

In summary, *The Urantia Book* authors affirm the divinity, uniqueness, and Savior status of Jesus, without picturing him as a sacrifice or a payment to God. They write "Though it is hardly proper to speak of Jesus as a sacrificer, a ransomer, or a redeemer, it is wholly correct to refer to him as a savior" (188:4.7 [2017.2]). They reject all atonement ideas that involve manipulation, collective guilt, or sacrificial payment.

The authors have a certain animus against sacrificial thinking, seeing it as coming from primitive religious instincts and having a materialistic motive. In discussing the evolution of

religion, one author writes "the business of offering sacrifices gradually developed into the game of man's philosophic bargaining with God" (89:8.6 [983.4]). The authors conclude: "All this concept of atonement and sacrificial salvation is rooted and grounded in selfishness" (188:4.9 [2017.4]). What *did* Jesus come here to do? "Never lose sight of the fact that the supreme spiritual purpose of the Michael bestowal was to enhance the *revelation of God*" (120:4.4 [1331.4]). The way that he faced death bravely and compassionately, without any recriminations, was a *part* of that revelation. It is the *whole life* that is the revelation.

The authors do acknowledge that even Christianity's partial embodiment of the teachings of Jesus is enormously helpful, and that some theological compromises had to be made. "Paul's . . . theologic compromises indicate that even revelation must submit to the graduated control of evolution. . . After long ages the cult of the sacrifice has evolved into the cult of the sacrament. Thus are the sacraments of modern religions the legitimate successors of those shocking early ceremonies of human sacrifice" (89:9.3-4 [984:2-3]). However, modern people now need a different model for thinking about salvation than Paul's sacrificial model: "Ancient man only attained consciousness of favor with God through sacrifice. Modern man must develop new techniques of achieving the self-consciousness of salvation" (89:10.1 [984:4]).

The Urantia Book puts an emphasis on progress and development over time. Progress now requires outgrowing the ancient manipulative assumptions underlying sacrificial thinking.

3. The Purposes of the Incarnation

I have said that a purpose of Jesus' life was to reveal the Father to humanity and to the local universe. There is an additional purpose, which is discussed at some length. That is the need for every Creator Son to live the life of his creatures. Every Michael Son must have seven bestowal lives as seven different orders of his creatures. Only the final bestowal takes place on an evolutionary planet. Our Michael Son had a bestowal life as a Melchizedek Son, two more as other types of local universe Sons, one as an angel (a seraphim), and two bestowals as an ascending pilgrim, such as we will be after our lives on earth. Finally he undertook his seventh

bestowal, as a mortal, being born as a baby and growing into adulthood. This is how the Michael Sons "come close to the life experiences of their subordinate living creatures" (119:0.2 [1308.2]). This scheme of seven bestowal lives is a prerequisite to the Michael Son achieving full sovereignty, so that he could say, in biblical terms, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:19).

Also in biblical terms, as the Epistle to the Hebrews says, he "share[d] flesh and blood . . . He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (Heb 2:14, 17). He can "sympathize with our weaknesses," for he "has been tested as we are" (Heb 4:15). *The Urantia Book* never quotes these passages from Hebrews, possibly because they occur in close proximity to some sacrificial sentences,² but it seems to me that the *UB* is strongly in sympathy with those sayings. This concept of solidarity with human suffering and hardship is a big part of the atonement theologies of many Christians, although the *UB* states these ideas without connecting them with atonement. A Michael Son has to experience solidarity with his creatures by living seven bestowal lives *as* those creatures. Thus does he demonstrate love in face to face encounters with his creatures.

Theosis

1. *Theosis without That Term*

Theosis has to do with believer transformation or divinizing, step by step, into progressively more spiritual status. In the biblical wording, "You . . . may become participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). It can be seen in the Lord's command: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48; see *UB* 26:9.3 [295.1]). *Theosis* is really a central teaching of Christianity, although it has been eclipsed and suppressed in the West due to the sin-and-salvation focus of Augustine, Anselm, Luther, and Calvin.

² "To make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people . . . we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb 2:17; 4:15).

Although never using the term *theosis*, but rather "perfecting" or "becoming like God" or "the ascension scheme," *theosis* is a key concept throughout the *UB*, from the repeated emphasis on growth to the descriptions of the re-keying and upstepping of our bodies as we ascend from world to world in the afterlife. *Theosis* in the *UB* is the plan for our never-ending spiritual progress and perfecting.

2. *The Ascension Scheme*

Theosis was central in the teachings of the Apostle Paul. In Romans, he wrote that believers are "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29).

Rather than speaking of becoming like Christ, the *UB* usually speaks of the goal as "to do the Father's will, to find God and to become like him" (132:3.4 [1459.4]); and again, "to know God and to seek to become like him" (145:2.9 [1630.5]). This involves a long series of progressive spiritual and ontological changes, a "stupendous scheme of upstepping the mortals of time to divine perfection" (31:10.19 [354.5]). This "ascension scheme for spiritualizing and training the mortals of time and space" (4:0.3 [54.3]) means ascending through a series of training worlds, which are not evolutionary worlds. This is not reincarnation, but a spiritual and educational progression. The plan for our growth and transformation involves extensive ethical, social, and spiritual instruction in these highly planned and organized worlds. They refer to this ascension scheme as a "vast experiential university" (25:4.12 [279.13]) where we make "progress . . . Godward" (147:5.7 [1653.1]).