

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 418—"The Development of the Noun 'Hypostasis'"

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Introduction

Two quick reminders. First, my online beginners course for learning NT Greek begins next Monday.

Second, my debate with Dr James White on whether the Bible teaches the doctrine of the Trinity is next Friday. It will not be live-streamed, but the moment the footage is released, you can be sure that I will post it on my channel.

This week, we will look at the language used in Trinitarian theology to describe the three persons of their doctrine. The credal language of the Trinity teaches that there is one God (in one essence or being, the Greek word *ousia*) and within the one God there are three persons (using the Greek word *hypostasis*). This week, we will examine this word that was understood to refer

to different (and importantly, a plurality of) persons within the one being of God. We are studying the noun *hypostasis*. Is this a word used by the authors of the NT? Yes. Is this a word that appears in the Septuagint? Yes. Does the Nicene Creed in AD 325 use this word? Yes. Does the Chalcedonian Creed in AD 451 use this word? Yes. Do all of these sources agree on the meaning of the noun *hypostasis*? They most certainly do not. In fact, it is pretty easy to see how the word changed its meaning over the course of hundreds of years.

How do the biblical authors use the noun *hypostasis*? Do they ever use it to refer to God? And in what ways do the post-biblical creeds diverge from the biblical definition of *hypostasis*?

I. The Biblical Definition of Hypostasis

- BDAG offers these definitions:
 1. 1. the essential or basic structure/nature of an entity, substantial nature, essence, actual being, reality (underlying structure, oft. in contrast to what merely seems to be
 2. a plan that one devises for action, plan, project, undertaking, endeavor
 3. The interp. situation, condition, also specif. frame of mind
 4. guarantee of ownership/entitlement, title deed
- 2. When we break the word apart
 - a) Upo - under
 - b) Stasis - standing(1) “That which stands under”
- 23x in the LXX
 1. The burden of the people of Israel (Deut 1:12)
 2. Sustenance (Judges 6:4 Aquila and LXX)
 3. Steadfastness (Ps 39:7; LXX 38:8)
 4. Secure foundation upon which to stand (Ps 69:2; LXX 68:3)
 5. In one of these 23 instances, it does refer to God, but not to God’s person (or persons). Rather, it refers to God’s sustenance or provision, in the form of the manna that he gave to the children of Israel (Wis 16:21)
- 5x in the NT (2 in 2 Cor, 3 in Hebrews)
 1. otherwise if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we-- not to speak of you-- will be put to shame by this confidence. (2 Cor 9:4)
 - a) By this *hypostasis*.

2. What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. (2 Cor 11:17)
 - a) In this *hypostasis* of boasting
 3. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being (Heb 1:3)
 - a) The imprint of his *hypostasis*.
 - (1) Steadfastness, confident hope, the essential substance of God.
 - (a) Anchor Bible, Hermeneia admit that the usage here is not the same as that which was expressed in the Trinitarian councils
 4. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end (Heb 3:14)
 - a) The beginning of *hypostasis*
 - (1) Steadfastness, confident substance of hope
 5. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb 11:1)
 - a) Faith is the *hypostasis* of things hoped for
- Hypostasis first refers to different persons in the 3rd century, in Origen.
 1. One example comes from *Contra Celsus* 8.12 (mid-3rd c.). But Origen subordinates the son to the Father, they are not coequal persons.

II. The Definition of Hypostasis at Nicea

- Τοὺς δὲ λέγοντας Ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, καὶ Πρὶν γεννηθῆναι οὐκ ἦν, καὶ ὅτι Ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων ἐγένετο, ἢ Ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι ἢ κτιστόν ἢ τρεπτόν ἢ ἀλλοιωτόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, τούτους ἀναθεματίζει ἡ ἀγία καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴ ἐκκλησία.
- **English Translation:**
- “But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.”
 1. At Nicea, the word hypostasis still seems to have its biblical meaning, the underlying reality or substance
 - a) Note how hypostasis and ousia are synonyms at Nicea
 - b) Nicea anathematizes those who think Jesus is a different hypostasis than the Father
 - (1) It does not mean person here, clearly. I wonder how many Trinitarians, who argue that hypostasis means person,

unknowingly fall under the anathema of Nicea by saying that Jesus is a different hypostasis than the Father.

III. The Definition of Hypostasis at Chalcedon

- σωζομένης δὲ μᾶλλον τῆς ιδιότητος ἑκατέρας φύσεως καὶ εἰς ἓν πρόσωπον καὶ μίαν ὑπόστασιν συντρεχούσης
- **English Translation:**
- “...while the property of each nature is preserved and concurring into one person and one hypostasis”
 1. Now we get a clear indicator, in the middle of the 5th century, that *hypostasis* refers to a person.
 - a) According to Chalcedon, Jesus is a divine person with a human nature. He is not a human person, despite all the evidence I provided last week, according to Chalcedon.
 - b) The biggest point here is that the meaning of hypostasis here is completely different from the usage in the biblical texts, both in the NT and in the LXX.
 - c) In other words, they had to change the meaning of words, redefining them from their biblical usage, in order to justify the doctrine of the Trinity.
 - d) Furthermore, there is a clear development from Nicea to Chalcedon. At Nicea, the Son was not a different hypostasis from the Father. At Chalcedon, there are three persons, and the Son is a distinguished hypostasis from the Father.

So, in conclusion, we have observed that:

There is a clear and undeniable development of the meaning of the term hypostasis, which was used at Chalcedon to refer to one of three persons in the one being of God. In the LXX and in the NT, the word meant underlying reality, substance, steadfastness, but it never referred to a person, nor did it ever get used to describe God. Not once. At Nicea, we see that Christ has been elevated to be of the same substance as the Father, using the word hypostasis to refer to one thing the Father and Son share. Clearly, here it does not mean person; otherwise, it would be collapsing the Father and the Son into one person. A further development occurred at Chalcedon, where hypostasis now means a person, and Jesus is a different hypostasis from the Father. But at this point, in 451, we have completely redefined the word used by the biblical authors. In short, the church councils were forced to develop and change the meaning of biblical language in order to

justify their new understanding of God, which is one of many reasons that Nicene and Chalcedonian christology should be completely abandoned.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode!

Join us next week as we explore the term ousia, looking at what it means in Trinitarian theology and what it means in Scripture.

Please look forward to our next episode.

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