What do we mean by "Godhead"?

by Stephen E. Broyles

We can remember a Scottish preacher, half a century ago, saying of God, "Godhead is what He is*; Godhood is what He* has*!" But "Godhood" is not a term in current theological use, although the late John Murray is known to have expressed a preference for it. We have a clearer distinction in the terms of Latin origin, "deity" and "divinity". Arguing for the use of the latter in Rom. 1: 20 and of the former in Col. 2: 9, E. K. Simpson said, "The* hand *of omnipotence may be traced in the countless orbs that bespangle the heavens, and in the marvellous coadjustments of our comparatively tiny globe; but in the Son we behold the* face *of God unveiled, the express image and transcript of His very Being." Even the latinate "deity" is used in more than one way, however: we speak of the deity of Christ, meaning His divine nature, but we also speak of the Deity absolutely, meaning the personal God. Whether we use a latinate or an Anglo-Saxon term (like Godhead), the important thing is that we should know what we mean by it it: is to this that Mr. Broyles addresses himself in the following pages.*

WE are likely to encounter the word "Godhead" in two places: in discussions of the Trinity, and in the Authorized and Revised versions of the Bible. Frequently the word is misused in the discussions and misunderstood in the versions, so it is worthwhile to ask, "What do we mean by Godhead?" Because the word has had a long history in English and the classical languages—and not only the word, but, more important, the idea—our understanding of the term must be the object of a two-pronged advance, one prong on English, the other on Greek lines.

I. GODHEAD AND THE GREEKS

In all three passages of the Greek Testament whose renderings in the Authorized Version include the word "Godhead," Paul is either speaking or writing.[1] Each time a different Greek term underlies the English, and each of the terms is a *hapax legomenon:* τὸ θεῖον, θειότης, and θεότης. It will be best if we pair the first two terms together, pair the third with θεός, and then contrast the two pairs. We will begin with the pair θεός-θεότης.

By θεός the Greeks always meant an individual god—as θεὸς Ζεύς—even if they were not always careful to have in mind any

1 Acts 17: 29; Rom. 1: 20; Col. 2: 9.

particular god. Agamemnon says to Achilles, θεός που οοὶ τό γ' ἔδωκεν, "I suppose a god gave you this."[2] The swineherd Eumaeus politely declines Odysseus' thanks for a good meal and says, θεὸς δὲ τὸ μὲν δώσει, τὸ δ' ἐάσει, "It is the god who will give one thing and withhold another."[3] The plural means the individual gods taken collectively, as θεοὶ δοῖεν 'Ολύμπια,[4] or, as in the exclamation, τοὺς θεοὺς σοί![5] In historical times the gods were conceived in human form, having human natures and passions, capricious and independent, not subject to old age and death, and powerful to an enormous degree. θεότης is the quality of being such a god. Plutarch, one of the last of the classical Greek historians, uses the term to speak of the final stage of the progress from man to god:

> Thus the better souls receive transformation from men into heroes, and from heroes into daemons. A long time later, a very few of the daemons, when they have been purified through merit, θεότητος μετέσχον, "partake of godhead."[6]

In other words, they become gods. It is θεότης that Paul uses in Colossians 2: 9: ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς, "In him the fulness of godhead dwells embodied." Paul's diction specifies the divine personality as opposed to the divine properties (Bengel: *Non modo divinae virtutes, sed ipsa divina natura.*[7]) The Latin versions translate, rather inexactly, *omnis plenitudo divinitatis*, but commentators have noted that the meaning is otherwise. The translator of Theodore's (Greek) commentary tacitly inserts the more precise *omnen plenitudinem deitatis.*[8] Beza makes the same point: *Non dicit*, τὴν θειότητα , *id est divinitatem, sed* τὴν θεότητα, *id est deitatem.*[9]

Turning to the pair τὸ θεῖον-θειότης, we find that the neuter adjective used substantively, τὸ θεῖον, appears about the fifth century B.C. with a meaning slightly different from θεός. Thucydides, describing the way the Lacedaemonians marched slowly, accompanied by many pipers, explains that the piping is without any religious motive:

> . . . οὐ τοῦ θείου χάριν, ἀλλ' ἵνα ὁμαλῶς μετὰ ῥυθμοῦ βαίνοντες προσέλθοιεν καὶ μὴ διαπασθίη αὐτοῖς ἡ τάξις, ". . . not for the sake of the Deity, but so they may advance evenly, going with a rhythmn, and their ranks not be broken up."[10]

2 Homer, *Iliad* 1.178.
3 Homer, *Odyssey* 14.444.
4 *Iliad* 1.18.
5 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 7.17.
6 Plutarch, *De Defectu Oraculorum* 10 (p. 451bc).
7 Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, Col. 2: 9 *ad loc.*
8 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. in B. Pauli Epistolas ad loc.* The Greek text is not extant at this point.
9 *Ad loc.*
10 Thucydides 5.70.

When Socrates is about to leave Phaedrus, his tutelary spirit does not permit him to depart until he clears his conscience, ὥς τι ἡμαρτηκότα εἰς τὸ θεῖον, "just as if I had somehow sinned against the Deity"[11] Writing in the first century, Diodorus Siculus initiates a discussion of theology with the question:

> Περὶ μὲν οὖν θεῶν τίνας ἐννοίας ἔσχον οἱ πρῶτοι καταδείξαντες τιμᾶν τὸ θεῖον, "Now then, what conceptions about the gods did those men have who were first to introudce the worship of the Deity?"[12]

In a famous passage, Thales is asked:

> "What is difficult?" He replied, "To know oneself." "What is easy?" "To give advice to another." . . . τί τὸ θεῖον; τὸ μήτε ἀρχὴν ἔχον μήτε τελευτήν.[13]

So far as τὸ θεῖον differs from θεός in pagan usage, it is not an individual god, but that inscrutable Deity behind all gods, which can be sinned against and can be reverenced and which evokes awe, but which is not particularized as a being with a personality of its own. It is τὸ μήτε ἀρχὴν ἔχον μήτε τελευτήν. (If the gods as well do not have any ends, they do at least have beginnings.) The term τὸ θεῖον is better suited than θεός for expressing the theology of people who are giving up belief in a pantheon.

When Paul addresses the Areopagus by invitation of a few Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, he perfectly accommodates his language to his audience when he says:

> γένος οὖν ὑπάρχοντες τοῦ θεοῦ, οὐκ ὀφείλομεν νομίζειν χρυσῷ ἢ ἀργύρῳ ἢ λίθῳ . . . τὸ θεῖον εἶναι ὅμοιον, "since then we are the offspring of God, we ought not think that the Deity is like gold or silver or stone."[14]

By use of the term τὸ θεῖον he gets back of the gods to something even more powerful than they; he penetrates behind the Olympian gods and arrives at the very threshhold of Deity itself. When he arrives there—and this is a distinctively Christian paradox—he finds that the infinite, inscrutable Deity is the same as the living and active, personal God who "commands all men everywhere to repent".[15]

Later, writing to the church at Rome, Paul uses the corresponding term, θειότης, in speaking of that which can be inferred about God from his creation:

> For since the creation of the world his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made, ἥ τε ἀίδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θειότης, "namely his eternal power and deity."[16]

11 Plato, *Phaedrus* 242c.
12 Diodorus Siculus, 1.6.1; see also Lucian, *Pro Imaginibus* 13.
13 Diogenes Laertius 1.36.
14 Acts 17: 29
15 Acts 17: 30
16 Rom. 1: 20.

θειότης is the quality of being τὸ θεῖον; it is "the totality of that which God is as a being possessed of divine attributes" [17]

II GODHEAD AND THE ENGLISH

We moderns are familiar with the word "Godhead" primarily from our reading of the Authorized Version of the Bible, but it was a part of the English Bible long before 1611. Although Wycliffe, in his translation of the Vulgate (1382-88), had rendered the Latin *divinum* as "godly thing" in Acts 17: 29 (not a good choice), he did select "godhead" to represent *divinitas* in Romans 1: 20 and Colossians 2: 9. The version of Tyndale (1525-35), the first English Bible made by direct translation from the Hebrew and Greek texts, has it in all three passages. Tyndale is followed by the Great Bible (1539-40), the Geneva Bible (1560-62), and the Bishops' Bible (1568-72). Rheims (1582) reads "Divinitie" in Acts 17: 29 and Romans 1: 20, but agrees with the others in reading "Godhead" in Colossians 2: 9. When King James' men put "Godhead" in the three passages, they did not introduce the term into the English Bible; they merely carried on the tradition as it had existed for well over two hundred years. As for that, the word "Godhead" was in use in English long before there even were any English Bibles.

Our English word is formed with the suffix *-head*, frequent in Middle English spelled also *-hede* or *-hed*, but replaced in current usage with its equivalent *-hood*, or sometimes, *-ness*. When we read in the York Pageant of the Barkers (*c.* 1440) that Lucifer says, "The beams of my brighthead are burning so bright," we register the meaning "brightness." Similarly for "boldhede," "drunkenhed," "knyghthede," and "manhede," we understand "boldness," "drunkenness," "knighthood," and "manhood" In the same way, "Godhead" means "Godhood" or "deity," the character or quality of being God. After a time, *-head* came into disuse and gave way to *-hood*, except in two forms only, "Godhead" and "maidenhead." Since the other compounds with *-head* have given way to other forms, it is unfortunate that these two remain: "maidenhead" is too like "bulkhead" and "Godhead" too like "fountainhead" to convey their traditional meanings

"Godhead" can be documented from the early 13th century in *Ancren Riwle* (i.e., "Rule for Anchoresses," an order of nuns), dating before 1225:

> This scheld thet wreih his Godhed was his leoue licome thet was ispred on rode.[18]

[17] H. A. W. Meyer, *Über den Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (Göttingen, *1872*), *ad* Rom. 1: 20.

[18] *Ancren Riwle* 390.

A few years later, in an early English song, *The Story of Genesis and Exodus*, we find these lines:

> For thre persons and on reed,
> On might and on godfulhed.

Next century, c. 1320, we find the word in a context that clearly shows its meaning by making Godhead parallel with manhood:

> That bi-falleth to Godes godhede
> As wel as to his monhede.[19]

The Scots Confession of 1560 uses the same terminology:

> We acknawledge and confesse, that this maist wonderous conjunction betwixt the God-head and the man-head in Christ Jesus, did proceed from the eternal and immutable decree of God, from quhilk al our salvatioun springs and depends.[20]

The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England, which were formulated in Latin in 1562 and later issued in an English edition in 1571, also express credence in this doctrine:

> *. . . ita ut duae naturae, divina et humana integre atque perfecte in unitate personae.*
> . . . so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and manhood, were ioyned together in one person.[21]

Similar examples could be multiplied over and again.

Sometimes the articular construction, "the Godhead," is fairly equivalent to "God", as the next examples show. Those who were taught the *Lay Folks Catechism* (1357) learned to say:

> The first poynt that we sal trowe of the godhede
> Is to trowe stedefastly in a trew god.[22]

The following (1398) is self-defining:

> The lyghte of the heuenly dyuyne clarete, couerte, & closid in the deyte or in the godhede.[23]

One of the four occurrences of "Godhead" in Shakespeare also belongs here:

> For your own gifts make yourselves praised; but reserve still to give, lest your deities be despised. Lend to each man enough, that one need not lend to another; for were your godheads to borrow of men, men would forsake the gods.[24]

A special point is raised by the customary formula, "three persons in the Godhead," which arose in the context of the "three persons, one substance" doctrine of God. Examples of this doctrine articu-

19 *Bishop Grosseteste's Castel off Loue* 81.
20 Art. VII; Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), vol. 3, p. 444.
21 Art. II; *ibid.*, p. 488.
22 *The English and Latin Versions of Archbishop Thoresby's Instruction for the People, 1357* (Early English Text Society, 1901), 83.
23 John de Trevisa, *Bartholomeus De proprietatibus rerum* 1 (1495), 3.
24 Shakespeare, *The Life of Timon of Athens* III, vi, 71ff.

lated in this way are abundant, and a few may be given here. We again cite the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England; Article I reads, in part:

> There is but one lyuyng and true God, . . . And in vnitie of this Godhead [*huius diuinae naturae*] there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternitie, the father, the sonne, and the holy ghost.[25]

This doctrine appears in identical wording as paragraph 8 of the Irish Articles of Religion (1615), and in similar wording in the Westminster Confession of Faith, II, iii (1647). Important because of its extensive use is the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647):

> *Ques. 6. How many persons are there in the Godhead?*
> *Ans.* There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.[26]

From the creeds we may turn to religious literature generally for further examples. Adam King in 1588 translated *Canisius' Catechisme* into English, and rendered the fifth article thus:

> The first personne in godheid is the father coelestiall.

Ralph Cudworth, in his book modestly titled *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), speaks of:

> That Essence or Substance of the Godhead, which all the Three Persons or Hypostases agree in.

Matthew Henry, commenting on Romans 1:20 around 1710, writes:

> They could not come by natural light to the knowledge of the three persons in the Godhead . . ., but they did come to the knowledge of the Godhead.

John Gill lengthily explains that "though there is but one God, there are three persons in the godhead." [27]

In all of these instances, "Godhead" has a neuter significance. As found in the formulaic expression, it is not the same as any of the three persons, for they are distinguished within it. It is not the "one substance, [28] for the substance is that which the persons in the Godhead share in common. Nor does it correspond to the sense of any of the three Greek words discussed a moment ago. Rather it is practically synonomous with "Trinity," and insofar as this is so, it is no true equivalent of the classical and Biblical terms.

Even so, in modern usage, "Godhead" (when it is used at all) is nearly always restricted to the sense "Trinity." This of course, does not mean that no one ever uses it "correctly" nowadays. Alexander

25 Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, pp. 487-88.
26 *Ibid*. p. 677.
27 John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* (1769-70), Book I, cap. xxvi.
28 Outside of the formula, however, Godhead is precisely equivalent to the substance: τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις . . . μία θεότης (Epiphanius *Haereses* 25.6).

Campbell, writing in the last century, consistently preserves its historic meaning:

> But the Scriptures speak of his divinity, or godhead, as well as of the unity, spirituality, and eternity of his being.[29]

And John T. Shawcross can still explain a line of Milton's poem, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," as an allusion to "Christ's *kenosis* or emptying himself of his godhead."[30] But most of us persist in a usage which ordinarily prefers to speak of Christ's being in the Godhead rather than of Godhead's being in Christ:

> I know not how that Bethlehem's Babe
> Could in the Godhead be;
> I only know the manger child
> Has brought God's love to me.

III. CONCLUSION

Behind the Biblical word "Godhead" lie rich and powerful ideas. Centuries of development among the Greeks made θεότης, τὸ θεῖον, and θειότης suitable for expressing the "god-ness" in Christ and the mystery of the infinite-personal God. Relatively recently, English speaking persons have lost sight of the distinctions discernible in their word "Godhead," because it began to be employed primarily as a technical term. I would not personally argue for a jettison of the phrase "three persons in the Godhead." That would be what Johnson deplored as a "dispute over noises." We can express our belief in the Trinity in that way if we want to. But when we allow the expression of one truth to obscure our vision of others, we suffer a real loss.

Florence, Alabama

29 Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (2nd ed.; 1839), cap. 3.

30 *The Complete English Poetry of John Milton*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Anchor Seventeenth-Century Series; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963), p. 41, n.2. [This might well be what Milton meant; he was no subscriber to Chalcedonian christology. ED.]