

Article of the Month  
November, 2016

***PROS TON THEON***

Okay! Almost none of us reads Greek! So why do we have a Greek title for this month's article? It is because there are times when a careful study of God's Word necessitates an examination of a Greek word or phrase. This particular Greek phrase literally translates to "toward the God." That is its literal translation, although variants of it are quite proper. For instance, it can be rendered "in service to God" or "pertaining to God." We will shortly see why this is of any significance.

—Its Effect on John 1:1-3 —

John 1:1-3 is, of course, a passage which trinitarians love to cite. It doesn't, however, mean anything like the concepts they wish to propagate. The NAS translation of the verses reads:

1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2. He was in the beginning with God.
3. All things came into being by him, and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being.

In verses 1 and 2, "pros ton theon" is the Greek for "with God." Now, we might logically inquire, "What is the significance of stressing that the Word was "with God" (twice!)? Does it mean that he was in close physical proximity to God? Does it mean that he was in agreement with God? If it means either of those two things, are we supposed to get something out of those statements? After all, what difference does it make WHERE the Word was? Or, would we not assume that God and the Word were in agreement? The point of these questions is to let us see that there just MIGHT BE a flaw in the translation of these verses. These words just MIGHT BE saying something more significant than appears in most translations. And, THEY ARE!

"Pros ton theon" DOES NOT MEAN that the word was WITH God. It means that he was "*in service to God,*" or "*toward God*" in the sense of dedication to God's purposes.

**NOTE VERY CAREFULLY:** John REPEATS the phrase. It's in BOTH verse 1 and in verse 2. He's trying desperately by repetition to make us consider that the phrase MEANS SOMETHING SPECIAL! And the context TELLS us what the Apostle John is trying to teach. In verse 1, John says that the Word was in God's service. In verse 2,

*Return to the article of the month index*

John repeats the same thought because he had interrupted it by making another point (which we'll consider in a moment).

So TWICE John tells us that the Word was in God's service. THEN, (and here's the reason and the point), he tells us HOW the Word was in God's service. He was serving God as God's active agent in MAKING ALL THINGS COME INTO BEING. That is, the Word did all the creating as God directed him to do. This makes these three verses extremely exciting and full of information. It also SEPARATES the beings and personalities of God and the Word.

That separation of being and personality is the reason for the words at the end of verse 1. The above translation says, "and the Word was God." Most of us should immediately question this wording strictly from a language and reasoning process. After all, if the Word WAS God, how is it that he was WITH God? PLEASE don't answer that it's a "mystery." The word "mystery" DOESN'T MEAN that nobody knows; it means that ONLY THOSE KNOW who have been let in on the secret! So passing this off as a mystery that nobody understands is an invalid argument.

William Barclay, the famous translator and scholar of Biblical language, has an interesting commentary on "and the Word was God." Barclay, by the way, was a trinitarian. But in his commentary on verse 1, he points out that the phrase means something more like "and the Word was God-like." Other Greek translators note that the first "God" in verse 1 has (in the Greek) the word "THE" before it. The second "God" in verse 1 does not have "THE" in front of it. Thus, two very viable translations of the verse would be:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in service to THE God; and the Word was a god (or a mighty one).

or:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in service to THE God; and the Word was God-like.

Both of these translations not only better reflect the meaning of the verse, but they give it a reasonable sense which other translations lack. Then, when verse 2 REPEATS the FUNCTION (service to God) of "the Word" just before explaining exactly what that function WAS, we have a context which is not only satisfying and reasonable, but quite excitingly in harmony with the rest of the Biblical story concerning Jesus, his prehuman existence, and his relationship to his Father.

So, once again, we commend to you a very good reading of these three verses:

*Return to the article of the month index*

1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in service to THE God; and the Word (himself) was God-like (or mighty).
2. He was in the beginning in service to THE God:
3. All things came into being by him, and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being.

— A Confirmation in the Writings of Paul —

While “pros ton theon” is not an uncommon phrase in the New Testament, its meaning is consistent. It doesn’t mean “with.” Two passages by the Apostle Paul in the book of Hebrews serve to illustrate the true meaning of this phrase.

In Hebrews 5:1, Paul says that Israel’s priests were “appointed on behalf of men in things ***pertaining to God.***” Those last three words are “pros ton theon” in the Greek — EXACTLY the same words as in John 1. It is clear here that the phrase means as we have suggested.

In Hebrews 2:17, Paul says that Jesus became “a merciful and faithful high priest in things ***pertaining to God.***” This demonstrates the same CORRECT usage of the phrase. Just as Jesus was “the Word” who was in God’s service for creation in John 1, so he is here a priest ***in service to God*** “to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”

It seems that Jesus BEFORE there was a world, and now AFTER there is a sinful world, CONTINUES “***in the service of God***” in order to make God’s plans become reality.

-----

We hope this little lesson in a common Greek phrase has excited your imagination and stimulated your desire to *dig deeply* into the true but often hidden meanings in the Word of God.