

February 1994

Frank W. Nelte

### **THE FACTS ABOUT 'HYPOSTASIS'**

Recently the Worldwide Church of God started to use the word "hypostasis" to describe the nature of God. While this word "hypostasis" is new to most of us, it has in fact been used for many centuries.

Let's examine this word more closely.

The word "hypostasis" can be understood in several different ways:

A) It is a word found in the English language.

B) It is a word found in the Greek New Testament (Greek for "HYPO" is "HUPO").

C) It is a word to which TRINITARIAN DOCTRINES have attached a special religious meaning since the 3rd century A.D..

Let's look at some of these in detail now.

A) In Webster's Dictionary the English word "hypostasis" is defined as:

"to stand under; to support; something that settles at the bottom of a fluid; it is derived from "HUPO" (under) + "HISTEMI" (to stand)."

This seems simple enough ... no esoteric meaning here.

B) In the New Testament the Greek word "HUPOSTASIS" is used five times. Let's look at these verses (in each verse I have rendered the translation of "hypostasis" in capital letters):

Lest haply if they of Macedonia come with me, and find you unprepared, we (that we say not, ye) should be ashamed in this same CONFIDENT boasting. (2 Corinthians 9:4)

That which I speak, I speak [it] not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly, in this CONFIDENCE of boasting. (2 Corinthians 11:17)

For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our CONFIDENCE steadfast unto the end; (Hebrews 3:14)

Now faith is the SUBSTANCE of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

Who being the brightness of [his] glory, and the express image of his PERSON, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right

hand of the Majesty on high; (Hebrews 1:3)

Note! Hebrews 1:3 and Hebrews 11:1 are INCORRECTLY translated!

For many years the Greek word "hupostasis" had puzzled the translators of the N.T., since it was one of the Koine words that was beyond the reach of the classical lexicons. It was not until Sir William Ramsay, the great archaeologist, came along with a papyrus that made clear that in Koine Greek the word "hupostasis" meant "TITLE DEED"! That's right! When you own a property, then the TITLE DEED is what your ownership "stands upon". So at the time when Paul was writing his letters, Paul understood the word "hupostasis" to mean "a title deed to a property".

It is really quite simple!

All of Paul's five usages of this word "hupostasis" agree with this meaning. And it has been established beyond doubt that this was the meaning in Koine Greek. And Paul wrote in Koine Greek. Paul most certainly did not use the word "hupostasis" with a Christian philosophical meaning, which meaning was only attached to this word at a much later time.

What the BIBLE actually means by this word HUPOSTASIS (which is used in only two books, remember) should now be clear:

Hupostasis refers to something we can stand upon; something that forms a good foundation in which we can have confidence, etc.. Try applying it this way to all five occurrences listed above.

- 2 Corinthians 9:4 = this same boasting we can stand upon ...

- 2 Corinthians 11:17 = in this boasting I stand upon ...

- Hebrews 1:3 = Christ being the express image (Greek here is CHARACTER) of what God the Father stands upon ...

- Hebrews 3:14 = if we hold the beginning of what we stand upon steadfast unto the end ...

- Hebrews 11:1 = Faith is what we stand upon regarding the things we hope for, the evidence (or PROOF) of things not seen.

Notice that both of Paul's uses of this word in 2 Corinthians are in connection with BOASTING and they have no particular hidden religious meaning! This is also true for the usage in Hebrews 3:14.

It is the other two uses in Hebrews that the Trinitarians have built their doctrine on. Put in very plain terms (perhaps somewhat oversimplified) they teach that HUPOSTASIS refers to the SUBSTANCE (from Hebrews 11:1) that the Godhead consists of. Supposedly God the Father and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are all one HUPOSTASIS, etc..

Now this interpretation of the word "hupostasis" is not in any way supported by the five times that Paul used this word in two different epistles in the New Testament. Paul really meant exactly what Webster's Dictionary understands the English word HYPOSTASIS to mean. We should remember that the word "SUBSTANCE" (with its present meaning in the English language) in Hebrews 11:1 is really a mistranslation. Hypostasis simply means: to stand under or upon, to support, etc. It has nothing to do with "substance". Greek words that refer to "SUBSTANCE" include: OUSIA and HUPARCHONTA.

Scholars recognize that the rendition as "PERSON" in Hebrews 1:3 is really an anachronism, i.e. it is chronologically out of place, meaning that it was NEVER translated as "PERSON" until the 4th Century A.D. ... i.e. soon after the time of Origen (185-254 AD).

Origen was a rather radical theologian of the Roman Catholic Church, who tried to reconcile Greek philosophy with Christian theology. This becomes quite evident in his works "DE PRINCIPIIS" and "CONTRA CELSUM". His use of the word "HYPOSTASIS" should be viewed as highly suspect.

The English word "substance" TODAY has acquired a modified meaning, namely "essential nature", etc.. But that is not what "hypostasis" meant in the days of the Apostle Paul!

Let's look again at Hebrews 1:3.

Who being the brightness of [his] glory, and the express image of his PERSON, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; (Hebrews 1:3)

Here the translators rendered "hypostasis" as "person". They did this before Sir William Ramsay's time, when they weren't really sure of what this word actually meant in Koine Greek. Today scholars readily admit that "person" is really an anachronism, since it was NEVER rendered as "person" until several centuries after Paul's time.. It is exactly the same kind of anachronism as when people today take the word "conversation" in the KJV of the Bible to mean "speech".

It is equally as much an anachronism to attach the meaning "essential nature" to this usage here in Hebrews 1:3, since it was not until Origen's time, well into the third century A.D., that "theologians" of the Catholic Church developed this meaning of "essential nature".

In Hebrews 1:3 Paul was basically saying:

"Christ, who being the brightness of glory, and the express character (in Greek) of WHAT THE FATHER STANDS UPON, and upholding all things by the word ..."

When it comes to character, God the Father and Jesus Christ have exactly the same foundation; they stand upon the same thing! There is nothing mystical about the nature of God in this verse; or what God the Father and Jesus Christ are composed of!

In the Greek of the N.T. there were words that mean "SUBSTANCE" as we tend to think of it. One of these was:

- "OUSIA", which is used twice in Luke 15:12-13. In verse 12 it is translated as "goods" and in verse 13 as "substance".

And the younger of them said to [his] father, Father, give me the portion of GOODS that falleth [to me]. And he divided unto them [his] living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his SUBSTANCE with riotous living. (Luke 15:12-13)

Another Greek word meaning "substance" is:

-HUPARCHONTA, which is used in Luke 8:3.

And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their SUBSTANCE. (Luke 8:3)

Another Greek word, from the same root as "huparchonta" is:

-HUPARXIS, which is used in Hebrews 10:34.

For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring SUBSTANCE. (Hebrews 10:34)

Look at this verse closely!

If we were really looking for a Greek word that means something like: substance, essential nature, what something is composed of, etc., then "HUPARXIS" is a much better candidate than "hypostasis". Just look again at Hebrews 10:34 ... can we see what kind of mileage we could get out of the expression ...

"you have in heaven a better and an enduring HUPARXIS"?

But that wouldn't go down well with the Catholic Councils of Nicea and Constantinople, or with Origen and a host of other Catholic "church fathers", would it? Also, and more importantly, "huparxis" didn't feature in Plato's ideas. He had already taught about the TWO divine "hupostases", NOT the two divine "huparxes". So let's abandon the idea of developing "huparxis" as a word to describe the (supposed) nature of God.

Next, it is a fact that all of these ideas about the nature of God, that the Catholic "theologians" developed through the centuries can be traced back to "Plato and his disciples".

The ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA, 1958 edition, volume 18, in the article "PLATO" states on page 63:

- "The thought of the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher and theologian Philo, in the first century A.D., is AT LEAST as much Platonic as Stoic."

- "... the earliest apologists (Justin, Athenagoras) appealed to the witness of Plato."

- "In the 3rd century Clement of Alexandria and after him, ORIGEN made Platonism the metaphysical foundation of what was intended to be a DEFINITELY CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY."

- "... in a less extreme form the platonizing tendency was continued in the next century by the Cappadocians, notably St. Gregory Nyssen and passed from them to St. Ambrose of Milan."

- "The main sources of the Platonism WHICH DOMINATED THE PHILOSOPHY OF WESTERN

CHRISTIAN DIVINES through the earlier middle ages, were, however, AUGUSTINE, the greatest thinker among the western fathers, who had

been profoundly influenced by Plotinus ... and BOETHIUS, whose WHOLLY PLATONIC vindication of the ways of Providence ... was the favourite "serious" book of the Middle Ages."

It should be quite clear to anyone who takes the time to study into this, that the religious views of the Catholic Church, as expounded by the Catholic "church fathers" and as discussed at the various Councils of the Catholic Church (Nicea, Constantinople, etc.) are STEEPED IN THE IDEAS OF PLATO! And the "hypostasis ideas" about the nature of God are central to that whole scheme of things.

Earlier I made a brief reference to Origen's work "DE PRINCIPIIS". Let's look at this work more closely now.

In "On First Principles" Origen begins in the first chapter of the first book to discuss the doctrine of God. Origen quickly begins to interpret the Christian faith in Platonic categories. He argued that the Holy Spirit could not be shared in the sense of dividing it up into parts. Sharing in the Holy Spirit of God, he argues, is like physicians "sharing" in the science of medicine. He describes God in the traditional Platonic vocabulary as: incomprehensible, immeasurable, INCOMPOSITE and INCORPOREAL, points that are integral to the hypostasis theory.

In the second book in the section that deals with the identity of the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, Origen, in equally Platonic fashion, stresses the BENEFICENCE of God i.e. he claimed that God could not actually experience anger. Therefore Origen goes to extreme lengths to INTERPRET ALLEGORICALLY any biblical passages that state that God does experience anger. Some of his allegories are rather drastic.

In his book "Wisdom" Origen stated that Wisdom is ... "A PURE EMANATION OF THE GLORY OF THE ALMIGHTY" (Wisdom 7:25). He identified "Wisdom" with Christ. So Christ, the supposed second divine hypostasis, is "a pure emanation" from God.

Origen argued that there could not be a time when the Father lacked the Son (i.e. while Christ was dead for three days), since, if there had been, the Father's nature would have to have changed in order to be a Father. THIS IS GOOD PLATONIC REASONING!

Origen discussed his Christology more fully in his first two books on his "Commentary on John", a work written only a short time after "On First Principles". It is helpful to study this work as well, as it also clarifies the reasoning behind the whole hypostasis idea.

Origen expressed Christ's nature as multiple in terms of "EPINOIAI". The Greek word "epinoia" means "THOUGHT", but in philosophical parlance it came to mean "aspects", which were to mean an entirely CONCEPTUAL distinction, as opposed to "hypostasis" which was supposed to mean a REAL distinction.

All of this is nothing more than "striving about words".

Anyway, these "epinoiai" fall into two groups, according to Origen. The first group, belonging to Christ's "ETERNAL NATURE", are four and they are involved with creation; they are: Wisdom, Word, Life and Truth. Some of this Origen got from Plato's "Timaeus".

Those "epinoiai" of Christ that characterize His role as redeemer correspond to roles of the second divine hypostasis in Platonism. Platonists, like the Catholic "fathers", conceived of the second hypostasis

as the means by which the creature can reascend to the simplicity of the first hypostasis. Christ's "epinoiai" in the order of redemption are far more varied than in the order of creation (which were only four). There need to be as many "epinoiai" (ASPECTS) here as there are needs.

If all this doesn't make sense to you, don't worry. It doesn't make sense. It is foolish philosophical reasoning. But it is also the foundation on which this hypostasis teaching, which has been introduced into the Church, is built.

Origen found it easy to be simultaneously a "Christian" and a Platonist. He only differed from the Platonists in accepting the "incarnation", something true Platonists viewed as an inconceivable degradation of the divine nature. Origen discusses his "doctrine of the incarnation" (God coming in the flesh) in the sixth chapter of the second book of "On First Principles". In this he made the fullest use of his philosophical background. Since, according to Plato's "Timaeus" and Aristotle's "On the Soul", THE SOUL IS DUAL, being rational it could be united to the Godhead, but it also had the capacity to be united with a human body.

Origen explained the incarnation and allowed for Christ's full humanity by postulating the union between:

#### CHRIST'S BODY + HUMAN SOUL + DIVINE NATURE

Origen taught that the Holy Spirit is the third eternally existing divine hypostasis. "TRIAD" is the word Origen used, rather than "Trinity". In Origen's time "Trinity" would have been an anachronism. Origen also stated that while some pagan philosophers knew of the Father and of the Son, none knew of the existence of the Holy Spirit as a third divine hypostasis. (Plotinus, 205 - 270 A.D., born in Egypt, founder of Neoplatonism, also taught three divine hypostases; his work "Enneads" was edited by Porphyry)

All this philosophical reasoning is heavy going, but we should be able to see where the whole hypostasis idea has come from.

Let's now compare the Greek and the Latin expressions that were used, not to establish a teaching, but simply to see the meanings that certain words had initially.

A) The Cappadocians summed up the doctrine of the Trinity in the Greek phrase: "one OUSIA, three HYPOSTASES";

B) The Latins summed this doctrine up in the Latin phrase: "one SUBSTANTIA, three PERSONAE".

BUT the Greek word "hypostasis" means the same as the Latin word "substantia"! And that adds a considerable amount of additional confusion into this already highly illogical teaching.

For example, in translating the Greek ideas into Latin, we could change the Latin phrase to say:

"one HYPOSTASIS, three PERSONAE".

But, in translating the Latin ideas into Greek, we could change the Greek phrase to say:

"one OUSIA, three SUBSTANTIAE".

So the Latins could be talking about ONE hypostasis, where the Greeks could be talking about THREE hypostases.

By mixing these two languages --- Latin and Greek--- one can see how the different meanings become blurred if one treats these different statements like mathematical equations. Eventually you conclude that these THREE words "ousia" and "hypostasis" and "substantia" really all mean the same thing.

And sure enough, LATER the words "ousia" and "hypostasis" came to be considered to be synonyms BY CATHOLIC "THEOLOGIANS"! But they were not originally synonyms!

Notice the proof that they came to be seen as synonyms! Jerome, who was living alone in a Syrian desert within the province of Antioch wrote two letters to Pope Damasus (376 - 377 A.D.) in which he asked, was it really necessary to profess three hypostases? Jerome wrote:

"Surely HUPOSTASIS was synonymous with OUSIA."

Now hupostasis and ousia are both Greek words, and they really had different meanings. But like a card-player shuffling a deck of cards, these Catholic "theologians" shuffled around the meanings of words long enough until they come up with a combination that suited them. To Jerome the words "ousia" and "hypostasis" were only synonyms. The truth is that the word "hypostasis" has NOTHING to do with "substance" or with "ousia".

And the meaning that Catholic theologians have attached to the word "hupostasis" has nothing at all in common with the meaning Paul understood this word to have, when he used it in two of his letters.

THE CONCEPT OF GOD BEING THREE HYPOSTASES IS TOTALLY AND UTTERLY AND COMPLETELY PAGAN, AND IT IS AN INSULT TO THE DIGNITY AND POWER AND MIGHT OF THE ALMIGHTY GOD!

Frank W. Nelte