

The Monotheistic Doctrine of Creation in Isaiah 44:24

A Response to George Kaplin

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Evangelicals argue that Isaiah 44:24 teaches that Jehovah alone made the physical universe. Since the New Testament reveals that the Son made the physical universe (e.g., Heb. 1:10), evangelicals (and other Trinitarians) conclude that the Son is Jehovah. Jehovah's Witnesses must disagree, since on their view the preexistent created Son is not Jehovah and yet did much or all of the work of making the universe. Recently a Jehovah's Witness, George Kaplin, has posted a series of messages to the Evangelical and JW Theologies forum defending the Witness position. In this paper, I respond to Kaplin's arguments and mount a detailed defense of a Trinitarian interpretation of Isaiah 44:24. As it turns out, only a Trinitarian interpretation of Isaiah 44:24 comports both with the monotheism of the text in its context and with the revelation of the Son's activity in creation in the New Testament.

I. Translations of Isaiah 44:24

The Hebrew text of Isaiah 44:24 uses five Hebrew (qal) participles as descriptions of Jehovah. English versions generally translate these either as nouns ("Redeemer") or in relative clauses ("who formed you from the womb"). If we translate all of them consistently as English participles, the result is as follows:

"Thus says Jehovah, [the one] redeeming you,
And forming you from the womb:
'I [am] Jehovah, making all things;
Stretching out the heavens alone;
Spreading out the earth on my own...."

I am here assuming the wording "on my own" for the concluding words of the verse, a matter to be discussed later. Here is a translation of the Septuagint version of the passage:

"Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer,
And the one forming you from the womb,
'I am the Lord, the one who brings about all things (hO SUNTELWN PANTA);
I stretched out [EXETEINA] the heaven alone [MONOS],
And made the earth strong" (Eng. trans. of the LXX).¹

¹The LXX translates the last few words of the Hebrew of Isaiah 44:24 as "who else" (TIS hETEROS) and construes them with the next sentence, which accounts for them not being quoted here as part of Isaiah 44:24.

The following are some notable modern translations of this verse:

“Thus saith Jehovah, thy Redeemer,
and he that formed thee from the womb:
I am Jehovah, that maketh all things;
that stretcheth forth the heavens alone;
that spreadeth abroad the earth (who is with me?)” (ASV).

“Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
who formed you in the womb:
I am the LORD, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who by myself spread out the earth” (NRSV).

“Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
and the one who formed you from the womb,
‘I, the LORD, am the maker of all things,
Stretching out the heavens by Myself
And spreading out the earth all alone’” (NASB).

“This is what the LORD says—
your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:
I am the LORD, who has made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself” (NIV).

“This is what Jehovah has said,
your Repurchaser and the Former of you from the belly:
“I, Jehovah, am doing everything,
stretching out the heavens by myself,
laying out the earth. Who was with me?” (NWT).

II. Evangelical and Jehovah’s Witness Viewpoints

The evangelical position on Isaiah 44:24 is that in this verse Jehovah, the LORD God of Israel, forcefully claims to have been the one and only maker of the physical universe. All evangelicals agree on this point; no other god, no angels, no celestial beings participated with Jehovah in making the universe. Some evangelicals may go further and understand this verse to mean that no other beings existed or were present at the time that Jehovah made the physical universe. Such an inference is not drawn by all or even most evangelical interpreters and is not essential to the evangelical position.

A good example of the standard evangelical argument was presented in an article by Francis Beckwith:

Yahweh is the only one who participated in creation;
 Christ is one who participated in creation;
 Therefore, Christ is Yahweh.²

However, Jehovah's Witnesses prefer to focus on the claim, made by some Trinitarians, that Isaiah 44:24 also indicates that no other beings existed at the time of the creation of the physical universe. They do this *even when interacting with Trinitarians who do not understand Isaiah 44:24 in that way*. Greg Stafford, for example, in a passage of his book critiquing my use of Isaiah 44:24, comments:

There was someone with God when He founded the earth, but not some idol god of the nations. Isaiah 44:24 does not in any way conflict with the biblical teaching that God's "Wisdom," His Son, was with Him when He 'stretched out the heavens.' Why, even the angels were present at that time and 'shouted in applause'! (Job 38:7) Jehovah alone created all things through the agency of the Logos.³

The last sentence does not follow as a conclusion to the preceding three sentences and appears to have been tacked on to cover all the bases. The problem is that Stafford's argument does not give us any reason to view his conclusion as compatible with Isaiah 44:24. He does offer a biblical argument for denying that Isaiah 44:24 means that Jehovah was the one being that existed when he made the physical universe. He does not, however, offer a biblical argument for denying that Isaiah 44:24 means that Jehovah alone did the making involved in the making of the physical universe.

George Kaplin also makes a point of critiquing the broader claim made by some evangelicals that Isaiah 44:24 entails the conclusion that no angels or other heavenly beings existed when Jehovah made the physical universe. He does this even though no one on the forum where he has posted his paper defends that position. Kaplin leads off his paper with this claim and then refers to me as disagreeing with it. Unfortunately, he does not explain in the body of his paper what my view is (one can more or less figure it out from a footnote).⁴ He also concludes his paper (at least what he has posted so far) by criticizing the view that Isaiah 44:24 means that no other beings existed when Jehovah created the world: "Therefore there are no lexical markers

²Francis J. Beckwith, "Of Logic and Lordship: The Validity of a Categorical Syllogism Supporting Christ's Deity," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (1986): 429-30.

³Greg Stafford, *Jehovah's Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics*, 2d ed. (Huntington Beach, Calif.: Elihu Books, 2000), 324.

⁴George Kaplin, "The Trinitarian 'proof-text' of Isaiah 44:24 reviewed contextually and exegetically," found 1/23/2006 at < http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evangelicals_and_jws/message/25486 >. Kaplin removed earlier versions of his paper from the archives of this online group after I pointed out that none of the five persons he originally cited interpreted Isaiah 44:24 to preclude angelic beings from existing when God made the physical universe. His new version cites two other individuals, one of whom (James White) has already repudiated Kaplin's representation of his position (as Kaplin admits in a footnote).

that require the interpretation that Jehovah was ‘alone’ as in without companion when he ‘alone’ originated all things.” Since no one on that forum has been defending that view, Kaplin’s critique of it amounts to knocking down a straw man.

Kaplin argues that Isaiah 44:24 means only that Jehovah takes credit for initiating or originating creation. In this way he argues that Isaiah 44:24 can be coherent with New Testament passages crediting Jesus with making the physical universe without acknowledging or inferring that Jesus himself is Jehovah.

According to Kaplin, the view I take “begs the question.” In a footnote he refers to a statement by evangelical New Testament scholar Murray Harris: “A related question demands brief treatment. To whom did the NT writers attribute the divine action described in the OT? To answer ‘the Lord God’ (YHWH ELOHIM = LXX KURIOS hO QEOS) is to beg the question.”⁵ Kaplin has misapplied Harris’s comment to me. Harris says that it would “beg the question” to say that the **New Testament** writers “attribute the divine action described in the Old Testament” to “the Lord God.” But my view of Isaiah 44:24 addresses the question of to whom the **Old Testament** writer (Isaiah!) attributes divine action. Kaplin thus ignores Harris’s very next statement (even though he quotes it in another footnote): “A clear distinction must be drawn between what the OT text meant to its authors and readers and how it was understood by the early Christians who lived after the advent of the Messiah and the coming of the Spirit.” It is therefore not “begging the question” to assert that *Isaiah* attributes to the Lord God the divine action described in Isaiah 44:24! I will have more to say about Kaplin’s use of Harris’s footnote later.

III. Isaiah 44:24 in the Context of the Book of Isaiah

Oddly, Kaplin refers throughout his paper to Isaiah 40-66 as “Deutero-Isaiah,” even though as a Jehovah’s Witness he rejects the theory that Isaiah 40-66 was written centuries after Isaiah. The reason appears to be that Kaplin almost completely ignores Isaiah 1-39 in developing his position with regards to the “context” of Isaiah 44:24. He mentions Isaiah 1:1-2 more than once, but the only other references to Isaiah 1-39 are in a table of Messianic prophecies mentioning that the Messiah was to be “from the family of David the son of Jesse” and “born of a virgin” (Is. 7:14; 9:7; 11:1, 10). It seems fair to conclude that Kaplin’s claim (made after I questioned him about his references to “Deutero-Isaiah”) that “the arguments in this analysis will be based upon the premise that the entire book of Isaiah is a coherent unity” is mere lip service. The truth is that it would not affect Kaplin’s argument significantly if he were to assume the late date of Isaiah 40-66. In a footnote, Kaplin states, “The contextual examples are taken from Isaiah chapters 40-66 because these form a single context. The lexical follow this convention.” However, if the Book of Isaiah is a unity then this approach is flawed. A better approach is to consider relevant passages throughout the book of Isaiah while giving closer attention to the section of Isaiah in which our text appears.

⁵Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 47 n. 112.

A. Isaiah Often Speaks of the Messiah as Jehovah

The bottom line of Kaplin's argument from the context of Isaiah (mostly 40-66) is that Isaiah differentiates Jehovah from the Messiah.

Exegetes rely upon the fact that Scripture is coherent. An assumption of coherence was necessary to prove that the "Servant of Jehovah" is not the nation of Israel in Isaiah 42 because the Messiah is distinguished from that nation as the mediator between that nation and Jehovah.... The same presumption of coherence which forces us to distinguish between the Messiah and the nation of Israel as the "Servant of Jehovah" when carried out consistently also distinguishes between the Messiah and Jehovah who anoints him and to whom he mediates on the basis of the nation of Israel.

A consistent hermeneutic will unambiguously identify Jehovah as the Father in those verses where the Messiah and Jehovah are distinguished. A presumption of coherence will also consistently identify Jehovah as the God and Father of the Messiah in all occurrence of the book of Isaiah.

To substantiate this conclusion, Kaplin presents a table of Messianic passages in Isaiah (taken from the article on "Messiah" in the Watchtower book *Insight on the Scriptures*). In all of these passages, Kaplin asserts, "Jehovah is identified as the God and Father of the Messiah," so that the Messiah is consistently distinguished from Jehovah (Kaplin cites [though not in order] Is. 7:14; 8:14-15; 9:1-2, 7; 11:1, 10; 28:16; 40:3; 42:1-4; 50:6; 53:1, 3-5, 7-9, 11-12; 61:1-2). The point to which Kaplin is driving is that New Testament passages that speak of Christ's activity in creation cannot be interpreted in light of Isaiah 44:24 to imply that Christ is Jehovah without contradicting the rest of the book of Isaiah.

There are several things wrong with this line of argument, but let us begin at the beginning with Kaplin's major premise. It is not the case that Isaiah "consistently" distinguishes Jehovah from the Messiah. I agree that Jehovah is distinguished from the Messiah in some of the passages Kaplin cites (Is. 11:1-10 [see vv. 1-3]; 42:1-4; 50:6; 53:6, 10-12; 61:1-2). However, other Messianic passages, including several of the very texts that Kaplin cites, do not make any such distinction.

- **Isaiah 7:14** calls the wonder-child (who will be the Messiah) "God-with-us" (*Immanuel*); furthermore, it says nothing explicitly distinguishing the Messiah from Jehovah.
- **Isaiah 8:14-15** in context is speaking of Jehovah:

"You are not to say, 'Conspiracy!'
In regard to all that this people call conspiracy,
And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it.
It is Jehovah [LXX, "the Lord"] of hosts whom you should regard as holy.
And he shall be your fear,
And he shall be your dread.
Then he shall become a sanctuary;

But to both of the houses of Israel,
a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over,
A snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”
(Isaiah 8:12b-15)

This passage does not distinguish Jehovah from the Messiah: Jehovah is the one whom they should regard as holy, the one whom they should fear, and the one who became the stone to strike and the rock of offense. Yet, as we know, the New Testament applies all of these descriptions from this very passage to Jesus the Messiah (1 Pet. 2:8; 3:14-15; cf. Luke 20:18). See also on Isaiah 28:16 below.

- **Isaiah 9:1-7** does not distinguish Jehovah from the Messiah. It refers to the zeal of Jehovah in accomplishing what the passage says, but this does not distinguish Jehovah from the Messiah. Verse 6, which Kaplin omits, even calls the Messiah “the mighty God” (*el gibbor*), a description Isaiah uses elsewhere for Jehovah (Is. 10:21).
- **Isaiah 28:16** could be understood to distinguish Jehovah from the Messiah (the “stone” that Jehovah laid in Zion). However, in light of Isaiah 8:14-15, where the stone of offense is Jehovah himself, one could also understand the “stone” of 28:16 to be Jehovah as well. The text would then mean that Jehovah was going to lay himself in Zion as the stone.
- **Isaiah 40:3** most certainly does not distinguish Jehovah from the Messiah. The voice calls out:

“Clear the way *for Jehovah* in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway *for our God*.”

The passage goes on to say things like the following:

“Then *the glory of Jehovah* will be revealed” (Is. 40:5).
“Say to the cities of Judah, ‘*Here is your God!*’” (Is. 40:9).
“Behold, *the Lord Jehovah will come with might*” (Is. 40:10).

The opening passage in the section of Isaiah 40-66, then, speaks of the Messiah’s coming as the coming of Jehovah, the God of Israel, no less than five times—and the passage nowhere distinguishes the Messiah from Jehovah.

Please note that the above passages are all cited by Kaplin as supposedly distinguishing Jehovah from the Messiah. He agrees—with citations from the New Testament as proof—that they speak about the Messiah. Kaplin cannot deny that Isaiah 8:14-15 or 40:3 is speaking about the Messiah, because he has already agreed that they are (in a chart taken from a Watchtower publication!). Yet these texts in particular not only do not differentiate Jehovah from the Messiah, they explicitly refer to Jehovah alone as the one to be hallowed and feared (Is. 8:14-15) and as the one who is coming (Is. 40:3, cf. 40:4-11).

Nor will it do now to argue that although these passages refer to Jehovah, they can be fulfilled in the Messiah as Jehovah's authorized representative. That was not Kaplin's claim; he claimed that these passages consistently distinguished Jehovah from the Messiah. They don't, as I have shown. One can, if one wishes, read into the texts the possibility of a representative acting on Jehovah's behalf, but *the texts do not say this*.

B. Isaiah Denies that Jehovah Redeems through an Intermediary

Furthermore, Isaiah actually denies the idea of Jehovah acting through an intermediary in salvation:

- **Isaiah 59:15b-20**

“Now Jehovah saw,
 And it was displeasing in his sight that there was no justice.
 And he saw that there was no man,
 And was astonished that there was no one to intercede;
 Then his own arm brought salvation to him,
 And his righteousness upheld him.
 He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
 And a helmet of salvation on his head;
 And he put on garments of vengeance for clothing
 And wrapped himself with zeal as a mantle.
 According to their deeds, so He will repay,
 Wrath to his adversaries, recompense to his enemies;
 To the coastlands he will make recompense.
 So they will fear the name of Jehovah from the west
 And his glory from the rising of the sun,
 For he will come like a rushing stream
 Which the wind of Jehovah drives.
 ‘A Redeemer will come to Zion,
 And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,’ declares Jehovah.”

The above passage in Isaiah 59 states that Jehovah acted personally to save Israel and to bring judgment on its enemies because there was no one else to intercede on his behalf (the same idea is expressed in Isaiah 63:5). As is the case throughout Isaiah (especially Isaiah 40-66), the political ‘salvation’ of Israel from Babylon and its restoration to the land prefigures the spiritual salvation of God's people. The New Testament freely interprets passages in Isaiah 40-66 as applying to the saving work of God in Christ. The above passage is no exception: the apostle Paul cites Isaiah 59:20 and applies it to the future salvation of Israel when the partial hardening on the Jews is lifted (Rom. 11:25-26).

One might suppose that Isaiah 59:20 does distinguish the “Redeemer” from Jehovah, but this supposition would be in error, for at least two reasons. First, Isaiah has just denied the availability of someone to intercede on Jehovah's behalf and stated that Jehovah himself will bring salvation and righteousness. Since this is functionally the meaning of redemption, the

Redeemer in this passage must be Jehovah. Second, throughout Isaiah the Redeemer is identified as Jehovah:

“Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel;
I will help you,’ declares Jehovah,
‘and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel’” (Is. 41:14).

“But now, thus says Jehovah, your Creator, O Jacob,
And he who formed you, O Israel,
‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are Mine!’” (Is. 43:1).

“Thus says Jehovah your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel...” (Is. 43:14).

“Thus says Jehovah, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, Jehovah of hosts:
‘I am the first and I am the last,
And there is no God besides me’” (Is. 44:6).

“Thus says Jehovah, your Redeemer,
and the one who formed you from the womb,
‘I, Jehovah, am the maker of all things,
Stretching out the heavens by myself
And spreading out the earth all alone’” (Is. 44:24).

“Our Redeemer, Jehovah of hosts is his name,
The Holy One of Israel” (Is. 47:4).

“Thus says Jehovah, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel...” (Is. 48:17).

“Thus says Jehovah, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One...” (Is. 49:7).

“Break forth, shout joyfully together,
You waste places of Jerusalem;
For Jehovah has comforted his people,
He has redeemed Jerusalem.
Jehovah has bared his holy arm
In the sight of all the nations,
That all the ends of the earth may see
The salvation of our God” (Is. 52:9-10).

For your husband is your Maker,
Whose name is Jehovah of hosts;
And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,
Who is called the God of all the earth” (Is. 54:5; see also v. 8).

“You will also suck the milk of nations
 And suck the breast of kings;
 Then you will know that I, Jehovah, am your Savior
 And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Is. 60:16).

“For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us
 And Israel does not recognize us.
 You, Jehovah, are our Father,
 Our Redeemer from of old is your name” (Is. 63:16).

Repeatedly before Isaiah 59, and in passages following it as well, Jehovah is explicitly identified as Israel’s Redeemer. In the light of this truly consistent usage and the fact that Isaiah 59 states that Jehovah could find no one to save Israel for him, Jehovah himself must also be the Redeemer in Isaiah 59:20.

C. Isaiah Saw His Glory

There are other passages in Isaiah that speak explicitly of Jehovah that the New Testament writers applied directly to Jesus, without any indication that they applied to him simply as his representative. A notable example is John’s statement that Isaiah saw Christ’s glory:

“After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them. Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said, ‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.’ Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him. Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him...” (John 12:36b-42).

In context, when John says that Isaiah saw “his glory,” he must mean Jesus’ glory, because the issue here is the failure of many Jews to believe in Jesus despite the signs he had performed (v. 36b). Furthermore, the first quotation from Isaiah is from Isaiah 53:1, in the passage about the Suffering Servant (Is. 52:13-53:12). Likewise, after saying that Isaiah “saw his glory and spoke about him” (v. 41), John says that many of the Jewish authorities “believed in him,” and that must also refer to Jesus. Thus, whether we look at the preceding or following context, the answer is the same: Isaiah saw Jesus’ glory.

At the same time, though, the glory that Isaiah saw was the glory of Jehovah. John’s second quotation is from Isaiah 6:10. The same passage begins with Isaiah’s statement, “In the year of King Uzziah’s death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of his robe filling the temple” (Is. 6:1). The NWT translates this verse as follows: “In the year that King Uz·zi´ah died I, however, got to see Jehovah, sitting on a throne lofty and lifted up, and his skirts were filling the temple.” Isaiah goes on to say,

“And one called out to another and said,
 ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is Jehovah of hosts,
 The whole earth is full of his glory” (Is. 6:3).

So the one whose glory Isaiah saw, in Isaiah’s context, was Jehovah. Moreover, Isaiah looked forward to the day when Jehovah’s glory would be revealed—expressing this prophetic expectation in contexts we all recognize as Messianic:

- **Isaiah 40:5**

“Then the glory of Jehovah will be revealed,
 And all flesh will see it together;
 For the mouth of Jehovah has spoken” (Is. 40:5).

- **Isaiah 60:1-2**

“Arise, shine; for your light has come,
 And the glory of Jehovah has risen upon you.
 For behold, darkness will cover the earth
 And deep darkness the peoples;
 But Jehovah will rise upon you
 And His glory will appear upon you” (Is. 60:1-2).

Again, although these passages are Messianic, they do not distinguish the Messiah from Jehovah. It will be Jehovah’s own glory that will appear. “Behold, your God comes!”

D. The New Testament Often Speaks of Jesus as Jehovah

If it were true that Isaiah always distinguished Jehovah from the Messiah and that the New Testament writers understood Isaiah in that way, we would expect them to safeguard against any confusion by following suit and avoiding any use of Isaiah that might tend to ‘confuse’ the Messiah with Jehovah. Notoriously, they don’t, as we have already shown with ample examples. Indeed, the New Testament writers (and Jesus himself!) exhibit what would have to be described as a reckless disregard for this alleged consistent differentiation of the Messiah from Jehovah. Moreover, they do so especially with regard to passages in Isaiah in the surrounding context of our text, Isaiah 44:24.

“‘You are my witnesses,’ declares Jehovah,
 ‘And my servant whom I have chosen,
 So that **you may know and believe me**
 And understand **that I am he**.
 [Gk., GNWTE KAI PISTEUSHTE...HOTI EGW EIMI]
 Before me there was no God formed,
 And there will be none after me’” (Is. 43:10).

“Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins;
 for unless **you believe that I am he** [Gk., PISTEUSHTE hOTI EGW EIMI],
 you will die in your sins....
 When you lift up the Son of Man,
 then **you will know that I am he** [Gk., GNWSESQE hOTI EGW EIMI],
 and I do nothing on my own initiative,
 but I speak these things as the Father taught me” (John 8:24, 28).

“Even from eternity I am he,
 And **there is none who can deliver out of my hand**” (Is. 43:13).

“...and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish;
 and **no one will snatch them out of my hand**.
 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all;
 and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29).

“Thus says Jehovah, the King of Israel
 and his Redeemer, Jehovah of hosts:
‘I am the first and I am the last,
 And there is no God besides me.
 Who is like me?
 ...And you are my witnesses.
 Is there any God besides me,
 Or is there any Rock?
 I know of none’” (Is. 44:6, 8).

“Do not be afraid; **I am the first and the last**, and the living One” (Rev. 1:17-18).

“**The first and the last**, who was dead, and has come to life, says this” (Rev. 2:8).

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, **the first and the last**, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13).

“And there is no other God besides me,
 A righteous God and a Savior;
 There is none except me.
 Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth;
 For I am God, and there is no other.
 I have sworn by myself,
 The word has gone forth from my mouth in righteousness
 And will not turn back,
 That to me **every knee shall bow**
and every tongue shall swear;
 [Gk., hOTI EMOI KAMYEI PAN GONU

KAI EXOMOLOGHSETAI PASA GLWSSA TWi QEWi]

They will say of me,

‘Only in the **LORD** [Heb., YHWH; Gk., KURIOS] are righteousness and strength.’

Men will come to him,

And all who were angry at him will be put to shame.

In the **LORD** [Heb., YHWH; Gk., KURIOS] all the offspring of Israel

Will be justified and will **glory**” (Is. 45:21-25).

“...in the name of Jesus **every knee shall bow** [Gk., PAN GONU KAMYH]

—in heaven and on earth and down below—

and every tongue confess [Gk., KAI PASA GLWSSA EXOMOLOGHSHTAI] that

Jesus Christ is **Lord**

to the **glory** of God [Gk., QEOU] the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11).

The New Testament passages cited above do frequently distinguish Jesus *from the Father*, but they do not distinguish Jesus from Jehovah (not even in the NWT!). Instead, they freely apply language used for Jehovah in Isaiah to Jesus Christ. In fact, this language used for Jehovah in Isaiah and applied to Christ comes from passages that are strenuously emphasizing that what is said is true of Jehovah only (Is. 43:10-13; 44:6-8; 45:21-25). This state of affairs is exactly what the doctrine of the Trinity would predict but not what we would expect according to Jehovah’s Witness doctrine in general or George Kaplin’s assertion of a consistent distinction between the Messiah and Jehovah in particular.

E. Jehovah as the Sole Maker in Isaiah

Now, let us return to Isaiah 44:24 and the central issue with regard to that text: does Isaiah 44:24 in context allow for the idea that Jehovah had someone else with him, someone who was not Jehovah, and who actually performed the work of making or forming the universe? Again, we are first trying to examine the context of Isaiah (as Kaplin also tried to do) before looking at the fine-grained lexical matters in the verse itself. The answer to that question is definitely No. Consider the following passages in Isaiah:

“O Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made the heavens and the earth” (Is. 37:16).

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance
And the hills in a pair of scales?” (Is. 40:12).

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain

And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in....
 Lift up your eyes on high
 And see who has created these stars,
 The One who leads forth their host by number,
 He calls them all by name;
 Because of the greatness of his might and the strength of His power,
 Not one of them is missing....
 The Everlasting God, Jehovah, the Creator of the ends of the earth
 Does not become weary or tired” (Is. 40:22, 26, 28).

“Thus says God Jehovah,
 Who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 Who spread out the earth and its offspring,
 Who gives breath to the people on it
 And spirit to those who walk in it...” (Is. 42:5).

“It is I who made the earth, and created man upon it.
 I stretched out the heavens with my hands
 And I ordained all their host” (Is. 45:12).

“For thus says Jehovah, who created the heavens (He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it and did not create it a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited), ‘I am Jehovah, and there is none else’” (Is. 45:18).

“Listen to me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called:
 I am he; I am the first, I am also the last.
 Surely my hand founded the earth,
 And my right hand spread out the heavens;
 When I call to them, they stand together” (Is. 48:12-13).

“That you have forgotten Jehovah your Maker,
 Who stretched out the heavens
 And laid the foundations of the earth...” (Is. 51:13a).

Throughout Isaiah, the work of creation is attributed to Jehovah only. No distinction in this regard can be made between creating and making the universe. Jehovah made the heavens (Is. 37:16) and he created the heavens (Is. 42:5; 45:18); he made the earth (Is. 37:16) and he created the earth (Is. 40:28). Isaiah states repeatedly that Jehovah stretched out the heavens (Is. 40:22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:13). Jehovah made, formed, founded, and established the earth (Is. 45:12, 18; 48:13). Jehovah created man on the earth (Is. 45:12).

The argument in this section of Isaiah is fairly straightforward. Jehovah is the only God because he is the only one who created, made, and formed the universe, who created man, who made Israel, and who is Israel’s redeemer. There is no other God; there is no other Savior or Redeemer for Israel. Even Jehovah does not know of any other God (Is. 44:8)! Therefore, Israel must repent and turn to Jehovah for salvation.

F. Conclusion

What we have seen so far with regard to the meaning of Isaiah 44:24 in the context of the rest of the book of Isaiah thoroughly undermines Kaplin's argument. It is simply false that Isaiah consistently distinguishes Jehovah from the Messiah. In fact, although in a few places Isaiah does speak of Jehovah and the Messiah as distinct, in more places he speaks of the Messiah as Jehovah—especially if we take the New Testament use of Isaiah as our guide. I do not mean that the Book of Isaiah is internally inconsistent, but that it is inconsistent with Kaplin's position. What we see in Isaiah is a paradox that is repeated throughout the Bible. (A paradox is a state of affairs that *seems* inconsistent on a superficial view of the matter but in fact is not inconsistent.) The angel of Jehovah is distinct from Jehovah and yet is also spoken of as being Jehovah. The Logos in John 1:1 is distinct from God and yet he is God. The Son of God (John 20:31) is also the disciples' Lord and God (John 20:28). Likewise, in Isaiah it is Jehovah who comes to redeem and save his people—because he could find no one to intercede on his behalf who could do the job—and yet this salvation comes through one who is also Jehovah's "servant." In short, the servant of Jehovah does what Isaiah elsewhere attributes to Jehovah alone.

Isaiah *is* undeniably consistent in what he says about Jehovah's role in creation: he speaks of Jehovah as the only creator, maker, and former of all things, of the heavens and the earth. His whole line of reasoning is based on the premise that Jehovah is the only creator and maker of the universe and therefore the only God that Israel should recognize. The distinction that Jehovah's Witnesses make between creation (which they attribute to Jehovah) and the making of the universe (which they attribute to the Son as empowered by Jehovah the Father) has no basis for support in the book of Isaiah. Jehovah creates, he makes, he forms, he stretches, he spreads out everything.

IV. Exegesis of Isaiah 44:24

Before I discuss the exegesis of Isaiah 44:24, I need to respond to another misunderstanding of my position in George Kaplin's paper. He writes:

As demonstrated earlier, some Trinitarian apologists hold a different viewpoint and consider the reference to Jehovah in this verse to be a reference to the Trinity. They hold maintain [sic] the Hebrew supports the view that there are three persons referenced in Jehovah in this verse because of their view that the creative activity of Jehovah in Isaiah 44:24 fits the description of the role of the Son in creation.

I don't know if any other "Trinitarian apologists" have said what Kaplin represents "some" saying, but I know this is not my position. I do not contend that the Hebrew text of Isaiah 44:24 "supports" the idea of three persons in Jehovah. The Hebrew text says nothing about three persons. It asserts that Jehovah is the only maker of all things. That's it. Trinitarians maintain that the New Testament reveals what is not stated in Isaiah 44:24, namely, that Jehovah is not unitarian but rather triune. They argue that Isaiah 44:24 contributes to the doctrine of the Trinity,

not by offering anything about the three persons, but by establishing the fact that there is only one God, Jehovah, who is the maker of all things.

Some of Kaplin's lexical and grammatical analysis is overkill because of his focus on this red herring. There is no question about the language of the text being singular (e.g., Jehovah says "I" and "me"). Since God is one indivisible being, naturally and appropriately he speaks to creatures in the first person singular. Does Kaplin really suppose that the ubiquitous use of singular pronouns with reference to Jehovah in the Old Testament (not just in Isaiah 44:24) somehow constitutes a defeater for the Trinitarian position? Only if one assumes a caricature of the doctrine of the Trinity might such a criticism seem at all telling.

Kaplin offers three arguments to refute the Trinitarian claim that Isaiah 44:24 asserts that Jehovah alone made or formed the universe. I shall consider each of these arguments in turn.

A. Is Jehovah in Isaiah 44:24 God the Father?

Kaplin argues that Jehovah in Isaiah 44:24 must be identified as the Father, thus excluding its application to the Son. Since the Son was involved in making the universe, Kaplin infers that Isaiah 44:24 cannot mean that Jehovah alone did work to make the universe. Kaplin's main reason for concluding that Jehovah in Isaiah 44:24 refers to the Father is his claim that in Isaiah 40-66 Jehovah "is distinguished from the Messiah who is identified as his Son in New Testament verses." I have already refuted this argument. The Messiah is sometimes distinguished from Jehovah in Isaiah, but he is more often spoken of as being Jehovah.

Kaplin also attempts to reach the same conclusion via another argument. He writes:

Isaiah is the prophet of Jehovah who speaks his words and Jehovah is God. The New Testament teaches that it was the Father who spoke "in the prophets," therefore in context Jehovah is the Father.

The New Testament text to which Kaplin refers is Hebrews 1:1-2, which states, "God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in [his] Son."

In support of this argument, Kaplin quotes evangelical New Testament scholar Murray Harris again. Since he rests so much on this quote from Harris, we will look at it in its entirety. In the main body of the text, Harris makes the following comment:

God is the Father (in the trinitarian sense), Jesus is the Lord (1 Cor. 8:6). When (hO) QEOS is used, we are to assume that the NT writers have hO PATHR in mind unless the context makes this sense of (hO) QEOS impossible.⁶

In a lengthy footnote, Harris comments:

A related question demands brief treatment. To whom did the NT writers attribute the divine action described in the OT? To answer "the Lord God" (YHWH ELOHIM = LXX KURIOS hO QEOS) is to beg the question, for the authors of the NT wrote of OT events

⁶Harris, *Jesus as God*, 47.

in the light of their trinitarian understanding of God. A clear distinction must be drawn between what the OT text meant to its authors and readers and how it was understood by the early Christians who lived after the advent of the Messiah and the coming of the Spirit. Certainly the person who projects the trinitarian teaching of the NT back into the OT and reads the OT through the spectacles of the dynamic or trinitarian monotheism of the NT is thinking anachronistically. On the other hand, it does not seem illegitimate to pose a question such as this: To whom was the author of Hebrews referring when he said (1:1), “At many times and in various ways *God* spoke in the past to our forefathers through the prophets”? That it was not the Holy Spirit in any ultimate sense is evident from the fact that in neither the OT nor the NT is the Spirit called “God” *expressis verbis*. And, in spite of the fact that the LXX equivalent of YHWH, viz., KURIOS, is regularly applied to Jesus in the NT so that it becomes less a title than a proper name, it is not possible that hO QEOS in Heb. 1:1 denotes Jesus Christ, for the same sentence (in Greek) contains “(the God who spoke...) in these last days has spoken to us in a Son (EN hUIW).” Since the author is emphasizing the continuity of the two phases of divine speech (hO QEOS LALHSAS... ELALHSEN), this reference to a Son shows that hO QEOS was understood to be “God the Father.” Similarly, the differentiation made between hO QEOS as the one who speaks in both eras and hUIOS as his final means of speaking shows that in the author’s mind it was not the Triune God of Christian theology who spoke to the forefathers by the prophets. That is to say, for the author of Hebrews (as for all NT writers, one may suggest) “the God of our fathers,” Yahweh, was no other than “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (compare Acts 2:30 and 2:33; 3:13 and 3:18; 3:25 and 3:26; note also 5:30). Such a conclusion is entirely consistent with the regular NT usage of hO QEOS. It would be inappropriate for ELOHIM or YHWH ever to refer to the Trinity in the OT when in the NT QEOS regularly refers to the Father alone and apparently never to the Trinity.⁷

Harris’s argument, which Kaplin picks up and uses for his own (different) purpose, considers only two possibilities: (1) the NT understands YHWH or ELOHIM in the OT to refer to the Trinity, or (2) the NT understands YHWH or ELOHIM in the OT to refer to one of the three divine persons (remember, Harris is a Trinitarian!). Since NT usage provides no basis for the former possibility, Harris favors the latter, and then by process of elimination and cross-referencing with Hebrews 1:1-2 concludes that the NT understands YHWH or ELOHIM in the OT to refer to the Father.

One problem with Harris’s argument as it is expressed in his footnote is that it only considers the two possibilities mentioned. A third possibility is that the NT understands YHWH or ELOHIM in the OT to refer simply to God in the unity of his being, without *specifically*

⁷Ibid., 47 n. 112. Note that Kaplin’s quotation of this footnote (his footnote 18) contains various typos, and accidentally omits parts of two sentences, shown in boldface here: “Since the author is emphasizing the continuity of the two phases of divine speech (hO QEOS LALHSAS... ELALHSEN), this reference to a Son shows that **hO QEOS was understood to be ‘God the Father.’ Similarly, the differentiation made between hO QEOS as the one who speaks in both eras and hUIOS as his final means of speaking shows that in the author’s mind it was not the Triune God of Christian theology who spoke to the forefathers by the prophets.**”

referring to the Trinity. On this view YHWH or ELOHIM in the OT would refer to the one true God who (we happen to know from the NT) is triune. A fourth possibility is that the NT understands YHWH or ELOHIM in the OT to refer *usually* to God *simpliciter*. This would leave open the possibility that in some instances the NT understands YHWH or ELOHIM in the OT to refer to the Father as distinct from the Son/Messiah (viz., where the OT speaks of YHWH or ELOHIM as sending or working through the Messiah), or to refer specifically to the Son (where the OT speaks of YHWH or ELOHIM coming himself, acting to save and redeem). This fourth view fits the actual evidence of the NT more completely than Harris's apparently sweeping conclusion that the NT understands YHWH or ELOHIM in the OT to refer to the Father.

I say "apparently" because Harris himself qualifies his conclusion. In the very footnote in question he acknowledges that "the LXX equivalent of YHWH, viz., KURIOS, is regularly applied to Jesus in the NT so that it becomes less a title than a proper name." Doesn't this mean that the NT at least sometimes views YHWH in the OT as the Son?

The fact is that Hebrews 1:1-2 cannot be used to prejudge the proper exegesis of every NT and OT text referring to God. Harris himself, in the same book, argues that the writer of Hebrews applied the designation hO QEOS to the Son a scant eight verses later:

The appellation hO QEOS that was figurative and hyperbolic when applied to a mortal king was applied to the immortal Son in a literal and true sense. Jesus is not merely superior to the angels. Equally with the Father he shares the divine nature (hO QEOS, v. 8) while remaining distinct from him (hO QEOS SOU, v. 9).⁸

I conclude that Harris's argument, which does not appear to have been intended to have the unqualifiedly sweeping implications that Kaplin derives from it, cannot be used to prove that YHWH in a text like Isaiah 44:24 must refer to the Father only in distinction from the Son. Furthermore, such an argument is not exegetical; it depends on a sweeping generalization of what the New Testament says and does nothing to exegete the language of Isaiah 44:24. Finally, such an argument is pointless because it has been constructed in order to justify interpreting Isaiah 44:24 to say something other than what it actually says, as I shall now explain.

B. Jehovah the Maker

Kaplin argues that the Hebrew words used in Isaiah 44:24 for making and forming are equivalent in meaning to the Hebrew word for creating. On this basis he concludes that all Isaiah 44:24 is asserting is that Jehovah is solely credited with creating, which he interprets to mean "initiating" the universe. This conclusion allows for the Jehovah's Witness belief that Jehovah's created Son shared in the work of creation without actually being credited as having created.

The activity represented by the word *asa* in **Isaiah 44:24** defines what it was that Jehovah the God and Father alone did in creation. HALOT identifies *asa* in **Isaiah 44:24** as equivalent to *bara*, which has the sense of "*originating*" something. This is the activity which Jehovah does "alone" or "by himself" (Hebrew *lebaddi*.)

⁸Harris, *Jesus as God*, 227.

In his table “Lexical Analysis of Isaiah 44:24,” Kaplin offers the same argument for the word “forming” (Hebrew, YATSAR):

To form, create. *Koehler/Baumgartner, Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, page 396 confirms that the sense of *yasar* when “von Gott said of God”, and specifically for *Is 44,24* is that of *bara*.

In short: Kaplin argues that both YASAR and ASAH (or ASA) in Isaiah 44:24 just mean the same as BARA’, that BARA’ (“create”) just means to “originate” something, and therefore Isaiah 44:24 merely credits Jehovah with originating creation, not with actually doing the work of making and forming the universe. This argument amounts to lexical sleight-of-hand, as we shall see.

1. YASAR (“forming”)

Koehler and Baumgartner’s (KB) lexicon states that when used “of God... YASAR is the older a[nd] more concrete word for younger BARA’.”⁹ We should probably ignore the diachronic distinction that KB draw here between YASAR as the older word and BARA’ as the younger word, as it assumes a Documentary Hypothesis approach to the Old Testament. The description of YASAR as more concrete is defensible, though. YASAR meant to shape or form; Isaiah uses it of the making of pottery by the potter (Is. 29:16; 45:9), an image that represents Jehovah as making Israel with his own hands (see also Is. 64:8). The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)* observes, “When used in its secular sense it [YASAR] occurs most frequently in the participial form meaning ‘potter,’ i.e., one who fashions (clay). The word is used in this form frequently in the prophets where ‘the potter’ provides an apt vehicle for the communication of the prophetic message (Isa. 29:16; Jer. 18:2, 4, 6; Zech. 11:13).”¹⁰ Biblically, the image hearkens back to the Genesis creation account, where Jehovah is described as having “formed” man from the dirt and breathing life into him (Gen. 2:7). Thus the Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB) lexicon comments on YASAR, “2. of divine activity: a. (as a potter) forming Adam out of APAR [dust, dirt] from ADAMAH [the ground] Gn 2:7,8.”¹¹

In Isaiah 44:24, the text under consideration, the word is used as part of the metaphor of the forming of a child in the womb, used to picture Israel as Jehovah’s offspring (see also Is. 44:2, 21; 45:10-11; 49:14-15).

Both images of forming pottery and forming a child in the womb express the direct, even intimate, involvement of Jehovah in the formation of Israel. Isaiah also uses this same word to describe Jehovah’s action in “forming” light (Is. 45:7), the earth (Is. 45:18), and the people whom he will then save (Is. 43:7).¹²

⁹Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 396, hereafter cited in the text as KB.

¹⁰R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:396, hereafter cited in the text as *TWOT*.

¹¹Francis Brown, with S. R. Driver and Charles Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996 reprint), 427, hereafter cited as *BDB*.

¹²All three of these texts are cited by KB, *ibid*.

2. ASAH (“making”)

The Hebrew word ASAH, usually translated “making” in Isaiah 44:24, is one of the most common words in the OT, occurring in the qal form over 2,500 times. As Kaplin correctly notes, its sense depends on context. Since it is used in Isaiah 44:24 in the context of the origins of the heavens and earth, its use here recalls the creation account in which it is used frequently (alongside BARA) in describing God’s creative acts.

The statement in the KB lexicon that Kaplin quotes on ASAH, “*make* (= *create*, the t[echanical] t[erm] of which is BARA’ . . .)” (KB, 740), does not mean that ASAH has the same connotation as BARA’ but that the two are equivalent in that both can be used to refer to God’s creative acts. In Genesis 1 (the paradigmatic creation passage), the usage of BARA’ has a special connotation as seen in its selective use for the creation of the heavens and earth (Gen. 1:1) and thereafter only for the creation of animals (Gen. 1:25) and of man (Gen. 1:27). Most interpreters recognize in this selective usage the connotation of a new and special act of creation by God. Genesis states both that God “made” (ASAH) man and that he “created” man (Gen. 1:26, 27); again, the parallelism indicates that the words have equivalent reference to the bringing into existence of man without treating the words as completely synonymous.

In Isaiah 44:24 the emphasis is on the universality of what Jehovah makes—“making all things.” The connotation of ASAH must, as has been said, be derived from the context, that is, from the interplay of the word with the other words in the passage. This interplay is structured primarily by the Hebrew parallelism of the text, which places the Hebrew participles describing God’s actions parallel to one another. More particularly, the “making” is described more concretely and specifically in the two lines that follow, where Jehovah lays claim to “stretching out the heavens” and “spreading out the earth.” In order to understand what Isaiah means by “making,” then, we must turn to those two lines.

3. “Stretching Out” (NATAH) and “Spreading Out” (RAQA’)

Isaiah’s use of these two verbs is very important, for two reasons. First, these two participles are parallel to ASAH (“making”) and in context give further explication of what was involved in Jehovah’s act of “making all things.” We know this is so because “heaven” and “earth” in these two lines are a common Hebrew pairing denoting the totality of the physical universe (as in Gen. 1:1). Second, it is to these verbs that the Hebrew text attaches words expressing the exclusive role of Jehovah in those actions usually translated “alone,” “by myself,” or “who was with me?”).

Although Kaplin gave considerable attention to a lexical analysis of ASAH and YASAR, he says nothing whatsoever about the words translated “stretching” (NATAH) and “spreading” (RAQA’). The reason is simple: there is no way to reduce these words to mean merely that Jehovah initiated the creation of the universe by commissioning his created Son to do the work. Jehovah claims emphatically that he stretched out the heavens and spread out the earth.

As we noted earlier, Isaiah frequently speaks of Jehovah as the one who stretched out the heavens (Is. 40:22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:13); this becomes virtually a definition of Jehovah’s role as creator and maker of the universe. The language pictures the heavens as a tent that Jehovah stretched out over the earth (Is. 40:22). The term “spreading” (RAQA’) is also an

action verb. It denoted the work of hammering or stamping gold or other metal into its final form, such as a bowl or platter, including embossing (so KB, BDB; *TWOT*, see also under RIQQUA‘).¹³ Its use in Isaiah 44:24, then, pictures Jehovah as shaping the earth into its present form. This metal-working metaphor parallels the image of Jehovah as stretching out the heavens. Indeed, the related word RAQIA‘ is used in the OT to refer to the heavenly expanse (Gen. 1:6-8, 14-15, 17). Both words credit Jehovah not only with starting the work of creation but as actively doing that work to bring the universe into its recognizable form. They recall the teaching of Genesis 1 that God not only “created” the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1) but also performed a series of acts to bring about the heavenly expanse and the atmosphere, the oceans and land masses on the earth, and the sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:3-19).

C. Jehovah “Alone”

Kaplin argues that the words translated “alone” and “who was with me” mean merely that he alone was “the responsible agent” in creation, that is, responsible for its “origination.” This also allows for the Jehovah’s Witness belief that Jehovah commissioned his created Son to do much or all of the ‘work’ of making and forming the universe while taking sole credit for its origination or creation.

1. “Alone” (LeBADDI)

Earlier we quoted the following comment from Kaplin:

The activity represented by the word *asa* in **Isaiah 44:24** defines what it was that Jehovah the God and Father alone did in creation. **HALOT** identifies *asa* in **Isaiah 44:24** as equivalent to *bara*, which has the sense of “*originating*” something. This is the activity which Jehovah does “alone” or “by himself” (Hebrew *lebaddi*.)

However, the word LeBADDI grammatically modifies “stretching out [NATAH] the heavens,” not “making” (ASAH):

‘I [am] Jehovah, making all things;
Stretching out the heavens alone [LeBADDI],
Spreading out the earth (who was with me?)....”

Every translation I have consulted (see quotes at the beginning of this paper from the LXX, ASV, NRSV, NIV, NASB, and even the NWT) correctly places the word “alone” (or “by myself”) after “stretching out the heavens.” Thus, Kaplin’s exegesis on this point is simply wrong. LeBADDI does not grammatically modify ASA. The parallelism of the three lines does allow the exegete to infer that the exclusivity expressed by LeBADDI applies implicitly to the other lines **as well as** the line to which it grammatically belongs. It is therefore fair to construe the text to mean that Jehovah alone “made all things,” but not in the narrow way that Kaplin

¹³See also Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, trans. Margaret Kohl; Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 213 n. 34 (citing KB).

claims. That is, one must first recognize the text as saying explicitly that Jehovah alone stretched out the heavens. This is probably the weakest aspect of Kaplin's argument. This one point completely undermines his argument, because it shows that it is impossible to limit the text's meaning to the idea that Jehovah was the sole initiator of the creation.

2. "Who Was With Me" (MI' ITTI) or "By Myself" (ME'ITTI)

We should begin our discussion of this part of Isaiah 44:24 by explaining a textual difficulty. In simple terms, biblical Hebrew was written in (generally) unbroken lines, and its characters are all what we would call consonants. Breaks between words and vowels were construed by scribes, with vowel points added around the consonants long after the biblical era. In addition, scribes occasionally made marginal notations of alternate ways of spelling the Hebrew text. They may have done so because they knew of other manuscripts with the alternate spelling or because there was some ambiguity or other difficulty in the text they were copying. The main text that they copied letter-for-letter was called the *ketiv* (or *kethib*), meaning what was written, and the marginal note was called the *qere*, meaning the alternate or preferred "reading," or what the scribe thought should be used when reading aloud from the text. There are over a thousand of these *qere* readings, and translations often follow them instead of the *ketiv* text.¹⁴

In Isaiah 44:24, the *ketiv* or main text is MI 'ITTI, "who was with me" (which in context must be a rhetorical question). The *qere* or marginal reading is ME'ITTI ("from with me," "by myself"), which has one less consonant (the 'I' in MI is the consonant *yodh*) and is formed as one word instead of two. The ASV, Young's Literal Translation, the (old) RSV, and the NWT follow the *ketiv*, whereas the KJV, NKJV, ESV, NASB, NRSV, NIV, NLT, and NET Bible, as well as the Jewish Publication Society version, all follow the *qere*.

Modern exegetical commentaries generally do not treat either version of the text as clearly or certainly correct, so we should avoid resting any interpretation dogmatically on one as opposed to the other. We will consider each way of construing the text in turn.

The *ketiv* text MI 'ITTI, "who was with me?" is a rhetorical question that, as Old Testament scholar Edward J. Young pointed out, "implies a negative answer, No one was with me."¹⁵ Joseph Addison Alexander, a nineteenth-century commentator quoted by Kaplin, makes the same point:

The textual reading of the last word makes it an interrogation, MI' ITTI, *who (is or was) with me?* implying strong negation, and equivalent in meaning to the affirmation, *there was no one with me.*¹⁶

The *ketiv* wording would seem to shut the door on the idea of Jehovah having someone else involved with him in the work of creation. Indeed, one way of understanding it would be that no one was present with Jehovah when he did the work described of stretching out the heavens

¹⁴See Michael Graves, "The Origins of Ketiv-Qere Readings," *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* 8 (2003), online at < <http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/vol08/Graves2003.html> >.

¹⁵Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 3:187.

¹⁶Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecy of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2:173. The statement was also cited by Kaplin but with a minor inaccuracy.

and spreading out the earth. However, it is more likely that the text means that no one was participating with him in the work of creation. The context is a repudiation of pagan religions such as those found in the ancient Near East in the first millennium BC. Against their ancient pagan cosmogonies that viewed the world as originating from the actions of a plurality of gods, Isaiah 44:24 asserted that the world originated from the action of Jehovah alone. Assuming that angels were present (as Job 38:7 appears to indicate), they would have been observers, not participants, in God's creative acts.

Kaplin appeals to something else Alexander wrote in order to defend his claim that Isaiah 44:24 means only that Jehovah gets sole credit for initiating creation. Kaplin writes:

According to the commentary by Joseph Addison Alexander, published by Zondervan, *mi' etti* and **me'etti** (*of myself*) yield the same sense as the Greek AP hEOUTOU but in two different ways. This view is also endorsed by Jamiesson Fausset Brown with a quote from Maurer.... Regarding *mi' etti* (Who was with me?) we have also seen that *Joseph Addison Alexander* states that both the Kt and Qr of the verse (*mi' etti* and *me'etti*) have the sense of originating something as well. And so also Koehler/Baumgrtner's designation on page 100 of the *etti* in *mi' etti* is that of "out of, from with" and not "together with" or "by the side of." Therefore there are no lexical markers that require the interpretation that Jehovah was "alone" as in without companion when he "alone" originated all things.

Kaplin's argument may work as a rebuttal to the claim (on which his conclusion focuses) that Isaiah means that no other beings existed when Jehovah made the world, but it cannot work as a rebuttal to the claim that Isaiah means that Jehovah alone made the world. Alexander has already said what he thinks MI 'ITTI means, "who was with me?" and his next comment does not negate that translation:

The marginal reading yields the same sense in another way. MI'ITTI, *from, by or of myself* (compare MIMMENNI Hosea viii. 4 and AP' hEMAUTOU, John v 30).¹⁷

What Alexander thinks is "the same sense" is that no one was with Jehovah when he made the heavens and the earth. This view allows for others existing or observing but not for participating in that activity. Alexander does not say, as Kaplin claims, that the *ketiv* reading MI'ITTI has "the sense of originating something." Nor does he say that about the *qere* reading ME'ITTI, to which we turn next.

Alexander's comparison of ME'ITTI to John 5:30 evidently derives from Gesenius's Hebrew lexicon, as does the same comparison made by BDB. Here is what Gesenius says (under the Hebrew word ET):

Isa. 44:24 Qere is i.q. [*idem quod*, 'the same as'] Gr[reek]. AP hEMAUTOU, John 5:30, from myself, or by my own authority.¹⁸

¹⁷Alexander, *ibid.*

¹⁸William Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon of the Old Testament Scriptures*, trans. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 94.

BDB (86-87) draws the same comparison to John 5:30, no doubt following Gesenius:

4. ME'ET...*from proximity with*...c. expressing origination...Is 44²⁴ Qr ME'ITTI *of myself* (cf. AP' EMOUTOU John 5³⁰; Kt is MI 'ITTI who was with me?).... (BDB, 86-87)

The commentary by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown makes the same comparison and also mentions Hosea 8:4, as did Gesenius:

alone—literally, “Who was with Me?” namely, when I did it; answering to “by Myself,” in the parallel clause (compare similar phrases, Hosea 8:4; John 5:30) [MAURER].

Kaplin takes various elements from these very brief comments and draws his own conclusion, which is that ME'ITTI in Isaiah 44:24 would mean that Jehovah alone was the “responsible agent” in “originating” creation.

Does this argument succeed in overturning the use of Isaiah 44:24 to prove that Jehovah alone did the work of making the universe? No. Assuming for the sake of argument that ME'ITTI is the correct reading and that it means exactly what Kaplin argues it means, that word appears only in one of the three key lines of Jehovah's statement in Isaiah 44:24. Jehovah also asserts in the previous two lines that he made all things and that only he stretched out the heavens. If the third line adds that the earth was spread out on the initiation or responsibility of Jehovah alone, that addition would not negate what has already been said.

That having been said, Kaplin's conclusion is a bit of a stretch. Consider the passages that the secondary sources cite. Hosea 8:4 says:

They have set up kings, but not by me [Heb., MIMMENNI];
They have appointed princes, but I did not know.

The idea of MIMMENNI here is not merely that the northern kingdom of Israel set up kings without God's initiation, but that he had nothing to do with it—he did not approve, endorse, support, authorize, or recognize their kingdom. In other words, God was not a party to their setting up a kingdom to rival the Jerusalem-based, Davidic kingdom.

The other text, on which Kaplin leans hard, is John 5:30, where Jesus says, “I can do nothing of myself [Greek, AP' EMAUTOU].” This phrase can indeed be interpreted to mean “on my own initiative” (NASB), but this is not the only possible connotation. The comment in the BDAG lexicon gives (as lexicons generally do) a very brief explanation:

To indicate responsible agents for someth[ing], *from, of*... The expr[ession] AF' hEAUTOU (pl. AF' hEAUTWN) *of himself* and AP' EMAUTOU *of myself* are common **Lk 12:57; 21:30; 2 Cor 3:5**; esp. sp in J[ohn]: **5:19, 30; 8:28; 10:18; 15:4.—7:17f**;

11:51; 14:10; 16:13; 18:34. So also AP' EMAUTOU OUK ELHLUQA *I did not come of myself* (opp[osed to] the Father sent me) **7:28; 8:42.**¹⁹

The term “responsible agents” used in BDAG is too vague to be the basis for limiting AP' EMAUTOU to mean responsibility for origination, which is what Kaplin wants to infer from it. Reviewing texts that use this Greek expression shows a variety of connotations. In Luke 12:57 Jesus chides the crowds for failing to judge what is right “on your own,” i.e., they were responsible for knowing what was right. In Luke 21:30 Jesus tells his listeners that they can tell “on your own,” that is, for themselves, when trees start sprouting leaves that summer is near. Here AF' hEAUTWN again connotes independent judgment. In 2 Corinthians 3:5 Paul denies thinking that he and his ministry associates are sufficient, competent, or adequate “on our own” for that work. Here he is simply denying that they can do the work of ministry apart from God.

What Kaplin’s argument fails to appreciate is that Jesus’ repeated denials of speaking or acting on his own are statements of dependence on the Father, not assertions that in no sense can he initiate or be responsible for his actions. In fact, in one of the texts cited in BDAG, Jesus asserts that he was laying down his life on his own: “No one takes it from me, but I myself lay it down on my own” (AP' EMAUTOU, John 10:18). Of course, Jesus is not saying here that with regard to his dying he was acting independent of the Father. Rather, Jesus is asserting that his impending sacrificial death was not going to be imposed on him by the religious and political leaders who sentenced him to death or the soldiers who carried out that sentence. This statement illustrates that the phrase “on my (your, his, their) own” must always be interpreted relative to the context. If we treat the phrase absolutely we will be implying a contradiction between John 10:18 and Jesus’ repeated statements, using the exact same phrase, that he did not come, speak, or do anything on his own (John 5:30; 7:17, 28; 8:28, 42; 14:10).

Going back to Isaiah 44:24, the *qere* reading ME'ITTI may be similar to or in some contexts equivalent to AP' EMAUTOU in some contexts, and perhaps in John 5:30, but both expressions will still have to be interpreted in context. In John 5:30, Jesus is asserting that his judgment is totally reliable because he never judges (or does anything else) on his own, in a self-seeking way, but always in compliance with the will of the Father who sent him. His judgment is therefore never independent of the Father or in tension with the Father’s will; there is no possibility of Jesus rendering a different verdict than the Father himself would render. In Isaiah 44:24, Jehovah is asserting that he put the earth into its form on his own, independent of any other putative god or creative force. He acted independently, on his own, in making the earth (and by extension all things). The language here creates no loophole for the notion that Jehovah did not himself actually put the earth into its form. He made all things: he alone stretched out the heavens, and he spread out the earth on his own. If we read the verse in its entirety, and respect the way Hebrew parallelism works, there is no getting around the fact that it presents Jehovah as the only one who made the heavens and the earth.

¹⁹A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 107, hereafter cited as BDAG (Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker).