"What is his name, and what is his son's name?" Proverbs 30:4 and the Trinity

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There is a long Christian tradition of asserting that the final questions of Prov 30:4 –"What is his name, and what is his son's name?"–are a clear, Old Testament depiction of two members of the Triune Godhead. Augustine directly applied this phrase to Christ as the divine Son, doing so in conjunction with his welding of Prov 8:25 to 1 Cor 1:24.[1] In the early 18th Century, Matthew Henry opined, "In ver. 4, there is a prophetic notice of him who came down from heaven to be our Instructor and Saviour, and then ascended into heaven to be our Advocate. The Messiah is here spoken of as a person distinct from the Father, but his name as yet secret."[2] In his excellent article on Christ and the Trinity in Prov 8, Richard Davidson makes a passing reference to Prov 30:4 as possible evidence of the Trinity in the Old Testament, saying "This inner-textual hint is *perhaps* reinforced in Prov 30:4 (with *possible* allusions to the Father and Son as Co-Creators)."[3] Several Christian internet sites make similar claims that this

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[1] *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, vol. 9, ed. J. Robert Wright (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 176. This compendium cites Augustine, Letter 102.5 (*Fathers of the Church*, vol. 18:168-9).

[2] Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 607.

[3] Richard M. Davidson, "Proverbs 8 and the Place of Christ in the Trinity," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17.1 (Spring, 2006):47. Emphasis supplied. This article is available online: http://www.atsjats.org/publication_file.php?pub_id=235&journal=1&type=doc.

text reveals Christ as Son of God in the Old Testament.[4] Some of these websites advocate the eternal subordination of the Son to God the Father, but with a fundamentally Trinitarian reading of the text.[5]

The eternal subordination debate raises the specter of an alternate, anti-Trinitiarian application of Prov 30:4 which remains otherwise Christological. From my experiences in assisting congregations who are grappling with anti-Trinitarian elements,[6] these opponents of the Trinity use Prov 30:4 to support their assertion that there are only two persons in the Godhead, the Father and the Son.[7] In addition, they use this text to support their belief in the perpetual sonship and subordination of Christ to the Father. I say "perpetual" instead of "eternal" because these anti-Trinitarians have informed me that they believe that the Father precedes the Son in existence. This would mean that Christ could not have preexisted throughout past eternity as a distinct individual, but would perpetually have been subordinate once he was "begotten.[8]"

The common element shared by Trinitarians, advocates of eternal subordination of the Son, and the anti-Trinitarians is that all assert some kind of Christological interpretation of Prov 30:4. All of them appear to

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[4]Examples include http://www.icr.org/bible/Proverbs/30/4; http://biblehub.com/proverbs/30-4.htm; http://jesus-rlbible.com/?p=2145; http://www.gospeloutreach.net/optrin.html; http://feedingonchrist.com/the-wisdom-of-the-son-seeing-christ-in-the-proverbs/.

[5]See, for example, the Covenant Baptist Church website article, http://covenantbc.com/files/eternal_sonship_of_christ.pdf. The question of eternal subordination has gained notoriety in recent years within Evangelical circles due to debates over the ordination of women to ministry. Scholars like Millard Erickson deny eternal subordination while others, such as Wayne Grudem, favor it. Both, however, are fully Trinitarian in the basic credal sense.

[6] Some early Seventh-day Adventists rejected the credal Trinitarian formulation, and presently there are pockets of professed Seventh-day Adventists who are seeking to reintroduce these anti-Trinitarian teachings back into congregational life. The views of these anti-Trinitarians are in disagreement with the present formulation of the Seventh-day Adventist statement of Fundamental Beliefs.

[7] For one example, see Gary Hullquist, "One Lord, One God," http://www.hullquist.com/Bible/bib-onegod-13.htm. In meetings with the congregation where Hullquist was a member, I coined the term "Binitarian" to describe his group's view of the Godhead. In this article, he adopts the term "Binitarian" to describe his understanding of the Godhead as two persons: an eternal Father and a begotten Son.

[8] Advocates of this view are adamant that they do not believe Christ was created. In their words, "Christ was begotten, not made."

make these claims without any significant exegetical work with the passage, either doing like Augustine and piecing proof-texts together or simply assuming the point to be self-evidentially true. A surface reading of this verse certainly tempts the Christian reader to draw such a conclusion. The fact that opposing views all claim Prov 30:4 in support their particular view of Christ raises a more basic question: Does this text speak about the composition of the Godhead?

The Challenge of Proverbs 30

This question is not easy to answer due to the daunting challenges associated with the early verses of Prov 30. Raymond Van Leeuwen declares, "The 'Words of Agur' is one of the most difficult and controverted sections in Proverbs. Not only does it present serious textual and exegetical problems (especially in v. 1), but also its very meaning and purpose have received radically contrary interpretations."[9] R. B. Y. Scott concurs, saying, "Much uncertainty surrounds this passage with respect to (a) its reputed authorship; (b) the translation, especially of vs. 1."[10] Commenting on Prov 30:1, Paul Koptak concludes, "scholars have written much and agreed little concerning this translation."[11] Tremper Longman's commentary reads: "**30:1-14.** *Sayings of Agur*. The 'words of Agur' passage is easily the most difficult section of the book of Proverbs to translate and understand."[12]

Van Leeuwen highlights an additional difficulty with this passage, in that the "LXX has some significant differences in arrangement from Hebrew text."[13] Thus, as Longman further notes, there is general disunity on which verses of the chapter are Agur's words, which are not, and there is no agreement concerning the structure of Prov 30.[14] Such difficulties

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[9] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 5 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 250.

[10] R. B. Y. Scott, "Proverbs," *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 176.

[11] Paul E. Koptak, "Proverbs," *The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life.* The NIV Application Commentary Series, ed., Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 655.

[12] Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, ed., Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 517.

[13] Van Leeuwen, 251.

[14] Longman, 517-518.

suggest that the text may not be as obvious in addressing the composition of the Godhead as some say, and thus we should approach this passage with great care and caution.

What is His Name?

In my view, the Christological interpretation hinges on the question, "What is his name?" If the answer is "God [Yahweh]" then the ensuing question–What is his son's name?–would indicate that God has a son, and hence the Christological conclusion falls into place.

Plenty of commentators believe that the opening question–What is his name?– should be answered as "God," and thus they open the possibility of the Christological reading. Examples include Roland Murphy, who declares that it is "obvious" the "who" is God through the first four questions of the verse, but he then asserts, ironically, that the fifth question –Who is his son?–is not clear.[15] Van Leeuwen and Koptak agree with Murphy that the "who" is God.[16] Duane Garret opines, "'God' is the only possible answer to the questions here."[17] All of these, however, do little to actually justify their assertions, seeming to assume that reader will see the same thing in the text.

By contrast, Paul Franklyn makes the strongest case I have found advocating the position that Agur is asking for God's name. He does so by linking first four "who" questions of Prov 30:4 to passages in Amos (4:13; 5:8; 9:6), Isaiah (51:15), and Jeremiah (10:16; 31:35; 51:19). In each case, these prophetic passages are doxological passages declaring God's creative power through rehearsing actions mentioned in Prov 30:4, and then concluding, "Yahweh [or "Yahweh of hosts"] is His name!" Franklyn acknowledges the possibility that the questions in verse 4 may point to a human instead of God, but then rejects that view: "There is reason to affirm the presence of a potential human subject in V. 4, and the series of rhetorical questions is aimed at uncovering 'Who could have done these things.' However, by way of qualification, the answer to this type of

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[15] Roland E. Murphy, "Proverbs," *Word Biblical Commentary,* vol. 22, eds. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glen W. Barker (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 228.

[16] For examples, see: Van Leeuwen, 252; Koptak, 656-657.

[17] Duane A. Garret, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 14, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 236.

question, which generally functions as a strong assertion, is so obvious that it simultaneously catapults God into the nominative position."[18]

Franklyn further bolsters his argument for the answer, "Yahweh," by adopting the LXX emendation of the final question from "who is his son" to "who are his sons?" as the better reading of the text. He justifies his adoption of the LXX by equating the "sons of God" to the "hosts" in the divine councils "as described in Isaiah and Ps 29; 68; 89, " as well as Job 38:7.[19] Thus, Franklyn sees "what are his sons names" as another reference to God's creative activity. He asserts that this question is the final capstone of a confession of Yahweh's greatness through the use of a series of rhetorical questions in Prov 30:4.

Note, however, the cost of Franklyn's argument. By reading the final question in the plural–"who are his sons?"–Franklyn eliminates the Christological option from consideration, partly through the plurality of sons and partly through concluding these sons are created beings. It is conceivable, however, to accept Franklyn's argument for Yahweh while rejecting his argument from the LXX and thus remain open for the Christological conclusion, even though his argument closely links them together. Two other factors, in my view, undermine Franklyn's argument.

First, his position seems weak due to its dependence on altering the Masoretic text to fit the LXX. With the LXX being made at a much later time, it seems likely that the LXX "translation" is more interpretive, reflecting the translators' struggles with making sense of the singular form, "son." By contrast, the Masoretic text would reflect a long oral tradition of how the text was recited, and the singular, "son," seems more probable to be the original form. When one's position depends on manuscript disagreement or an amendment to the biblical text, it seems more likely that humans are taking license with the biblical text to make it conform to their desired interpretation.[20]

Second, Franklyn's position turns on the claim that the "type of question" found in the words of Agur "generally functions as a strong assertion" about God and thus it "is so obvious that it simultaneously

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[18] Franklyn, 246.

[19] Franlyn, 247-248.

[20] Franklyn twice depends on emendations, including a repointing of the vowels of one Hebrew word as well.

catapults God into the nominative position."[21] I observe, however, three of the four lines of evidence Franklyn uses to support this claim are from Amos (4:13; 5:8; 9:6), Isaiah (51:15), and Jeremiah (10:16; 31:35; 51:19). In Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, however, there are no questions asked at all. The passages are declaring God as creator to ground the authoritative nature of the prophecy. This raises the question of how non-interrogative statements can be evidence supporting the claim that "type of question" found in the words of Agur "generally functions as a strong assertion" of God's identity. The literary genres and theological purposes are entirely different from what Agur seems to be doing. Franklyn seems to force an unnatural union of differing literary and theological genres.

Franklyn's fourth evidence is Job 38, where he rightly notes the similarity of the "who" (מִי-*miy*) questions in grammar and style with the words of Agur. I am not convinced, however, that the purpose of the "who" (מִי-*miy*) questions in Job vault God to the "nominative position" in the way Franklyn asserts. Franklyn does very little with Job 38 even though nearly every commentator sees its linkage with Prov 30:4. It behooves, us then, to more closely examine the ties between these two passages. I propose that Job 38-40 provides the key to properly understand Prov 30.

The Theological Template of Job

The similarities of Prov 30 to Job 38-40 suggest that the entire chapter is Agur's teaching. While most focus on the ties of Prov 30:4 to Job, there is a second intertexual tie with Job at the end of the chapter. "If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth" (Prov 30:32). The echo of Job 40:4 cannot be ignored, especially in light of the allusions to Job 38-39 noted earlier. Thus, Prov 30 opens and closes with inter-textual ties to Job 38-40. By borrowing the language and theology of Job, Agur appears to be building a similar theology of human limitations in knowing the deep things of God. This is a larger theme in the book of Job as Zophar (11:7-9), Eliphaz (5:9), Elihu (37:23), and Job himself each opine that the source of Wisdom is hidden (26:14; 28:20-22). Ultimately, only Job gets the point and covers his mouth (40:4) and repents in sackcloth and ashes (42:1-6). As Longman

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[21] Franklyn, 246.

notes, "God peppers him [Job] with questions to show him his ignorance, and Job submits before Him."[22]

A further examination of the questions in Job 38-39, reveals there are only six "who" (מִי-*miy*) questions (38:5, 8, 25, 35; 39:5 (2)), but there are 22 "you" questions (38:4; 12, 16-17, 22, 31-35 (6), 39; 39:1-2 (3); 10-12; 19-20; 26-27). In each case, we always find "you"questions before we encounter "who" (מִי-*miy*) questions. The dominance of the "you" questions–addressing Job–combined with the parallel usage of "who" questions with "you" questions, strongly implies that the "who" is the same as the "you," namely Job or any human. This point is bolstered by the nature of the whole interrogative pericope of Job 38-40 in which God challenges Job to gird his loins like a man and answer questions (38:1-3). Job is the central object of the questions. Does Job have the secret knowledge of God? No.

Furthermore, in the opening question–"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?"–God makes it clear that He is not trying to find out who did all these things, for He stakes His claim to credit immediately. He reinforces this point with similar claims in another "you" question in 38:22 and a "who" (מִי-*miy*) question in 39:5-6. In short, God already gives the "correct" answer to His own questions: He is the sole being who does all these things. The point of these questions is not to identify "who" did all these things. All these activities are uniquely divine, and Job knows that. There is no need for God to ask "who?" as if Job is ignorant.

The sense of the "who" questions in Job is the same as the sense of the "you" questions, namely that God is challenging Job to find Him a human, including Job himself, who can lay claim to the wisdom of the secrets of the creation. Thus, the "who" in these questions is a human, not God, and the answer to each question is that no human is capable of such actions. This view is bolstered by Job's response, for Job gets the point, confesses he has spoken beyond his limits and vows to put his hand over his mouth in deepest humility.

The ties of Prov 30: 4 to the book of Job suggest that the words of Agur are to be understood as a Job-like challenge to Ithiel and Ucal designed to highlight the inability of a human to know the secrets of God. Like the questions to Job 38, then, "who" is to be understood as "what human."

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[22] Longman, 521.

What human has ascended to heaven and descended? What human and holds the wind and wraps the waters? What human established the ends of the earth? The obvious answer to each is "no human."[23] This forms the theological basis for Agur's later appeal to humbly acknowledge one's personal epistemological limits.

Proverbs 30 as Agur's Wisdom

I would further propose that the allusion to Job 40:4 at the end of Prov 30 reveals the main point for the entire chapter: "If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth." Longman captures the thrust of this conclusion when he says, "We take these words as those of Agur. They are clearly self-effacing. Those who would be truly wise must first acknowledge their ignorance."[24] Verse 32, thus epitomizes the theological thrust of the chapter, namely the injunction to recognize the limits of one's own knowledge and thus to avoid making claims in matters not known. The confession of verses 1-4, lays the foundation for this injunction.

Scholars have debated exactly how to translate verse 1, but the literary ties of the ensuing verses to Job lend credence to the position that Agur is addressing two individuals named Ithiel and Ucal.[25] Like the book of Job, then, we appear to be getting a snippet of a dialogue or debate between Agur and these two men. Agur's opening salvo (vs. 2-3) is a self-effacing confession that he is too stupid to be human and that he cannot know the deep things of God. In light of the apparent sarcasm at the end of verse 4,[26]

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[23]See Longman, 523, where he draws very similar conclusions.

[24] Longman, 520.

[25] I reject the alternate translation, "I am weary . . ." because it requires amending the text, which I am reticent to do. Manuscript variation is one thing, and a valid problem in places, but here scholars modify the text since they have difficulty expounding it in the form written. I do not believe, however, that the choice of translation in this verse has significant impact on the theology of the larger passage.

[26] While many scholars see the sarcasm in this passage, Franklyn's penetrating article on Prov 30:1-9 rejects the sarcastic view. Franklyn attempts to build a case that verses 1-9 are the last words of a pious, frail, possibly dying man in oracular form, and thus these verses are "a reverent acknowledgment of the transcendence of God." See Paul Franklyn, "The Sayings of Agur in Proverbs 30 : piety or scepticism?" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 95:2 (1983), 245. The extreme similarity between the challenge ("surely you know") in Job 38:5, which is reinforced by Job 3 and Prov 30:4 seems to favor the

it seems highly likely that these comments could be sarcastic as well. Thus, as Kenneth Aitken notes, "Here Agur expresses his exasperation with those who profess to know all that there is to be know about God and to whom the ways of God with men are patently obvious. . . . The knowledge of God which they so confidently claim, has eluded his best efforts to find it (v. 3)."[27] Ithiel and Ucal seem cast in the role of Job's know-it-all friends, while Agur's "wisdom" declares that he cannot match their apparent claims of an exhaustive knowledge of God.

Based on such a view of verses 1-3, then, a number of commentators argue in agreement with my assertion that this "who" who ascends to heaven and returns cannot be God. Crawford Toy argues, "The subject cannot be 'God'–this interpretation is excluded by the sequence *ascended . . . descended* (the starting-point being the earth)."[28] I believe Toy makes a most important observation. As Longman notes,

> The question begins from earth and asks who has gone up and come down. The answer is, "No human being." God may be said to come down from heaven, and certainly the angels come down and go back up, as Jacob's dream at Bethel describes (Gen 28:10-22). But this question presupposes that wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is in heaven, which is not the source[29] of human beings. Those who think they can go to heaven and come back on their own power are cited in Scripture as examples of overweening pride, such as we see a the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) and in the taunt against Babylon's king (Isa 14:13-15).[30]

Additionally, although Murphy says this "who" is God, he correctly queries, "what is odd is the question itself, since God is already in heaven by definition."[31] With God in heaven, the order of first ascending to heaven,

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ironic/sarcastic overtone recognized by a goodly number of commentators.

[27] Aitken, Kenneth T., *Proverbs,* The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 253.

[28] Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs,* International Critical Commentary (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 521.

[29] Longman's wording seems a bit strange to me, but I believe his point is that heaven is not the starting point–i.e., source–for human movement towards God. Our movement would originate from earth.

[30] Longman, 522.

[31] Murphy, 656.

then returning does not make sense if the "who" is God. I believe these observations are penetrating and insightful.

By contrast, Bruce Waltke takes the opposite position, asserting that the "who" who ascends to heaven is indeed God. Waltke first appeals to extra-biblical data, saying, "Parallels in two Near Eastern texts infer that only a god, not even a superhuman being, can ascend into heaven (cf. Gen 11:7; 35:13)." His next evidence is to observe that "in the hymnic literature, the LORD ascends his throne, perhaps in the symbolic form of Israel's king ascending the throne, to exercise dominion over the earth (Pss 47:5[6] [cf. Num 23:21; 2 Sam 15:10; 2 Kings 9:13]; [Psa] 68:9[10])." His final point is that "in the prophetic literature, the LORD sends to the lowest depths earthlings who in hubris resolve to become God by ascending to heaven to assume dominion (Isa 14:13-14; Jer 51:53)."[32]

Waltke's position, in my view, has several weaknesses. First, in my own survey of Scripture, the descriptions of God's movement between heaven and earth always start with God descending or coming down from heaven, then ascending back to heaven. For example, in Genesis, God is said to come down from heaven to see the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:5,7). The passage makes no direct mention of a divine ascent to heaven. Waltke's citation of this text as an example of God ascending to heaven thus seems unfounded. In reality, in this passage, God starts in heaven and comes "down" to the earth. Any implied ascent to heaven would seem to come after first descending to earth.

In like manner, God comes "down" to Mount Sinai (Exo 19:20) to give the law, and He comes "down" to talk to Moses (Num 11:25; 12:5). These texts likely explain God's going "up"–ascending–after meeting with Jacob (Gen 35:13, cited by Waltke) and previously with Abraham (Gen 17:22). In both cases, God is first said to "appear" to Jacob (Gen 35:9) and to Abraham (Gen 17:1). In light of the texts just cited concerning Sinai and Moses, it is reasonable to conclude that God's "appearing" to Jacob and Abraham was a coming down, after which God then went back up from whence He had descended. The texts cited by Waltke do not clearly vindicate his own claims about what they say.

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[32] Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 472.

One text where God clearly ascends somewhere is Psa 47:5[6]. Here God ascends with a shout, likely from the worshipers. While the throne is not directly mentioned, the Psalm is focused on God's ruling and reigning, so ascending to exercise His rulership from the throne is a reasonable inference. This ascent, however, is set in the heavenly realm, and because there is no indication it is an ascent from earth to heaven, the intergalactic travel option seems unsupported. At best we find God, already in heaven, moving within heaven to His throne of rulership to govern the universe. The lack of clear movement from earth to heaven in Psa 47 severely weakens Waltke's argument. The other texts cited in this regard by Waltke are all examples of the Israelite king being installed into kingship, none of which use the language of ascent. They merely share the language of shouting and trumpets with the Psalm. It seems difficult to legitimately extrapolate from these texts any concept of God ascending from earth to heaven. I am not convinced this body of texts give adequate support for conclusions Waltke makes based on them.

Waltke's final point, that God casts earthlings to the lowest depths when they try to make themselves God, is valid insofar as the destiny of said earthlings.[33] The casting down of rebellious creatures, however, says nothing about God ascending to heaven from earth. Isaiah 14 seems to cast Lucifer in a heavenly setting from which he is cast down to the earth (v 12). On this basis, this text depicts God as being in heaven already. It is Lucifer, not God, who attempts to ascend, in this case to the throne of God in within heaven. Following the Babylon theme of Isa 14, Jer 51:53 has a brief mention of Babylon trying to "mount up to heaven" but being finally destroyed. Neither text, then, has any indication of God ascending in any way, let alone from earth to heaven. A careful examination of the texts Waltke uses to support his position falls short of establishing it. For this reason, I believe the arguments suggesting that the question in Prov 30:4–"who has ascended into heaven?"–refers to a human, not to God, to be stronger. The incarnation provides a potent reminder that in the Bible, God always starts in heaven, comes down to earth, then ascends to return. Jesus

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[33] Some interpretational traditions see Isa 14:12,ff. as using the king of Babylon to symbolize Satan the fallen angel of Rev 13. But even here Waltke's point would be true, namely that any creature who tries to usurp God's throne to become God gets cast down to the lowest depths. Whether the creature is angelic or human matters not, in this case.

(John 1:1-3, 18) first descends from heaven before ascending back (John 3:13).

One other possibility for explaining the ascent in Prov 30:4, is found in Gen 28:12. Here, the angels are described as both "ascending and descending" on Jacob's ladder between earth and heaven. A significant challenge to using this verse to enlighten our understanding of Prov 30:4 is that the angels are presented as being in a two-way traffic flow between heaven and earth. There is no ordered sequence of actions, except by inferring that each angel started in heaven so must have first descended the ladder. It seems, then, that texts depicting divine or angelic movement between heaven and earth offer no meaningful help in understanding Prov 30:4. Murphy appears to have stumbled upon a better option when he notes, "but perhaps the question, even unconsciously, recalls the question about the Torah in Deut 30:12 'who of us can go up to the heavens to get it?'"[34] Waltke likewise sees a possible connection with Deut 30:12.[35] It appears prudent, then, to explore this connection further.

Agur's Theological Use of Deut 30:12

In Deut 30, God reviews how repentance can restore Israel from the curses of breaking the covenant. God then adds that "this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deut 30:11-13).[36]

Here, the "who" who ascends to heaven to bring back God's commandment is understood to be a human being. We also note that Deut 30:12 depicts the same sequential order of movement from earth to heaven and back as found in Prov 30:4. It seems reasonable, then, to suggest that Agur is using the Deuteronomic message to reinforce the concept he has

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[34] Murphy, 656. Van Leeuwen cites Deut 30:12 along with several texts to prove that humans cannot ascend to heaven and come back, but he makes no direct intertextual argument connecting it to Prov 30 as such.

[35] Waltke, 470.

[36] Paul quotes from this passage in Rom 10:6-8. Since his epistle did not exist at the time Proverbs was written, I am not making use of the Pauline text in this argument.

already established in Prov 30:2-3, and which he will reinforce later in verse 4 by borrowing from Job. That message is that no man can access the secrets of God.[37] Thus, as Toy, notes, "Since the questions (which appear to be modeled on Job 38, cf Prov 8:24-29) express divine acts, they must be regarded as a sarcastic description *of a man* who controls the phenomenon of the universe."[38] While Koptak is incorrect in saying, "'Who has gone up to heaven and come down' should also be answered with 'the Lord,'" he rightly sees the connection to Deut 30, adding, "although the question implies that mortals have tried and failed (cf. Deut. 30:12)."[39] This intertextual connection to Deut 30:12 helps solidify the argument that Prov 30:4 is asking questions to highlight the limits of man, not to inform us with what is already obvious about God. It is no accident that Agur borrows from Job and Deuteronomy[40] as these passages were crafted for the same purpose, namely to highlight the limits of man in reference to knowing the secrets of God.

What is his name?

Since Agur is challenging his friends (or opponents) to find him a human who has ascended to heaven and found the secret knowledge that eludes him, this fact must then control our understanding of the final question, "What is his name and his son's name?" John MacArthur astutely argues, "the words are from Agur, who was speaking to two men and asking if any human being could be compared to God. Has any human ascended to heaven, or gathered the wind, or wrapped up the waters, or created the earth? If so, Agur says, tell me his name—and tell me who his son is, so that I can identify him exactly!"[41]

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[37] Waltke, 470.
[38] Toy, 521. Emphasis supplied.
[39] Koptak, 656.
[40] I am aware that parts of Proverbs are considered to be very old, likely older than the Mosaic writings. Since the identity of Agur is not clearly known and is hotly debated, it is by no means clear that Agur's saying preexist Deuteronomy and Job, and the fact that Solomon compiled this well after Moses certainly makes it a plausible option that the Agur material indeed draws off Deuteronomy and Job.
[41] John F. MacArthur, Jr., "The Sonship of Christ," http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/sonship.htm, 1991. Accessed 5/21/2015.

Garret reasons in a similar vein, capturing the holistic unity of the verse:

> In a series of rhetorical questions (v. 4), he first challenges the reader to admit that no one has achieved direct understanding of the world and the truth behind the world. To 'go up to heaven and come back down" is to attain and bring back direct knowledge of eternal truth. . . . no one can explain the metaphysical powers behind the visible creation. . . . Finally, he ironically demands that the reader produce such a sage if he can.
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> Strictly interpreted, the line "What is his name, and the name of his son?" is no more than a request for identification [of said sage].[42]

R. N. Whybray succinctly summarizes the point, "'**What is his name?':** this and the following question are ironical. This is not an enquiry after the identity of the creator-god; rather, Agur is asked ironically to name a human being able to do these things."[43]

We appear, then, to have good reasons to conclude that the query, "what is his name and his son's name?" is not asking about God and a divine son.[44] Rather, it is an attempt to fix precise identity. A number of genealogical entries in the Old Testament identify a man by who is son is, not just by who is father is, or even apart from listing his father. Examples include, Gen 22:21; 34:6; Joshua 15:13; 21:11; 1Chr 2:21, 23, 24, 42, 44-45, 49-52. Thus, naming a son can be an alternate means of establishing precise identity. Agur's question, then seems to be a sarcastic challenge to

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[42] Garret, 236-237.

[43] R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, The New Century Bible Commentary, ed., Ronald E. Clements (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 409. I disagree with Whybray that Agur is the one being asked. I believe Agur is doing the asking, but Whybray's larger point, that the question is seeking the identity of a man, not of a God, is significant. Boldface heading is as in the original.

[44] The scope of this article prevents me from developing this point more, but let me say this much. My feeling is that one of two phenomena would explain this alternate format. Option 1: At the time of the writing, contemporary readers would be more familiar with a notable son than an obscure father, thus the writer clarified the identity through the well-known son. Option 2: You may have two men with the same name, and for some reason, possibly related to option 1, the writer distinguishes one from the other by who his son is. Thus, we do have some examples in the Old Testament of a man's identity being clarified by naming his son instead of naming his Father. Prov 30:4 matches this pattern, thus seeking the clear identity of the sage who went to heaven and back by naming his son as well.

claims that some man can find the secret things of God as if he has ascended to heaven and brought them back. "Precisely identify him for me!" This closing challenge, "surely you know!" seems to reinforce the sarcastic sense of the question. This is especially so in the light of the already established connections to Job 38, for in Job 38:5, God makes the same tart challenge to Job as part of process of humbling him. Thus, there are good reasons to conclude that Prov 30:4 has no bearing on the doctrine of the Trinity because the questions of a name and a son's name are not asking about Deity.

Inserting the Trinity into the Text

In my view, then, Christians who try to read the Trinity into this text, as well as anti-Trinitarians who try to read a Binity into this text, do so wrongly. A fully contextual argument leaves virtually no basis for interpreting this query as being about God. Garret rightly recognizes this when he declares, "strictly interpreted, the line 'What is his name, and the name of his son?' is no more than a request for identification. *The Christian interpreter,* however, cannot but think of the Son of God here and recall that he come down from above to reveal the truth to his people (John 3:31)."[45]

Garret's honesty is striking. He candidly admits the "strict sense" of the text does not point to the Trinity and then admits that the influence of Christian belief takes the "Christian interpreter" beyond the "strict sense" of the text to read Trinitarian overtones into the questions. Thus, Garret tacitly admits that the Trinitarian interpretation is not contextually and exegetically based. It seems more reasonable, then, to conclude that this passage is not fair game for Trinitarian discussions. Instead, we find Agur challenging Ithiel and Ucal to do the impossible, namely to identify the man who has ascended and found the secrets of God, for surely they must know such a man!

Proverbs 30: The Humility of Wisdom

The larger point of the passage, then, is this: the truly wise man knows the limits of his knowledge and wisdom and refuses to pontificate about that which he does not know. Such a conclusion is supported by Augur's

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[45]Garret, 237. Emphasis supplied.

exhortation at the chapter's end: "If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth" (verse 32). To claim knowledge of the secrets of God is foolish, exalting oneself.

In between verses 4 and 32, the chapter alternates between examples of overconfident self-exaltation and the wise admission of one's limits in knowledge. Verses 5-6 warn about adding to God's words, that is, going beyond the limits of divine revelation and claiming knowledge you do not have. To do so invites divine rebuke. Verses 7-9 are a prayer to God for help to be wise by His assisting the process of a proper recognition of moral and personal limits by not under or over blessing the person. Verses 10-17 depict examples of self-exaltation and overconfidence. Examples include a slanderous spirit, being pure in one's own eyes when not cleansed of one's filth, and how like leeches and the grave, one can never get enough self-exaltation to be satisfied. They also mock their parents. By contrast, in verses 18-19 Agur admits four things he cannot explain or understand. He wisely recognizes his limits. Verses 20-23 are more examples of the problems caused by someone of lowly estate being suddenly exalted. They become egotistical and overconfident. Verses 24-28 contain more examples of things Agur cannot understand and explain. He knows his limits and will not exalt himself by trying to explain the unexplainable. Verses 29-31 are the final example of overconfident self-exaltation. The self-exalted are like a strutting king and rooster, like a prideful lion flaunting his strength. Finally we arrive at the punch-line in verse 32: "If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth."

What happens when we attempt to explain the mysteries of God and life unlike the wise man who faces such questions by putting his hand over his mouth? Agur answers, "for pressing milk produces curds, pressing the nose produces blood, and pressing anger produces strife" (verse 33). When Trinitarians and anti-Trinitarians both try to explain mysteries of God which are beyond human wisdom and ability, these efforts produce conflict and strife that damages the body of Christ. The controversy drives humble seekers of God and truth away, and derails the salvific mission of the church.

Summary and Conclusions

I have surveyed key arguments and evidences both for and against Prov 30:4 containing a reference to the Triune Godhead. I have argued that the purpose of Prov 30 is to instruct us that those who are wise are keenly aware of the limitations of their knowledge. I have given evidences supporting the claim that the question, "what is his name, and what is his son's name?" refers to human beings, not to the Godhead. Even if my efforts have not conclusively eliminated the Godhead option, they have, at minimum, shown that this passage has enough questions and enough interpretational challenges that it cannot be considered a strong candidate for demonstrating the Trinity in the Old Testament. These challenges also mean that Prov 30:4 is not suitable to clearly establish an eternal or pre-incarnation subordination of Christ the Son to the God the Father. Furthermore, if my position is correct, such a subordination is neither proved or refuted because this verse would not be addressing the Godhead question. Thus, the counsel of Adam Clark seems a most appropriate conclusion for this article. Commenting on Proverbs 30:4, Adam Clarke declares:

> Many are of the opinion that Agur refers here to the first and second persons of the everblessed Trinity. It may be so; but who would venture to rest the proof of that most glorious doctrine upon such a text, to say nothing of the obscure author? The doctrine is true, sublimely true; but many doctrines have suffered in controversy, by improper texts being urged in their favor. *Every lover of God and truth should be very choice in his selections, when he comes forward in behalf of the more mysterious doctrines of the Bible.* Quote nothing that is not clear: advance nothing that does not tell. *When we are obliged to spend a world of critical labor, in order to establish the sense of a text which we intend to allege in favor of the doctrine we wish to support, we may rest assured that we are going the wrong way to work.* Those who indiscriminately amass every text of Scripture they think bears upon the subject they defend, give their adversaries great advantage against them. I see many a sacred doctrine suffering through the bad judgment of its friends every day. The Godhead of Christ, salvation by faith, the great atoning sacrifice, and other essential doctrines of this class, are all suffering in this way. My heart says, with deep concern, *Non tali auxilio, nec defensoribus istis,Tempus eget.* [No

such help or defenders are needed at this time].[46] When truth is assailed by all kinds of weapons, handled by the most powerful foes, *injudicious defenders may be ranked among its enemies.* To such we may innocently say, "Keep your cabins; you do assist the storm."[47]

In the spirit of both Clarke's and Agur's calls to acknowledge our finiteness, the most prudent approach to this text would be to recognize the challenges and difficulties in interpreting Prov 30:4 by refraining from crafting dogmatic theological conclusions based on this single verse.

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[46]Translated with the help of Google Translate and my colleague, Lisa Diller, Ph.D, professor of History at Southern Adventist University. Diller informs me that Clarke is apparently quoting a proverb from Virgil's Aeneid, which is most often translated as "No such aid, nor such defenders, does the time require."

[47]Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Published 1810-1826,http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/acc/view.cgi?bk=19&ch=30#4, accessed 5/21/2015. Emphases supplied.