

Did Jesus Come Down from Heaven?

by Servetus the Evangelical

The institutional church has always claimed that the Bible says Jesus preexisted as God in heaven and came down to earth to become a man, called “the incarnation.” The Nicene Creed says of Jesus, “For us men and our salvation he came down from heaven.”

The church also has claimed the incarnation is based on the Bible. Yet there is nothing in the first three gospels of the New Testament (NT) to indicate this. In contrast, the church has cited the Gospel of John as incontrovertible evidence of the incarnation (cf. John 1.1, 14). Indeed, this gospel presents a flurry of texts which *seem* to proclaim that Jesus preexisted and that he came down from heaven to become a man (1.15, 30; 3.13; 6.27-63; 8.58; 17.5, 24).

But should these Johannine texts be interpreted literally? In the 3rd century, church father Clement of Alexandria referred to the Gospel of John as “the spiritual gospel,” and scholars ever since have rightly endorsed this label. It is because the Johannine Jesus used so many metaphors. The most well-known is when he told Nicodemus he needed to be “born again,” and he thought Jesus meant a second physical birth (John 3.3). At the end of Jesus’ ministry he told the Eleven, “I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will speak no more to you in figurative language but will tell you plainly” (16.25; cf. 10.6). He explained his mission and the disciples replied, “Lo, now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech” (16.29). So, the Gospel of John provides the ultimate reality—the spiritual meaning that lies behind Jesus’ words.

Forty times the Gospel of John says God “sent” Jesus or words to that effect. Such language does not indicate sent from heaven but merely sent in the prophetic tradition, that is, God sending someone to do a mission, as he did with John the Baptist (John 1.6).

Most of the supposedly preexistence passages in the Gospel of John describe Jesus as having “come down” either “from heaven” or “from above.” Traditionalists (those who believe Jesus is God) have interpreted these texts literally; yet the spiritual nature of this gospel should caution us to undertake further examination. For example, Nicodemus did not mean preexistence when he told Jesus, “You have come from God” (John 3.2).

Twice this gospel records that John the Baptist said Jesus “has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me” (John 1.15, 30). These statements have been taken to infer that Jesus preexisted, since he was born at least six months after John was (Luke 1.26, 36). But some Bible versions translate the last clause, “for he was before me” (AV, NRSV, NIV), meaning rank. And this is what John means when he twice says of Jesus, “He who comes from above/heaven is above all” (3.31), meaning “over all.”

Also, the Johannine Jesus proclaimed, “no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man” (John 3.13). Most scholars arbitrarily reverse this ascending/descending order, so that the supposedly preexistent Jesus descended from heaven at the incarnation and ascended after his resurrection. But the context demands otherwise. Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born “from above” with a spiritual birth (John 3.3-5). Plus, Jesus as the Son of Man alludes in Daniel 7.13-14, in which this figure ascends to God’s heavenly throne to receive a kingdom consisting of humans and then presumably bringing it to earth (cf. Luke 19.11-12), thus an ascending/descending order.

Many Christians think the foremost preexistence passage in the Gospel of John about Jesus coming down from heaven is his lengthy Bread of Life discourse in John 6.25-65, which contains lots of descent language. Yet this graphic picture is full of metaphors. Jesus describes himself as “the (living) bread that came down out of heaven” (6.41, 51, 58). Even though he obviously does not mean he is literal bread, nearly all readers of this gospel have thought that he meant it literally, thus inferring his personal preexistence and incarnation. Yet Jesus also said in this discourse that people need to eat his flesh and drink his blood, and if they do they will never hunger or thirst again but live forever (vv. 50-58). Many of Jesus’ hearers grumbled that these were difficult words (vv. 41, 60-61), and many of his disciples no longer followed him because of it (v. 66). Yet Jesus had just explained that he was speaking figuratively by saying, “the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (v. 63). If the bread, flesh, blood, hunger, and thirst are strictly metaphors intended spiritually and not literally, can we justify treating the only other idea in this account any differently—Jesus coming down from heaven?

Later, Jesus said to his unbelieving Jewish interlocutors, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world” (John 8.23). He surely does not mean he literally preexisted and came from heaven. If so, to be consistent he also would have to mean his opponents literally came from below. So, in all such Johannine passages Jesus does not indicate literal origin but spiritual reality. That is, he is associated with God and heaven whereas they are associated with the devil and hell (cf. 8.44).

In Jesus’ high priestly prayer uttered prior to his capture and arrest, he prayed, “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.... My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17.5, 24). This seems to indicate that Jesus preexisted in heaven prior to creation, when he possessed a glory he apparently shared with God.

But Jesus could be referring to the Shekinah glory which accompanied the Israelites. He could have meant that, in God’s mind and prior to creation, God loved his Son whom he foreknew (cf. Ephesians 1.4; 1 Peter 1.20), for whom he predestined the Shekinah. Indeed, Judaism taught that the Shekinah glory was predestined for the Messiah.

In sum, it seems that all language in the Gospel of John about Jesus preexisting and coming down from heaven was intended metaphorically in this spiritual gospel.