

Did Jesus Preexist in Heaven?

By Servetus the Evangelical

The institutional church has always proclaimed that Jesus preexisted in heaven. And it has concluded that Jesus' preexistence indicates that he was and is God.

But in modern times, the idea that Jesus preexisted has been seriously challenged. One argument is that if Jesus preexisted as a fully developed personality, that does not allow for human development and therefore compromises his being human.

Luke claims Jesus had a normal human development. He says of Jesus' childhood, "The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2.40). Notice that Luke also distinguishes the Child Jesus from God, which always indicates that Jesus was not God. Then Luke adds, "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (v. 52). How could Jesus have increased in favor with God if he was God? William Barclay therefore states, "one of the most difficult of all ideas [is] the idea of the preexistence of Jesus."

Christians claim that they base their beliefs on the Bible. While the first three gospels of the New Testament (NT) contain nothing about Jesus having preexisted, the Gospel of John *seems* to have several important passages that do so. And there are notable texts in the Apostle Paul's letters and the book of Hebrews that do, which we will now consider.

Paul does not state explicitly anywhere in his NT letters that Jesus preexisted. Thus, Karl-Josef Kuschel asserts, "there is no sign of any unambiguous and explicit statement about pre-existence in the Christology outlined by Paul." But most scholars have thought that Paul states it implicitly. And Gerhard Kittel observes, "Christological pre-existence sayings are a constituent part of the whole of Paulinism."

But how did Paul conceive of Jesus having preexisted? Did he think it was a personal subsistence or merely a personification? There is quite a difference.

James Dunn contends, "There is no good evidence that Jesus thought of himself as a pre-existent being" or that Paul thought Jesus either preexisted or possessed deity. Dunn claims that much of Paul's language of preexistence is personified Wisdom language, as in "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1.24), and that Paul never intended for it to be understood as literal preexistence. Dunn maintains that by the time Paul wrote Romans, in the mid-50s, "there is no evidence that Christian thought had so far evolved the idea of incarnation, or that the language of preexistence when referred to Christ (1 Cor 8:6) would as yet be taken to imply his personal preexistence, or that talk of his being 'sent' (Rom 8:3) was as yet understood to imply a descent from heaven." Dunn concludes, "Paul was not seeking to win men to belief in a pre-existent being."

Regardless of whether or not Jesus preexisted, D.A. Carson logically states, "pre-existence does not entail deity." Indeed, Second Temple Judaism regarded certain pious men as having preexisted, yet Jews did not think this compromised their monotheism.

John Knox warns, "the more fully the logic of pre-existence is allowed to work itself out in the story [of Jesus], the less important the [his] resurrection is bound to become."

Most Christians have thought that Paul implicitly affirms Jesus' preexistence in 1 Corinthians 8.9. Therein, he states, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." The common view of this passage has been that the word "rich"

indicates Jesus' personal preexistence, and the words "poor" and "poverty" signify him abandoning this lofty status at his incarnation. Karl-Josef Kuschel observes, "Traditional exegesis has always interpreted this passage in terms of pre-existence Christology and incarnation, as have present-day exegetes right across all confessional camps."

But Dunn says concerning this passage, "Though he could have enjoyed the riches of an uninterrupted communion with God, Jesus freely chose to embrace the poverty of Adam's distance from God, in his ministry as a whole, but particularly in his death" for our salvation. Dunn adds, "2 Cor 8.9 is as a vivid allusion to the tremendous personal cost of Jesus' ministry ... this self-impoverishment ... That Paul intended an allusion to the preexistent Christ's self-abasement in incarnation must be judged unlikely."

Until Jesus was thirty years old, he probably had an emotionally rich and fulfilling life as the eldest of four brothers and several sisters (Mark 6.3). And he must have had a good reputation as the carpenter of Nazareth and its vicinity. But in a most profound and untold single act of self-denial, he laid aside this comfortable lifestyle, left home, and undertook an itinerant, public ministry of financial poverty and even forfeiture of his life. He once told his disciples about himself, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8.20/Luke 9.58).

Many Christians have thought that the author of the NT letter of Hebrews presents Jesus as having preexisted. For example, he says God "through" Jesus "made the world" (Hebrews 1.2). And he further explains of Jesus, "He comes into the world" by God giving him "a body" (10.5). Yet this author also relates that at Jesus' heavenly ascension, "He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty [God] on high; having become as much better than the angels" (1.3-4). But if Jesus preexisted as God, he always was better than the angels and therefore could not later have become so. Dunn concludes that "the author of Hebrews has no place in his thinking for pre-existence as an ontological concept."

One thing seems to rule out the actual preexistence of Jesus in this letter of Hebrews. For him to be Savior and High Priest, he had to be like us in every way except sin. The author of Hebrews explains concerning Jesus, "He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest" (Hebrews 2.17). Again, this requires that Jesus did not literally preexist, since the rest of us humans did not. It thus seems that God created the world "through" Jesus simply by having him in mind.