

The Birth of the Messiah

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Does the biblical message about the birth of the Messiah have anything at all to do with an eternally pre-existent 2nd person of the Trinity who comes down from heaven so as to become flesh and save the world? If so, the New Testament scriptures are strangely silent about any such concepts. The only two accounts of the announcement of Jesus' birth recorded in the Bible are set forth in Matthew and Luke. Let's let them speak for themselves:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:18-21).

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her. "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:26-35).

These records are beloved by "all who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, their Lord and ours" (I Cor. 1:2). They speak of the miraculous conception of God's unique Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. They also point to the significance of who God's Son is: the one who is named "Jesus" because he will "save his people from their sins", and the one who will be given "the throne of his father David" and whose "kingdom will never end." All of this is set forth by Matthew and Luke as being the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy about the coming human Messiah.

Speaking from the perspective of almost two thousand years of Christian history gone by it is also important to point out what these passages of scripture clearly do *not* teach. Raymond Brown, in his widely acclaimed book *The Birth of the Messiah*, confirms what is plainly obvious to many when he says in regards to these accounts,

Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of preexistence; seemingly for them the conception was the becoming (begetting) of God's Son ... there is no suggestion of an incarnation whereby a figure who was previously with God takes on flesh [p. 33,141].

It is certainly not unreasonable to ask that if neither Luke nor Matthew ever once mentions the pre-existence of Christ and never once hint at a mysterious doctrine of one God in three persons, how it could have come to be held by so many Christians today that the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundational truth of Christianity? Does it make sense that the writer of Luke and Acts, who recorded all of Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension, as well as the foundational years of the Christian church, would have failed to mention this "truth" if it was really so important? Or should we simply say that by the standards of today Luke was simply "unorthodox" or, at best, had a "low" christology!! Certainly, he, as well as all the NT churches about which he writes, would have failed to pass the one critical test that is set down today for becoming a

member of the World Council of Churches: the belief that Jesus is both Savior and God!

The Humanity of Jesus the Messiah

G.B. Caird states, in his book *NT Theology*, a simple fact that should be obvious to us all:

New Testament Christology should start from where the first disciples of Jesus started. They knew him first as a man, and whatever other staggering affirmations they may have later come to make about him, they never ceased to think of him as a man ... Perhaps the most arresting piece of evidence is to be found in Luke ... Luke's interest from start to finish is the human Jesus, 'a man singled out for you by God' (Acts 2:22), and 'anointed with the Holy Spirit and power' (Acts 10:38 [p. 280, 282]).

One thing that is agreed upon by most serious NT scholars today is that at the time of Jesus, in the early 1st century A.D., there was no inkling among the Jewish people that the expected Messiah already "pre-existed" as a personal divine being in heaven before his "coming into the world" (John 6:14). Phrases in the Bible that are often thought to indicate pre-existence such as "sent from God", "sent into the world" or "come into the world" are used in the Gospel of John to describe *not only Jesus* but also *other human beings* as well (e.g. John 1:6; 1:9 KJV; 17:18; 16:21, etc.). As has been well documented by many NT scholars, the "sending" language of the Bible is the language of the commissioning of prophets and has nothing at all to do with the *place of origin* of the one who is "sent." Instead, such language emphasizes *God*, the sender, and the *purpose* for which the messenger is sent.

Two NT passages (Phil. 2:5-8, II Cor. 8:9) that are often pointed to to prove Christ's pre-existence are thought by many, including many trinitarian scholars, to be instead a portrayal of the human self-giving Jesus in contrast with Adam who "grasped for equality with God". They are also presented in the light of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Luke Timothy Johnson speaks for many, when he states in his book, *The Real Jesus*, in regards to Phil. 2:5-11:

Some scholars argue that the passage describes the incarnation of a preexistent one. But with other scholars, I hold that the entire passage describes the "messianic outlook" of Jesus in his *human* life ... the "way Jesus thought" is explicitly recommended to the Philippians as the measure of how they should

"think" in community: they are to follow the pattern of a Messiah whose servantlike obedience to God is the paradigm for mutual service within the community (2:1-4) ... [p. 162].

Here is a section of scripture that more than any other that is often presented as "proof" of Christ's deity or pre-existence is dependent for our understanding on translation. Some versions (e.g. NIV in contrast to the better NAB, REB, NJB) have bent over backwards to translate in a way that makes Christ's so-called deity or pre-existence "self-evident" to the reader. However, as the notes of the *New Jerusalem Bible* state, instead of speaking of a pre-existent being,

More probably Jesus is here contrasted as the second with the first Adam (Rm. 5:12f; I Co. 15:22f). The first Adam, being in the form or image of God attempted to grasp equality with God and, by his pride, fell. By contrast, Jesus, through his humility, was raised up by God to the divine glory ... [p. 1941 note d. Cp. notes d-h].

It then adds that the "traditional" understanding regarding pre-existence,

is not only less scriptural but also anachronistic for the development of christology at this moment of Paul's thinking [*ibid.*, note g.]

Most scholars agree that these passages *do* contrast Christ with Adam. The only question is do they speak of a pre-existent Christ as well. In this regard James Dunn points out the crucial factor that Paul "explicitly denies" that "the second man, from heaven" (I Cor. 15:47) is "the spiritual, *pre-existent* prototype of Adam." Instead,

the spiritual comes *after* the natural; it is the risen Christ who is the prototype of resurrected humankind [*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3, p. 402].

In regards to Philippians 2:5-11 Dunn emphasizes the fact that nowhere else in the NT is Adam christology ever used in relationship to a pre-existent being:

Adam Christology elsewhere in Paul focuses on Christ's death and resurrection, not on his birth, as the decisive moments of epochal significance (Rom. 5:15-19; I Cor. 15:20-22, 45-50). And the distinctiveness of Adam christology from the gnostic redeemer myth lies precisely in the fact that the life, and death, of a historic individual (Jesus) is perceived as imbued with suprahistorical significance for humankind as a whole, rather than that a

preexistent divine being entered the alien territory of the human form. Moreover, the regular link between Psalm 110:1 and Ps. 8:6 elsewhere in earliest christology (I Cor. 15:25-27; Eph. 1:20-22; Heb. 1:13-2:8; I Pet. 3:22; cf. Phil. 3:21) suggests that Christ's exaltation to lordship following his Adamic death was also seen in Adamic terms; that is, not as a restoration to a heavenly status previously enjoyed, but as the fulfillment of God's purpose in creating man in the first place ("to put all things under his feet") "to the glory of God the Father" [*ibid.*].

To "read into" verses like Phil. 2:5-11 and II Cor. 8:9 the idea of pre-existence is to say something that the text itself does not say. In each case, these verses are presented by Paul as a pattern for believers to imitate. Surely, the portrayal of a self giving human Messiah is much more consistent with the rest of scripture and, without any doubt, more capable of being imitated than a pre-existent divine being about which the scriptures speak nothing.

"Jesus" is what God's Word/Wisdom "Became"

Nowhere does the NT ever say that "Jesus became flesh." Nor does it ever say "the Son of God became flesh." For the first readers of the Greek New Testament it was the "logos" i.e. God's wise, creative and self-revealing "Word" - through which God created the world and through which he revealed his purposes to OT believers - which "became flesh" -in the person of Jesus the Messiah. Paul specifically states that Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:24) and that Christ Jesus "has *become* for us wisdom from God" (I Cor. 1:30). In a similar way John states in the prologue of his Gospel that "the Word *became* flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). In each case the point that is being dramatically made is this: Jesus, the Messiah, is what God's wise, creative and self-revealing Word "became."

This is simply the language and thinking of the OT and early Judaism. Nowhere in the writings of the Old Testament or in the writings of the Judaism until the time of Jesus is the Word or Wisdom of God ever portrayed as a pre-existent divine "person." Instead, both the Word and Wisdom of God are always attributes of the one true living God which can at times be *personified* and given a capital "W" so as to emphasize the Word or Wisdom of *God*

himself in creating or in relating to his creation. Prime examples of this personification are Proverbs 8, Isa. 55 and the writings of early Judaism.

It is within this OT and Jewish background of the wise, creative and personified power of God's Word or Wisdom that John 1:1-18 is set forth. And, it is in the light of this prologue that the entire Gospel of John is meant to be read and understood. The opening statement of John 1:1:

"In the beginning was the logos and the logos was with God and the logos was God"

does *not* say that "Jesus" was in the beginning with God *nor* does it say that either Jesus or "the logos" can be *identified* with God. As many scholars have pointed out, this is the language of *personification* not of a pre-existent divine *person*. The *person* of Jesus comes into existence, as consistent with both Matthew and Luke, in John 1:14 when "the logos *became* flesh".

We may translate "logos" as "Word" with a capital "W" if we wish, so as to emphasize the aspect of personification that is being presented, but this is by no means inherent in the text itself. And we could, with Caird, just as easily translate,

In the beginning was the purpose, the purpose in the mind of God, the purpose which was God's own being (*NT Theology*, p. 332).

This translation would also be in line with Jewish thinking and usage of the word "logos". As James Dunn states in his book *Christology in the Making*,

Initially at least Christ was not thought of as a divine being who had preexisted with God but as the climatic embodiment of God's power and purpose ... God's clearest self-expression, God's last word [p. 205].

Whichever of these translations we choose - i.e. "Word" or "purpose" - the thought is pretty much the same and the emphasis is, as Dunn describes, the transition from "impersonal personification to actual person." In Jesus, the logos is "identified with a particular person" (*ibid.*, p. 243). G.B. Caird in his book *NT Theology* emphasizes the importance of understanding this concept:

John never uses "Son" of the pre-existent *logos*, only of the incarnate *logos*, the human Jesus ... neither the Fourth Gospel nor Hebrews ever speaks of the eternal *logos* or Wisdom in terms which

compel us to regard it as a person ... acute problems arise if "Son" is seen as interchangeable with John's *logos*. Throughout the body of the Gospel Jesus is never called *logos*, nor is the pre-incarnate *logos* ever spoken of as "Son." For John the Son is what the *logos becomes* by virtue of incarnation ... Indeed, if without support from the Gospel, we were to ascribe sonship to the pre-cosmic or pre-incarnate *logos*, we would blunt the very point John is attempting to make: that it is the humanity of Jesus which is the perfect expression of what God intended when his *logos* created the universe. Jesus is the only one who could express and disclose the ultimate end which God has for men and women: that they should become his children [p. 296, 342-343, 322].

In the same way, Colossians 1:15-20 is speaking of *God's* purpose in creation. It is not Paul's intent to tell us of a pre-existent divine being through whom God created the world. This would clearly contradict the Old and New Testament records that state that God the Father alone created the world (e.g. Isa. 44:24). It was through his own Word or Wisdom that God himself created the world (Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:6, 9; 148:5; Prov. 8; John 1:3; Heb. 11:3). Since this Word or Wisdom of God "became" flesh in the person of God's Son, all that was said of the Word or Wisdom of God can now be said of Christ because Jesus is the *embodiment* of God's Word or Wisdom. As Col. 1:19 states, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him ..."

Note that *God* was the one who was "pleased" to do this - it was not a decision which *Jesus* made. This also occurred at a certain point *in time* - not in an "eternal generation". To be consistent with other NT passages this must have been when "the *logos* became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

Once again Caird puts his finger on the point that is being made by Paul in these verses,

In Colossians we are told of "the secret design hidden for long ages and through many generations but now disclosed to God's people", because "the secret is Christ himself, *in whom* lie all God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 1:26; 2:2). The ground for those assertions has been given in an earlier paragraph, in which Paul declares that Christ "is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), and by the one word "image" he combines two of the most important themes of Old Testament theology. On the one hand, God created the human race to be His image, with supremacy over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:27-28; Ps. 8:6), so that in fulfilling the

human destiny Christ has achieved pre-eminence over the universe. On the other hand ... Paul's hymn to the cosmic Christ is full of echoes of Wisdom's function as the plan and artificer of creation. These two themes are held together by the fact that wisdom which shone forth in Creation was also a divine attribute which God always intended to impart to the human race (Ecclus. 24:7-10), so that the perfect human being is one in whom Wisdom resides, or as Paul puts it, "God in all his fullness has chosen to dwell" (Col. 1:19; 2:9) [p. 46].

William Barclay, the beloved NT commentator, explains the significance for his own life of God's Word/Wisdom becoming flesh in the person of Jesus:

For me the most important single text in the Bible is John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."... for me the supreme truth of Christianity is that in Jesus I see God ... It is not that Jesus *is* God. Time and time again the Fourth Gospel speaks of God sending Jesus into the world. Time and time again we see Jesus praying to God. Time and time again we see Jesus unhesitatingly and unquestioningly and unconditionally accepting the will of God for himself. Nowhere does the New Testament *identify* Jesus and God ... There are attributes of God I do not see in Jesus. I do not see God's omniscience in Jesus, for there are things which Jesus did not know. I do not see God's omnipotence in Jesus for there are things which Jesus could not do. I do not see God's omnipresence in Jesus, for in his days on earth Jesus could only be in one place at any given time. But in Jesus I see perfectly and completely and finally, and once for all revealed and demonstrated, the attitude of God to men, the attitude of God to me. In Jesus there is the full revelation of the mind and heart of God. And what a difference it means to know that God is like that. [William Barclay: *A Spiritual Autobiography*, Eerdmans, p. 55-57].

James Dunn, in his article "Incarnation" in the new multi-volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary* sums up the importance of understanding this NT concept that Jesus is what the Word or Wisdom of God "became":

The recognition that Wisdom christology is the most obvious root of incarnation Christology also has an important corollary, particularly when it is recalled that in Jewish thought Wisdom is not a being independent of God but is God's self-manifestation. The point is that Christ is the *incarnation* of the Wisdom/Word. To speak of Christ as himself

preexistent, coming down from heaven, and so forth has to be seen as metaphorical, otherwise it leads inevitably to some kind of polytheism ... Whereas what a Wisdom/Word christology claims is that Jesus is the person /individual whom God's word *became* ... The incarnation doctrine which comes to expression in the NT is properly understood only if it is understood as the incarnation of God's self-revelation, and *in that sense*, as the incarnation of God himself. [*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, p. 404].

[For detailed studies on "christology" the place to start is with J.D.G. Dunn's groundbreaking book, *Christology in the Making*, 2nd edition, SCM Press. Available through CBD ph. 1-508-977-5050. Also, Dunn's important articles on "Christology" and "Incarnation" in the new *Anchor Bible Dictionary* which "correct" his earlier thinking on John. J.A.T.

Robinson's chapter "The Person of Christ" in his book *The Priority of John* is the best study that I know of on Jesus in the Gospel of John. Though out of print, it can be checked out through the inter-library loan system. G.B. Caird's works, including his *NT Theology* (available from CBD), are also helpful. Two recommended books are: the very biblically based *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-inflicted Wound* by Anthony Buzzard and Charles Hunting (Atlanta Bible College, P.O. Box 100,000 Morrow, GA. 30260) and the very theological *Born Before All Time: The Dispute Over Christ's Origin*, by Karl-Joseph Kuschel (English translation from SCM Press and available through bookstores from Crossroad Press.)].