

Did Jesus Live in Heaven Before His Birth on Earth?

By George McHaffie

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(Old Testament quotations are from the King James Version and New Testament quotations are from The New English Bible, except where stated otherwise.)

Chapter 1

Introduction

THE God in whom Christians believe has made Himself known. In Old Testament times he was revealed to the fathers by the prophets, and with the coming of Christ he has spoken to us by His Son. There is difference of opinion, however, on precisely how we are to regard Jesus. An ancient and popular view is that he is a divine being who left heaven and took up a life and mission on earth. A popular chorus puts it this way:

Out of the ivory palaces
Into a world of woe,
Only His great eternal love
Made my Saviour go.

The Nicene Creed

Discussion on the subject in the 4th century of our era led to the formation of the Nicene Creed, first at Nicea in A.D. 325, and, with modifications, confirmed by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. The creed has been the touchstone of Christian orthodoxy for centuries. It runs:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things, both visible and invisible:

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made: Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life

The Meaning of the Creed

The simple meaning of this creed seems to be that there are three divine beings in heaven, one of whom, the Son of God who is very (or truly) God, left heaven and became a man on earth. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how there can be only one God, the Father, and at the same time another who is truly God. For a number of reasons therefore the creed has come under criticism and it is not altogether clear what its composers visualised.

The creed is the work of the leading members of the 4th century church. These were Greek thinkers and their form of reasoning followed the patterns established by Greek philosophy. It was characteristic of many Greek philosophers to speak of ideas or thoughts as though they were living beings. As an example, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, compared the being of God with the human mind. There is the man, his thought, and if the thought is, say, about his wife, the love with which he conceives his thought. To make the comparison, God can then be considered as Father (the man), Son (the man's thought) and Spirit (the man's love). The Son is then a mental activity of God and not a separate being. If, however, complications of this kind have entered the formation of the creed, it is evident that its interpretation is not so simple as would at first appear.

From another point of view it is claimed that although the contents of the creed are not found in the New Testament, its teaching arises out of the implications of what is found there. But if, at Nicea, the biblical implications were worked out in terms of Greek philosophical conceptions, we who live in later times have every reason to return to the Bible and look at the evidence afresh.

The Bible, however, is older than the Creed of Nicea. It has its own figures of speech and word meanings. The persistent and attentive reader will grow used to the atmosphere and usages of the Book, and, with occasional help from contemporary sources, it is generally possible to arrive at a writer's meaning. Some conceptions of the Son of God's descent from heaven may arise from misapprehension of biblical figures of speech and from misinterpretations along the lines of Greek philosophical categories.

Chapter 2

I have come down from heaven

I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. (John 6:38)

He who has come from God has seen the Father, and he alone. (John 6:46)

THESE two quotations from the gospel of John would doubtless leave the impression that Jesus claimed to have descended personally from heaven, that while in heaven he took a decision to do His Father's will and accept a mission on earth among human beings. By implication, in contradistinction to those who had not "heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape" (John 5:37, KJV), he claims to have actually seen the Father. It is suggested, nevertheless, that the apparently simple and obvious conclusion to be drawn from these texts is not the one intended either by the writer or by Jesus Christ. This problem can only be approached satisfactorily by looking at similar language found elsewhere in the Bible.

Access to Heaven

In Proverbs 30 a plaintive voice is heard which makes the opposite claims to those Jesus made. The speaker, Agur, says:

Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man.
I neither learned wisdom, nor have the knowledge of the holy. (Proverbs 30:2-3)

In the following verse we are given what appears to be an excuse for this moral and spiritual condition:

Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended?

In the ancient world, people generally did not believe that heaven, where God lived, was very far away: behind the clouds, perhaps, or veiled by the blue of the sky, but not altogether beyond man's reach. So the people of Babel thought to build a tower which would reach "unto heaven" (Genesis 11:4). The children of Israel were likely to come forward with the same excuse as Agur, for they were warned against it:

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? (Deuteronomy 30:11-12)

In much the same vein is Jacob's dream of a ladder which reaches to heaven. The angels ascended the ladder (presumably with messages from Jacob to God) and descended (with answers from God to Jacob). God spoke from the top of the ladder. Jacob spoke of the place as the "gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:10-22).

Figures which utilise the idea of man having access to heaven to commune with God and to receive information will be found well established in the New Testament. The main action of the book of Revelation is made known to John by a door being opened in heaven, and a voice saying, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen hereafter" (Revelation 4:1). Then follow descriptions of what John sees, including God sitting on His throne and being described as "Holy, holy, holy" (compare verse 8 with Proverbs 30:3, "knowledge of the Holy One", RSV). In 2 Corinthians chapter 12 Paul writes of "visions and revelations". He obtained these by being "caught up as far as the third heaven ... caught up into paradise,

and heard words so secret that human lips may not repeat them.” The expression “third heaven” was used by the Jews as the place of God’s abode.

Heaven wide open

All the above instances may be taken as extended examples of more usual expressions such as, “the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God” (Ezekiel 1:1) and “There appeared a man named John, sent from God” (John 1:6).

It is especially significant that this mode of expression is used in John’s gospel. In John 1:51 we find a repeat of the vision of the ladder, with Christ as the focal point on earth.

I tell you all, you shall see heaven wide open, and God’s angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. (John 1:51)

This claim to wide open contact between himself and God is developed in chapter 3 where Jesus throws out a challenge:

If you disbelieve me when I talk to you about things on earth, how are you to believe if I should talk about the things of heaven? (John 3:12)

How could Jesus talk of things of heaven? The answer seems to be in the statement which immediately follows:

No one ever went up into heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man¹ (John 3:13)

This may be thought of as a descent prior to his birth and an ascent subsequent to his resurrection, but in the light of the established imagery of ascending to heaven and descending, it is suggested that here we have a claim to have ascended to obtain heavenly knowledge, and a descent to impart it to humans. It is also a claim to be absolutely unique in having made this ‘journey’.

In My Father’s Presence

Another instance of the same mode of speech is in chapter 8 where Jesus says to the Jews²:

¹ This verse is concluded with the words “which is in heaven” (KJV) or “whose home is in heaven” (NEB). The KJV translation is closest to the Greek text, but these words do not appear in certain ancient and important manuscripts and were almost certainly not spoken by Jesus but are an aside by the gospel writer or a later commentator.

² It is important to realise that the term “the Jews” in the gospel of John should not always be understood as describing the Jewish people as such (then or now), but those amongst the Jewish people who opposed Jesus and his teaching as reported in the gospel of John. Jesus himself was a Jew (John 4:9) and criticisms he made were given within the Jewish belief-system not against it (Matthew 5:17, Matthew 23:1-2, Luke 24:27, John 4:22). It has been suggested that in some places the term should better be translated “the Judaeans” (the people living in the area of Judaea), as distinct from “the Galileans” (the people living in the area of Galilee), and this is done in the translation produced by the noted New Testament scholar Tom Wright. See, for example, his New Testament Commentary *John for Everyone*, page 92, commenting on John 7:1-13, where Jesus chose to stay in Galilee rather than go to Judaea: “After this, Jesus went about in Galilee. He didn’t want to go about in Judaea because the Judaeans were after his blood” – Tom Wright’s translation of John 7:1. Scholars vary in their opinion on this, but it is certainly important to avoid any anti-semitism, especially in view of the unfortunate antipathy towards the Jewish people over the centuries, much of it, sad to say, done supposedly in the name of Jesus but totally against the true spirit of Jesus.

I am revealing in words what I saw in my Father's presence; and you are revealing in action what you learned from your father. (John 8:38)

In this context the father of those who are opposed to Jesus is not Abraham but, as Jesus says, "Your father is the devil" (verse 44). While, therefore, Jesus is saying that he has been in the presence of God to learn the words of truth, he asserts that those who sought to kill him (John 8:40)³ have been to the devil's abode (perhaps even brought up there) to learn lying and murder, for the devil is the father of these. None of his opponents had, of course, undertaken that journey. The mode of speech is a reference to those who communed with one another and with their dark and murderous thoughts.⁴ Similarly, Jesus is not speaking of having been literally in God's actual presence, but is referring to his communion in prayer with his Father.

The Bread of Life

If we now return to the 6th chapter of John's gospel we will find that the statement "I have come down from heaven" (John 6:38) is part of a highly figurative scheme. Jesus claims to be "the bread of life" (verse 48) which comes down from heaven to sustain "eternal life" (verse 54). This is compared with the manna which came down from heaven to sustain the mortal life of the Israelites during their desert wanderings. Did the coming down of the bread of life relate to a descent at a period prior to Christ's birth in Bethlehem? If so, the figurative usage would be inappropriate, for the bread which came down from heaven is his "own flesh" (John 6:51) which in no sense is generally considered to have come down from heaven. The general meaning of ascent and descent in this figurative manner of speaking, as used elsewhere in the Bible, points to its use in the gospel of John of Jesus ascending and descending as a mature person – one who is able to seek communion with God by first "ascending". The "descending" figuratively means the imparting of the revelation of God. The revelation is the bread of heaven for those who receive it. The revelation can be understood by contemplating the life and teaching of Jesus Christ who is the "Word" or uttered thought of God. Anyone who feeds on this "bread" or "flesh" or revelation will find "life".

Hard Sayings

These were hard sayings for those who appear to have looked for literal meanings when only spiritual ones were intended. The next difficult saying is in verse 62.

What if you see the Son of Man ascending to the place where he was before?

It may be tempting to see this "ascending" as that which followed Jesus' death and resurrection, and the "before" as applying to the period prior to his birth in Bethlehem. The ascension from Mount Olivet, however, hardly seems relevant to the immediate discussion and unlikely to "shock" (verse 61) any of them, as it was witnessed by only a band of convinced believers. Also, in terms of coming down from heaven as set out in the Nicene Creed, the expression "Son of Man" is inappropriate because it was not as *man* that the Creed asserts that he came down. Consistency and relevance to the occasion can nevertheless be maintained by continuing the figurative usage of "ascend". Jesus has just made a statement which was more than his hearers could "stomach" (John 6:60). It was that if they ate the

³ See previous footnote about the term "the Jews" in the gospel of John. And note that a distinction is made in John's gospel between "the people" – who were Jews too, and who were inclined to believe (John 7:40) – and other Jews like the Pharisees and the chief priests in Jerusalem who opposed him (John 7:32, and 45-52)

⁴ As described in Mark 3:6, Luke 22:2, John 5:18.

“bread” which he offered they would live forever. In effect he meant that they should believe the truth that he was bringing to them and let it have its effect on their lives. If, however, they were unable to follow his teaching thus far, he now says that they would be even more put out if he sought further and more profound knowledge to impart to them by “ascending up where he was before”. But if any are not shocked but go on and feed on the further revelation which Jesus gives, they will have “life” indeed.

Chapter 3

Before Abraham

IN the previous chapter it was maintained that spatial terms such as “ascend” and “descend” may be employed for aspects of spiritual communion. It will also be found that expressions relating to time are given a spiritual rather than a literal meaning in John’s gospel. Jesus says, for example,

In truth, in very truth I tell you, the believer possesses eternal life. (John 6:47)

This would normally be taken to mean that the believer is immortal, but a mortal person is meant, one who will die, for the additional promise is “and I will raise him up on the last day” (verse 40). The possession of “eternal life” is, in this context, the possession of the spiritual qualities of life such as Jesus displayed, rather than any temporal extent of physical life.

A Christian life can be spoken about in this way because the qualities of character expressed belong to the timeless life of God. In God’s eternal kingdom all will share these qualities. For a man to have this eternal life is not to be understood as if he had consciously been with God from the beginning of time or that he will consciously continue from now on. The “eternal life” is seen in the transformed life of the follower of Christ.

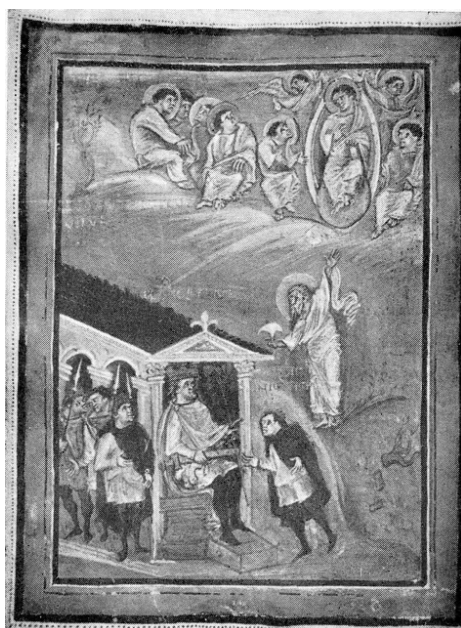
Abraham rejoiced to see my day

The conversation between Jesus and the Jews⁵ in John 8:56-59 reveals how completely they failed to grasp the points, spiritual and figurative, which Jesus was making.

Jesus says,

Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day; he saw it and was glad. (John 8:56)

The meaning of this should be clear. Abraham was given a promise of a coming day when all families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). This was to be through a seed which is Christ (Galatians 3:16, KJV). Abraham looked forward to the day when the seed would be born who would guarantee the blessing. The Jews⁵, however, mistook the meaning of Christ’s words, thinking that he was claiming to have seen Abraham, or, as a well-supported ancient text reads, “Has Abraham seen you?” In either reading they imply that Jesus claimed to have been living since the time of Abraham.



CHRIST, DEPICTED IN HEAVEN,
WATCHES AS DOEG ACCUSES
AHIMILECH BEFORE KING SAUL

— from a French manuscript of about AD 850

From an early period of the church this misunderstanding was taken up by Christians. Christ was imagined to be present throughout the period of the Old Testament, surveying the events and helping the Israelites. A medieval painting of the incident when Doeg the Edomite told Saul about Ahimilech’s meeting with David (1 Samuel 22:9-23) shows Christ watching the proceedings

⁵ Please see footnote 2 for comment on the term “the Jews” in this part of the gospel of John.

from heaven. Attempts have been made also to see Christ in person in some of the incidents of the Old Testament. For example, he was thought to be one of the three men who appeared to Abraham (Genesis 18:2), the others being the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus does not say that he *was* before Abraham. He uses, instead, an unusual mode of speech. He says, "... before Abraham was born, *I am*" (John 8:58). In this way Jesus does not intend to answer in terms of time at all. He is turning the question towards spiritual realities and asserting that he belongs to a way of life which transcends time. His life spiritually belongs to God's way, of which he is a manifestation.

Word and Wisdom

How Jesus is related to this life of God is explained in the beginning of the gospel of John.

When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was. The Word, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him. All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men. ... So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.
(John 1:1-4, 1:14)

It is important for us to try to grasp what these words meant to the writer and the first readers. When a Jew read them he would recall the creation when "God said ..." and it was done (Genesis 1). All things, therefore, came into being because God spoke the "word". As, however, the speech or words of God recall His inner purpose, it is natural to identify the words with the mind and will of God. Moreover, the imagery of word is linked with activity. "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29). So the word was proclaimed as God's special agent in carrying out His will. In the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Aramaic, changes were made which bring out how extensively the Jews thought of the term "word" as an agent. The Hebrew of Isaiah 48:13 reads, "Mine hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth...." This was translated into Aramaic as "By my word I have founded the earth...." In a very similar way the word "wisdom" was used. It was described as a woman, created before the world and then, in turn, sharing the life of God during the rest of the creative process (Proverbs 8:22 ff.). Jewish readers, then, were used to the idea that the attributes of God – His wisdom, His purpose, or His thought expressed in words – could be spoken of as active and having "life".

When a Greek read the gospel of John he would not find it as easy to understand as a Jew, but, even so, he could draw on contemporary use of the "word". Tradition says that the gospel of John was written at Ephesus and it was in this city that the philosopher Heraclitus, for the first time of which there is a record, taught that the "word" (*logos* in Greek) gave pattern to, and was the principle of order behind the universe. Later Greek philosophers developed this idea and the "word" became for them the "mind" of God which was suffused throughout the universe, giving it orderliness and, through man's mind, instructing him in truth. There is much evidence, principally in the writings of the Jew Philo, that both Jew and Greek had contributed to a common understanding of "word" by the time in which the gospel was written.

The beginning of the gospel of John is, therefore, saying that the creation had come about according to the thought and purpose in the mind of God, that this purpose has been a light among human beings, bringing spiritual understanding through the revealed "word", and that, finally, the fullest revelation has been given by God's act through the birth and life of Jesus Christ. It would, then, be untrue to say that because the "word" was with God, that a person,

such as Jesus of Nazareth, was living with God before the birth of this same Jesus in Bethlehem.

Image or Portrait

To this figurative use of “word” and “wisdom” there must be added “image”. In New Testament times this meant “portrait”. To this day the meaning is still recalled in the “icons” of the Eastern Orthodox Church. These are religious portraits and the name “icon” is derived from the original Greek word for image. In one of the religious books of the Jews, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (7:26) “wisdom” is said to be the “image” of God’s goodness. Paul uses “image” in this way in Colossians 1:15: “He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God”. The thought here seems to be that like “wisdom” or “word”, God’s “image” was created before the world, “the first-born of all creation” (RSV), and now the man Jesus Christ has become “the express image of his person” (Hebrews 1:3, KJV).

The passages which can be understood in the way the terms “word”, “wisdom”, and “image” are used in the New Testament with application to Christ are drawn together below. The translation is that of the Revised Standard Version.

(i) From the beginning God has a purpose: it expresses what He is.

- (a) The LORD created me [wisdom] at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. (Proverbs 8:22)
- (b) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.... He was in the beginning with God (John 1:1-2)
- (c) He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. (Colossians 1:15)

(ii) This purpose gives order to the natural world and to the structure of man’s civilisation.

- (a) ... when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I [wisdom] was beside him like a master workman. (Proverbs 8:29-30)
- (b) ... all things were made through him [the Word], and without him was not anything made that was made. (John 1:3)
- (c) ... through whom [the Son] also he created the world. ... upholding the universe by his word of power. (Hebrews 1:2-3)
- (d) ... for in him [the Son] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ... in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:16-17)

(iii) Knowledge of this purpose brings spiritual understanding.

- (a) For he who finds me [wisdom] finds life and obtains favour from the LORD. (Proverbs 8:35)
- (b) In him [the Word] was life, and the life was the light of men. (John 1:4)
- (c) In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets. (Hebrews 1:1)

(iv) The purpose of God, a portrait of Himself, was revealed among human beings in the birth of Jesus Christ.

(a) And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

(John 1:14)

(b) ... but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.... He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature....

(Hebrews 1:2-3)

(c) He who has seen me has seen the Father.

(John 14:9)

The passages from various writers of the New Testament quoted above all declare a common theme – the purpose of God being centred upon the man Jesus Christ. Though a man on earth, he bore a unique relationship to the eternal mind. The meaning of his life was therefore greater than a short, mortal existence would suggest. It spoke of truths which had been essential to God before the world was, and will reach out time without end. These things were cryptically yet spiritually expressed when Jesus said: “Before Abraham was born, I am.”

Chapter 4

A Man

*Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven,
And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary,
And was made man.*

The Nicene Creed

NATIVE to the religious thinking of the Greeks was a belief that there was a virtually unbridgeable gap between whatever belonged to the supreme God and life on earth. Many philosophic devices were employed to alleviate the problem of divine and human communication. Especially unacceptable to the Greeks was the idea that God could have a direct relationship with humans, or experience emotions and suffering. The Greek leaders of the early church, not to mention many of the early heretics, were strongly influenced by these views. As a result they were unwilling to believe that Christ had been a man or had suffered. Some believed that he was an angelic being who only appeared to be a man. Others thought that he only temporarily inhabited a human body but did not experience emotions or any suffering. A number of New Testament passages can be seen in a fresh light if they are recognised as deliberate contradictions of these views. In this connection might be quoted, “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14), and “every spirit which acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2). At the same time it was necessary to maintain that, although Jesus was a man, he was nevertheless “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15, KJV).

“Man”

The Greek attitude is subtly in evidence in the Nicene Creed which states that the Son of God became “man”, that is, he assumed the qualities associated with humanity. This is not the same, however, as saying that he was *a* man. If the authors of the creed had been less influenced by Greek thinking and more ready to accept to the full the New Testament evidence, they would have seen clearly that Jesus is presented not only as “man” but as “a man”.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter said:

I speak of Jesus of Nazareth, a man singled out by God and made known to you....
(Acts 2:22)

Jesus Christ is shown also to be in a distinctive relationship to other human beings. He is the head of a new race. He is the “second” man, the last Adam. Apart from the occasional use of these names by Paul, this teaching is carefully worked out in the epistle to the Hebrews and in the epistle to the Philippians in contexts which also recall his unique portrayal of the qualities inherent in God. In Hebrews 2:7 a quotation is made from Psalm 8:5-6:

Thou didst make him for a short while lower than the angels;
thou didst crown him with glory and honour;
thou didst put all things in subjection beneath his feet.

We naturally associate these words with the creation story:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion....
(Genesis 1:26, RSV)

In the epistle a simple point is made that we do not yet see man with this dominion. In one case, however, God's original purpose has been fulfilled. While the first Adam, "the son of God" (Luke 3:38), has led the race to corruption and ruin, the "Son" who is Jesus Christ "the express image of his person" (Hebrews 1:3, KJV), made "a little lower than the angels" (Hebrews 2:7, KJV), is now crowned "with glory and honour" as God intended that human beings should be. In the epistle the complete kinship of the "leader who delivers" (Hebrews 2:10), with his "brothers"⁶ (verse 11), sharing the "same flesh and blood" (verse 14), is emphasised.

In Philippians 2 the same basic comparisons between the first and the second Adam are made. The first Adam, though in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26), sought, by seizing the forbidden fruit, to be "like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5, RSV). The second Adam, though "the divine nature was his from the first" (Philippians 2:6), and therefore living as the divine image ought to be lived "did not think to snatch at equality with God" as the first Adam did. Instead he showed himself to be a humble servant of God. "Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death" (verse 8). In this he is an exhortation to his brothers and sisters whose "bearing towards one another" should "arise out of your life in Christ" (verse 5), and so they will themselves reflect the image and likeness of God.

Because Jesus humbled himself in this way:

Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—in heaven, on earth, and in the depths—and every tongue confess, 'Jesus Christ is Lord', to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:9-11)

The bestowal of the name is clearly connected with Isaiah 45:

... there is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else. I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear. Surely, shall one say, in the LORD [Yahweh] have I righteousness and strength....

(Isaiah 45:21-24, KJV)

The quotation of the passage in Philippians and its application to Christ makes it clear that the name bestowed is the sacred name for God, "Yahweh", translated "Lord". In Jesus the image of God has become complete. The name of God is bestowed upon him and with it the qualities and new status associated with the name. He has been raised to divine status. In the book of Revelation, Jesus promises that the faithful will share this:

... I will write the name of my God upon him ... and my own new name.

(Revelation 3:12)

⁶ "Brothers" (Greek *adelphoi*) is the normal way of referring to those who are members of Jesus' new spiritual family, male and female. Some modern translations make this clear by translating *adelphoi* as "brothers and sisters". For example, the latest version of the NIV (2011) translates Hebrews 2:11 as: "Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters."

Chapter 5

True God

OF the status of Christ the Nicene Creed has this to say:

We believe ... in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father....

The expressions “God of God”, “Light of Light” are to be understood in the sense God “out of” God, Light “out of” Light, that is, “derived from”. If these definitions “God” and “Light” were used in a similar way and with the same force as “wisdom” in Proverbs 8, their use could have been regarded as a not unreasonable extension of what the Bible actually implied. The Nicene Creed may well be a development from an earlier point of view of this kind, for it was modelled on an earlier confession in use in Caesarea. The Caesarean statement read, “... one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God”, instead of “Son of God”. Nevertheless, the Caesarean and Nicene Creeds both assert that “Jesus Christ” was “begotten of the Father before all ages” (Caesarean Creed) or, as was later added to the Nicene Creed, “Begotten before all worlds”.

Plain Words

In order to evaluate the scriptural evidence with which to compare these statements it is necessary to differentiate between passages such as those found in John’s writings, in Colossians and Hebrews where the use of the imagery of the “word” is found, and other passages devoid of this imagery where direct and plain statements are made. Of this latter type, the promise of the birth of Christ, as set out in Luke 1, is a good example.

‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for God has been gracious to you; you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus. He will be great: he will bear the title “Son of the Most High”; the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel for ever; his reign shall never end.’ ‘How can this be?’ said Mary; ‘I am still a virgin.’ The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy child to be born will be called “Son of God”.’
(Luke 1:30-35)

This simple narrative sets out the historical action of God in His determining to redeem men and women in Christ. It explains how Jesus could be uniquely in the image of God. As wax takes the impression of a seal, so Jesus is the “stamp of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:3), for he was born as the result of the power of God, the Holy Spirit, being the agent of his conception. He therefore takes after the characteristics of his father, God. There is no hint in such narratives of a divine being assuming “manhood” in the form of a “child”.

If, therefore, we wish to continue with the figurative usage we could describe God’s purpose, word, wisdom and image, or even the idea of sonship as being born from God before all worlds. It is inadmissible, however, to say that Jesus Christ was so born.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

IT would be broadly true to say that since the rise of Christianity, three dominant answers have been put forward as solutions to the problem raised in the title of this study.

(i) The view generally held to be expressed in the ancient creeds, in which Jesus is regarded as a divine being, the equal of God, who, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, make up the Godhead. The person (there are various shades of meaning attached to this word) God the Son is believed to have left heaven and assumed the qualities consistent with human life on earth. This view seems to dominate and be one of the requirements of the World Council of Churches which, while not mentioning the manhood of Christ, requires belief in “Jesus Christ as God and Saviour”.

(ii) The view favoured by Arius of Alexandria in the 4th century. This regards Christ as a divine being who had a begetting in time but before the creation of the world. Jesus is held to have a subordinate status and something of the role of head of all angelic and non-angelic beings. His descent from heaven is understood in literal terms to assume the role of a man on earth. The Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses are the most prominent and zealous supporters of this view today.

(iii) The view taken in this study in which Jesus has no conscious existence prior to his birth in Bethlehem.

The first of these views is, as commonly understood, likely to endanger the unity of God. Jesus Christ is presented in the New Testament as one through whom God is made known and through whom God acts, not as the supreme God.

The second view can only be maintained if figurative usages, especially of such words as “wisdom”, “word”, “image”, are not given their essential meaning and weight. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see how Western readers have been convinced of this point of view.

The third view can make claim to greater antiquity than that of the definitions of Nicea. These arose largely through the adoption of the second view in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. This third view can lay claim, also, to never having been very far below the surface of the most analytical religious thinking. This is especially true today.

Does it Matter?

An agreed solution of this problem is of more than academic interest. Christianity has suffered setbacks for decades and has lost much of its former standing in people’s hearts and minds. While much of this former strength may have been artificial, it seems that a breakdown in the power to communicate what Christ stands for is one of the great failures of today. It is essential, therefore, to recover the simplicity of Christ, freed from the entanglements of doctrinal disputation characteristic of the 4th and 5th centuries of our era.

The issue is not only of local or national importance. It is cosmic in its scope. As Jesus said:

This is eternal life: to know thee who alone art truly God, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent.
(John 17:3)

Appendix

Between the Old and New Testaments

A NUMBER of books produced between the time of the Old Testament and the time of the New are included in what is known as the Apocrypha. Some of these illustrate clearly the development in thought involving “Wisdom” and “Word” coming down to dwell on earth. An examination of these helps us to understand the background to the usages in the New Testament as outlined in this study. The words which are particularly relevant are printed in italics. The first quotation is from the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament and sets the scene for the Apocrypha quotations which follow. The translation used below is that of the New English Bible (1970).

Wisdom, personified as a woman, was created before all else and was with God at creation

Hear how Wisdom lifts her voice
and Understanding cries out.
‘The LORD created me [Wisdom] the beginning of his works,
before all else that he made, long ago.
Alone, I was fashioned in times long past,
at the beginning, long before the earth itself.
When there was yet no ocean *I was born,*
no springs brimming with water.
Before the mountains were settled in their place, long before the hills *I was born....’*
(Proverbs 8:1, 8:22-25)

God’s word carried out the work of creation.

‘O Lord, at the beginning of creation you spoke the word. On the first day you said, “Let heaven and earth be made!”, and *your word carried out its work.*’
(2 Esdras 6:38)

Wisdom is a flawless mirror – she accurately reflects what God is like – and she is the image of his goodness.

... *wisdom* moves more easily than motion itself, she pervades and permeates all things because she is so pure. Like a fine mist she rises from the power of God, *a pure effluence from the glory of the Almighty;* so nothing defiled can enter into her by stealth. She is the brightness that streams from everlasting light, *the flawless mirror of the active power of God and the image of his goodness.*
(Wisdom of Solomon 7:24-26)

Wisdom lives with God.

She [*Wisdom*] adds lustre to her noble birth because *it is given to her to live with God....*
(Wisdom of Solomon 8:3)

God made all things by His word and in His wisdom He created mankind. Wisdom sits besides God’s throne.

God of our fathers, merciful Lord, *who hast made all things by thy word,* and *in thy wisdom hast fashioned man,* to be the master of thy whole creation, and to be steward of the world in holiness and righteousness, and to administer justice with an upright heart, give me *wisdom, who sits beside thy throne....*
(Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-4)

Wisdom is with God, and is first of all created things. She is from God's word, and is given to everybody to some extent, and in plenty to those who love Him.

*All wisdom is from the Lord;
wisdom is with him for ever. ...
Wisdom was first of all created things;
intelligent purpose has been there from the beginning.
[The fountain of wisdom is God's word on high,
and her ways are the eternal commandments.*]
Who has laid bare the root of wisdom?
Who has understood her subtlety?
One alone is wise, the Lord most terrible,
seated upon his throne.
It is he who created her, surveyed her, and measured her,
and infused her into all his works.
To all mankind he has given her in some measure,
but in plenty to those who love him. (Ecclesiasticus 1:1-10)*

Wisdom, the word, dwelling in heaven, came down to dwell on earth.

*Hear the praise of wisdom from her own mouth....
'I am the word which was spoken by the Most High;
it was I who covered the earth like a mist.
My dwelling-place was in high heaven;
my throne was a pillar of cloud.
Alone I made a circuit of the sky
and traversed the depths of the abyss.
The waves of the sea, the whole earth,
every people and nation were under my sway.
Among them all I looked for a home:
in whose territory was I to settle?
Then the Creator of the Universe laid a command upon me;
my Creator decreed where I should dwell.
he said, "Make your home in Jacob;
find your heritage in Israel."
Before time began he created me,
and I shall remain for ever.
In the sacred tent I ministered in his presence,
and so I came to be established in Zion.
Thus he settled me in the city he loved
and gave me authority in Jerusalem.
I took root among the people whom the Lord had honoured
by choosing them to be his special possession. (Ecclesiasticus 24:1-12)*

Wisdom appeared on earth and lived among men.

*Has any man gone up to heaven to gain wisdom and brought her down from the clouds?
.... Only the One who knows all things knows her: his understanding discovered her.
This is our God; there is none to compare with him. The whole way of knowledge he
found out and gave to Jacob his servant, and to Israel whom he loved. Thereupon wisdom
appeared on earth and lived among men. She is the book of the commandments of God,
the law that stands for ever. (Baruch 3:29, 3:32, 3:35-37, 4:1)*

* These two lines are only in some manuscripts.

Symbolic Language

Word and wisdom are identified and personified in this literature between the Old and New Testaments. The language is poetic and symbolic, and is not to be understood literally. Parallel expressions, as often in Jewish poetry, explain the meaning. For example,

Wisdom was first of all created things;
intelligent purpose has been there from the beginning. (Ecclesiasticus 1:1-10)

This symbolic language is a way of saying that God is wise, intelligent, and purposeful. When it says that “wisdom appeared on earth and lived among men” (Baruch 3:37), the meaning is explained in the next verse: “She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that stands for ever”. But we are not intended to understand that wisdom really was a woman who was created by God and lived with Him in heaven and subsequently came down to earth. The intention is to state that God revealed the wisdom and knowledge of Himself in the law.

When we look at the New Testament, we find this same kind of symbolic language is used to explain that God revealed the wisdom and knowledge of Himself in Jesus.

This study suggests that the language of word and wisdom should not be understood as representing a literal person (female as “Wisdom” or male as “Word”) living in heaven with God and who then comes down to earth, but is a poetic, vividly symbolic description of how God’s eternal characteristics became embodied in the man Jesus Christ.

The style of thinking as shown in the above passages should therefore be remembered when we read the descriptions given in the New Testament, such as in the Gospel of John and in Colossians.

The Gospel of John

When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was the Word was. The Word, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him. All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it.

So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-5, 1:14)

The Letter of Paul to the Colossians

He is the image of the invisible God; his is the primacy over all created things. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible order of thrones, sovereignties, authorities, and powers: the whole universe has been created through him and for him. And he exists before everything, and all things are held together in him. (Colossians 1:15-17)

Ian McHaffie
mchaffie1@talktalk.net
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The theme of this study has been what is known in theological terms as the “pre-existence” of Christ. This doctrine is closely linked with that of the Trinity. A companion study by George McHaffie (1920-1985) is also available on this subject entitled:

The Trinity – A Modern Examination