

## Who Was He Before He Was Jesus?

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Who was Jesus of Nazareth before he came to dwell among us and became "one of us"? What was his name before he became "Jesus" (*Yeshua/Iesous*)? Was he "the Son of God" before he experience the incarnation? Was he with God from the very beginning of time, or did he exist before the beginning of time? Is he an eternal being or a created being? What do you as a Christian believe about this, and why do you believe what you do?

From what we are told in Matt 1:18-25, the name "Jesus" (Hebrew *Yeshua*, Greek *Iesous*) was given to the one who was to be born in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, as per the instruction of the angel of God:

*. . . as he (Joseph) considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and **you shall call his name Jesus**, for he will save his people from their sins," (Matt 1:20-21).*

"All this took place," the angel said, "to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us)" (Matt 1:22-23). This revelation from God was given to Joseph in a dream while he slept. "When Joseph woke from sleep," Matthew informs us, "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus" (Matt 1:24-25).

Why was this one who came from God by means of a miraculous conception to be called "Jesus"? No doubt because in Hebrew his

name (*Yeshua*) meant "God's salvation." Was he *Yeshua* (God's salvation) from eternity, or was he someone else? According to the apostle John, in the beginning (i.e., when time came into existence) he was "*ho logos*" - the Word (John 1:1). How are we to understand this?

In the Old Testament God has many names, all are descriptive designations; e.g., *El Shaddai* (he is almighty), *El Olam* (he is eternal), *El Elyon* (he is transcendent/universal), *Elohim* (he is deity), etc. So also is it with the revelations of Jesus we have in the New Testament. The various titles given to him are descriptive designations of who he is. His name Jesus (*Yeshua/lesous*) mean "God's salvation." The title Christ (*Mashiach/Christos*) means that he was the anointed representative of God sent into the world to bring deliverance. The title Son of God (*Ben Elohim/Huios tou theou*) identifies him as one who was brought into being by (or out of) God. The title Lord (*Adonai/Yehweh/Kurios*) is the title of one in authority or in the Greek Old Testament it is the very designation of God. The meaning of a name in the ancient world carried greater significance and purpose than in our present-day world.

### The Pre-Existent Word of God

Perhaps no title of Christ is so significant to the issue of the identity of Jesus prior to his coming into this world as Jesus of Nazareth as that found in the prologue of John. In John 1:1 he is called "the Word," which was one and the same with God and which came forth from God; in Hebrew *Ha Daber Elohim* and in Greek *Ho Logos Tou Theou* - "the Word of God."

*In the beginning was **the Word**, and **the Word** was with God, and **the Word** was God. (John 1:1) . . . And **the Word** became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father. (1:14) . . . No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known (1:18).*

## *The Word of God as Personified Revelation*

The expression "the word of God" as revelation personified in Old Testament usage makes for a very interesting study. The idea of the word of God as a pre-existent entity is basically a Hebrew concept (or poetic metaphor) wherein revelation of God becomes personified and enters into the world as a manifestation of God's presence and power. The Hebrews believed deeply in revelation from God. In fact, they believed that the means by which God, as a transcendent being, entered into the world to accomplish his will was by the sending forth of his spirit and by the sending forth of his word.

It was by **the sending forth of his spirit** that he created the world, "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2). In Job 33:4 we read, "The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." And in Psalms 104:30, "When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created." The spirit of God (called the *Ruach Elohim*) is considered the "spirit of the prophets" or the "prophetic spirit" because in the Old Testament it is the spirit of God who gave power to God's special agents, as was the case with Sampson:

*. . . and the Spirit of the Lord (Yehweh) came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion asunder as one tears a kid; and he had nothing in his hand (Judges 14:6; cf. 14:19; 15:14).*

It was through the spirit of God that he spoke to (and through) the prophets: David (2 Sam 23:2), Isaiah (Isa 61:1), and Ezekiel (Ezek 11:5). This Old Testament belief is confirmed by Peter, ". . . no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

In the same manner this transcendent God could enter into the realm of his creation by **the sending forth of his word**. In fact, the creation of the heavens and earth were brought about by the word of God: "By **the word of the Lord (Yehweh)** the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Psalms 33:6).

Several Old Testament passages contain this poetic metaphor of the word of God in the form of a personified revelation of God being sent forth from God into the world. The classic passage is Isa 55:11, where God says through the prophet,

*" . . . so shall **my word be that goes forth from my mouth**; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing **for which I sent it.**"*

Another such passage is Psalms 107:19-20, where the word of God is portrayed as an agent of healing and deliverance for Israel,

*Then they cried to the Lord (Yahweh) in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; **he sent forth his word, and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.***

So also in Psalms 147:12-17 this poetic metaphor is used to portray God's word as an agent sent forth from God to care for the needs of his people, Israel.

*Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your sons within you. He makes peace in your borders; he fills you with the finest of the wheat. **He sends forth his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.** He gives snow like wool; he scatters hoarfrost like ashes. He casts forth his ice like morsels; who can stand before his cold? **He sends forth his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow** (Psalms 147:12-17).*

In Isaiah 2:2ff God's deliverance is promised to his people and the announcement of salvation is portrayed by the metaphor of God's word marching forth out of Zion going out to other nations,

*. . . and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For **out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem** (Isaiah 1:3).*

One of the most common usages of this imagery is found in the way revelation from God is presented to the inspired prophets of the Old Testament. In over 123 occurrences throughout the Old Testament we see the expression "the word of the Lord came to [the prophet named]" as a way of communicating to the reader that God had revealed his word to an inspired man. This expression is found as early as Gen 15:1, where we read, "After these things **the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision**, 'Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great'" (see also vs 4). So also in 1 Samuel 15:10, we read, "The word of the Lord came to Samuel . . ." This expression is found throughout 1 Sam, 2 Sam, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chron, 2 Chron (some 17 occurrences) to convey the idea of revelation from God had been given to a prophet, including such prophetic figures as Samuel, the prophet Gad, David, Solomon, Elijah, Nathan, Shemaiah, and others.

In the book of Jeremiah the expression, "the word of the Lord came to me" (or a similar expression) is found in over 42 occurrences. This same poetic metaphor is found in Ezekiel in 47 occurrences, and in 17 occurrences in the minor prophets. The imagery this expression presents to us is that of the word of God coming to the prophet as an agent sent forth from God, bringing revelation from God to the prophet. Scholars recognize this piece of Old Testament imagery as a poetic metaphor or figure of speech; it, nonetheless, presents us with an interesting concept which may help in our interpretation of the language John uses in his prologue where Jesus, in a pre-existent state, is presented as "the word [of God]" who came from God into the world as a revelation of God and an agent of God's salvation.

### *The Word of God in New Testament Usage*

When the Jews of the third century BC translated their Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (the Greek Septuagint), they translated this Hebrew expression *ha daber* by the Greek word *ho logos*, the very term found here in John 1 as the designation of the pre-existent Christ; and it is of no little significance that both the Hebrew and Greek terms are used throughout the Old and New Testament for "revelation of God."

This Old Testament figure is carried over into the New Testament, especially in the writings of John:

*In the beginning was **the Word**, and **the Word was with God**, and **the Word was God**. He was in the beginning with God; (John 1:1-2) . . . And **the Word became flesh and dwelt among us**, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father (John 1:14).*

In the first letter of John he affirms that he and the other apostles had empirically verified the reality of the incarnation of God in the person Jesus Christ:

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, **concerning the word of life** - the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).*

In John 10, we see Jesus using the very same poetic metaphor (i.e., "the word of God came to") used in the Old Testament Scriptures to speak of revelation of God"

*Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods **to whom the word of God came** (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? (John 10:34-36)*

This biblical expression - "the word" - is filled with multi-coloredness in meaning and use. However, our English term "word" hardly expresses the fullness of the Greek term *logos*, in that in Greek it is a much more exacting term than in our language. Words are sounds when spoken or symbols when written which represent and communicates ideas or concepts held within our minds. The Greek

word *logos* stands not only for the sound or symbol that communicates the idea or concept, it stands also for the very idea or concept it represents - the reality expressed by the spoken or written symbol. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons John chose it to describe Jesus as the very revelation of God. Jesus of Nazareth, as he himself claimed, was the very revelation the concept or idea - the reality - of God.

The expression "the word" is, to most of us, synonymous with "the Scriptures;" but, in John's usage, it may be as readily applied to Jesus as to Scripture. An analogy, which beautifully exemplifies the full sense of what John is communicating to us here, is as follows. Just as the Scriptures are the word of God (revelation of God) inscribed, Jesus of Nazareth is the word of God (revelation of God) personified. The Scriptures are the thoughts (ideas or concepts) of God revealed by God in the form of parchment or papyri scrolls. Jesus of Nazareth is, in a similar sense, the thought (idea or concept) of God revealed by God in the form of a human being. Jesus was "the word of God" revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth rather than in the form of a book or ancient scrolls.

## Jesus as the Pre-Existent Word of God

Throughout the New Testament Jesus is portrayed as one who pre-existed as God before he entered into this world as Jesus of Nazareth to reveal God to us as well as God's salvation. Although the pre-existence of Jesus is implied throughout the New Testament, the most convincing NT texts on this doctrine are those of John, Paul, and the Hebrew's writer.

### *The Pre-Existence of Christ in the Writings of John*

The most explicit of these texts is John 1:1-2,

*In the beginning was the Word, and **the Word was with God**, and **the Word was God**. He was **in the beginning with God** . . .*

Here John clearly affirms the deity and pre-existence of Jesus in

the name of *ho logos* - the Word. He was in the beginning with God (his pre-existence affirmed) and the Word was God (his deity affirmed). Of further significance are the words of Jesus in John 8:23. Jesus says to his Jewish antagonists: "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world." Further, In John 6:51, Jesus states concerning himself, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

In John 8:58 he clearly affirms his pre-existence with the claim, "Before Abraham was, I am." Here the expression, "I am," is the very Greek designation used in the Greek Old Testament to translate the Hebrew *Yahweh*. The Hebrew expression literally means "I am that I am." The Greek translation is "*Ego Eimi*" (an emphatic construction consisting of the first person personal pronoun and the first person singular of the verb "to be"). It literally translates "I, I am," and to the Greek speaking Jew was the very designation of his God. In the John 8:51 text, Jesus could have said, "Before Abraham was, I was" by using the imperfect indicative form of *eimi*. He does not, and this is of great significance. What he does say implies that he pre-existed Abraham, and that in his pre-existence his name was the name of God - Hebrew *YHWH*, Greek *Ego Eimi*.

### *The Pre-existence of Christ in the Writings of Paul*

In Paul's faith, as with John, Christ was believed to have existed before his existence as Jesus of Nazareth and in that pre-existence he was one with God. The text of Paul clearly affirms Paul's beliefs here. The first is Phil 2:5ff,

*Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus, who, existing [continuous action] in the form [i.e., characteristics/attributes] of God, counted not the being equal with [isos-the same as] God, a thing to be grasped [i.e., held on to], but emptied himself, taking upon himself the form [characteristics/attributes] of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil 2:5-7).*

Paul here speaks of Christ as having an ongoing or continuous existence of sameness or oneness with God prior to his experiencing the incarnation (i.e., his being born of man). Further, in Col 1:15-17, Paul says of Christ:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the first [i.e., first cause] of all creation; for in him 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. He is before all things . . . (Col 1:15-17).*

According to Gen 1:26-27, man was created in the image of God. Twice in his writings, Paul states that Jesus is the image of God. The first reference is 2 Cor. 4:4 and the second here in Col 1:15. The significance of this Colossian text is that here Christ's pre-existence is affirmed as well as his being identified with God's creative activity. The Greek term *prototokos* when used in a passive sense can mean "first caused" or "first fruits." However, when used in an active sense it means "first cause." Here in this text, especially in this line of Greek text, the active sense is clearly called for, especially in light of the statement of verse 16, "for in him all things were created." Whether we take the term *prototokos* in an active or passive sense, the pre-existence of Christ is, none-the-less, implied.

### *The Pre-existence of Christ in the Book of Hebrews*

This New Testament epistle opens with a declaration of belief in the deity of Christ.

*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he **has spoken to us by a Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things, **through whom also he created the world**. He reflects the glory of God and imprint [Greek-character] of his essence, upholding the universe by the word of his power (Heb 1:1-3a).*

According to this inspired writer, Jesus was the very reflection of God's glory (a dominant theme of the Gospel of John). In many

occurrences of this Greek term, here translated "reflection, " it has the two-fold meaning of (1) a reflection as in a mirror, and (2) a breaking forth of light, a diffusion of light or a radiant reflection of light. And further, he (i.e., Jesus) bore the very imprint of God's nature or essence. As stated above, he was the very image of God. He was, in no uncertain terms, "God with us," and his apostles beheld this glory - the deity within him kept breaking through the fabric of his humanity. As Vincent Taylor says:

A curtain there is, but through it shines a celestial glow, and there are breaks in the fabric through which the light shines (Taylor, *The Person of Christ*, p. 294).

Here also it is stated that it was through this one who became "a Son" that the world was created (verse 2b), a clear affirmation of his existence prior to his becoming Jesus of Nazareth by means of his birth to the virgin Mary.

## Conclusion

There can be no serious doubt to the fact that the voice of Scripture, in both explicit and implicit language, affirms the pre-existence and the deity of Jesus of Nazareth, who became, by means of incarnation, the Son of God and entered into human history as "one of us" in order that he might save us through the belief that he was also "God with us." He was the Word who was in the beginning with God (his pre-existence affirmed), who was God (his deity affirmed), who became flesh and dwelt among us (his incarnation affirmed); and all is confirmed by the testimony of the inspire New Testament writers John, Paul, and the author of Hebrews.

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## Questions For Discussion

1. Who was Jesus before he came to dwell among us and became "one of us?"

2. What was his name before he became "Jesus"?
3. Was he "the Son of God" before he experienced the incarnation? Was he with God from the very beginning of time, or did he exist before the beginning of time? Is he an eternal being or a created being? What do you as a Christian believe about this, and why do you believe what you do?
4. Why was this one who came from God by means of a miraculous conception called/named "Jesus"?
5. Was he *Yeshua* (God's salvation) from eternity, or was he someone else? Has he always been eternally "the savior"?
6. How do you understand the designation John gives to Jesus in his pre-existence state, i.e., "the word/*ho logos*"?
7. In what sense can Jesus of Nazareth be identified with revelation of God? How do you understand the expression "revelation of/from God"? Is this expression synonymous with "the word of the Lord/God"?
8. What do you think John is doing with the repeated references to "the word" and "the word of God" as a designation of Jesus. This expression is found in his Gospel, his first letter, and the book of Revelation.
9. How does the analogy between the Scriptures as the word of God inscribed and Jesus as the word of God personified help in understanding John's designation of Jesus as "the word" (i.e., a revelation of God)?
10. Discuss the textual evidence for the pre-existence of Jesus as found in the writings of John, Paul, and the Hebrews writer. What data (explicit or implicit) in the texts of these writers affirms the pre-existence of Christ?
11. Of what importance is this whole discussion to our belief

concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth?

12. Would it be essential that Jesus be an eternal being in order for him to be one with God or to be believed in as "God with us"?