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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 3: THE PREEXISTENCE OF JESUS

Although we may be used to thinking of the life of Jesus as beginning with his nativity in Bethlehem, the story of the Son of God begins, of course, in eternity – before all space and time. Thus, the apostle John opens his gospel with the sublime statement:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-14)

Nowhere is the preincarnate existence and status of the One who became Jesus of Nazareth made clearer, and we will look more closely at this passage below. But this is not the only statement of the preexistence of Jesus to be found in the Bible. We will survey some of that background evidence here, as it helps us to understand much of what is said in the gospels.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

We catch glimpses of the preincarnate Word at various points in the Old Testament. For example, scholars from a number of branches of Christianity feel that we see him in the person of Melchizedek, of whom the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews tells us:

First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. (Hebrews 7:2-3)

That the author of Hebrews is equating Melchizedek with the preincarnate Christ is clear, according to these scholars, as Melchizedek is described in terms of specific characteristics that were believed to identify a true god in the Greco-Roman world in which the New Testament was written (see Note 1).

In the same way, “*the* angel of the Lord” (rather than “*an* angel of the Lord”) who is mentioned at numerous points in the Old and New Testaments is described in ways that set him apart from other angels. The Bible directly implies this “Angel” is a manifestation of the Lord, as we see in the story of Hagar:

The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” (Genesis 16:10 ESV)

Note that the angel of the Lord said, “I will multiply your offspring” (which would seem very unlike a statement a regular angel would make), and after the appearance of this angel to Hagar we read:

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” (Genesis 16:13)

We can compare this statement to Genesis 18 where we are specifically told that one of the three angelic visitors to Abraham was the Lord himself:

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. (Genesis 18:1)

In these and many other examples, the angel of the Lord (or “the angel of his presence” – Isaiah 63:9; etc.) appears to clearly be a theophany – an appearance of God in bodily form. Although some have thought this must be God the Father, it is more likely that these instances speak of the preincarnate God the Son – Jesus Christ – especially as Jesus himself said that he came to reveal the Father (Matthew 11:27; John 1:18; etc.), and that “No one has seen the Father” (John 6:46).

“... they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” (1 Corinthians 10:4)

As a final background example, we can turn in the New Testament to the apostle Paul’s words regarding the identity of the One who accompanied ancient Israel in their desert wanderings:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud, and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

This passage clearly shows that it was the preincarnate Christ who accompanied Israel in the wilderness and indicates it is indeed likely that, as the Angel of the Lord, he also dealt with Abraham and other individuals who experienced theophanies in Old Testament times. With this background in mind, we can now examine what the gospels themselves show us regarding the preexistent nature of Christ.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

It is often said that the Greek term *logos* – literally “word” – with which John begins his description of the preexistent Christ (“In the beginning was the Word” – John 1:1) was used in ancient philosophy to signify the “reason” or underlying principle that created the universe. The Hellenistic Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria who lived around the time of Christ used *logos* in this manner. It is likely that many gentiles in John’s audience would have thought in terms of this philosophical usage, while Jews and Jewish Christians would have more likely understood the apostle’s description of Jesus as the “Word” in terms of their own Scriptures.

Jewish people would naturally have associated what John wrote with the opening statement of Genesis, that “In the beginning God made ...” (Genesis 1:1); but while Genesis stresses God’s action, John chooses to stress the Son of God’s person and identity. Jewish readers (or hearers) of John’s Gospel would also have recognized wider associations regarding his use of “Word.” They knew that “by the word of the LORD the heavens were made” (Psalm 33:6), and they also knew that the book of Proverbs personified that Word as the “Wisdom” that was active in the creation of the world (Proverbs 8:22).

Some early Jewish commentators even pointed out that the creation story of Genesis 1 used the expression “God said” ten times, seeing an analogy in this with the Ten Commandments (which were called the *aseret hadevarim* – the “ten words”). God’s “word” could also mean, of course, all of God’s revelation to humanity. As a result, many of John’s readers would have understood that he was characterizing Jesus as the personification and embodiment of God’s wisdom, law, and even all of God’s word – the entirety of the Scriptures.

But there are more specific connections between what John says in the introduction to his gospel and the Hebrew Scriptures. The most significant are the parallels we find between John’s description of Jesus and the portrayal of God in the book of Exodus. These connections are frequent and clear. For example, just as Exodus tells us that God was present among his people in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-37), so John begins his description of Jesus by telling us that the Word dwelt (literally “tabernacled”) with humankind (John 1:14). Just as Exodus tells us that Moses beheld God’s glory (Exodus 33:18-23), so John makes a point of recording that the disciples and others beheld “his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father” (John 1:14). Just as Exodus tells us that God’s glory was full of graciousness (grace) and truth (Exodus 34:6 International Standard version), so John goes on to say that Jesus was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Because the New Testament clearly indicates that the preexistent Christ was the One who was with Israel in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:4), these connections may seem straightforward to us, but to John’s audience they were revelatory. Many verses in the first chapter of John – such as John 1:14 – would have suggested numerous parallels that devout Jews of that day would have recognized and found amazing.

First century readers versed in the Hebrew Scriptures would have picked up other similarities between what the book of Exodus tells us and John’s words regarding the divine nature of Jesus. In this way the Word was shown to be not only the promised “prophet like Moses,” but also very God himself. John does this by emphasizing Christ’s preexistence and through it, his superior position to Moses. While Exodus tells us that the law was given through Moses (Exodus 34:29), John confirms that although “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Jesus was not simply a prophet relaying the words of God, he was the One who was the Word and who himself exhibited the very characteristics of God – for grace (Hebrew *hesed*) and truth (Hebrew *emet*) were considered to be the two most central aspects of God’s nature (Exodus 34:6; etc. – see Note 2).

These were John’s central points in associating Jesus in the first chapter of his gospel with many well-known passages in the book of Exodus. Although Exodus stressed that no one could see all of God’s glory, and John confirmed the fact that “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18), John also stressed that in Jesus that same glory was revealed: “but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18).

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

Importantly, the gospels – and most clearly, that of John – show that the concept of the preexistence of Jesus was frequently confirmed by Jesus himself. Not only do we find numerous passages where Jesus speaks of his “coming down from heaven” (John 3:13, 31; 6:33, 38; etc.) and coming “from the Father” (John 6:46; 8:42; 16:28; etc.), but we also find key scriptures such as Jesus’ statements “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5) and “the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24).

These affirmations of his own preexistence reached a climactic point in Jesus’ argument with the Pharisees, recorded in John 8, when Jesus told the Jewish religious authorities:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” “You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!” “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8:56-59)

Jesus’ statement “before Abraham was born, I am” had an immediate and powerful effect. “I am” is, of course, the self-expression of God’s name found in the Hebrew Scriptures – most famously in Exodus 3:14 where God told Moses; “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” There was probably no stronger manner in which Jesus could have affirmed his own divinity and preexistence, which is why, of course, the unbelieving Jews immediately picked up stones to throw at him for what they perceived as blasphemy.

Yet this concept of Christ’s preexistence was central to his true identity. It is the reason he told the Jews “if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:24). In fact, the word “he” is not present in the original Greek of this verse – it is added by modern translators to supposedly make the verse clearer for the English-speaking reader – but the sentence should be translated literally as “if you do not believe that *I am*, you will indeed die in your sins.” Similarly, when Jesus told his disciples “It is I; don’t be afraid” (John 6:20), the Greek is literally “*I am*; do not be afraid!” At the end of Christ’s ministry, at his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, John tells us that this same concept was evident again:

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. (John 18:4-6)

The shock of those who were seeking to arrest Jesus, but who fell to the ground at his words is more readily understandable when we realize that once again although modern translations often add the word “he” to Jesus’ reply, it is not present in the Greek New Testament – and the verse should be translated “When Jesus said, “*I am*” they drew back and fell to the ground.”

So, the truth of Jesus’ preexistence lies behind much that we read in the gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament. We have already seen how Paul refers specifically to it in 1 Corinthians 10, and we find the same truth in his epistle to the Philippians where the apostle effectively sums up the whole story of the four gospels in saying that Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

The concept of Christ's preexistence was a fundamental principle as far as the early church fathers were concerned, and it is no exaggeration to say that its proper understanding is central to the Christian faith. We cannot understand the gospels – or for that matter, the whole Bible – without keeping it in mind. Time and again, as we will see in this course, in studying the gospels the preexistence of Jesus informs our understanding of Christ's birth, life, ministry, and death. Although we may think of it as a concept most clearly present in John's Gospel, it is present and vital in them all.

* Note 1: See, for example: "the author of Hebrews intends his readers to understand the figure described in 7:3 as a true deity, completely in accord with the *topoi* which describe true gods as fully eternal, uncreated or ungenerated in the past and imperishable in the future." Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J. "Without Beginning of Days or End of Life" (Heb 7:3): *Topos* for a True Deity." University of Notre Dame, accessible online at www3.nd.edu/~jneyrey1/days.html .

* Note 2: The Hebrew terms *hesed* (sometimes translated "lovingkindness") and *emet* (sometimes translated "faithfulness") that are found together in Exodus 34:6, where God reveals his own nature, can be translated in a number of ways – but "grace" and "truth" are central to the concepts of *hesed* and *emet*, respectively.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Apart from the first verses of the Gospel of John, select and memorize three New Testament verses given in this unit that show the preexistence of Christ.

Beneath the Surface:

Reflect on how a knowledge of the preexistence of Jesus Christ informs and enhances our understanding of his sacrifice on our behalf.

Everyday Applications:

Think about how the biblical evidence that Christ was, in many cases, the one called God or Lord in the Old Testament affects our understanding of God. For example, how does this fact affect our understanding of the view of some that there is a difference between the Old Testament God of law and the New Testament God of love?

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