

IS JESUS
TRULY GOD?



*How the Bible Teaches
the Divinity of Christ*

GREG LANIER

“This book does two remarkable things: it solidly reinforces Christian belief in Jesus as God by gathering the most up-to-date evidence, and it also helpfully reshapes our ways of talking about Jesus as God, in greater conformity with biblical patterns of thought. Lanier doesn’t just show that the Bible teaches the deity of Jesus, he shows precisely how the Bible teaches it.”

Fred Sanders, Professor of Theology, Torrey Honors Institute, Biola University; author, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*

“‘Jesus is Lord’ is the fundamental confession of the Christian faith. Writing with the heart of a pastor and the wisdom of a seminary professor, Greg Lanier unfolds the rich Trinitarian framework within which the Old and New Testaments present Jesus as God’s divine Son. Anyone who desires to become a more competent reader of the Bible and a more faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ will find this book enormously instructive.”

Scott R. Swain, author, *The Trinity: An Introduction*; coeditor, *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*

“Maybe you think you can answer the title of this book with a simple *yes* and move on. But how do you know that Jesus is truly God? Can you articulate that well to others? Why does it matter? What changes about your faith if Jesus isn’t truly God? Is Jesus fully God and fully man—even now? In this succinct book, Greg Lanier works through both the Old and New Testaments to present a robust Trinitarian Christology that will equip believers and lead us to further delight in our Lord.”

Aimee Byrd, author, *Theological Fitness* and *No Little Women*

“Where would you go in Scripture to prove that Jesus is truly God? In this brief, accessible book, Greg Lanier shows that Christ’s divinity doesn’t rest on just one or two proof texts. Instead, it’s woven into the fabric of the whole New Testament, including the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament. *Is Jesus Truly God?* will help you know Jesus and your Bible better. I plan to give it away regularly to church members and to stock it in our church’s bookstall.”

Bobby Jamieson, Associate Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church; author, *Jesus’ Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews*

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To my wife, Kate,
my true companion in all of life

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Abbreviations

1 En.	1 Enoch
1 Macc.	1 Maccabees
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> (Josephus)
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
DBTJ	<i>Detroit Baptist Theological Journal</i>
<i>De Trin.</i>	<i>De Trinitate</i> (Hilary of Poitiers)
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogus cum Tryphone</i> (Justin)
Did.	Didache
<i>Eph.</i>	<i>To the Ephesians</i> (Ignatius)
Ezek. Trag.	Ezekiel the Tragedian
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus haereses</i> (Irenaeus)
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism

12 Abbreviations

<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>Legum Allegoriae</i> (Philo)
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
<i>Marc.</i>	<i>Adversus Marcionem</i> (Tertullian)
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>Paed.</i>	<i>Paedagogus</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
Q (with preceding number)	Qumran texts, i.e., the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., 1QS; 4Q174; 4Q252; 11Q5)
Sir.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
T. Levi	Testament of Levi
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Introduction

In a recent interview with an individual seeking to work full-time in a Christian vocation, I asked, “Where would you go in the Bible to show that Jesus Christ is fully divine?” After an uncomfortable pause, the individual ventured in a slightly embarrassed way, “Uh . . . the first chapter of John?” Of course, that is a fine answer, but is there more? This book aims to help equip Christians with a more robust answer to such a question.

Why This Book?

The confession that the true God of all creation is triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is rooted deeply in the soil of Christian theology. And one of the most debated, and at times perplexing, aspects of this confession is the question “Does Scripture actually teach that Jesus is fully God?”

The early church experienced numerous fights on this front, as Theodotus, Noetus, Arius, Nestorius, and Eutyches (among others) challenged in various ways the full divinity of Jesus Christ. A series of writings and councils spearheaded by a prominent group of early church fathers, ranging from Athanasius to Cyril of Alexandria, defended the traditional doctrine and ruled the competing teachings out of bounds. The key

doctrines were crystallized in the Nicene Creed (AD 325) and Chalcedonian Definition (AD 451).

But the debates have not gone away. Outside the church, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons reject the Christian teaching that Jesus is fully divine. For instance, the translation of the Bible used by Jehovah's Witnesses (New World Translation) famously renders John 1:1, "The Word was a god," ascribing to Jesus the status of a "god"-like or quasi-angelic being but nothing more. Furthermore, while the Qur'an affirms some true facts about Jesus—such as his birth to Mary and his role as a prophet—Islam holds that the confession of Jesus as the fully divine Son of God is *shirk*, that is, the unforgivable sin of ascribing "partners" to Allah (e.g., Q 'Imran 3:151; Q Nisa' 4:48). And the acid rain of secularism has, for more than two centuries, eroded all possibility of a divine human altogether, instead holding that this doctrine was invented when pagan Greek theology was imported into the church.

Even within the church, Jesus is often taken to be an "ideal human" at best or perhaps simply a good teacher—especially within mainline denominations. But many evangelical Christians are confused or inconsistent as well. A 2018 survey by Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research found that nearly 95 percent of self-described evangelical Christians affirm the Trinity, but simultaneously, about 80 percent believe that Jesus Christ is the "first and greatest being created by God."¹ The shocking thing is that these respondents do not appear to realize the stark contradiction in these two positions.

There is thus a clear need for fresh teaching on Christology (i.e., the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus). It could take many shapes: retrieving the teachings of Athanasius, de-

1. See "The State of Theology," Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research, accessed October 28, 2019, www.thestateoftheology.com.

constructing ancient and modern heresies, summarizing the orthodox teaching from the angle of historical or modern systematic theology, sorting out the complexities of Karl Barth. Each of these paths would be fruitful, but none is the focus of this book.²

Instead, I aim to do something even more basic: not only to affirm that, yes, Scripture does indeed teach *that* Jesus Christ is fully God but also to help average Christians understand *how* it does so. It is one thing to know the “right” answer; it is another altogether to understand how the New Testament authors get there—to show their work, so to speak.

Such an endeavor is by no means new. Numerous scholars—particularly among the members of the self-described “early high Christology club” (Richard Bauckham, Martin Hengel, Larry Hurtado, and others)—have recently explored these issues not just in the creeds and church fathers but in the pages of Scripture itself. But the vast majority of their work has focused on one aspect of the issue or one subset of writings (such as Paul’s letters), and their output has been largely confined to scholarly monographs and articles. It is high time for the findings to be set forth in a way that reaches a broader audience.³

In short, I am arguing that the full *Trinitarian Christology* that is bedrock to Christianity is found throughout the New Testament from the earliest days, is derived from the teachings of Jesus himself, and is rooted in the Old Testament. Put differently, my aim is to help readers discern how the concepts

2. In his Simon J. Kistemaker Lectures at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando (February 2019), Fred Sanders commented that the “eternal subordination” controversy of 2016–2017 produced much clarification on the person of Christ from a dogmatics perspective but that there is now a need for fresh work proving things more robustly from an exegetical perspective. I hope this small book helps further that goal.

3. Larry W. Hurtado has taken this step in summarizing thirty years of research on early-church worship patterns in his *Honoring the Son: Jesus in Earliest Christian Devotional Practice* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018). I will cover this topic in chap. 4.

that later coalesce in the creeds are right there in the pages of Scripture from the outset of the Christian church.

But First: The Humanity of the Son

In view of all this, many Christians are surprised to find out that the early church spent just as much time debating whether Jesus Christ was *fully human*, which is rarely a real debate today, as it did debating whether he was fully divine.⁴ If the Nicene Creed majors on the question of Jesus's full divinity ("Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds . . . very God of very God"), the Chalcedonian Definition majors on his humanity.⁵ It affirms that Jesus is "the same perfect in deity and the same perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man . . . acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably."⁶

It would be a mistake, thus, to press on in discussing the divinity of Jesus without making clear that the church has historically taught that the two natures—divine and human—cannot be fully separated. Yet the two are also *distinguishable* in various ways ("unconfusedly," per Chalcedon), and there is value in understanding Scripture's teaching on both. It would take another book to iron out the physics of *how* Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine at the same time. Here I simply survey the New Testament's key affirmations of his humanity before turning the bulk of attention in this book to his divinity.

First, several passages assert that Jesus is human in the fullest possible sense and not just a visible apparition of a deity or angel. Matthew 1:16; Luke 2:6–7; and Galatians 4:4 state that Jesus

4. The Docetism controversy—asserting that Jesus only *appeared* human—arose with Serapion (among others) and was refuted in the ecumenical councils.

5. *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (Willow Grove, PA: Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture, 2018), 852.

6. Author's own translation from the Greek provided in Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *Early Eastern and Medieval* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 180.

was “born” or “begotten” of a woman. Similarly, John 1:14; 1 Timothy 3:16; and Hebrews 2:14 affirm that Jesus “became,” was “manifested in,” and “share[d] in” the same kind of “flesh” (Gk. *sarx*) that all humans possess. Throughout the Gospels Jesus eats, walks, sweats, shows emotion, sleeps, and so forth. Even—or perhaps especially—after Jesus’s resurrection, the Gospel writers go to great lengths to reiterate that his resurrected body is still a fully human, though transformed, *body*, as seen in John 20:27 (Thomas touches Jesus’s scars) and Luke 24:42–43 (Jesus eats a fish). The apostle John emphasizes that he has “seen” and “touched” Jesus (1 John 1:1) and declares that anyone who denies “the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” is a deceiver and “antichrist” (2 John 7). Indeed, the full humanity of Jesus is a line in the sand separating true Christianity from unbelief.

Second, the New Testament draws attention to the ways in which Jesus’s humanity is not only a true fact but is central to his accomplishing God’s redemptive plan. His humanity is essential to his fulfillment of everything expected of the *human* Messiah, or deliverer. I will catalog but a few. Jesus is

- the eschatological prophet like Moses (Acts 3:22)
- a priest in the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:10)
- the king like David (Matt. 21:9; Rom. 1:3) who is born from his line (Matt. 1:1–18)
- the anointed one, or Messiah/Christ (Luke 2:11; 9:20; John 20:31)
- the second and greater Adam (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:45)
- the servant who would suffer and die vicariously (Acts 8:32–33; 1 Pet. 2:22–23)
- the “root” of Jesse and “star” of Jacob (Rev. 5:5; 22:16—echoing Isa. 11:1 and Num. 24:17, respectively)
- the shepherd of the flock of Israel (John 10:14; Heb. 13:20)

Each is grounded in old covenant promises and comes to fruition in Christ. None of these, strictly speaking, *require* fulfillment by a fully divine person, but they do, often quite explicitly, envision a *human* fulfillment (e.g., shedding of blood, keeping the law in place of Adam). Consequently, these passages highlight how Jesus Christ accomplishes salvation specifically *as a human mediator* (1 Tim. 2:5). Without his full human nature, there is no redemption of humans.

Thus, the question that the rest of this book focuses on is this: How does the New Testament go further and teach that Jesus is specifically a *divine* messianic deliverer? How is he not only a human prophet, priest, king, and mediator but *more than that*—fully God? What I aim to demonstrate is this: the shocking “reveal” of the New Testament that Jesus is not just the Messiah but *more than a Messiah*.⁷

What Is the Goal?

One might at this point interject and ask whether the New Testament ever calls Jesus “God” (Gk. *theos*)⁸ and allow that to settle the matter. I will eventually take up that topic (in chap. 6—the short answer is yes). But we cannot start there. While it is an important consideration, calling Jesus *theos* may not necessarily prove anything. *Theos* was typically used in the ancient world for the pantheon, and “divine” or “god” language was regularly employed for human rulers, including Julius Caesar, who was called “divine Julius” (Lat. *divus julius*); Octavian, called “son of a god” (Lat. *divi filius*), and Domitian, called “lord and god” (Lat. *dominus et deus*). Further, in Acts 14:11 the crowds

7. To borrow language from Andrew Chester, “The Christ of Paul,” in *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and James Carleton Paget (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 121.

8. All Greek words are transliterated in lowercase for consistency, even if a word is referring to God. English translations, however, follow normal conventions for capitalizing clear references to God.

in Lystra claim that the “gods” (Gk. *theoi*) have appeared in human form as Barnabas and Paul. Angels are called “gods” in John 10:35. And Paul even calls Satan the *theos* of the present age (2 Cor. 4:4)!

So merely calling Jesus “god” may say little more than what Jehovah’s Witnesses—and Arius long before—could affirm.

Other ideas must also be avoided: that Jesus is an angel like Michael or Gabriel or a demigod like Hercules or Achilles, or that he started out as a human and then somehow *became* divine at a later stage. None of these notions capture what early Christians believed. And if that is all we find on the pages of Scripture, then we have a real problem.

Further, we are not looking for something foisted on Jesus long after the fact or for something limited to one or two proof texts (e.g., John 1). If Jesus Christ is truly what the Christian church has confessed—fully man *and fully God* in the way the creeds articulate—then we would expect this belief to be held by Jesus himself and to be saturating the pages of his revealed Word.

So what is the goal of this study? I aim to test whether Scripture actually teaches that Jesus Christ has a real existence from before creation; that he is eternally the second person of the triune God; that there is absolute unity and equality in essence among Father, Son, and Spirit; and that the distinctions in person are not collapsed altogether (such that the Son is absorbed into the Father, or vice versa). Anything else would not be orthodox Christianity.

The goal in the chapters that follow is to demonstrate that a full-orbed divine Christology is taught throughout the entire New Testament, focusing on *how* Scripture does this in six major ways (one per chapter):

1. asserting Jesus’s preexistence
2. claiming that Christ is a fully divine “Son”

3. applying the Old Testament in a variety of ways to show that Jesus is fully Israel's God
4. describing early worship offered to Jesus
5. showing the relation of the Son to the Father *and* Holy Spirit
6. directly describing Jesus as *theos* ("God")

Preexistence

An Eternally Alive Son

The time-honored science-fiction trilogy *Back to the Future* explores what it would be like for someone to travel back in time and influence past events in such a way that would, in due course, change his own future when he is born. Though mostly pitched as comedy, the films raise intriguing questions about what it means to “exist”—and to shape reality (as when Marty McFly rescues his teenage father from a car wreck)—before you exist. While the movies fall woefully short as analogies to the eternal existence of the Son of God, they do get us thinking in the right direction.

One of the prerequisites for a full doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ is that he exists forever in the past. God is, by definition, uncreated. God cannot come into being; he *exists*, from eternity past to eternity future. Yet as we saw in the introduction, Jesus Christ was born as a man. For him to be divine,

he somehow must also have had a real, eternal existence even prior to his human birth to Mary. This is typically called *preexistence*: that is, the Son of God was alive and active as a spiritual being before taking on flesh at a particular point in time. He was not just a glimmer in the mind of God, but he was (and is, and always will be) *real*.

The aim of this chapter is to unfold the various ways in which Scripture indeed affirms the Son's real, active, heavenly preexistence within the Godhead. Though such preexistence is often overlooked (perhaps owing to our lack of ability to conceptualize it or to the exclusive focus in some circles on the cross of Christ), this study hopefully puts it more on the layperson's radar.

Heavenly Origin

I begin by examining where Jesus is from.¹ Though the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke—and Christmas pageants ever since—make the point clear, there was some debate about the birthplace of Jesus during his ministry. Some Jewish crowds questioned whether the Messiah (Gk. *christos*) was to come from Galilee, Bethlehem, or some other place (John 7:40–43).² Jesus challenged their preconceived notions, however, when he revealed to various opponents (though cryptically at the time), “I am the living bread that came down from heaven” (6:51), and, “You are from below; I am from above” (8:23).

One does not have to look only at John's Gospel. Paul, writing years before John's Gospel was published, indicates that Jesus's own view about his place of origin was accepted very early by his followers. Paul asks in Romans 10:6, “Who

1. For more details, see Douglas McCreedy, *He Came Down from Heaven: The Preexistence of Christ and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

2. As a side note, the reference to Bethlehem in John's Gospel may indicate his familiarity with the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke.

will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down).” This could, in principle, refer to Christ’s reign in heaven upon his ascension, but it may refer to his original existence in heaven. A clearer reference is found in a near parallel (Eph. 4:9–10), where Paul describes how Jesus “descended” from *somewhere* to earth, only to reascend to heaven later.

But even if these passages are debatable, Paul states clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:47 that the Son of God “is from heaven.” He is not from around here. He existed as a real person, though without a physical body, in the heavenly places. In John 3:31 John the Baptist (or perhaps John the apostle, depending on whether the quotation ends in 3:30 or 3:36) further affirms this by claiming that Jesus is “he who comes from above” and he “who comes from heaven” (cf. 1:15). While it is true that Jesus was physically born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, he comes from *before* then and from *above* them. He is actually from heaven.

If all this is true, one might expect there to be indications of his heavenly dwelling prior to his physical birth. And that is precisely what is found in the Old Testament.

Let us start with the most famous Old Testament vision of the heavenly court of God: Isaiah 6. The prophet Isaiah sees “the Lord sitting upon a throne,” and his “glory” is filling the heavenly temple and the earth (6:1–3). God then speaks directly to Isaiah in 6:9–10, describing the rejection the prophet will face in his ministry. Centuries later, John applies this same text to the rejection Jesus himself faces in his ministry (John 12:40). John then explains that “Isaiah said these things”—that is, Isaiah 6:9–10, which John had just quoted—because he (Isaiah) “saw *his* glory and spoke of *him*” (John 12:41). But to whom are “his” and “him” referring? In the context of the Gospel, the only possibility is Jesus. So what is John saying?

Quite stunningly, the “glory” that Isaiah sees in the heavenly throne room—the radiant and inexpressible manifestation of God himself—is actually *Jesus’s* “glory.” In other words, John reveals that whomever it was that Isaiah glimpsed in the heavenly throne room was actually the preexistent Son of God in his glory. This is decisive apostolic evidence that the heavenly manifestation of God to an Old Testament prophet was actually the second person of the triune God.

Following Isaiah’s cue via John, we might turn to a second major heavenly vision of the Old Testament: Ezekiel 1. In his glimpse into the heavenly throne room, Ezekiel breathlessly tries to capture as best he can what cannot truly be captured in words, ranging from thrones to chariots to angelic beings. He saves the best for last, when he turns his gaze to the expanse above the heavens, where there is “the likeness of a throne” (1:26). Here, at the pinnacle of heaven, is God himself. But notice how Ezekiel describes what he sees: “Seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance” (1:26). He describes the fiery physical appearance of this human-like figure (1:27) and concludes, “Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (1:28). Ezekiel goes to great lengths to make clear that he is not seeing God the Father directly, for no one can see God and live (Ex. 33:20). But what *is* he seeing? The appearance, or the likeness, of the glory of God—which looks like a man! It is God but in human shape, reigning in heaven. Intriguingly, John uses some of these descriptors from Ezekiel 1 to describe Jesus in Revelation (1:15; 2:18), though without directly quoting it. It seems probable that this human-like manifestation of God’s glory points, once more, to the preexistent Son.

A final example is found in Daniel 7. It is well known that Jesus regularly refers to himself as “Son of Man” in the New

Testament (~80x). Though there is still much debate about what Jesus means by this enigmatic phrase,³ the most likely explanation is that he is pointing us to Daniel 7, as becomes clear in Mark 13:26 and 14:62.⁴ In another almost indescribable scene, the prophet Daniel recounts a vision of heaven, where “thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat,” appearing with fire and hair that is white like wool (Dan. 7:9). This, of course, is God himself. But suddenly into the heavenly court appears “one like a son of man,” who goes before the Ancient of Days and receives eternal “glory” and an everlasting kingdom (7:13–14).

As history unfolds, this image takes on multiple levels of significance. Jesus uses “Son of Man” to describe his earthly authority (e.g., Mark 2:25–28) and suffering (e.g., 9:31) numerous times during his earthly ministry. “Son of Man” is also a way of capturing Jesus’s enthronement at God’s right hand immediately after his ascension (Acts 7:56). And it is an eschatological image of Christ’s return (Rev. 14:3–14). But there is no reason to think that the scene in Daniel 7, given its multiple layers, was not also, over five hundred years before Christ’s birth, a legitimate glimpse of the heavenly preexistence of the Son, particularly when viewed alongside Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1.⁵

The plot thickens when one considers an early Jewish translation of Daniel 7:13 into Greek, where this “son of man” does not come “before” the presence of the Ancient of Days (as in

3. The most comprehensive recent study is Mogens Müller, *The Expression “Son of Man” and the Development of Christology: A History of Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

4. See the robust defense of this position in Michael F. Bird, *Are You the One Who Is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 79–92.

5. In fact, the Dan. 7 “son of man” is taken precisely as a preexistent figure in 1 En. 48.2–3 (“At that hour that Son of Man was named in the presence of the Lord of Spirits, and his name before the Head of Days. Before the sun and the signs were created, before the stars of the heaven were made, His name was named before the Lord of Spirits”), as well as possibly in 4 Ezra 13:25–26.

Aramaic and other Greek translations) but comes “as the Ancient of Days”—suggesting that the two heavenly beings are somehow identified as the same.⁶ Little more might be made of this if not for how John, in his own apocalyptic vision of the throne room, takes the attributes of fire and wool-white hair that Daniel uses for the Ancient of Days and applies them directly to Jesus (Rev. 1:14), deftly joining their identities in an impressive though impressionistic way.

When the pieces of Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, and Daniel 7 are laid out on the table—with John as a guide in both his Gospel and his Apocalypse—a consistent picture starts to emerge from the puzzle. What these three prophets see, when they have a glimpse into the heavenlies long before the physical birth of Jesus, is in some way understood to be the glory of the Son himself alongside the Father. In heaven the Son was already, in eternity past, the radiant manifestation of the Godhead. *That* is the heavenly preexistence, the heavenly point of origin, of the incarnate Jesus Christ. For good reason the prophets all collapsed under the weight of such a vision (Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 7:15, 28).

“I Have Come”

Every so often a new alien movie comes out. The plot typically revolves around an alien life-form coming to earth—having been sent by the mother ship—to accomplish some mission. The thing that drives the plot is how its *coming* from a different place of existence brings into sharp relief the massive distinction between humans and aliens.

Now, I must be careful to emphasize that Jesus Christ is no alien. (As I established in the introduction, he is emphati-

6. This reading is found in most manuscripts of the Old Greek of Daniel; see the textual apparatus of *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*, vol. 16.2, *Susanna, Daniel, Bel et Draco*, ed. Joseph Ziegler and Olivier Munnich, 2nd ed., Societatis Litterarum Gottingensis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

cally understood by himself and all early Christians as truly human.) But if he *is* indeed from somewhere else, not just from Bethlehem—if he is actually from heaven, from “above,” as the prophets, apostles, and Jesus himself agree—then one might expect there to be a sense of “coming” from the heavenly realm to the earthly realm. And that is exactly what Scripture conveys.

At various points, the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) state that Jesus has “come” to accomplish something on earth. At first glance, most of these statements seem rather ordinary. Who has not said that he or she has “come” to do something (e.g., “I came to your house to watch the football game”)? And no doubt, the verbs that convey “coming” are spoken by Jesus quite a bit. But a few of them merit close inspection. They suggest that Jesus has “come” from somewhere else *to earth*. And that somewhere else, as shown above, can only be heaven. Thus, such statements about Jesus’s “coming” from a heavenly place to earth imply his preexistence and, thereby, his distinction from other created humans. Let us look at a few key examples.⁷

First, early in his ministry, Jesus is confronted by an unclean spirit in Capernaum who addresses him as “the Holy One of God” and asks him, “Have you come to destroy us?” (Mark 1:24). A similar encounter takes place with demons in the Gadarene region (Matt. 8:28–29). As spirit beings who apparently once existed in the heavenly realm but are now on earth,⁸ the demons instantly recognize who this “Son of God” is. This only makes sense if he was, indeed, preexistent in heaven. And now they ask if he has left heaven and “come” to destroy them on earth “before the time” (Matt. 8:29).

7. See the extensive treatment of the evidence by Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

8. As may be deduced from, say, Deut. 32:17; 2 Cor. 11:13–15; Rev. 12:7–9 (though the evidence is sparse).

Second, Jesus makes one of his classically difficult statements in Luke 12:49–51 when he asserts, “I came to cast fire on the earth. . . . Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?” There is much debate about what “fire” means and why Jesus speaks so harshly. For the present purposes, the key is that Jesus is self-aware that he has “come” specifically to “earth” to accomplish judgment. It would make little sense for the average Joe to say that he has “come” to bring fire or peace to earth *if he is from earth*—what would that even mean? The most logical way of taking this statement is that Jesus is attesting that he has “come” from *outside the realm of earth* to do something *on the earth*. Moreover, if the “fire” is one of judgment, then the closest parallels to this idea are found in passages where *God* sends fire from heaven to earth (e.g., Gen. 19:24; 2 Kings 1:10, 12–14; 1 Chron. 21:26; Job 1:16; Luke 9:54; Rev. 20:9).

Third, Jesus summarizes the entirety of his earthly ministry when he claims, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). While many issues pertaining to atonement hinge on this verse, I focus here on the use of “come.” Jesus is clearly not saying he has “come” to any specific location (like Capernaum, Nazareth, or Jerusalem), for what he has in mind extends to all mankind in some way. And, moreover, the scope of what he is doing is not to “teach a bit in Galilee” or to “do some miracles in Bethany” but to provide salvation that is world encompassing. Thus, it is best to take this verse as indicating that the entire mission of the Son is to “come” from somewhere, *to earth*, in the flesh, to offer his life as a ransom.

In these instances, Scripture records a clear statement from Jesus that he has “come” to accomplish something, but that something presupposes either a heaven-earth distinction (as in

the first two examples) or a whole-earth scope (as in the third). These “I have come to do X” statements amount to more than what any ordinary human, or even prophetic figure, could say. They suggest that Jesus is fully conscious that he “comes” from beyond the human realm. In fact, the “I have come” statements of Jesus sound very much like what angels say when they leave heaven and “come” to earth for some specific purpose (e.g., 1 Kings 22:19–22; Dan. 9:22–23; 10:13–14; Luke 1:19).

If Jesus has self-awareness of “coming” from somewhere else into the earthly realm, do his earliest followers share that awareness? Yes, several examples indicate that they do. In one of his earliest letters, Paul states that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman” (Gal. 4:4). The Son existed chronologically before the “fullness of time” and then was “sent forth” to be born of a woman. This is reiterated in Romans 8:3, where Paul attests to God’s “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.” The person we now know as Jesus did not start to exist when he was born in the flesh, but he was *already the Son in his preexistence*, and then he was “sent” in the flesh. Paul even passes on an early Christian “trustworthy saying” about this movement from outside the world into it, recording that “Christ Jesus came into the world” (1 Tim. 1:15). Furthermore, John twice states that God “sent” his Son “into the world” (John 3:17; 1 John 4:9), and Hebrews 10:5 speaks of “when Christ came into the world.” As with Paul, both John and the author of Hebrews attest that the Son, or the Christ, was “sent” or “came” into the world, implying that he originated from outside it.

In short, both Jesus and the apostolic circle offer a few ways of thinking about his preexistence. Temporally, he existed in eternity past and then “came” at a point in time. Locationally, he existed in heaven before “coming” or being “sent” to

earth. Existentially, he was a true spiritual person as “Son” before taking on flesh as a human. This preexistent, heavenly origin of Jesus Christ makes him entirely different from any other human and creates the space for him to be an eternally uncreated God—though I add more details in the following chapters to develop this argument further.

Active Role in the Life of Israel

If, as the preceding two sections have suggested, the Son of God already existed eternally in the heavenly realm before “coming” or being “sent” to the earthly realm, another question arises. What was he doing back then? For, recall, we are exploring not just a theoretical kind of preexistence—like an idea in God’s head—but a *real* preexistence. Granted, as limited humans, we lack the mental horsepower to fully understand this. But if Christ did have a real preexistence and was not just a glimmer in the imagination of God, then one would expect him to be active in the period before his birth. Strikingly, Scripture does indeed show signs of the Son’s preexistent activity.

I begin by looking at how Jesus himself provides the key to seeing how he was present and active during the Old Testament era. Then I probe other examples where the curtain is pulled back to reveal a glimpse of the Son’s work centuries before his birth to Mary.

The Son in the Psalms

A great launching point is how Jesus reads himself into Psalm 110 in Mark 12:35–37.⁹ In this influential psalm, David writes,

9. For more extensive analysis on this use of Psalm 110 (and similar examples)—often dubbed “prosopological exegesis”—see Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Matthew Scott, *The Hermeneutics*

YHWH said to my *Adon*,
“Sit at my right hand.” (Ps. 110:1, my trans.)

Examining the psalm closely, we find that there are three persons in the mix: YHWH (usually displayed in English translations as “LORD,” in small caps), who is speaking; *Adoni* (usually translated “my Lord”), to whom YHWH is speaking; and David, who is recording this speech and referring to *Adon* as “my.” In other words, David is writing down something that YHWH says to his (i.e., David’s) *Adon*. Even in the ancient context of the psalm itself, this is rather striking. But its beauty is multiplied when Jesus reveals its true sense.

In a key moment when he turns the tables on the religious opponents who have perpetually picked fights with him about scriptural matters, Jesus asks,

How can the scribes say that the Messiah/*christos* is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared,

“The Lord said to my Lord,
‘Sit at my right hand.’” . . .

David himself calls him “Lord.” So how is he his son?
(Mark 12:35–37, my trans.)

This is a bit complex, so let us break it down.

Jesus brings up the common Jewish belief that the Messiah/*christos* is the “son of David.”¹⁰ He then goes back to Psalm 110 and points out that David refers to this Messiah figure,

of Christological Psalmody in Paul: An Intertextual Enquiry, SNTSMS 158 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Aquila H. I. Lee, *From Messiah to Preexistent Son: Jesus’ Self-Consciousness and Early Christian Exegesis of Messianic Psalms*, WUNT, 2nd ser., vol. 192 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005). Irenaeus, among others, supports this take on Psalm 110 (*Haer.* 3.6.1).

10. As expressed in, say, 2 Sam. 7:12–13 and elaborated in intertestamental writings such as Pss. Sol. 17.4–46; 4Q174; 4Q252.

who is enthroned at God's right hand, as "my Lord"—that is, *Adoni*, discussed above. He concludes with an open-ended question: If David refers to this person as "my Lord," how can he also be his "son"? Upon inspection, it becomes clear that Jesus is saying that the very same person is simultaneously (1) the "son of David," (2) the Messiah/*christos*, and (3) the "my Lord" (*Adoni*) that David is describing in Psalm 110:1. And while Jesus leaves his audience hanging at this point, those with ears to hear quickly realize that Jesus is identifying *himself* as that very person, fitting all three descriptions.

In other words, here is how Jesus reads Psalm 110: David, who was "in the Holy Spirit," has recorded a conversation between YHWH and someone David calls "my Lord" (*Adoni*), whom Jesus now reveals to be the "son of David" and "Messiah/*christos*"—namely, himself. And all this is roughly a millennium before Jesus comes. The whole scene being described in Psalm 110 is now unveiled to be fantastically Trinitarian: the Spirit reveals that the Father (YHWH) addresses the Son (David's Lord/*Adon*) in his heavenly preexistence and seats him at his right hand to rule over all things. *When* this happens and *how* to work out all the details are beyond the present scope. What matters is that Jesus directly attests that he, as the preincarnate Son of the Father, is the one being addressed by YHWH in Psalm 110, long before his human birth.¹¹

This psalm does not simply point to or anticipate or prefigure the coming of the Son; *it is profoundly about him from*

11. Psalm 110:1 is also cited elsewhere in the New Testament with reference to the ascension of Jesus after his resurrection (e.g., Acts 2:34–35). Thus, it appears that Jesus and the apostolic authors find multiple ways of interpreting the verse: *prior* to his death and resurrection, Jesus points us backward to David's day and, thereby, his preincarnate existence (in Mark 12); *after* the resurrection, other New Testament authors point forward to the ascension. This dual reading of Ps. 110 is consistent with the notion that Christ comes from his heavenly throne (in his incarnation) and, in a sense, is "re"-enthroned when he returns to heaven (after fulfilling his earthly ministry).

the outset. It is a record of the Father and the preexistent Son talking to one another in the heavenly throne room in times past. That is truly stunning. Moreover, in the ancient Greek translation of Psalm 110, God is described as addressing these words to the Son/*Adoni*/Lord figure:

From the womb, before the morning star,
I have begotten you. (Ps. 110:3, my trans.)

This, too, fits with how the psalm points to the eternal “begetting” of the preexistent Son.

This marvelous disclosure by Jesus that he is being directly addressed in this psalm influences various New Testament authors. Periodically in the New Testament, Jesus, not David or someone else, is revealed to be the active participant in different psalms:

- Acts 2:25–35: Peter reveals that in Psalms 16 and 110, “David [spoke] concerning him,” that is, Jesus—not himself—when he spoke about burial and ascension.
- Acts 13:33–37: Paul argues (as with Peter) that Psalms 2 and 16 were not really about David (who “fell asleep . . . and saw corruption”) but about Jesus.
- Romans 15:2–3: Paul argues that Psalm 69 was speaking about Christ’s self-humbling.
- Hebrews 2:11–12: The author describes the words of Psalm 22 as something Jesus speaks.

These passages do not necessarily convey Christ’s preexistence, but they do express how some psalms as originally given had a longer-term, Christological horizon in view.

But one more example *does* evoke preexistence, as the closest parallel to Jesus’s teaching on Psalm 110. In Hebrews 1:8–9, the author recounts how God is speaking in the Psalms

and observes that “to the Son, he says, ‘Your throne . . . ,’” quoting Psalm 45:6–7 (my trans.).¹² According to Hebrews, God is speaking to (Gk. *pros*) a “you” in Psalm 45, and that “you” is the Son. The likelihood that Hebrews is indeed treating Psalm 45 in the same way that Jesus treated Psalm 110—namely, as revealing a conversation between the Father and the preexistent Son about his heavenly throne—increases when we arrive at the end of the chapter (Heb. 1:13). The author concludes his series of Old Testament quotations precisely with Psalm 110, which God “said” not to the angels but to his Son.

The Son in Ancient Israel

To summarize the point so far, I have attempted to show that Jesus and the author of Hebrews appear to treat at least some psalms as Spirit-inspired records of prior conversations between the Father and Son in heaven, long before the Son’s birth on earth. But if Israelites like David were in some way aware of such an intrinsic plurality in the one true God (though how much they humanly understood is unclear), is there any evidence that the second person of this Godhead was actually involved in their lives even back then? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer is yes. The New Testament authors look back and give a few examples of the preexistent Son at work in the life of Israel.

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, God provided water from a rock, beginning at Exodus 17:6 and ending at Numbers 20:8–11 (cf. Deut. 8:15; Neh. 9:15). But Paul reveals that, in some way that remains mysterious to us, “the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). Paul goes on to say that, when the Israel-

12. “To the son” better captures the force of the Greek *pros ton huion* than, say, the ESV’s “of the son.”

ites grumbled against Moses as they circumnavigated the land of Edom—resulting in God’s sending serpents among them (Num. 21:5–6)—they had actually “put Christ to the test” (1 Cor. 10:9). Paul does not work out the mechanics for the reader. He simply implies that the preexistent Son was actually present with Israel during the ups and downs of their wilderness sojourn, sustaining them and even being the target of their grumbling.

Jude pushes the chronology further back in time. In an oft-overlooked passage, he most likely writes, “I want to remind you . . . that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe” (Jude 5).¹³ The implications are quite astounding. Here the half brother of the earthly Jesus says that this same Jesus was active as a real divine person who rescued his people in the exodus, some 1,500 years before his physical birth.

Such a reading of Jude 5 raises another intriguing possibility, especially when viewed in tandem with how Paul parallels “angel of God” with Christ (Gal. 4:14). The church has long debated whether and when the enigmatic “angel of the LORD” (or similar figures) is actually a preincarnate appearance of the Son of God. According to Moses’s own reckoning, it is precisely such an angel who led the people out of Egypt and guided them through the wilderness (Ex. 14:19; 23:20; 32:34; etc.). Hence, Jude 5 indicates that “the angel of the LORD”—at least in these instances—is apparently *the same entity as the preexistent Son of God*.

13. I say “most likely” because this section of Jude in the Greek is very thorny. There are over thirty textual variations for Jude 5 in the known Greek manuscripts, according to Barbara Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior*, vol. 4.1, *Die Katholischen Briefe*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013). Many manuscripts read that “God” led this exodus from Egypt; many others say that it is the “Lord” who did so. But based on the latest research, the most likely initial version, written by Jude, is that it is “Jesus” who led this exodus. The main scholarly Greek edition was recently updated to accept this reading instead of “Lord,” though many English translations were already doing so.

Other candidates that are often debated as possible Old Testament appearances of Christ (“Christophanies”) include the following:

- the three angelic “men” of Genesis 18 (one of whom is God himself)
- the angelic “man” who wrestles with Jacob in Genesis 32
- the “angel of the LORD” who appears to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3
- the angelic “man” who commands the armies of God in Joshua 5
- the “angel of the LORD” who appears as a “man of God” to Manoah’s wife in Judges 13
- the mysterious fourth “man” who looks like a “son of the gods” in the furnace of Daniel 3
- the angelic judge in Zechariah 3

In such passages we have angelic figures who represent the Lord and are often partially equated with him but yet remain distinct in some way. For good reason, then, the church has long grappled with whether such scenes picture the active role of the Son before his incarnation.¹⁴

The cumulative force of these examples is this: the Son of God was present and active in the life of Israel even before his human birth. This is precisely what one would expect if he was, indeed, fully divine and dwelling in the heavenly places before all time, prior to his being “sent” into the world. And this evidence may shed some light on what Jesus was getting at

14. See, for instance, Justin, *Dial.* 58–61; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.6.1–2; Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.9; Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trin.* 4.23–24. More recent studies of the role of angels in the formation of early Christology include Peter Carrell, *Jesus and the Angels: Angelology and the Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, SNTSMS 95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, AGJU 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1998). Keep in mind that many studies of “angelomorphic Christology” do not fall in line with orthodox Trinitarianism.

when he declared, “Abraham . . . saw [my day] and was glad” (John 8:56).

Explicit Statements of the Son’s Preexistence

I wrap up with some of the most direct statements of the preexistence of the Son in the New Testament. I avoided beginning here because laying the foundation using other passages helps show that these statements are not outliers but that they simply corroborate the other evidence.

First, Paul states plainly that Jesus Christ is “before all things” (Col. 1:17), most likely using the Greek preposition *pro* in a temporal sense. From the perspective of time, the Son is antecedent to the creation of all things.

Second, Paul draws on what is likely an early Christian confession when he affirms that Christ “was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16). While previously I focused on the “flesh” part of this verse, here I want to focus on the “manifested” part. For Paul—and early Christians—to make this confession, they had to presuppose that Christ existed beforehand. Otherwise, the use of “manifested” would make no sense. It is not a verb that is used for something that comes into being from scratch; it is used for something that already exists but is more fully disclosed. Thus, this passage holds that the Son already existed, and *then* he was manifested or unveiled in the flesh. This conviction is voiced even more clearly by Peter, when he describes how Christ “was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times” (1 Pet. 1:20). The Son existed before the creation of the world, but at a point in time, he was “manifested” (the same verb as above) on earth.

Third, Paul writes how Christ “was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9). At first glance this may seem to be simply making a statement about Jesus’s economic status.

But note that Jesus was never “rich” in his earthly life, nor did his standard of living change. He was born into relative poverty,¹⁵ and throughout his adulthood he was clearly not materially “rich.” So when was he “rich,” according to Paul? The likeliest explanation, when this passage is compared with others in Paul’s letters, is that Paul is alluding to the riches the Son had in his preexistent glory, and so his becoming “poor” refers to his earthly incarnation and suffering.

Finally, consider the clearest and most stunning statements by Jesus himself: “I have come down from heaven” (John 6:38); “Before Abraham was, I am” (8:58); and “Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (17:5). Stronger affirmations of a real, heavenly existence of Jesus before Abraham—yes, even before the creation of the world—could scarcely be found.

Summary

The thrust of this chapter has been to sketch how the Old and New Testaments affirm that the Son of God existed in eternity past before he took on flesh and was placed in the manger in Bethlehem. His *real* point of origin is the heavenly places, which some Old Testament prophets glimpsed. From heaven he “came,” having been sent from above to the world to accomplish his task. But even before he “came,” he was active in the life of Israel, though often in the shadows.

What is perhaps most impressive is that these claims about the preexistence of the Son come from so many angles across the New Testament. Some passages are quite direct, while others are more subtle. Some authors, like Paul, discuss it more frequently than others, but nearly every New Testament author

15. For instance, Luke 2:24 records how Joseph and Mary apparently offered two birds in Jerusalem upon Jesus’s birth, which is an accommodation for those who are poor in Lev. 12:8.

deals with the idea in some way. But standing as the fountain-head of it all, as far as the evidence suggests, is Jesus himself. While Jesus did not wear a name tag that read, “I am the pretemporal and preearthly Son of God from heaven,” he came pretty close, using the scriptural concepts of his own day. It is unsurprising, then, that we see his followers reflect their teacher’s self-awareness in so many ways.

So What?

The preexistence of the Son is such an important but often overlooked doctrine that a moment’s reflection on the “so what” is merited.

Many Christians approach the Old Testament with only two tools: prophetic fulfillment (“what was predicted back then has come to pass in Jesus”) and typology (“this person/place/thing in ancient Israel was playing a redemptive function that culminates in Jesus”). While both tools are valid and powerful, they tend to impose a gap between the era of Israel and the incarnation of Christ—essentially ignoring his preexistence.

The material of this chapter might help the church recover the instinct of not just seeing the Old Testament as something that *pointed forward* to the Son of God (which it does) but seeing the Son *at work even back then*. This should, in turn, affect how we preach and teach Christ from all Scripture, giving us more tools to work with than simply straining to find the cross in every nook and cranny of the Old Testament.

THE QUESTION OF JESUS'S DIVINITY has been at the epicenter of theological discussion since the early church. At the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325, the church fathers affirmed that Jesus is “true God from true God.” Today, beliefs such as this one are confessed through creeds in churches around the world, and yet there remains confusion as to who Jesus is.

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THEOLOGY / CHRISTOLOGY

