

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#35—Christology—Part I¹
The Son Before Bethlehem

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January 20, 2008

The next study will be on the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Helpful for this study are sections 29 and 30 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*.

He is described, among other ways, as the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Lord, the I AM, Immanuel, the Lamb, the Child (Isa. 9:6), Our Great High Priest, the Vine, the Word of God, the Savior, the Rock, the Stone, the Servant, the Branch, and the King. He is the dominant theme of the Bible—the Lord Jesus Christ. Most Christians know of his Person and work only in fragments. They need a comprehensive study of both areas in order to get a grasp of the overall teaching of the Bible and to put together and relate to each other his Person in its various aspects and his works for human beings.

And so in this study we start Christology, the study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as with our study of the Bible's teaching on the Trinity, our study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ should be a lifelong endeavor. We can never know too much about the One who took on human flesh that He might die in the place of sinners. The Bible student should use this study as a springboard to long-term investigation of that One to whom all the Scriptures point.

Where was Jesus before Bethlehem? What was he doing? How is he described? Was he a priest? Was he a king? Who was he? Actually, he was simply the second Person of the Trinity, and so it is not correct to speak of a 'Jesus' before Bethlehem. 'Jesus' is the name given to the God-Man after his birth (Mt. 1:23). So we will be rigorous here and speak of the 'Son' and not 'Jesus.'

The reason we speak of Bethlehem as a dividing and change point is because it marks the beginning of the incarnation, the joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh and means roughly 'in flesh': the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.

The important thing is to inquire whether the Son was active in ways that had continuity with the activities of Jesus after Bethlehem. It is likely that if any average Christian were asked what the second Person was doing before Bethlehem, he would not be able to say very much. And that is unfortunate, because we lose out when we do not see His work before the incarnation. The Son did exist before Bethlehem (something called His 'preexistence,' and different from His 'eternality,' which denotes that He has always existed) and was very active in human affairs. Our study of the work of the Son before Bethlehem will reveal that he also existed as God. So we have three intersecting concepts: the Son's deity, the Son's pre-existence and the Son's eternality. If we demonstrate his deity, we automatically demonstrate his eternality and pre-existence. If we demonstrate his eternality, then his deity and pre-existence are automatically demonstrated. But if we demonstrate only his pre-existence, we do not necessarily demonstrate his deity and eternality. In other words, passages that teach his pre-existence are the weakest in terms of what they show. However, if we ask if any human being exists before birth, the answer is no. So at the very least, demonstrating the son's pre-existence shows us he is greater than a human being. The following examples treat only a few of the many scriptures that provide information about the Son's activity before Bethlehem.

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The Work of the Son in creation and providence

To begin with, the Son was active in the creation of the universe (along with the Spirit):

Gen. 1:1-2: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Jn. 1:1-3: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Col 1:15-17: ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

The last passage also reveals that one of his tasks has been to uphold the universe and enable it to function since the Creation. In this role he is the agent of the Trinity for providence. If we believe, as we should, that only God can create, then these passages teach that the Son is God. They also show his eternality, because a creator is above time. And, of course, they show his pre-existence.

The names of the Son across the testaments

Several names provide insight into His activity. For example, when John quotes Zech. 12:10 in Rev. 1:7 he is making an equation between the ‘Jehovah’ of the Old Testament (“me” in Zech. 12:10) and the ‘Jesus’ of the New Testament. Daniel 7:13-14 provides the other source for the quotation: the one coming with clouds is qualified to approach the Ancient of Days, who must be God.

Rev. 1:7: Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.

Zech. 12:10: ¹⁰ “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

Dan. 7:13-14: ¹³ “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The same truth is taught when Ps. 110:1 is quoted in Heb. 1:13, which is found in a passage about the deity of the Son. It is clear that the writer to the Hebrews is equating the ‘Lord’ of the psalm with the ‘Son’ of Heb. 1.

The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

¹³ To which of the angels did God ever say, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?

Appearances before Bethlehem

The Son's activity before Bethlehem is emphasized by His many appearances to groups or individuals in the Old Testament. All of these are describable as theophanies, an appearance of God. In what sense can we say that these are appearances of God? Although there are passages that speak of appearances of the Lord in the Old Testament, John 1:18 tells us that no one has ever seen God:

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

Is there a contradiction here? No. We have to assume that Jn. 1:18 means that no one has ever seen *the Father* and that appearances of God in the Old Testament refer to the pre-incarnate Son.

A Christophany is an appearance of Christ. In a strict sense, all theophanies are Christophanies; since no one has ever seen the Father. And, since Jesus is God, all Christophanies are also theophanies.

Perhaps the most striking of these appearances are the incidents involving the angel of the Lord. In Zech. 1:12-13 the angel of the Lord is simply an angelic being:

Zech. 1:12-13: ¹² Then the angel of the LORD said, "LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?" ¹³ So the LORD spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.

So, while not all angel of the Lord appearances involve the pre-incarnate Son, most do. His appearances show a great breadth of work, mainly for Israel. For example, in Gen. 22:11-18 He comes on the scene to stay Abraham's hand in sacrificing his son and to promise further blessings for the patriarch. There can be no question that the angel of the Lord here is God, and thus the pre-incarnate Son.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." ¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided." ¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Clearly it was the Son of God who spoke directly with Abraham here.

In Judges 2:1-4 it is the angel of the Lord that warns and judges Israel, reminding them of the covenant he made with them. Clearly we are to take the angel and the 'I' in this passage as one and the same.

2 The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, ² and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? ³ Now therefore I tell you that I

will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.”

Other incidents, although they do not speak of the angel of the Lord, clearly involve the pre-incarnate Son. Certainly he was one of the three men who appeared to Abraham in Gen. 18:1-33, since v. 1 tells us that the Lord appeared to Abraham, and v. 10 records that he spoke as one of the men (see the translators’ note where the NIV has rendered ‘he’ of the Hebrew text as ‘the Lord,’ suggesting that the translators believed that the one speaking to Abraham was God).

18 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. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ³ He said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord,^a do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.” “Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.” ⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.” ⁷ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸ He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. ⁹ “Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him. “There, in the tent,” he said. ¹⁰ Then the LORD^c said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Implications for other areas of theology

What can we conclude from this kind of evidence?

1. The work of the Son in creation and providence crosses the Testaments, and so arches over time: he has always been involved with what he has made. The universe belongs to him!
2. When New Testament writers interpret Old Testament divine names as applying to Jesus, we can learn that through progressive revelation God was preparing people to understand Jesus’ work after the incarnation. This enables us to comprehend better God’s desire that we grasp the meaning of that event.
3. Jesus’ appearances before Bethlehem help us to see the pre-incarnate Son of God as doing the same things in the Old Testament for Israel as he does today for us: comforting, guiding, empowering, protecting, correcting, warning, chastising, promising and testing faith. This is an example of Rom. 15:4: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”
4. Guidance and provision for Israel were very important to God. Although God sometimes used angels as agents of care, on many occasions it was the Son of God himself who appeared to key people in Israel’s history to direct and provide for them.

We should learn also by noticing what is missing from the Old Testament descriptions.

1. Jesus was not the Son Man before Bethlehem, since he is that only after being joined to humanity. The various kinds of appearances, and the emphasis on the birth in Bethlehem, indicate that he did not have a body before then.

^a Or *O Lord*

^c Hebrew *Then he*

2. God was not present among human beings as Immanuel, since it is after his birth that people would call him that (Mt. 1:23: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, ‘God with us.’”).
3. He was not a king yet and he is not really ruling publicly as a king even now although that is just a matter of time (Ps. 110:1; Heb. 10:13).
4. The Son’s prophetic ministry did not begin until after the incarnation, a role described, for example, in Rev. 1:5 (“the faithful witness”) and Jn. 1:18, where He is characterized as the perfect revealer of God, the basic function of the prophet.
5. The Son’s role as priest could only be carried out after humanity was joined to deity, since his priesthood involved knowing both sides perfectly and bringing them together.
6. Because his roles as prophet, priest and king toward Israel did not begin in the formal sense until after Bethlehem, the Son was not fulfilling the role of the Messiah before that point.

Our next study will treat the incarnation of the Son. The fact that all these roles began or had their basis in the events at Bethlehem should make us very alert to the significance of the incarnation.

Study questions

1. What do the following passages teach us about the work of the Son before Bethlehem and how do they give us this information?

Gen. 16:7-13

Isa. 9:6

Micah 5:2

Jn. 1:1-4

Jn. 6:33-62

Jn. 8:58-59

Jn. 17:5, 24

2. There are no appearances of the angel of the Lord after Bethlehem. Why?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.
42. Christology: The study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
43. Incarnation: The joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.
44. Pre-existence: Used of the Son, it means that he existed before Bethlehem.
45. Theophany: An appearance of God.
46. Christophany: An appearance of Christ.