

I have been trying to explain the unusually important statement about Christ in Paul's "Christ Poem" in Phil. 2:6-10. It's an extremely high Christology. Christ is a divine being before coming into the world; and at his exaltation he was made *equal* with God. Wow. Just 20 years earlier Jesus was a virtually unknown peasant with a few followers in a remote part of rural Galilee. Now he's equal to the Lord God Almighty?? How did *that* happen???

That, of course, is the topic of my book *How Jesus Became God*. I try to explain how it happened. In the book I talk about other passages in Paul that have similarly remarkable things to say about Christ. Here is how I discuss it there. (I do refer back to some of my earlier discussions in the book here — e.g., about how some Jews thought of another power being on God's level; I can post some of those too if anyone is interested.)

Other Passages in Paul

The incarnational Christology that lies behind the Philippians hymn can be seen in other passages of Paul's letters as well. There is no need to go into these at any length; I can simply mention them and say a couple of things about them. I have already indicated that Paul understood Christ to be the "rock" that provided life-giving water to the Israelites in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4) and pointed out that Paul stated that Christ, unlike the first Adam, came from "heaven" (1 Cor. 15:47). When Paul talks about God "sending" his son, he appears not to be speaking only metaphorically (like John the Baptist is said to have been "sent" from God in John 1:5, for example); instead, God actually sent Christ from the heavenly realm. As he put it in the letter to the Romans, "For what the law could not do, God did, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3). It is interesting that Paul uses this term "likeness" — just as the Philippians poem did, when it spoke of Christ coming in the "appearance" of humans. It is the same Greek word in the two places. Did Paul want to avoid saying that Christ actually became human, but that he only came in a human "likeness"? It is hard to say.

But it is clear that Paul does not believe Christ just ...

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appeared out of nowhere, the way angels seem to do in the Hebrew Bible. One of the verses in Paul that long puzzled me was Galatians 4:4, where Paul said that "When the fullness of time came, God sent his son, born from a woman, born under the law." I always wondered why Paul would indicate that Christ had been born from a woman. What option is there, exactly? But the statement makes sense if Paul believes that Christ was in fact a pre-existent angelic being. In that case he indicates that he really was born in a human way: he did not simply appear as the Angel of the Lord did to Hagar, Abraham, or Moses. Here in the last days he actually was born in the likeness of human flesh, as a child.

Paul says even more exalted things about Christ. In chapter two, we saw that there were Jewish texts that understood God's "Wisdom" to be a hypostasis of God, an aspect or characteristic of God that took on its own form of existence. Wisdom was the agent through whom God created all things (as in Proverbs 8), and since it was God's Wisdom in particular, it was both God and a kind of image of God. As the Wisdom of Solomon

expressed it, Wisdom is “a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty...for she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (7.25-26). Moreover, we saw that Wisdom could be seen as the Angel of the Lord.

Jesus, for Paul, was the Angel of the Lord. And so he too was God’s Wisdom, before coming into this world. Thus Paul can speak of “the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). Even more striking, Christ can be described as the agent of creation:

For us there is one God, the Father,
from whom are all things and we for whom we exist,
and one Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

This verse may well incorporate another pre-Pauline creed of some kind, as it divides itself neatly, as can be seen, into two parts, with two lines each, the first part a confession of God the Father and the second a confession of Jesus Christ. It is “through” Christ that all things come into being and that believers themselves exist. This sounds very much like what non-Christian Jewish texts occasionally say about God’s Wisdom. And God’s Wisdom was itself understood to be God, as we have seen.

So too Jesus in Paul. One of the most debated verses in the Pauline letters is Romans 9:5. Scholars dispute how the verse is to be translated. What is clear is that Paul is talking about the advantages given to the Israelites, and he indicates that the “fathers” (that is, the Jewish patriarchs) belong to the Israelites, and “from them is the Christ according to the flesh, the one who is God over all, blessed forever, amen.” Here Christ is “God over all.” That is a very exalted view.

But some translators prefer to take the passage as not indicating that Christ is God, and do so by claiming that it should be translated differently, to say first something about Christ and then, secondly, to give a blessing to God. They translate the verse, then, like this: “from them is the Christ according to the flesh. May the God who is over all be blessed forever, amen.” The issues of translation are highly complex, and different scholars have different opinions. The matter is crucial. If the first is correct, then it is the one place in all of Paul’s letters where he explicitly calls Jesus God.

But is it correct? My view for many years was that the second translation was the right one, and that the passage does not call Jesus God. My main reason for thinking so, though, was that I did not think that Paul ever called Jesus God anywhere else, so he probably wouldn’t do so here. But that, of course, is circular reasoning, and I think the first translation makes the best sense of the Greek, as other scholars have vigorously argued.^[1] It is worth stressing that Paul does indeed speak about Jesus as God, as we have seen. That does not mean that Christ is God the Father Almighty. Paul certainly thought Jesus was God in a certain sense – but he does not think that he was the Father. He was an angelic, divine being before coming into the world; he was the Angel of the Lord; he was eventually exalted to be equal with God and worthy of all of God’s honor and worship. And so I now have no trouble recognizing that in fact Paul could indeed flat out call Jesus God, as he appears to do in Romans 9:5.

If someone as early in the Christian tradition as Paul can see Christ as an incarnate divine being, it is no surprise that the same view emerges later in the tradition as well. Nowhere does it emerge more clearly or forcefully than in the Gospel of John.

[1] See the fuller discussion in the commentaries by Fitzmyer and Jewett, cited in note xxx on p. xxx. [/private]



[Maybe the Passage wasn't "Original"!!
A Fuller Exposition of the Christ Poem in Philippians](#)