

## John 3:13 and 6:62

There has been much discussion about Jesus' enigmatic statement that "no one has ascended to heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." If the words are taken as Jesus' own words, rather than a later comment by John, Jesus appears to be saying that he alone has ascended to heaven. Commentators are struck by the surprising use of the perfect tense. "The perfect tense 'has ascended' is unexpected."<sup>1</sup> "The use of the perfect tense is a difficulty, for it seems to imply that the Son of Man has already ascended into heaven."<sup>2</sup> "The difficulty of the verse lies in the tense of 'has ascended.' It seems to imply that the Son of Man had already at the moment of speaking ascended into heaven."<sup>3</sup>

In what sense can Jesus have claimed already to have ascended to heaven? The statement has been taken by some to mean that sometime during his historical ministry Jesus had been literally transported into the presence of his Father. But the Gospels nowhere record such an event. Others have argued for a predictive sense of the past tense, i.e., that the Son of Man was destined to ascend, a prophecy of his ascension after the resurrection.

There is an easier explanation of Jesus' ascent into heaven, based on biblical precedent and Jewish ways of speaking. "No one has ascended to heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven" is a figurative description of Jesus' unique perception of God's saving plan. Jesus possesses a unique understanding of the secrets of the universe which he now reveals to all who will listen. The phrase "who is in heaven," which appears in some Greek as well as Latin and Syriac manuscripts, indicates that Jesus, while living on earth, was at the same time also "in heaven" in constant communion with his Father on whom he depended for everything. As the bridge between heaven and earth he claimed to have unique access to divine information. A similar status applies later to all believers whom Paul describes as "seated in heavenly places" (Eph. 2:6).

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 223.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1:132.

<sup>3</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1972), 177.

Jesus' ascent to heaven during his ministry points then to his intimate fellowship with his Father. As Son he resides "in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18). The context of John 3:13 shows Jesus in conversation with Nicodemus about the secrets of immortality. Jesus is "talking about what we *know*" (John 3:11). In contrast to Nicodemus' unfamiliarity with the keys to entering the Kingdom and the necessity of being born again, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, we are testifying to what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony" (John 3:11). Jesus doubts Nicodemus' capacity to receive "heavenly things." It is these heavenly secrets which Jesus is able to reveal because he "has ascended to heaven" and "is in heaven." In Proverbs 30:3-4 the words of Agur contain a similar reference to ascension to heaven. The object of such an "ascent" is to gain understanding and divine revelation. "Surely I am more stupid than any man. I do not have the understanding of a man. Neither have I learned wisdom. Nor do I have the knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended to heaven and come down?" Similarly, Baruch 3:29 asks: "Who has gone up to heaven and obtained her [Wisdom] and brought her down from the clouds?" (cp. Deut. 30:12).<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Jesus, the supreme and final revealer of God's purposes, a bridge from heaven to earth has been built. The Son has "exegeted" the Father (John 1:18). No one but the Son of Man has received such a measure of divine wisdom. At the same time the Son of Man — the Human Being — has descended from heaven, a Jewish expression meaning not that Jesus was alive before his birth, but that he is God's gift to the world (cp. James 1:17; 3:15).

Adam Clarke commented on our passage:

This seems to be a figurative expression for "no one has known the mysteries of the Kingdom," as in Deuteronomy 30:12 and Romans 10:6; and the expression is found in the generally received maxim that to be perfectly acquainted with the concerns of a place, it is necessary for a person to be on the spot.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1:128-146.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by John Wilson, *Concessions of Trinitarians* (Boston: Munroe & Co, 1845), 324.

A German expositor, Christian Schoettgen, in his *Horae Hebraicae* observed of John 3:13: “It was an expression common among the Jews who often say of Moses that he ascended to heaven and there received a revelation on the institution of divine worship.” He quotes the rabbis as saying, “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Oh that we had one like Moses the prophet of the Lord to ascend into heaven and bring it [the Law] down to us’” (*Jerusalem Targum* on Deut. 30:12).

In John 6:62 Jesus made a challenging statement about his destiny as the predicted Son of Man. After referring to his own “difficult statements” about being “the bread which came down from heaven” (John 6:58-60), Jesus asked whether this teaching might also cause his audience to stumble: “What if you should see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?”

Jesus spoke of himself in this passage as the Son of Man. As is well known, the title originates in Daniel 7:13 where, 550 years before the birth of Jesus, Daniel saw a vision of the Son of Man in heaven receiving authority to rule with the saints in the future Messianic Kingdom:

Jesus used [the title Son of Man] of himself with the implication that in him was the fulfillment of the vision of Daniel...It is the title which he specially employed, when he was foretelling to his disciples the Passion as the inevitable and predestined issue of his public ministry.<sup>6</sup>

The following texts from the Synoptic Gospels illustrate the point. In each case Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of Man — a title meaning “member of the human race” — who is destined to suffer, die, and rise again: “The Son of Man is to go just as it is written about him” (Matt. 26:24). Mark speaks of the Passion of the Son of Man as the subject of Old Testament prophecy: “How is it *written of the Son of Man* that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?” (Mark 9:12).

In John’s Gospel also, the title “Son of Man” is associated with prediction, with what is destined to happen to Jesus in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy or typology: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent...so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14).

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<sup>6</sup> J.H. Bernard, *St. John, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1948), 1:cxxx, cxxxi.

The subject of the enigmatic statement in John 6:62 is the Son of Man, the title which designates Jesus as *the* Human Being. If we ask where *the Son of Man* was before, the biblical answer is found in Daniel 7:13. The *man* Messiah was seen in heaven in a vision of the future which became reality at the ascension (Acts 2:33), when Jesus had been exalted to the right hand of God. David had not ascended to heaven (Acts 2:34). Contrary to much cherished tradition, the patriarchs have not “gone to heaven.” They are sleeping in their graves awaiting the resurrection of all the faithful (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28, 29). Only the Messiah was destined for that position. In John 6:62 he anticipates his future ascension in order to fulfill what was predetermined for him according to the divine plan revealed in Daniel’s vision.

These verses give no support to the doctrine that a second member of the Godhead, the “eternal Son of God,” was in heaven before his birth. It is the “Son of Man,” a *human person*, who preexists in heaven. There is no “eternal Son” in heaven before the birth of Jesus. Son of Man does not refer to an uncreated second divine being, as required by Trinitarian theology. The texts relate to the activity of the Son of Man. Trinitarians do not claim that the Son of Man, the human Jesus, existed prior to his conception.

Underlying the apparent complexity of John 6:62 is a very simple concept, to which readers of John must become accustomed. Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the foreordained “program” laid out in advance by the Scriptures. What has been promised for him may be said to have actually happened in vision or other prediction before it happens in reality. The Son of Man was in heaven, seen, so to speak, in a “heavenly preview” before he actually arrived there (John 6:62). A similar phenomenon reported by the Synoptics is the appearance *in vision*, not actually, of Elijah and Moses (Matt. 17:1-9). In John 3:13 the Son of Man has already gained access to heavenly wisdom. But later in John 20:17 Jesus states that he has “*not yet ascended* to the Father.” The first statement (John 3:13) is to be taken figuratively, while the latter refers to Jesus’ actual departure to the Father.

We must reckon with this special mode of thought in John’s Gospel, remembering that John was a profound thinker and theologian who delighted to report Jesus’ Jewish, and sometimes enigmatic, interchanges with his audience. This should caution us against reading John in a way which sets his Christology in opposition to Matthew, Mark, Luke and the book of Acts. It is significant that the traditional

Christology which supports a Trinitarian creed is derived almost exclusively from John without much concern for the Synoptic portrait of Jesus, nor that of Peter in his sermons in the book of Acts and his letters. It is upon Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah that the Church is to be founded (Matt. 16:16, 18). Peter gives us no reason to believe that he thought that Jesus literally preexisted his birth. And John wrote with the sole purpose of convincing us that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," certainly not God Himself (John 20:31).

*(The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound, p. 205-210).*

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Texts in John which have been claimed as evidence for the literal preexistence of Jesus have been misunderstood, because too little attention has been paid to John's and Jesus' Jewish categories of thought. The phenomenon that past tenses do not always mean a reference to past events has been overlooked (John 17:5; cp. 17:22, 24). In John 3:13 Jesus said nothing of an eternal preexistence as "God the Son." He claimed rather to have been uniquely admitted to the divine counsels. He had not literally "ascended to heaven," nor had the Son of God been in heaven from eternity. He was destined to go to the Father, fulfilling Daniel's vision of the Son of Man (John 6:62). John 13:3, 16:28 and 20:17 have been mistranslated in the NIV to give the impression that Jesus was going *back* to his Father (see KJV, RSV). His glory had been prepared for him before the world came into existence (John 17:5; cp. Matt 6:1: future rewards are already secure), and he was chosen as God's supreme human representative, the Messiah, long before Abraham (John 8:58). It was as the *human Son of Man* that he had "preexisted" in the divine decree. Jesus is convinced that he must carry out God's predetermined plan: "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer?...All things written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms *must be fulfilled*" (Luke 24:26, 44).