

By Alan Hayward

Did Jesus Christ really come down from Heaven?

Introduction

Before we begin it is necessary to make one thing absolutely clear.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is the greatest Being in all the universe, apart from God Himself. The purpose of this booklet is to honour the Lord Jesus, as he should be honoured.

Unfortunately, the Bible's teaching about the Lord Jesus is often misunderstood. In a well-meaning but misguided attempt to honour Jesus, many churches teach things about him that are not Biblical. This booklet sets out to correct these wrong ideas.

This is not from a desire to criticise anybody's religion, but simply to show what the Bible really teaches about Jesus, the Son of God. Only when we understand this can we give the Lord the glory that he deserves.

Alan Hayward

"I Came Down from Heaven"

The title of this booklet is a question: did Jesus Christ come down from heaven? In Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John there is a verse which appears to answer that question. Jesus said:

"I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me."
(Verse 38.)

But we must not jump to a conclusion. This subject is not nearly as simple as it might seem.

A difficulty arises because there are two very different kinds of language, literal language and figurative language. Both kinds are used by Jesus in the chapter we are considering.

In verse 64 he said, "There are some of you that do not believe." This is literal language. It means exactly what it says. Even a child could not mistake its meaning.

But many other verses are not like this. Take verses 53 and 54, for instance. Here Jesus said:

"I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."

This is figurative language. It does not mean what it appears to say; instead, it carries a deeper meaning. You have to think carefully to discover its real meaning. Consequently, if we are not careful we can easily misunderstand it.

As a matter of fact the unbelieving Jews did misunderstand this and similar sayings of Jesus. They said, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Perhaps they thought Jesus was preaching cannibalism! Whatever they thought, they were very much mistaken.

Well, what about the statement, "I came down from heaven." Is this literal, or figurative?

There is good reason to think that it could be figurative. In verse 31 of the same chapter there is a mention of what the Old Testament called "manna". This was a kind of bread which God provided, by a miracle, for His people to eat while they were in the desert. The words of verse 31 are, "He (God) gave them bread from heaven to eat."

This is obviously figurative language. This miraculous bread was not baked in heaven and then delivered to the earth. The statement that it came from heaven informs us that the God of heaven created it on earth.

There is a famous hymn which people sing at harvest time. The chorus begins, "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above." These words are taken straight from the New Testament, from James 1:17, which says that every good gift "is from above, coming down from the Father." When farmers sing that hymn, they do not imagine that their crops literally come down "from heaven above." They simply mean that God gives us our harvests.

More Figurative Language

The Bible uses this sort of figurative language about men, as well as about things. It tells us that "there was a man sent from God, whose name was John." (John 1:6.) Yet John was never in heaven. "Sent from God" simply means that God gave him a special job to do.

But this explanation could only apply to those verses that actually speak of Jesus "coming down" from heaven. There are a number of other passages which seem to suggest, in one way or another, that Jesus once lived in heaven, long before he appeared on earth. This is one of them:

"Father (said Jesus), glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had with you before the world was made." (John 17:5)

What are we to make of verses like that? Are they literal, or figurative? Did Jesus really live with God in heaven before the world was made? Or do the words carry some deeper meaning than this?

The purpose of this booklet is to let the Bible speak for itself and answer those questions for us.

Three Views of Jesus

People who do not believe the Bible usually say that Jesus was just an ordinary man. They are wrong. He was the Son of God. We need not waste any time considering their point of view.

But we shall have to consider the three different views of Jesus that are held by Bible-believing Christians. *

The first view is by far the most widely held. This is that Jesus is God Almighty in human form. People who believe this often refer to Jesus as "the Second Person in the Trinity," although it is not easy to discover exactly what they mean by that phrase. According to this view, Jesus lived in heaven for ever and ever before he appeared on earth.

The second view is taught by the body known as "Jehovah's Witnesses," and a few smaller sects. They say that Jesus is not God, but is a mighty angel who was created by God long ago. They, too, believe that Jesus lived in heaven for a very long time before he lived on earth.

People who hold either of these views, of course, take literally the verses that speak of Jesus coming from heaven.

The third view is held by Christadelphians and some others. According to this view Jesus did not live personally in heaven before he was born on earth; and the verses which refer to his heavenly origin must be understood figuratively.

This is the view that will be explained in this booklet. If the thought of it surprises you, please be patient and read on. There is a great weight of Bible evidence to support this view.

Jesus Was a Real Man

Jesus was not an ordinary, sinful man. Let us make no mistake about that. He was a unique man. He was the Son of God. Nevertheless, in a very real sense he was a man and not God Almighty.

This does not mean that he ceased to be a man as soon as he went bodily to heaven. The Bible teaches us to think of him as a man, even now. Long after Jesus had risen from the dead and ascended to heaven, the New Testament was making statements like this:

"God's grace is much greater, and so is his free gift to so many men through the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ.... How much greater is the result of what was done by the one man, Jesus Christ... many will be put right with God as the result of the obedience of the one man." (Romans 5:15-19, Today's English Version.)

"There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5.)

So Jesus really is a man. This is the undoubted teaching of the New Testament. Now compare that with these words by the former Bishop of Woolwich, Dr. Robinson, in his book, "Honest to God," in a passage where he was explaining how most Christians view Jesus:

"Jesus was not a man born and bred, he was God for a limited period taking part in a charade. He looked like a man, but underneath he was God dressed up - like Father Christmas."

Many church people find the bishop's reference to Father Christmas offensive. Yet apart from that, they agree that this is a fair statement of church teaching. If Jesus was really God, or even a mighty angel who once lived in heaven, then he was never a real man, but a Divine Person dressed up in human flesh.

But the New Testament disagrees. It describes Jesus as a man.

This is our first reason for thinking that the usual view of Jesus is mistaken.

The Birth of Jesus

The birth of the Lord Jesus Christ was the result of a mighty miracle. His mother was a young unmarried woman of excellent character. She was a virgin. This was how it happened:

"The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus... 'And Mary said to the angel, 'How shall this be, since I have no husband?'

"And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.'" (Luke 1:30-35.)

Study those words closely. There is much to be learnt from them.

The child was to be Mary's own son. The angel did not say, "Mary, you will produce a body of flesh for a Divine Person to come and live in." He said, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son." These words were obviously intended to be understood literally. They describe the beginning of a new human life - not the coming to earth of a Divine Person.

Also, if Jesus had been a Divine Person, millions of years older than Mary, could he have been, in any real sense, her son? Yet he was her son, and not just an unusual sort of foster child. Throughout the gospels she is called his mother, and never his foster-mother.

On the other hand, although the man Joseph, who afterwards married Jesus' mother, is sometimes called his father, we are not left in any doubt about the real facts. Luke refers to Jesus as "the son, as was supposed, of Joseph." (Luke 3:23.)

So Jesus was truly the son of Mary, not a Divine Person pretending to be the son of Mary. As children do, he took after his mother in many ways. That is what made Jesus truly a

man. Real men do not live in heaven before they are born, and neither did this man. His miraculous conception and birth was the very beginning of his existence as a person.

Human nature is weak, and full of temptations. As we shall see later, Jesus inherited the weakness of human nature from his mother.

But that is only half the story. The angel made it plain that the son of Mary was to be also the Son of God. "The power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God", said the angel. (Luke 1:35.)

Jesus also inherited many things from his other parent. God was his father, and from God he inherited the desire to do what was good, always. It was this which helped him to overcome the weakness of his human nature - to fight temptation and to conquer it.

The Childhood of Jesus

We are told very little about the childhood of Jesus. One thing which we are told is extremely important. Luke describes the way he grew up like this:

"Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man." (Luke 2:52.)

Those who believe that Jesus was actually God are perplexed by this verse. How could God grow wiser, and increase in favour with Himself?

The very idea is absurd. Obviously Luke did not believe that Jesus was God, dwelling for a time in a boy's body.

What of the other idea, that Jesus was a mighty angel from heaven, inhabiting the body of a growing boy? This is no better. Such an angel must surely have been perfect, long before he came to earth. An angel within a boy's body could not "increase in wisdom and .. in favour with God."

No, this verse describes the growing up of a real boy. His body developed. His store of wisdom was steadily enlarged. And his character matured so well that his Father became more and more pleased with him.

His Victory over Temptation

It is said that professional boxers or wrestlers sometimes get together before a fight and strike a bargain. They agree not to hurt each other, although for the sake of the crowds they will make it look as if they are fighting hard. They even decide who shall win this mockery of a fight, and of course they agree to share the prize money.

There is a name for this sort of deception. It is called a "pushover."

Now the Lord Jesus is described in the Bible as fighting a tremendous battle against human temptations. He fought temptation every day; and every single time he won.

All of us know what temptation is. If Jesus was a real man, then we can understand what a struggle he had. But if Jesus was a heavenly being dressed up in a human body, then it was not a fight at all - it was just a "pushover"!

For there is no possibility of God or an angel being tempted like us. The Bible says,

"God cannot be tempted with evil."(James 1:14.) Yet we are told this about Jesus:

"We have a high priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin." (Hebrews 4:15, Today's English Version.) Once when Jesus was fighting against temptation he said to God, "Not my will, but yours, be done." (Luke 22:42.)

Evidently Jesus had a will of his own which had to be crushed, so that God's will could be done instead. If he was truly man, we can understand this verse. But it makes no sense at all if Jesus was really God, or an angel in human form.

How Jesus Became Perfect

There are two very different ways in which something can be less than perfect. It is important to appreciate the difference between them.

An old house that is nearly ready to fall down is not perfect. This is because it is rotten: there is a lot wrong with it.

A new house that is only half built is also not perfect. But this is a different sort of imperfection. There is nothing wrong with this half-built house. It is fine, as far as it goes. But it is not yet complete.

Now Jesus was never imperfect in the first sense. There was never anything wrong with him. He never sinned, not once.

Nevertheless, his character had to be developed gradually, like a house being built, until it was complete. In this sense he had to become perfect, as these Bible quotations show:

"Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered: and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation." (Hebrews 5:8, 9.)

"For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering." (Hebrews 2:10.)

Once more it is clear that there is something badly wrong with the popular idea, that Jesus was a Divine Being clothed with a human body. Can you imagine such a Being "learning obedience through what he suffered"? Can you conceive of such a Divine Person being "made perfect through suffering"?

Of course not. We have here a description of a real man building up a perfect character, layer upon layer.

If Jesus had been God Himself, or a great angel, then he would have been perfect long before he came to this world. But this was not so. Jesus, we are plainly told, only became perfect through his sufferings on earth.

His Death on the Cross

The death of the Lord Jesus presents yet another problem to those who hold the more usual views about his nature. God cannot die, says the Bible. (Daniel 12:7; 1 Timothy 6:16.) Neither can angels (Matthew 22:30.)

Yet, as everybody knows, Jesus died on the cross.

Some people think they have an answer to this. They say, "Yes, but it was only his body that died. The Spirit Being inside the body lived on."

This will not do. The Bible says that it was not only the body of Jesus that died. We are told that "He poured out his soul to death." (Isaiah 53:12.)

Moreover, the Bible shows us that Jesus dreaded death as much as we do. Death was a frightening ordeal to him, just as it is to us.

"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear." (Hebrews 5:7.)

This also is strong evidence that Jesus was neither God nor an angel in human form. Would such a Being have suffered great distress at the thought of losing his temporary human body?

Surely, only a real man, who was really about to die, could feel like that about death.

Why Jesus is at God's Right Hand

At the present time Jesus is seated at God's right hand (Psalm 110:1; Hebrews 1:13.). In these words and in various other ways the Bible tells us how great Jesus is. He is the second greatest person in all creation, second only to God Himself.

Now suppose that we were to ask the question, "Why is this? Why is Jesus so great? Why has God given such a high place to him?"

Those who believe that Jesus is God or an angel have a simple answer. They say, "Because he always was great. He was a great Spirit in heaven before he came to earth. Afterwards he went back where he belonged. He returned to the high place that he came from."

But this is not the answer of the Bible.

The Bible says that Jesus became great after his life on earth. It says that he became great then because God made him great. And it tells us, time after time, that God made him great because he had deserved it by what he did on earth.

"We see him crowned with glory and honour now because of the death he suffered." (Hebrews 2:9, Today's English Version.) "Because he (Jesus) hath set his love upon me (God), therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name." (Psalm 91:14, King James Version.)

"You (Jesus) love righteousness and hate wickedness, therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows." Psalm 45:7.)

"He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him." (Philippians 2:8,9.)

This, surely, is the final, conclusive evidence that Jesus is a real man. A real man, but nevertheless a very special man. He is the only man who has ever conquered human temptation completely. That is why he now Sits at God's right hand.

Seeing Things from God's Point of View

On pages 1 and 2 we looked at the words of Jesus, "I came down from heaven." Remembering the Bible-based words of the hymn, "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above", we saw that these words of Jesus could easily have been figurative, not literal.

Now we can reach a more definite conclusion. In the light of all the plain teaching we have looked at, we can be certain that Jesus was a real man. That being so, his words about "coming down from heaven" simply must have been figurative. We can be sure of that now. He evidently meant that his life began when the God of heaven reached down to earth and worked a mighty miracle on his mother, Mary.

This still leaves a number of puzzling verses. There are, for instance, the words from John 17:5, where Jesus referred to the glory which he "had with God before the world was made", and a few others? Bible passages where similar expressions occur. Could this also be figurative language?

Yes, it could indeed. But to appreciate the meaning of such sayings we must make a special effort to see things from God's point of view. There are many differences between God and ourselves. The one that concerns us just now is this. To us the future is unknown: we can only guess what will happen tomorrow. But God knows the future; tomorrow is as real to Him as today is to us. That is why Bible prophecy always comes true.

Paul commented on this fact in Romans 4:17. He pointed out that God had said to Abraham in the Book of Genesis, "I have made you the father of many nations."

Note that word, 'have'. Not, "I will make you," but, "I have made you". At that time Abraham had only one child. But when God promises something, that promise is certain. The thing is as good as done.

When a man makes a promise he normally says, "I will do such-and-such". But God, through His prophets, frequently says about the future, "I have done such-and-such", when He means that He is certainly going to do it.

In the second half of Romans 4:17 Paul drew out this same lesson. He said, in the words of the New English Bible, that God "summons things that are not yet in existence as if they already were."

The Future is Real to God

With a little help from the apostle Paul we have now established an important principle. To us, only the past and the present are real. The future is hidden from our eyes.

But God is different. He can see the future perfectly. The future is as real to God as the present is to men. Consequently, God can speak of the future as if it had already happened.

There are many places in the Bible where God has done this. Here are three of them.

(1) "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.' "(Jeremiah 1:4,5.)

So God knew Jeremiah before the man was born! Obviously, this is figurative language. It does not mean that Jeremiah really existed before his birth. It means that God could look into the future and see Jeremiah before he was born. To express it another way, before Jeremiah was born he existed in the mind of God.

(2) "Before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his in Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him. Because of his love, God had already decided that he would bring us to himself as his sons - this was his pleasure and purpose." Ephesians 1:4,5, Today's English Version.)

So it was not only Jeremiah; God also knew the members of His church before they were born! This, too, is figurative language, based on God's knowledge of the future. In the second sentence of that quotation, Paul said what he really meant, in literal language: "God had already decided that he would bring us to himself."

(3)"He (Jesus) was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake." (I Peter 1:20.)from which we get the English word "prognosis". In that quotation the word "destined" is interesting. It is the translation of a Greek word meaning "known in advance". This is a form of the Greek word

Prognosis is a word mostly used by doctors. Like its Greek equivalent, it means "advance knowledge". A doctor might say, for instance, "This man has cancer of the stomach. My prognosis is that the bleeding will continue, and he will be dead within a month."

Doctors, of course, can make mistakes. They admit that their prognosis, like weather forecasts, often turn out to be wrong. God is different. He really does know in advance. A prognosis by God is absolutely certain.

The verse quoted above, then, tells us that God knew all about Jesus before He created the world. This is only what we might expect. We saw in the previous quotation that God knew all about the early Christians before the world began.

Jeremiah, the early church, and the Lord Jesus Christ. They were all there, in the mind of God, from the beginning of time.

So it is not surprising that Jesus should have said to his Father in heaven, "Glorify me with the glory which I had with you before the world was made." (John 17:5.)

We know now what he must have meant by this.

God the Great Planner

Whenever men propose to do anything important they begin by drawing up a plan.

Before launching an attack an army commander prepares a plan of battle, and reveals it to his generals. Before any great building is erected an architect is engaged to draw a plan of it.

The plans of men often come to nothing. The enemy might make a surprise move and make it impossible for the generals to begin their attack. The customer might run out of money and tell the architect to tear up his drawings.

But nothing can stop God from carrying out His plan for this world. As we have seen, He began to speak as if His plan had already been completed, even before He started work.

The Old Testament had a name for God's plan. It called it God's "Wisdom". The New Bible Dictionary (which is written by churchmen, not by Christadelphians) says that wisdom in the Old Testament stands for "God's irresistible fulfilment of what He has in His mind."

That is a good definition. It fits the following Old Testament passage very well:

"Does not wisdom call, does not understanding raise her voice? ... at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud: "... The Lord created me (Wisdom) at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.' Proverbs 8:1-23.)

In other words, before God started work on this world He drew up His Plan -Wisdom, as the Jews called it.

The Greeks - who believed in a god or gods, although not the God of the Bible - gave it a different name. They called it God's "Word". The same Bible Dictionary says that the Greek word for "word" means "both God's plan and God's power of creation."

This is helpful because it enables us to understand the first chapter of John's Gospel. John seems to have combined the Greek idea of God's Word with the Jewish idea of God's Wisdom. His Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word."

Some people cannot make any sense out of this passage. Others think they can, but they take the wrong sense from it, because they think the Word is a living Being. (This, by the way, is why the translators in this passage refer to the Word as "he" in our English Bible. The Greek word for "he" also means "it", and that is how it should be translated here.)

Now if we think of God's "Plan" instead of His "Word", and use "it" instead of "he", this is what we learn from John 1:

"In the beginning was the Plan, and the Plan was with God, and the Plan was God. It was in the beginning with God; all things were made through it, and without it was not anything made that was made. In it was life, and the life was the light of men. . . .

And the Plan became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." (John 1:1-14.)

These words of John's summarise the Bible's teaching beautifully. Jesus did exist in heaven from the beginning, but not as a person. He existed as a great idea in God's mind, as the very centre of God's Plan. He did not exist as a person until he was born in Bethlehem. Then, in John's phrase, "the Plan became flesh".

Honouring Jesus

Now that we have seen what the Bible really teaches about Jesus we can begin to honour him as, perhaps, we have never done before. You will see why this is so if you think back over what we have discussed.

We saw that there are two kinds of language in the Bible. There is literal language, which means exactly what it says on the surface. And there is figurative language, which bears a deeper meaning.

At the time when Jesus said that he came down from heaven he had never been in heaven personally. So his words cannot have been literally true, but I must have a figurative meaning.

Because God knows all things He can see into the future. When God Almighty decides to do something it is as good as done. So before He created the world God drew up a plan. Jesus was the beginning of this plan, and the most important part of it. The followers of Jesus were all in the plan, too. Both they and their Lord are spoken of as existing before the creation of the world.

Neither he nor they were alive then, of course. They existed only in God's mind as part of His plan. In this figurative sense they were all in heaven from the beginning of creation.

But the actual life of the Lord Jesus Christ only began when he was born in Bethlehem. His birth followed a miracle. God was his father, and Mary, his mother, was a virgin.

She was his real mother, and he was just as much her son as he was God's son. Because of this he was a real man. This meant that he suffered the same temptations to sin as any other man.

But he conquered temptation, completely. He lived a sinless life, and developed a perfect character. As a reward for this God raised him from the dead, and made him the greatest person in the universe after God Himself.

If it pleased God to honour Jesus like that, we also should honour him, and God: for the same reason. We should be able to look up towards heaven, and say to God:

"Our Heavenly Father, your Son had to fight temptation, just as I have to fight it. So he knows how I feel."

"But he won every single battle he fought against temptation, while I often lose mine. Lord, I admire his great victory and wish I could follow his example more perfectly than I do."

"But I am weak. Lord, please pity me and help me. Help me to be more like your Son. Help me to try with all my heart to follow Him. Help me to love him and honour him and obey him."

"Almighty God, your Son has been through this life of suffering and death himself. Because I know he understands me, Lord, I pray through him for your help. And I know that you will hear me."

By Alan Hayward, 1975

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