

WAS CHRIST IN THE “FORM OF GOD” WHILE ON EARTH?

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Some conservative writers have attempted to defend the idea that the second Person of the Godhead, at the time of the “incarnation” (i.e., when “the Word became flesh”—John 1:14), laid aside “the form of God.” They contend that the concept of an infinite God being clothed within a human body is illogical. Though these authors undoubtedly mean well, their position is quite erroneous as to the nature of the incarnate Christ.

Several arguments have been employed in an attempt to buttress this position. For example, it has been argued: (a) God cannot be tempted (James 1:13); but (b) Jesus was tempted (James 1:13). Thus, the conclusion is supposed to be: **Jesus did not exist in the form of God.**

The logical consequence of this position is that Jesus Christ was not deity in the flesh. Advocates of this view usually do not mean to affirm explicitly that conclusion, but that is where the reasoning leads. What these writers have failed to realize, with reference to James 1:13, is that God the Father—not Christ the Son—is in view in that context. James was not discussing the nature and/or role of Christ. Thus, it is improper to generalize regarding the nature of the Lord from this brief reference.

The text commonly appealed to as proof that Jesus did not exist on Earth in “the form of God” is Philippians 2:6. Here is the full context of what Paul wrote:

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross (Philippians 2:5-8, ASV).

But the position advocated is incorrect for the following reasons.

In Philippians 2:6, Paul spoke of Christ as “existing in the form of God...” The term “existing” is not a **past tense** form. It translates the Greek term *huparchon*, a present-tense participle. The present tense reveals that the Savior’s existence in the “form of God” is a **sustained** mode of being, not one that was interrupted by the incarnation. A. T. Robertson called attention to the difference between the present tense, *huparchon* (denoting “eternal existence in the *morphe* [form] of God”), and the Lord’s “becoming” (aorist tense) in the likeness of man (1931, 4:445). There was a time when the second Person of the Godhead did not exist as man; there never has been a time when He was not in “the form of God.”

W.E. Vine commented that this grammatical form denotes “an existence or condition both previous to the circumstances mentioned and continuing after it” (1991, p. 279). Another scholar noted that the word expresses “continuance of an antecedent state or condition” (Abbott-Smith, 1923, p. 457). Hendriksen was quite correct when he asked: “[O]f what did Christ empty himself? Surely not of his existence ‘in the form of God’” (1962, p. 106). Wuest amplified the present tense form of the participle by suggesting that Jesus “has always been and at present continues to subsist” in the form of God (1961, p. 462). It is unnecessary to multiply additional examples.

Contrary to the evidence, however, it has been alleged that whereas Christ existed in the form of God prior to the incarnation, He divested himself of that status while on Earth. Finally, according to the theory under review, Jesus resumed the form-of-God nature when He returned to heaven. There is no biblical support for this concept, which violates the explicit testimony of Scripture.

The Greek word for “form” is *morphe*—a term denoting that which is “indicative of the interior nature” of a thing (Green, 1907, p. 384), or as Kennedy observed, *morphe* “always signifies a form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it” (1956, 3:436). Trench commented that “none could be *en morphe theou* [in form of God] who was not God” (1890, p. 263). All of this simply means that if Jesus gave up the “form of God” when He became incarnate, then He ceased being God at that time. This is equivalent to the doctrine advocated by Jehovah’s Witnesses, namely, that Christ was “nothing more than a perfect man.” I must say—in the kindest way possible—that the position under review is unrepresentative of the teaching of the New Testament.

But it is alleged that Jesus could not have existed in “the form of God” because the New Testament speaks of the Lord being led of the Spirit, protected by angels, etc. Obviously, therefore, Christ was not “infinite God.” The thing that seems to be at the root of this misunderstanding is a failure to recognize that the Lord’s earthly limitations were not the consequence of a less-than-God nature; rather, they were the result of a self-imposed submission reflecting the exercise of His sovereign will. Of what did Christ “empty” Himself when He became flesh?

A.H. Strong expressed it well when he noted that, by means of the incarnation, Jesus “resigned not the possession, nor yet entirely the use, but rather the independent exercise, of the divine attributes” (1907, p. 703). To say the same thing an-

other way, the Lord's incarnate status involved, not a **divestiture** of divine form/essence or attributes, but rather a **subordination** of those attributes to the Father in terms of **role function**. When Jesus affirmed, "[T]he father is greater than I" (John 14:28), He was not disclaiming divine nature; rather, He was asserting that He had subjected Himself voluntarily to the Father's will.

Think about this for a moment: How could Christ be void of the divine attributes, and still be divine? A thing **is** the sum of its attributes. This is an insurmountable difficulty for those who argue that the incarnate Christ was not in the "form of God." If Christ was not fully God, i.e., existing in the "form of God," exactly what was He? Quasi-God? Half-God? Merely **appearing to be God** (as certain Gnostics held)? Only perfect Man? What?

Moreover, if Jesus did not exist in the "form of God" while He lived on Earth, how could He claim to be "one" (neuter gender, suggesting unity of nature) with the Father (John 10:30)? Why did the Lord allow Thomas to call him "God" (John 20:30)? Why did Jesus accept worship (Matthew 8:2), when He plainly taught that only God is worthy of worship (Matthew 4:10)?

Finally, if it is to be argued that Christ laid aside His status of being in "the form of God" by virtue of His humanness and His subordination to the Father, then one likewise must contend, to be consistent, that Jesus does not possess the "form of God" now, because as our Mediator, He is "the man, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5), and He still is in subjection to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:27).

Some may feel that this is simply a matter of inconsequential semantics. However, sometimes semantics is quite important. Gospel truth is a message of words, and every Christian teacher needs to be accurate in the language he employs. May the Lord help us to be precise in the expression of biblical truth.

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Originally Published In
Reason & Revelation
March 1995, 15[3]:21-22

ARTICLE REPRINT

Distributed by
Apologetics Press, Inc.
230 Landmark Drive
Montgomery, AL 36117-2752
(334) 272-8558