

## **John 3:13 and the Omnipresence of Jesus Christ**

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### **Introduction**

The doctrine of the omnipresence of Christ, while He was alive on this earth, is an area of some disagreement among theologians. Some use texts such as Matthew 18:20 or 28:20 to acknowledge His omnipresence.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Erickson argues that in His incarnation, Christ voluntarily willed that “he would not have the free use of his omnipresence. It was not that he was pretending that he could not use it; he really could not.”<sup>2</sup> The focus verse of this paper has direct relevance to this discussion.

This article purposes to interpret John 3:13 showing its relationship to the question of Christ’s omnipresence. Before doing this, however, the question related to the Greek text of the verse must be mentioned. The American Standard Version (1901) translates John 3:13: “And no one hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, *even* the Son of man, who is in heaven.” The KJV and the NKJV essentially agree with the ASV. On the other hand, the New American Standard Bible translates it: “And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who

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<sup>1</sup>See, for examples: Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 94; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1964), 1:342; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 548.

<sup>2</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 549.

descended from heaven, *even* the Son of man.” Many contemporary versions, such as ESV, NIV, agree with the NASB. The question centers on the final phrase, “who is in heaven.”

John 3:13 could constitute a strong argument in support of the doctrine of Christ’s omnipresence, but it depends on what is done with the text. If the Greek text which underlies the NASB is accepted, then John 3:13 does not contribute to the theological discussion. However, if the Greek text which underlies the ASV of this verse is the original text, then John 3:13 is a potent verse supporting the theological doctrine of the omnipresence of Christ.

A full discussion of the textual variants is beyond the scope of this present article.<sup>3</sup> However, after thoroughly examining both the external evidence and the internal evidence, this author is convinced that both lines of evidence point to the validity of the major variant. This article, therefore considers that the Greek text of John 3:13 is the following: καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Ἀνθρώπου ὁ ὢν ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (*kai oudeis anabebēken eis ton ouranon ei mē ho ek tou ouranou katabas, ho huios tou anthrōpou ho ōn en tō ouranō*, “and no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended out of heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven”).

### **Interpreting John 3:13**

#### The Context

The third chapter of John is familiar territory to students of the Word of God. The account of Nicodemus coming to Christ at night, and its emphasis throughout the section on the new birth through faith in the Son of God, is fairly common knowledge. Because of this, an extensive amount of space need not be given to review the general historical context.

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<sup>3</sup>Readers desiring to obtain complete data concerning the textual variants may contact the author at: [loverstreet@nbs.edu](mailto:loverstreet@nbs.edu). Discussions of the external evidence, including specific evidence for each of the text types, and the internal evidence will be e-mailed to those requesting it.

On the other hand, the exact way that v. 13 fits into the overall context does need some clarification. In the eleventh verse the Lord stated that He was giving testimony concerning things He knew and Nicodemus did not receive that testimony. Following that, the Lord asked Nicodemus in v. 12 how he could believe heavenly things when he had not believed earthly things. Having opened the way with this question, in verse 13 the Lord proceeded to give Nicodemus the first piece of information concerning these heavenly things.<sup>4</sup>

The overall sense of the passage is that the perfect knowledge of God's plan of salvation, including the new birth and eternal life, is not obtained by any man ascending from earth to heaven to have it revealed to him. No man has so ascended. Rather, the Son of man, who has perfect knowledge of God's plan, "being essentially and unchangeably 'in the bosom of the Father,'"<sup>5</sup> has descended to this earth not only to reveal how the new birth is necessary (John 3:3, 5), but also how it can be obtained only through the Son (John 3:14-17).

### The Problems

Significant, interpretive problems are encountered in this verse. Two of these interpretive difficulties are relatively minor and two others have greater importance.

#### ***The Minor Interpretive Problems***

Although less interpretive importance is placed on the two minor problems, considerable disagreement among interpreters does exist over these questions. These will now be examined.

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<sup>4</sup>J. C. Ryle, *Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 3:152.

<sup>5</sup>David Brown, *The Gospel According to John, A Commentary Critical, Experimental and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, by Robert Jamieson, A. R. Faussett and David Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 363.

**The Phrase “and no one has ascended into heaven.”** Some disagreement exists over the scope and exact significance of the phrase “and no one has ascended into heaven.” The Greek phrase is: καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν (*kai oudeis anabebēken eis ton ouranon*).

The first area of difficulty is determining the meaning of the conjunction καὶ (*kai*), commonly translated “and.” Some regard this as being simply continuative, saying that Jesus is merely adding words of explanation.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, others regard it as having more than “a mere conjunctive force,” and prefer to translate it “and yet.”<sup>7</sup>

The view which regards the καὶ (*kai*) as being a simple continuative appears to be deficient in this context. Although καὶ (*kai*) “is usually copulative,”<sup>8</sup> it certainly is not grammatically impossible for καὶ (*kai*) to have more than a mere conjunctive force. Robertson says that it “is common to find καὶ [*kai*] where it has to bear the content ‘and yet,’”<sup>9</sup> and he lists John 3:13 as one of the places. In addition, it seems that the context of this section would demand the καὶ (*kai*) to have the significance of “and yet.” This is observed by MacGregor: “In the face of such teaching by Christ [in the preceding verses] the world remains skeptical; ‘and yet’ [emphasis his] if anyone can claim credence he can, in virtue of that unique relationship to ‘heavenly things’ which enables him alone to speak about them at first hand.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1942), 249.

<sup>7</sup>H. R. Reynolds, *The Gospel of John*, The Pulpit Commentary, ed. H. D. M. Spence (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, n.d.) 119.

<sup>8</sup>David Alan Black, *It's Still Greek to Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 131.

<sup>9</sup>Archibald Thomas Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 1182.

<sup>10</sup>G. H. C. MacGregor, *The Gospel of John* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 76.

The second area of interpretive difficulty relates to the words “no one has ascended into heaven,” which are variously understood. One view is to refer the words to the ascension of Christ. A presentation of this view is given by Gaebelein:

But why does He speak here of ascending into heaven, and afterwards mention His descent? He speaks prophetically, that is in anticipation, as elsewhere in this Gospel, especially in His prayer in the seventeenth chapter. There He said, “I am no longer in the world,” yet He was still in the world. So here He anticipates His ascension.<sup>11</sup>

A modification of this ascension of Christ view is given by Barrett: “It seems necessary to suppose that this verse is a comment made from the same standpoint as v. 11; it is not a saying which can be placed within the setting of the historical ministry of Jesus but is the testimony of the Church after His death and ascension.”<sup>12</sup>

The primary difficulty with the interpretation that makes the phrase “no one has ascended into heaven” refer to the ascension of Christ is the use of the perfect indicative ἀναβέβηκεν (*anabebēken*). While the perfect tense can have a futuristic (proleptic) use, Wallace notes that “This usage occurs in the apodosis of a conditional clause (either explicit or implicit) and depends on the time of the verb in the protasis. The proleptic perfect is quite rare.”<sup>13</sup> That the perfect tense in this verse does not fit grammatically with the idea of a future ascension is clear because in “the indicative the perfect signifies action as complete from the point of view of present time.”<sup>14</sup> “In terms of action (*Aktionsart*), the perfect tense expresses *completed* action.

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<sup>11</sup>Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John* (Neptune: Loizeaux, 1965), 717; see also Henry Alford, “ΚΑΤΑ ΙΩΑΝΝΗΝ,” *The Greek Testament*, rev. Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 1:717.

<sup>12</sup>Charles Kingsley Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 178; see also MacGregor, *John*, 76.

<sup>13</sup>Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 581.

<sup>14</sup>H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 200.

The action has ceased. Now the *results* are operative [emphasis his].”<sup>15</sup> To put it another way, the “The force of the perfect tense is simply that it describes an event that, completed in the past (we are speaking of the perfect indicative here), has results existing in the present time (i.e., in relation to the time of the speaker).”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the use of the perfect tense demonstrates that Christ cannot be referring to His future ascension.

The modification of this view which says that this is a later testimony of the church after Christ’s death and ascension, which is here placed on Christ’s lips, serves to cast doubt on the entire veracity of the account. Either Christ said these words or He did not; that much is clear from the context. To say that He actually did not, but is represented as so doing by the later church impinges on the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration, and must be rejected.

An alternate interpretation of the phrase, “no one has ascended into heaven,” regards heaven as a state, rather than a place, the state being that of communion with God. The words would therefore signify: “No one hath attained to communion with God and to the immediate knowledge of divine things, nor can reveal them to others.”<sup>17</sup>

This view that heaven is a state, rather than a place, and that this verse means that Christ attained to the state of communion with God must be rejected for several reasons. In the first place, the verb ἀναβαίνω (*anabainō*, “ascended”) cannot be made to mean “attain” as this view

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<sup>15</sup>James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 162.

<sup>16</sup>Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 573.

<sup>17</sup>Frederic Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. M. D. Cusin and St. Taylor, II (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 62; see also: George Hutcheson, *An Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1959), 45; George Reith, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1948), 1:50.

necessitates. While the lexicons do allow for a figurative<sup>18</sup> or a metaphorical<sup>19</sup> usage of the verb, there is no allowance for anything like that which this view would require.

Secondly, the word οὐρανόν (*ouranon*, “heaven”) is preceded by the definite article τόν (*ton*, “the”). This is significant since, “The Greek article is used to point out particular *identity* [emphasis his],”<sup>20</sup> and if the quality of heaven (or, “state”) were being emphasized one would have expected the article τόν (*ton*) to be absent since, the “anarthrous construction is used to indicate quality or characteristics.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the grammar of the verse points to the “heaven” here as being one with a particular identity.

Having established that the word “heaven” is one with a particular identity, the third reason against this view is the usage of the word “heaven” in the Bible. “The word *heaven* [emphasis his] in the Bible may refer to one of three major realms: (1) the atmospheric heavens which are immediately above us, in which we live and move; (2) the stellar heavens, which ultimately must include the entire universe; and (3) the heaven of heavens, the abode of God.”<sup>22</sup> In this verse the word heaven must refer to the abode of God.

In the fourth place, if heaven is conceived of as being a state in this part of the verse, then it should also be so conceived in the next part of the verse since it is presented in the same fashion. But, if it is other than a place in the next part, then how could Christ have descended from it? Christ did not descend to earth from a “state,” but a place.

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<sup>18</sup>Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 58.

<sup>19</sup>G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner’s, n.d.), 27.

<sup>20</sup>Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville: Broadman, 1950), 16.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Wilbur M. Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 28.

Lastly, if this verse means that Christ had to attain to some spiritual state with the Father in order to obtain a knowledge of divine things, as this interpretation would necessitate, it presents a position inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture elsewhere. As Meyer said:

But Christ brought with Him out of His *pre-existent state* His immediate knowledge of divine things (ver. 11, I. 18, viii. 26, al), and possesses it in uninterrupted fellowship with the Father. To represent Him, therefore, as *during His earthly life*, bringing it down by a figurative and spiritual exaltation to heaven, is wholly inappropriate [emphasis his].<sup>23</sup>

For all the above reasons, the interpretation that heaven is a state must be rejected.

The view which best fits the context and significance of this verse is that which understands it in the sense of no one having ascended to heaven and returned to earth again. This is concisely set forth by Lenski: “If any ordinary man were to become a direct witness of heavenly things, this would necessitate that he first ascend to heaven and then come down again and thus testify what he had seen and heard while he was in heaven.”<sup>24</sup> Watkins presents this interpretation in more detail:

There can be no other means of receiving heavenly truth. . . . No man had so passed to heaven and returned again to earth; but there was One then speaking with him [Nicodemus] who had been in heaven with God, and could tell him its eternal truths. He had that knowledge which a man could obtain only by ascending to heaven and He came down from heaven with it.<sup>25</sup>

Burge also recognizes the depth of these words which come from the lips of Jesus: “Jesus is unique among all others to disclose these heavenly truths because he is the only one among humankind who has truly entered heaven’s realms (3:13). Human teachers do not have access to

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<sup>23</sup>Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Gospel of John*, trans. William Urwick (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), 129.

<sup>24</sup>Lenski, *John’s Gospel*, 249.

<sup>25</sup>H. W. Watkins, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 79.



this sort of revelation. He alone brings a capacity for disclosure that exceeds both human imagination and wisdom.”<sup>26</sup>

**The Phrase “but he who descended out of heaven.”** Some difference of opinion also exists concerning exactly what is involved in the phrase “but he who descended out of heaven.”

The Greek phrase is: εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς (*ei mē ho ek tou ouranou katabas*).

Ryle takes this phrase in an adversative sense:

The Greek word which we render “but,” I am inclined to think, ought to be taken in an *adversative* rather than in an *exceptive* sense. Instances of this usage will be found in Matt. xii. 4; Mark xiii. 32; Luke iv. 26, 27; John xvii. 17; Rev. ix. 4; xxi. 27. The thought appears to be, “Man has not and cannot ascend into heaven. But that which man cannot do, I the Son of man can do [emphasis his].”<sup>27</sup>

While the view which understands the words εἰ μὴ (*ei mē*) in an adversative sense is possible grammatically, it appears dependent on a deficient understanding of the text. This view assumes that the verse means that what man cannot do, which is to ascend into heaven, that Christ can do, the implication being that Christ either had already ascended or that He is yet to ascend. Neither thought fits with the context of the preceding phrase, “and no one has ascended into heaven.”

The words εἰ μὴ (*ei mē*) are better taken in an exceptive sense. In this sense of exception Lenski presents a standard view: “This exception is Jesus; εἰ μὴ [*ei mē*], as so often, introduces an exception. . . . Any other person would first have to ascend into heaven, not so this person--he was in heaven to begin with. Hence all he needed to do was to come down from heaven.”<sup>28</sup> The exceptive sense interpretation takes the words in their usual sense of indicating an exception, but this must be understood. “The particles do not imply that Christ had ascended to heaven, as

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<sup>26</sup>Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 117.

<sup>27</sup>Ryle, *Thoughts on the Gospels*, 153.

<sup>28</sup>Lenski, *John's Gospel*, 249; see also Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek: Illustrated By Examples*, English ed. adapted from the 4<sup>th</sup> Latin ed. (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1979), 158.

though He were one of a class, and contrasted with all the others (*no man except*), but simply that He in fact enjoyed that directness of knowledge by nature which another could only attain to by such an ascension [emphasis his].”<sup>29</sup> To put it another way, “Only the revealer who descended can claim to have ascended. And that he did--not to receive revelation, but to be enthroned as heavenly Son of Man.”<sup>30</sup>

Concerning the phrase “he who descended out of heaven,” interpreters agree that it refers directly to Christ’s incarnation and also encompasses His pre-existence. Regarding this phrase Meyer observed that these words “necessarily imply *existence in heaven* [emphasis his],”<sup>31</sup> and Robertson concludes that the words speak of the “Incarnation of the Pre-existent Son of God who was in heaven before He came down and so he knows what he is telling about ‘the heavenly things.’”<sup>32</sup>

In general, “the aorist participle denotes action that took place *before* [emphasis his] the action of the main verb (antecedent action),”<sup>33</sup> and the use of the aorist participle in this context definitely “suggests antecedent action;”<sup>34</sup> this is also substantivized by the definite article *ὁ* (*ho*). As Westcott correctly observes: “The exact form of expression is very remarkable. It preserves the continuity of the Lord’s personality, and yet does not confound His natures: ‘He that came

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<sup>29</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 115-16.

<sup>30</sup>John W. Pryor, “The Johannine Son of Man and the Descent-Ascent Motif,” *JETS* 34/3 (September 1991), 351.

<sup>31</sup>Meyer, *Gospel of John*, 129.

<sup>32</sup>Archibald Thomas Robertson, “The Fourth Gospel,” *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 5 (New York: Harper, 1932), 49; see also Thomas Whitelaw, *The Gospel of St. John* (Fincastle: Scripture Truth, n.d.), 69.

<sup>33</sup>Black, *It’s Still Greek*, 124.

<sup>34</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 859.

down from heaven, even He who being Incarnate is the Son of man, without ceasing to be what He was before.”<sup>35</sup>

### *The Primary Problems*

**The Phrase “the Son of man.”** Disagreement occurs concerning the exact significance and implications of the phrase “the Son of man.” This is the Greek phrase: ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Ἀνθρώπου (*ho huios tou anthrōpou*).

Some interpreters assert that in this phrase “Jesus wished by thus designating Himself to point Himself out as the Messiah.”<sup>36</sup> Others advocate that by “using the term ‘Son of man,’ Christ emphasized the exalted dignity that is involved in the extent of his self-humiliation and complete sympathy with us.”<sup>37</sup> Still others state that Jesus was called “thus from his being *a man* [emphasis his]; from his interest in man; and as expressive of his regard for man.”<sup>38</sup> Morris presents a more encompassing view when he writes:

Jesus adopted the term, firstly because it was a rare term and one without nationalistic associations. It would lead to no political complications . . . . Secondly, because it had overtones of divinity . . . . Thirdly, because of its societal implications. The Son of man implies the redeemed people of God. Fourthly, because it had undertones of humanity. He took upon Him our weakness.<sup>39</sup>

Concerning this phrase, each of the various interpretations has hit upon an aspect of the true significance of the term. Therefore, rather than attempt an evaluation of the interpretations,

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<sup>35</sup>Westcott, *St. John*, 116.

<sup>36</sup>C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 273.

<sup>37</sup>Reynolds, *John*, 120.

<sup>38</sup>Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical: Luke and John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 205.

<sup>39</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 172.

it is more beneficial to examine this phrase in its Biblical setting, and by this arrive at an understanding of the phrase.<sup>40</sup>

The term examined. This precise phrase always occurs with both definite articles: it is ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Ἀνθρώπου (*ho huios tou anthrōpou*, literally “the son of the man”). This use of the two definite articles indicates that there is something definite and particular involved here. The phrase, as it comes from the lips of our Lord, is such that He is always distinct from just *any* “son of man,” that is, a mere human being. The phrase indicates that He is more than the average human being. Yet, at the same time, the phrase also clearly points to His human nature and so, while He is more than a mere human, He is at the same time possessive of the human nature.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it may be said that this “term does not imply mere humanity . . . . This expression was intended to define the humanity of Christ in a sense like no other of the sons of men.”<sup>42</sup>

The term’s origin. Interpreters commonly recognize that this term has its origin in the prophecy of Daniel (Daniel 7:13). Indeed, Morris points out that the term is “a literal translation

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<sup>40</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) presents seven points concerning which current consensus exists about the phrase “the Son of Man” (924-25). He then observes that the “debate over the meaning of the phrase *Son of Man* in its first century Aramaic setting is complex.” (925): that it has the sense of “someone” or “man all agree, but could it also be an ambiguous way of merely saying ‘I,’ like English speakers use an editorial ‘we.’” His conclusion is: “But my contention is that NT usage makes it clear that *either* sense of the Aramaic, even the ambiguous sense, in the original setting and tradition would contain a veiled reference to Jesus. Either way, contextually, the force of Jesus’ use would point only to him” (926). In examining Luke 5:24 specifically he asserts that the phrase refers first “to Jesus as a representative man called by God to exercise authority over sin” in a unique way, second that “Jesus’ actions underlined this authority and defined it,” and third that the “authoritative Son of Man was merged with the Suffering Servant portrait of Isa. 52:12-53:12” (930). For further discussion on the phrase “the Son of Man,” see: Barnabas Lindars, *Jesus Son of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); David R. Jackson, “The Priority of the Son of Man Sayings,” *The Westminster Theological journal* 47.1 (Spring 1985): 83-96; Richard L. Longenecker, “‘Son of Man’ as a Self-Designation of Jesus,” *JETS* 12.3 (Summer 1969): 151-58; and Richard L. Longenecker, “‘Son of Man’ Imagery: Some Implications for Theology and Discipleship,” *JETS* 18.1 (Winter 1975): 3-16.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Lenski, *John’s Gospel*, 178.

<sup>42</sup>Herman A. Hoyt, *The New Birth* (Findlay: Dunham, 1961), 78.

of the Aramaic” of Daniel 7:13.<sup>43</sup> This, then, clearly gives the term a Messianic significance as Keil so aptly pointed out: “If, then, Jesus speaks of Himself as the Son of Man, He means thereby not merely to say that He was the Messiah, but He wishes to designate Himself as the Messiah of Daniel’s prophecy, *i.e.* as the Son of Man coming to the earth in the clouds of heaven.”<sup>44</sup> Since the term has its origin in Daniel 7:13, that text must be examined.

The term in Daniel 7:13. In Daniel 7:13 the word “like” that precedes the phrase “Son of man” points out that as Daniel looked at this heavenly person he observed a contrast, that this person was “not like the beasts,”<sup>45</sup> but was “like unto a son of man.” In addition, “in so far as the preposition ‘like’ may indicate the preincarnate state of the heavenly Figure . . . the humanity of the Person is also indicated.”<sup>46</sup>

Daniel 7:13 also states that He “came with the clouds of heaven.” The “expression that He is attended by ‘clouds of heaven’ implies His deity,” since in the Bible clouds “are frequently characteristic of revelation of deity (Ex 13:21-22; 19:9, 16; I Ki 8:10-11; Is 19:1; Jer 4:13; Eze 10:4; Mt 24:30; 26:64; Mk 13:26).”<sup>47</sup>

Daniel 7:14 also indicates that a worldwide everlasting kingdom encompassing “all the peoples, nations, and languages” would be given to Him. Clearly someone far above the average man is involved in this term’s use in Daniel. Longenecker astutely observes that the title “Son of Man was a distinctly self-designation of Jesus used by Him to indicate His understanding of the

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<sup>43</sup>Morris, *John*, 172.

<sup>44</sup>Keil, *Daniel*, 274; see also Edward A. McDowell, *Son of Man and Suffering Servant* (Nashville: Broadman, 1944), 100-05.

<sup>45</sup>Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 154.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 155-56.

<sup>47</sup>John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 167; see also Frederick A. Tatford, *The Climax of the Ages* (London: Oliphants, 1964), 114.

nature of His Messiahship. In so doing, He reached back to the enigmatic figure of Daniel 7 and in fulfillment of the prophet's vision sought thereby to explicate His person and redemptive ministry in terms of glorification through suffering."<sup>48</sup>

The term's significance. Carson has accurately observed that "Outside the New Testament, the title is associated with glory (especially Dn. 7; 1 *Enoch*); within the Synoptics, the title is as frequently associated with suffering. In John, the two are dramatically brought together."<sup>49</sup> This term's broader overall significance can be summarized as follows:

It is His racial name as the representative Man, in the sense of 1 Cor. 15:45-47 . . . . Our Lord constantly uses this term as implying that His mission (e. g. Mt. 11:19; Lk. 19:10), His death and resurrection (e. g. Mt. 12:40; 20:18; 26:2), and His second coming (e. g. Mt. 24:37-44; Lk. 12:40), transcend in scope and result all merely Jewish limitations . . . . It is in this name, also, that universal judgment is committed to Him (John 5:22, 27). It is also a name indicating that in Him is fulfilled the O. T. foreview of blessing through a coming man (Gen. 1:26, note; 3:15; 12:3; Psa. 8:4; 80:17; Isa. 7:14; 9:6, 7; 32:2; Zech. 13:7).<sup>50</sup>

**The Phrase "who is in heaven."** The phrase "who is in heaven" is variously interpreted by those who consider it as part of the actual text of this verse. The crucial item is to determine what it signifies as it relates to the life of our Lord. The Greek phrase is: ὁ ὢν ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (*ho ōn en tō ouranō*). This seemingly simple and direct phrase has occasioned considerable difference of opinion in interpretation.

The heaven is home interpretation. Although Plummer doubts the genuineness of the words in this textual reading, he states that, "If they are retained, the meaning is, 'Whose proper home is heaven.'"<sup>51</sup> While this view correctly understands heaven as an actual place, it is

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<sup>48</sup>Longenecker, "'Son of Man' as a Self-Designation," 158; see also: Kenneth O. Gangel, "Daniel 7: A Vision of Future World History," *Grace Theological Journal* 6.2 (Fall 1985), 253-55; Seyoon Kim, *The Son of Man as the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 15-37.

<sup>49</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 482.

<sup>50</sup>C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1945), 1006.

nonetheless deficient. The heaven is home interpretation asserts that the reference is to the idea that Christ's home is heaven, even though He was for a time on earth. The primary difficulty with this particular interpretation is that it simply does not agree with the obvious language of the verse. The verse does not say that Christ's *home* is in heaven; rather, it says that *Christ* is in heaven at the very time He is talking to Nicodemus.

The spiritual sense interpretation. The spiritual sense interpretation is that which takes the word "heaven" in a spiritual sense, as a state, and says that Christ was actually in this state rather than in a local place known as heaven.

If heaven is thought of as a place infinitely distant beyond clouds and sky, or as a time in the far future when this world's life shall end, then it is indeed hard to understand what is here meant . . . . But if heaven is something wholly different . . . ; if it is a state, a life, in which we are, which is in us--now in part, hereafter in its fullness—then may we understand.<sup>52</sup>

In a previous section of this paper, the term "heaven" was discussed and reasons presented why the word should be understood in the sense of locality. The same reasons apply here. To attempt to make the word mean something other than a local place is inconsistent with the wording of the text.

The later insertion interpretation. A third deficient interpretation is mentioned by Lenski. It asserts that the phrase is an insertion by the writer John and means that, as John writes his gospel, Jesus is again in heaven.<sup>53</sup> Lenski cogently evaluates this viewpoint: "The interpretation

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<sup>51</sup>A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: Clay, 1883), 97; see also Meyer, *Gospel of John*, 129.

<sup>52</sup>Watkins, *John*, 79-80; see also Godet, *St. John*, 63 and Robert Govett, *Exposition of the Gospel of St. John*, vol. 1 (London: Bemrose, n.d.), 96.

<sup>53</sup>Lenski, *John's Gospel*, 253.

that ‘who is in heaven’ is an insertion by the evangelist and means that now, as he writes, Jesus is again in heaven, destroys the entire historical nature of John’s Gospel.”<sup>54</sup>

The past tense or future tense interpretation. The fourth view understands ὁ ὢν (*ho ōn*, “the one being”) as either meaning “who was,” taking it in the past tense as an imperfect, or “who shall be,” taking it in the future tense. For example, Godet states: “Some commentators have understood ὁ ὢν . . . as signifying *who was* (before the incarnation) or *who shall be* (after the ascension) [italics his].”<sup>55</sup> Zerwick, for example, asserts that the participle can be understood in a past tense manner: “So too the variant reading Jo. 3.13 ὁ ὢν ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ may be rendered not only ‘who is in heaven’ but also ‘who was in heaven.’”<sup>56</sup>

If the future tense had been meant, no reason exists why our Lord did not use the actual future tense of the verb εἶμι (*eimi*, “to be”). He could have used ἔσομαι (*esomai*, “I shall be”) if He had wanted to indicate a future tense. The fact is, however, that a present participle was chosen, and not the future tense.

If the past tense is what is meant here, Lenski pointed out that the grammar of the verse should still have been different. In answering the question as to what should be said about this view he has written:

This is based on the grammatical fact that the present participle ὢν [*ōn*] serves for both the present and the imperfect tense, the more since εἶναι [*einai*] really has no aorist. While the grammatical point is correct, ὢν [*ōn*] means “was” only when it modifies an imperfect tense of the verb and from that verb, like other present participles (all of which serve also for the imperfect tense) derives the sense of the imperfect. In the statement of Jesus no imperfect tense of a verb appears to which ὢν [*ōn*] could be attached.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Godet, *St. John*, 64.

<sup>56</sup>Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, 92.

<sup>57</sup>Lenski, *John’s Gospel*, 251.



The omnipresent Christ interpretation. A final way this phrase has been understood is presented by Adam Clarke:

Lest a wrong meaning should be taken from the foregoing expression, and it should be imagined that, in order to manifest himself upon earth, he must necessarily leave heaven; our blessed Lord qualifies it by adding, *the Son of man who is in heaven*; pointing out, by this, the *ubiquity* or *omnipresence* of his nature [italics his].<sup>58</sup>

This is the best way to understand this phrase. It contends that while Jesus was on earth speaking to Nicodemus He also was in heaven at the same time. Having said this, however, some clarification is needed.

What is seen in this verse is the fact that, although He was only one person, Christ very clearly had two natures: divine and human. “In becoming flesh He certainly came down from heaven: yet He never ceased to be God who is in heaven.”<sup>59</sup>

As far as His divine nature is concerned, Jesus Christ is God and therefore omnipresent. Walvoord recognized the significance of this: “If the disputed translation of John 3:13 be allowed to stand, the clause ‘which is in heaven’ is an explicit statement of this doctrine. If Christ is God, then He is omnipresent; and if He is omnipresent, He is God.”<sup>60</sup>

The relationship of Christ’s humanity to the doctrine of omnipresence must also be considered, however. Asserting that Christ is omnipresent in His deity does not therefore require that His human body must also be omnipresent: “Falsely, however, do the Ubiquitarian heretics maintain that the body of Christ is everywhere, because His Divinity is everywhere. For it is proper to His Divinity to be everywhere, but to His

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<sup>58</sup>Adam Clarke, “The Gospel According to St. John,” *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon, n.d.), 532-33.

<sup>59</sup>F. B. Hole, *The Gospel of John Briefly Expounded* (London: Central Bible Truth Depot, n.d.), 28.

<sup>60</sup>John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 28.

humanity to be in a certain and determined place, circumscribed by limits.”<sup>61</sup> Feinberg correctly expands this point, as he states concerning Christ’s deity: “Omniscience is just that always; omnipresence is always such; omnipotence connotes the same thing always. There is not a limited omnipresence, because although the Logos was in the body of Christ, He was also in heaven (John 3:13).”<sup>62</sup>

Thus, while Christ was speaking to Nicodemus both His human and divine natures were in the presence of Nicodemus, but beyond this His divine nature was also in heaven at the same time. “Jesus *is* [italics his] in heaven though as the Son of man he walks on earth--that fact stands whether it staggers our reason and powers of comprehension or not.”<sup>63</sup>

Although Burge does not specifically comment on the omnipresence of Christ, his comments on the depth of theology in this text are relevant:

Therefore there is an *ontological* [italics his] dimension to Christology in John that is essential. Jesus has descended from heaven (3:13). This notion offers a remarkable appeal to my century: Christology makes an absolute claim, an outrageous claim, to religious truth. No other source can rival what is being claimed here for Jesus. He provides access to God that is unlike any other religious founder.”<sup>64</sup>

When we consider that this text presents a Christology which not only asserts that Jesus alone provides access to God, but that when He, on earth, provided that access to Nicodemus He was also then simultaneously in the presence of God in heaven, then the extent of the Christology of the Gospel is indeed unlike any other.

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<sup>61</sup>Cornelius Á. Lapidé, *St. John’s Gospel—Chaps. 1 to 11*, trans. Thomas W. Mossman (London: Hodges, 1886), 418.

<sup>62</sup>Charles Lee Feinberg, “The Hypostatic Union, Part 2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 92 (October-December 1935), 417.

<sup>63</sup>Lenski, *John’s Gospel*, 252-53.

<sup>64</sup>Burge, *John*, 125.

### **Conclusion**

John 3:13 contains several areas of difficulty for the interpreter. The first problem in the verse is the determination of its actual Greek text. This paper assumes that the reading of the Majority Text, representing the major variant from the critical text, is the true text of John 3:13. That text, therefore, was the one which was interpreted in this article.

The historical setting of the verse is familiar ground to the student of the New Testament with its emphasis on the new birth and how the Son of God came to reveal its necessity and how it could be obtained. Since there was no one who ever could ascend into heaven to receive the divine truth of God's salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself descended from heaven, in His incarnation, to reveal to mankind heavenly things.

In His ministry upon this earth He was seen to be the Son of man, a title drawn from Daniel 7:13, which demonstrated His humanity, His Messiahship, and implied His Deity. Even though He took upon Himself human form and walked on this earth, He never ceased to be God; and as God He was in heaven while He was also on earth. John 3:13 serves as direct evidence, therefore, of the doctrine of Christ's omnipresence and also assumes the doctrine of the hypostatic union.