

WHO COMES FIRST ... JESUS OR JOHN?

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John bore witness of Him, and cried out, saying, "This is He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me'" (John 1:15 NASB).

"This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me'" (John 1: 30 NASB)

According to this translation, John the Baptist *twice* told all of Israel that Jesus Christ "existed before" him. If true, this translation supports the common notion that Jesus personally pre-existed John --- either as an angelic spirit-being or as God Himself. And we might therefore have to agree, that Jesus' alleged priority in time is a good reason why John would say Jesus is "higher in rank" than he.

Some translations take outlandish steps to promote Jesus' personal, conscious pre-existence before John the Baptist. The TEV for example, reads that John said of Jesus,

"He comes after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born"!

Is this doctrine warranted? Was Jesus literally around long ages before John himself was born of Elizabeth?

Remember that John and Jesus were blood-relatives, cousins. Also recall that John the Baptist was physically older than Jesus because he had been conceived 6 months before the angel Gabriel told Mary she would miraculously conceive the Son of God. We must therefore ask, whether this greatest of all Israel's prophets (according to Matt. 11:11), really did believe his cousin Jesus was *both* older and younger than he was!?

"THE FIRST OF ME"

Now, there is indeed a translation challenge here, it must be admitted. Most readers of our English Bibles are unaware that John did not actually say that Jesus "existed before me". The Greek language had a very good way of saying that something pre-existed, or existed before hand. But that is not what is written here. ¹ What John actually says is that Jesus *has become the first of me.* ²

To say that Jesus is "the first of me" may mean one of two things. Either Jesus is the first of John because he really was alive before his conception in Mary, which is to say, that Jesus existed first in time before John came to be born. As already mentioned, the TEV certainly takes it this way by making John claim that Jesus "existed before I was born."

Or, it can mean Jesus is the first in the sense that he is John's superior by rank --- Jesus is God's designated King of Israel, the Messianic Lord promised long ago. Therefore, it is first in terms of status. So, which nuance does John intend? First in time, or first in status, or perhaps both?

CONTEXT

As always, any ambiguity must be settled by the context in addition to the grammar. Let's recall that John the Baptist was the "forerunner" who came announcing the arrival of Israel's long-promised Messiah. John was sent by God to bear witness of the light that was then breaking into Israel's lost and dark state. ³ At long last the wait was over. Israel's king was finally on the scene. John had set the stage up perfectly. He knew he was only "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (Matt. 3:3).

¹ For those interested the word *prohuparchon* would suffice nicely, but this word is never once used in the New Testament to speak of Jesus' alleged pre-human origin. Furthermore, *pro* is the commoner word in John's Gospel to convey previously in time.

² *Gegonen* is a perfect active indicative 3 singular = "he has become" from *ginomai*.

³ John 1: 6-7.

John was very clear as to his calling and mission. On one occasion some of his own concerned disciples were worried about Jesus' rising popularity. John made it quite clear that he was not worthy to stoop down and untie the sandal straps of Jesus Messiah stating that, "**he must increase but I must decrease**" (John 3:30).

This real-life context (the theologians call it the *Sitz im Leben*) surely helps us understand what John the Baptist meant when he said that Jesus who had been behind him has now moved to the front? ⁴ The obvious time-element referred to is that, John's prior ministry of being the forerunner, preparing the way for Messiah, is now fulfilled. Jesus Christ is the one he was preparing for, pointing to, anticipating. John's time is finished. Jesus now moves to the front. Jesus is now first in respect of John. Jesus is John's superior, to the extent that John's brief ministry pales into insignificance compared to the everlasting kingship of Jesus the Messiah.

John the Baptist gives the reason why Jesus is **mightier** than he. He says Jesus is the one who **will baptise you with the holy Spirit and fire. And his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3: 11f).** So, according to the Baptist himself, the stated reason why Jesus is greater is because he will baptise in the holy Spirit --- not just in water for the remission of sins as John was able to do. And to baptise in the holy Spirit and in fire to Jewish ears was code-talk meaning, Jesus is the Messiah about to inaugurate the new Kingdom Age.

An essential aspect of such a baptism of fire, says John, is that Jesus is the judge who will determine who goes into the barn as the precious wheat belonging to God, and who will be excluded. Jesus holds the eternal destiny of everybody in his hands! This enormous position is certainly not John's.

When this context is taken into full consideration, we see the obvious and most natural reading of John's announcement is that, the only time-element being considered is the timing of their respective ministries. John's preaching was first in time, being preparatory and anticipatory of the coming Messiah.

The fair minded reader will see this time-element has **nothing** to do with Jesus "**existing before I was born**"; **nothing** to do with any so-called eternal existence of Jesus before the creation of the world! **Nothing** to do with Jesus being God before becoming man! **Nothing** to do with Jesus being a spirit-being or an angel before transforming into flesh! It has **everything** to do with John stepping out of the limelight and indeed, becoming redundant. **Everything** to do with Jesus eclipsing John's secondary role. Jesus is now first, number 1.

So, let's translate John's statements according to their cultural context and their Scriptural world-setting:-

John bore witness of him, and cried out, saying, "This is he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for he is the first of me (where God's Kingdom plans are concerned)'" (John 1:15).

"This is he on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who has a higher rank than I, for he is first before me (in terms of priority in God's Kingdom)'" (John 1:30).

Not a few Bible translators recognize this is the essence of John's statements. The esteemed Australian Anglican theologian Dr. Leon Morris renders it; "**He was my Chief**" (*New International Critical Commentary on John*). And Schonfield has it, "**For he is my superior**" (*Authentic New Testament*). Others could be cited.

HARMONY WITH OTHER SCRIPTURES

There is another time in Scripture where the similar expression "of whom I am first" is a reference to rank and not to priority in time. The apostle Paul says in **1 Timothy 1: 15,**

This is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all (NASB). ⁵

⁴ The Greek preposition *opiso* means behind or after.

⁵ The Greek reads, "**... of whom first I am**".

In the Greek here, Paul literally says, “of whom I am first”. It obviously does not mean Paul was the first ever sinner --- that ignominy belongs to Adam. No. The meaning is that Paul is the foremost of all sinners in order of ranking. Paul is the first --- albeit in a negative way --- in the sinner category, so that he might be an example of God’s saving grace. Paul is the first sinner because he is the chief sinner.

Back to Jesus. John says Jesus is first in rank. The rest of the NT says the same thing. For instance, **Colossians 1: 16-18** gives a beautiful summary of Jesus’ current status and rank in God’s plan for mankind. The careful reader will note in what way Jesus has been made number 1, that is, the first of all of us, and indeed, the first of all created beings;

For in him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities --- all things have been created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; and he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that he himself might come to have first place in everything.

Contrary to popular thinking, these verses have nothing to do with Jesus’ personal pre-existence as God before the Genesis creation. The context has everything to do with the state of affairs since the resurrection of the Lord Messiah Jesus from the dead. Having been raised from the dead Jesus is now the accredited Lord Messiah. Observe that this is part of Paul’s hymn of praise to God the Father who has “qualified” us “to share in the inheritance of the saints in light”, and Who has delivered us from Satan’s dark domain and “transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son” (vs. 12-13). This is new Kingdom age talk, not original Genesis beginning stuff!

Verse 15 then looks at the now-ascended and presently glorified Lord Jesus who “**is** --- note *the present tense!* --- the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation”. As **the firstborn over all creation**, Jesus holds a superior rank and status above all other created beings, “whether they are in heaven or on earth, visible or invisible, whether thrones of dominions or rulers or authorities” (v. 16).

All of which is to say, that God’s original ---but now redeemed and re-organised creation --- has been re-created with a view to Jesus and his Messianic lordship. ⁶ The Messianic era has now begun for there has been a massive cosmological shift from the old Genesis creation to the new. This is what John the Baptist announced!

In this way Jesus “**is** before all things” (v. 17). The careful reader will again observe *the present tense*. It does not read as many would wish it did. It does not say that Jesus “was before all things”! He **is** before all things in the sense that he is over all things in superiority and lordship.

So it’s all about Jesus’ present exalted status. He is “the head of the body, the church”. This is talking about ranking. And Jesus has it in spades, so to speak. He is “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead” (v. 18), which means Jesus is “the beginning” precisely because he is the first man ever raised to immortality by God.

And God’s stated purpose in doing this is, “**so that he himself might come to have first place in everything”** (v. 18). Please note carefully: God has done all this in and through our Lord Jesus for the express purpose of making His Son **come** to have first place in everything within God’s predetermined purpose for all creation. If Jesus had already existed as God from the beginning then he already had first place and would not need to have it bestowed upon him. It would have been his by virtue of his Divine creating --- regardless.

Here then is a status that Jesus has “**come**” to hold. That is, he did not return to a pre-incarnated status in the Godhead as per popular trinitarian thinking! The idea is that Jesus is first in relation to an inherited position, and not first by virtue of a pre-existence in time before all creation. Our Lord Jesus is preeminent in dignity over all the earth and heaven for he has been given first place as the head of God’s new creation. Hallelujah!

⁶ This verse clearly says in the original that “**in him**”, that is, with a view to the Messiah, God has brought the whole universe into existence --- it definitely does not say that “by him” (i.e. by Jesus) all things were created! James D.G. Dunn translates “**in him in intention**” in his *Christology in the Making*, p 190 which captures the Greek perfectly.

WHY IS JESUS 'WORTHY TO TAKE THE BOOK AND BREAK ITS SEALS'?

After one meeting I recently attended, a certain woman came up to me and made this astounding claim; "In the Book of the Revelation Jesus is the only one found in heaven worthy to open the book and break the seals. This proves Jesus is God!"

Now I asked the lady to go and read the passage again, because I tried to politely insist that the reason this Scripture gives for Jesus being worthy is that he is firstly, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who has **overcome** so as to open the book and its seven seals (Rev. 5: 5). Which is to say, that Jesus has fulfilled the prophetic qualifications of being the messianic descendant of David. He is the victorious one, having "**overcome**" by virtue of his having been raised by God to immortality. Because God raised him up victorious, Jesus now holds **the keys of death and of Hades** (Rev. 1: 18). (Which is why Jesus is first over John the Baptist.)

Secondly, the stated qualification for Jesus opening the book is that he is called **the Lamb of God** who **was slain** (v. 6). And if there is any doubt that the reason Scripture says Jesus is worthy to open the Book of (the redeemed) creation, all one has to do is to listen to the praise given to him from the four living creatures and the 24 elders that follows,

"You are worthy to take the book, and to break its seals; *for you were slain, and did purchase for God with your blood those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And you have made them to be kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth*" (Rev. 5: 9f).

The stated reason why Jesus is first and why he is worthy to open the book is because of his completed redemption to secure the kingdom for the people of God. There is not a single word about Jesus being worthy to open the book because he is God Himself! Not a word. (This is not even to mention the absurdity of suggesting the immortal God --- whom Jesus defined as "Spirit" --- can die and bleed!

Perhaps John the Baptist did not envision the full impact and implications of his prophetic announcement that Jesus is the Lamb of God who is **the first of me**? That probably goes without saying. After all, he was the forerunner who probably only saw things dimly and in outline. Yes, he certainly saw Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". But he probably never imagined the full length and breadth, nor the full height and depth, of the eschatological implications of his prophetic call.

John the Baptist probably never envisioned the exalted glory of the victorious Lamb. He probably never saw **myriads of angels** also joining the paean of praise to the Lamb who was slain. (John was killed in Herod's prison, a forlorn character, who had even doubted that Jesus was the Messiah.) But note carefully, although Jesus is now fully identified with the One who sits on the Throne, and although he is worshipped in closest association with that One, he is never identified as the One God who is on the throne. Jesus is worthy to receive all power and riches and honour and glory and blessing because of his redemptive victory (v. 12).

Even though now glorified, Jesus still confesses that he has One Who is God above him (Rev. 1:6; 3: 2, 12, etc.). It is always **"God and the Lamb"**, never "God as the Lamb" (e.g. Rev. 6: 16; 7: 10; 14:4; 15:3; 21:22; 22: 1, 3). **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself."** Definitely not, "God was Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5: 19). Definitely not, "As Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself"!

So. Who comes first ... Jesus or John? Hah. No contest! Jesus is before all of God's creation, in this age and in the one to come, which is to say, he is before all things in the sense that he is above all, over all, higher than all, superior to all ... with the exception of his God and our God, his Father and our Father, who has given him first place. And that's exactly what John the Baptist confessed, **"He is the first of me --- my Messianic Lord, my Superior and King!"**