

Did Jesus have a “Pre-Human” Existence?

There are very, very few groups in the world that have “Unitarian” beliefs - that is, the belief that only **one** person - our Heavenly Father - is Almighty God. (Almost all denominations state that God exists as “three persons in one Godhead”.)

Among the few groups that *do* have Unitarian beliefs, there are two main doctrines about who Jesus, himself, actually is. Those doctrines are called the “Biblical Unitarian” doctrine, and the “Arian” doctrine.

According to the Biblical Unitarian doctrine, Jesus did *not* personally exist, *until* he was conceived in Mary’s womb. In other words, Jesus did *not* have *any* pre-human existence - just like *we* did not have any pre-human existence. However, God had Jesus “in mind”, from the beginning of creation. In other words, Jesus was part of God’s *plan of salvation*, even before the earth was formed.

According to the Arian doctrine, Jesus is the very *first* being that God created. In other words, God created Jesus, *before* anything else in the universe existed. As a result, Jesus *did* personally exist - as a spirit being - long before he was born on the earth. Also, according to this doctrine, Jesus actually *created the universe* - i.e., after God created Jesus, then Jesus created *everything else* (under God’s direction.)

There are a number of verses that can be used, to support *both* of the above doctrines. So, in this document, I’d like to provide an overview of the two main “issues” involved, in trying to determine which of those doctrines is closer to the truth.

1. The “translation” issue

First off, as we all know, the Bible was *not* originally written in English - it was written in other languages, and then *translated* into English. As a result, it is absolutely essential that the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek words from Scripture be translated *accurately*, in order for English speakers to be able to obtain a proper understanding of Scripture.

There are a number of verses that can be translated multiple ways into English - and some of those verses have a profound impact on our understanding of who Jesus is. Here are the two most important verses that I have found, with regard to this issue.

John 1:1 (ESV):

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The Greek word which is translated as “Word” is *logos*. Biblical Unitarians believe that *logos* is better translated as God’s “will”, or “plan”. In other words, *logos* represents what God *wants* to happen. Arians believe that *logos* refers to God’s “master worker”. That is, *logos* represents the *pre-human* Jesus, existing as a spirit being.

Colossians 1:15 (ESV):

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

The Greek word which is translated as “firstborn” is *prototokos*. That Greek word has two completely *different* (and *valid*) meanings: first in **time**, and first in **rank**. Biblical Unitarians believe that in this

verse, prototokos should be translated as “first in rank” - i.e., Jesus has been given the highest level of **authority** in all of creation. Arians believe that in this verse, prototokos should be translated as “first in time” - that is, Jesus was the very first being - **chronologically** - to be created.

2. The “literal vs. figurative” issue

Many of the verses in the Bible are definitely *literal*; whereas others are obviously *figurative*. In other words, in some verses, we must take the words of Scripture in their most “natural” or “normal” sense; while in other verses, we must take the words of Scripture as “figures of speech”, or as “object lessons”.

Here are two examples of this issue – one literal, and one figurative:

Deuteronomy 6:4 (ESV):

⁴“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Matthew 5:29 (ESV):

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

The first verse, above, is definitely *literal* - while the second verse is certainly *figurative*. In those verses, this is quite obvious. However, in many cases, it is not so obvious which verses are literal, and which are figurative.

This issue has an enormous impact on learning who Jesus is. In my view, our *entire understanding* of who Jesus is depends upon which verses we take as literal, and which we take as figurative!

Here are some of the most important verses, with regard to this “literal vs. figurative” issue. These verses are arranged into two “groups”:

Group 1:

2 Samuel 7:12 (ESV):

¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up **your offspring** after you, who shall come from **your body**, and I will establish his kingdom.

If I take the above passage in its most “natural” sense, then I conclude that the messiah will be a literal, genetic, **descendant** of King David. As a result, if that passage is taken literally, then that tells me that Jesus did *not* have a pre-human existence – because if he did, then he would **not** be a “descendant” of David at all!

Luke 1:30-31 (ESV):

³⁰And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will **conceive in your womb** and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

If I take the above passage in its most “natural” sense, then I conclude that Jesus’ existence began when God caused Mary to **conceive** – i.e., when He caused one of Mary’s eggs to become fertilized. As a result,

if this passage is taken literally, then that tells me that Jesus did *not* have a pre-human existence – because if he did, then Mary would **not** have “conceived” a baby – instead, she would have “received” a baby!

1 Peter 1:20 (ESV):

²⁰He was **foreknown** before the foundation of the world but was **made manifest in the last times** for the sake of you

If I take the above passage in its most “natural” sense, then I conclude that God **knew** that He **would** create Jesus, from before the foundation of the world; but He did **not** actually create Jesus, *until* He caused Mary to conceive. As a result, if this passage is taken literally, then that tells me that Jesus did *not* have a pre-human existence – because if he did, then Jesus would not have been **foreknown** before the foundation of the world – instead, he would have **existed** before the foundation of the world!

Isaiah 44:24 (ESV):

²⁴Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
who formed you from the womb:
“I am the LORD, who made all things,
who **alone** stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth **by myself**,

If I take the above passage in its most “natural” sense, then I conclude that God created the universe **all by Himself** – *no one* assisted Him in that task. As a result, if this passage is taken literally, then that tells me that Jesus did **not** create the universe – i.e., that Jesus is **not** God’s “master worker”, who created the heavens and the earth.

Group 2:

John 17:5 (ESV):

⁵And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that **I had with you before the world existed**.

If I take the above passage in its most “natural” sense, then I conclude that Jesus **personally** received glory from God, before the world was created. As a result, if this passage is taken literally, then that tells me that Jesus *did* have a pre-human existence – because if he didn’t, then he could not personally receive glory from God before the world began!

Philippians 2:5-7 (ESV):

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though **he was in the form of God**, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ **but made himself nothing**, taking the form of a servant, **being born in the likeness of men**.

If I take the above passage in its most “natural” sense, then I conclude that Jesus originally had a **different type** of existence – an existence “in the form of God”. Then, sometime after that, Jesus was born as a human being. As a result, if this passage is taken literally, then that tells me that Jesus *did* have a pre-human existence – because if he didn’t, then he would **not** have had another type of existence, before being born as a man!

John 3:13 (ESV):

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except **he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.**

If I take the above passage in its most “natural” sense, then I conclude that Jesus personally **existed**, in heaven, **before** he was born on the earth. As a result, if this passage is taken literally, then that tells me that Jesus *did* have a pre-human existence – because if he didn’t, then he would **not** have actually “descended” from heaven!

1 Corinthians 15:47 (ESV):

⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; **the second man is from heaven.**

If I take the above passage in its most “natural” sense, then I conclude that Jesus was **originally** created in heaven – while Adam was originally created on the earth. As a result, if this passage is taken literally, then that tells me that Jesus *did* have a pre-human existence – because if he didn’t, then he would **not** have originally existed in heaven!

The verses in the above two groups greatly affect my understanding of who Jesus is. Basically, if I take the verses in group 1 as **literal**, and the verses in group 2 as **figurative**, then I arrive at a Biblical Unitarian understanding of Jesus. However, if I take group 1 as **figurative**, and group 2 as **literal**, then I come to an Arian understanding of Jesus.

I myself wrestled with the issue of “who Jesus is” for a long time; but a few years ago, I finally arrived at a Biblical Unitarian understanding of Jesus. (Of course, I could still be wrong...) I would be very interested to hear what any of you have to say on this issue!

I would like to thank Patrick Navas for his very thought-provoking information on this subject - the whole “literal vs. figurative” issue that I describe above was inspired by a huge pdf document that he wrote! A link to that doc can be found here: http://ncbf.homestead.com/Pre-Human_Existence.pdf

In closing, I would like to bring up an important point. It is certainly true that the Biblical Unitarian and Arian doctrines cannot **both** be true – i.e., either Jesus **did** have a personal pre-human existence, or he did **not**. However, in “overall” terms, both of those doctrines **agree** with each other, much *more* than they disagree with each other. For example, consider the following items:

- Both Biblical Unitarians and Arians believe that only **one** person – our Heavenly Father – is God;
- Both Biblical Unitarians and Arians believe that God **created** Jesus – i.e., Jesus did **not** always exist;
- Both Biblical Unitarians and Arians believe that Jesus actually **died** on the cross – i.e., he did not have a “God nature” that kept on living.

In essence, the only item that Biblical Unitarians and Arians disagree on is about **when** God created Jesus. As a result, I would definitely encourage people from **both** groups to try to fellowship with each other. After all, 99% of Christians disagree with *all three* of the above points. So, I think it is very important for the few of us that **do** believe those items to try to stick together!