

Exegetical Brief: The Son Of Man Who Is In Heaven

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One of the most interesting textual variants in the New Testament is found in John 3:13: "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man [who is in heaven]." The bracketed words make an astonishing claim. Did Jesus claim that he was in heaven even while he was talking to Nicodemus on earth?

The NIV relegates the bracketed words to a footnote. The latest edition of the UBS text omits the bracketed words and gives the shorter reading a B rating. However, a very strong case can be made for the longer reading.

The textual commentary on the UBS text cites the "quality of the external attestation supporting the shorter reading," but evidence for the omission is restricted largely to Egyptian witnesses. The omission of the reading from the UBS text seems to be an example of the editors' bias toward Sinaiticus and Vaticanus.

The reading "who is in heaven" is present in nearly all the uncial and minuscule manuscripts of the NT, nearly all the ancient versions, and the majority of the citations in the early church fathers. The support for the longer reading is spread over a wide geographical area. An objective consideration of the manuscript evidence clearly supports the longer reading.

What about the more subjective internal evidence?

The longer reading is clearly the more difficult for human reason to grasp. It is easy to understand why a scribe might omit it. It is very hard to imagine why one would add it.

The difficulty of the longer reading "who is in heaven" explains all three variants to v 13, namely, the omission of these words and the emendations to "who was in heaven" and "who is from heaven." All three of these readings can be explained as attempts to remove the difficulty.

Many textual critics like the criterion "the shorter reading is preferred" since they claim that scribes were more likely to add explanatory words than they were to omit words. However, there is nothing in the verse which would be explained by the addition of "who is in heaven."

The reading "who is in heaven" is scriptural theology, fully in keeping with John's Christology. It agrees with the theology of John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." The theology of both verses is the same, but the wording is dissimilar enough to render unlikely the opinion that the longer reading in 3:13 was added to harmonize 3:13 with 1:18.

The textual commentary to the UBS suggests that the longer reading is an interpretative gloss, reflecting later Christological development. It is true that the longer reading reflects a high Christology. But is it true that such a high Christology is a later development? Throughout his Gospel John proclaims Jesus as the God-man. Jesus, who as the Word pre-existed from eternity, did not cease to be the infinite God when he took on human flesh and blood. Even while he was the Son of Man on earth, Jesus did not cease to be the Son of God in heaven.

Both the textual evidence and the theological evidence support the incredible conclusion that "the Son of Man who came from heaven is in heaven." The UBS's omission of the description of the Son of Man as one "who is in heaven" seems to be based on an overestimation of the value of the Egyptian uncials and an underestimation of John's Christology.