

Some Issues Relating to the Preexistence of Christ in the New Testament and the Current Debate

ANTHONY BUZZARD, M.A. (Oxon.), M.A.Th.

“The dogma of Christ’s deity turned Jesus into a Hellenistic redeemer-god and thus was a myth propagated behind which the historical Jesus completely disappeared” (Martin Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma*, p. 298).

I. THE MODERN DEBATE

The question of the preexistence of Christ is of fundamental importance to any Christological discussion, since it bears directly on issues related to the Incarnation and the Trinity. If the personal subject who is Jesus existed as the eternal Son before His birth, in what sense did a new person originate in Mary’s womb? If a new personality was conceived by Mary under the influence of “holy spirit,” would not Jesus be bipersonal? Does the traditional definition of Jesus as God with an “impersonal human nature” allow the Savior to be a genuinely human person,¹ the descendant of David and therefore identifiable as the “one who is to come”?²

These and other Christological questions have been raised throughout Christian history, but in modern times with greater intensity and

¹A.T. Hanson, having been taught the Chalcedonian formula, abandoned the whole idea as incoherent. See *Grace and Truth*, London, SPCK, 1975, 1.

²Matt. 11:3.

sophistication since the publication in 1977 of *The Myth of God Incarnate*³ and its sequel, *Incarnation and Myth, the Debate Continued*.⁴ A welcome voice in the continuing debate, which has far-reaching implications for the very heart of Christianity, is that of James Dunn. His widely acclaimed *Christology in the Making*⁵ challenges us to consider how far, for centuries, we may have been reading back the formulations of the church Councils into the New Testament documents. He invites us to reflect on whether we have not unwittingly fixed on one form of Christology, supposedly found in John, and then read it into the other New Testament writers, producing a homogenized view of Jesus which blots out the individuality of the New Testament witnesses and builds an inflexible and possibly distorted Christology on a fraction of the evidence.

The question raised by Dunn reminds us of James Barr’s observation that

traditional and orthodox theologies seldom worked according to the proportions of the biblical material; on the contrary they commonly elevated to a key position in their structures elements which had comparatively slight and even marginal representation within the biblical material. . . . In this sense traditional orthodoxy is a monumental example of the “picking and choosing” that it deprecates in others.⁶

Listening to the various participants in the debate one is impressed by the honesty of the searching questions they are prepared to ask. Dunn finds no preexistent Jesus in Paul, but rescues the traditional view in John, only, however, after conceding that the prologue in its original form does not necessitate a belief in a real as distinct from “ideal” or “notional” preexistence for Jesus. His discussion at this point is crucially important as presenting a different way of reading John 1:14 and John 1:1, 2 which the longstanding traditional understandings of these verses make hard to grasp at first hearing.

The conclusion which seems to emerge from our analysis thus far is that it is only with verse 14 that we can begin to speak of the *personal Logos*. The poem uses rather impersonal language (became flesh). . . . Prior to verse 14 we are in the same realm as pre-Christian talk of Wisdom and *Logos*, the same language and ideas that we find in the wisdom tradition and in Philo, where, as we have seen, we are dealing with personifications

³SCM Press, 1977.

⁴SCM Press, 1979.

⁵Westminster Press, 1980.

⁶*Holy Scripture*, Canon Authority Criticism, Westminster Press, 1983, 39, 40.

rather than persons, personified actions of God rather than an individual divine being as such. The point is obscured by the fact that we have to translate the masculine *Logos* as “he” throughout the poem. But if we translate *Logos* as “God’s utterance” instead, it would become clearer that the poem did not necessarily intend the *Logos* of verses 1-13 to be thought of as a personal being. . . . The revolutionary significance of verse 14 may well be that it marks not only the transition in the thought of the poem from *pre-existence to incarnation but also the transition from impersonal personification to actual person.*⁷

John Robinson in *Dunn on John*⁸ does not find literal preexistence anywhere in John’s Gospel or elsewhere in the New Testament. His solution seems attractive, since if, with Dunn, we do not find preexistence in Paul, it would be reasonable to expect its absence in John. For those who take the New Testament canon as a unified (despite differences of emphasis) testimony to its central figure, it is hard to believe that the apostles would have been divided on such a fundamental question about the nature of Jesus. A person who preexists himself is a very different being from one who comes into existence in his mother’s womb; hence the underlying concern about the real humanity of the traditional Jesus and an awareness of the dangers of docetism which characterize much of the current discussion.

A number of biases seem to plague Dunn’s reviewers. It is thought that a “high” Christology must make Jesus fully God in the classical sense and that any Christology which starts with his humanity is “low.” But this begs the question. The highest Christology must be that which is true to the New Testament data. In the reviewers’ minds the “sending” language of Galatians 4:4 and Romans 8:3 seems automatically to imply preexistence⁹; but they make very little attempt to establish their point exegetically.

One senses in the background the influence of Philippians 2:5-11, thought by many to be a proof text for literal preexistence. Leon Morris makes every effort to be fair to Dunn, but it is doubtful whether he has allowed himself enough time to “live with” Dunn’s perspective on Philippians 2. He admits that “the churches’ definitive statements have

⁷*Christology in the Making*, 243.

⁸*Theology* 85 (1982), 332-8.

⁹Review of Dunn in *Themelios* 8:1 (1982), 17. Cp. Abridged Kittel on *exapostello*, 68: “The idea that in Galatians 4:4 the ex- denotes a prior presence with the sender finds no support.”

been with us all our lives.” But has he fully reckoned with the power such prolonged exposure to the “right” view can exercise over the faculty of judgment? Morris asks: “How could Jesus ‘come’ unless he existed before He came? An expression like ‘the Son of Man came to seek and save that which is lost’ (Luke 19:10) seems to mean more than that Jesus was conscious of a divine mission.”¹⁰

But did, for example, Nicodemus think of Jesus as preexistent when he said, “We know that you are a teacher come from God” (John 3:2)? The dismissal of Dunn’s careful examination of these points is disappointing. An illuminating analysis of the Johannine preexistence language is found in chapter 5 of John Robinson’s *Human Face of God*¹¹ (pp. 169-179). Leon Morris reveals that he had not before considered that Philippians 2 might not refer to preexistence, “but now that Dunn points it out I cannot accept it.”¹² He does not have space to tell us why Dunn is wrong; nor, as far as I know, has he answered the detailed arguments presented by Talbert,¹³ George Howard,¹⁴ and, above all, J. Murphy-O’Conner,¹⁵ who are among many who find no reference to personal preexistence in Philippians 2.

The reservations of Maurice Wiles about traditional views of preexistence stem from “the distorting effect on the understanding of the figure of Jesus which arises when he is seen as the Son of God conscious of his existence with the Father before the world was made.” He fears that the efforts of the fathers to integrate the *Logos/Son* into a monotheistic system may not have been successful. Wiles puts his finger on a crucial issue when he says: “As other strands of Judaism presented the Torah as pre-existent in order to claim its continuity with and sameness as the archetypal purposes of God, so John presents Christ as preexistent.”¹⁶ He adds: “Since Christ was a conscious being, and not an inanimate object like a scroll, it is a natural extension of the same parabolic logic to present Christ as conscious of his pre-existence.”¹⁷

It is obviously only a very short step from the notion of preexistence as foreordination, to the idea of a preexisting hypostasis in some way a being distinct from God, who in later human life can remember his “pre-

¹⁰*Themelios* 8:1 (1982), 17.

¹¹SCM Press, 1973.

¹²*Themelios* 8:1 (1982), 18.

¹³*JBL* ’86, (1967), 147-153.

¹⁴*CBQ* ’40, (1978), 368-387.

¹⁵*RB* ’83, (1976), 25-50.

¹⁶*Theology* 85 (1982), 325.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 328.

life.” It is just this development of the preexistence concept which Maurice Wiles, J.A.T. Robinson, and Geoffrey Lampe¹⁸ seek to avoid because of the dangers of docetism and even bitheism. With Dunn we may agree that “initially at least Christ was not thought of as a divine being who had pre-existed with God but as the climactic embodiment of God’s power and purpose . . . God’s clearest self-expression, God’s last word.”¹⁹

We must reckon seriously with the possibility that there is in fact a common apostolic view of the person of Christ found with different emphasis throughout the New Testament, both initially and finally. An evolution from “low” to “high” should not be presupposed. In fact it is very hard to believe that Peter, a leading Christian spokesman, did not possess the highest and best Christology with which to initiate the New Testament church. The Christology of his sermons in Acts should be considered “high.”

Did the classical view of Jesus’ preexistence have its origins in canonical Scripture? Or is it the result of a transition of conceptualization occurring when early gnosticism found personal preexistence more congenial than New Testament orthodoxy? In our attempt to answer the question we bear in mind that “nothing is easier than for Divine titles to pass from one religion to another and for their original meaning to be forgotten.”²⁰ The same would be true of ideas about Jesus. We must not overlook the fact that Christianity was guided almost exclusively by Jews during the New Testament period, and thereafter almost entirely by Gentiles.

II. “REAL” OR “NOTIONAL” PREEXISTENCE

As a preliminary to our discussion we must note the oddity of a method which in order to establish real preexistence for Jesus seems to occupy itself almost exclusively with a small number of texts in John’s Gospel and a handful of verses in Paul. Ought not a primary factor in the investigation to be the broad evidence of the New Testament? It is widely agreed that Luke writes his two volumes with a view to presenting the faith to his contemporaries. Is it unreasonable to think that he does not

¹⁸Maurice Wiles in *Theology* 85 (1982), J.A.T. Robinson in *Human Face of God*, and Geoffrey Lampe in *God as Spirit*, SCM Press, 1977.

¹⁹*Christology in the Making*, 262.

²⁰Cheyne, *Bible Problems*, 81 (cited in *The Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, Vol. II, 808).

include his own mature Christology? He also claims in Acts to show us Peter’s view of Jesus. In addition we have the epistles of Peter from which we can confirm the picture drawn in the Acts sermons. There is also good prima facie evidence that Luke as traveling companion of Paul would have shared the latter’s Christology. Another primary consideration is the fact that apostolic Christology shows plain evidence of being based on the portrait of “the one who is to come” provided by the Old Testament. Peter and Paul in Acts, and John labor to show that Jesus is the one who fits the categories delineated by Deuteronomy 18:15-18 and Psalms 2; 8; and 110. The prophet who speaks God’s words (Deut. 18:15-18) may well be the stimulus for all that John recognizes in Jesus as the agent of God, following the Jewish concept of the “*shaliach*.”²¹ It was, after all, the one of whom Moses had written in the Law who was recognized as the Christ (John 1:45). This provides the framework for New Testament Christology.

Psalm 110 is vastly important for New Testament Christians, and should be central for any examination of New Testament Christology. In addition, since Messiah is by far the dominant category of the entire New Testament witness, it would be proper to exhaust that title and its functional implications before sources outside the Old Testament are sought to explain Jesus. Alan Segal, a Jewish commentator, seems to be almost alone in calling our attention to the “one major way in which the early church created its Christology, by exegesis of *the Old Testament* passages reunderstood as messianic prophecies. Dunn . . . misses a crucial dimension in which Christianity was both unique and typically a sectarian group of its day, in the way it made hermeneutical use of the biblical text to understand its historical experience.”²²

Since it is clear that the New Testament’s own exegetical dynamic is found in the application of the Old Testament categories to the “one who is to come,” it is essential to consider whether the Old Testament contains any category for the personal existence of the Messiah before his birth. The major evidence clearly points to a human ruler of the line of David, supernaturally endowed with the spirit and bearing divine titles (2 Sam.

²¹See Raymond Brown on John in *Anchor Bible*, Vol. II, 632, and his reference there to P. Borgen, “God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Religions in Antiquity*, Leiden: Brill, 1968, 137-148. Cp. C.B. Caird in *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 180: “The practice of treating the agent as though he was the principal is of the greatest importance for New Testament Christology.”

²²*Semeia. Christology and Exegesis*, Soc. Bib. Lit., 1985, 88.

7; Isa. 9:6; 11:1-5), though foreseen *in vision* as Son of Man in Daniel 7.²³ A remarkable statement in Micah 5:2 describes the coming King as one “whose goings forth are from old, from ancient days.” There is nothing in this data to imply a preexistence for the Messiah other than in the eternal counsels of God, echoed in the New Testament by the statement in Revelation 13:8 that Jesus was the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. Alan Segal says: “The important thing to notice is that there were no traditions explicitly linking the Messiah with angelic status though the corner towards preexistence was turned by suggesting that God knew the Messiah’s name from creation.”²⁴ However, this is not preexistence in the classical sense.

It is important to observe with C.B. Caird that “the writers of the New Testament show remarkable unanimity in their treatment of the manhood of Christ.”²⁵ The linking of Psalm 8 and Psalm 110 is one of the most striking features of New Testament Christology and it should always be prominent in any description of the person of Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews, for example, assumes that everyone will understand that Jesus is to be defined in terms of a corpus of Old Testament Messianic texts. In chapter one he gives us a catena of them to show the relative position of Jesus to the angels.²⁶ It can scarcely have been the writer’s view that Jesus was God in the classical sense, since it would have been sufficient to state this in order to prove that Jesus was superior to the angels, Moses, and Aaron!

The texts cited from the Old Testament by the New Testament writers do not provide evidence for the category of personal preexistence. Where Jesus is linked with the creation it is clear that a reference to wisdom is implied (Col. 1:15ff). But there is all the difference in the world between

²³The Son of Man in Dan. 7 is the saints collectively, not excluding the Messiah. The Son of Man receives the Kingdom in verse 14 and the saints are given it in verse 22. This is exactly what the New Testament expects: The Messiah and the saints will rule together in the post-Parousia Kingdom (Luke 22:28-30; Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26, 3:21). Dan. 7:22 is quoted in Rev. 20:4.

²⁴*Semeia*, 93.

²⁵“The Development of the Doctrine of Christ in the New Testament,” in *Christ for us Today*, SCM Press, 1968, 70.

²⁶The key to the Christological statements in chapter 1 is found in 2:5: It is “the inhabited earth of the future about which we are speaking.” Then Messiah will reign supreme. A.T. Hanson’s comment on the Christology of Hebrews is important: “It is not even certain that the name ‘Son’ is unhesitatingly applied by the author to the pre-existent state. Hebrews 1:2 could be rendered, ‘He has in the last days spoken to us in the mode of Son,’ which would imply that sonship only began at the incarnation” (*The Image of the Invisible God*, SCM Press, 1982, 83).

personification and person. When Jesus is linked with preexistent wisdom or *logos* it is his importance in the divine scheme that is being stressed. This is in keeping with the Jewish background to the New Testament. The Midrashic commentary on Genesis, *Bereshith Rabba*, opens with a paragraph describing the Torah as the blueprint which God consulted when He created the world. The Torah and wisdom are linked. In two places in the Babylonian Talmud we learn that seven things existed before the creation—the Torah, repentance, Paradise, Gehenna, the throne of glory, the temple, and the name of the Messiah. Appropriate biblical references are given for the preexistence of each item. This well-defined category of preexistence in the counsels of God provides the key to Paul’s seeing the Messiah as the central reason for the creation. It was “in,” “through” (not “by”), and “for” him that God created everything (Col. 1:15). Thus Christ takes over the place of the Torah, which had been for the Rabbis the *reshit*—the beginning, sum-total, head, and first-fruits in which all had come into existence. C.B. Caird points out that “neither the fourth Gospel nor Hebrews ever speaks of the eternal Word or Wisdom of God in terms which compel us to regard it as a person.”²⁷ If we do, it is because we are reading them in the light of classical Christology.

III. THE ORIGIN OF THE SON OF GOD IN LUKE

Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus—and indeed his whole Gospel—shows no interest in the idea of preexistence. Indeed, a careful reading of Luke 1:35 suggests that the conception of the Messiah in Mary’s womb marks the *beginning of the existence of the Son of God*. The point, which has received far too little attention thus far in the debate, is well developed by Raymond Brown’s impressive analysis of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke.²⁸ Luke establishes a direct causal relationship between the overshadowing of Mary by divine power and “holy spirit” and the resulting creation of the Son of God. In Luke 1:32-35, Christology is strictly within Old Testament categories, proved by the parallel with Genesis 1 and the explicit prediction of 2 Samuel 7 (used in just the same way by the Qumran Essenes).²⁹ The fatherhood of God is promised by 2

²⁷C.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 79.

²⁸*The Birth of the Messiah*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1977.

²⁹The fragment is from Cave IV, 4Q 243. The crucial line reads: “He will be said to be Son of God and they will call him Son of the Most High” (see J.A. Fitzmyer, *NTS* 20 [1973], 391-394).

Samuel 7 to a future descendant of David (“I will be a father to him, and he will be my son”). The relationship of father and son is to be established *in the future*. Thus for Luke the promised one now comes into existence as the Son of God and Son of David, and God becomes his father at his conception. Raymond Brown rightly calls Luke’s view “conception Christology”—which is quite different from adoptionism and certainly not Chalcedonian!³⁰

The crucial passage in Luke 1:32-35 sets the tone for the whole Lukan Christology and eschatology and it is carefully placed within the Old Testament framework. With Raymond Brown, Fitzmyer insists that “in Lukan theology there is no question of Jesus’ pre-existence or incarnation.”³¹ Raymond Brown points to the obvious difficulty presented to those schooled in classical Christology.³² His observations may be taken as a symbol of the tensions being felt between the demands for adherence to classical creeds and the very different picture drawn by the Synoptics. Brown says that in Luke “there is no suggestion of an incarnation whereby a figure who was previously with God takes on flesh. . . . For pre-existence Christology the conception of Jesus is the beginning of an earthly career, but not the begetting of God’s Son. . . . In the commentary I shall stress that Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of pre-existence, seemingly for them the conception was the becoming (begetting) of God’s Son.” Raymond Brown points out further that “the harmonization whereby John’s pre-existent Word takes on flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary is attested only in the post-New Testament period.” Luke’s conception Christology “has embarrassed many orthodox theologians since in pre-existence Christology a conception by the holy spirit in Mary’s womb does not bring about the existence of God’s Son. Luke is seemingly unaware of such a Christology. Conception is *causally related to divine Sonship for him*.”³³

³⁰*The Birth of the Messiah*, 141.

³¹*Anchor Bible*, comm. on Luke, 197.

³²*The Birth of the Messiah*, 291.

³³*Ibid.*, 141, 150, 291, emphasis added. Cp. J.A.T. Robinson, *Human Face of God*, 144: “Luke presupposes that Christ is brought into existence as son of Mary and Son of God simultaneously by the creative act of the Holy Spirit. His link to God at the beginning is established not by pre-existence but by the line of human descent.” The same point can be made in Matthew 1:18 which describes not the “birth” of Jesus but his “genesis” or origin. (See Krista Stendahl in “Quis et Unde,” in W. Eltester, ed., *Judentum Urchristentum, Kirche: Festschrift für Jeremias, Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, Beiheft XXVI*, 1960, 94-105.)

IV. PETRINE CHRISTOLOGY

What is said about Luke may be said also of Peter’s sermons in Acts and his epistles. The Messiah has appeared in accordance with God’s ancient promises. . . . His position as “lord and Messiah” has been established by His ascension (Acts 2:26). But there is no hint that He was not the Messiah until the moment of exaltation. His baptism and resurrection are decisive moments in the progress of the Son of God towards his session at the right hand of the Father as foreseen by Psalm 110:1. It remains only for heaven to retain him until the *apokatastasis* of all things, of which times the prophets spoke (Acts 3:21). This is “Jewish” Christology and eschatology, but it proceeds from the leading Christian spokesman and close associate of Jesus, and may therefore be reckoned as normative. It is important to note, with E. G. Selwyn,³⁴ that “we are not entitled to say that Peter was familiar with the idea of Christ’s pre-existence with the father before the incarnation. . . . He has not extended his belief in Christ’s divinity to an affirmation of his pre-existence.” The same view spans Peter’s career from beginning to end. There is no evolution from a so-called “low” to a “high” Christology.

V. PREEXISTENCE IN THE SYNOPTICS AND ACTS

The Synoptics and Acts present us with no doctrines of preexistence or incarnation. Yet they are written late. We may not therefore plead a development from primitive to mature Christology, and justify a preexistence Christology on that basis. A.T. Hanson sees this as a “puzzling fact.”³⁵ The puzzle may be solved by asking how far the data in Paul and John may have been forced to conform to the later classical Christology. Might it not be an equally valid exercise to see if they cannot be reconciled with their brother apostle Peter, and with Luke whose writings comprise more of the New Testament documents than any other writer? There is a need to weigh the merits of Maurice Wiles’ suggestion that:

Within the Christian tradition, the New Testament has for long been read through the prism of the later conciliar creeds. . . . Talk of Jesus’ pre-existence ought probably in most, perhaps in all cases to be understood on the analogy of the pre-existence of the Torah, to indicate the eternal divine

³⁴*Thornapple Comm. on 1 Peter*, reprinted by Baker Book House, 1981, 248, 249.

³⁵*The Image of the Invisible God*, 85.

purpose being achieved through him, rather than pre-existence of a fully personal kind.³⁶

VI. PHILIPPIANS 2

The difficulty of this passage is suggested by the vast literature associated with it. Its terms are sufficiently problematic to allow for preconceived ideas about what it is “supposed” to say to play a large role in interpretation. It ought not surely, therefore, to be taken, as it often is, as the starting point for a doctrine of preexistence in Paul. This would be justified only if we had already found clear evidence for this elsewhere.

Firstly we should note that it is not uncommon for Paul to urge his disciples to follow the ethical example of Jesus. Romans 15:1-5: “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good . . . For even Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written. . . . Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus.” First Corinthians 11:1: “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” Ephesians 5:2: “Walk in love, as Christ . . . gave himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God. . . .” 1 Thessalonians 1:6: “You became followers of us, and of the Lord. . . .” The suffering of Jesus is held up as a model in the Synoptics also. Mark 10:44, 45: “Whoever wishes to be the first among you shall be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for all.” Similarly in 1 Peter 2:21-25: “For you have been called for this purpose since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps,” and then follows a quotation from Isaiah. It would not be unreasonable to begin with a hypothesis that the exhortation in Philippians 2 is along these lines. If it speaks of a preexistent life of Jesus it would indeed be unique in Paul’s epistles in describing a decision made in eternity, the abandonment of eternal Godhood in favor of becoming man. The warning of A.H. McNeile in 1923 still has force:

Paul is begging the Philippians to cease from dissensions, and to act with humility towards each other. In 2 Corinthians 8:9 he is exhorting his readers to be liberal in alms giving. It is asked whether it would be quite natural for him to enforce these two simple moral lessons by incidental references (and the only reference he ever makes) to the vast problem of the incarnation. And it is thought by many that his homely appeals would

³⁶*The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, SCM Press, 1974, 52, 53.

have more effect if he pointed to the inspiring example of Christ’s humility and self-sacrifice in his human life, as in 2 Corinthians 10:1 — “I exhort you by the meekness and forbearance of Christ.”

McNeile suggests the following paraphrase: “Though Jesus was throughout the whole of his life divine, yet he did not think it a privilege to be maintained at all costs to be treated as on an equality with God, but of his own accord emptied himself (of all self-assertion of divine honor) by adopting the nature of a slave.”³⁷

Next it should be noted that the subject of our passage is Messiah Jesus, the order of the words giving prominence to the title. It is *Messiah* who is under discussion. It would be most odd for Paul to apply this title to a person before the birth of Jesus, and it seems strange to suggest that a preexisting person of the Godhead would have consciously decided not to retain his position as God. There is much in the history of the exegesis of this passage to show how preconceptions have controlled its interpretation. Translations will tend to add an “and” between *labon* and *en omiomiati*, giving the impression that “he emptied himself by becoming a slave *and* being made in the likeness of men.” However, if the poem is punctuated with Lohmeyer and the “and” is omitted, there is no necessity for that connection to be made.³⁸ The “being made in the likeness of men” may then be joined in sense with the following “he emptied himself.” The point will certainly not decide our exegesis and it seems wrong to say as Talbert does³⁹ that the structure of the lines must determine its meaning. However, it is a mistake to add the word “and” after *labon*. Citing C.F. Moule to the effect that “in the New Testament there is no exception to the rule that an aorist participle denotes an action prior to that of the main verb, with the possible exception of two passages in Acts,”⁴⁰ some would translate: “He emptied himself [in death], having taken the form of a slave, having appeared as man.” However, if *ekenosen* is to refer to an incarnation, it is clear that Jesus did not empty himself having first become a slave. It is better to render the sentence, “he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave.”

³⁷*New Testament Teaching in the Light of St. Paul’s*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1923, 65, 66.

³⁸Even if the connection is made, it does not constitute a proof that Paul has preexistence and incarnation in mind.

³⁹JBL 86 (1967), 141.

⁴⁰“Philippians in Recent Studies: Some Exegetical Conclusions,” WTJ, 41, No. 2, 247, by Robert Strimple.

As to the meaning of the crucial terms of the hymn, it seems to this writer that an interpretation within Messianic categories is the right one. It is after all *Messiah* Jesus who is being described. Robert Strimple reveals that for years he tried,

like Warfield and Murray, to maintain the view of Lightfoot that Paul uses *morphe* in the sense it had acquired in Greek philosophy . . . but I have to conclude that there is very little evidence to support the conclusion that Paul uses *morphe* in such a philosophical sense here and that my determination to hold on to that interpretation was really rooted in its attractiveness theologically.⁴¹

The point illustrates the detrimental influence of Greek, non-Messianic ways of thinking in exegesis. *Morphe*, it turns out, when the word is examined in a biblical context, has to do with a visible form as in Isaiah 52:14: “So his appearance was marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men.” One does not need to establish that *morphe*, *doxa*, and *eikon* are entirely synonymous in order to maintain the idea that the *human* Jesus is being described as the representative of the one God, reflecting his glory as a divine human being. Ridderbos and many others admit the parallel with Adam (though Ridderbos is uneasy about drawing the parallel too clearly, since Adam did not preexist).⁴² Jerome Murphy-O’Connor appears to this writer to come closest to a reading which suits a Messianic context.⁴³ He remarks that “the notion of preexistence is only part of the ‘Vorverständnis’ [preconception] with which exegetes approach the hymn. For the majority it seems to be derived from an uncritical acceptance of the current consensus, an acceptance that is facilitated by the dogmatic understanding of Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity.”⁴⁴ Of particular value is the remark of Bartsch about the proper methodological approach to our passage:

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 259.

⁴²*Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, SPCK, 1977, 75.

⁴³It should not be forgotten that “the Christ in whose death and resurrection the new aeon dawns is the Messiah of Israel (Rom. 1:2-4; 9:5). . . . However much the name Christ in Pauline usage seems to have acquired the sense of a proper name, this does not mean that this designation has lost its official historic-Israelite significance. Paul proclaims Christ as the eschatological bringer of salvation whose all-embracing significance must be understood in the light of prophecy” (Ridderbos, *Paul*, 51). This is the proper framework for constructing both Pauline and New Testament Christology; cp. John 20:31.

⁴⁴Jerome Murphy-O’Connor in RB 83 (1976), 25.

Es geht bei der Frage des Hymnus nicht um einen allgemeinen, wie immer gestalteten Präexistenzgedanken, sondern es geht präzise um die Frage, ob der überliefernden Gemeinde, die Paulus zitiert, der Gedanke einer personalen göttlichen Präexistenz des Christus zugemutet werden kann. Tut man dies, so übernimmt man die Beweislast, die Herkunft und Möglichkeit dieser Vorstellung in dieser präzisen Form einer göttlichen Präexistenz zu jener Zeit nachzuweisen. Im Christus Hymnus selbst das älteste Zeugnis dieser Vorstellung zu sehen, ist nur dann wissenschaftlich vertretbar, wenn alle anderen Interpretationsmöglichkeiten erschöpft sind.⁴⁵ [We cannot assume in the hymn a general and long-standing belief in preexistence. The question is whether such a belief can be attributed to the community addressed by Paul. If we say yes, then we must demonstrate the origin of this notion of divine pre-existence. To find it in the Phil. 2 hymn is only tenable when all other possible interpretations have been exhausted.]

The key to the passage lies in the contrast between the royal status of the Messiah as God’s vice-regent and his willingness to take the role of servant. This is a theme found in the Synoptics. The background in the book of Wisdom reveals the destiny for the righteous who are to be “clothed in royal raiment and stand with the confidence born of full authority in the midst of those who afflict them.”⁴⁶ Referring to the human being, the Son of Man, Paul may be saying that Jesus “did not regard his being equal with God as something to take advantage of.” Thus Jesus as the Messiah was entitled to royal status, representing God like the pre-fall Adam, who according to the rabbis was a figure of light; his face shone brighter than the sun.⁴⁷ The glory of the Messiah was indeed manifested on a special occasion at the transfiguration, but he was normally seen as every other man. He was, however, only “like other men” since he was sinless and therefore a unique human being. He never availed himself of the privilege that was his right as the second Adam, but poured out his life in service to others and humbled himself to suffer a criminal’s death on the cross. The contrast between riches and poverty in 2 Corinthians 8:9 is very much like the contrast in 1 Corinthians 4:8, where again the question of royal status is in view: “Now you are full, you are rich, you have reigned as kings without us, and I would to God that you were in fact reigning so that we might also be reigning with you.” The reference is to

⁴⁵Cited by Murphy-O’Connor, 31.

⁴⁶Murphy-O’Connor, 36.

⁴⁷J. Jervell, *Imago Dei*, Göttingen, 1960, 100.

Paul's hope for rulership in the Messianic Kingdom to be revealed at the *Parousia*. By contrast, Paul, following Jesus, has renounced all pretensions to royal status, is being treated as "the scum of the earth" (v. 13) and is making himself slave to all. The king/slave motif applies most dramatically to Jesus as the Messiah and uniquely God's Son, but each Christian must follow his example by busying himself with service to others. Paul speaks of his own *kenosis* in Philippians 3:7-11, 20ff. The language of Philippians 2:6-8 reappears: "be found," "being conformed," "refashion" (*metaschematisei*), "humiliation," "conform." This contrast between "riches" and "poverty" will better account for 2 Corinthians 8:9 than Dunn's suggestion that there is a reference to Christ's material poverty. In this way "being rich" may correspond to "being in the form of God" and becoming poor to renouncing divine status. It is interesting that in the Philippian passage the initial contrast is between being in the form of God and taking the form of a *slave*, not man.

VII. THE PREEXISTENT JESUS AS SON

The traditional argument for a preexistent Son in the New Testament seems to be labored and complex. It is common to find commentators saying that Galatians 4:4 ("God sent his son into the world") "seems to imply that God's Son was sent from heaven."⁴⁸ But does it? The verb "sent" certainly does not normally carry any overtones of preexistence. John the Baptist was sent (John 1:6). Nicodemus thought that Jesus had "come" into the world (John 3:2). All the prophets were sent (2 Chron. 36:15). So also the disciples are sent (John 17:18) just as Jesus was sent. The state is "sent" by God (1 Pet. 2:14). The fact that Paul emphasizes that Jesus was "born of a woman" underlines the significance of his birth (is there an unspoken reference to the virgin birth here?) Being sent from God means no more than that God initiated the appearance of the Messiah, provides him in the fulness of time, and commissions him. The uniqueness of Jesus according to Luke is his coming into existence as Son, in Mary's womb. Certainly nothing is said of a preexistent *Son* in Philippians 2. Too often the uncertain evidence of Philippians 2, Galatians 4:4, and Romans 8:3 is used to support an equally uncertain conclusion about personal preexistence. The sending of the Spirit in Galatians 4:6 is

⁴⁸Leon Morris: Review of *Christology in the Making*, in *Themelios* 8:1, (1982), 17.

quite unreasonably taken by C.R. Holladay to imply personal preexistence for the Son.⁴⁹ We may agree with A.T. Hanson that "it is not even certain that the name 'Son' is unhesitatingly applied by the writer of Hebrews to Jesus in the preexistent state. Hebrews 1:2 could be rendered: 'He has in the last days spoken to us in the mode of a son,' which would imply that the sonship only began at the incarnation."⁵⁰

In a challenging chapter entitled "The Problem of the Pre-existence of the Son,"⁵¹ J.P. Mackay is critical of the way in which the term "Son" has often been divorced from its roots in the Old Testament.

It is well known that texts [referring to the Son] which had their original reference to the enthronement of the Davidic King were used in the early resurrection kerygma. So now the title "Son of God," which already indicates a uniquely obedient servant of Yahweh can be used to claim that this one, so shamefully executed, was God's expected anointed one. But this belief that the one who was obedient unto death was now exalted to God's right hand and would rule God's future kingdom is still a long way from belief in a pre-existent divine figure who becomes man. The logical path to alleged pre-existence is a tortuous one no matter what selection of authors we make.

In connection with the preexistence of the Messiah, Mackey quotes Vermes:

The surviving sources are concerned only with a kind of notional pre-existence of the Messiah insofar as his "name," i. e., his essence and nature preceded the formation of light by God on the first day of creation. . . . In Jewish thought the celestial pre-existence of the Messiah does not affect his humanity.⁵²

Mackey adds that such preexistence

is part and parcel of the revelation model in human imagining by which God, who is not bound by time, had in mind in eternity or "before anything else was created" the one who was the key to all existence who would bring all to consummation and for whom (in whom, through whom) all could therefore be said to be created (cp. Col. 1:15).⁵³

Mackey contends that talk of "coming down" from heaven points to the divine initiative behind the whole mission of Jesus. Belief in the

⁴⁹*Semeia* 30, 1985, 74.

⁵⁰*Image of the Invisible God*, 83.

⁵¹*The Christian Experience of the Trinity*, SCM Press, 1983, 51-55.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 57.

⁵³*Ibid.*

virginal conception gives particular point to this notion since Jesus is in some sense “inserted” from outside into the human race by the action of the Holy Spirit. Language about “existing before” can refer to God’s plan before creation to send the Messiah (cp. 1 Pet. 1:20, which uses the same concept when it states that Jesus was the lamb foreknown before creation).

Mackey’s conclusion is that, if the Bible is to be normative for our belief,

we simply may not pretend that Scripture gives us any substantial information about a second divine “person” or hypostasis distinct from God the Father and from the historical Jesus before Jesus was born, or before the world was made.⁵⁴

VIII. THE DANGER OF CRYPTO-DOCETISM

Many of the prominent contributors to the current debate about preexistence believe that the humanity of Jesus is threatened when his person is thought of as preexisting. John Knox states that “we can have the humanity without the pre-existence and we can have the pre-existence without the humanity. There is absolutely no way of having both.”⁵⁵ Raymond Brown sounds a similar warning when he tells us that “Johannine Christology has nurtured a widespread unconscious monophysitism, popular even today, in which Jesus is not really like us in everything but sin, but omniscient, unable to suffer or be tempted, foreseeing the whole future.”⁵⁶ John Robinson likewise sees the traditional view of preexistence as destructive of the human personality of Jesus and notes that John, who calls Jesus a man more than any other writer and insists that the Father alone is the only true God, has no intention at all of creating a docetic portrait.⁵⁷ The reaction in his epistles to such a false reading of his Gospel bears this out fully. Significantly, in 1 John 1:2, John has deliberately substituted “eternal life” for “word” in an effort to counteract the tendency, already at work, to retroject the person Jesus on to the eternal word. John sees the denial of the humanity of Jesus as the certain sign of opposition to the faith (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). Later a docetic streak runs through much of Alexandrian Christology, and the link between

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁵*The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, Cambridge University Press, 1967, 106.

⁵⁶*The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, London, 1979, 163.

⁵⁷*Human Face of God*, 169-179.

Clement of Alexandria and Valentinus seems clear; both insist that no true digestion or elimination took place in the Lord. This seems to be far removed from the Scripture and common sense; but is the whole idea of “anypostasia” less so? And could not the critically important conception Christology of Luke eliminate the whole problem of personal preexistence and open up a new approach to the reading of John? The glory which the Johannine Jesus “had with the Father before the world began” (17:5) can well be the glory promised in the divine plan. The glory already “given” to the disciples (v. 22) had not in fact been given to them.

It remains a remarkable fact that Paul hardly ever, if at all, calls Jesus “God” and seems to be unaware of any theoretical difficulty over Jesus being both God and man. May this not simply be because the One God of his Jewish monotheistic heritage is still the Father alone (1 Cor. 8:6; 1 Tim. 2:5) while the “man Messiah Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5) is His unique representative, embodying the divine majesty?⁵⁸

IX. CONCLUSION

When the concept of a preexistent divine person is taken as the model—and the exclusive model—for Christology, it seems very difficult to ascribe to Jesus a real human personality genetically related to David through Mary. It is hardly satisfactory to dismiss the whole problem by simply restating the Chalcedonian definition and hoping that an antitheoretical approach will resolve all difficulties. The problem may be a warning that we are not reading the Scriptures in their own Hebraic context. This might not be surprising in view of the dramatic change which is likely to have been initiated in the faith, when within a few years after the death of the apostles no Jewish leaders were left, and theology fell into the hands of the Greeks. Greek lack of sympathy for things messianic was natural but not necessarily conducive to preserving the central thrust of the New Testament that Jesus is the Messiah foretold by the Old Testament. Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, it would appear, was early obscured by a translation, via a misunderstanding of the *logos* of John 1, into Greek ways of thinking. The result seems eventually to have been the

⁵⁸The frequently repeated assertion that for Gentiles the term “Christ” was little more than a meaningless proper name may in fact point to a devastating post-New Testament loss of biblical Christology, not, as we have so long been told, a legitimate development of it.

replacement of the real human individual by an abstraction. The remark of Geoffrey Lampe should challenge our generation:

The Christological concept of the pre-existent Son reduces the real socially and culturally conditioned personality of Jesus to the metaphysical abstraction “human nature. . . .” According to this Christology, the eternal Son assumes a timeless human nature which owes nothing essential to geographical circumstances; it corresponds to nothing in the actual concrete world; Jesus Christ has not, after all, really come in the flesh.⁵⁹

If, as D.M. Scholer asserts, “our tradition dances best to a docetic tune,”⁶⁰ it may be because it is the only tune most churchgoers have ever known. But a change to a Hebrew melody along the lines of Luke 1:32-35 and Matthew 16:16 may bring a refreshing new mood, and enable us to see more truly what it means to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (John 20:31).

⁵⁹*God as Spirit*, SCM Press, 1977, 144.

⁶⁰Lectures in Christology, Northern Baptist Seminary, Winter Quarter, 1986.