

The Nature of Preexistence in the New Testament

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Within the Christian tradition, the New Testament has long been read through the prism of the later conciliar creeds . . . Speaking of Jesus as the Son of God had a very different connotation in the first century from that which it has had ever since Nicea. Talk of his preexistence ought probably in most, perhaps in all, cases to be understood, on the analogy of the preexistence of the Torah, to indicate the eternal divine purpose being achieved through him, rather than preexistence of a fully personal kind.¹

The mainstream churches are committed to a certain doctrine about Jesus, but specialists in early Christian thought are questioning the arguments by which that doctrine was reached. New Testament scholars ask if the New Testament teaches it at all, and historians wonder at the gulf between Jesus himself and fully-developed Christianity. These questions are very unsettling, for they imply that Christianity may be in worse condition than was thought. It is perhaps not a basically sound structure that needs only to be modernized, but may be in need of radical reconstruction . . . The New Testament never suggests that the phrase “Son of God” just means “God.”²

¹ Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine, The Hulsean Lectures 1973*, London: SCM Press, 1974.

² Don Cupitt, *The Debate About Christ*, London: SCM Press, 1979, vii, 4.

The New Testament is a thoroughly Jewish book. Its writers were almost all Jews. The probable exception was Luke (who, however, is as Jewish as any of the writers in terms of his delight in the Jewish salvation offered in Jesus to both Jew and Gentile). Modern Bible-readers approach basic biblical issues with an entrenched Greek outlook on life. This they have inherited from the churches, which have often forgotten that Jesus was a Jew who thought and taught in Jewish categories.

The idea that the soul separates from the body and survives consciously apart from the body is a thoroughly unJewish idea (at least from the Old Testament perspective). Modern readers of the Bible are shocked to discover that in the Bible the whole man dies and goes into unconsciousness (“sleep”) and is returned to life only by the future resurrection of the whole person.

The notion that Jesus was really alive and conscious before his birth in Bethlehem is also a very unJewish idea. Human beings in Hebrew thought do not exist consciously before they are born. The preexistence of souls belongs to the world of Greek philosophy and was held by some church fathers. But they did not derive this idea from the Bible.

I. FOREKNOWLEDGE AND PREEXISTENCE

When the Jew said something was “predestined,” he thought of it as already “existing” in a higher sphere of life. The world’s history is thus predestined because it is already, *in a sense*, preexisting and consequently fixed. This typically Jewish conception of predestination may be distinguished from the Greek idea of preexistence by the predominance of *the thought of “preexistence” in the Divine purpose*.³

Our scholar goes on to tell us that this typical mode of Jewish thought is clearly illustrated in 1 Peter. The letter is addressed to “the elect according to the *foreknowledge* [*prognosis*] of God the Father.”⁴ Peter’s doctrine of future things is permeated by the same thought that all is predestined in God’s great Plan. God sees everything laid out before Him.

³ E.C. Dewick, *Primitive Christian Eschatology, The Hulsean Prize Essay for 1908*, Cambridge University Press, 1912, 253, 254.

⁴ 1 Pet. 1:1, 2.

Those who have the gift of the spirit will share God's outlook and in faith recognize that the realities of God's plan will in the future become realities on earth. According to Peter the Messiah himself was *foreknown*, *not just his death for our sins but the person Messiah himself*.⁵ Peter uses the same word to describe the "existence" of Christ in God's plan as he did to describe the "existence" of the Christian church (v. 2).

Though the Messiah was foreknown (not known, but *foreknown*, as was Jeremiah before his birth, Jer. 1:5), he was manifested by being brought into actual existence at his birth. This is a typically Jewish way of understanding God's purpose for mankind. He executes the Plan at the appropriate time.

The sort of "preexistence" Peter has in mind is the sort that fits the Jewish environment, not the Greek atmosphere of later Christianity.

We are not entitled to say that Peter was familiar with the idea of Christ's preexistence with the Father before the incarnation. For this idea is not necessarily implied in his description of Christ as "foreknown before the foundation of the world," since Christians are also the objects of God's foreknowledge. All that we can say is that the phrase *pro kataboles kosmou* [before the foundation of the world] affirms for Christ's office and work a supramundane range and importance Peter has not extended his belief in Christ's divinity to an affirmation of his preexistence: his Christology is more like that of the early chapters of Acts than of John and Paul.⁶

Peter, as the leading apostle,⁷ would have had no sympathy with either a Trinitarian or Arian (cp. modern Jehovah's Witnesses) view of Jesus.

We note also that the future salvation of the Christians, the Kingdom they are to inherit at the return of Christ, is likewise waiting in heaven "ready to be revealed in the last time."⁸ The Second Coming is thus to be an "apocalypse" or unveiling of what is now "existing" but hidden from our sight. So it is said of Jesus that he was "foreknown," and waiting to be *revealed* in God's good time.

Paul uses the same concept and language about the future of the saints. He says that we already "*have a building from God, a house fit for the*

⁵ 1 Pet. 1:20.

⁶ E.G. Selwyn, *First Epistle of St. Peter*, Baker Book House, 1983, 248, 250. I disagree that Peter's idea of Jesus is different from that of Paul and John.

⁷ Matt. 10:2.

⁸ 1 Pet. 1:4.

coming age.”⁹ Our future resurrection body already “exists” in God’s intention and may be thought of as real because it is certain to be manifested in the future. In that sense we “have” it, though we obviously do not yet have it literally.

Having grasped this elementary fact of Jewish theology it will not be difficult to adjust our understanding of other passages where the same principle of “existence” followed by actual manifestation is found. Thus Jesus says in John 17:5: “Glorify me [now] with the glory which *I had with you* before the foundation of the world.” On the basis of 2 Corinthians 5:1 a Christian in the future, after the resurrection at Christ’s return, will be able to say that he has now received what he already “had,” i.e. laid up for him in God’s plan. Christians are said to *have* treasure in heaven,¹⁰ that is, a reward stored up with God and destined to be conferred in the future. This is only to say that they will one day “inherit the Kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world.”¹¹

When Jesus says that he “had” the glory for which he now prays, he is merely asking for the glory which he knew was prepared for him by God from the beginning.¹² That glory existed in God’s plan and in that sense Jesus already “had” it. We note that Jesus did not say, “Give me *back* the glory which I had when I was alive with You before my birth.” This notion would have been completely foreign to Judaism. It is quite unnecessary and indeed wrong to read Gentile ideas into the text of Scripture when we can make good sense of them as they stand in their Jewish environment.

The so-called “preexistence” of Jesus in John refers to his “existence” in the Plan of God. The church has been plagued by the introduction of non-biblical language. There is a perfectly good word for “real” preexistence in the Greek language (*prouparchon*). It is very significant that it appears nowhere in Scripture, but it does in the writings of Greek church fathers of the second century. These Greek commentators on Scripture

⁹ 2 Cor. 5:1. This is the proper translation of *aiionios*, i.e., belonging to the coming age of the Kingdom, not “eternal.” This does not of course mean that the body of the future is temporary. It confers immortality and thus lasts forever. The acquisition of that body is nevertheless the great event of the coming age introduced by the resurrection.

¹⁰ Mark 10:21.

¹¹ Matt. 25:34.

¹² The synoptic way of expressing the same idea is to talk of the Kingdom “prepared before the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34).

failed to understand the Hebrew categories of thought in which the New Testament is written.

The so-called “pre-human existence” of Christ in the Bible refers to the prior existence of *Jesus in God’s Plan and vision*. This is most significant for Jesus’ understanding of himself as the Son of Man. The Son of Man is found in the book of Daniel. He “preexists” only in the sense that God grants us a vision of His Plan for the future. The Son of Man is *a human being* — that is what the words mean. Thus what John wants us to understand is that the *human* Messiah was in heaven before his birth and was seen *in Daniel’s vision of the future* (Dan. 7).¹³ Jesus at his ascension gained the position which had been prepared for him in God’s Plan. No text says that Jesus went *back* (*upostrepho*) to God, though this idea has appeared in some modern English translations to support “orthodoxy.” Such translation of the Greek “go to the Father” as “go *back* to the Father” tells its own story.¹⁴

The Son of Man is not an angel. No angel was ever called a “Son of Man” (= member of the human race — with good reason Jesus’ favorite self-title). To call the Messiah an angel would be a muddling of categories. Hence scholars rightly report that the existence of the Messiah *antecedent to his birth in Bethlehem* is unknown in Judaism: “Judaism has never known anything of a preexistence peculiar to the Messiah antecedent to his birth as a human being.”¹⁵ “The dominance of the idea in any Jewish circle whatever cannot seriously be upheld. Judaism knew nothing of the [literally] *preexistent* ideal man.”¹⁶

To claim to “be before Abraham”¹⁷ does not mean that you remember being alive before your birth. That is to think like a Greek who believes in the preexistence of souls. In the Hebrew thought of the New Testament one can “exist” as part of God’s Plan as did also the tabernacle, the temple, repentance and other major elements of the Divine purpose.¹⁸ Even Moses preexisted in that sense.¹⁹ John the apostle could also say that Christ was “crucified before the foundation of the world.”²⁰ This gives us

¹³ John 6:62.

¹⁴ See NIV at John 16:28.

¹⁵ Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, 128-132, 248, 252.

¹⁶ Charles Gore, *Belief in Christ*, John Murray, 1923, 31.

¹⁷ John 8:58.

¹⁸ Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, Vol. II, 529.

¹⁹ *Testament of Moses*, 1:13, 14.

²⁰ Rev. 13:8.

a valuable clue to the way the New Testament writers understood “preexistence.”

There are multiple examples of past tenses in the Hebrew Bible which actually refer to future events. They are “past” because they describe events fixed in God’s counsels. Bible-readers disregard this very Jewish way of thinking when they conclude that when Jesus said he “had” glory with the father from the foundation of the world, he meant that he was alive at that time. Certainly in a western frame of reference the traditional understanding is reasonable. But the Messiah must be understood in his own Hebrew environment.

There is complete silence about any real preexistence of Christ in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts and Peter. Not only do they not hint at a pre-human Son of God, they contradict the idea by talking of the origin of Jesus (Matt. 1:18) and his begetting as Son (Matt. 1:20) *in Mary’s womb*. For Arians this would be a second begetting. Luke knows nothing of such an idea. Unprejudiced readers will see (as acknowledged by a host of biblical experts) that the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts and Peter is a human being originating at his birth as do all other human persons. He has not preexisted.

It is a serious imposition on the Gospel of John to understand him to teach a different sort of Jesus than Matthew, Mark and Luke — one who is really an angel or God appearing as a man. Such a non-human Messiah is foreign not only to the rest of the New Testament, but to the whole revelation of God in the Old Testament in regard to His definition of the coming Messiah. Deuteronomy 18 expressly says that the Messiah is to arise from a family in Israel. All Jews who looked forward to the Messiah expected a human person, not an angel, much less God Himself! Though the Jews had not understood that the Messiah was to be born supernaturally, even this miraculous begetting was in fact predicted.²¹ A “pre-human” Messiah, however, is nowhere suggested.

According to Isaiah 44:24 God was unaccompanied at the original creation. Jesus in the Gospels attributes the creation to the Father²² and has no memory of being the agent in the Genesis creation.

²¹ Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23.

²² Mark 10:6; Matt. 6:30; Luke 12:28.

“God speaks of things which do not exist *as though they did*.”²³ It is a mistake to confuse “existence” in the Plan of God with actual preexistence, thus producing a non-fully human Jesus. The Christ of biblical expectation is a human person. Therein lies the supreme glory of his achievement for us.

The “Rock” apostle whom Jesus appointed to “feed my sheep” has given us a lesson in how to understand the meaning of preexistence as foreknowledge and predestination. It was Peter whose recognition of Jesus as *the Messiah* was greeted by the approval of Jesus. Peter and John understood that the glory which Jesus already “had” is the same glory believers subsequent to the time of Jesus (and therefore not yet born when Jesus spoke) also “had been given.”²⁴ This means only that things which are fixed in God’s counsels “exist” in a sense other than actual existence. We must choose whether to understand the language of the New Testament as modern Westerners or as sympathetic with Jesus and his Jewish culture. A verse in Revelation speaks of things “being” before they were created: “They *were* and were created.”²⁵

A knowledge of the background to the New Testament reveals that Jews believed that Moses “preexisted” in the counsels of God, but not actually as a conscious person:

For this is what the Lord of the world has decreed: He created the world on behalf of His people, but He did not make this purpose of creation known from the beginning of the world so that the nations might be found guilty . . . But He did design and devise me, who was prepared from the beginning of the world to be the mediator of the covenant (*Testament of Moses*, 1:13, 14).

If Moses was decreed in the Plan of God, it makes perfect sense that the Messiah himself was the purpose for which God created everything.

²³ Rom. 4:17.

²⁴ John 17:22.

²⁵ Rev. 4:11. The use of the verb “were” is interesting in the light of an alternative reading in John 17:5 which speaks of “the glory which *was* with you.” This would be a statement about the preexisting glory (not the pre-human Jesus) which Jesus prayed to have bestowed on him (John 17:5), and also on his followers (John 17:22). See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Doubleday, 1970, 743. Note also that Augustine, and many other commentators, find no evidence for literal preexistence in John 17:5.

II. A SHIFT OF THINKING IN THE “CHURCH FATHERS”

The proposition introduced by Gentile “Church Fathers” that Jesus was either a second “member” of the Godhead (orthodoxy) or a created angel launched the whole vexed problem of the nature of Christ in relation to the Godhead and drew a veil over the true Messiahship of Jesus and his Messianic Gospel about the Kingdom. Jesus of Nazareth is what the Word of John 1:1 *became*.²⁶ He is the unique expression, as a human being, of the Wisdom of God. It was the Wisdom of God which existed from the beginning, and that Wisdom became a person at the conception of Jesus. This explanation leaves intact the great cardinal doctrine that the One God is the Father and that Jesus is the Lord Messiah, not the Lord God.²⁷

It is most significant that Paul often speaks of the gospel as having been hidden in the counsels of God from “ages past.”²⁸ He also says that the Son of God “*came into existence*” from a woman and from the seed of David.²⁹ It is unimaginable that Paul could have believed in the preexistence of the Son. It would be untrue to say that the Son came into existence at his birth, if in fact he had always existed. It is far more reasonable to suppose that Paul agreed with Peter that the Messiah was hidden in the divine counsels and then revealed in the fullness of time.³⁰

Finally, it is most unreasonable to claim that “Wisdom” in Proverbs (i.e., “Lady Wisdom”) was in fact Jesus, the Son, preexisting. “Wisdom” here is a personification of a divine quality, not a person. The proof of this is found not only in all major commentaries but very clearly in the text itself: “I, Wisdom, dwell with Prudence”³¹ If Wisdom is really a (male) Son of God, then who is Prudence?

²⁶ John 1:14. Jesus embodies the wisdom of God as he also embodies “salvation” of God (Luke 2:30).

²⁷ Deut. 6:4; Mark. 12:29ff.; 1 Cor. 8:4-6; 1 Tim. 2:5; John 17:3; 5:44.

²⁸ Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:2; cp. 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8.

²⁹ Rom. 1:4; Gal. 4:4.

³⁰ We note James Dunn’s justifiable protest against Cranfield’s comment on Rom. 1:4. “Unconcerned by his use of anachronistic categories, Cranfield continues to argue that Paul ‘intended to limit the application of “who came into existence” to the *human nature which* the One (God’s Son, v. 3) *assumed*” (*Romans, 1-8, 15*, Word Books, 1988). Cranfield struggles to justify “orthodoxy” from Paul’s words. But Paul was neither an “orthodox” Trinitarian nor an “unorthodox” Arian.

³¹ Prov. 8:12.

Preexisting purposes and personifications are all part of the literature of Judaism. A non-human Messiah is not. A Messiah who is not originally a human being approximates much more closely to the pagan idea of preexisting souls and Gnostic “aions.” It was that early invasion of paganism which unfortunately began to corrupt the faith, just as Peter and Paul warned.³²

That intrusion of paganism resulted in some very strange language about Jesus. His “pre-human existence” signals the fact that he is really not a human being. He has existed as an angel before being born. This is close to the idea of “the gods coming down in the likeness of men” (Acts 14:11). Such a Jesus sounds like a pagan savior figure. There were many such cosmic saviors in the Graeco-Roman world. But there was only one Messiah whose identity was given long in advance of his birth. He was *foreknown* and would arise from the House of Israel, a Jew from the tribe of Judah (Deut. 18:15-18). Christians should be careful to claim allegiance to that Savior. To worship a Savior with wrong ideas about him runs the risk of worshipping another Savior.

³² 2 Pet. 2; Acts 20:29-31.