

The Nature of

# *Preexistence in the New Testament*

by Anthony Buzzard

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 the Council of Nicea (325 AD). Talk of his preexistence 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 purpose being achieved through him, rather than pre-existence of a fully personal kind.<sup>1</sup>

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.'<sup>2</sup> [*Yet evangelicalism insists on that equation if one is to be considered a Christian!*]

When the Jew wished to designate something as predestined, he spoke of it as already 'existing' in heaven.<sup>3</sup> [*Thus "preexistence" statements in the New Testament really have to do with foreordination and predestination. It was the Greeks who misunderstood Jewish ways of thinking and turned Jesus into a cosmic figure who entered the earth from outer space. But is such a Jesus a human being? Is he the true Messiah of Israel?*]

Many dedicated Christians are currently exercised about the Gnostic and mystical tendencies affecting the church. But many are unaware that philosophical, mystical ideas invaded the church from the second century onwards via the "Church Fathers," who were steeped in pagan philosophy and laid the foundation of the creeds now called "orthodox." The seed of Trinitarian doctrine was planted in the thinking of Justin Martyr, the second century Christian apologist who

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<sup>1</sup>. Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine: The Hulsean Lectures* (London: SCM Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>. Don Cupitt, *The Debate About Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1979), vii, 4.

<sup>3</sup>. E.G. Selwyn, *First Epistle of Peter*, 124.

found in Platonism the nearest approach to Christianity and felt that no break was required with its spirit and principles to pass into the greater light of Christian revelation. ... The forces which operated to change apostolic doctrine were derived from paganism. ... The habits of thought which the Gentiles brought into the church are sufficient to explain the corruptions of apostolic doctrine which began in the post-apostolic age.<sup>4</sup>

Intelligent Christians need to be informed of these corruptions and how they are currently “canonized” as Scripture by many. Discernment means learning the difference between revealed truth and pagan, philosophical teachings which originated outside the Bible, yet affected what is now called “orthodoxy.”

The reader is asked to consider the disastrous effects of not paying attention to the Jewish ways of thinking found in the Bible, which was written (with the exception of Luke) by Jews. Clearly, if Jews do not mean what we mean by “preexistence” we are liable to misunderstand them on basic issues about who Jesus is. There is a huge difference between being predestined or foreordained and actually preexisting. Greek philosophy believed in a “second God,” a non-human intermediary between the creator and the world. The true Jesus, however, is the “man Messiah,” the one Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). “To us Christians there is one God, the Father, and one Lord Messiah” (1 Cor. 8:4-6). Note carefully Paul’s definition of the One God.

The New Testament is a thoroughly Jewish book. Its writers were all Jews except probably Luke (who, however, is as Jewish as any of the writers in terms of his obvious delight in the Jewish salvation [John 4:22] 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 and early post-biblical creeds which overlooked the fact that Jesus was a Jew who thought and taught in Jewish categories.

There is an anti-semitic tendency in traditional, creedal Christianity which must be recognized and forsaken. It has dramatically affected Christian doctrine. It has affected the way we define the person of Jesus, the Messiah.

The idea that the soul separates from the body and survives consciously apart from the body is a thoroughly unJewish idea (this is well established in the Old Testament perspective – and the New Testament teaching about the nature of man is based on the Old). 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. Traditional Christianity persists with the mistaken notion that man has an “immortal soul” which survives death. Many Bible readers have not paid attention to the statement of the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*.

No biblical text authorizes the statement that the soul is separated from the body at the moment of death.<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> G. T. Purves, D.D., *The Testimony of Justin Martyr to Early Christianity* (New York: Randolph & Co., 1889), 167.

<sup>5</sup> Vol. 1, p. 802. See further our article, “Do Souls Go to Heaven?”

born. The preexistence of souls belongs to the world of Greek philosophy and was held by some church fathers (notably the philosophically- and mystically-minded Origen). But they did not derive this idea from the Bible.

Part of repentance is the willingness to admit we have been deceived, that we have not had sufficient information to make good decisions on Bible issues.

One most important fact we need to know before we attempt to understand who Jesus was is this:

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, pre-existing 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.<sup>6</sup>

Our scholar goes on to tell us that this typical mode of Jewish thought is clearly illustrated in 1 Peter. This reminds us immediately that Peter did not abandon his Jewish ways of thinking (based on the Hebrew Bible) when he became a Christian. Peter's letter is addressed to "the elect according to the foreknowledge (prognosis) of God the Father" (1 Pet 1:1, 2). Peter believed that all Christians were foreknown, but that did not mean that we all preexisted!

Peter's doctrine of future things is permeated by the same thought that all is foreordained in God's great Plan. God sees everything laid out before Him. 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 (1 Pet 1:20). Peter uses the same word to describe the "existence" of the Son of God in God's plan as he did to describe the "existence" of the Christian church (1 Pet 1:2).

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 (Luke 1:35). 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, post-biblical Christianity.

We are not entitled to say that Peter was familiar with the idea of Christ's preexistence with the Father before the incarnation [*we are therefore not entitled to claim that Peter was a Trinitarian!*]. 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 pre-existence: his Christology is more like that of the early chapters of Acts than of John and Paul.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> E. C. Dewick, *Primitive Christian Eschatology, The Hulsean Prize Essay for 1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 253, 254.

Peter, as the leading Apostle (Matt 10:1), would have had no sympathy with either a Trinitarian or Arian (*cp.* modern Jehovah's Witnesses) view of Jesus.

We note also that for Peter 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" (1 Pet 1:10, 11). 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 (1 Pet 1:20). Neither the Kingdom nor Jesus actually existed in advance. They were planned from before the foundation of the world.

Paul uses the same concept and language about the future resurrection and immortality of the saints. He says that we already "have a building from God, a house fit for the coming age."<sup>8</sup> 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. The same is true of the treasure we have in heaven. It is promised for our future. We will receive the reward of the inheritance (Col 3:24) when Christ brings it from heaven to the earth at his future coming.

### **Foreordination Rather than Literal Preexistence**

Having grasped this elementary fact of Jewish (and biblical) theology and thinking, 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 Cor 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 (Mark 10:21), that is, a reward stored up with God now and destined to be conferred in the future. This is only to say that they will one day in the future "inherit the Kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world" (Matt 25:34).

When Jesus says that he "had" the glory for which he now prays (John 17:5), he is merely asking for the glory which he knew was prepared for him by God from the beginning.<sup>9</sup> 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 onus is on those who believe in literal preexistence to demonstrate that the texts cannot be explained within their own Jewish context.

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

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<sup>7</sup> E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Essays* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 248, 250. That Peter's idea of Jesus as being different from that of Paul and John is highly improbable.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Cor 5:1. This is the proper translation of *aionios*, *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 for ever. The acquisition of that body is nevertheless the great event of the coming age introduced by the resurrection.

<sup>9</sup> The synoptic way of expressing the same idea is to talk of the Kingdom "prepared before the foundation of the world" (Matt 25:34).

word for “real” preexistence in the Greek language (*pro-uparchon*). 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 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. Preexistence in the Bible does not mean what it meant in later creeds: the actual conscious existence of the Son of God before his birth at which time he entered the earth and the human condition by passing through the womb of his mother.

A Jewish and biblical conception of preexistence 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 him in 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 (in God’s Plan) and was seen in Daniel’s vision of the future (Dan 7; John 6:62). Jesus at his ascension went up to the position which had been previously prepared for him in God’s Plan. No text says that Jesus went back (*upostrepho*) to God, though this idea has been wrongly imported into some modern English translations to support “orthodoxy.” Such a mistranslation of the Greek “go to the Father” as “go back to the Father” tells its own story.<sup>10</sup> The translation of the Bible has been corrupted to mirror traditional, post-biblical ideas of who Jesus is.

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 idea of preexistence for the Messiah “antecedent to his birth in Bethlehem is unknown in Judaism.” The Messiah, according to all that is predicted of him in the Old Testament belongs in his origin to the human race:

‘Judaism has never known anything of a preexistence peculiar to the Messiah antecedent to his birth as a human being’ (Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, pp. 128-32, 248, 252). The dominance of the idea in any Jewish circle whatever cannot seriously be upheld. Judaism knew nothing of the [literally] preexistent ideal man.<sup>11</sup>

To claim to “be before Abraham” (John 8:58) 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. Even Moses pre-existed in that sense, according to a quotation we introduce later. John the Apostle could also say that Christ was “crucified before the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8). This gives us an enormously valuable clue as 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 and therefore certain to be realized. Bible readers disregard this very Jewish way of thinking when they leap to the conclusion that when Jesus said he “had” glory with the Father from the foundation of the world (John

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<sup>10</sup>. This is the translation of the *New International Version* of John 16:28.

<sup>11</sup>. Charles Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief: Belief in God. Belief in Christ. The Holy Spirit and the Church* (London: John Murray, 1923), 31.

17:5), he meant that he was alive at that time. Certainly in a western frame of reference the traditional understanding is reasonable. But can we not do the Messiah the honor of trying to understand his words in their own Hebrew environment? Should not the Bible be interpreted in the light of its own context and not our later creeds?

### **No Preexistence for Jesus in Matthew, Mark and Luke**

There is a deafening silence about any real preexistence of Christ in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts and Peter, and the whole of the Old Testament. Not only do they not hint at a pre-human Son of God, they contradict the idea by talking of the origin (genesis) of Jesus (Matt 1:18) and his begetting as Son (Matt 1:20) in Mary's womb.<sup>12</sup> Note that for Aryans and Trinitarians, who think that Jesus was begotten in eternity long before his conception/begetting in Mary, this would be a second begetting.<sup>13</sup> 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 "begettal" and birth as do all other human persons. He has not preexisted. Matthew even speaks of the "genesis" of Jesus in Matt 1:18.

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 18:15-18 expressly says that the Messiah is to arise from a family in Israel. The Messiah is expressly said in this important Christological text not to be God but God's agent born to the family of 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 (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). 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 Father (Mark 10:6; Matt 6:30; Luke 12:28) and has no memory of being the agent in the Genesis creation. If Jesus had really been the creator of the Genesis heaven and earth, why does he have no memory of this? Why does he expressly say that God was the creator? The answer is that Jesus worked within the Jewish and biblical framework of the scriptural heritage he had received and which he "came not to destroy."

The spirit of God is available to believers. As they learn to think as God does, they will share the concept that "God speaks of things which do not exist as though they did" (Rom 4:17). It is a mistake to confuse "existence" in the Plan of God with actual preexistence, thus creating a non-fully human Jesus. The Christ of biblical expectation is a human person, supernaturally conceived. The

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<sup>12</sup> Note the mistranslation in our versions: The text does not refer to conception, but to "begetting" by the Father through the Holy Spirit. It is the action of the Father which brings the Son into existence. The Son of God, the Messiah, is a supernaturally created person, the "Second Adam." Note also in Acts 13:33 the reference to the "raising up" of Jesus, which refers to God's bringing him into being. Verse 34 mentions his subsequent resurrection.

<sup>13</sup> Justin Martyr is perhaps the first Church Father to speak of a begetting of the Son prior to Genesis (*i.e.*, prior to Creation). But he provides no scriptural support for such an ante-mundane begetting of the Son. According to the Bible the Son of God was begotten, as are all human persons, at the time of his conception in his mother's womb. Justin differs from Matthew by saying that the Son came "through" Mary. Matthew holds that he came from Mary. This points to the shift of thinking that has taken place by 150 AD, a shift which provided the seed of the later Trinitarian formulation.

supreme glory of his achievement for us lies in the fact that he really was a human being. He was tempted. But God cannot be tempted (James 1:13).

The “Rock” Apostle whom Jesus appointed to “feed my sheep” has given us a marvelous 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 excited approval of Jesus (Matt 16:16-18). 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” (John 17:22). 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 Americans or Europeans or as sympathetic to Jesus and his Jewish culture. A verse in Revelation speaks of things “being” before they were created. “They were and were created” (Rev 4:11).<sup>14</sup> Their creation followed from God’s original Plan to bring them into being.

A knowledge of the background to the New Testament reveals that Jews believed that even 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 [Moses], 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. All things may then be said to have been created on behalf of the Christ. Out of respect for God’s revealed Plan and in honor of the human Savior, we should seek to understand his identity in the context of his own Hebrew setting.

A fine statement of the Jewish understanding of “preexistence” is given by the Norwegian scholar, Mowinckel, in his famous *He That Cometh*:

That any expression or vehicle of God’s will for the world, His saving counsel and purpose, was present in His mind, or His ‘Word,’ from the beginning is a natural way of saying that it is not fortuitous, but the due unfolding and expression of God’s own being [*cp.* John: “the Word was with God and was God”]. This attribution of pre-existence indicates religious importance of the highest order. Rabbinic theology speaks of the Law, of God’s throne of glory, of Israel and of other important objects of faith, as things which had been created by God, and were already present with Him, before the creation of the world. The same is also true of the Messiah. It is said that his name was present with God in heaven beforehand, that it was created before the world, and that it is eternal.

But the reference here is not to genuine pre-existence in the strict and literal sense. This is clear from the fact that Israel is included among these pre-existent entities. This does not mean that either the nation Israel or its ancestor existed long ago in heaven, but that the community Israel, the people of God, had been from all eternity in the mind of God, as a factor in His purpose.

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<sup>14</sup> 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* [New York: Doubleday, 1970], 743.) Note also that Augustine, and many other commentators, find no evidence for literal preexistence in John 17:5.

... This is true of references to the pre-existence of the Messiah. It is his 'name,' not the Messiah himself, that is said to have been present with God before creation. In *Pesikta Rabbati* 152b is said that 'from the beginning of the creation of the world the King Messiah was born, for he came up in the thought of God before the world was created.' This means that from all eternity it was the will of God that the Messiah should come into existence, and should do his work in the world to fulfill God's eternal saving purpose.<sup>15</sup>

The proposition introduced by Gentile, philosophically-minded "Church Fathers" that Jesus was either a second "member" of the Godhead (later orthodoxy) or a created angel (Arians and, in modern times, Jehovah's Witnesses) launched the whole vexed problem of the nature of Christ in relation to the Godhead and put under a fog the true Messiahship of Jesus and his Messianic Gospel about the Kingdom. Jesus of Nazareth is what the Word (God's Wisdom) of John 1:1 became.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> It was the early Greek Church Fathers who confused the issue of Jewish/Christian monotheism by introducing the idea of a "numerically second God."<sup>18</sup>

It is most significant that Paul often speaks of the gospel as having been hidden in the counsels of God from "ages past."<sup>19</sup> He also says that the Son of God "came into existence" from a woman and from the seed of David (Rom 1:4; Gal 4:4). 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.<sup>20</sup> Paul believed that "all things have been created in Jesus" (Col. 1:15). He did not say they had been created "by him."

Finally, it is most unreasonable to claim that "Wisdom" in Proverbs (*i.e.*, "Lady Wisdom") was in fact Jesus, the Son, preexisting. It should not be difficult to discern that "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..." (Prov 8:12). If Wisdom is really a (male) Son of God, then who is Prudence?

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<sup>15</sup>. Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, tr. G. W. Anderson, (New York, Abingdon Press, 1956), 334.

<sup>16</sup>. John 1:14. We should note, in this sense, that Jesus embodies the "wisdom of God" as he also embodies the "salvation of God" (Luke 2:30).

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

<sup>18</sup>. Dialogue 56, 62, 128, 129. Justin believed that the Son was begotten before the Genesis creation, but not that he had always been the Son. Justin, therefore, was not a Trinitarian.

<sup>19</sup>. Eph 3:9; Col 1:26; 2 Tim 1:9; Tit 1:2; cp. 1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8.

<sup>20</sup>. We note James Dunn's justifiable protest against Cranfield's comment (C. E. B. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary: Romans* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975], 1:61) on Romans 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'" (James D. G. Dunn, *World Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8* (Word Books: Dallas, 1988), 38A:15). Cranfield struggles to justify "orthodoxy" from Paul's words. But Paul was neither an "orthodox" Trinitarian nor an "unorthodox" Arian.

Preexisting purposes and personifications are all part of the literature of Judaism. A preexistent, non-human Messiah is not! A Messiah who is not a human being approximates much more closely to the pagan idea of preexisting souls and Gnostic “aeons.” It was that early invasion of paganism which unfortunately began to corrupt the faith, just as Peter and Paul warned (2 Pet 2; Acts 20:29-31).

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 (1 Pet 1:20) and would arise from the House of Israel as an Israelite of the tribe of Judah (Deut 18:15-18; Acts 3:22; 7:37). That important text in Deuteronomy actually states that the promised agent of God would not be the Lord God, but His spokesman (Deut 18:16, 17). 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. The creed of Jesus is the right creed for Christians (Mark 12:28ff.). As so many scholars know, that creed is not a Trinitarian creed. The One God of Israel and of Jesus was and is the Father (John 17:3; John 5:44; 1 Tim 2:5; 1 Cor 8:4-6), “the One and only God” (John 5:44), “the only true God” (John 17:3).

### John 1:1

Christology (the study of who Jesus is) has to do with a reasoned statement about the relation of Jesus to the One God of Israel. There is no doubt that for the early Christians Jesus “had the value and reality of God.” This, however, does not mean that they thought Jesus “was God.” It has been held by some that John presents Jesus in metaphysical terms which would appeal to people in the Greek world who thought in terms of abstract ideas familiar to Hellenistic thought. “Orthodoxy” claims John as its bridge to the world of Greek metaphysics - the metaphysics which helped to mold the Jesus of the Church Councils.

We suggest that we should first see if John can be readily understood in terms of his otherwise very Jewish approach. Why should we attempt to read John as though he were a student of the Jew Philo or of Gentile mystery religion? Why should John be claimed as a supporter of the dogmatic conclusions of the much later Church Councils? Should we not make sense of him from the Old Testament world of ideas? “What we do know,” says a leading Bible scholar, “is that John was steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures. If we wish to understand the historical ancestry of John's Logos [word] concept as he himself understood it, we have to go back to those Scriptures.”<sup>21</sup>

It is a considerable mistake to read John 1:1 as though it means “In the beginning was the Son of God and the Son was with the Father and the Son was God.”<sup>22</sup> This is not what John wrote. The German poet Goths wrestled with a correction in translation: “In the beginning was the Word, the Thought, the Power or the Deed.” He decided on “deed.” He comes very close to John's intention.

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<sup>21</sup> C. J. Wright, “Jesus the Revelation of God,” in *The Mission and Message of Jesus: An Exposition of the Gospels in the Light of Modern Research* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1953), 677.

<sup>22</sup> Cp. the very misleading paraphrase of the *Living Bible*: “Before anything else existed, there was Christ, with God. He has always been alive and is Himself God. He created everything there is - nothing exists that He did not make” (John 1:1-2).

What the evangelist wanted to say was: “The Creative Thought of God has been operating from all eternity.”

As a leading British Bible scholar wrote:

When John presents the eternal Word he was not thinking of a Being in any way separate from God, or some ‘Apostasies.’ The later dogmatic Trinitarian distinctions should not be read into John’s mind ... in the light of a philosophy which was not his .... We must not read John in the light of the dogmatic history of the three centuries subsequent to the Evangelist’s writing.<sup>23</sup>

To understand John (and the rest of the New Testament) we must pay close attention to John’s cultural heritage which was not the world of Greek philosophy in which the dogmatic creeds were formed some three hundred years later. When John is read in the light of his Hebrew background he provides no support for the doctrine of a Jesus who is “God the Son,” an eternal uncreated Person in a triune godhead:

An author’s language will confuse us, unless we have some rapport with his mind .... The evangelist John takes a well-known term *logos*, does not define it, but unfolds what he himself means by it .... The idea belonged to the Old Testament, and is involved in the whole religious belief and experience of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the most fitting term to express his message. For a man’s ‘word’ is the expression of his ‘mind’; and his mind is his essential personality. Every mind must express itself, for activity is the very nature of mind .... Thus John speaks of the ‘Word’ that was with God, and was Divine, to express his conviction that God has ever been Active and Revealing Mind. God, by His very nature, cannot sit in heaven and do nothing. When later in the Gospel Jesus says, ‘My Father works up till now’ he is saying what the Evangelist says in the first verse of the Prologue.

John’s language is not the language of philosophical definition. John has a ‘concrete’ and ‘pictorial’ mind. The failure to understand John [in his prologue] has led many to the conclusion that he is ‘father of metaphysical [*i.e.*, Trinitarian] Christology,’ and therefore responsible for the later ecclesiastical obscuration of the ethical and spiritual emphasis of Jesus .... The evangelist did not think in terms of the category of ‘substance’ - a category which was so congenial to the Greek mind.<sup>24</sup>

In an illuminating article in *Biblical Review*, J. Harold Ellens points out that titles such as Son of God, as used at the time when the *New Testament* was written

were never meant to designate the figures to whom they were applied as divine beings. They meant rather that these figures were imbued with divine spirit, or the *Logos*. The titles referred to their function and character as men of God, not to their being God. Thinking of a human as being God was strictly a Greek or Hellenistic notion. Thus the early theological debates from the middle of the second century on were largely between Antioch, a center of Jewish Christianity, on the one hand, and Alexandrian Christianity, heavily colored by neo-Platonic speculation, on the other. For the most part, the Jewish Christians’ argument tended to be that they had known Jesus and his family and that he was a human being, a great teacher, one filled with the divine *Logos* ... but that

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<sup>23</sup> C. J. Wright, *Jesus: The Revelation of God. Book 3 of The Mission and Message of Jesus* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1938), 707.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 707, 711.

he was not divine in the ontological sense, as the Alexandrians insisted. The arguments persisted in one form or another until Cyril of Alexandria's faction finally won the day for a highly mythologized Jesus of divine ontological being. Cyril was capable of murdering his fellow bishops to get his way.

By the time of the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, this Alexandrian perspective of high Christology was dominant but not uncontested by the Antiochian perspective of low Christology. From Nicea to Chalcedon the speculative and neo-Platonist perspective gained increasing ground and became orthodox Christian dogma in 451 CE. Unfortunately, what the theologians of the great ecumenical councils meant by such creedal titles as Son of God was remote from what those same titles meant in the Gospels. The creeds were speaking in Greek philosophical terms: the gospels were speaking in Second Temple Judaism terms. ... The Bishops of the councils should have realized that they had shifted ground from Hebrew metaphor to Greek ontology and in effect betrayed the real Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup>

It is not difficult to understand that the Bible is abandoned when fundamental terms like Son of God are given new and unbiblical meanings. The Church Councils under the influence of Greek speculative neo-Platonism replaced the New Testament Son of God with a God the Son fashioned by philosophy. When a different meaning for a title is substituted for the original a new faith is created. That new faith became "orthodoxy." It insisted on its dogmas, on pain of excommunication and damnation (the Athanasian Creed). Nicean dogmatic "orthodoxy" lifted Jesus out of his Hebrew environment, twisted John's Gospel in an effort to make John fit into "orthodoxy's" philosophical mold. And so it has remained to this day.

A revolution is needed to reverse this tragic process. It will come when Christians take personal responsibility for getting in touch with the Bible and investigating it with all the tools now at our disposal. A key to proper biblical understanding is to recognize that the Bible is a Jewish library of books and that Jesus was a Jew steeped in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament).

The hidden paganism in Christianity needs to be exposed. The history of orthodoxy shows signs of a spirit which is far removed from the spirit of Jesus. Those who have questioned "orthodoxy" have often been roughly handled.<sup>26</sup> One commentator asks:

How is it that the religion of love has been responsible for some of the worst cruelties and injustices that have ever disgraced humanity? ... The church has persecuted more cruelly than any other religion.... Our religious beliefs are propped up on the traditional scaffolding, and many of us are intensely annoyed if the stability of this scaffolding is called in question. The average Catholic [and the same applies to many Protestants] relies on the infallibility of his Church, which he has usually accepted without investigation. To own that his church has been wrong, and has sanctioned heinous crimes, is almost impossible for him.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>. See "The Ancient Library of Alexandria" in *Bible Review*, Feb. 1997 and further comments in *BR*, June 1997 (emphasis is mine).

<sup>26</sup>. For an illuminating example of misguided religious zeal and cruelty, see the account of Calvin's savage persecution and execution of the Spanish doctor and scholar who questioned the doctrine of the Trinity, in Marian Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1553): The Turning Point in the Struggle for freedom of Conscience*, (Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

<sup>27</sup>. Dean W. R. Inge, *A Pacifist in Trouble* (London: Putnam, 1939), 180, 181.

## **Monotheism**

Neither Paul nor any writer of the Bible ever stated that “there is One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” No example out of thousands of occurrences of Jahweh (OT) and God (NT) can be shown to mean “God in three Persons.” The Triune God is foreign to the Bible. The words of Paul need careful consideration: “There is no God but one.... To us there is One God, the Father” (1 Cor. 8:4, 6) There is also one Lord Messiah, Jesus (1 Cor. 8:6), but He is the Lord Christ (Luke 2:11; Ps. 110:1), the Son of the One God, His Father.

The two major players in the Bible are described in a precious divine oracle quoted in the New Testament more than any other verse from the Hebrew Bible: Ps. 110:1. There the One God “Yahweh” speaks to David’s Lord, who is addressed as Adoni (“my Lord”). Adoni in its 167 occurrences never means the One God. It refers always to a human (or occasionally) angelic superior, other than God. Jesus is the Lord of David of whom Ps. 110:1 speaks. He was appointed Lord and Messiah – appointed by God, his Father (Acts 2:34-36).

Out of respect and honor for Jesus the Messiah, Christians should adopt his Jewish creed in Mark 12:28ff.: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.” God is one Lord. Jesus is another Lord. That makes two Lords, but the creed knows of only one Lord who is God (Deut 6:4; Mark 12:28ff.). That is the creed of Jesus and therefore the original and authentic Christian creed. It is also the creed of Paul. May we all joyfully embrace that creed and align ourselves with the Jesus Messiah of history.

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