



## Pre-Existence Christology: Can We Dispense with It?

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In pre-critical times there was no problem with pre-existence Christology. It had its sanction in the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Fourth Gospel (e.g., John 8:58, 10:30, 13:3 and 17:5). Now that we cannot employ the discourse material of the Fourth Gospel as direct evidence for the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, some have sought to find sanction for it in Jesus' use of Son of man as a self-designation. However, even if we grant that the title Son of man was already fixed in pre-Christian Jewish apocalyptic for a pre-existent figure to be manifested as eschatological judge and savior, and even if we grant that Jesus did use the term and use it as a self-designation—all of which is greatly in dispute<sup>1</sup>—there is no indication anywhere in the synoptic Son of man sayings of the Son of man's pre-existence.

Indeed there is fairly wide consensus today that the pre-existence Christology is a post-Easter development. When exactly this development took place is not clear. Those who regard Philippians 2:6-11 as a pre-Pauline hymn, and who interpret verses 6-7 as referring to a pre-existent state, would date this development between A.D. 35 and 50 (so M. Hengel<sup>2</sup>). Those who interpret the Philippian hymn in terms of a two-stage Christology—involving only earthly life and post-existence<sup>3</sup>—would find the earliest occurrence of pre-existence Christology in 1 Corinthians (especially 1 Cor 8:6). Thereafter it is found in hymnic materials both within the Pauline school (Col 1:15-20) and beyond it (Heb 1:3-4), in the Johannine prologue and (see the references above) in the discourse material of that Gospel.

Hans Grass and others have argued that contemporary systematic theology should abandon pre-existence Christology.<sup>4</sup> It is, they say, irretrievably mytho-

<sup>1</sup>For a recent discussion of the Son of man problem, especially in its relation to pre-existence Christology, see James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 65-97.

<sup>2</sup>M. Hengel, "Christologie und neutestamentliche Chronologie," *Neues Testament und Geschichte*, ed. H. Baltensweiler and B. Reicke (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972) 43-67.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Christological Anthropology in Phil. 2:6-11," *Revue Biblique* 83 (1976) 25-50.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Grass, *Christliche Glaubenslehre* (2 vols.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973-74) 1.117-38.

logical. It has no basis in the self-understanding of the historical Jesus. It was unknown in the earliest kerygma, which focused rather on the death and exaltation of Jesus. When it does appear it is confined almost entirely to hymnic materials, and until the Fourth Gospel little attempt is made to integrate it into the theology of those writings where it appears. When used today, it shifts the focus of Christology away from the death and resurrection of Jesus, where the focus properly belongs. It distorts the picture of Jesus as he really was, a truly human person, making

him instead a celestial visitor from an alien world.

Grass asks whether pre-existence and incarnational Christology is the only way to express the significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) of Jesus for faith. A “sending” Christology should be sufficient, a Christology which speaks of Jesus’ historical mission. Such a Christology would safeguard the divine initiative behind the history of Jesus, and the presence of God in him. It would allow for a distinction between the sending of Jesus and the sending of the prophets, for it would recognize that the sending of Jesus was definitive, permanent, and universal in significance. It would speak of pre-existence but in an “ideal” sense, not of a real, substantial, or personal pre-existence. It would speak of the election of Jesus of Nazareth from all eternity to be the medium of God’s final revelatory and saving act.

Such an interpretation is particularly attractive, since it is no mere reversion to the older liberal Christology in which Jesus had the value of God for us because of the sublimity of his teaching and human personality. Moreover, it allows for a God who acts, for human sin, and for finality of God’s redemption in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, it involves the abandonment not only of the incarnation as traditionally understood but also, as Grass himself notes, the doctrine of the Trinity. The question is whether this substitution of a “God in Christ” Christology for traditional Christology does justice to the biblical witness.

Let us try to deal in turn with the objections to the pre-existence Christology presented above. The first objection is that it is mythological. This objection originates in part from the theory that the pre-existence Christology was an importation from pre-Christian gnosis in the shape of the so-called gnostic redeemer myth. This theory, originating in the History of Religions School, enjoyed a long popularity, especially among the Bultmannians, but was conclusively demolished by C. Colpe in 1961.<sup>5</sup> The publication of the Nag Hammadi documents more recently has not materially altered the situation.<sup>6</sup> A series of articles by E. Schweizer from 1959 on<sup>7</sup> has created a widespread consensus that the source of pre-existence Christology is to be found in the Jewish speculation about the divine Wisdom. Is this speculation correctly characterized as mythological? It would be if Wisdom were an actual being, somehow distinct from the being of God. But recently J. D. G. Dunn has argued persuasively that Wisdom in this speculation is no more than a personification of a certain aspect of God’s activity:

<sup>5</sup>C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). It is ironic that my copy of this work was given to me personally by R. Bultmann, then editor of the series in which it was published, for it was the demolition of one of the foundations of his life’s work.

<sup>6</sup>See the discussion in Dunn (as in note 1), 98-101.

<sup>7</sup>E. Schweizer, “Zur Herkunft der Präexistenzvorstellung bei Paulus,” *Evangelische Theologie* 19 (1959) 65-70.

“Wisdom never became more than a convenient way of speaking about God acting in creation, revelation, and salvation; Wisdom never became more than a personification of God’s own activity.”<sup>8</sup> If this is so, then the identification of Jesus with God’s Wisdom does not involve the mythological idea of a pre-existent divine being, in some way distinguishable from the being of God, becoming incarnate. What it is saying is that that aspect of the being of God which Jewish thinkers had previously experienced has become now fully embodied in the life of Jesus. There is really nothing mythological about this.

Does all this have any basis in the self-understanding of the earthly Jesus? Since the pursuit of the so-called “New Quest” it has usually been held that Jesus’ eschatological message, his conduct, etc., all “implied a Christology,” or they were an assertion of an “indirect Christology.” We have no intention of quarreling with that claim, and in fact we have frequently advanced it ourselves. We would, however, for present purposes propose a substitute. What this really means is that Jesus held what E. Schillebeeckx has called in a slightly different connection (viz., with reference to the kerygma of the earliest post-Easter community) a “theology of Jesus.”<sup>9</sup> That is to say, Jesus spoke and acted, even if he did not explicitly assert it in so many words, that God was present speaking and acting through him. In fact, E. Fuchs, one of the proponents of an “implied Christology,” actually formulates this in terms of Jesus’ “daring to speak and act for God” (this in reference to his conduct in eating with the outcast).<sup>10</sup>

Now this is a far cry from a pre-existence Christology, and in fact at first sight it seems rather to support H. Grass’ proposed substitution, “God was in Jesus.” Yet, as Jesus’ eschatological proclamation shows, he regarded his activity as the eschatological culmination of God’s dealings with his people. The same God was present in him as had been present throughout Israel’s history.<sup>11</sup> Here we have the basis upon which the later pre-existence Christology was to develop.

Nor was this view of Jesus unknown to the earliest kerygma.<sup>12</sup> True, the earliest kerygma had no pre-existence Christology. Indeed, the earliest Christology is often characterized (see e.g., Acts 2:36 and Rom 1:3) as “adoptionist.” A closer examination of it however indicates that the earliest community continued precisely Jesus’ own “theology of Jesus” so far as the interpretation of his earthly life was concerned. In fact we might describe the earliest Christology as a “theology of Jesus” interpretation of his earthly life combined with an explicit Christology for his post-exaltation existence:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs *which God did through him* in your midst (Acts 2:22).

<sup>8</sup>Dunn (as in note 1), 210.

<sup>9</sup>A term coined by Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 545-50.

<sup>10</sup>E. Fuchs, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1964) 11-31, especially pp. 20-21: “We are certainly confronted by a very daring line of conduct on the part of Jesus: he dares to affirm the will of God as though he himself stood in God’s place.”

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Mark 12:1-9; Matt 23:34-36 par Q.

<sup>12</sup>The historical value of the kerygmatic speeches in Acts is much controverted. I take the mediating view of E. Schweizer, “Concerning the Speeches in Acts,” *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 186-93, that the christological nucleus of these speeches is pre-Lucan and primitive. Luke’s redaction interprets the earthly life of Jesus christologically, whereas the speeches interpret it in terms of a “theology of Jesus.”

He went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, *for God was with him* (Acts 10:38).

Indeed we might regard the famous Pauline statement, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19) as a survival of the primitive “theology of Jesus,” a theology Paul can

still use after he has accepted an explicit Christology for the earthly life of Jesus, and (what is perhaps even more significant) at a time when he has already used hymnic materials affirming pre-existence Christology.

It is perfectly true, as Grass has observed, that even after the introduction of pre-existence Christology it remains, until the Fourth Gospel, rather peripheral. It is confined almost exclusively to hymns, although where these hymns are quoted the pre-existence part of it cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the theological argumentation. In Philippians (if the hymn does indeed feature pre-existence) it serves to reinforce the exhortation to humility. In 1 Corinthians the portrayal of Jesus as the embodiment of Wisdom serves to counter the false notions of Wisdom prevailing at Corinth. In Colossians the attribution of creation to the pre-existent One serves to counter the Colossians' ascription of creation to the angelic powers, thus introducing a dualism which undermined the kerygma by denying the salvability of creation.<sup>13</sup> At the same time we must admit, however, that no effort is made by the New Testament authors until the Fourth Gospel to integrate the pre-existence Christology to the rest of their Christology.

As for the next objection—that a pre-existence Christology shifts the focus away from the death and resurrection of Jesus where it really belongs—this may be true of some Christologies in the post-New Testament period, but it is not true of the New Testament (not even, I would argue, *pace* Bultmann, of the Fourth Gospel) nor of the concern of the classical christological definitions,<sup>14</sup> nor of the Reformation Confessions.<sup>15</sup> Treated rightly, therefore, the pre-existence and incarnation Christology provides the indispensable basis for the right understanding of the cross and resurrection.

The last objection to the pre-existence and incarnational Christology is that it distorts the picture of Jesus as he really was, a truly human being and not a celestial visitor from an alien world. Now this Christology never asserts in mythological fashion that the man Jesus was pre-existent. The statements about pre-existence refer not to Jesus in himself, but to Wisdom, i.e., that aspect of the being of God which was incarnated in Jesus. True, in some hymnic passages the antecedent of “who” is “Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:6; 1 Cor 8:6). But these passages do not have as their antecedent simply “Jesus,” and therefore I would argue that the relative clauses have as their antecedent Jesus in his revelatory and salvific capacity. Strictly speaking, the relative clauses speak of “that of God which is incarnated in

<sup>13</sup>C. H. Dodd in his Cambridge lectures on Pauline theology (1937) used this word to justify the development of pre-existence Christology in Colossians.

<sup>14</sup>Cf., e.g., Athanasius, *de Incarnatione*.

<sup>15</sup>In the XXXIX Articles of Religion, articles I-VIII reaffirm the doctrine of the traditional Catholic creeds before continuing with the new soteriological emphases of the Reformation (articles IX-XVIII).

the man Jesus.”<sup>16</sup> Since therefore it is not Jesus as such who is thought of as pre-existent, and since Wisdom is not a personal mythological being, but an aspect of the being of God, it follows that the pre-existence Christology is not mythological, and that therefore it cannot have the effect of making Jesus a celestial visitor from an alien world.

If this is the true interpretation of that Christology, have we not purchased our solution at the cost of surrendering any real Christology? Does it not leave us after all merely with a theology of Jesus? Is not Grass finally right, and can we not simply content ourselves with the

assertion that “God was in Christ”? Now the Fourth Gospel goes beyond this. It alone, of all the New Testament writings, has sought to integrate the Wisdom Christology with the earthly life of Jesus. More specifically, it has integrated the Christology of the incarnation of the divine Wisdom (or *Logos*, to use the language of the Prologue, though that language is not picked up in the rest of the Gospel) with a Christology of the Father and the Son:

The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand (John 3:35).

The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing (John 5:19-20).

This Father-son language is not pure speculation, but is rooted in the undoubtedly historical fact of what Schillebeeckx calls Jesus’ *Abba* experience. The Johannine writer would claim that this development is the result of a prolonged meditation on that experience under the guidance of the Paraclete (or Counselor), whose function is “to take what is mine and declare it to you” (16:14). On one level this Father-son Christology is an exposition of the earthly experience of the man Jesus. But because Jesus is the earthly manifestation of the divine Wisdom or Logos, his life is a disclosure of a mutual relationship between God and the Wisdom-Logos in eternity. The earthly life of Jesus has therefore disclosed the full mystery of what Jewish speculation had arrived at in its poetic personification of the Wisdom of God. Wisdom is now disclosed to be a personal entity within the Godhead existing in personal relationship with the being of the Father. This however is neither mythology nor speculation, but a revelation disclosed in the actual earthly life of Jesus. That which is incarnated in him (*ho logos sarx egeneto*, the Word became flesh) is a personal reality sharing the being of God yet distinguishable from him (“what God was, the Word was,” NEB<sup>17</sup>). The disclosure of God in action in the man Jesus results in a profound modification of Jewish monotheism, but it is an enrichment of it, not its abandonment. The raw materials of the doctrine of the Trinity lie in the historical life of Jesus as the Fourth Evangelist had come to see it. If we are to be true to the profoundest understanding of the Jesus phenomenon, the pre-existence and incarnation Christology cannot be abandoned. Rather, it is the foundation of the Christian understanding of God.

<sup>16</sup>I owe this phrase to my former colleague, Dr. Albert T. Mollegen, who used it in his Zabriskie Lectures of 1979.

<sup>17</sup>The Greek text of John 1:1 reads, “*theos*”—not “*ho theos*”—“*en ho logos*.”