

The Prophetic Pre-existence of the Messiah

by Robert Hach

The question of the so-called “pre-existence” of the Messiah is not settled by a biblically-informed rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity. That the Messiah existed before his birth is clear from many NT texts. In what sense, or form, he existed remains a question insofar as it continues to be a matter of debate among those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, while refusing to embrace the extra-biblical identification of Jesus as the Trinitarian “God the Son.” Regarding the “preexistence” of the Messiah, the options can be termed personal pre-existence, that is, that prior to his birth, the Son existed in some other-than-human form, and prophetic pre-existence (the option for which I argue in this paper).

Undeniable, I think, is the fact that the very term preexistence is a product of the post-apostolic debate that gave birth to Trinitarian theology. While it is possible to reject the Trinity as a non-biblical formulation and a post-apostolic invention while, at the same time, retaining the doctrine of the personal pre-existence of the Messiah, it is not possible to trace any term that might be translated as pre-existence back to apostolic times.

The Athanasian-Arian debate that was decided at the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E. seems to have been the cradle out of which emerged the terminology of pre-existence, which only afterward became enshrined in Christian theology.

The term that, in my view, serves as the biblical equivalent of pre-existence is foreknowledge. The NT claim that the Messiah “was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times” (1 Pet. 1:20) is sufficient, in my view, to explain every NT text in which the concept of pre-existence is found.

To say that God the Father foreknew the Son “before the foundation of the world” is to say that the Son existed in the purpose of the Father from “the beginning” in the form of “the word” (John 1:1, ‘and the word was God’ in the sense not that “the word” was part of God’s being but that “the word” was, thereafter, the revelatory form which God used to mediate his presence and purpose to his people and to the world).

No textual necessity for interpreting “the word” (Greek, *ho logos*) as a person (or a Person) exists in the prologue of John’s Gospel. (The Greek pronoun, *autos*, is susceptible to either the neuter [“it”] or the masculine [“he”] rendering, depending on what the context makes the more likely.) The NT writers uniformly use “the word” to refer to the gospel, that is, the message spoken by and about Jesus. For the NT writers, “the word” is the message about the fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah of the biblical God’s purpose in Adam and promise to Abraham.

When “the word became flesh” (John 1:14), God’s Adamic purpose and Abrahamic promise became

God's Messianic person. That is to say, the Son existed in the form, first, of God's purpose and, then, of God's promise before he existed in the form of the person of Jesus.

The biblical concept of foreknowledge is not compatible with the concept of personal pre-existence. If the Son existed as a person from "the beginning," how was his existence a matter of God's foreknowledge? That God foreknew the Messiah would seem to preclude the possibility that God also knew him in some pre-existent other-than-human form. Rather than God having both foreknown the coming Messiah and known the pre-existent Son at the same time (though in presumably two radically different personal forms), God's foreknowledge and his knowledge of his Messiah-Son were one and the same. This is the case in the sense that, from a biblical standpoint, what (or whom) God foreknew is what God knew as a foreordained reality before it came to pass in human history. (This has nothing in common with Calvinistic predestination, which asserts that God has foreknown and foreordained all that has ever happened or will ever happen; by comparison, biblical predestination is confined to what God purposed in Adam and, subsequently, promised to Abraham and, therefore, has fulfilled and will fulfill in his Son and Messiah Jesus.)

God's foreknowledge of the Messiah, then, is the biblical alternative to the doctrine of personal pre-existence. Biblical foreknowledge is, in the terminology of pre-existence, best represented in terms of prophetic pre-existence. That is to say, the existence of the Messiah was, prior to his birth, a matter of prophecy. And, from a biblical standpoint, to believe that God had made a promise, conveyed by the words of the prophets (that is, in the form of prophecy), was to believe that what God had promised (and, therefore, previously purposed) had been an inevitable reality from the instant God purposed it. (The literary rhetorical term for this figure of speech is prolepsis: to speak of a future event as a present reality; in the case of "the word," however, prolepsis becomes far more than a mere figure of speech in that it is a matter of God's righteousness—that is, faithfulness—that what he has promised will inevitably come to pass and, therefore, can be spoken of as a present reality.)

This is consistent with the NT definition of faith: "Now faith is the reality [Greek, *hupostasis*] of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). The existence of the Messiah was a reality of faith—a reality in the eyes of God, that is to say, a prophetic reality—from its "beginning" as "the word" (John 1:1). The Messiah's existence passed from a reality of faith ("the reality of things hoped for") to a reality of fact when "the word became flesh" (John 1:14) in the person of Jesus.

Nothing about this idea is alien to the biblical testimony; in fact, the idea of foreknowledge-as-prophetic-pre-existence is rooted in the Hebrew prophetic tradition. When God promised to make Abraham "the father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5), Paul pointed out that God spoke as if the promise had created a present reality—"as it is written, 'I have made [not 'will make'] you the father of many nations'"—and then calls God the one who "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). Literally rendered, Paul wrote that God calls things not being as being. Which is to say that what the biblical God spoke in the form of a promise—having already been foreknown and, therefore, foreordained (that is, predestined) according to his purpose (see Rom. 8:29)—was a prophetic reality long before the promise was fulfilled, from the instant that the promise was made. Accordingly,

Abraham was “the father of many nations” in faith, that is, prophetically, long before he became so in fact. Likewise, the Son existed—and, further, was crucified and resurrected and exalted—in faith, that is, prophetically, long before he existed in fact, that is, personally.

Accordingly, when John’s Jesus asks the Father to “glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5), he speaks of “the glory” that God had purposed in “the beginning” to manifest in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. This is clear in that Jesus asks the Father to “glorify me . . . with the glory that I had with you”: the very same “glory” that the Father and the Son shared “before the world existed” would now be manifested in Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Not a “glory” that was manifested then (to whom?) and another “glory” that would be manifested now in his crucifixion and resurrection. Rather, the Son asks the Father to “glorify” him now in fact and in person “with the glory that I had with you” in faith and in prophecy from “the beginning” (John 1:1). Which is to say that Jesus’ prayer to the Father was a prayer of faith, arising out of what Jesus believed the Father to have purposed and promised regarding his Messiah.

Only if the Messiah is understood to have been (as he is invariably and consistently affirmed to have been by the NT writers) a fully human being—one whose person originated in his mother’s womb—can his proclamation of the word and his crucifixion by the world be understood as the manifestation of his faith in the promise of God. Otherwise, when John’s Jesus speaks of his “glory” with the Father, he speaks not out of his faith in “the word” (John 1:1; 3:31-34), through which God revealed his destiny to him, but out of a god-like memory of an extra-human pre-existence.

(Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that precisely the same construction in the original language for “the faith of Abraham” [Rom. 4:16] appears in multiple Pauline texts regarding faith and Jesus: Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 2:16, 20; 3:22; Phil. 3:9. Each of these texts is best understood as contrasting “works of law” with the “faith of” Jesus as the condition of his followers’ righteousness, just as “the faith of Abraham” [Rom. 4:16] rather than his works was the condition of Abraham’s righteousness. The fact that English NT versions almost invariably render these texts in terms of “faith in” rather than the “faith of” Jesus may be indicative of their Trinitarian bias. A Trinitarian “God the Son” would have had no need for faith. Neither, however, would a Son who could recall a pre-existence as a god like spirit being.)

The NT writers’ insistence on Jesus’ humanity, and their testimony to his faith in the promise of God, must call into question any interpretation of so-called pre-existence texts that would cast doubt on either his exclusive humanity or his faith. The concept of personal pre-existence requires that, prior to his conception (laying aside the question of how a pre-existent being could be said to have been conceived) and birth, the Son must have been some-other-than-human-kind-of-being who would not have fit into any biblical category of being—neither God nor human nor angel (at least according to Hebrews 1) nor nonhuman animal. Such a god-like spirit being that the Son is believed to have been prior to his birth (?) in the person of Jesus, if he existed, did not begin as a human being but somehow “morphed” into humanity in the process of transitioning through the womb of Mary. (The question here is not whether or not God could have created such a being but whether or not the NT writers are best understood as testifying that God did so.)

If this is the case, the NT writers seem to have seen no need to name or explain this unique kind of being. Instead, they were content to repeatedly claim and affirm that he was a fully human being. For the NT writers, the Messiah's uniqueness was not that he was a one-of-a-kind other-than-human being before he was human. To the contrary, for them, the uniqueness of the Messiah was that he was a one-of-a-kind human being (whose resurrection, according to the NT writers, makes him the prototype for the new humanity of the coming age).

That he was "the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15) identifies Jesus not as a pre-existent person but as the one who was purposed from the beginning to inherit (according to Hebrew tradition, the right of the firstborn son) all things from the Father (see Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:22; Phil. 2:9-11; etc.). That God created "all things . . . in [Greek, en, in other texts not usually rendered 'by'] him" and "through him and for him" (Col. 1:16) does not make him the co-Creator but, rather, means that "the word" that purposed and later promised his coming was the blueprint and the instrument and the rationale for God's creation (which, after all, agrees with the testimony of Genesis 1 that the biblical God spoke his creation into existence).

When Jesus was created in the womb of his mother by the power of God, "the word became flesh" (John 1:14) in that God's promise to send his Messiah to deliver God's people from sin and death through his proclamation of the kingdom, crucifixion for sins, resurrection from the dead, and exaltation to God's side (that is, "the word") was fulfilled (that is, "became flesh").

The biblical concept of foreknowledge establishes the prophetic pre-existence of the Son in the Adamic purpose and, subsequently, in the Abrahamic promise of God. Moreover, biblical foreknowledge provides a reasonable and sufficient biblical paradigm for interpreting each of the NT texts that are used by both Trinitarian and some non-Trinitarian believers to support the personal pre existence of the Son. Given that this is the case, the burden of proof would seem to rest with those who insist that the Son existed as some-other-than-human-kind-of being in heaven before he existed as a human being on earth.