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052161600X - Pre-Existence, Wisdom and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-Existence in the New Testament

R. G. Hamerton-Kelly

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INTRODUCTION

The precise subject of this book is not immediately evident from the title. In contemporary usage, 'pre-existence' signifies the idea that the individual soul existed before its life on earth. The idea is expressed in the various doctrines of pre-existence and metempsychosis, from Plato and the philosophies of the East, to Gnosticism and occultism, both ancient and modern. Our concern in this work is not limited to the pre-existence of the individual soul; it encompasses any person or thing thought of as existing before its own manifestation or before the creation of the world.

At the outset we are faced with a peculiar difficulty. It is not possible to define the term 'pre-existence' *a priori*. All that can be said *a priori* is that 'pre-existence' means 'existence before...'. The meaning of the term must be established *a posteriori* for every context in which it is used. Where the meaning of a term under consideration is not self-evident, one must proceed by proposing a hypothetical or working definition and refining it as the discussion develops. We shall follow this method.

Our difficulty arises from this need for a hypothetical or working definition. Such a definition should be based only on the texts; but, since the term itself never occurs in the texts, its distinctive content is not apparent from a preliminary survey. Our only recourse is to the work of scholars who have used the term before us.

Adolf Harnack¹ used 'pre-existence' to signify a theory held by 'the Ancient Jews and by all the ancient Semitic nations' that everything of real value which, at some time, appears on earth, exists in heaven perpetually.² This heavenly existence was of two kinds: most frequently the valuable entities were thought

¹ *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg i. B. 1888) I, 710–11.

² This emphasis on 'real value' probably derives from A. Ritschl's influence on Harnack. Pre-existence is not a metaphysical term but an axiological one. Cf. Heitmüller, *R.G.G.* iv (Tübingen, 1913) col. 1712: 'die Ueberzeugung von dem ewigen Wert und der schlechthinigen Gewissheit wichtiger religiöser Güter fand ihre Ausprägung in dem Glauben dass diese Güter vor aller Welt bei Gott vorhanden seien, um dann zu ihrer Zeit in die Erscheinung zu treten'.

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to exist in God's knowledge, as part of his plan for the world; less frequently the entities were thought to exist in heaven, independently and in their own right.¹ The former type of pre-existence Harnack calls 'ideal'; the ideal entities are just as real as those existing in their own right. We suggest that the latter type of pre-existence be called 'actual'. We shall therefore use the terms 'ideal pre-existence' and 'actual pre-existence', regarding the entities in both types as equally 'real'.

Harnack's use of 'real' in connection with existence in the mind of God needs some explanation. Apparently he understands the texts to teach that there is a difference between the mind of God and the mind of man, so that, whereas in the mind of man things can exist only as ideas, in the mind of God they can and do exist with such a greater degree of reality than the ideas in a human mind that they can be said to have 'real' existence.² We are aware that there are many philosophical 'loose ends' in this brief statement, but Harnack can plead the exigencies of the texts themselves. One cannot be more precise than the evidence. Therefore, we accept as a working hypothesis the somewhat strange notion that things have real existence, before their manifestation on earth, in the mind of God. The reality of these things should probably be imagined by analogy with real things existing in the world. Some commentators describe this idea by means of the accurately paradoxical phrase 'ideal pre-existence'.³

We may, at this point, distinguish the meaning of 'ideal pre-existence' from that of 'predestination'⁴ or 'fore-knowledge'. It would seem that 'ideal pre-existence' and predestination are

¹ E.g. Ex. 25: 9, 40, 26: 30, 27: 8; Num. 8: 4.

² Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte* I, 710.

³ E.g. H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (6 vols., Munich, 1926-61), II, 334-5 (cited henceforth as S.-B.), on 'Die ideelle Präexistenz des Messias in der Gedankenwelt oder in dem Weltplan Gottes...'. The term 'ideal pre-existence' goes back to A. Ritschl, who, in his dislike for the classical doctrine of the 'substantial' divinity of Christ spoke of the "'ideale" Präexistenz Jesu Christi im Ratschluss Gottes'; quoted from P. Althaus, *R.G.G.*³ v, (Tübingen, 1961) col. 492.

⁴ For a definition of predestination see: Paul Volz, *Die Eschatologie der jüdischen Gemeinde im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen, 1934), p. 109; G. E. Mendenhall, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, *ad loc.*; R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London, 1959), p. 105.

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the same thing. Both terms seem to describe the pre-existence of entities in God's mind. Harnack does not clearly distinguish 'ideal pre-existence' and predestination, therefore we venture to suggest a distinction of our own.

Entities – that is, persons or things – can be said to exist, but events are usually said to 'happen'. Therefore, only entities can be pre-existent. For events that are planned and known beforehand, 'pre-existence' is not an accurate description. The precise word for describing such events is predestination (or foreknowledge, or foreordination). We therefore suggest that 'ideal pre-existence' be used to describe *entities* which pre-exist in the mind or plan of God, and 'predestination' for *events that are known and planned* by him beforehand. We shall not be concerned with predestination in this work.

Therefore, if we follow Harnack, we must consider all texts which tell of God's planning things beforehand, and all which tell of entities existing in heaven.

Since Harnack, there has been no serious attempt, as far as we know, to delineate the structures or trace the history of the idea of pre-existence in the Biblical traditions. This does not mean that scholars have not used the term, especially in discussions of Christology; but it does mean that there has been a singular lack of clarity in their usage. We shall therefore consider the way in which selected representatives of modern scholarship have referred to or used the idea of pre-existence; but before we do that, some further discussion of Harnack's treatment is in order. This will lead us conveniently into the modern discussion.

Harnack's implication that 'value' was the impulse which led the ancient people to attribute pre-existence to certain objects, raises the question of the possible motive for this idea. Since most of the objects which were pre-existent were religious objects, it seems not unlikely that value had something to do with the development of the idea of pre-existence; but was it the only agent in the development of this idea? Harnack assumes that 'value' is the essence of the religious attitude; but this assumption does not seem to be entirely justified.

Mowinckel¹ is more judicious when he allows, in addition to the expression of value, that pre-existence probably also ex-

¹ S. Mowinckel, *R.G.G.*² (Tübingen, 1930), iv, col. 1384.

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pressed the divinity or ultimacy of an entity in a 'substantial' sense (as in the case of Wisdom and 'Son of Man'), as well as the need for speculation and rational clarification (as in the case of the pre-existence of souls), on the part of the promulgators of the idea.

Fred B. Craddock,¹ in a somewhat cursory study, carries the discussion of the motives which gave rise to the idea of pre-existence so far that one may suspect that he sometimes has gone beyond the evidence. His intention is declaredly hermeneutical; he attempts to discover the 'meaning' or 'function' that the idea had for those who used it in the Biblical tradition, hoping thereby to recover some meaning for today. It is assumed that every time the category occurs it answers some felt human need. For instance, in apocalyptic circles it speaks to a sense of hopelessness about the course of history by pointing to a trans-historical ground of hope, or, in opposition to a 'gnosticizing' denial of the value of this world, in favor of a transcendent world, pre-existence also affirms that value by linking this world and the transcendent world. This, although Craddock does not perceive it, is precisely the reverse of the function that, he claims, pre-existence performs in apocalyptic. Instead of leading one from this world to the other, it brings one from the other into this. Thirdly, in answer to the Church's need to understand the continuity between itself and the people of the Old Testament, pre-existence binds the two testaments by means of the idea of the pre-existent Word who spoke in the prophets and was incarnate in Jesus.

What we miss in Craddock's work is a careful analysis of the structures and history of the idea of pre-existence, on which the judgements about its function are based. He does, in passing, distinguish various structures of the idea; for example, he refers to 'precreation' as distinct from 'preincarnation';² but there is no sustained attention to the phenomenology of the idea. Neither is there much consideration of the way in which the structure of the idea changed from one layer of the tradition to the other. His concentration on the function of the idea tends to overshadow his treatment of its history and changing form. But

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *The Pre-existence of Christ in the New Testament* (Nashville and New York, 1968), *passim*. See the review of this work by Robin Scroggs, in *J.A.A.R.* 37 (1969), 170-3. ² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

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this is all consonant with his intention, which is somewhat anti-historical. He expresses dissatisfaction with ‘the method of study which attempts to illuminate ideas by tracing them back to their sources.’ He writes:

It is quite evident that it is not sufficient to ask of a passage that reflects the idea of pre-existence, What is its source? Even if the source were known, the same questions must be asked of the source that are asked of the text: What is the function of the idea of pre-existence within the context where it is found? How is pre-existence conceived in each particular affirmation?¹

We have attempted to answer Craddock’s last question, ‘How is pre-existence conceived in each particular affirmation?’ and we have tried to do so for all the layers in the New Testament tradition. We have not asked about the function of the idea, because we have not, as he has, conceived ours to be a direct attempt at interpretation. Craddock may be right in his claim that the ‘function’ of an idea illuminates its meaning, but that is a claim which presupposes a great deal about the nature of ancient and modern processes of understanding, and we simply have not been able to investigate the philosophic justification for such a method. Rather, we have followed the established procedure of historical and phenomenological analysis, in the confidence that this method still yields understanding.

Despite our criticism, we welcome Craddock’s book as an important contribution to a neglected area in Protestant scholarship. Our own contribution, in addition to differing in method and intention, also differs in scope. Whereas he is concerned with the pre-existence of Christ only, we are concerned with the idea of pre-existence in itself, whatever person or thing it is attributed to. We hope that our contribution will take its place along with his work, and help to illuminate an important aspect of Biblical theology.

Recent attempts to define pre-existence agree that it involves and presupposes a whole view of reality. Beth,² writing in 1930, emphasized that it presupposes the existence of a world of reality not perceptible by the senses. He includes the Platonic world of ideas among the pre-existent entities. Ratschow,³ in

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

² *R.G.G.*² (Tübingen, 1930), IV, cols. 1382–3.

³ *R.G.G.*³ (Tübingen, 1961), V, cols. 490–1

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1961, maintains that pre-existence can be spoken of only within a context of discourse in which 'existence' is clearly defined as a time-bound category. Where there is no clear understanding of existence as temporal, and as distinct from a non-temporal essence, there can be no idea of pre-existence. It would appear, therefore, that pre-existence belongs in the realm of discourse which is concerned with the world of reality other than the sense-perceptible world, namely, in the realm of metaphysical discourse.

Contemporary Protestant Biblical scholarship, however, seems, on the continent at least, to interpret pre-existence in such a way as to minimize its reference to a metaphysical realm. The idea occurs exclusively in the discussion of Christology, and it is understood as describing an element in the experience of salvation.

R. Bultmann, for example, writes: 'To the extent that the statements about Christ's pre-existence and incarnation are of a mythological nature, they neither have the character of direct challenge, nor are they expressions of the faith that is surrender of "boasting". Yet in context within the proclamation they express a decisive fact: the origin and significance of Jesus' person and his fate are not within earthly occurrence, but God was acting in them and this action of his took place "when the fulness of time was come"' (Gal. 4: 4).¹

The soteriological emphasis of this passage from Bultmann is clear. Pre-existence expresses the dimension of transcendence in the experience of responding to the Christian proclamation. Bultmann's view does not deal seriously with Christ as the mediator of creation. It seems arbitrary to assume, as he does, that the idea of pre-existence intends only to illuminate salvation, and not to say anything important about creation. It seems to be important for the theology of Paul, which is under consideration here, that the same power operative in the redemption was operative in the creation as well – and this seems to be a significant thing to say about the creation. We detect in this formulation of Bultmann's the influence of continental dogmatic theology, which, as Norman Pittenger reminds us,² tends to

¹ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (2 vols., New York, 1951), I, 304–5.

² W. Norman Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate* (New York, 1959), p. 131. He writes, 'It appears to me that the line of thought which would suggest some

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treat Christ as an alien intruder into a world with which he has no ontological connection.

The idea of Christ as one who ‘breaks in’ is even more dramatically stated by one of Bultmann’s followers, Hans Conzelmann. He writes: ‘That Jesus is not of worldly origin, but nevertheless is “born of a woman”, means that salvation does not develop out of the world, say as the meaning and goal of world history. It is not a possibility immanent in the world, but *breaks in from outside* [our italics] and thus remains God’s salvation. *Pre-existence thus means that salvation is founded on God’s miraculous act* [our italics]; the word means the actualization of the prevenient salvation event and this describes the objective priority of God’s act to my faith.’¹

For these two commentators, therefore, pre-existence in Paul’s theology describes an element in the historical experience of believing response to the proclamation. It designates the transcendent source of that experience, but it does not communicate anything about that source in its own essence. Since the language describing the pre-existent Christ is mythological, it is interpreted, according to Bultmann’s well-known existentialist method, as an objective and therefore misleading presentation of subjective experience. As myth, it presents the existential phenomena of lived existence in this world, as a happening in another world.

It is not our purpose to discuss the general validity of this existentialist translation of myth. We shall be concerned, rather, to observe the history and structures of the ‘myth’ of pre-existence, and to leave it to the reader to decide whether, as far as can be judged, all forms of the idea are patient of the interpretation Bultmann suggests, or whether some other interest (we do not say ‘function’!) is not served by the myth.

catastrophic intrusion, some entirely unprecedented down-thrust without parallel in any degree, makes nonsense both of the actual picture of Jesus in the gospels and of the experience of men in finding God in Jesus as their human Brother. At the same time it introduces a view of the relation of God and his world which I find both essentially unbiblical and thoroughly incredible in the light of our best knowledge.’ See also pp. 132–45, where Pittenger expounds and criticizes Emil Brunner’s Christology for precisely this view of the incarnation.

¹ Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (New York, 1969), p. 201.

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Oscar Cullmann proposes a view of the pre-existence of Christ that is similar in an essential respect to Bultmann's. The pre-existence of Christ in the New Testament does not

indicate unity in essence or nature between God and Christ, but rather a unity in the work of revelation, in the *function* of the pre-existent one.¹

This seems to mean that the pre-existence of Christ is an element in the historical phenomenon of Jesus; some intuition, or aura, of his transcendence. Cullmann does allow that John 1:1 indicates some interest in the 'unity in essence or nature' between Christ and God, but this is peripheral, according to him, and is not developed.² Attacked by Roman Catholics³ as advocating a Sabellian interpretation of the New Testament Christology by denying the essential and separate person of the Son, Cullmann insists that the 'function is personal in the incarnate Christ and in the pre-existent Christ',⁴ but still refuses to allow that the New Testament has any interest in the nature of Christ in himself, apart from his soteriological function.

Although this accusation levelled against Cullmann is not entirely fair to the point of view expressed in the *Christology of the New Testament*, it is true that Cullmann leaves himself open to such attack. His point is valid, that the New Testament speaks of Christ on the basis of the experience of his work as Saviour, but he emphasizes it so much that one easily misses the few statements to the effect that Christ performs this work because of what he is in himself.⁵ We have attempted to pay attention to the New Testament statements about the transcendent nature

¹ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 247. See the judicious discussion of Cullmann's 'functional' interpretation by R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York, 1965), pp. 247–50.

² Cullmann, *Christology*, pp. 248–9; cf. Conzelmann, *Outline*, pp. 343–44.

³ E.g. L. Malevez, 'Functional Christology in the New Testament', *Theology Digest*, x (1962), 77–83.

⁴ O. Cullmann, 'Functional Christology: A Reply', *ibid.*, p. 216.

⁵ E.g. 'According to the witness of the whole Gospel tradition, the "Son of God" title as applied to Jesus expresses the historical and qualitative uniqueness of his relation to his Father.' (*Christology*, p. 275.) 'Like his consciousness of being Son of Man, Jesus' consciousness of being Son of God refers both to his person and to his work: his work of salvation and revelation shows that the Father and the Son are one.' (*Ibid.*, p. 290.)

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of Christ, to see how they answer the question, Who is this that does these things? In this way the true balance of emphasis in the Christology of the New Testament may, we hope, be perceived.

Roman Catholic scholarship continues to take the view that the testimonies to Christ's pre-existence in the New Testament express his unity with God in essence.¹ It sees the mythological statements about Christ's pre-existence as a primitive, but nevertheless real, attempt to talk about the transcendent aspect of Christ's person.² The metaphysics of being, essence and existence, to which Catholic scholarship, for the most part, still subscribes, might be regarded as an alternative – and earlier – attempt at demythologizing, to the existentialist interpretation of Bultmann.

All the examples of the use of the term 'pre-existence' so far have come from the Christological discussion. The term is, however, also used in the discussion of Jewish apocalyptic. The idea that the things to be revealed in the eschaton already exist in heaven has been called a commonplace of apocalyptic thought.³ Albert Schweitzer, in his great book on Paul, interpreted the apostle's thought consistently in the categories of Jewish apocalyptic. He concludes as follows:

The Pauline mysticism is therefore nothing else than the doctrine of the making manifest in consequence of the death and resurrection of Jesus, of the pre-existent Church (the community of God).⁴

The apocalyptic idea of pre-existence was often expressed by means of the term 'mystery' (μυστήριον) which referred to the

¹ E.g. Malevez, 'Functional Christology'; A. Grillmeier, 'The Figure of Christ in Catholic Theology Today', in *Theology Today*, vol. 1, *Renewal in Dogma*, trans. P. White and R. H. Kelly (Milwaukee, 1965), pp. 66–108. An older, but still important treatment, of many of the texts discussed in this work of ours is J. Lebreton, *Histoire du Dogme de la Trinité des Origines au Concile de Nicée* (2 vols., Paris, 1927), 1. Lebreton shows the Catholic interest in 'substantial' pre-existence and its importance for the doctrine of the Trinity.

² Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York, 1954), believes that mythology is a primitive form of ontology.

³ By Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York, 1967), p. 171, and Morna D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (Montreal, 1967), pp. 42–3, cf. pp. 25 and 29.

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. W. Montgomery (London, 1931), p. 116.

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hidden pre-existent things. In connection with this term, and on the basis of the apocalyptic scheme entailing pre-existence in general, recent Catholic scholarship has delineated a doctrine of the pre-existence of the Church in the New Testament.¹ We hope to show that this is, indeed, an important form of the idea of pre-existence in the New Testament, although we have reservations about the methodology of the Catholic scholarship we have consulted.

Erik Sjöberg² attempted a consistent interpretation of the Messianic witness of the gospels, from the self-understanding of Jesus to the most obviously interpretative layers of the Johannine tradition, in terms of the apocalyptic idea of the hidden, pre-existent Son of Man. Beginning with the phenomenon of the 'Messianic secret' in Mark, he argues that there is a consistent understanding in all the major layers of the Synoptic tradition of Jesus as the hidden, pre-existent Son of Man, revealed only to 'those who have ears to hear'. The parables are mysterious presentations of Jesus' dignity, solved only by a few; the miracles, likewise, are misunderstood by most, but seen by the few as revelations of Jesus' pre-existent nature. There is much in Sjöberg's book that is illuminating, chiefly because it has been neglected by most recent scholarship, but there is also much that seems to us forced and untenable. A most telling point made against Sjöberg, by H. E. Tödt,³ is that there is no precedent in the apocalyptic Son of Man traditions for the concealment of that heavenly figure on earth, and that it is doubtful procedure to use the idea of concealment in heaven to explain the rejection of Jesus as the concealment of the Son of Man on earth. A more general criticism that might be made is that Sjöberg overestimates the clarity of profile and the extent of influence of the figure of the Son of Man in Jesus' time. Furthermore, Sjöberg's zeal for his apocalyptic scheme in the gospels causes him to overlook other possible influences. His interpreta-

¹ E.g. M. J. Le Guillou, O.P., *Christ and Church, A Theology of the Mystery*, trans. C. E. Schaldenbrand (New York, 1966); L. Cerfaux, *The Church in the Theology of St. Paul*, trans. G. Webb and A. Walker (New York, 1959).

² Erik Sjöberg, *Der verborgene Menschensohn in den Evangelien*, Acta Reg. Societatis Humaniorum Litterarum Lundensis, LIII (Lund, 1955).

³ H. E. Tödt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. Dorothea Barton (Philadelphia, 1965), pp. 297–302.