

JESUS' PRE-EXISTENCE --- LITERAL OR NOTIONAL?

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Our first task is to locate which Jesus is in the Bible. This sounds rather simplistic, however we all bring to the Bible our own teachings from childhood, our own cultural biases, and in particular our own inherited church traditions.

A helpful place to start is to ask whether Jesus pre-existed his own miraculous conception in the womb of Mary. I am not one of those who denies the Virgin birth. It is clear that Jesus himself knew God was His Father in a unique sense and that his conception was different to all others. So the question is, did Jesus personally and consciously exist with God in Heaven before his miraculous conception? Was the Son of God personally alive before he was conceived in Mary before he became a human being?

Traditional Christianity answers in the affirmative: Yes, Jesus has always existed as God the Son. Indeed, Jesus was there in the very beginning of the Genesis creation with God the Father and with God the Spirit. There never was a time when God the Son did not personally exist, but in order to save lost humanity Jesus laid aside his eternal glory and “took on flesh” so that he might bleed and die to redeem mankind and bring us back to God. Modern theology calls this literal descent from heaven to earth at Bethlehem the “incarnation”.

A number of “default” verses are quoted in support of this type of conscious and personal pre-existence --- Jesus is the Word who was with God in the beginning ([John 1:1](#))... Jesus said he came down from Heaven ([John 6:38](#))... Jesus claimed to exist before Abraham as the “I AM” ([John 8:58](#))... Jesus prayed to be given the glory he personally had with God before the world began ([John 17:5](#))... Jesus created the heavens and the earth ([Col. 1:16](#))... Jesus always existed in very nature as God ([NIV Phil. 2:6](#)), etc. Any Westerner reading these verses finds it natural to see a Jesus who actually and consciously existed before his miraculous “incarnation”. This may be called a ‘literal’ or ‘actual’ pre-existence. It is the majority view held today.

However, there is a second type of pre-existence which is widely recognised by Biblical scholarship, but sadly not even heard of by most in the pew. This is a case when ignorance seems to be bliss. Such ignorance is to our shame for it distorts Jesus by ripping him out of his cultural setting. Such ignorance creates “another Jesus”, indeed a “false Christ” that our Lord Himself warned us about.

The Jewish worldview was that something planned (that is, foreknown in the counsel of God) existed notionally or ideally, but not yet in actuality upon earth in our experience. David Capes’ article on “Preexistence” in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* helpfully notes that,

“The pre-existent state may be described as ideal (existence in the mind or plan of God) or actual (existence alongside and distinct from God).”¹

Thus, it is well understood within Biblical scholarship that pre-existence may mean either that something or some one may literally exist in Heaven (the ‘incarnational’ model already mentioned) or may be of the Jewish ‘ideal’ type where something or someone may exist in God’s mind before He literally brings it into material existence.

There is a mountain of Jewish literature that confirms how all-pervasive “notional” pre-existence was in Jewish thinking at the time of Christ. One of the most prominent scholars in modern christological studies, Larry Hurtado, states, [There is today a virtual consensus among scholars that the pre-Christian Jewish tradition provides the most important background for the idea of pre-existence in the NT.](#) ^{2.}

Regarding the Jewish understanding of foreknowledge, the article in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* is helpful:

...the term foreknowledge is an expansion of the idea of God’s “counsel” or plan, regarding it as an intelligent prearrangement, the idea of foreknowledge being assimilated to that of foreordination. The same idea is found in [1 Pet. 1:20]. Here the apostle speaks of Christ as a lamb “foreordained” by God before the foundation of the world...It has the idea of a purpose which determines the course of the Divine procedure. ^{3.}

This evidence must be seriously considered before we conclude Jesus was actually living and conscious as God before his appearance on earth, otherwise we run the risk of imposing on the Bible our own traditional cultural reading, no matter how “orthodox” we may imagine it to be. That is the error of *eisegesis*, reading *into* the text, rather than *exegesis*, reading *out* of the text as the original readers thousands of years ago would have done.

Notional pre-existence is the idea that something or someone may ‘exist’ in the mind of God before actualising on earth in history at the appointed time. What God purposes and decrees is considered so certain that it is spoken of as though it already exists.

Indeed God is the One who “calls those things which are not as though they were” ([Rom. 4:17](#)). That is, what God promises already exists with Him “in Heaven”. When Jews spoke of something or someone pre-existing in heaven they understood it was “ideal” or “notional” in God’s foreknowledge, but not yet actual on earth. That is, it already existed in God’s mind and in God’s plan.

There is a mountain of Jewish literature that confirms how pervasive “notional” pre-existence was in their world view. It would take a book to record how all encompassing this thinking was in the Jewish mind. There is room only to cite a few sources here, but it’s important to note that this type of commentary is ubiquitous in Jewish literature. We will also look at a few examples from the Scriptures to complete this brief study.

First then, let’s take a quick look at some of the important extra-Biblical writings from these Jewish sources. Outside of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, the most authoritative Jewish literature is the *Babylonian Talmud*. It contains the *Mishna* and 600 years of rabbinical comment. Much of the *Babylonian Talmud* forms a vital background to the way Jews thought about pre-existence in the times before, during, and just after, the New Testament apostolic period, what scholars call the Second Temple period. Note the following excerpt from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Pesahim 54a*:

Seven things were created before the world was made, and these are they: Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the throne of glory, the house of the sanctuary, and the name of the Messiah. Torah: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before the works of old” (Prov. 8:22). Repentance: “Before the mountains were brought forth, of even [before] you had formed the earth and the world...you turn man to destruction and say, Repent, you sons of men” (Ps. 90:2). The Garden of Eden: “And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden from aforetime” (Gen. 2:8). Gehenna: “For Tophet is ordained from old” (Isa. 30:33). The throne of glory: “Your throne is established from of old” (Ps. 93:2). The house of the sanctuary: “A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary” (Jer. 17:12). And the

name of the Messiah: “His name shall endure forever and has existed before the sun” (Ps. 72:17).

Observe that seven things, some material such as the Garden of Eden and the tabernacle, and some immaterial such as repentance and Torah, are said to pre-exist their actual appearance on earth.

Amongst these seven pre-existing things is the name of the Messiah. Another midrashic commentary is called *Genesis Rabbah*. Upon commenting that the Torah was the blueprint for the creation, the writer speaks about pre-existence this way ...

Six things preceded the creation of the world; some of them were actually created, while the creation of the others was already contemplated. The Torah and the throne of glory were created. The Torah, for it is written, “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, prior to his works of old” (Prov. 8:22). The throne of Glory, as it is written, “Thy throne is established of old” etc. [sic] (Ps. 93:2). The creation of the Patriarchs was contemplated, for it is written, “I saw your fathers as the first-ripe in the fig-tree at her first season” (Hos. 9:10). [The creation of] Israel was contemplated, as it is written, “Remember Thy congregation, which Thou hast purchased aforetime” (Ps. 74:2). [The creation of] the temple was contemplated, for it is written, “Thou throne of glory, on high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary” (Jer. 17:12). The name of Messiah was contemplated, for it is written, “His name exists before the sun” (Ps. 72:17).

Once again note the distinction made between things which were *actually created* and things which were *previously contemplated within God’s mind*. The Torah and the throne of glory were created while the Patriarchs, the children of Israel, the temple, and the name of the Messiah were all bound up within God’s purposes and contemplated designs awaiting literal creation in due time.

Genesis Rabbah, also known as *Bereshit Rabbah*, is an exegetical Midrash (exposition) upon the first book of the Hebrew Bible. Written in both Aramaic and Hebrew this contains detailed commentary on a variety of chapters and verses in Genesis. Upon asserting that Torah was the means through which God ordered creation, the author writes:

In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, “In the beginning God created (1:1),” ‘beginning’ referring to the Torah, as in the verse, “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way (Prov. 8:22).”

This passage speaks of the pre-existence of Torah as the concept with which God ordered the Genesis creation. In attempting to convey this image, the author employs the imagery of an architect who utilizes plans and diagrams in order to accomplish his work. In this way, the Torah was in God the architect’s *plans and diagrams*, thus pre-existing in that very manner. In order to justify such a position, the author cites Prov. 8:22, which speaks of a personified Wisdom figure as a “master workman” (Prov. 8:30) working alongside the Creator God through which he ordered the cosmos. This demonstrates that Torah and Wisdom were understood as pre-existing specifically as plans and purposes for God to use in creating.

The author furthermore offers comments regarding the nature of things pre-existing with God. He expounds the phrase “In the beginning God created” as follows:

Six things preceded the creation of the world; some of them were actually created, while the creation of the others was already contemplated. The Torah and the throne of glory were created. The Torah, for it is written, “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, prior to his works of old” (Prov. 8:22). The throne of Glory, as it is written, “Thy throne is established of old” etc. [sic] (Ps. 93:2). The creation of the Patriarchs was contemplated, for it is written, “I saw your fathers as the first-ripe in the fig-tree at her first season” (Hos. 9:10). [The creation of] Israel was contemplated, as it is written, “Remember Thy congregation, which Thou hast purchased aforetime” (Ps. 74:2). [The creation of] the temple was contemplated, for it is written, “Thou throne of glory, on high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary” (Jer. 17:12). The name of Messiah was contemplated, for it is written, “His name exists before the sun” (Ps. 72:17).

As I indicated there is a veritable mountain of similar commentary in Jewish writings. Sufficient in this brief article has been given to demonstrate (to quote Dr Smith) ...

“that Jews frequently spoke of both people and objects as pre-existing, although this pre-existence is strictly within the mind and purposes of God. In other words, this pre-existence is notional rather than literal. Among those persons pre-existing within God’s mind are the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the mediator Moses, the congregation of Israel, and even the Messiah. In regard to objects pre-existing in God’s plans, the temple, the throne of glory, Gehenna, the Garden of Eden, the Torah, the new heavens and the new earth, and the city of Jerusalem are all included. No one seriously considered that the persons mentioned literally possessed a pre-human existence with God in heaven, only to come to earth in some sort of incarnate state. Rather, they were so cherished and valued within the plans for Israel that God had already considered and contemplated them within his design and foreknowledge ...“

If, as all Biblical scholars know, the Bible comes to us from Jewish patterns of thought, it is logical to enquire which model of pre-existence we find in the pages of Scriptures themselves? The Bible is our final authority.

A classic example of this Jewish ideal pre-existence taken right out of this Second Temple rabbinic commentary and used as a Biblical example concerns the tabernacle that Moses built in the wilderness. Moses was instructed to build the tabernacle according to a “pattern” that God showed him on the mount (**Num. 8: 4**). The heavenly blueprint was to be followed. The priests and the tabernacle serve as “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (**Heb. 8:5**). Once again, the idea is that the literal on earth pre-existed beforehand in Heaven in the mind and purposes of God.

As we have seen the Jews applied this thinking to many of their great national treasures. We have seen they developed the idea of “a Jerusalem, divine, pre-existent, prepared by God in the heavenly places, there from all time, and prepared some day to come down among men. The old house is folded up and taken away, and a wonderful new house which the Lord has built comes and takes its place (I Enoch 90: 28,29). The pre-existent Jerusalem was shown to Adam before he sinned.” **4**.

Thus, when in the book of **Revelation in chapter 21:10** the new Jerusalem is seen “coming down out of heaven from God” we are not meant to infer that city is already constructed and will literally descend from outer space. In good Jewish thinking that new Jerusalem is ideal and notional, but certain to one day become literal because it exists already in the plan and promise of God.

In similar fashion are you aware that you already *have* your new immortal and resurrection body (**2 Cor. 5: 1**)? It pre-exists in heaven, but you don’t yet have it literally. And you can have a reward (present tense) with God in Heaven even now (Matt. 6:1). This explains in perfect Jewish thinking how Jesus could pray for the glory which he had with God in Heaven from the foundation of the world without any

idea of him having personally experienced it in a pre-incarnation state. In fact, in that very same prayer (John 17: 22,24) you as a believer in Messiah also *had the same glory before you were born!* (By the way, those translations that make Jesus say he was “going back” to the Father or “returning” to Heaven are very, very naughty! The Greek text says no such thing, just that he was “going to” the Father or “ascending to” God in Heaven.)

In the verse alluded to earlier in **Romans 4:17** where God “calls the things which do not [yet] exist as [already] existing” note that the context refers to Isaac who was “real in thought and purpose of God before he was begotten.” **5.**

Likewise, Jesus the Christ was “foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times” for our sakes (**I Peter 1:20**). We know this does not mean Jesus was personally known before the world began because in the very same chapter we are told that we Christians have also been “in the foreknowledge of God the Father” (**v. 2**). Thus Peter uses the same idea of “foreknowledge” to refer both to Christians and to Jesus Christ. We Christians do not literally pre-exist in Heaven before our birth. “It is the divine purpose for Christ which ‘existed’ from the beginning, not the one in whom it should be fulfilled; just as Paul can speak of the divine purpose similarly predetermined for those who believe in Christ” (**Rom. 8: 28-30**). **6.**

Similarly, the Bible speaks of Jesus as the Lamb of God who was crucified before the world began (**Rev. 13:8**). It is true that grammatically the verse could also be made to read that it is the names of the saved which “have been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.” But it is really only a moot point, because there is a clear statement elsewhere teaching that Jesus was handed over to the authorities for crucifixion “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (**Acts 2: 23**). The point is that it is evident that Jesus was not literally crucified before the world began. But in classical Jewish thought, God planned the crucifixion before the world began. The notion was real, but not yet historically actual. That which materialised in history under Pontius Pilate had already happened in God’s plan before the world began!

The book of Ephesians is replete with this notional pre-existence. We Christians were chosen in Christ “before the foundation of the world” and according to God’s gracious determination were “predestined” to sonship in God’s purpose (**Eph. 1: 4-ff**). No Bible believer thinks for a moment this means we personally existed before the world began. Our pre-existing election is notional, not literal.

In a future day at his Second Coming our Lord Jesus will say to his own people, “Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). In Paul’s language this hope is “laid up for you in heaven”. Here “heaven” is a metaphor signifying God’s promised future and we are said to already have it notionally. It is in the same vein as Paul saying that those of us who are already saved and justified before God are “glorified” [note the past tense, though the literal fulfilment is still future] (Rom. 8: 30).

We are now able to ask, which type of pre-existence should we apply to Messiah Jesus when we come to the Bible? Did Jesus literally and personally pre-exist his own birth as traditional thinking today would have us believe? Or does the Jewish model of notional and ideal pre-existence better fit?

Right up to the symphonic conclusion of the Biblical revelation we see the model of notional pre-existence on display. When John on the isle of Patmos peered into the apocalyptic realities depicted in the Book of Revelation, he records for his readers the symphonic chorus of the heavenly hosts. In one such vision twenty-four elders offer prostrated worship unto the one seated upon the throne and boldly declare,

Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honour and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will, they were, and were created" (Rev 4:11).

I often used to be riveted by this unusual turn of phrase ... “because of Your will, they *were*, and *were created*.” Now I understand ‘ideal’ pre-existence I get the full impact. This scene of worship gives glory and honour and power to God for a specific reason: He is the creator of all things. And just exactly how has God created all things now material and actual? The answer: God possessed a will, a desire contained within his purposes to accomplish whatever He pleased. God’s plan purposed that all things “*were*” (already), and then they “*were created*” (literally).

In other words, within God’s desire, things can be described as *already existing, before they are actually created*. This is textbook Jewish notional pre-existence, as all things pre-existed within God’s mind before coming into a physical and tangible existence!

To sum up: Both extra-Biblical commentary from the Second Temple Jewish world (Jesus’ own culture), and throughout the Scriptures themselves, objects and people are said to exist notionally without any thought of them literally being in Heaven before materialising here on earth in God’s due time. When this paradigm is applied to those texts which seem to our Western understanding to imply that Jesus personally did consciously exist (as God) before his physical appearance on earth, confusion disappears. As always, context should win the day! Let’s leave it to a modern Jewish writer to have the last word...

Messiah ... “is present in the mind of God and chosen before the creation, and from time to time revealed to the righteous for their consolation; but he is ... not actually pre-existent. He is named and hidden from the beginning in the secret thoughts of God, finally to be revealed in the Last Times as the ideal Man who will justify God’s creation of the world.”⁶

FOOTNOTES:

I acknowledge my extensive use of this material from my good friend Dr Dustin R. Smith in his article titled: “John and Jewish Preexistence: [An Attempt to Responsibly Set the Christology of the Fourth Gospel in its Proper Historical and Theological Matrix of Thought](#), presented at the 2015 Atlanta Bible College Theological Conference. For the reader interested to follow this theme in more detail I recommend Dr Smith’s entire article.

1. David B. Capes, “Preexistence,” in *DLNT*, 956.
2. Larry Hurtado, “Pre-existence,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 743.
3. Caspar Wistar Hodge, “Foreknow,” in *ISBE*, vol. 2, 1130.
4. Barclay, William, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, Amsterdam: SCM Press, 1962, p. 136.
5. Everett F. Harrison, *Romans, Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 1976, p. 52, my emphasis.
6. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, London, SCM Press, 1989, p. 235.
7. Schonfield, Hugh. *The Passover Plot*, p. 256