

5. WHERE IS CHRIST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

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While reading “Where is Christ in the Old Testament?” a question occurred to a thoughtful reader:-

Does **I Peter 1: 11** suggest that Christ was previously alive and witnessing to the OT prophets of Israel before he was born as man? Good question! Let’s read the relevant verses ---

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the suffering of Christ and the glories to follow.

It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven --- things into which angels long to look. (I Peter 1: 10-12 NASB translation).

Certainly, many do see here the suggestion that **the Spirit of Christ** is a reference to a pre-existing Christ in the Old Testament. After all, as translated here by the NASB and some other modern versions, He predicted his own sufferings!

Is it not therefore reasonable to believe it was Christ himself who prophesied through the prophets concerning his own future incarnation? Whether he was in Spirit-form as the Second Person in the ‘Triune Godhead’ or as ‘the Angel of the LORD’ many sincerely believe our Lord Jesus Christ prophesied about his own forthcoming incarnation.

In some modern translations, other verses appear to support this idea of the personal pre-existence of Jesus Christ in the OT. Instead of reading that, “the Lord” did this or that, they say “Jesus” did this or that. For example, Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that **Jesus**, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe (Jude 1: 5). And, **Nor let us tempt Jesus, as some of them did [in the wilderness] and were destroyed by the serpents (I Cor. 10:9).**

By catapulting him back through the proverbial **Time Machine**, these recent translations want to give us the impression that Jesus was personally walking around and talking to men in the OT. Thankfully most translations admit the textual evidence for altering “the Lord” to “Jesus” is weak indeed, so they keep this suggestion out of the main body of the text --- but they do include it in their marginal footnotes just to flag this novel idea.

What is particularly puzzling about these corrupted verses is the fact that even trinitarians do not believe that Jesus existed until his conception in Mary! We have to give these folks who say it was Jesus who was personally there with Israel in the wilderness-wanderings full marks for zeal in their cause, even if we must give them an ‘F’ for their theology! Unfortunately though, once a tradition has been set, the tail of the paradigm will wag the dog!

But our question remains: Since Jesus did not personally exist in the OT did Christ pre-exist in the Spirit? You know, I often think we could simplify things by being far more Biblically literate simply by recognizing the truth that “Christ” is not a name, but a title, and an office. So much confusion would be eliminated by calling Jesus the Messiah, which is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word ‘Christ’. Both ‘Messiah’ and ‘Christ’ mean ‘anointed one’ ... i.e. a man commissioned, sealed and appointed by God. In the Bible, the Eternal God is never anointed because He does the anointing!

FIRST, A HISTORY LESSON...

Before examining what **1 Peter 1:11** actually says, let's first ask where this idea that Jesus pre-existed his own human birth in some kind of Spirit-form came from. Did it come from the Bible, or did it originate some time after the close of the NT canon?

The prominent Lutheran church historian **Alfred Harnack (1851-1930)** traced the early influence of Greek philosophy on church history and doctrine. **Harnack** notes that it was a statement in **The Second Epistle of Clement** that formalised post-apostolic Christianity's doctrine that Jesus existed first as Spirit, before he was incarnated.

Second Clement, by the way, is considered by the Coptic Orthodox Church to this very day to be part of their canon of Scripture. The 'epistle' is actually a very early sermon by an unknown author recorded between 95 A.D. - 140 A.D. So, it's very early. In fact, outside of the NT itself **Second Clement** is probably the earliest surviving sermon yet found!

The quote relevant to our topic from **II Clement** reads: **"Jesus, who was first Spirit became flesh for us."** (Better read that again as it's quite seminal to our discussion!) Putting it the other way round, it states that before Jesus became man, he existed in the "Spirit" realm.

Harnack alleges that, **On this text the whole of orthodoxy is based. The historical Jesus was replaced by a fictional Christ.**

Thus, **Harnack** is in no doubt that, the idea that Christ existed first as 'Spirit' before his so-called 'incarnation in human flesh', may be historically traced to this extra-biblical text.

... AND NOW A BIBLE LESSON!

That said, I am quite aware that today's "orthodoxy" (a.k.a. trinitarianism) appeals to the Bible itself for their dogma of a personal pre-existence of the Son of God. One of the classic verses appealed to is -

FIRST CORINTHIANS 15: 47

The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven (NASB).

If you are a lover of the King James Version (KJV), this verse seems to read even more convincingly that the Lord Jesus pre-existed Adam,

The first man is of the earth, earthy: The second man is the Lord from heaven.

This verse, *in isolation*, might seem to suggest that Jesus was **the Lord from heaven** prior to his becoming human. However, a little attention to the context should dispel this idea quickly. ¹

First Corinthians 15 is all about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and its implications for the world. The whole chapter is a message about post-resurrection perspectives. **James D.G. Dunn** ² notes that those who identify **the second man from heaven** as the pre-existing Lord Jesus, fail to account for this

¹ For the interested reader the various scribal corruptions of this text make a fascinating study. Bart Ehrman's *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* is a great place to start. I Cor. 15: 47 has been tampered with extensively to say that Christ is not the second Adam, but the "Lord-man", "the spiritual man", "the heavenly man", etc., thus giving the impression that Jesus is far more than a second creation of God that surpasses the first!

² James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*. SCM Press, London, Second Ed., 1989, Foreword to Second Edition, p xviii (Emphasis original).

all-pervading resurrection-context. **Dunn** rightly states that this verse must be read in its post-Easter setting (though I myself prefer not to use that word) and is ...

Focused on the resurrection and is built on a sequence of parallel contrasts --- physical/spiritual, earthly/heavenly, first man/second man --- where it is clear enough that the second half of each contrast refers to the resurrection state. This includes the description of the second man as “from heaven,” for it is precisely his heavenly image which provides the pattern for the resurrection state of others (I Cor. 15: 49).

Paul has already made this clear earlier in the same chapter: Christ in his resurrection is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”; **as risen** he is the archetype of resurrected humanity (15: 2-23). And in the immediate context he has been at some pains (for whatever reason) to insist that the spiritual does **not** precede the physical (15:46).

Hence in relation to (first) Adam, Christ is **last** Adam (15:45). It would throw his argument into complete confusion if he was understood to mean that “the **second** man from heaven” was actually the pre-existent one, and therefore actually first, **before** Adam.

Dunn is on solid exegetical ground here. Note what the apostle wrote in the verses surrounding;

And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. However, **the spiritual is not first**, but the natural; **then the spiritual** (vs. 45-46).

This is a clear statement that it is only *after his resurrection* that Jesus is said to have **become a quickening spirit** (KJV), or if you prefer the modern translations, **a life-giving spirit**. But do not miss the salient point; The physical man Adam preceded the now-resurrected Messiah! Adam existed before Jesus Christ!

According to the apostle, Christ did not personally precede Adam in time. Jesus is the Second Adam, the Second Man. Adam is the original! Christ is the antitype, the one who comes afterwards --- second! **Traditional trinitarian doctrine reverses this Scriptural order**. Both **Harnack** and **Dunn** only emphasize the obvious.

The description “**the man from heaven**” cannot be a reference to the apostles’s supposed belief in Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God. As already mentioned, even believers in the Trinity know Jesus did not exist prior to his conception in Mary!

“**The man from heaven**” is a reference to the risen Lord who is now ascended into heaven. He is now the first-ever immortalised man. Jesus Christ became “**the Life-giving Spirit**” **after his resurrection**.

The whole of **First Corinthians chapter 15** concerns the resurrected Christ who is now in heaven waiting to bring immortality and glory to the Christian when God consummates this age. One day the Lord Jesus is going to hand over to His God and Father an entire Kingdom beautifully renewed (**I Cor. 15: 27-28**)! This eschatological climax of the chapter decides who the man from heaven is --- our risen Lord --- and it has nothing to do with pre-existence or with incarnation from Spirit into flesh!

And just by the way, this confirms **Alfred Harnack’s** assertion that **Second Clement’s** “Jesus, who was first Spirit became flesh for us”, really did form the basis for **the whole of orthodoxy ...** which displaced **the historical Jesus** and **replaced** him with a **fictional Christ**.

Harnack’s allegation is that, by reversing the order of the appearance between Adam and Christ, “Orthodoxy” (i.e. Trinitarianism) has manufactured a make-believe Jesus!?! And who wants to believe in fairy tales? We are now on the way to understanding Peter’s expression, **the Spirit of Christ**.

SOME BASICS ABOUT ‘THE SPIRIT’

Scripture is replete with the description, “**the Spirit of ...**”³ The function of the Spirit is then variously supplied. Let’s look at a few easy examples as listed here;

The Spirit that God places upon people takes on different names as it refers to different functions. This can be abundantly proven. Nevertheless, the spirit is the same. God always gives His spirit, and then it is named as it functions.

When it is associated with wisdom, it is called the “spirit of wisdom” (Exodus 28:3; Deut. 34:9; Eph. 1:17). When it is associated with grace, it is called the “spirit of grace” (Zech. 12:10; Heb. 10:29). When it is related to glory, it is called the “spirit of glory” (I Pet. 4:14). It is called the “spirit of adoption” when it is associated with our everlasting life (Rom. 8:15, which is translated as “spirit of sonship” in some versions). It is called the “spirit of truth” when it is associated with the truth we learn by revelation (John 14:17; 16:13).

When it came with the same power as it brought to Elijah, it was called “the spirit of Elijah” (2 Kings 2:15). These are not different spirits. All the names refer to the one gift of holy spirit that God gives. Ephesians 4:4 states clearly that there is “one spirit”, and that spirit is God’s gift of holy spirit given to some people in the Old Testament and to all believers today.⁴

This background now brings us to our text from **I Peter 1:11 ...**

When Peter mentions that “the spirit of Christ” was upon prophets as they “predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glory that would follow,” it is easy to see that the spirit is called the “spirit of Christ” because it is associated with Christ and foretold of Christ, not because Christ was actually alive during the Old Testament.⁵

AND WAIT FOR IT ... NOW A GRAMMAR LESSON!

Does the expression “**the Spirit of Christ**” mean “the Spirit who is Christ”? Or, does it mean “the Spirit about (concerning) Christ?”⁶

A. THE SPIRIT WHO IS CHRIST

Here is a significant fact. **The expression “the Spirit of Christ” does not occur anywhere in the OT.** Over and over again in the OT we read of “the Spirit of the LORD” or “the Spirit of God” or “the holy Spirit”, but *never* “**the Spirit of Christ**”. Nowhere in the OT is the Spirit of God said to be the Spirit who is Christ.

But of course, this fact alone does not necessarily mean that Peter’s expression “**the Spirit of Christ**” cannot mean “the Spirit Who is Christ”. Let’s keep an open mind here for a moment.

B. THE SPIRIT CONCERNING CHRIST.

Second critical fact: The phrase **the Spirit of Christ** (and its parallel terms such as the one-off mention of **the Spirit of Jesus {Acts 16: 7}**) also does not occur in the NT until **after** the resurrection/ascension/glorification of Jesus Christ. **James D.G.Dunn** makes the point saliently: **Such**

³ I have chosen to capitalise **Spirit** to indicate that it is God who gives His Spirit to enable these functions He supplies. There is no translation necessity to do this, and it would be equally acceptable to use the small ‘s’.

⁴ *One God & One Lord: Reconsidering the Cornerstone of the Christian Faith*. Mark H. Graeser, John A. Lynn, John W. Schoenheit, Christian Educational Services, USA. Third Ed. 2003. p.528.

⁵ Op. Cit. p 528

⁶ Is this a genitive of subject, or a genitive of object?

identification as there is in the NT between Christ and the Spirit begins with Jesus' resurrection, [and] stems from Jesus' exaltation. ⁷

This fact, often forgotten, or just plain overlooked, is critical to a correct interpretation of **the Spirit of Christ**. **You won't and don't read of the Spirit of Christ until Jesus comes out of the tomb.**

We note that Peter supplies some more information here. He mentions how, after they gave their prophecies about the coming **sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow**, that they still had to make enquiry. The prophets weren't given the full picture. They could look into the future only through the proverbial **dark glass**. We should therefore understand the phrase ("**the Spirit of Christ**") to mean the Spirit concerning the Messiah who would **follow** their predictions. This is an easy statement indicating that the Spirit of God operating in the prophetic forecasts predicted Christ's future suffering and glory.

Anthony Buzzard expresses the idea brilliantly,

The Messianic spirit is the spirit of everything to do with God's Messianic program in His Son. ⁸

In fact, Peter tells us this is exactly what he means in a parallel passage in the Book of Acts. Speaking to his countrymen about their crime of crucifying their Messiah, Peter announces that all these events **God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ [Messiah] should suffer, [and] He has thus fulfilled (Acts 3: 18).**

In other words, **the gospel** foreshadowed (in part/s) through the prophets in the OT is now being preached in its fullness throughout the world **by the holy Spirit sent from heaven** where Christ now sits at the right hand of God. Which is to say, all of heaven's delegated authority in Christ is behind this Gospel message which was foretold beforehand by prophetic inspiration.

Jesus said that after he left the apostles and ascended to where they could no longer see him physically, he would come to be with them in a new form of ministry and comfort ... **"I am going ... the Spirit of Truth will be in you ... I will come to you"** (John 14: 4,17,18).

So, let's not forget **Dunn's** salient observation again, *Such identification as there is in the NT between Christ and the Spirit begins with Jesus' resurrection, [and] stems from Jesus' exaltation.* In simple terms, Peter's expression **"the Spirit of Christ"** is a description of the now-risen Christ fulfilling all that the prophets looked forward to after his suffering --- not a reference to a supposed pre-existent Spirit-form before incarnation.

UNFORTUNATE TRANSLATION BIAS

This unfortunately brings us to more translator bias in the text. Without getting bogged down in technicalities, we must clear up a couple of points of grammar. Many English translations follow the NASB version that I quoted at the beginning. They say "the Spirit of Christ" is a **He (Who predicted the suffering of Christ and the glories to follow)**. But I can assure you that the Greek text does not use the masculine third person pronoun by referring to "the Spirit of Christ" as **"He"**.

Here is one place where the KJV is correct when it reads how the prophets **enquired and searched diligently ... what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ ...**

⁷ Ibid, p160, (Italics original.)

⁸ Anthony Buzzard, *The One God, the Father, One Man Messiah Translation: New Testament with Commentary*. Restoration Fellowship, 2014. Footnote 8, p572.

IT'S ABOUT INSPIRATION NOT INCARNATION!

The Spirit of Christ is the prophetic spirit which expressed itself about the future coming of the suffering and glorified Messiah. It ought to be obvious that the subject matter --- the context --- of **First Peter 1: 11** is not about Christ's putative pre-existence before *incarnation*. No. It's rather about *inspiration*, that is, the prophetic Spirit in which the prophets announced the future coming of Christ. Peter's subject is inspiration and not incarnation.

The standard method the NT writers (i.e. the apostles of Christ) employed when interpreting their Hebrew Scriptures was to see Jesus Christ foreshadowed in all the marvelous OT types, shadows, and allegories, which all anticipated Messiah's arrival. Not for one moment did they entertain the thought that their Messiah existed in the Spirit realm before his becoming human flesh. If I may quote the esteemed **James Dunn** again,

In short, despite its ancient lineage in the patristic period (Dunn means the so-called Church Fathers from the Second to Fifth Centuries A.D.,) **this particular thesis does not in fact provide us a way into the thought of the NT writers or into their christology.** ⁹

Which being interpreted means, any theology that sees a personally pre-existing Christ in the OT needs a new pair of exegetical glasses! Or to be kinder, at least they must learn to read their Bible in its original context and setting --- otherwise, according to **Dunn**, we go down a blind alley.

STOOPING DOWN TO GAZE IN TO LOOK UP!

I love how Peter describes the earnest enquiry those prophets made as they tried to figure out what God was indicating to them through their visions, dreams, inner impressions and writings concerning the coming Messiah. They were left scratching their heads about what it could all mean. They could only look into the future through the **glass dimly** --- as we still do concerning God's promised future for the resurrected saints at the *Parousia*!

Peter says **the angels long to look** into these inspirational Gospel matters too. The verb used conveys the strong idea of coveting or lusting after! ¹⁰

It's the same word used in **John 20: 5,11** where Peter and John are in a foot race to get to the empty tomb. John outruns Peter. John stops at the door of the tomb, and **stooping and looking in**, sees the linen wrappings lying there, **but he did not go in**.

But, when puffing, panting Peter gets to the tomb he barged right on in and **entered the tomb and he beheld the linen wrappings lying there**. Now, the fascinating point is that the word used of John **stooping and looking in** at the empty tomb, is the same word Peter uses in **I Peter 1: 12** of the angels who **long to look into** the full significance of the Messianic Gospel now being preached to us.

Which gets me to thinking; Since the angels are bending over with intense interest and staring at the cosmic implications of the prophetic events concerning our Messiah, and since the prophets also diligently enquired about these things, how much more should we --- with all the benefits of hindsight --- marvel at what God has done in His Son for our everlasting joy. And all so brilliantly outlined in the Old Testament Scriptures!

⁹ Op. Cit., p 158

¹⁰ The Greek verb *epithumousin* is indicative, present active, 3 plural. The angels are still inquisitively looking into the full glory and implications of God's predetermined plan as revealed in Christ's Gospel!