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PREEXISTENCE OF CHRIST

The *πρεινχαρνατε* existence of Christ may be only a simple, contemplative inference backwards from the spiritual glory of the present Christ, certainly its clearest expression is found in later writing reflecting upon the messianic assessment of Christ in the primitive Christian community (Acts 2:22-23; 10:38). Yet preexistence is at least implied in words of Jesus Himself: "The son of man came"; the owner of the vineyard "had still ... a beloved son: finally the Father sent Him." It is explicit in sayings attributed to Jesus in John's Gospel: "I came down from heaven"; "The glory I had with thee before the world was."

Jewish scholars attributed "ideal" preexistence to things (law, temple) and persons (Adam, Moses) deeply revered, echoed perhaps in Paul's calling Christ "last Adam ... from heaven." Greek thinking, reflected in Philo, was familiar with preexistence of souls. But it is unnecessary to find here more than a source of usable terms. The idea that the Son of God, eternally preexisting in glory with the Father, moved by love became incarnate was too central to Christian faith to depend upon coincidences of language for its basis.

Paul appeals for generosity because Christ, "though rich became poor." He pleads that converts live as sons because "God sent forth his son"; argues for self-effacement from the fact that Christ, being in the form of God, "emptied Himself"; contends, against the Gnostics' *πλερομα* filling the gulf between God and creation, that "all things were created in, through, and for Christ ... who is before all things.

As "Lord from heaven" Christ provides the pattern of our resurrected humanity; as He first descended, so He has ascended, the measure of His triumph and assurance of ours (2 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:5-6; Col. 1:15-16; Ephesians 4:8-9). For such practical, pastoral exhortations one does not argue from fringe speculations, but only from familiar, accepted, foundation truths.

John's Gospel and Epistle, assuming that Christ came from God and went to God (John 13:3), emphasize His being sent by the Father on divine mission, expressing divine love (John 3:16; I John 4:9-10), a revelation of the unseen Father by one belonging "in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18), a divine Word, present when God spoke at creation and now again conveying meaning and power to the world (John 1).

For John as for Paul, mankind's salvation derives not from any human initiative but from the coming of the eternal Son into time. That is the crucial truth here at issue.

The implications of preexistence are a concern of subsequent Christian thought. Does it impair the manhood of Jesus? Why the delay in Christ's arrival? Does preexistence imply continuity of memory between the eternal Son and Jesus? But the fact of preexistence is not questioned, except where Christ's deity and divine mission are wholly denied.