



The Pre-Existence of Christ

A study of the narrative of John's Gospel

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1. Introduction

John's Gospel opens with one of the most profound sections in all of Scripture, commonly referred to as the Johannine Prologue (John 1:1-18). The meaning and significance of this passage, and in particular the interpretation of the Logos, are widely debated. One of the most hotly debated questions is whether the pre-existent Logos was a personal being or an idea. There are different ways to approach the question. One would be a meticulous study of the Greek of John 1:1-18. Another would be a thorough investigation of the Jewish literary context in which these words were written, including the Old Testament and the non-canonical writings of Second Temple Judaism. Both of these methods are important and necessary to discern John's meaning. A third approach, and the one we will take here, is to first study the rest of the Gospel of John, and let our findings inform our interpretation of the Logos in the Prologue. This approach makes sense because the Prologue is not an arbitrary theological statement but a preface to the narrative of Christ's ministry. It plays a similar role to that of birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. It would be a serious contextual error not to see a direct link between the statements made in the Johannine Prologue and the record of what Jesus did and said in the subsequent narrative.

With this in mind, let us embark upon a study of the pre-existence of Christ in the narrative portion of John's Gospel, in order to gain insight which will help us to understand the Prologue.

Let the reader note that we will be completely sidestepping a major line of evidence for Christ's pre-existence in the Johannine narrative, namely the significance of the "I am he" sayings in light of Yahweh's "I am he" sayings in Isaiah. These are discussed in depth in my work, *Before Abraham was, I am he: Jesus' self-revelation as Yahweh*. I have also discussed John 1:3, 10 as pre-existence texts in my work, *Dia: a small word with big implications*.

2. John the Baptist contrasted with Christ: John 1:30, 3:31-32

John the Baptist is already introduced in the Prologue of John's Gospel and functions as the one who prepares the way of the Lord as prophesied in Isaiah. From the onset of his ministry he confesses that he is not the Messiah (John 1:20) and contrasts himself with another One whose sandal he is not worthy to untie (John 1:25).

2.1. "He was before me" (John 1:30)

When John the Baptist introduces Jesus in his ministry, he declares, "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because **he was before me**'" (John 1:30). Here is as clear a statement of Christ's pre-existence as we could ask or hope for. John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus in human life, yet he declares that Jesus existed before him! This can only be a personal pre-existence since he declares, "**He** was before me" and this he refers to the male person that was Jesus of Nazareth.

Now some have seen the last clause in John 1:30, "He was before me," as referring to precedence in rank rather than time. There are three strong reasons right in the verse itself for rejecting this claim.

- (1) John the Baptist has already mentioned precedence in rank earlier in the verse! This explanation has him saying, "After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he

ranked before me.” This is not only completely redundant; it fails to make sense of the shift from present tense to past tense.

- (2) John the Baptist’s statement opens with the emphatic word “After.” There is irony in his statement, because according to Jewish custom, the elder took precedence over the younger; the predecessor took precedence over the successor (see how Elisha submits himself to Elijah in 2 Kings 2). John the Baptist is emphasizing that here is an exception to this rule: in this case the successor takes precedence over the predecessor. He then gives the reason for the exception: his successor actually predated him. This makes perfect sense: the opening word “after” is clearly temporal and **requires a matching, temporal “before” for the irony to work.**
- (3) The word translated ‘before’ in John 1:30c, John 1:15c is *protos*. Granted, this word can refer to priority in time (‘earliest’ or ‘earlier’) or in rank (‘most prominent’ or ‘foremost’), and takes on both meanings numerous times in the New Testament. However, within John’s Gospel and epistles it **always** refers to time, and not once to rank (John 1:41; 2:10; 7:51; 8:7; 10:40; 12:16; 15:18; 18:13; 19:32; 19:39; 20:4; 20:8; 1 John 4:19). This suggests that in keeping with John’s style we ought to interpret the word temporally in 1:30c and 1:15c.

However, the evidence for a pre-existence meaning in John 1:30 goes well beyond the verse itself. The statement’s relationship to the Prologue is unassailable, because it is quoted in the Prologue (John 1:15)! Furthermore, in saying “He was before me,” the Gospel uses the exact verb and tense (the durative imperfect of *eimi*, to be) which the Prologue uses to draw a temporal contrast between the Logos and John the Baptist. In John 1:1-2, 4 and 9, the imperfect tense of the verb *eimi* (to be) is applied to the Logos, denoting **continuous past existence**: “In the beginning **was** the Word.” By contrast, in John 1:6 the Baptist is introduced thus: “There **was** a man sent from God, whose name was John.” The difference does not appear in English, but in Greek it is pronounced. The verb here is the aorist tense of the verb *eimi*, to be, denoting a **completed action in the past**. The contrast in the force of verbs is this: in the beginning, the Logos’ existence was **already** in progress (hence some scholars translate, ‘In the beginning the Word had been’); whereas the man John **came into being** at a designated point in time. By using the same verbal construction here of Jesus, the writer declares that Jesus was the pre-existent *Logos*.

2.2. “He who comes from heaven...bears witness to what he has seen” (John 3:31-32)

John the Baptist makes a further statement contrasting himself with Jesus in John 3:27-30:

“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.”

These words are immediately followed on by these comments of John the Evangelist in v. 31-32:

“He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.”

It is plain from v. 35 and the wider context of John's Gospel (see John 8:23) that 'he who comes from heaven' refers to Christ. Given the contrast between John the Baptist and the Christ in the preceding verses, it appears that "he who is of the earth" refers to John the Baptist. Thus we have a stark contrast between John the Baptist, who "is of the earth, belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way," and Christ, who "comes from heaven," "is above all," and "bears witness to what he has seen and heard."

In what sense did Christ come from heaven, according to this passage? Is it a metaphorical way of emphasizing that his birth was the result of miraculous divine intervention? This is very unlikely, for several reasons. Firstly, the Gospel of John does not contain an account of Jesus' birth. Secondly, according to Luke, **John the Baptist's birth was also the result of miraculous divine intervention**, complete with an angelic visit predicting it. The only difference is that John the Baptist was born of a barren, aged human couple, whereas Jesus was born of a virgin and had no human father. This difference is significant, to be sure; but is it significant enough to make the stark contrast that we read above? Not, I would suggest, unless the virgin birth signified the pre-existent divinity of the Christ.

Others have argued that Jesus was before John the Baptist in the sense that he preceded him in the foreknowledge of God. However, the Scriptures declare that God knew all things from the beginning (Rom. 4:17), and predestined all the saints from the beginning (Eph. 1:5), so this must be true of both Jesus and John the Baptist and does not mark a very profound contrast between them. Still others have argued that Jesus was before John the Baptist in the sense of having a divine commission – being sent by God. This again fails the 'contrast test' because the Gospel reports that the Baptist, too, was "sent from God" (John 1:6).

The language of John 3:31-32 confirms the personal nature of the pre-existence, because it says that the One from heaven bears witness to what he has seen and heard in heaven.

2.3. Other 'experience of heaven' passages

There are several other passages in John where Jesus claims to have seen and heard things in heaven:

"We speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen...heavenly things"
(John 3:11-12)¹

"And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen" (John 5:37; the implication here is that Christ has heard his voice and seen his form)

"Not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father" (John 6:46; given the emphatic biblical testimony that no man has ever seen God, even within John's Gospel at 1:18, this is strongly suggestive of a pre-human existence for Christ)

¹ An interesting side question is why Jesus resorts to the plural, 'we' here. The immediate answer is that according to the Law of Moses, a second witness was needed to establish a charge (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). This then begs the question, who was the second witness? It might appear from the immediate context to be John the Baptist. However, John 5:31-37 declares that ultimately the legally requisite second witness was not John the Baptist, but the Father Himself!

“I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father” (John 8:38; A.T. Robertson notes, “Locative case of *pater* and article used as possessive (common idiom), ‘by the side of my Father,’ picture of intimate fellowship”)

“And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5)

3. The descent and ascent of the Son of Man: John 1:51, 3:13, 6:62

The descent and ascent of the Son of man is discussed by Jesus several times in the Johannine narrative.

3.1. “Angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of man” (John 1:51)

John 1:48-51: “Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

The account of Nathanael’s conversion closes with a puzzling statement which is actually Jesus’ first of eleven uses of the enigmatic self-title “The Son of Man” in the Gospel of John. It is also his first use of the phrase, “Amen, amen, I say to you” in the Gospel (the Synoptic Gospels contain the phrase but without the double ‘Amen’). The double use of Amen may reflect three sections of the Book of Psalms which close with “Amen and amen” (Psalm 41:13; 72:19; 89:52). The authoritative “I say to you” contrasts sharply with the phrase “Thus says the LORD” used by previous prophets.

The title “The Son of Man” has generated a storm of scholarly debate in modern times. In the early church it was so puzzling that it quickly dropped out of use – it is not used even once in the New Testament epistles. However, it is generally agreed among scholars that Jesus’ use of the term derived primarily from the heavenly figure described in Daniel 7 (cf. Matt. 26:64). On the Danielic Son of Man, Ridderbos writes:

“In the vision in Daniel 7 the appearance of the Son of man is depicted as a theophany: The Son of man is to ‘come on the clouds of heaven,’ words used elsewhere only of God. The phrase ‘one like a son of man’ does not point to human origin but rather suggests a humanly recognizable form in the manifestation of divine glory (cf. Ezek. 1:26b, 28b). At the same time this Son of man is he to whom is given (by ‘the Ancient of Days’) divine glory and unlimited kingship. In this respect Daniel 7 reminds one of the divine characteristics attributed elsewhere in the Old Testament to the messianic king as coregent and son of God (cf. Isa. 9:1-6; 2 Sam. 7:14; Pss. 2:7ff; 110). But the way in which Daniel 7 speaks of the Son of man far surpasses those features. To be sure, the Son of man is also distinguished from God (‘The Ancient of Days’), but his appearance

on the clouds and his divine 'glory' and possession of unlimited power impart to his kingship an absolutely transcendent character."²

The scene depicted in Daniel 7 is a latter-day one, so it does not explicitly require the Son of man's pre-existence. However, it is worth noting that at least some circles of Jewish thought in the intertestamental period identified the Danielic Son of man as a pre-existent heavenly being (see 1 Enoch 48:4-6; 62:7).

Returning to John 1:51, we find the Son of man depicted in a scene that evokes Jacob's dream in Gen. 28:11-13:

"And [Jacob] came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring."

What does this passage have to do with the Son of man, and with Jesus' self-understanding? Phillips says:

"The Lord arrested [Nathanael's] attention with the first of his double amens. He carried him back in thought to the night of Jacob's conversion and reminded him of Jacob's ladder and how Jacob had seen the angels of God ascending and descending that celestial stairway which linked earth and heaven. 'I am that ladder,' Jesus said in effect to Nathanael. You have hailed me as 'Son of God' and so I am. I put my hand on deity, so to speak, because of my deity. You have hailed me as 'King of Israel,' great David's greater Son, and so I am. I put my hand on humanity, so to speak, because of my humanity. I am that ladder. I link God and man, heaven and earth. I am the one and only mediator between God and man, the only link between heaven and earth. The angels ascend and descend because of me."³

This begs the question of how angels travelled between heaven and earth prior to Jesus' existence, if he did not personally pre-exist. Even more importantly, it establishes that in the Johannine context, language about ascent, descent, and other travel between heaven and earth is literal. When angels descend from heaven, they actually descend from heaven.⁴ Furthermore, when Christ ascends to heaven after his resurrection, he actually ascends to heaven (Acts 1:9-11), so the language of ascension in John 20:17 must also be taken literally. This gives us two 'bookends' of literal ascent/descent language in John, within which we find two other important passages about the Son of man.

3.2. "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of man" (John 3:13)

² Ridderbos, Herman N. *The Gospel according to John: a theological commentary*, p. 93.

³ Phillips, John. *Exploring the Gospel of John: an expository commentary*, p. 50.

⁴ This is not to say that 'descending from heaven' is a movement from Point A to Point B in physical, spatial terms. The location and properties of the heavenly realm are beyond our comprehension, so the language of ascent and descent is a simplification for our convenience as finite beings. Nevertheless it is literal.

Part of Jesus' nighttime dialogue with Nicodemus reads thus, in John 3:9-15:

"9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

First of all, a couple textual notes:

- 1) The words "which is in heaven" appear at the end of John 3:13 in the KJV but have little manuscript support and are widely regarded as spurious; thus they are omitted in nearly all modern English Bible translations.
- 2) There is no indication of where Jesus' speech stops and the Evangelist resumes his commentary. Many modern scholars punctuate the text so that Jesus' words stop after verse 15. Some have suggested that Jesus' words stop after verse 12, but there are several reasons for rejecting this. Firstly, there are 76 other instances of the title 'the Son of man' in the Gospels; in 75 of them Jesus is the speaker (the lone exception is when the Jews asked him, 'Who is this Son of man?' in John 12:34). Secondly, in verse 14 we have the verb *dei* in the present tense, meaning 'it behoves' or 'it ought to be,' referring to the lifting up of the Son of man (i.e. the crucifixion). If this is John's commentary as he wrote his Gospel, this verb would be in the past tense, *edei*, reflecting the fact that the crucifixion had already occurred. See, for instance, Luke 24:26, which says retrospectively that Christ's suffering "ought to have happened" (*edei*). Clearly, in John 3:14 Jesus is anticipating the necessity of his own death, so the speaker in 3:13 must also be Jesus.

The focus in this part of the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus is **access to understanding and knowledge**. Jesus may be refuting a contemporary Jewish legend that Moses had ascended to heaven to receive the Law, in order to proclaim his own ascendancy over Moses (cf. John 1:17). Whatever the case, he is asserting his own access to divine knowledge, which he has obtained through personal observation in heaven. He asserts that this prerogative is unique among men undoubtedly reflects Prov. 30:3-4:

"3 I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. 4 Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? **What is his name, and what is his son's name?** Surely you know!"

The answers to the 'Who' questions is undoubtedly YHWH God; however, what are we to make of the puzzling question question, "What is his son's name?" Jewish interpreters would likely answer, "Israel" and they would not be wrong as this is probably the immediate sense. However, is the Christian reader not justified in seeing Messianic significance here? This text is not directly quoted in the New Testament. However, Jesus' allusion to it

certainly supports the Messianic interpretation, and there is precedent in the New Testament for interpreting Old Testament passages about Israel messianically (see Matthew's use of Hos. 11:1 in Matt. 2:15).

By comparing Prov. 30:3-4 with Jesus' statement in John 3:13, we are left to conclude that as of Old Testament times, YHWH already had a Son who participated in his uniquely divine acts, such as control over the weather, as well as ascent to and descent from heaven! Jesus demonstrated the first prerogative on other occasions in his ministry (Mark 4:39-41; John 6:18-21); here he declares the second: that the Son of man, unlike any other man, has ascended to and descended from heaven.

Those who deny the pre-existence of Christ come up with other explanations of the language of descent from heaven: it refers to the supernatural circumstances of his birth, or to his pre-existence in the foreknowledge of God, or to his divinely commissioned ministry. We have already discussed problems with these claims in light of the contrast between Jesus and his prophetic predecessor, John the Baptist. However, further problems arise when we encounter the language of **ascent to heaven**. What figurative explanation can be advanced for Jesus' claim to have ascended to heaven, especially in light of the fact that he did literally ascend to heaven after his resurrection? If we admit that the ascent in John 3:13 is literal, it would be difficult to maintain that the descent is figurative, since they are linked: "No one has **ascended** into heaven except he who **descended** from heaven."

The Polish Socinians, who denied the pre-existence of Christ, came up with an innovative explanation of this verse: they said that Jesus ascended to heaven after his baptism to receive instruction from God, and then came back down to begin his ministry. This explanation sounds plausible, but must be rejected on the grounds that there is absolutely no evidence for it! A better explanation of the text was given by Bernard and McNeile:

"The argument is that none can speak with authority of [heavenly things], except one who has been [in heaven], and has come down from thence. And of no one can this be said but the 'Son of Man,' for no man has ever ascended thither...It is only the Son of Man who came down from heaven, which is His home, who can speak of it and of [heavenly things] with the authority of knowledge."⁵

3.3. "What if you were to see the Son of man ascending to where he was before?" (John 6:62)

The other passage in the Johannine narrative which speaks of the Son of man's descent from and ascent to heaven is John 6:62:

"⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. ⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" ⁶¹ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

Before discussing the key text, we ought to comment on claims Jesus made in the context to have descended from heaven. Repeatedly, Jesus referred to himself as the bread which came

⁵ Bernard, J.H. & McNeile, A.H. St. John: Critical and Exegetical Commentary, p. 111.

down from heaven, an allusion to the manna given in the wilderness (see Ex. 16). He contrasted himself (or his flesh) with manna, saying that by eating of his flesh one would live forever. Obviously it is highly figurative language for Jesus to call himself bread. One might argue that manna did not literally come from heaven; it fell from the sky, but it only came down from heaven in the sense that it was given by God (as in James 1:17). In the same way, Jesus came down from heaven only in the sense that he was given by God.

However, there are a couple of reasons to reject this understanding. First of all, the Psalmist understood manna to have literally come from heaven. He referred to it as “the grain of heaven” and “the bread of the angels” (Psalm 78:23-25). Furthermore, while manna was obviously a passive, impersonal gift, in John 6:38 Jesus is different: “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me.” This suggests that Jesus descended from heaven with purpose. How could he have thought about whose will he was descending to fulfil unless he personally pre-existed? Gathercole identifies a number of places in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus also uses this kind of language, which may mean that, contrary to popular belief, the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ is not absent from the Synoptics (see Appendix 2).

Returning to the passage at hand, the words, “ascending to where he was before” (John 6:62) are reminiscent of John the Baptist’s declaration, “he was before me,” and expand on it by telling us implicitly where he was in his pre-existence: in heaven! If this statement is taken at face value, it is not only indirectly prophesying Christ’s ascension, but it is telling us that Christ’s ascension would actually be a **return** to heaven rather than being his first trip there. This is obviously impossible unless Jesus personally pre-existed! The reference to “the Son of man” reinforces the association of this title with heavenly pre-existence.

Those who disbelieve in the pre-existence have produced alternative explanations of Jesus’ words here. One is that Jesus was referring to a topographical ascent to Jerusalem. Support for this view is claimed in the use of the verb *anabaino* (to go up), which is used of going up to the feast in Jerusalem in John 7:8, 10, 14. However, the context in John 6 renders this view completely untenable. The disciples thought Jesus’ statements about being bread that came down from heaven, and giving his flesh to eat, were “hard.” Jesus’ response, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if...” suggests that he is about to say an even harder saying. “Then what if... I went up to the feast at Jerusalem?” does not qualify as a hard saying!

A slightly more plausible suggestion is that Jesus was referring to his resurrection: that after dying he would ‘ascend’ to where he was before, i.e. life above ground. This too is fraught with difficulties. Firstly, the verb *anabaino* is never used in the sense of resurrection. There were straightforward ways to describe resurrection in Greek and John made use of several of them in his Gospel; why would Jesus use strange, unorthodox language for it here? Furthermore, *anabaino* is a present active participle here; Jesus is emphasizing the action in progress: what if you were to see the Son of man **in the act of ascending** to where he was before? This makes little sense in the context of a figurative, resurrection meaning; but a lot of sense in light of actual history – that some of the disciples would ultimately “gaze up into heaven” watching the Son of man ascend (Acts 1:11). “Where he was before” should be interpreted as the place Jesus claimed to have descended from in this immediate context: **heaven** (John 6:33, 38, 42, 50, 51, 58).

Bernard and McNeile bring out the true sense of the text well:

“Here is suggested the pre-existence of the Son of Man, as before at 3:13...The meaning of vv. 62, 63 is best brought out if we take them in connexion with v. 58 (cf. v. 51), which had seemed to the hearers of Jesus to be hard of acceptance...that He was the Bread which came down from heaven...That One moving among men in the flesh had descended *from* heaven seemed incredible, but is it not still less credible that He should ascend *to* heaven? Yet the former had happened (in the Incarnation); the latter will happen at the Ascension, and some of those present might be there to see it.”⁶

4. Other pre-existence passages: John 8:42, 13:3

Two other texts in the Johannine narrative which suggest a personal transition of Christ from heaven to earth (and thus a personal pre-existence) are John 8:42 and 13:3.

John 8:42 reads, “Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.” The final clause is redundantly obvious if Jesus’ existence began at his human birth: of course a human baby did not arrive on the scene of its own accord! Furthermore, the emphatic, “I came from God **and I am here**” suggests a literal relocation. One does not say “I am here” except to emphasize that one has arrived from elsewhere!

John 13:3-4a reads, “3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 rose from supper.” Here we again have two converse statements that must be interpreted consistently: just as Jesus had come from God, so he was going to God. We know that he went literally to God by ascending personally to heaven; thus he must have come literally from God by descending personally from heaven.

In conclusion, there is abundant evidence in the Gospel of John that the human being known to the world as Jesus of Nazareth had personally and consciously existed in heaven prior to his human birth, as the Son of Man. There he had seen and heard things from God; indeed he had seen God. Then, at God’s commission he had descended to earth to fulfil his destiny of taking away the sin of the world and giving life to those who believed in him. The pre-existence taught in the Johannine narrative (and perhaps, to a lesser extent, the Synoptic narratives) proves that the *Logos* of the Johannine Prologue is not a concept but the pre-existent person of Christ.

Appendix 1: Proleptic verbs

At this point we can briefly deal with another explanation of these Johannine passages which seeks to avoid the conclusion that Jesus personally pre-existed. It appeals to the so-called proleptic or futuristic aorist, a special case of the aorist tense of Greek verbs. The aorist verb refers to a completed event, normally in the past. In rare cases, the aorist “can be used to describe an event that is not yet past as though it were already completed.”⁷ In other words, the author wants to emphasize the certainty of a future event to such a degree that he speaks of it as if it is already past.

⁶ Bernard & McNeile, *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁷ Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar beyond the basics*, p. 563.

The proleptic aorist must be applied with great caution. The aorist is the most common tense used for simple past events in the New Testament, so imagine how badly one could abuse the Scriptures if one felt free to whimsically interpret any aorist verb as yet future! We should first realize that there are certain criteria that must be satisfied before a proleptic aorist interpretation is possible. First (obviously), the tense must be aorist. Second, the mood must be indicative (not subjunctive, optative or imperative). Fanning in his book *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, identifies two types of proleptic aorist. One is the ‘conditional’ case, which requires an if-then clause: if X occurs, then Y is regarded as having occurred (although yet future). For instance, John 15:6 – “If anyone does not abide in me **he is thrown away.**” The other is the ‘implied conditional’ case, which views a future event as certain in light of a divine decree or other circumstances which render it inevitable. For instance, Rom. 8:30 – “Those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified **he also glorified.**”

Outside of these conditions being fulfilled – aorist tense, indicative mood, and an explicit or implicit conditional clause – there is no grammatical basis for a proleptic interpretation. There is also an even more rare proleptic perfect, in which “the perfect [tense] can be used to refer to a state resulting from an antecedent action that is future from the time of speaking. This usage occurs in the apodosis [the ‘then’ part of an if-then construction] and depends on the time of the verb in the protasis.”⁸ **There is no such thing as a proleptic imperfect.**

With these technical grammatical points in mind, is there any reason to see proleptic future in any of the key pre-existence texts we have discussed in John: 1:30, 3:13, 6:38, 6:46, 6:62, 8:38, 8:42, 13:3 or 17:5? The simple answer is no. In 1:30 and 6:62, the key verb ‘was’ is in the imperfect tense and so must be past. In 3:13, “has ascended” is in the perfect tense but not in an apodosis (‘then statement’) and so must be past; “descended” is in the aorist participial mood and is not conditional or implied conditional and so must be past. In 6:38, the key verb “came down” is in the perfect tense but not in an apodosis, and so must be past. The same goes for “has seen” in 6:46 and 8:38. “Came from God” and “he sent me” in 8:42 are aorist indicative, but “I came not of my own accord” is in the perfect tense and not in an apodosis, so the whole verse must be past. “Had come from God” in 13:3 is aorist indicative, but is not conditional or implied conditional and so must be past. “The glory that I **had** with you” in John 17:5 is in the imperfect tense and so must be past.

In summary, none of these texts fit the criteria for proleptic verbs and so cannot be interpreted futuristically.

Appendix 2: Pre-existence in the Synoptic Narratives

A recent book by Simon J. Gathercole entitled *The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, argues that a number of sayings in the Synoptic Gospels may imply Christ’s pre-existence. These are ten in total, and they all follow this formula (with some slight variation): “I have come” + an infinitive of purpose.

“What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the holy one of God!” (Mark 1:24; cf. Luke 4:43)

⁸ Wallace, *Ibid.*, p. 581.

“What have we to do with you, Son of God? Have you come here to destroy us before our due time?” (Matt. 8:29)

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:17 par. Matt. 9:13; Luke 5:32; Luke adds ‘to repentance’)

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them.” (Matt. 5:17)

“I have come to cast fire onto the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.” (Luke 12:49)

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword/division.” (Matt. 10:34 par. Luke 12:51)

“For I have come to divide man against father and daughter against mother, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Matt. 10:35)

“For even the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45 par. Matt. 20:28)

“For the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (Luke 19:10)

Gathercole argues:

“A deliberate act requires a before-and-after, and, in the case of a ‘coming,’ an origin from which the speaker has come. Hence the *usual* sense which one would attach to the statement “I have come to do such-and-such” would be that the person was previously not carrying out the task, but has come *from* somewhere in order to carry it out. Furthermore, if the person, if the person is referring to his whole earthly activity as the goal of the coming, the place of origin is logically somewhere outside of the human sphere.”⁹

Acknowledging that the usage could be idiomatic, Gathercole does not rest his case there. Rather, he advances three lines of evidence in support of his claims: first, that none of the other options advanced by scholars can be considered plausible; second, that in Jewish literature of that time, the ‘I have come’ + purpose formula is most closely and abundantly paralleled in announcements by angels of their comings from heaven; thirdly, some points from the content and literary context which point to heavenly features of these sayings.

Many of the alleged parallels suggested by Gathercole are in the Book of Daniel: 9:21-23; 10:12, 14, 20; 11:2.

“21 While I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. 22 He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, “O Daniel, **I have now come out to give you insight and understanding.** 23 At the beginning of your pleas for mercy a word went out, and **I have come to tell it to you,** for you are greatly loved. Therefore consider the word and understand the vision.”

⁹ Gathercole, Simon J. *The Pre-existent Son*, p. 87.

“12 Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and **I have come because of your words...**14 and **came to make you understand** what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come"...20 Then he said, "Do you know why I have come to you? But now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come.”

In addition to these Gathercole cites nearly two dozen alleged parallels in non-canonical Jewish literature. Certainly the pre-existence interpretation is an intriguing possibility and one worthy of consideration.