

## JOHN'S PORTRAIT OF JESUS

This study deals with issues raised in the Gospel of John concerning John the Baptist's statements in John **1:15** and **30** that "[Jesus] existed *before* me" and Jesus' statements in:

- 3:13 — "but he that descended from heaven"
- 3:31 — "He that comes *from heaven*" (John).
- 6:33-58 — "bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven"
- 6:46 — "except he who is from *God*; this one has *seen* the Father."
- 6:62 — "see the Son of man ascending to *where he was before*?"
- 8:58 — "Before Abraham came into existence I am" (*I have been*' NWT).
- 12:41 — "Isaiah...saw his [*Messiah's*] glory...."
- 16:28 — "I came out from the Father and have come into the world..."
- 17:5 — "with the *glory* that I had alongside you before the world was."

Although John's gospel was written last it cannot be maintained, that whilst the other gospels and writings do not speak of pre-existence, that John is providing a new revelation as to who Jesus was. Jesus never changed the Jewish definition of what the Messiah was to be i.e. a descendant of David. So Bible Scholar *Sir Anthony Buzzard* notes that:

We also see that there has been no evolution or change in the basic identity of Christianity's founder. Peter, in conversation with Jesus in the 30's A.D provides the creedal statement about Jesus as Messiah, Son of God. And John writing probably in the 90's makes the same identity of Jesus the whole point of his gospel-writing. This should put an end to any theories of "progress" through the New Testament period... everything John included in his gospel was to demonstrate the Messiahship and sonship of Jesus. *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian*, p. 120.

### JOHN'S GOSPEL WAS NOT TO PROVE THAT JESUS WAS GOD OR OTHER SPIRIT BEING

- "But these have been written down *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ* [*Messiah*] the Son of God..." (**John 20:31**).

Rather than any pagan idea that Jesus had a past life as a divine being, John's gospel was written to prove that Jesus was the Messiah, thereby maintaining harmony with the synoptic writers. In this very Gospel that is most quoted to prove pre-existence, John didn't present Jesus' sayings so that we would believe that he had a pre-human existence as God or an archangel. Yet, John is, unique in concentrating on *the words* of Jesus (5:24, 8:31, and 12:48).

### THE TRANSLATION OF **JOHN 1:15** AND **1:30**

The rendering of the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses is:

- "The one behind me has advanced in front of me, because he **existed before** me."

Because Jesus was born 6 months after John was born this and similar translations are used in an attempt to prove that Jesus must have pre-existed. However, when we examine the Greek Interlinear it becomes evident that it is the **pre-eminent status of Jesus** that John speaks of. Furthermore, this concerns the time **immediately prior to the beginning of Jesus' ministry** and does not concern any comparison of timing of Jesus' coming into existence with John's time of birth.

Word for word KIT reads:

- “The one behind me coming *in front of me has come to be*, because **first** of me he was.”

This is literally:

- “The one coming behind me *has come to be in front of me*, because he was **first** of me.”  
Or
- “The one coming after me *has moved ahead of me*, because he was my **superior** (or chief).”

The Revised Version reads:

- “because he is **first** (*in rank. Gk protos*) in regard of me.”

The Geneva Bible reads:

- “He that cometh after me was before me: for he was **better** than I.”

The Emphatic Diaglott reads:

- “He who comes after me is in advance of me; for he is my **superior**.”

Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible reads:

- “He who after me was coming, before me hath advanced; because my **chief** he was.”

Theologian C.H Dodd translates:

- “There is a man in my following who has taken precedence over me, because he is and always has been essentially **my superior**.”

This verse is primarily about **the importance of Jesus’ ministry as compared to the importance of John’s ministry** since it would be Jesus who would be pre-eminent in bringing about the salvation of mankind. This verse makes no comparison of the timing of Jesus’ coming into existence with John’s time of birth, but refers **to Jesus’ superior ministry as beginning after John’s ministry began**.

In the NWT the Greek word *protos* is variously translated as: Top-ranking, **first in the sense of rank**, best one, principal (men/women/cities). It is generally translated chief or first (in rank). Only for John 1:15 and 1:30 has *protos* been translated as “**before**” in most translations. (Wigram’s Greek Concordance shows every instance of the translation of *protos*). Most modern Bibles wrongly rearrange the sentence structure to say: “He who comes after me **ranks before** me, because he was (*existed NASB*) before me” (ESV). **However, it makes no sense to say that someone has advanced in front of someone else simply because he existed before him; but it does make sense to say that even though John began his ministry 6 months before Jesus began his, Jesus has advanced in front of John because he is John’s superior.** An appropriate paraphrase is:

“The one whose work (*or ministry*) started later than mine has advanced in front of me because he was my superior.”

Other examples where John the Baptist speaks of Jesus as outranking him are:

- “...the one *coming after me* is **stronger** than I am, whose sandal I am not **fit** to take off” (Matt. 3:11).
- *me* someone **stronger** than I am is coming; I am not fit to stoop and untie the laces of his sandals” (Mark 1:7).
- “...the one *coming behind me*, but the lace of whose sandal I am not **worthy** to untie...” (John 1:27. See also Acts 13:25).

THE ENIGMATIC AND FIGURATIVE STATEMENTS  
IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Unlike the synoptic gospels, the Gospel of John mainly concerns events for Jesus in Judea and is written from the standpoint of Jesus' post-resurrection glory. It unifies the earth-based Jesus with the exalted "Christ". This is evident from Jesus' use of the literary devices of **prolepsis** and **heterosis**. Therefore, single Christological texts from John cannot be taken literally and used legitimately as proof texts for pre-existence. They must be seen in the light of all of John's gospel and of the synoptic gospels. Furthermore, systematic theologian Colin Brown states with reference to the fourth Gospel:

When read in context, the statements are evidently about Jesus' relationship with the Father on earth.

*THE SCOPE OF JESUS' FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE*

- "These things I [*Jesus*] have spoken to you **in figurative language**" (John 16:25 NASB) ("figures of speech" NAB, "comparisons" NWT).

*NOTE: John's mention of "figure of speech" in the fine shepherd parable of John 10:6.*

*Raymond Brown* states with reference to the fourth gospel that:

Jesus frequently uses figurative language or metaphors to describe himself or to present his message. *The Gospels and Epistles of John*, p.17.

From John chapters 1 to 17 a large body of the sayings of Jesus are given in obscure and figurative language e.g. 'the **temple** of his body' (2:19-22); the '**born** again' discussion with Nicodemus (3:1-12); 'lifting up the **serpent** in the wilderness' (3:13); '**water** bubbling up to impart everlasting life' (4:9-15); 'I have **food** to eat of which you do not know' (4:31-34); 'the **harvest**' (4:35-38); 'the **manna** – bread from heaven' (6:22-51); 'eat the flesh of the Son of Man and **drink his blood**' (6:53-58); 'streams of **living water**' (7:37-39); 'I am **the light** of the world' (8:12); '**night** is coming when no man can work' (9:4,5); 'sheepfold, fine **shepherd**, doorkeeper, door, other sheep' (10:1-16); 'Lazarus is **asleep**' (11:10-14); 'unless a grain of **wheat** falls to the ground and dies' (12:23-25); '**the light** will be among you' (12:35,36); 'another **helper**' (14:16, 25); 'the true **vine**/branches/fruit' (15:1-8); 'the **helper**' (16:7-11); 'a woman when she is **giving birth**' (16:20-22); and the many proleptic sayings in chapter 17. So it should not surprise us that the other ascending/descending and pre-existence language in John is also figurative. In fact, even in the synoptic gospels more than one third of Jesus' teaching is given in parables i.e. figurative language. This preponderance of figurative language from the lips of Jesus in John's gospel should put one on alert to question just how literal are the apparent pre-existence proof texts concerning Jesus' origin.

As *Roger Haight* says: "To read **a metaphor** as literal speech is misinterpretation..."

When one understands Jewish ways of thinking i.e. that the Jew would speak of future things as already existing in heaven, and would use numerous types of figures of speech, then one can draw out the real meaning.

SON OF MAN "DESCENDED FROM HEAVEN"

**John 3:13**

- Jesus says: "...no man **has ascended** into heaven, but he that **descended from heaven** [i.e. *has his origin in God*] **the Son of man** [which is in heaven KJV]."

It is only a superficial or cursory reading of this verse that seems to suggest Jesus' self-consciousness of any literal pre-existence.

*THE CONTEXT:*

- Jesus spoke figuratively to Nicodemus about being “*born from above*,” but was misunderstood by him as referring to being literally born again. This, therefore, strongly indicates that Jesus' words in verse 13 are also figurative. The phrase “*has ascended*” implies that the Son of man is, **at that moment, in heaven**. This cannot be literally so, since Jesus is with Nicodemus. Also, Jesus had *not, at that time, literally* ascended as he told Mary (John 20:17). A similar situation of humans being described as being in heaven and yet actually standing on earth is described in Ephesians 2:6 where believers at the time of writing are figuratively “*seated in heavenly places*” although they are actually here on earth.
- The term “**Son of man**” means someone *wholly human* and not the incarnation of a spirit being. So, it was hardly the case that such a **human** literally came from heaven.

*THE CROSS-REFERENCES TO JOHN 3:13* in the NASB are:

Deuteronomy 30:12 and Proverbs 30:3, 4 which give similar figurative usage of ascending/descending language:

- “It is not in the heavens, so as to result in saying, ‘Who will ascend for us into the heavens and get it [*this commandment*] for us, that he may let us hear it’... For the word is very near you...” (**Deut. 30:12, 14**).
- “**The knowledge** of the Most Holy one I do not know. *Who* has ascended to heaven that he may descend?” (**Prov. 30:3, 4**).

*In these two texts no one imagined that any ordinary human could literally ascend to heaven. Accordingly they speak of a figurative ascension to bring “the knowledge of the Most Holy one” down.*

The *Word Biblical Commentary* makes the following points with reference to Proverbs 30:3, 4:

This is the first of 5 rhetorical questions similar to those asked of Job in 38-41. The obvious answer to the first 4 questions is: God ... But the fifth question is totally different from the previous ones. It concerns identity, and begins with “what” and not “who”... But it is not clear why the name of the son is included with the question ... Agur is asked ironically to name a human being able to do these things.

*THE MEANING OF JOHN 3:13*

The Adam Clarke Commentary says regarding John 3:13: “This seems a figurative expression for ‘No one hath **known the mysteries** of the kingdom of God.’”

In John 3 Jesus observes that Nicodemus fails to understand “earthly things” and then says to him: “*how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*” Jesus then elaborates by showing that he acts between heaven and earth for bringing down the “*heavenly things*.” These “heavenly things” are “**the mysteries of the kingdom of God**” which are communicated to Jesus. He, therefore, **figuratively ascends** to be in heaven in **communication with his Father and then figuratively descends to provide this knowledge for others**.

“HE THAT COMES FROM ABOVE”

**John 3:31 and 8:23**

- “He that comes from above is over all others...He that comes *from heaven* is over all others” (3:31).
- “You are from below. I am from above” (8:23).

These statements simply mean that Jesus is from God, as the one who is commissioned by God. He is in the higher spiritual position compared to these **Jews who do not think God's thoughts**. It is the same as in John 3:3, 7 where Jesus encourages Nicodemus to be “*born from above*” Rotherham, NAB, and Diaglott. The footnote in NWT says: “Lit. ‘should be generated from above.’”

“HE WHO COMES FROM GOD”

**John 16:28 and 13:3**

Jesus said: “I came out from the Father and have come into the world...”

This does not mean that Jesus literally travelled from God to the earth, but rather that he was commissioned by God. John 16:28 KIT says: “out I came **out of** (Gk *ek*) the Father.”

*CHRISTIANS COME FROM GOD YET DID NOT PRE-EXIST*

- “...the one [***the ordinary believer***] being **out of** (Gk *ek*) the God the sayings of the God is hearing” (John 8:47 KIT).

*For John 8:47 the NWT reads as:* “He that is **from God** listens to the sayings of God.”

*NJB reads:* “Whoever **comes from God** listens to the words of God; the reason why you do not listen is because you are not **from** (*ek*) **God**.”

*NAB and NIV read as:* “Whoever **belongs to God** hears the words of God...”

As believers are *from God - belong to God - come from God* but do not travel from God to the earth; so in the same manner Jesus *comes from*, belongs to, and was commissioned by God. Also note the bread of life discourse, and John's baptism - as being from above. Also the phrase: “*have come into the world*” does not mean travelling from outside of the world:

The earth is frequently referred to as the dwelling place of humanity in language that is paralleled in Jewish idiom: *coming into the world* (John 6.14; 9.39; 11.27; 18.37), *being in the world* (9.5a), *departing out of the world* (13.1; 16.28b). While some of these [Johannine] sayings acquire theological significance because of the context in which they are used, the idiom itself is familiar Jewish terminology. *To come into the world* means merely to be born; to be in the world is to exist; and to depart from the world is to die [H. Sasse, *TDNT* 3:888; see also 1Jn. 4.1,17; 2Jn7; Heb 10.5; 1Tim 1.15].

G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the NT*, p. 261.

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

**John 6:33-58**

*Jesus said:* <sup>33</sup>“For the bread of God is the one who comes (*present tense*) down from heaven... <sup>38</sup>, <sup>(42)</sup> I have come down from heaven... <sup>41</sup>, <sup>(58)</sup> I am the bread that came down from heaven... <sup>51</sup> I am the living **bread** that **came down from heaven**; if anyone eats of this bread he will live forever; and for a fact, the **bread** that I shall give is **my flesh** in behalf of the world.”

It is *the human Jesus (my flesh)* who “comes down from heaven” and yet a **flesh body** did not literally descend from heaven because Jesus came into existence in Mary. See Matthew 1:1, 18 KIT.

*THE CONTEXT:* Nominal disciples were shocked at Jesus’ **metaphor** of eating *his flesh and blood*. More shocking to the Jews were his words that implied that he was greater than Moses and was uniquely associated with God. Concerning God’s miraculously feeding of their ancestors with the manna at verse 31 Jesus says: “He gave them *bread from heaven* to eat.” Yet the manna was not literally sent from God’s throne in heaven. At Exodus 16:4 Jehovah speaks **figuratively** of “*raining down bread for you from the heavens*” but what happens in reality is that:

- “...the layer of dew evaporated and here upon the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flaky thing upon the earth” (**Ex. 16: 14**).

Similarly, Jesus’ “*coming down from heaven*” means **his being God’s provision for everlasting (permanent) life**, in contrast to the bread that came through Moses (John 6:32) the eating of which did not give them permanent life (verse 49). There is a past and present aspect to it. Here Jesus is also stating that he is now the only channel through which life may be had – he supersedes Moses.

#### *THINGS WHICH ‘COME DOWN FROM HEAVEN’ METAPHORICALLY*

Similar statements of things that figuratively “come down from heaven” are:

- “...test me out, please, in this respect,” Jehovah of armies has said, “whether I shall not open to YOU people the floodgates of the heavens and actually **empty out upon YOU** a blessing until there is no more want” (**Mal. 3:10**).

*Yet no one would take this to mean that God opens literal floodgates in heaven and literally pours blessings onto people from heaven.*

- “Every good gift and every perfect present is **from above**, for it comes down from the Father” (**Jas. 1:16**). Also “the wisdom **from above** is...” (**Jas. 3:17**).
- Jesus asks: “Was the baptism of John **from heaven** or from men?” (**Luke 20: 4**).

*This last verse really asks the question: Did this baptism originate with God? Of course, there were no baptisms literally in heaven that could come down to earth.*

#### THE ONE WHO HAS “SEEN” THE FATHER

##### **John 6:46**

“Not that any man has **seen** the Father except he who is *from God*;  
this one has **seen** the Father.”

*THE CONTEXT: The previous verse i.e. verse 45 quotes Isaiah 54:13:*

- “...they will all be **taught by** Jehovah’. Everyone that has **heard from** the Father and has **learned** comes to me”

In Greek **knowing** and **seeing** are near synonyms according to Kittel and Friedrich’s Theological Dictionary of the NT. The Greek word used here is *eoraken* as in John 1:18 which links “seeing” God with understanding Him because of Jesus’ “explaining” of Him. *Eoraken* is from *horao* and means: to perceive, **spiritually perceive**, or to become acquainted with by experience e. g:

- “He who has seen me **has seen** the Father” (John 14:9) as meaning ‘He who has **spiritually perceived** me has **spiritually perceived** the Father.’ Also see John 12:45.

*This cannot mean simply physically **caught sight of Jesus**, but those who get to know Jesus get to know or spiritually perceive the Father. Additionally, John pointed out those who also do not know God as:*

- “no one who is practicing sin has either **seen** him or come to **know** him [God]”  
(1 John 3:6).

For example, Job did not physically see God, yet after his experience he knew God in a far better, although limited, way than before:

- “In hearsay I have heard about you, but now my own eye does **see** you” (Job 42:5).

Evidently Job’s was not the same depth of understanding as was Jesus’ “seeing” of the Father. As John 1:18 notes Jesus explained the Father and so:

- “What things I have **seen** with my Father I speak” (John 8:38).

It is supposition on the part of those who believe in pre-existence to think that Jesus referred to the “seeing” of the Father at a time prior to his coming into existence in Mary’s womb. During almost 30 years of life Jesus was “seeing” the Father and, in fact, he used the **present tense** when stating that:

- “...the Son cannot do a single thing of his own initiative, but only what he **beholds** (Gk *blepo*) the Father doing (*present participle*)” (John 5:19).

NOTE: *Blepo* is translated as “see” in most other versions. Also *The Theological Dictionary of NT Words* informs us that *blepo*: “is near to *horao* in meaning” ...and that...“it also represents intellectual functions.”

There is no logical reason to understand that John 6:46 concerns the ‘seeing’ of the Father by Jesus other than while he is on earth. One should not jump to the conclusion that Jesus’ ‘seeing’ the Father means that Jesus pre-existed; otherwise one would logically have to imagine that Isaiah pre-existed because he said “I, however, got to **see** Jehovah” as well as saying “for my eyes **have seen** the King Jehovah” (Isa. 6:1, 5). In this instance the “seeing” was by means of a vision and not physically seeing.

#### THE FOREORDAINED MESSIAH IS SEEN IN DANIEL’S VISION

##### John 6:62

“What...if you should see the **Son of man** ascending to **where he was before?**”

However, could the ideal **human** (i.e. “Son of man”) have been literally in heaven before his birth? As with 1 Peter 1:20 and Acts 2:23, Jesus’ words in John 6:62 provide a case of Jesus’ being foreordained. So Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the “*Son of man*” (i.e. the human Messiah) program laid out in advance in the Scriptures:

- “...how is it that it is **written respecting** the *Son of man*...” (Mark 9:12).
- “The Son of Man is going away just **as it is written** concerning him” (Matt. 26:24).

The place where the Son of Man’s *ascending* is written about, as part of the Messianic program (Acts 2:23), is found in Daniel 7 where the human Messiah was seen (i.e. **before**) in heaven in **the vision** of verse 13 and hence of the future. If this verse is interpreted literally it

would mean the impossible case of “the Son of Man” - a *mortal* human - having been in heaven. An alternative understanding, presented by Greg Deuble in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of his book *They Never Told Me This in Church*, is that by “ascension” Jesus is referring to his coming resurrection back to “*where he was before*,” namely the earth – the land of Israel. In the full context of John 6, where the resurrection is a significant subject, “Jesus may possibly be announcing that his own resurrection from the dead would be proof that he is indeed “from God”” (p.216). However, one thing is certain – Jesus is not teaching that he had literally come down from heaven. Such an idea is impossible because the references in John 6 are to his “flesh” (vs. 51) and his being “the Son of Man” (vs. 62) i.e. a human.

### MESSIAH’S FUTURE GLORY IN JOHN 12:41

“Isaiah said these things because **he saw his** [Messiah’s] **glory** and he spoke about **him**.”

This verse is used in an attempt to prove either that Jesus is Jehovah (*Trinitarian*) or that Jesus pre-existed with Jehovah in Isaiah’s time (*Arian*). However, the question is: which part of Isaiah was John quoting from in verse 41?

John 12:38-41:

38 “So that the word of Isaiah was fulfilled which he said: ‘**Jehovah, who has put faith in the thing heard by us? And as for the arm of Jehovah, to whom has it been revealed**” (**quoting Isa. 53:1**). 39 The reason why they were not able to believe is that again Isaiah said: 40 “**He has blinded their eyes and he has made their hearts hard, that they should not see...**” (**quoting Isa. 6:10**). 41 Isaiah said **these things** because **he saw his** [Messiah’s] **glory** and he spoke about **him**.”

Although all cross-reference Bibles give Isaiah 6:1 “*I got to see Jehovah sitting on a throne and His skirts were filling the temple*” as the reference for John 12:41 because the Isaiah 6:10 quote is nearest to it, there is, however, no direct proof that this is the reference that John had in mind. It seems more likely that John 12:41 is a reference to the many statements in Isaiah concerning the **future** Messiah, and in particular to **Isaiah 52:13** which concerned **the suffering servant**. This connects with Isaiah 53:1 and, given the context of John 12:41 which is that of the suffering servant’s death (52:32, 33) and his glory (52:23, 28), it is part of the same prophecy:

➤ “Behold **my servant** shall understand, and be exalted, and **glorified** (Gk *doxasthesetai*) exceedingly” (**Isa. 52:13 Septuagint**).

- There are many more points of contact between Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and John 12 than between Isaiah 6 and John 12.

In *The Pillar New Testament Commentary, The Gospel According to John*, Professor D.A. Carson noted that, in chapter 12, John:

may well be thinking of the Suffering Servant who was exalted...what makes it very likely is the dozen or so overtones of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 found within John 12 that show the Evangelist had the Servant Song in mind when he composed this chapter.

pp. 449-450.

- Because the phrase “**these things**” is plural it refers to what is said in Isaiah 53:1 as well as 6:10. So the glory noted in John 12:41 is not the glory of Jehovah noted in the vision of Isaiah 6:1, but is the future glory of the Messiah described later in much of Isaiah, that is, in 9:6-7; 11:1-10; 16:5; 32:1; 33:17; 42:1-4; 52:13 to 53:12; and 61:1-3.



- Isaiah 6:1 describes Jehovah, but the context of verse 10 is that of “who will go for us?” (vs. 8) and so concerns the negative response to the prophetic message and deeds of the chosen messenger of God [*“the arm of Jehovah” in 53:1*] and not the actions of Jehovah himself.
- The unbelief of the Jews is prophetic, making Messiah’s glory also *prophetic* and **future**.

Andreas Kostenberger Professor of New Testament and Director of Ph.D/Th.M. studies at South-eastern Baptist Theological Seminary commented that:

The first passage cited is Isa. 53:1 LXX (cf. Rom. 10:16). In the original context, reference is made to the Servant of the Lord, who was rejected by the people but exalted by God (cf. Isa. 52:13-15). In John, the verse is applied to Jesus the Messiah, who is that promised Servant, and to the rejection of his message and signs (‘arm of the Lord’) by the Jews...In the wake of two Isaianic quotes in 12:38 and 12:40, the evangelist concludes that ‘Isaiah saw Jesus’ glory’ (cf. 8:56). In light of the preceding quotation of Isa. 6:10, some say that the background for the present statement is the call narrative in Isaiah 6. Yet though *autou* (his) probably refers to Jesus, John does not actually say that Isaiah saw *Jesus*, but that he saw Jesus’ glory. Hence, it is not necessary to conclude that the evangelist believed that Isaiah saw ‘the pre-existent Christ’ (Schnackenburg 1990: 2.416; cf. Talbert 1992: 180; D. B. Smith 1999: 244) or that he saw Jesus ‘in some pre-incarnate fashion’ (Carson 1991: 449). Rather, Isaiah foresaw that God was pleased with a suffering Servant who would be ‘raised and lifted up and highly exalted’ (52:13), yet who was ‘pierced for our transgressions’ and ‘bore the sins of many’ (53:5, 12) (see esp. Evans 1987). Hence, Isaiah knew that God’s glory would be revealed through a suffering Messiah—something deemed impossible by the crowds (John 12:34). Like Abraham, Isaiah saw Jesus’ ‘day’ (cf. John 8:56, 58).

*Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 390-392.

So it is incorrect exegesis when commentators make Isaiah 6:1 the reference for John 12:41 when, in fact, the only Scriptures quoted by John are Isaiah **6:10** and **53:1**. Therefore, what is expressed in John 12:41 does not equate Jesus with God. Any such equation would mean that Jesus was actually “God the Father.” This then would be the heretical teaching of Modalism. Furthermore John 12:41 does not concern an already literally existing being with a pre-human glory. This verse may be similar to “*Abraham rejoicing at the prospect of seeing my [Jesus] day, and he saw it*” (John 8:56) through eyes of faith or possibly a vision. So Isaiah’s vision of the future glory of Messiah concerned his ministry as “the suffering servant” and his death. This was what John referred to in 12:41.

BEFORE ABRAHAM CAME INTO EXISTENCE THE PROMISE  
OF THE MESSIAH EXISTED

Hans Wendt Professor of Theology at the University of Jena wrote:

It is clear that John 8:58 and 17:5 do not speak of a real pre-existence of Christ. We must not treat these verses in isolation, but understand them in context.

**John 8:58**

“Before ABRAHAM came into existence *I have been*” (NWT).

word for word :-	KIT	Before Abraham	to become	I am ( Gk <i>ego eimi</i> ).
	UBS	Before Abraham	came into being	I am.

## I AM HE – THE MESSIAH

All other instances of this Greek phrase (ego eimi) are translated as “**I am he**” or “**I am (he)**” or “**I am the one**,” see John 4:26, 8:24, 8:28, 9:9, 13:9, and 18:5. This is recognized as correct by all scholars. There is no contextual reason to render 8:58 any differently. Only B. Wilson’s Diaglott is consistent on this point. However, in 4:26, Young’s Literal, and the NAB, render it as “I am [he],” and the NLT has “I Am the Messiah”

*Edwin Freed comments:*

Jesus is reported as affirming his *messiahship* through the use of ‘ego eimi’... *and that John 4:26 is...* “the clue to understanding all other passages where the words ‘ego eimi’ occur. ... In John 8:24 ‘ego eimi’ (I am) is to be understood as reference to Jesus’ **Messiahship**... ‘If you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins.’”

*EGO EIMI in John 8:24 in the Light of its Context and Jewish Messianic Belief,*  
JTS 33, 1982, p. 163.

*So what did Jesus mean?* In **John 4:25, 26** the woman at the well says:

“I know that **Messiah** is coming” *Jesus said to her:* “**I** who am speaking to you **am he** (ego eimi).”

This is further proved by a comparison of “I am he” in Mark 13:6/Luke 21:8 with the parallel account in Matthew 24:5: “I am the Christ [*Messiah* NAB].” So he is saying “I am he—the **Messiah**.” Hence in John 8:58 he is telling them the same thing, that is, that he is the Messiah. In his *Concise Commentary* Robert Young notes: “The I am or I am he, means a claim to Messiah, and implies neither divinity nor pre-existence.”

And Barratt in his famous *Commentary on John* says:

“Before Abraham’s coming, **I am He**,” that is, the promised Messiah. The simple phrase ‘I am He’ is used by Jesus 15 times, but in every case but the present it is rendered in the Common Version, ‘I am He’ or ‘It is I.’ See Mat. 14:27, Mk 6:50, 14:62, Luke 21:8, 22:70, 24:39, John 4:26, 6:20, 8:24, 28, 13:19, 18:5, 6, 8.”

NOTE: Even if “I have been” as in the NWT is a correct translation (grammatically ‘from the past to the present’) it would refer to Jesus as the Messiah i.e. “I have been he (the Messiah).” As shown above the phrase concerns the identity of the Messiah and does not concern timing of coming into existence. So this, cannot mean literal pre-existence but only foreordination. The literal coming into existence of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God was at his conception (Luke 1:32, 35). Nevertheless to change “I am he” in John 8:58 to “I have been” separates it from all the other phrases in John which mean “I am he” (the Messiah) and for no grammatical reason but only a theological one.

## THE MESSIAH WAS FOREORDAINED

John 8:58 is also a case of Jesus’ being foreknown or foreordained in the “**predetermined plan**” of God as shown in Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:20. The subject here in its immediate context (8:53) is **who is the greater**, Abraham or Jesus. Who takes precedence, Abraham or the promised Messiah? The Jews ask: “Who do you claim to be?” By pointing out that he fulfils the role of the Messiah **that was promised**, he shows that he is greater than Abraham. **The proof comes, that** only in this foreordained sense did Jesus exist before Abraham, when Jesus said:

➤ “Abraham *rejoiced greatly at the prospect of seeing my day* and **he saw it** (*through eyes of faith or possibly a vision*) and rejoiced” (**John 8:56**).

This statement **shows that Jesus did not literally exist** at that early time because Abraham did not then literally see him. So Abraham was privileged to see into **the future** – to Jesus’ day. He looked forward and saw the coming of the Messiah before its realization. So

when Jesus says “*Before Abraham came into being I am he*” he is not making a statement about literal pre-existence, but simply claiming to be the One who was promised to come, which promise existed before Abraham was born and the fulfilment of which Abraham was privileged to see in his mind. So in prophetic terms, in Messiahship, Jesus is before Abraham. The Jews, as ever, misunderstand and think that Jesus was meaning that he - Jesus - had seen Abraham (8:57), but Jesus is emphasizing that he takes precedence over Abraham because of his **superior position** in being the promised, **foreordained** Messiah and with that promise concerning the Messiah having existed “**before** Abraham came into being...” that is, in the sense that **the planned Messiah was in God’s mind** (Gen. 3:15). *J.A.T Robinson* makes the point that:

to say that Jesus is “before” him is not to lift him out of the ranks of humanity but to assert his *unconditional precedence*. To take such statements at the level of “flesh” so as to infer, as “the Jews” do that, at less than fifty, Jesus is claiming to have lived on this earth before Abraham (8:52 and 57), is to be as crass as Nicodemus who understands rebirth as an old man entering his mother’s womb a second time (3:4).

*The Priority of John*, p. 384.

Similarly, as **Revelation 13:8b** states:

- “The lamb who was slaughtered from the founding of the world” *speaks not of a literal pre-existence but of foreordination.*

So, as now fulfilled in Jesus, the planned and promised Messiah existed in Jehovah’s mind before Abraham was born. Jesus’ fulfilling this role as Messiah is what made him greater than Abraham. Professor Wendt provides the background and his clear explanation:

The saying in John 8:58, “Before Abraham came to be, I am” was prompted by the fact that Jesus’ opponents had countered his remark in v. 51 by saying that Jesus was not greater than Abraham or the prophets (v. 52). As the Messiah commissioned by God Jesus is conscious of being in fact superior to Abraham and the prophets. For this reason he replies (according to the intervening words, v. 54f.) that Abraham had “seen his day,” i.e., the entrance of Jesus on his historical ministry, and “had rejoiced to see” that day. And Jesus strengthens his argument by adding the statement, which sounded strange to the Jews, that he had even been “before Abraham” (v. 58). This last saying must be understood in connection with v. 56. Jesus speaks in vv. 55, 56 and 58 as if his present ministry on earth stretches back to the time of Abraham and even before. His sayings were perceived by the Jews in this sense and rejected as nonsense. But Jesus obviously did not (in v. 56) mean that Abraham had actually experienced Jesus’ appearance on earth and seen it literally. Jesus was referring to Abraham’s *spiritual vision* of his appearance on earth, by which Abraham, at the birth of Isaac, had foreseen at the same time the promised Messiah, and had rejoiced at the future prospect of the greater one (the Messiah) who would be Israel’s descendant. Jesus’ reference to his existence before Abraham’s birth must be understood in the same sense. There is no sudden heavenly preexistence of the Messiah here: the reference is again obviously to his earthly existence. And this earthly existence is precisely the existence of the Messiah. As such, it was not only present in Abraham’s mind, but even before his time, as the subject of God’s foreordination and foresight. The sort of preexistence Jesus has in mind is “ideal” [in the world of ideas and plans]. In accordance with this consciousness of being the Messiah preordained from the beginning, Jesus can indeed make the claim to be greater than Abraham and the

prophets. *The System of Christian Teaching*, 1907, Cp. Professor Wendt, *Teaching of Jesus*, 1892, pp. 453-460.

### MESSIAH'S FUTURE GLORY IN JOHN 17:5

“So now you, Father, glorify me alongside yourself with the **glory** that **I had** alongside you **before** the world was.”

The glory was alongside or with God as a scripturally stated promise to the Messiah. It was a glory that was prepared for the yet to come Messiah and is similar to the promise to *the sheep* of “*inheriting the kingdom **prepared for you from the foundation of the world***” (Matt. 25:34). Similarly Romans 9:23 speaks of: “...Vessels of mercy, which he **prepared beforehand** for glory.”

#### PROLEPTIC SAYINGS – THE PROPHETIC PAST TENSE

In John 17:3 Jesus used the Hebrew literary technique where **the past tense is used of future events** because they are certain of fulfilment in being fixed in God's purpose and therefore such sayings give assurance of fulfilment to humans. Although anticipated they are spoken of as if they have already occurred. (Please see *Figures of Speech used in the Bible*. E.W. Bullinger). The following are examples of the use of this technique in the Scriptures.

#### PROLEPTICS IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

➤ “And Jehovah went on to say to Joshua: ‘See, I **have given** Jericho and its king, the valiant mighty men, into your hand’ (**Josh. 6:2**).

*This was stated before the city had been subdued by Joshua's forces. Similarly Jesus anticipates what he will later do for his brothers:*

➤ “For there **has been** a child born to us, there has been a son given to us; and the princely rule **will come to be** upon his shoulder...” (**Isa. 9:6**).

*This has the meaning of: a child **will be** born – It is future as in “will come to be upon his shoulder.”*

➤ “...he **was being pierced** for our transgression; he **was being crushed** for our errors; and because of his wounds there **has been** a healing for us” (**Isa. 53:5**).

*Yet at the time of writing the Messiah clearly had not been pierced, crushed or had carried out any healing. But because of the use of the prophetic past tense it was guaranteed that he would do so.*

#### PROLEPTICS IN JOHN'S WRITINGS

1. “The Father loves the Son and **has given all things** into his hand” (**John 3:35**). *Yet clearly this had not occurred at the time Jesus said it because: “Now, though, we do not yet see **all things** in subjection to him” (Heb. 2:8).*

2. “...but take courage! I **have conquered the world**” (**John 16:33**). *Yet Jesus' greatest trials to be overcome were in Gethsemane and on the cross both of which lay ahead.*

3. “He that exercises faith in the Son **has everlasting life**; he that disobeys the Son will not see life” (**John 3:36**).

4. “..., He that believes **has everlasting life** ... <sup>54</sup> He that feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood **has everlasting life**, and I shall resurrect at the last day” (**John 6:47, 54**).

5. “And I **give** them **everlasting life...**” (John 10:28).
6. “And this is the witness given, God **gave us everlasting life**, and this life is in his Son ... <sup>13</sup>I write YOU these things that YOU may know that YOU **have life everlasting...**”  
(1 John 5:11, 13).

But at present Christians only have “everlasting life” **in prospect**. Actually having it is yet future. Because Jesus himself had not, at that time, been granted immortality it was not possible for him to give Christians everlasting life then. So this is a promissory statement i.e. it is **everlasting life in prospect**. In fact, John Chapter 17 contains many **proleptic** sayings, but with a switching in and out of prolepsis. This follows the pattern of prolepsis elsewhere in the Scriptures.

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WBTS) of the Jehovah’s Witnesses readily acknowledges that Jesus’ statements concerning “everlasting life” are about life in prospect and that Christians do not literally have it now. Yet the WBTS is inconsistent in not acknowledging that the same literary technique is used elsewhere in the Scriptures and in particular in John 17:5.

#### PROLEPTICS IN JOHN 17

- “I have glorified you on the earth, **having finished** the work you have given me to do”  
(Verse 4).  
*Yet this work wasn't finished until: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures”*  
(1Cor. 15:3).
- “...all things that are...yours, **are mine and I have been glorified** among them”  
(Verse 10).  
*Jesus had yet to die and be resurrected before he would have God's things and be glorified.*
- “**I am no longer** in the world” (Verse 11). *Yet he evidently still was in the world until he died.*
- “When I **was** with them, I **used to** watch over them on account of your name...not one of them is **destroyed** except *the son of destruction*” (Verse 12). *Yet Judas, at this time, had not been destroyed.*
- “I also **sent** them forth into the world” (Verse 18). *This was yet to happen at Pentecost.*
- “**I have given them the glory that you have given me**” (Verse 22).
- “Father, as to what you have given me, I wish that, where I am, they also may be with me, in order to behold my **glory** that you **have given me**, because you loved me before the founding of the world” (Verse 24).

Neither Jesus nor his disciples were had the glory at that time. Jesus was glorified at the time of his resurrection and the disciples will be glorified when Christ returns at the last day. Jesus connects the having of eternal life with being raised at the last day:

#### Returning to JOHN 17:5

- “So now you, Father, glorify me alongside yourself with the **glory** that I had alongside you before the world was.”

It is not possible that Jesus would be asking his Father for **a past glory** because glory comes with exaltation and Jesus’ exaltation came after his life course of perfect obedience leading to

his death. (Please see STUDY 14 subheading 4. THE SON WAS EXALTED TO PRE-EMINENCE ONLY AFTER HIS RESURRECTION giving Philipians 2:8, 9 and Colossians 1:18, 19 as verses that show that Jesus was “highly exalted” that he “might become pre-eminent”). In all of the above texts Jesus speaks proleptically **as though he were already living his future exalted life**. This is because all these things had been promised by his Father and, therefore, were certain of fulfilment. So, the glory that Jesus “*had before the world was*” evidently was **glory that was laid up for him** as a deposit potentially his in God’s plan. – it was **the glory that pre-existed** alongside the Father and **not the Son**. It was this glory that Jesus, in full confidence, knew would be his after he was resurrected and exalted. It is similar to Paul’s proleptic /anticipatory statement in 2 Corinthians 5:1 where he says: “we **have** a building from God” according to the literal Greek. However, the NWT renders it as its actual meaning: “we **are to have** a building from God” showing that this too was in prospect. Professor Wendt explains, in *The System of Christian Teaching*, 1907, and Cp. Professor Wendt, *Teaching of Jesus*, 1892, pp. 453-460, that:

**In John 17:5** Jesus asks the Father to give him now the heavenly glory which he had with the Father before the world was. The conclusion that because Jesus possessed a preexistent glory in heaven **he must also have preexisted personally in heaven is taken too hastily**. This is proven by Matt. 6:20 (“Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven”), 25:34 (“Come, you blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom **prepared for you** from the foundation of the world”), Col. 1:5 (“the hope which is **laid up for you in heaven** about which you heard in the word of Truth, the Gospel”), and I Pet. 1:4 (“an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, which does not fade away, **reserved in heaven** for you”). Thus a *reward* can also be thought of as *pre-existent in heaven*. Such a reward is destined for human beings and already *held in store*, to be awarded to them at the end of their life. So it is with heavenly glory which Jesus requests. He is not asking for a *return* to an earlier heavenly condition. Rather he asks God to give him now, at the end of his work as Messiah on earth (v. 4), the heavenly reward which God had appointed from eternity for him, as Messiah. As the Messiah and Son he knows he has been loved and foreordained by the Father from eternity (v. 24). Both John 8:58 and 17:5 are concerned with God’s predetermination of the Messiah.<sup>4</sup>

NOTE 1: Jesus didn’t say ‘give me **back** the glory I had.’

NOTE 2: *The Anchor Bible* notes the possibility of a different reading of this verse: “‘Among the Latin fathers and some Ethiopic Mss. there is support for the reading ‘that glory which **was** with you,’ reading *een* = ‘was,’ instead of ‘I had.’”

## CONCLUSION

Evidently John’s gospel account concerning Jesus has been very much misunderstood perhaps beginning with the second century apologists because of the influence of Greek philosophical thinking rather than understanding the sayings of Jesus as being from a totally Hebrew mindset containing much metaphorical enigmatic language, as is clear from the contexts of the various passages, and little metaphysical language.

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