

Literal and Notional Pre-existence: Crossroads for the Incarnation Debate

By Sean Finnegan

INTRODUCTION

The prologue of John's Gospel (John 1.1-18) is for millions the defining text on Christology. Yet there are as many different interpretations of the passage as there are verses. The three major interpretations are orthodox, Arian, and Socinian. The traditional orthodox view (more than 90% of Christians) says that God the Son became a man, yet without giving up his Deity. The Arian belief (subscribed to by Jehovah's Witnesses) is that Michael the archangel became human. The Socinian position (believed by the writer) is that the divine plan and action of God was expressed when Jesus was born and that before his birth he did not exist other than in the mind of God. Before moving on, it is important to define a few terms:

incarnation ¹ : the event in which the word became flesh notional pre-existence: the Son pre-existed in the mind of the Father as a notion literal pre-existence: the Son literally pre-existed as a conscious divine being
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It is my intention to outline and critique the traditional view of literal pre-existence and then to present the Socinian idea of notional pre-existence. But before I do either, one must understand the importance of this issue. Historically there has been resistance to any discussion about the incarnation. Thousands have been excommunicated, persecuted, and in some cases even executed because they have dared to question the traditional view. Even during the time of the Reformation when many were questioning the authority of the Catholic Church there was little tolerance for inquiry.

In 1521 Melanchthon expressed a view that was typical of his day in his first edition of the *Loci Communes*, , "It were more fitting to adore the mysteries of the Godhead than to inquire into them; for this can not be attempted without great peril, as holy men have more than once found out... There is no reason why we should pay much attention to the profoundest subjects about God, his unity, his trinity. What, pray, have scholastic theologians in all the centuries gained by dealing with these subjects alone?"² This sentiment is typical of the resistance that has historically challenged free thinkers. Surprisingly, even today the Incarnation is not open for free conversation or analysis. The paradox of the traditional understanding of the Incarnation has been well stated by the popular saying, "if I try to understand it, I'll lose my mind; if I don't believe it, I'll lose my soul." It has been asserted by some that it is arrogant to assume that anyone could understand God and His nature. He is infinite, all-powerful, and awesome while we are limited, impotent, and small. I agree that it is impossible to understand God in His entire splendor yet it stands to reason that if He desires for us to believe in the Incarnation, then He would have equipped us with sufficient intellect to do so. As

¹ Throughout this paper I will distinguish between the two types of incarnation as follows:
Incarnation = the pre-existent Son became flesh.

incarnation = the creative influence and plan of God became flesh.

² Melanchthon, *Loci*, 102-105.

Maurice Wiles elegantly put it, “I am not claiming that one ought to be able perfectly to fathom the mystery of Christ’s being before one is prepared to believe. We do not after all fully understand the mystery of our own or one another’s beings. But when one is asked to believe something which one cannot even spell out at all in intelligible terms, it is right to stop and push the questioning one stage further back. Are we sure that the concept of an incarnate being, one who is both fully God and fully man, is after all an intelligible concept?³” Certainly an investigation into this subject is warranted.

The next question to ask is, “What profit can be gained by focusing on the issues surrounding the Incarnation?” In order to answer this question it may be helpful to see the consequences of getting it wrong. According to Hastings’ Dictionary of the Bible, “It is simple truth to say that, if Jesus be not God, Christians are idolators, for they worship One who is not God. There is no other alternative.⁴” Furthermore, one’s view of the incarnation will necessarily affect the way other Scripture is interpreted. For example, “The common belief that Philippians 2.6-11 starts by speaking of Christ’s pre-existent state and status and then of his incarnation is, in almost every case, a presupposition rather than a conclusion, a presupposition which again and again proves decisive in determining how disputed terms within the Philippian hymn should be understood.⁵” The interpretations of dozens of texts hang in the balance. We must determine our position on the Incarnation or else we may end up with “another Jesus” (2 Corinthians 11.4). I contend that the entire system of literal pre-existence should be examined in order to determine if it fits the data of Scripture.

TRADITIONAL VIEW OF INCARNATION

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1.14). The incarnation is the event in which the word became flesh. The traditional view has been that belief in the Incarnation of the literally pre-existent Son is required for salvation. St. Anselm of Canterbury argued in his *Cur Deus Homo?* that atonement cannot be made unless it was by a God-man.⁶ “The fact on which the whole of the Christian religion depends is therefore the fact that Jesus Christ is both God and man.⁷” Certainly this issue is one that carries with it weighty consequences.

Even so, it is important to get to the crux of the matter. The question, which separates the literal from the notional view of pre-existence, is, “what/who became man?” According to literal pre-existence, the Word *is* the Son who became human. The Fourth Ecumenical Council met at Chalcedon in 451 to work out this very issue. Below is the statement that resulted.

“Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all with one voice teach that it is to be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same God, perfect in divinity, and perfect in humanity, true God and true human, with a rational soul and a body, of one substance with the Father in his divinity, and of one substance with us in his humanity, in

³ Maurice Wiles, *The Myth of God Incarnate: Christianity without Incarnation?* ed. John Hick (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press), 5.

⁴ James Hastings, ed. Hastings’ Dictionary of the Bible, *Trinity* by J. F. McCurdy (New York: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), 950.

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1980), 114.

⁶ St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo?* II.6.

⁷ James Hastings, ed. Hastings’ Dictionary of the Bible, *Incarnation* by J. H. Maude (New York: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), 379.

every way like us, with the only exception of sin, begotten of the Father before all time in his divinity, and also begotten in the latter days, in his humanity, of Mary the virgin bearer of God. This one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, manifested in two natures without any confusion, change, division, or separation. The union does not destroy the difference of the two natures, but on the contrary, the properties of each are kept, and both are joined in one person and *hypostasis*. They are not divided into two persons, but belong to the one Only-begotten Son, the Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. All this, as the prophets of old said of him, and as he himself has taught us, and as the Creed of the Fathers, has passed on to us.⁸

PROBLEM #1

This complicated definition is how the orthodoxy of the time comprehended the Incarnation. According to their model, God took on humanity without in any way diminishing His divinity. Thus, the Word is a person, namely, God who consciously existed with the Father before his birth as a human. It would appear then that the ego (consciousness or mind) of God the Son entered the womb of Mary and became the human fetus at the moment that the Holy Spirit overshadowed her (Luke 1.35). However, it is clear that human nature includes an ego of its own—how can one be human and not have a human mind? As a result some have upheld that the two natures contain separate egos and are not confused. Still, there are many who claim that Jesus only had one ego. A binary table may be a helpful guide to demonstrate the various possibilities of ego configurations. At each letter a question is asked, depending on the answer (1 or 2) go to the next letter to see either the next question or the result. (It may be fun to try each of the different paths).

- A. What is the word?
 - 1. the Son (go to B)
 - 2. the plan of the ages (go to C)
- B. Does the incarnate Son contain one or two egos?
 - 1. one (go to D)
 - 2. two (go to E)
- C. The ego is developed in the same way as ours yet without the impediment of sin. Jesus *is* the Son—the Son is what the word became. It is precisely because of the creative action of God in Mary through Holy Spirit that the child is the Son of God (Luke 1.35).
- D. Which ego drove him?
 - 1. the human ego (go to F)
 - 2. the divine ego (go to G)
- E. If Jesus had two egos, the divine and the human, then is not Jesus two persons with two distinct sets of memories, wills, and thoughts? If this were the case then Jesus should be found using the plural personal pronoun in reference to himself (i.e. “Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Be of good cheer! It is *we*; do not be afraid.” Matthew 14.27). However, every time Jesus uses a personal pronoun it is in the singular, which is a clear indication that he only had one ego.
- F. If Jesus does not have a divine ego, in what sense is he divine? If his ego is not carried through the Incarnation process then he cannot still be God because to exist without consciousness is not to exist at all. If Descartes were in on the discussion he

⁸ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, (Peabody, MA: Prince Press 2001), 257.

may be inclined to put it this way, “I do not think, therefore I am not.” In this case his divinity would be diminished by his humanity.

- G. If Jesus were controlled entirely by a divine ego then he would have with him memories of the past eons. He would recall the day when the clouds rolled in and Noah entered the ark, and the day that Adam was formed, and the day that the angels sang as the universe was created. If he truly maintained his divine ego through the Incarnation then how did he learn (Hebrews 5.8), increase in wisdom (Luke 2.52), and not know the day of his return (Mark 13.32)?

PROBLEM #2

Even if one is able to sort out the problem of egos, a second issue arises that requires investigation: the dual nature of God the Son. How can Jesus be both God and man at the same time? This problem is well articulated by Hans Schwarz, “If Jesus had not really assumed human nature, so common thought went, he could not actually redeem humanity, since he seemed to be aloof from it. Yet if he had taken on human nature, did this not threaten his divinity from which salvation would necessarily come forth? But even if both ‘natures’ were maintained, how could they ever be joined to form one being? Would not a savior composed of two ‘natures’ almost resemble a monster, totally unlike a truly divine or truly human being? One can easily imagine that questions like these defied easy answers or simple solutions.”⁹

When discussion of the two natures is embarked upon it is often quipped, “Jesus is 100% God and 100% Man.” Nevertheless, the question naturally arises, “Isn’t that 200%?” In order to determine whether or not it is possible to have coexisting natures, the characteristics of both deity and humanity need to be explored. It is possible to be both fully God and fully man if and only if both natures are entirely compatible. To illustrate this one can consider a man who has children. It can be said that he is both a father and a son at the same time. He is a father to his children and he is the son of his father. Thus, he is fully a father and fully a son. This is only possible because there is no contradiction of attributes between the two relationships. However, another analogy may be the case: imagine trying to fill one glass with milk up to the brim and then filling that same glass with an equal amount of water. The two substances, milk and water, contradict because they both require the full space of the glass and a mess results. It is important to determine which of these two analogies is applicable to the dual natures presented by the literal pre-existence view. Below is a chart containing a few of the attributes of deity and the corresponding attributes of humanity. If even one of the two rows conflicts with the other then the latter of the two analogies applies. However, if there is no conflict then the two natures may be said to coexist and the former of the analogies applies.

<u><i>Attributes of God</i></u>	<u><i>Attributes of man</i></u>
Thinking (Jeremiah 29.11)	Thinking (Philippians 2.6)
Compassion (Exodus 33.19)	Compassion (Matthew 14.14)
Omniscience (Psalm 147.5)	Limited Knowledge (Mark 13.32)
Omnipotence (Job 42.2)	Limited Power (John 5.19)
Immortality (1 Timothy 6.16)	Mortal (1 Thessalonians 4.14)
Invisible (1 Timothy 1.17)	Visible (Luke 23.8)
Cannot be tempted (James 1.13)	Can be Tempted (Hebrews 4.15)

⁹ Hans Schwarz, *Christology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 138.

This short list makes the point that although there are some areas where compatibility exists, there are also several characteristics that contradict. It would appear that either the deity of Christ must be diminished by his humanity or his humanity must be elevated by his deity. Still, if either he is diminished or elevated he is no longer fully either much like the milk and water analogy. A portion of milk and water can fit in the same glass, but not all of both at the same time—it is simply impossible. Maurice Wiles recognized this when he reflected upon the past struggle over this issue, “It seems to me that throughout the long history of attempts to present a reasoned account of Christ as both fully human and fully divine, the church has never succeeded in offering a consistent or convincing picture. Most commonly it has been the humanity of Christ that has suffered; the picture presented has been of a figure who cannot by our standards of judgment (and what others can we apply?) be regarded as recognizably human.¹⁰” Knox pointedly agrees when he says, “We can have the humanity without the pre-existence and we can have the pre-existence without the humanity. There is absolutely no way of having both.¹¹”

Thus far I have tried to show how the literal pre-existence view is understood with regards to the Incarnation. I realize that thousands of pages have been written on this subject and that the cursory description given here does not do justice to all of the work that has been done by those who subscribe to this view. It has not been my intention to construct a “straw-man” argument even though it is sometimes unavoidable. I have pointed out two of the difficulties with the traditional Incarnation model: (1) the problem of egos (2) the problem of dual natures. Now I would like to turn to the notional pre-existence view in order to present what I see as the solution to these problems.

NOTIONAL PRE-EXISTENCE

I believe that the Scripture can bail us out of these metaphysical difficulties that I have just discussed. In order to focus on the notional concept of pre-existence, John 1.1 needs to be consulted and analyzed piece-by-piece. “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God” (John 1.1). There are three parts to this verse, which I will designate as follows:

John 1.1a “In the beginning was the word/Εν αρχη ην ο λογος”
John 1.1b “and the word was with God/και ο λογος ην προς τον θεον”
John 1.1c “and the word was God/και θεος ην ο λογος”

JOHN 1.1a

The first part of the verse, “In the beginning was the word” (John 1.1a), contains strong echoes of Genesis. It was in the beginning that God created the Heavens and the Earth through his utterance (Genesis 1.3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). Psalm 33.6, 9 states, “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth...For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” In this case the word is not seen as a person, rather it is the means of God’s creative action.

JOHN 1.1b

“And the word was with God.” It is strange to think of the medium through which God created the worlds to be with Him. There must be more to the word. The Old

¹⁰ Maurice Wiles, *The Myth of God Incarnate: Christianity without Incarnation?* ed. John Hick (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press), 4.

¹¹ Knox, *Humanity*, 106.

Testament is very helpful here because the “word of the LORD” appears 255 times and in over 90% of these cases it is referring to a word of prophecy. Therefore, the chief function of the word is to reveal God’s message through the prophet to the people. “The prophet is a man *spoken to by God*. Again and again in every prophet we read the word of the LORD came to the prophet (Isaiah 38.4, Jeremiah 18.1, Ezekiel 20.2, Hosea 1.1, Joel 1.1, Micah 1.1, Zephaniah 1.1, Haggai 1.1). The characteristic phrase of the prophet is: ‘Thus says the LORD.’ The prophet is not venturing to express an opinion; he is not even witnessing to his own conviction; he is nothing less than the mouthpiece and the messenger of God.¹²” In the phrase, “the word of the LORD came...” the Hebrew word for came is *בָּרַח* which literally means “happened.” “In Hebrew the word *happens* to people; in English it is considered correct to render the expression *the word of the LORD which came*.¹³” Receiving the word from God is an event, a phenomenon with which only a few people in the Old Testament were privileged.

Even so, the word is more than just what comes out of God’s mouth. There is an independent element that exists in the Hebrew Bible. Below are some texts to consider:

“He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions” (Psalm 107.20).

“He sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly...He sends forth His word and melts them; He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow. He declared His words to Jacob...” (Psalm 147.15, 18, 19a).

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and make it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55.10, 11).

These texts demonstrate that the Hebrew understanding of the word has an independent existence of sorts once it is sent forth. After God’s word is spoken it has a life of its own. It seems to run around accomplishing God’s will. A good example of this is the Torah which was orated by God to Moses who in turn wrote it down. The Torah was in a sense God in the hands of the people. To relate to God, one must relate to Torah, to know God, one must know Torah, to obey God, one must obey Torah. The Torah is God’s word, revelatory, explanatory, and demands obedience to Him. Yet, no one would say that the Torah is a literal person.

The word of the LORD is thought of the same as the LORD Himself acting. The word does not have a personality or volition of its own; rather, the word functions as a convenient literary metaphor for the activity of God. This is how the word can be “with God.” There is also an intellectual element that is involved. The word is what is in the mind of God as well as what is expressed by Him. Below is a chart containing texts demonstrate that something that is with someone is really in them. The left column lists the texts from versions where the word “with” is used and the right column lists the texts from versions where the word “in” is used. By comparing the two columns one can see how what is with someone (according to Hebrew thought) is really what is in them.

¹² William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 235.

¹³ Bonnie Kittel, Vicki Hoffer, and Rebecca Wright, *Biblical Hebrew: A Text and Workbook*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 23.

Numbers 14.24

<KJV>

But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit **with** him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it.

<NKJV>

But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit **in** him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it.

1 Kings 11.11

<YLT>

And Jehovah saith to Solomon, `Because that this hath been **with** thee, and thou hast not kept My covenant and My statutes that I charged upon thee, I surely rend the kingdom from thee, and have given it to thy servant.

<RSV>

Therefore the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this has been **your mind** and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant.

Job 10.13

<KJV>

And these things hast thou hid in thine heart: I know that this is **with** thee.

<NASB>

Yet these things You have concealed in Your heart; I know that this is **within** You:

Proverbs 2.1

<KJV>

My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments **with** thee;

<NIV>

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands **within** you,

Jeremiah 27.18

<NASB>

But if they are prophets, and if the word of the LORD is **with** them, let them now entreat the LORD of hosts that the vessels which are left in the house of the LORD, in the house of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem may not go to Babylon.

<NIV>

If they are prophets and **have** the word of the LORD, let them plead with the LORD Almighty that the furnishings remaining in the house of the LORD and in the palace of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem not be taken to Babylon.

Based on the above evidence and many other Scriptures¹⁴ it is clear that what is with someone is what is in their heart/mind. It is important also to note that according to the Old Testament, the spirit of God, wisdom of God, and word of God are ways of speaking about the LORD as He interacts with the universe (Job 26.4, Luke 11.49). For example in Psalm 33.6, the word is parallel to the breath (spirit) of his mouth and in Proverbs 3.19 wisdom is the medium by which the earth was founded. "The three (spirit, wisdom, and word) are simply alternative ways of speaking about the effective power of God in His active relationship with His world and its inhabitants."¹⁵ These three ways of

¹⁴ For an in-depth treatment of this see Anthony Buzzard, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound*, (New York: International Scholars Publications 1998), 195, 196.

¹⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1980), 219.

speaking of God in action allowed for personification and new levels of expression that would be limited otherwise. “Some [New Testament writers] envisage him [Jesus] as the embodiment of that pre-existent wisdom of God, of which the Old Testament wisdom literature speaks, or of the Logos (word or reason) of God.¹⁶” I believe this to be the case in John 1.1b. The word/wisdom/spirit is what became Jesus, but before the notional view of incarnation is further explored it is necessary to cover the last part of John 1.1.

JOHN 1.1c

“And the word was God” (John 1.1c). There is no definite article before θεος. “When in Greek two nouns are joined by the verb to be and when both have the definite article, then the one is fully identified with the other; but when one of them is without the article, it becomes more an adjective than a noun, and describes rather the class or the sphere to which the other belongs.¹⁷” A good illustration for this is the sentence, “The prophet is the man,” which means that the prophet about which we are speaking specifically is the man in question. However if one were to say, “The prophet is man,” then the omission of the definite article causes the prophet to be seen as a member of the human race, a person within the sphere of man. This is the case here in John 1.1c. The phrase, “the word was God,” could be understood that the word belongs to the sphere of God. The word is not one to one equivalent with God; rather God is used in an adjectival sense to describe the nature of the word. Three translations that capture this sense are: (1) “The word was Godlike” (2) “God is what the word was” (3) “What God was, the Word was.”¹⁸

It is my contention that the word/spirit is the interface through which God interacts with the universe. Man has experienced God chiefly through the medium of His λογος or דבר. This is most clearly demonstrated in the episode of the Sinai theophany as recorded in Exodus 19 and 20.

“So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently” (Exodus 19.16-18).

As the people trembled in fear of this raging mountain, God audibly spoke the Ten Commandments. After this the people stood at a distance from the mountain and requested Moses to go and talk to God and bring the words back to them. They were convinced that if they stayed any longer listening to the very voice of the Almighty then they would die (Exodus 20.19). Never had there been a time when so many people experienced God at once in this grandiose manner. It is amazing to see that the way in which they experienced Him was through His voice, His word. According to Deuteronomy 5.4, “The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire.” To those people, the fire was not God, the trumpet was not God, the cloud

¹⁶ Maurice Wiles, *The Myth of God Incarnate: Christianity without Incarnation?* ed. John Hick (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press), 3-4.

¹⁷ William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 21.

¹⁸ New English Bible (NEB)

was not God, the earthquake was not God; the word was God. The way that Israel experienced the LORD at the birth of the nation was through His word. Ever since the national consciousness has been aware that as far as Israel is concerned God is not a shape and cannot be represented by an idol, He is the voice, the word, for that is how they experienced Him and all Scripture reading is an echo of that phenomenal event.

THE NOTIONAL VIEW OF INCARNATION

I have shown thus far the notional view of the word in John 1.1. However, what does this mean when the incarnation is considered? “And the word became flesh...” (John 1.14). Jesus was the perfect incarnation of the Father’s word. It was through the mouth of Jesus that God reconciled the world to Himself (1 Corinthians 5.19). Deuteronomy contains a prophecy of one who would have the LORD’s words in His mouth (Deuteronomy 18.18). This prophet would speak all that the LORD commands. This prediction of a super prophet was fulfilled in Jesus when the word became flesh. John the Baptist confirmed this when he said of Jesus, “He whom God has sent speaks the words of God” (John 3.34). Jesus often stated how his words originated, “...the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world” (John 8.26). “For I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given a commandment as to what to say and what to speak” (John 12.49). Even in private Jesus said, “The word which you hear is not mine, but the Father’s who sent me” (John 14.24). Jesus brought the words of God to the people in much the same way that Moses did on the day the Torah was given (Exodus 19.7, 8). Jesus fulfilled the Mosaic prophecy, and he was “The Prophet.” This is a major element to the incarnation of the divine *λογος*.

However, there is more to the picture, Jesus is not just one who received the word, he is what the word became. Everything Jesus did and said was in the will of his Father (John 4.34, 5.19, 30, 6.38, 8.28). He never sinned, not once. Jesus did not find himself asking WWJD, rather he would think WWGD, what would God do? In every situation Jesus did that which the Father would have done. To see Jesus living his life is to see the Father. This is why he could say to Philip, “He that has seen me [Jesus] has seen the Father” (John 14.9). If the Scriptures can be compared to an audiotape of God then Jesus can be compared to a videotape of Him. He expressed the words of the Father and always did the works of his Father. Jesus is the express image or icon of the Father (2 Corinthians 4.4, Colossians 1.15, Hebrews 1.3). He is the living, breathing, walking word of God. He had godly thoughts, actions, and words—he was God expressed in the flesh.

CONCLUSION

It is always good to start with the Scriptures that are clear and then interpret the uncertain texts in the light of the certain ones. One proposition that is very clear from every translation and every variant is that Jesus is a man (John 1.30, 4.29, 9.11, Acts 2.22, 1 Timothy 2.5). “Those who actually companied with Jesus found him fully and naturally a man. He did not seem to them to be some indeterminate person from some halfway land in which human and divine were intermingled; he did not seem to them a kind of Greek demigod, neither fully human or fully divine; he did not seem to them to be so divine as to be inhuman. There was nothing unnatural about him. He was a man among men, as fully a man as they were men, and they found no difficulty in calling him

a man.¹⁹” The model of the incarnation must be able to account for this simple human fact. And here is the core of the matter: if one pre-exists their human birth, that is, they are non-human by origin, then can it honestly be said that they are human after birth? Wouldn't this be someone dressed up as a human, wearing humanity as a robe?

Another principle by which theories are evaluated is their scope. Does the incarnation theory help to explain more Scripture or does it detract considerably? I believe that notional pre-existence leads to the conclusion that Jesus is the second Adam quite naturally. After all, the original gospel (πρωτο-ευαγγελιον) contained a prophecy of one who would come as the seed of the woman (Genesis 3.15) in order to right the wrong of the first Adam (Romans 5.17). “In the New Testament Jesus was the embodiment of all God's promises brought to fruition...such characterization represents New Testament Christology better than the idea of incarnation...It is eschatology, not incarnation, which makes Christ final in the New Testament...Christ is final for Paul, not as God incarnate, but as last Adam.²⁰”

The Scripture needs to be read with fresh naivety. It needs to be allowed to define itself and even contradict our understanding if need be. Often times those who set out on a study of the Incarnation find exactly what they are looking for. This is because the gospel of John is read in a vacuum without reference to the mass of Scripture that preceded it. “He who defines too closely what he is looking for at the start of a NT study in most cases will find it soon enough, but usually in his wake will be left elements which were ignored because they were not quite what he was looking for, and material and meaning will often have been squeezed out of shape in order to fit the categories prescribed at the outset. This danger has not always been successfully avoided in the recent investigations of ‘pre-existence’ in the NT. Or again, terms whose current technical meaning owes most to later developments and clarifications can be too readily superimposed upon the first-century material and hinder rather than help us in trying to understand the meaning intended by these writings.²¹” One must be open to correction if that is what the Scripture demands, as the expression goes, “One should have an open mind, but not so open that their brain falls out.”

Physicists have discovered in studying the universe that the laws of nature are best expressed by equations that are simple and elegant. Most often a poor model of a particular physical phenomenon is easily sniffed out by the aesthetics and clumsiness of its equations. On the other hand, a good model will handle the data with ease. It would stand to reason that the primitive unitarian concept of the Father and the Son are the simplest and most elegant of hypotheses. The theory is beautiful, concise, and intelligible, it is the story of a Father who had a child: Yahweh is God the Father who has always existed, Jesus is the Son of God who began in the womb of Mary, and the spirit is their means of influence and presence in the universe. Although this is a simple view, it is also robust because I believe it can handle all of the data of the Scriptures.

¹⁹ William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 15.

²⁰ Young, *Incarnation*, 174.

²¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1980), 9.

APPENDIX

The incarnation of the word is part of a bigger picture that spans the entirety of human history. God had perfect fellowship with Adam and Eve before the fall and will again have at least the same level of interaction and communion with His people in the kingdom. God has always had a dream that He would be a God to a people—providing, protecting, loving, and nourishing them—and that the people would serve, honor, love, and obey Him as is fitting for His people.²² This dream was shattered as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve. Ever since the dreadful account of Genesis 3, God has worked to draw man progressively closer to Himself in order to regain the initial intimacy that He once enjoyed. Below I have mentioned what seems to be the progression of God working with man through His λογος/spirit from the beginning until the post millennium paradise.

God's progressive interaction with the human race

1. Garden of Eden: perfect communion with Adam and Eve, God dwelled with man
2. Fall: Wedge driven between God and man. God no longer dwells with man because of his sin. This original sin is imputed to all of Adam's descendants (Romans 5.12).
3. Premosaic prophets: God works with individuals such as Enoch (Hebrews 11.5, Jude 14, 15), Noah (Genesis 6.8, 13, 7.1, 2 Peter 2.5), and Job (Ezekiel 14.14, Job 38.1, 42.5) to reveal Himself to them.
4. Chosen family of Abraham: God works with Abraham and successive children revealing his word to them (Genesis 12.1, 17.3, Isaiah 41.8). Abraham taught Isaac and Jacob and they taught their children. God also revealed Himself to them individually, expanding upon what was said to Abraham (Genesis 26.2-5, 28.12-15).
5. Written Scripture: Torah given through Moses and written down (Exodus 20). The Torah enabled people to experience God in a totally new way (Deuteronomy 5.3, 4).
6. Nevi'im and Kethuvim: Successive prophets given word to write down and add to Torah until entire Old Testament is written. After Malachi there is a four hundred year gap after which one expects either more prophets to add to OT or the next level of experience with God to be made available.
7. Word Incarnate: Word becomes flesh and God reveals Himself through Christ to all who come in contact with him. Jesus goes around preaching the words of God as the super prophet (Deuteronomy 18.18). He is super prophet because not only does he reveal the words of God but he lives in perfect obedience (no sin) and in so doing shows the world what God would do in every situation. Jesus is the express image (Hebrews 1.3) and icon (Colossians 1.15) of the Father. To see Jesus living his life is to see how God would live as a man—to see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14.9).
8. Paraklete: As a result of Jesus' death, the original sin of Adam was paid for (Rom 5.1) and anyone who desires justification receives it there and then (it is not just credited as was the case with Abraham (Genesis 15.6)). God is able to dwell in

²² Genesis 17.8, Exodus 15.17, 29.45, Leviticus 26.12, Jeremiah 24.7, 31.1,33, Ezekiel 11.20, 37.23, 27, Psalm 68.18, Zechariah 2.10, 8.8, John 14.23, 2 Corinthians 6.16, Hebrews 8.10, Revelation 2.1, 21.3, 22.3,4

- man in a new way (Ephesians 3.19, 1 John 4.12, 13) through the Spirit. This is even better than having Jesus here on earth (John 16.7).
9. Resurrection: Believers are freed not only from the guilt of Adam's sin but also from its effects. Resurrected saints are given immortality and spirit can dwell within man in the same sense that it dwelt in Jesus (Psalm 17.15, Colossians 2.9, John 3.34). Without sin in man's life, perfect fellowship with God via the spirit is possible.
 10. Post millennium perfection: Man is restored to the state that Adam and Even enjoyed before the fall. God dwells on earth with man (Revelation 7.15, 21.3, 4, 22, 23, 22.3,4). All sin is destroyed to make this possible including death (1 Corinthians 15.26, 2 Peter 3.13).

According to this perspective, the incarnation of Christ (#7) is absolutely vital yet is not the sum and substance of the whole of Christianity. Without the incarnation, we would never be able to be at #8 today nor have the hope of #9 and #10 in the future. If God has already succeeded in dwelling with man then why did Jesus leave? I believe that the traditional Incarnation robs the beauty from the plan of God throughout the ages. Praise to God for his brilliant plan and His ingenious methods of carrying it out. He will get what He wanted all along. He has a dream and one day it will become reality:

“And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.” (Revelation 21.3)