

# Exploring the Question of “pre-human existence”

Reflections on Problems and Issues of Scriptural Interpretation  
in Reference to the Son of God

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“Jesus answered, ‘Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I came from or where I am going.’ —John 8:14

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Presented to Friends:

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~2006~

**“I have descended from heaven, not that I should be doing my will,  
but the will of him who sends me...And they said ‘Is not this Jesus,  
the son of Joseph, with whose father and mother we are acquainted?  
How then, is he saying that out of heaven have I descended?’”**

—John 6:38, 42, *Concordant Literal New Testament*

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# Introduction

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“How then, is he saying that out of heaven have I descended?” is the very question we wrestle with. Did Jesus mean here and on other occasions that the true emergence of his life pre-dated his human conception, that, indeed, his real origin extended even further back in time than his birth in Bethlehem (involving a downward ‘descent’ from heaven to earth), and that he literally possessed “glory” “alongside” the Father “before the world was” (John 17:5)? Or, when Jesus requested that his Father glorify him with the glory he had before the world existed, was this really a case of “proleptic” language—the so-called “prophetic-past-tense”—undeniably, a well-established precedent of biblical literature? That is, not an expression of his memory of a pre-human, heavenly glory, but an expression of Jesus’ *faith* in the certainty that God would bring about the glory he had planned and purposed for him “before the world was”? And when Jesus said, “I have descended out of heaven,” did he mean that in a kind of figurative, metaphorical sense, or that “the word (*ho logos*)” of God did—in a manner of speaking—come down from heaven, becoming flesh in the man Jesus, and in this way Jesus could use such words, but not necessarily meaning that he (as a *person*) came down?<sup>1</sup>

On the matter of whether or not the Son of God truly had a personal, heavenly existence before his actual birth as a man, my mind is very open to the possibility that I have erred in the way I have always understood the Scriptures in this regard. I have familiarized myself with the classical “Unitarian-Socinian” perspective and now consider their interpretations of the relevant Scriptures to be quite reasonable and biblically defensible. That is, although I think that the relevant texts do naturally seem to suggest that Jesus of Nazareth enjoyed a pre-human, heavenly life, I also think that others (Buzzard, Deuble, Mages, Broughton & Southgate) have presented very intelligent and contextually-based possibilities for how they can be explained in a different way, at least for most of the texts.<sup>2</sup> I also believe that their proposed interpretations have not been given the attention they deserve and may, in fact, command from Bible students. That is part of the challenge I attempt to address in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:1-14

<sup>2</sup> The best modern works that I know of containing discussions on the subject of “pre-existence” from the Socinian perspective are: *The Trinity, True or False?* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Great Britain: The ‘Dawn’ Book Supply, 2002) by Broughton & Southgate; *Bible Basics, A Study Manual revealing the joy and peace of true Christianity*, Fourth Edition (United Kingdom: The Christadelphian Advancement Trust, 2000) by Duncan Heaster; *The Doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound* (Oxford: International Scholars Publications, 1998) by Buzzard & Hunting; *They never told me this in church* (Atlanta: Restoration Fellowship, 2006) by Greg S. Deuble.

Over the past few months, ever since I met Dan Mages, re-read Anthony Buzzard's treatment on the nature of pre-existence in the New Testament, and Greg Deuble's excellent, recently-released work, *They never told me this in Church*, I have been struggling mentally and spiritually with this particular issue. Although it may not appear that way from certain points presented in this paper, I do consider myself somewhat of an agnostic now when it comes to the matter of Christ's pre-human existence. At this point, I don't know if it is possible to know with complete certainty whether or not the writers of the New Testament intended to impress upon their reader's minds the notion of a literal, personal pre-existence, or whether they really intended to convey an "ideal" pre-existence, through the use of the proleptic and metaphoric/poetic device. Although I realize that only one can be fundamentally true, I *truly* believe that a strong case can be made for either viewpoint. Since I do not—at the present time—accept either view as undoubtedly and irrefutably correct, I decided to write this paper in the hopes that it would help to provoke further discussion and invite further insights and reflections from those who are concerned with (and knowledgeable about) this important scriptural subject, in light of the issues I present. Actually, I found that the most important point of this particular discussion seems to come down to the simple (or not so simple) matter of whether or not we should take the "pre-existence" statements of Scripture as more-or-less *literal*, at "face value," or as *figurative*, poetic and "ideal." And the ultimate question I am struggling with is, essentially, *how can I make that determination with certainty? Can I make that determination with certainty? How important is it? And, what are the implications of holding to one view while rejecting the other?*

Because I am still involved in the process of searching the Scriptures and asking myself and others these kinds of questions, the following will not be an attempt on my part to move others into the acceptance of either viewpoint<sup>3</sup>, but will be, rather, a discussion of what I consider to be the most important questions, issues, and scriptural texts that need to be resolved in this controversy, and in my own mind. So, really, this is a paper that represents my own personal ponderings and reflections, a case of me "thinking out loud," organized and broken down into the most important subjects that need to be addressed, with various Scriptures, questions and arguments that I have been considering. Whatever one's conclusion is at the end of the day, I hope that the points made and research presented will prove to be a beneficial contribution to those striving to "attain to the unity of faith" and the "true/accurate knowledge [Gk: *epignosis*] of the Son of God (Ephesians 4:13)."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although it may appear that way in some instances, it is only because I, at present, do not see or have not been shown a satisfying way of explaining particular expressions made in Scripture outside of personal, pre-human existence, from (what I consider to be) an objective standpoint. It is also my purpose in this paper to call attention to certain points that my Unitarian/Socinian friends may not have yet taken into serious consideration.

<sup>4</sup> I agree with the sentiments of Brian Wright: "If someone persuades me that there is something wrong about what I believe, they have done me a great service. I will change my belief and I will thank them. If someone fails to persuade me that there is something wrong about what I believe, they have done me a great service. I will be strengthened in

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## Does a “pre-human” Messiah disqualify or compromise the human Messiah’s true humanity?

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*“Perhaps my major objection to ‘personal preexistence’ (whether Trinitarian or Unitarian) is that it calls into question (at the very least) the true humanity of Jesus. If the Son was a man after ‘the word became flesh,’ what was he before that? We know what Trinitarian theology says. But what was he for the Unitarian who believes in Jesus’ ‘personal preexistence’? If not God or man, then what? An angel?<sup>5</sup> ...If he was neither God nor angel nor man before ‘the word became flesh,’ then how can one argue for the true humanity of Jesus? What kind of ‘human’ is it whose flesh is human but whose spirit is that of a preexistent being? If human being is biblically defined as the combination of the breath (or spirit) of life and the dust of the earth (which Gen. 2:7 calls ‘a living soul,’ or ‘being’), how does a ‘preexistent spirit-being’ inhabiting a human body qualify as a true human being? This strange divine-human hybrid is, in my view, a survivor of the docetic form of second-century Gnosticism that claimed that Jesus only appeared to be human, actually being a god who inhabited the body of Jesus temporarily or a god who appeared in bodily form as Jesus.” (Robert Hach, Correspondence: 6/18/06)*

This is probably the principal and foundational basis for objecting to the notion of Christ having had a pre-human life. I think that this particular and often-voiced objection (at least the way it is expressed above), however, may be based on somewhat of a misunderstanding of the traditional (non-trinitarian) view of how the Son—conceived as once existing in the form of a divine spirit—“descended” from his heavenly dwelling into the lower realms, “in the likeness of sinful flesh.”<sup>6</sup> I do not believe that God’s unique Son “*only* appeared to be human” and that he was actually “a god who inhabited the body of Jesus temporarily or a god who appeared in bodily form as Jesus.” Nor do I think that the Scriptures support such a concept. I also do not think that those who have historically shared my perspective do either.

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what I believe and I will thank them.” It is my sincere hope that this paper will amount to a service rendered and received in the same spirit expressed here.

<sup>5</sup> Personally I do not identify Christ formally or doctrinally as “an angel” simply because I do not know of any place in Scripture that makes it a point to. However, if we remember that the term “angel” simply means “messenger,” and that Jesus is undoubtedly God’s ultimate messenger/spokesman in these last days (Hebrews 1:1, 2), it shouldn’t strike us as so odd if, scripturally, he can appropriately be thought of and accepted as God’s chief-angel. Yet Anthony Buzzard argues: “To call the Messiah an angel would be a muddling of categories” (*The Nature of Preexistence in the New Testament*). And in his book, Greg Deuble likewise objects to the notion of Christ being viewed as an angel: “I will not spend time on this position, because Scripture clearly teaches that the Son of God was not and is not an angel (Heb. 1:4-14)” (Deuble, p. 140). But simply change the specific term from “angel” to “messenger” (the actual meaning of the word) in these statements and I don’t think that Buzzard and Deuble would feel comfortable expressing themselves along the same lines.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:3

At present, I tend to believe—based on a certain understanding of Philippians 2:5-7, John 1:1-18, and other texts—that God’s Son, at one time, was existing in God’s form/external likeness (or ‘in a god’s form’); yet even when he was abiding in such an exalted, celestial state, he “did not consider equality with God something to be seized/grasped at” (or ‘did not consider his equality with/likeness to God something to exploit for his own gain’, according to another legitimate way of taking the language); but, rather, he “emptied himself” of that form (‘he gave up all he had’, *TEV*), taking on the form of another (‘a slave’s form’) when he “*came to be* in the likeness of men.” What I mean is that the language of Philippians 2:5-6 can (and I would argue, perhaps *most naturally*) support the notion that God’s Son was, at one point, a divine person, yet who, at another point, *emptied himself of his divinity* (his ‘god-form’) in order to take on a slave’s form by becoming a human being fully submissive and obedient to the will of God and dedicated to the interest of others. That is to say, at the time the Son became a human being, he *ceased to be a divine one*, in order to become fully human (‘although he was rich, he became poor for our sake’, 2 Cor. 8:9).<sup>8</sup> Non-trinitarian believers in Jesus’ pre-human existence do not believe Jesus was a hybrid mixture of divinity and humanity, but a perfect human being, the “last Adam.” But “the first man is out of the earth and made of dust; the second man is out of heaven (1 Corinthians 15:45-48).”

The traditional Socinian objection to the “personal pre-human existence” view is certainly noble, respectable and understandable, in that it seeks to protect and preserve the authentic manhood of Jesus, feeling that Jesus could not have been a true *human* being if he existed as a *spiritual* being prior to his conception. But—we have to ask ourselves—how can we argue or assume, with certainty, that a divine being cannot “divest himself” of his divinity in order to become an authentic human being? I believe (at least at this point), based on what the language can allow for, that this is actually what Philippians 2:6 seems to suggest, for more than one reason. I am *not* saying that this is the true, definitive interpretation. But this is the impression I am deriving from the passage, even after close scrutiny. But perhaps I need to look closer.

It also seems, to me, that we can force the kind of argument presented by Hach and others on any perspective. For instance, one might argue against the Unitarians: How could Christ have been an *authentic* man if he possessed supernatural knowledge, read people’s minds, walked on

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<sup>7</sup> Although one might contest this, pointing out, in effect, “Paul did *not* say Christ ‘emptied himself of the god-form,’” this certainly is a plausible and contextually-based explanation of what Paul meant by the expression “he emptied himself.” Whatever the case may be, we have to ask ourselves, what does “emptied himself” mean? Of what did Christ Jesus empty himself? Perhaps, as an alternative, he “emptied himself [completely of self-interest].” Or he “emptied himself [in the sense that he completely poured out his life and energies into the service of others, to the point of death, v. 8].”

<sup>8</sup> One Bible scholar argued: “That, despite His supernal dignities, the disposition of Christ was one of love and compassion, and utterly lacking in selfishness and pride, is shown by his self-abasement. He empties Himself. What this means is clearly indicated by the change in form. He was not God and He did not become a slave. But He had God’s form, yet He took a slave’s form. He did not carry with Him any of the former into the latter.” —A. E. Knoch, *Studies in Philippians (Part Four of Eight) The Example of Christ Philippians 2:1-8*

water, turned water into wine, opened the eyes of the blind, etc.?<sup>9</sup> What “man” do you know of who can do such things? And what true “man” was ever born of a virgin?

Of course, although one might attempt to force on others an argument of this kind, the fact is, scripturally, that the man, Jesus of Nazareth, was empowered by the Spirit of God to perform these mighty miracles; yet, as we know, this does and need not compromise or call into question his true humanity.

The so-called “Arian” interpreters have, to my knowledge, never advanced the notion that the Son, as a god, combined his “deity” with “humanity,” or that the divine Son merely and temporarily disguised himself in human flesh. But rather, that the one who originally existed in the form of a god “emptied himself” of this god-form, taking on the “form of a slave” and hence “came to be in the likeness of humanity” (*Bible in Living English*). Or, explained in another context, the one that was called “the word (*ho logos*),” the same one that was “a god (*theos*)” when “with God (*pros ton theon*)” in the beginning, ceased being “a god (a divine spirit being)” when “the word” became a man—a *true* man, *not* a “hybrid mixture of divinity and humanity.” That is, “the word was a god (*theos en ho logos*),” yet “the word *became flesh (ho logos sarx egeneto)*” (John 1:1c; 14).<sup>10</sup>

But really, the question of whether or not such would invalidate or call into question Christ’s true humanity seems, to me, to be a kind of philosophical one.<sup>11</sup> If the Scriptures *do* teach that a divine spirit (God’s first-born spirit son) became a man in Jesus of Nazareth, they obviously do not go into detail explaining or justifying how this would be possible (just as they do not explain how God could have always existed, or how Jesus could have performed miracles), or how or if the Son retained his divine ego (self-consciousness), or at what point in his human life he remembered his previous, heavenly existence, or if he was always conscious of it. These are details and perceived problems we can only speculate on in the end. Socinian interpreters can argue that if we accept this concept as true, then Christ’s humanity cannot be genuine—yet it must be. But this is, ultimately, an argument, an opinion, the soundness of which—in my own estimation—is

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<sup>9</sup> John 1:47-50; Matthew 9:4-6; John 6:19; 2:1-12; 9:1-7

<sup>10</sup> According to Deuble: “The Bible makes it clear that to pass as a human being, one must be in a body.” —*They Never told me this in church*, p. 290. If this is a genuine standard for true “humanity”, then belief in the pre-human existence of God’s Son in no way compromises the Son’s humanity, in light of my exposition of John 1:1-14 and Philippians 2:5-7.

<sup>11</sup> By this I do not mean to suggest that this is not a fair question worthy of exploration, or that Socinians rely on philosophical thought and speculation (or pure ‘rationalism’) to determine their understanding of the Bible, whereas I rely on the Bible alone as my guide. I just mean that the question itself has to be discussed on a kind of philosophical and theoretical level, almost like, “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” Similarly, “If a (so-called) human being had a personal, pre-human existence, is he really an authentic human being?” My own intuition tells me that this *is* possible (with God) and that it does not necessarily represent a violation of logical principles or metaphysical laws. Nor do I believe that the concept is comparable to the orthodox doctrine of the “hyspotatic union”—the idea of adding humanity to deity, so that Jesus possesses two natures simultaneously, that of Almighty God and that of man. As I believe Dan Mages has rightfully argued, this is comparable to saying “this desk is a 100% wood and 100% steel (or that a squared-circle can exist)”, a logical impossibility. Although, in discussing this particular matter with Trinitarians, I would not object to such a doctrine primarily on “logical” or “rational” grounds, but on the grounds that the Bible simply does not teach it—but that is beside the point!

difficult to determine with certainty. That is, philosophically, abstractly, it is difficult to answer the question of whether or not a divine being can become a human and, if so, could he rightfully be considered a true human in a way that would satisfy the Messiah's required credentials as the "second Adam," "the seed of Abraham" or the "son of David." This is hardly an exact science and, again, the argument for either view seems to hinge on opinion, not on fact, not on hard-and-fast metaphysical laws (or verifiable scriptural principles) that can be empirically tested or proven.

One can argue that, "Yes, 'pre-human existence' *would* mean Jesus was not a true human, for what human ever had a pre-human existence as a heavenly being?" But one could counter, "Well, Christ was unique, and it is not necessary to suppose that he could not have been a true human being if he lived as a divine spirit prior to his human birth." These questions and arguments can only take us so far I think. It is—I think most would agree—not *primarily* an issue of whether or not it is philosophically sound or metaphysically plausible to say that a divine being could become a human being, but whether or not the Scriptures actually teach this. If one chooses, one *could* argue and stand by their objection to the idea of personal pre-existence on the grounds that this takes away from Jesus' true humanity. But, again, I would argue that an outsider could even argue against the Socinians, "You say and emphasize that Jesus was a human. But what kind of 'human' was ever born of a virgin? What kind of 'human' walks on water, turns water into wine, feeds thousands from a handful of fish and bread, reads men's thoughts, gives men eternal life? What 'human' was ever 'the word (*ho logos*)' of God made flesh?" So these arguments are comparable in one sense. But let me elaborate on the logic in case my point is unclear:

**A theoretical argument:** (1) Real "human" beings *cannot* walk on water. (2) Jesus walked on water. (3) Therefore, Jesus was not a *real* human being.

The answer seems to be, "No, Jesus *was* a real human and he did walk on water, but he did so by the miraculous intervention of God. That is, God made an exception in that particular case by suspending or circumventing the laws of gravity, for a specific purpose." The same could be argued against the traditional Socinian reasoning: "Yes, the Son of God *did* exist in the heavenly realm and was born as a true human, simply by a unique and powerful miracle of God."

So, in my opinion, it is possible that this objection and line of questioning (presented by Hach, Buzzard, Mages) is representative of a non-existent dilemma. And if belief in the personal, pre-human existence of God's Son is a mistake, I doubt that such belief is, at heart, a "survivor of the docetic form of second-century Gnosticism"; but is, rather, a *misunderstanding*, a *mistaken* interpretation of the scriptural information; a failure to recognize where and when the Bible writers and participants are using language of the figurative and proleptic kind (an interpreting as *literal*



that which was intended to be taken as *metaphoric* and *ideal*); and, even, in certain cases, a result of mistaken judgments having to do with debatable issues of translation and of textual criticism.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, if disbelief in the pre-human existence of Jesus Christ is a mistake, it is based, not on any sinister motive or lack of honesty or faith in the Bible's teaching, but based largely on a belief that in the cases where Christ spoke about himself (or when others spoke about him) as if he existed before his human birth, that it was really meant proleptically, ideally—which we must acknowledge are verifiable literary characteristics woven all throughout the sacred Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Socinians may be correct about this. But I don't believe the argument that a "pre-human Messiah means that the human Messiah was not really a human" carries enough weight to effectively establish their case and should not be accepted as the primary basis for rejecting such a concept—if, of course, it is genuinely biblical. Nor should such a philosophical presupposition interfere with our judgment regarding texts that potentially could teach a pre-human existence.<sup>13</sup> The question that concerns us most is, again, what do the *Scriptures teach*? What did Jesus teach?

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## Philippians 2:6-8

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Philippians chapter two is one of the most important and intriguing texts in this discussion. But there are, as many are aware, several expressions occurring there that are difficult to interpret. Although there can only be one true meaning (the meaning intended by the writer), it must be admitted that the language itself can allow for more than one possible understanding. The challenge is, of course, uncovering the true, original meaning; or at least, to narrow everything down to the most plausible range of meanings—meanings that do not violate the language, grammar, context and underlying spirit.

We know that Paul's object was to get the Christians to whom he was writing to have and live according to the same attitude of mind that was in Christ, namely, that of humility and of looking out for the interest of others

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<sup>12</sup> Consider, for example, the controversies surrounding the correct translation/meaning of John 1:1 (Trinitarian: 'the Word/Son was (absolute) Deity.' Arian: 'the Word was a god.' Socinian: 'the word was God [in communication]' or "the word was God [in the sense of being the vehicle of the expression of God's thoughts and plans]' and the correct manuscript reading/translation for John 1:18 ('an only-begotten/unique god' or 'the only-begotten/unique son?'). The determination of the meaning of these texts has an extremely important bearing on the matter of "pre-human existence."

<sup>13</sup> What I mean more specifically is that I think it would be a mistake to begin with the presupposition: "Jesus could not have been a human being if he had a pre-human existence." I'm not sure if this is a safe or knowable assumption. And I think it would be unfortunate if this prevented us from accepting texts that reveal pre-existence, *if* they really do.

(self-abasement and selfless service). But what did Paul mean when he said that Christ was existing in “the form of God (or a god; *en morphe theou*)”? What did he mean when he said that Christ “emptied himself”? “Emptied himself” of what? What did he mean by “the form of a slave”?<sup>14</sup> And in the next line, did Paul mean that Christ did not consider equality with God (what he did *not* have) something to seize? Or did he mean that Christ did not consider (his functional) equality (or equality of form, i.e., he had the same form that God had, a divine, celestial, spiritual form) with God (that which he did have) something to exploit for his own self-aggrandizement? And of even greater importance, I believe, what did Paul mean by “**he came to be in the likeness of men**”? And how does this fact fit into the overall point the apostle was making about Christ’s attitude of mind and how Christ acted based on it? This expression is, in my opinion, the most significant; because it is something that appears to have occurred *after* the descriptions and actions already described in verse 6 and in the first part of verse 7. That is, the structure and flow of the hymn seems to suggest that Christ was in one form (a high and exalted one) but, in spite of being in such an exalted form, he gave no consideration to trying to seize or grasp at equality with God, but chose, rather, to “empty himself” of that form and to take on the form of another (a lowly and humble one), a slave’s form. Then, *after this* (*after* Christ’s decision to ‘empty’ himself instead of trying to seize equality with God) he “came to be in the likeness of men.” Or perhaps, that his “taking slave form” was essentially equivalent or directly linked to (as another translation expresses it) his “coming into the likeness of humanity” (*Bible in Living English*).<sup>15</sup> This is the impression I am left with. After all, how did Christ Jesus “not think to snatch at equality with God” (*NEB*) and “empty himself” *before* he was “made in the likeness of men” if he did not exist (and hence think and act) before he was “made likeness of men”?

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<sup>14</sup> Some Socinians have pointed out that the term “slave” is a reference to a “function” or “role,” and thus interpret the “form of God” and the “form of a slave” to mean “the function of God” and “the function of a slave.” But it should be remembered that the sense of “function” would lie within the term “slave” and “God” itself, not in the word “form.” In that case we could say that Christ took on the form of one who exercises this particular function or role (that of a slave), having previously existed in the form of one who exercises the function of God. But when did Christ ever give this up as the text seems to suggest?

<sup>15</sup> The fuller translation reads: “when he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as a prize, but emptied himself, taking slave form, coming into the likeness of humanity...” (Byington, *Bible in Living English*). *Today’s English Version* reads: “He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness.” Other, essentially literal translations, read: “having been made in the likeness of men; and being in condition as a man, he humbled himself...” (*Emphatic Diaglott*); “came to be in the likeness of men. More than that, when he found himself in fashion as a man, he humbled himself (*NWT*); “taking his place in [the] likeness of men; and having been found in figure as a man, humbled himself...” (*Darby’s Translation*); “...himself, emptied, taking, a servant’s form, coming to be, in men’s likeness; And, in fashion, being found, as a man, humbled himself...” (*Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible*); “...in the likeness of men having been made, and in fashion having been found as a man, he humbled himself...” (*Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*); “...taking the form of a slave, coming to be in the likeness of humanity, and, being found in fashion as a human, He humbles Himself...” (*Concordant Literal New Testament*); “Made in the likeness of humankind, And, being seen as a human figure, He humbled himself...” (*The Unvarnished New Testament by Andy Gaus*); “Having come to be in the likeness of people, and having been found in appearance as a person, He humbled Himself...” (*Analytical-Literal Translation*) Albert Barnes argued: “The Greek word means likeness, resemblance. The meaning is, he was made like unto men by assuming such a body as theirs. See Barnes ‘Romans 8:3’.” —*Barnes Notes on the New Testament* (Electronic Version).

Then, the apostle indicates that “when he was found in fashion as a man” he further humbled himself in obedience to God to the point of death on a stake. The statement “when he was found in fashion as a man” is likewise, in my opinion, strongly suggestive of pre-human existence. If the Socinian interpretation is to be accepted as valid, we have to answer the question: *What was so significant about the one who was always a man being “found in fashion as a man”?* It almost seems as if this statement would be robbed of its relevance and significance if Christ did not enjoy another kind of existence at some point before he was “found in appearance as a man” (NASB). It seems to make more sense that “this one who once existed as a divine spirit, in a divine form (the form of God or a god)” was at another point in his existence, “found in fashion as a man.” And when this was so, this one further humbled himself to the extent of dying a criminal’s death. “*This is why God has so highly exalted him.*” That is, he gave up what he once had (the wealth and riches of his glorious heavenly state), took on the lowly appearance of a slave, lived in obedience to God *when found in fashion as a man*, and did so to the extent of sacrificing his own life in behalf of others, to the glory of God.<sup>16</sup>

Some have objected that if Christ was once a divine person who became a man, we could not relate to that and that this would make Paul’s instruction to imitate Christ of none effect. But I think a satisfying answer to such a potentially misleading objection is found in the words of one Bible scholar:

“...it has been argued that a disquisition upon the pre-existence of Christ is not within the scope of the Apostle’s purpose, that he is interested only in setting before his converts an example of unselfishness and true humility. To this we can heartily agree, insisting, at the same time, however, that this very purpose of the writer is a strong argument for the reference to a pre-existent state... As to the rather shallow objection that such an example would be beyond the power of men to imitate, we may answer that this is to miss the spirit of the passage altogether. The Apostle is not asking for a mechanical imitation of the precise act in which our Lord ‘emptied himself, whatever that act may have involved. He is pleading that men shall have in them ‘the mind’ which was in Christ Jesus, and which impelled Him so to act as the passage describes, in the interest of others. Moreover, to exclude the idea of pre-existence from the passage is to render obscure its meaning.”<sup>17</sup>

## Comparing Philippians 2:3-8 with 2 Corinthians 8:9

In a book scheduled soon for publication I wrote: “Most significantly, in another place, the apostle Paul said by way of reminder: “For you know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been: *he was rich, yet for your sake*

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<sup>16</sup> To me the text suggests that Christ’s “being made in the likeness of men” (ASV, 1901) was a critical feature of the humility of mind he showed and the result of his having (or perhaps the means by which he) “emptied himself.”

<sup>17</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Doctrine of the Kenosis in Philippians 2:5-8*, page 89.

*he became poor*, so that through his poverty you might become rich.”<sup>18</sup> This statement seems to be an allusion to, or another way of describing, what Paul wrote about what Christ did in Philippians chapter two; once again, suggesting that, at a certain point, Christ was subsisting in one state or condition, but that (‘for our sake’) he voluntarily took on that of another. That is, Christ willingly went from ‘wealth’ to ‘poverty’ (the ‘form/likeness of God’ to the ‘form/likeness of a slave’).”

The question is: **In what way did the Lord Jesus Christ go from being “rich” to being “poor” from the Socinian perspective?** What makes the most sense to me is that the wealth or “richness” once enjoyed by Christ is equivalent to, or poetically/metaphorically representative of, “the glory [he] had along-side [‘the only true God’] before the world was” (John 17:5). That is to say, God’s Son, the “only begotten/unique god,” once dwelt in the glorious presence of his Father in the heavenly realm (‘in the bosom of the Father’ John 1:18) but voluntarily gave up all he had (‘emptied himself’ of the ‘form of God’) thereby *becoming poor*, as he descended into the baser realms of a corrupt, sinful world, coming to be in the likeness of men (becoming a real, authentic man, *not* a god-man), sent by God “*in the likeness of sinful flesh*” (Romans 8:32)—further, subjecting himself, not only to the common miseries and tribulations of human existence, but to the cruelties of worldly persecution and ultimate death—all in behalf of saving sinners, and for the magnification of the glory of his Father. He was existing in the (beautiful, glorious) form of God but took on the (lowly, humble) form of a slave. **“He was rich but he became poor for our sakes.”** That is, he had something of incredible value, but he *gave it up* for the benefit of others.

I also observe even more specifically that “Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 8:9 may very well correspond to the second chapter of Philippians (and other scriptural points) in the following ways: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich (‘though he was in the form of God,’ Phil. 2:6; and had ‘glory with [the Father] before the world was,’ John 17:5), yet for your sake he became poor [‘he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,’ humbling ‘himself, becoming obedient to death,’ Phil. 2:7, 8; coming down ‘from heaven, not to do [his] own will, but the will of him who sent [him],’ John 6:38), so that by his poverty you might become rich (so that you ‘were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will [you] be saved by his life.’ Romans 5:10).”

This is how I have always looked at it. And I think that most can see and would agree that the pieces do seem to fit quite satisfactorily.<sup>19</sup> Or do they?

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<sup>18</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9, *New English Bible* (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> Even if these interpretive scriptural connections that I suggest are only a result of my own (honest-hearted) creative thinking and imagination, isn’t it interesting how perfect and how natural they seem to fall into place?

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## John 1:1, 18

What was the nature of the *logos* before the *logos* “became flesh and dwelt among us”?

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“If the translation were a matter of substituting words, a possible translation of *theos en ho logos* would be, ‘The Word was a god.’ *As a word-for-word translation it cannot be faulted...*” —C. H. Dodd, *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Jan. 1977 (emphasis added).

“The reference to the Word as ‘God’ in John 1:1f. could be taken as a technical way of distinguishing Christ from the Father as a subordinate ‘deity’ (*theos* as opposed to *ho theos*) in view of the absence of the definite article...” —Christopher B. Kaiser (Professor of systematic theology at Western Theological Seminary), *The Doctrine of God, A Historical Survey—Foundations For Faith*, p. 31.

“It is true, on the most natural reading of the text, that there are two beings here: God and a second who was *theos* but this second is related to God in a manner which shows that God is the absolute over against which the second is defined. They are not presented as two equal gods.” —William Loader, Ph.D, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel—Structures and Issues*, p. 155.

“Jn 1:1 should rigorously be translated ‘the word was with the God [= the Father], and the word was a divine being.’” —*McKenzie Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 317.

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The challenge of understanding John 1:1 correctly (actually John 1:1-18) involves long-debated issues of translation and interpretation. In a correspondence, Robert Hach wrote:

*Isn't it the case that the personal pronouns of John 1: 1-14 can be correctly rendered 'he' or 'it,' the rendering depending on whether 'the word' is determined by the context to be a person or a purpose? This determination is, of course, a matter of interpretation, no?*

I don't know how much weight should or can be attributed to the rendering as “it” or “him.” I think that the correct understanding of what John meant when he said, “*theos en ho logos* (literally: god was the word),” along with the expression made in 1:18, will have a weightier impact on our determination of the nature of the *logos* before the *logos* became flesh.

In his book, *The Doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound*, Anthony Buzzard makes a correct point when he states regarding John 1:1: “The Word is not identical with God. It is distinguished from God in some sense by being ‘with Him.’” But he goes on to say: “The Word was not a second God” without a substantial discussion or analysis of the grammar that would validate this point. Robert Young, a Protestant and Bible translator, said that the phrase should be translated “a Divine being

was the Word.” Greek scholar, Jason Beduhn, in his relatively new book on translation, demonstrates quite adequately the grammatical legitimacy of the translation “the word was a god.” The point is, if the word was a god (a divine being), and with God, then the word *was* a second god (that is, there is one that is *theos* with another who is *ho theos*). So before a statement like “the Word was *not* a second God” is established, one must prove, or at least discuss why, based on the grammar. And if one wishes to lend credence to the point, it would be appropriate to present a counter argument against the points that have already been made by those who have argued for the “word was a god” rendition. They cannot be ignored.

The foundational argument I have seen presented by Socinian interpreters, however, revolves around establishing the significance of “*ho logos*,” *the word* that was “with God” in the beginning. They argue, quite reasonably and with good evidence, that “the word,” in this context, carries with it the idea of “(God’s) word/wisdom, utterance, communication, plan, reason, promise, purpose,” and that it is a mistake to see John 1:1 as meaning “in the beginning was *the Son* and *the Son* was with God...” This “word,” it is argued, is not a “person.” But “the word” *did* become a person when it was finally embodied in the human-person, Jesus of Nazareth.

To me, this comes across as a very reasonable and intelligent way of looking at the text, as opposed to the traditional way of conceiving “the Word” as an actual “person.” But the argument that “the word” was not really a living “person” (but the plan and promise of God) becomes difficult to reconcile, from my vantage point, with the very likely possibility that John is really saying that the one that was called “*ho logos*” was “a god,” a divine being; and even more difficult to harmonize with what seems to be a parallel statement in verse 18, where John describes Jesus as “an only-begotten/unique god” dwelling in “the bosom of the Father.”

It is true that John 1:1 speaks of “the Word” and not “the Son” specifically. But is it possible that “the Word” is another term/title that fittingly applies to the Son of God before his heavenly descent into “the likeness of sinful flesh” (in the same way that the terms ‘word’ and ‘wisdom’ of God are applied to the personal, earthly or resurrected/exalted Son)?<sup>20</sup> The *personal* Son of God is called “the Word of God” in Revelation 19:13. And since the term *logos* is intimately associated with the concept of *wisdom* itself, is it possible that a heavenly, pre-human Son of God could appropriately be called “the Word” or “Wisdom” of God because, as Paul points out in his letter to the Colossians, “in him lie hidden all God’s treasures of *wisdom* and knowledge”? In that case, this one could be identified as Wisdom because, as one writer put it, “all of God’s wisdom is seen in the creation of him and it continues to be seen in this one’s works.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> It may be helpful to point out that if we were to accept that the *logos* is a personal, heavenly being—God’s Son before he “became flesh”—it is not necessary to abandon the view that the *logos* is also the plan, promise and purpose of God. In the same way that God’s Son, as a person, is still considered by Paul to be the power, wisdom and glory of God. He can be all these and still be a person at the same time.

<sup>21</sup> From the essay *Jesus Christ—Wisdom Personified* (March 24, 2006), Scripturaltruths.com.

But the most important issue I am interested in regarding John 1:1 is the translation of the final, controversial clause: *theos en ho logos*. If the word was “with” God and was “a god” which, contrary to the claim of some, has much to recommend it grammatically as a legitimate translation (over against ‘the Word was God’ translation), doesn’t the description or title “god” normally apply to a *personal* being—again, especially one that was “with” God in the beginning, and that “became flesh” in the man Christ Jesus? The very application of the term *theos* to the one that was “with God” seems to suggest that the one that was with God was in fact a personal being, a divine one. Is it possible that this is the one whom God was addressing when he said, “Let *us* make man in our own image” (Genesis 1:26)? This makes some sense. I would imagine that at least one other person was “with” or near God (*pros ton theon*) when God said, “*let us* make man in our own image.”

The question of John 1:1, of course, hinges on a number of factors. But I think the most significant one that Socinians might be overlooking is the issue of accurate *translation/sense*. I don’t know how much research various Socinian interpreters have invested on this particular matter, but—believe it or not—the translation/sense of “*theos*” for John 1:1c (contrary to what Trinitarian apologists try to argue) can very easily be taken in an indefinite sense, as “the word was *a god*” or “the word was a divine being.” And although Trinitarian (and some Unitarian/Socinian) Christians might argue, “well, then, that would imply polytheism, another god/deity with the Almighty Deity; that is against the Bible’s strict monotheism.” The question would have to be asked: Why does the existence of God’s own angels as *elohim* (gods, divine beings)<sup>22</sup> not represent a compromise to or abandonment of “biblical monotheism”? Are not the angels powerful, divine, super-human, celestial beings that dwell among and serve God in the heavenly realm? And are there not “myriads and myriads” of such supernatural, heavenly beings in existence?<sup>23</sup> It would seem clear to me that if the angels are described in the Scriptures as “gods,” and this is something perfectly acceptable within the framework of biblical monotheism, then there is no valid objection (in terms of any potential controversy surrounding true ‘monotheism’) that “the first born of all creation” really is an “only-begotten god,” a unique and powerful celestial being, who dwells in the “bosom of the Father.”

If that was in fact John’s intended sense (which is quite easily and quite naturally derived from the grammar), then it would be difficult to imagine that “a god” (and a certain *kind* of god, John 1:18) that was with *the* God in the beginning (or in the ‘bosom of the Father’) was not a real person. Significantly, the statement at John 1:18, about “an only begotten/unique god existing in the bosom of the Father” seems parallel to the description in John 1:1. That is, in verse 1 we have ‘a god’ which is said to have been “with God,” and in verse 18 we have “an only-begotten/unique

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<sup>22</sup> Psalm 8:5

<sup>23</sup> Revelation 5:11

god” who is said to be “in the bosom of the Father.” This text would also appear to support the indefinite understanding and rendering of John 1:1c, and that the Word that was with the God was actually a real, living being after all. That is, the “word/wisdom” was God’s “word/wisdom” in the sense of being God’s representative image and spokesperson, even to the inhabitants of the heavenly abode. So instead of the Word as the Wisdom of God in a kind of ideal, promissory, more abstract sense, the Word could have been the one whom God was pleased to embody the wealth of his knowledge and wisdom in a person, his own Son, the one through whom all others were made.<sup>24</sup>

As a concluding thought, I would point out that it is generally agreed that the reading *monogenes theos* (only-begotten/unique god) is the original, not *monogenes huios* (only-begotten/unique son, *KJV*). As far as I can tell, Socinian interpreters focus their argumentation on supporting the reading “only-begotten son” and discrediting the reading “only-begotten god.” But I would argue that, instead of simply arguing for the other reading, they would do well to take into serious consideration the very real (and more likely possibility) that “only-begotten/unique god” is the original reading (as the four oldest and best manuscripts agree) and be willing to present an interpretation that is harmonious and consistent with their understanding of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

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## John 8:58

**“I tell you most solemnly, I existed before Abraham was born.”**  
—*New Testament* by C.B. Williams

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“Jesus said unto them, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.’” (*KJV*)

Christians who reject the mainstream doctrine of the Trinity agree in their rejection of the traditional Trinitarian interpretations of John 8:58,

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<sup>24</sup> The expression in John 1:14, “the word became flesh,” seems equivalent to the expression, “God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.” These references may not be equivalent, but they do seem to be.

<sup>25</sup> “Whether one considers external evidence or transcriptional probabilities, *monogenes theos* [only begotten god] has a considerably stronger claim to originality than *ho monogenes huios* [the only begotten son], the other principal variant. External attestation for *monogenes theos* is admittedly restricted in extent, representing, as it does, mainly the Alexandrian textual tradition, but it is not uncommon for this text type alone to have preserved the original reading.” —Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God, The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992) p. 82. According to F. F. Bruce, the reading is “attested by early authorities, including the two earliest known (the Bodemer papyri 66 and 75)...” —*The Gospel of John*, p. 44. Another source likewise points out: “The manuscript evidence for the first reading, *an only-begotten, God (monogenes theos)* is decidedly superior to the evidence for the second reading, *the only-begotten Son (monogenes huios)*. The papyrus MSS [manuscripts] (P66 P75), the earliest and best uncial MSS (a\* B C\* L) and some good early versions (Coptic and Syriac) support the first reading...The fact that P66 [A.D. 150-175] and P75 [A.D. 200], two of the earliest extant MSS, read—*God* has firmly secured this reading a place in the text of John.” —*Guide to the Ancient Manuscripts, A Guide to Understanding Marginal Notes on Differences in the New Testament Manuscripts*, Philip W. Comfort: *The Eight Translation NT* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1974) p. 2004.



especially the one that attempts to connect Jesus “I am (*ego eimi*)” statement with Jehovah’s revelatory words at Exodus 3:14.

Socinian interpreters have generally taken the expression in John 8:58 as similar to the way other “I am” statements should be taken, where it is clear that Jesus’ meant something like, “I am *he* (i.e., the Messiah, the Son of Man, the light of the world, etc., depending on the context. See: John 4: 25, 26; 8:24, 28; 13:19).” The question is, in John 8:58, did Jesus mean “before Abraham was born I am *he* (the Messiah)? If so, although a grammatically strenuous statement in English, would not that still imply a ‘pre-abrahamic’ and hence ‘pre-human’ existence? He was the Messiah before there was ever an Abraham? Or, could it be, he was the Messiah (conceived in God’s mind) long before Abraham’s birth? Or perhaps, he was the one whom God always had in mind to be, and fulfill the mission as, the Messiah? How did the Jews take it? And what is more important, what did *he* intend to mean by it? The classical Socinian view is a possibility, and has, in my opinion, a great deal to recommend it over against the traditional Trinitarian interpretation(s) of this text.

But there is another, more likely (and perhaps more satisfying) possibility, made clear through what might be accepted as a more accurate and grammatically sound English translation of the Greek. To my knowledge, the modern advocates of Socinianism have not discussed the fact that the present tense “I am (I exist)” can be modified in a context like John 8:58 due to being accompanied and governed grammatically by an expression of past time, as in, “before Abraham came to be.” Greek/New Testament Scholar, Professor Jason Beduhn, elaborated on the point:

John 8:58 has two verbs, one (‘am’) in the present tense, and the other (‘came to be’) in the past (technically, the ‘aorist’) tense. In most sentences where we see a past tense verb and a present tense verb, we would assume that the action of the past verb is earlier in time than the action of the present verb (‘John wrote the book that I am reading’: ‘wrote’ happened before ‘am reading’). This is true in most cases in Greek as well as in English. But in John 8:58 this is not the case, and we know it is not the case because the preposition *prin*, ‘before,’ coordinates the relationship between the two actions represented by the verbs. This preposition tells us that the action of the verb in the present tense (‘am’) happened (or began to happen, or was already happening) ‘before’ the action of the verb in the past tense (‘came to be’). ...It is ungrammatical English for something referred to with a present ‘am’ to occur earlier in time than something described with a past ‘came to be.’ ...A quick glance at Smyth’s *Greek Grammar* reveals that what we are dealing with in John 8:58 is a well-known Greek idiom. The pertinent entry is section 1885 on verb tenses, which states, ‘The present, when accompanied by a definite or indefinite expression of past time, is used to express an action begun in the past and continued in the present. The ‘progressive perfect’ is often used in translation. Thus,...*I have been long* (and am still) *wondering.*’ I think you can see immediately that his entry applies to John 8:58, where the present verb *eimi* is accompanied by an expression of past time, *prin Abraam*

*genesthai* ['before Abraham came to be'].<sup>26</sup>

I attempted to elaborate further on the reasons for accepting the suggested translation by observing: “Another scholarly source offers a translation for Jesus’ words at John 8:58 which might be considered the most literal rendition into English possible: “*I have been in existence since before Abraham was born.*”<sup>27</sup> Professor Beduhn observed: “In John 8:58, since Jesus’ existence [*ego eimi*] is not completed past action, but ongoing, we must use some sort of imperfect verbal form to convey that: ‘I have been (since) before Abraham came to be.’ That’s as close as we can get to what the Greek says in our own language if we pay attention to all parts of the sentence.”<sup>28</sup>

Grammarians have called this Greek idiom “extension from the past” or “present of past action still in progress.” John 14:9 is a closely related example in the English Bible which reads: “Jesus said to him, ‘*Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip?*’” (NASB) The Greek is literally: “So much time with you *I am (eimi, present tense)* and not you have known me...” But in the Greek it means the same as it is translated into English (‘*have I been so long with you...?*’) and must be translated this way for the English to be grammatically coherent and intelligible. As it was correctly noted by Dr. White: ‘There are many instances in historical narrative or conversation where the Greek will use a present tense verb that is best rendered in English by the perfect tense. John 15:27 would be a good example: ‘because you have been with me from the beginning.’ The verb is in the present tense, but the context makes it clear that it is in reference to both the past and the present.’<sup>29</sup>

At John 8:58, the Greek literally reads, ‘before Abraham came to be I am.’ However, it is legitimately translated into English: “before Abraham came to be I have been [or ‘I have been in existence (since) before Abraham came to be’].” This is so because the preposition “before” (Gk: *prin*) accompanied by the completed expression of past time—“Abraham came to be”—functions grammatically (and for the purpose of English translation) as an indication that the action—‘I am’—took place, or was taking place, *before* Abraham was born, and continued into the present. In other words, in terms of grammar, the phrase ‘I am (*ego eimi*)’ embraces the entire period from ‘before Abraham came to be’ to the present; that is, the present moment that Jesus was speaking and standing before the Jews. In English, this is best

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<sup>26</sup> BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation*, pp. 104-111 (words in brackets added for clarification).

<sup>27</sup> K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek, An Aspectual Approach* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1994) p. 42. McKay identifies this idiom as “Extension from Past”—“When used with an expression of either past time or extent of time with past implications...the present tense signals an activity begun in the past and continuing to present time”; citing Luke 13:7; 15:29; John 14:9; Acts 27:33 and John 8:58 as examples.

<sup>28</sup> BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation*, p. 11. Professor Beduhn points out that when “the verb tenses or any other part of grammar is used in a way outside of usual expectations, we call it an ‘idiom.’ Because Greek idioms are different from English idioms, translators do not translate these expressions word-for-word, but rather convey the meaning of the Greek idiom in proper, comprehensible English. At least, that is what translators are supposed to do.”

<sup>29</sup> White, *The Forgotten Trinity*, p. 97. Another respected commentator similarly pointed out: “*Eimi* is used to express a former condition which is continued in the present, as in 14:9, 15:27, Luke 15:29,...Jer. 1:5, Septuagint.” —Dr. Augustus Tholuck, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1859) p. 243.

conveyed by the phrase ‘I have been,’ where the action or state of the verb encompasses the past but does not exclude the present.<sup>30</sup> The translators of the *Contemporary English Version* attempted to capture the sense by translating John 8:58: ‘I tell you for certain that even before Abraham was, I was, and I am.’ Similarly, only with a reversal of word order, one Roman Catholic translation of the New Testament rendered the statement: ‘I tell you the plain truth,’ replied Jesus; ‘I am here—and I was before Abraham!’<sup>31</sup>

After reading my discussion, Robert Hach expressed appreciation for the point when he correctly noted that “the present tense [*eimi*]” can be “affected by its immediate context...” But then he wrote: “Isn’t the question, though, in what form Jesus existed ‘before Abraham’ and ‘In the beginning’? Does his existence prior to his birth unambiguously require his ‘personal preexistence’?” Although one could, with good reason, say, in effect, “how much more explicit could Jesus have been on the matter of pre-abrahamic/pre-human existence?: “**Truly, truly** I tell you, I have existed before Abraham was born” (*The Bible, A New Translation by James Moffatt*). Or as others put it: “The truth is, I existed before Abraham was ever born!” (*New Living Translation*); “The absolute truth is that I was in existence before Abraham was ever born!” (*The Living Bible*).

Yet I now realize—based on the Socinian interpretive paradigm—that even if the translation/sense I am advocating (which happens to satisfactorily account for the violent reaction on the part of the Jews) is established beyond all shadow of a doubt, the Socinian position could still, and likely would (as it has), say or ask, “Well, in what *sense* did Christ exist before Abraham? As a personal, spiritual being? Or as the plan, purpose and promise of God?” In that case the translation/sense would be accepted yet *interpreted* as meaning: “truly, truly I say to you, I (as the Messiah) existed (in the plan and purposes of God) before Abraham was ever born!” And this would likely mean that the Jews took him literally (since they picked up stones to stone him), whereas Jesus really meant it metaphorically or *ideally*. Again, it is, like other relevant examples, a matter of *interpretation*—not withstanding the fact that the statement taken and interpreted at “face value” plainly suggests that Christ (‘I’) existed before his human conception. In this context it becomes not a matter of translation or grammar but a question of *interpretation*. Should this statement be taken literally or figuratively/ideally?

Whatever translation we believe to be correct for John 8:58, it still seems to come down to a matter of *meaning*.<sup>32</sup> For one *can* argue that the

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<sup>30</sup> It was pointed out by one Bible student: “In the sentence *prin abraam genesthai ego eimi* the main clause is *ego eimi*; and we must note that it follows an adverbial phrase of past time—a fact which changes its meaning rather dramatically. Why? Because in Greek when an adverb of time is followed by a statement which denotes continuing action which began in the past, Greek uses the present tense where English ordinarily uses the perfect tense.” —M. James Penton, *The “I AM” of John 8:58, The Christian Quest Magazine*, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> *The New Testament, Rendered From the Original Greek, Kleist and Lily*.

<sup>32</sup> It is interesting that the statement made by Jesus in John 8:56 has been used by both those who deny and those who affirm the pre-existence of Christ as supporting their viewpoints. In an email correspondence (7-21-06), Greg Stafford wrote: “I always thought that John 8 56-58 effectively proved that Jesus had a conscious, pre-human existence. Otherwise, how would he have known that Abraham ‘saw his day and rejoiced.’ This is not stated anywhere in the Bible, or in other biblically related literature. Indeed, the Jews took it to mean just that, that he had ‘seen’ Abraham.

establishment of the true translation does not settle the question with absolute certainty. Maybe Jesus did mean, “I have been in existence since before Abraham was born.” But maybe that *really* meant, “I have been in existence (in God’s plan and foreknowledge) before Abraham was born (not that I, literally, personally, existed as God’s Son).” Or, again, maybe Jesus simply meant what such a phrase would seem to most naturally imply; namely, that he himself lived before Abraham<sup>33</sup> (in glory along side God, John 17:5), and, by necessity, before his own physical conception as a man.

One point seems reasonably clear. First we have to explore the issue of *translation*. This cannot be overlooked or neglected. Then we can proceed to consider the matter of accurate *interpretation*.

While I was considering the possible implications of this controversial but important text (issues relating to translation, interpretation, and the model through which Socinians interpret the Scriptures), I found that the suggested Socinian model itself ultimately turns out to involve what I and others could describe as a “non-falsifiable” proposition. By this I do not mean to imply that the Socinian way of interpreting the relevant texts is by any means discredited thereby. But it really is true that, based on their proposed interpretive framework (*ideal pre-existence*), *if* the Bible writers and participants did believe and mean to teach that the Son of God existed in a heavenly form prior to becoming a man, there really isn’t anything they could have theoretically said to convince one of the truthfulness of this, if one is committed to the Socinian, interpretive framework (along with the idea that a real human being cannot have had a pre-human life). After all, Jesus could have said “truly truly I say to you, I existed before the foundation of the world with my Father in heaven, where I lived and dwelled in glory and enjoyed the greatness of my Father’s glorious presence.” But

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Jesus understood their view of his words, and confirmed it (verse 58).” Broughton and Southgate, however, argue: “...before Abraham was born Christ ‘was’ in the sense that he was envisaged as the one through whom God and estranged man would become reconciled. A glance at the context of the words shows that was in Christ’s mind. The Jews were claiming the privileges of descent from Abraham, whilst Jesus replied that if they were his children they would do what Abraham did (John 8:39). And one of the things Abraham did, in contrast to his unbelieving descendants, was that he ‘rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad’ (v.56), whereas the Jews who were actually living in the ‘day’ of Christ did not recognise it. We are specifically told in what sense Abraham saw Christ’s day. It was in prospect, as an expression of his faith in the coming of Abraham’s seed...We are told that Abraham, on receipt of [the] promise that he would be the father of the Messiah ‘believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness’ (Genesis 15:6). Through this belief Abraham foresaw the coming day of Christ. He foresaw his death and resurrection after the pattern of his own offering of Isaac, and he foresaw the world-wide blessings that would come from that act. But it was all in prospect: Abraham did not believe that his future son was already in existence in heaven. And this too is what Jesus was saying in his reply to the Jews. He re-affirms the fact that he was ‘present’ in the *plan* of God even before the time of Abraham. He could say this without any suggestion of his personal pre-existence.” —*The Trinity, True or False? 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Nottingham: The Dawn Book Supply, 2002) pp. 233, 234. Also, see Deuble, *They never told me this in church*, p. 171.

<sup>33</sup> This reminds me of the Trinitarian interpretive model involving the “two natures” of Christ. Jesus could have very well said, “I am not God, do not believe that I am”; yet Trinitarians could simply say, “This is an example of Jesus speaking from his ‘human’ perspective. Jesus has two natures, that of man and that of God. As a man he is not God, of course, and would not claim to be. But as one who also possesses a divine nature, he is God and would claim to be.” With this model, there is virtually nothing Jesus could have theoretically said or taught that would decisively prove that he was not God, the second person of the Trinity. Similarly, there is virtually nothing that Jesus could have said to prove that he existed prior to his human birth, if we accept the interpretive model of “ideal” pre-existence. The question is, are these the correct lenses through which we should understand the “pre-existence” statements that apply to Christ in Scripture?

the Unitarian-Socinian position would see Jesus as meaning: “truly truly I say to you, I existed before the foundation of the world with my Father [in my Father’s plan and purpose].” Just as in “truly truly I say to you, I have been in existence since before Abraham came to be” would simply mean “I have been in existence [in the plan and purpose of God] since before Abraham came to be.”

In the end, no matter how many times statements like these are made, and no matter how clear they seem (on the surface) to speak of Christ having had a pre-human life, they will always be taken and proposed to mean: “in the mind/plan/promise/purpose/foreknowledge of God.”<sup>34</sup> This may be correct. But it makes me somewhat uncomfortable, for I feel I have no *sure* way of knowing what to believe. And I do not believe I can argue that “Socinians” are without a measure justification in this regard. As of right now, I am left thinking, “it could be this way, yet it could be that way. I think it is this way, it makes sense to me and there is evidence to support my way of thinking; but I also feel there is evidence to support what others are saying. How can I *know* the truth and the mind of God on these matters?”

**“It is not disputed that Jesus had some kind of existence before Abraham was born, but was it a *personal* existence, or one in the mind and purpose of God?”**

—Broughton, Southgate, *The Trinity, True or False?* p. 233

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## John 17:5

**“[Father]...glorify me alongside yourself with the glory that I had alongside you before the world existed.”**

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Anthony Buzzard wrote: “If one approaches the text with the firm belief that Jesus existed before his birth, no doubt, John 17:5 will appear to lend strength to that conviction.”<sup>35</sup> Although I now consider the Socinian interpretation of Jesus’ statement to be quite compelling, this is not an

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<sup>34</sup> According to several English versions, John the Baptist said of Jesus: “This is the one of whom I said: He who comes after me has passed ahead of me because *he existed before me*” (John 1:15, *New Jerusalem Bible*). Socinians generally argue against this translation, preferring “he who comes after me has passed ahead of me because he was before me”, interpreting this to mean, “because he is of a higher rank than I am (‘For he is my superior’ *Emphatic Diaglott*).” But again, it doesn’t really matter if the first translation represents the true sense, for it would simply be taken to mean: “he existed before me [in the mind and plan of God].”

<sup>35</sup> Buzzard & Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound*, p. 210.

entirely true and even-handed suggestion in my opinion. Because one could verily easily approach the text—“glorify me alongside yourself with the glory I had with you before the world was”—without *any kind* of belief that Jesus existed before his human birth and still be left with the strong impression that he existed before the world itself existed (and hence before his physical birth), by this one statement alone. This is the natural implication of Jesus’ statement. Robert Hach wrote:

*Jesus believed ‘the word’ (about his future glory). If so, wouldn’t Jesus’ reference to ‘the glory that I had with you before the world existed’ arguably have been Jesus’ confession of his faith in ‘the word’ (about his purposed glorification through death and resurrection), which he received from the Father through the Spirit (see John 3:34). When the Trinitarian representative in the debate insisted that the Greek tense regarding ‘the glory’ Jesus HAD with the Father ‘before the world existed’ referred to a past completed action (which I had already acknowledged), as if that proved the Son’s personal preexistence, he showed his ignorance of the biblical use of prolepsis (i.e., referring to a future event as if having already occurred) and, therefore, of the biblical meaning of faith as ‘the reality of things hoped for’ (Heb. 11:1).*

I consider this reasonable. But it also seems difficult from my perspective to entirely exclude the possibility that Jesus, in this case, simply meant what he said in a more-or-less literal way. After all, one could argue, Jesus could have said, “Father, glorify me with the glory you purposed for me before the foundation of the world.” Perhaps Jesus *did* mean that. I do not discount that as a valid possibility. But again, who could completely dismiss the possibility that Jesus really meant that he, as God’s Son (the only-begotten god) truly had glory alongside the Father (in the bosom of the Father) before the world was?

*When Jesus asked the Father to ‘glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed,’ wasn’t he asking that the Father to employ that very same past ‘glory’ to ‘glorify’ him now that ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’ (John 12:23) through his death? ...Jesus’ perfect faith is revealed by John 17:5 in his confession that his feared-death-and-hoped-for-resurrection was the glorification God had purposed for him. As such, it was ‘the glory that I had with you before the world existed.’ In light of Heb. 11:1, Jesus referred to ‘the things hoped for,’ his glorification via resurrection and exaltation to God’s right hand—as the ‘reality’ that had existed from ‘the beginning.’ (In light of the biblical meaning of ‘faith,’ and its application to the historical Jesus, John 17:5 becomes a revelation not of Jesus’ memory of ‘personal preexistence’ but of Jesus’ perfect faith in ‘the word.’)*

But even the perfect faith of Jesus that Hach speaks of does not, in my opinion, eliminate the idea that he could have existed as God’s spiritual Son prior to his physical conception. Jesus had genuine faith in God and in the fact that God would raise him from the dead. If Jesus really dwelled in God’s glorious presence before the world was, I think that the faith and

confidence Jesus possessed would have had its very basis in the intimate knowledge he had of the Father (and the Father's plan and power) when he was "in the bosom of the Father" for untold ages. And couldn't one also argue, "When Jesus asked the Father to 'glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed,' wasn't he asking that the Father employ that very same past "glory" he had in the beginning "with God" (John 1:1), in the "form of God [or a god]" (Philippians 2:5) and in 'the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18)? I always took the statement in John 17:5, as brief as it is, to be a rare, precious and beautiful insight into the Father and Son's heavenly relationship before the world as we know it came into being—a case in the Bible where Jesus' gives us a glimpse into the heavenly dwelling place, what went on there, the profound and intimate spiritual bond that existed between God and his divine offspring, his firstborn Son—a glorious picture. But maybe I understood this wrong.

I believe reasonable arguments can be made to support the Socinian view. But I'm not sure of any way to verify those arguments as absolutely certain. But because we find that elsewhere in the Scriptures a similar phenomenon occurs: "**he was wounded for our transgressions...bruised for our iniquities...**" (Isaiah 53:5)"—a future event from Isaiah's perspective, spoken as if it already occurred in *the past*—I don't believe it would be fair or intellectually honest on my part to dismiss the Socinian understanding as unscriptural, unreasonable or indefensible.<sup>36</sup> Actually, we find the same style of language in the immediately surrounding context of John 17:5 itself. This is what, from my perspective, makes the argument so compelling. In fact I never found the Socinian explanation of Jesus' statement convincing until it was pointed out to me how, in the very same context (the same prayer), Jesus evidently spoke of other things that had not yet taken place *as if* they had: "I am no longer in the world" and "not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled." And "The glory that you have given me I have given to them" (v. 22). The nature of these expressions (future, destined events and actions spoken of as if they were completed), to me, make the Socinian interpretation of John 17:5 more meaningful and more defensible. But the tricky part is, Jesus does not limit himself to this way of speaking in his prayer. He almost seems to switch in and out of this "prophetic past tense" way of speaking. At certain points he speaks of future events as if completed in the past; at other points he seems to speak of things rather straightforwardly. For example:

6 "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. 8 For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have

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<sup>36</sup> Buzzard: "There are multiple examples of past tenses in the Hebrew Bible which actually refer to future events. They are 'past' because they describe events fixed in God's counsels and therefore certain to be realized." The most important question is, obviously: Is Jesus' statement at John 17:5, 24 an example of this? And how can we know?

*received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9 I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me.....they are in the world, and I am coming to you.*

*Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and 13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.*

18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world [could be either. He sent the 70 out to preach (past tense). But he *will* send his followers to ‘make disciples of all nations’].

24 Father, I desire that they also, *whom you have given me*, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world [this is reminiscent of ‘the lamb slain from the foundation of the world’ Revelation 13:8]. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and *these know that you have sent me* [better: ‘*the world has not come to know you; but I have come to know you, and these have come to know that you sent me forth*’]. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

So when Jesus requested that his Father glorify him with the glory he had with him before the world was, was this the glory that Jesus had as a pre-existent, heavenly being? Or was this the glory that God had *planned* for him, so certain in God’s purpose that Jesus could speak of that glory as if it was something that existed in the past? I don’t know. Although I find the Socinian arguments difficult to dismiss based on the context and other biblical precedents, I also find it difficult to dismiss the possibility that Jesus meant what his statement seems to naturally imply, namely, that he lived and had glory with God “before the world existed.”<sup>37</sup> So it remains a dilemma for me.

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## Hebrews 1:2; 11:3; 9:26 and the significance of the “ages” that were made through the Son

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<sup>37</sup> The statement about being “*along-side*” God “before the world existed” seems to correspond so well with John 1:1, 18, about the one that was “*with*” God in the beginning and “*in the bosom*” of the Father. And in Proverbs 8:30: “I was *beside him* as a master-worker.” Incidentally, they are all references to that which took place “before the world was,” “before the beginning of the earth” (Proverbs 8:23), and before “all things were made” (John 1:3).



Some translations, like *KJV* and *TEV*, give the impression that it was through the Son that God created the “worlds” that now exist, the present “universe.” If God made the “universe” or existing “worlds” through his Son, this would obviously mean that the Son existed before everything was created by God through him. This comes across as consistent with Paul’s statement in his letter to Colossians: “He is *before* all things” (1:17). If the Son of God is “before” all things in terms of time, and if God created the existing “worlds” through him, this would, obviously, clearly establish the Son’s pre-human existence. But the underlying Greek word used in Hebrews 1:2 is literally “ages.” *NWT* renders it “the systems of things.” The problem is that it is kind of difficult to know with certainty what is meant in this context by “ages.” What “ages” is the author of Hebrews referring to?

It seems that most commentators have taken the term to carry the idea of “worlds” (the created orders of things) and as basically synonymous with the “all things” of John 1:3. The same term “ages (*aiōnas*)” is also used in Hebrews 11:3 which most interpret as a reference to the existing created orders. But this is open to question. It may, in fact, refer to the orders of things God has brought into existence, or will bring into existence, in association with Christ’s kingdom. Yet, it may be significant to note—at the same time—that the terms “age (*aion*)” and “world (*kosmos*)” are used interchangeably in the New Testament on at least two occasions that I am aware of, so the *KJV* and *TEV* are not entirely without justification in their renditions.

Socinian interpreters believe that the statement in Hebrews 2:5—“**the coming inhabited earth which we are speaking of**”—aids us in clarifying what the author has in mind for 1:2. But I am not sure if the “coming inhabited earth” should or can be equated with the “ages” that God created through the Son. It may be. But I just don’t know for sure at this point. Additionally, the author of Hebrews applies a text from Psalm 102 to the Son (a text that originally applied to God in the Hebrew text, yet the writer quotes from the Greek Septuagint), “**in the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth and the heavens are the works of your hands...**” This does obviously seem to point to the original Genesis creation and, in fact, did originally apply to the Genesis creation when first written. But, again, Socinian interpreters take it as a reference to the “*coming* inhabited earth,” the new creation God brings into existence through the Son.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> It is also interesting how Socinians point out that in Psalm 102 verse 18 the author says: “Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD” (*ESV*). They see this as further evidence that the statements made about creation in Hebrew 1 refer, not to the present creation, but to the new created order. But the author of Hebrews does not make reference to this particular statement, so it may not even have any impact on, or relevance to, his intended meaning and purpose in quoting from Psalm 102 and applying it to the Son. And I wonder if in the context this text was originally written if the “generation to come” and the “people yet to be created” referred exclusively to the people/generation of the Messianic age. Or is this more of a general statement, referring to all future generations that would read and derive comfort and strength from the words written by the Psalmist? As one Bible commentator wrote: “It shall be recorded for the instruction and encouragement of future ages. The fact that God has heard the prayer of his people in a time of trial shall be so recorded and remembered that it may be referred to in similar circumstances in all time to come, for he is an unchanging God. What he has done now, he will always be willing to do hereafter.” —*Barnes’ Notes, Psalms*, p. 70.

But I may have come across further, potential evidence to support the Socinian interpretation. I actually stumbled across this when I was investigating the possible meaning behind the “ages” spoken of in Hebrews 1:2, which are, again, said to have been created by God through the Son. I had always thought that the “ages/systems of things” spoken of at Hebrews 1:2 referred to the present created order (the heavens and the earth, the cosmos, the solar systems, galaxies, worlds, etc.), or as *Today’s English Version* translates it: “the universe.” However, my Socinian-Christian friends believe (if I understand them correctly) that the “ages/systems of things” that God created through Christ at Hebrews 1:2 refer, not to the present created orders, but to the *new* “orders/systems of things” that God has brought (or will bring?) into existence through Christ (in ‘these final days’). Again, they also call attention to the statement made in Hebrews 2:5, “Now it was not to angels that God subjected *the world* [more lit., the ‘inhabited earth’] *to come, of which we are speaking.*” They believe that this statement serves as a signal for understanding the context of Hebrews chapter one (but, again I don’t know if it is contextually valid to equate or connect the ‘ages’ spoken of at Hebrews 1:2 with the ‘world/inhabited earth to come’ spoken of at Hebrews 2:5). Also, when the author says that the Son “sustains all things by the word of his power,” this also refers, not to the present universe, but to the new Messianic order, the new creation.

So when I was trying to establish the true sense of the term “ages” at Hebrews 1:2, I thought that the statement made at Hebrews 11:3 (‘By faith we understand the ages to have been prepared [‘created’ *ESV*] by a word of God,’ *Analytical-Literal Translation*) would probably support the notion that God created the *present* created order as we know it through the Son, and that this would effectively establish the point that Christ did in fact exist prior to the creation of universe, thereby proving (or providing further evidence concerning) his “pre-human” existence.

But I found out that the term used at Hebrews 11:3 does not necessarily mean “to create/fashion” (as some translations have it), but to “adjust, set in order, repair, make right, etc.”<sup>39</sup> One commentator pointed out: “The word rendered *created* [for Heb. 11:3] is not the usual term but one which means *to set in order or put to rights* (e.g. it is used at Mark 1:19 of the disciples ‘mending’ their nets)...”<sup>40</sup> So I see how it could make sense that “By faith we perceive that the [*new*] ages/systems of things were put in order by God’s word”—although, admittedly, I do not know what to make of the following statement: “so that what is beheld has come to be out of things that do not appear.”

But if this is more-or-less the true sense (that Hebrews 11:3 points to the *new* ‘systems of things’ set in order by God, rather than the original universe created by his word), I think that this would give added support to the Socinian interpretation of Hebrews 1:2, for both use the same word, “ages/systems of things.” I am still in the process of investigating the

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<sup>39</sup> According to Robertson, the term means “to mend, to equip, to perfect.”

<sup>40</sup> *New Century Bible Commentary, Hebrews*, R. McL. Wilson, p. 203.

matter, and I do not know yet how or by what means we can know the true meaning of the “ages” spoken of at Hebrews 1:2 and 11:3 with confidence. One scholar argued strongly that the “ages” spoken of at Hebrews 11:3 did not refer to the original “worlds” created by God:

That the worlds were framed is not pertinent to this passage. It deals with the change in God’s administration of the eons [ages]...Those associated with this new grace find that, in spirit, not the kingdom, but the new creation has come (2 Co. 5:17), and not only so, but the very consummation has arrived (1 Cor. 10:11). This does not preclude the actual kingdom in the future for which the Hebrews hope. They died in faith, like the elders, not having received the promises. The faith of the Pentecostal Hebrews was largely founded on miracles and signs. Our sheer faith has no foundation but God’s declaration. Therefore, in spirit, we soar far ahead of the Hebrews, beyond the Regeneration, into the new Creation.”<sup>41</sup>

This is, in my opinion, strikingly consistent with the Socinian argument regarding “future” creation events in Hebrews chapter 1. Another commentator argued for the same basic point:

If the truth in this verse is not obscured to readers by this rendering [in the KJV], I am ready to bow to them for being full of wisdom and able to understand ‘dark sentences’! In the early years of my study of the Scriptures, well do I recall the diligence given toward apprehending the truth of this verse, and the more I read it the less I got out of it.

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<sup>41</sup> *Concordant Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 346. The following notes on Hebrews 11:3 may be beneficial to our exploration: “...the verse is sometimes claimed as a proof-text for a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, but this is not stated in so many words...” —*New Century Bible Commentary, Hebrews*, R. McL. Wilson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) p. 203. “This statement is not intended to teach creation *ex nihilo* [‘out of nothing’], or to say anything at all about the character of the prior substance from which the world was made. The writer’s only point is that ‘no purely physical explanation of the world is possible’ (Westcott, Comm., p. 353). Faith looks for its answers beyond that which is seen” —F.F. Bruce, *The International Bible Commentary*, p. 1526. “The ‘ages’ were ‘put in order’ (*katartisthai tous aionas*), not created, as one might expect when the report covers the creation stories in Genesis...The author’s concern for the unseen was not primarily that which was invisible or intangible, but *that which was future*, that which had not yet happened (See Comment on 1:2). It was a concept of time rather than of substance or essence” —*The Anchor Bible, Hebrews*, Buchanan, p. 183. According to others who take the traditional approach: “The writer has already made clear in 1:2 that the Son was the agent through whom God created the world, although, here he uses a more expressive verb (*katertisthai*) for the act of creation. In this context it means ‘to furnish completely or equip’ and thus draws attention to the perfection of the total number of creative acts and sees the whole as a balanced and complete unity” —*Tyndale Commentaries*, p. 227. “*Were framed*. It is observable that the apostle does not here use the word *make or create*. That which he does use (*katartizo*)—means, to put in order, to arrange, to complete, and may be applied to that which before had an existence, and which is to be put in order or re-fitted, Matthew 4:24; Mark 1:19; Matthew 21:16; Hebrews 10:5. The meaning here is, that they *were set in order* by the word of God. This implies the act of creation, but the specific idea is that of *arranging* them in the beautiful order in which they are now. Doddridge renders it ‘adjusted.’ Kuinoel, however, supposes that the word is used here in the sense of form or make. It has probably about the meaning which we attach to the phrase ‘*fitting up anything*’—as, for example, a dwelling—and includes all the previous arrangements, though the thing which is particularly denoted is not the *making*, but the *arrangement*. So in the work here referred to. ‘We arrive at the conviction that the universe was fitted up or arranged, in the present manner, by the word of God’ —*Barnes Notes on the New Testament*. “The word ‘worlds’ is the translation of *aion*. While the context speaks of created things, yet it does not seem that the meaning of *aion* should be limited to the material universe alone. It includes that here, but embraces more. It refers to the created universe and the periods of time as administered by God. Alford says that the expression ‘includes in it all that exists under the conditions of time and space, together with those conditions of time and space themselves, conditions which do not bind God, and did not exist independently of Him, but are themselves the work of His word.’ The words ‘were framed’ are the translation of *katartizo* which means ‘to fit out or equip, so that person or thing thus equipped or fitted out might subserve the purpose for which it was made.’ It speaks of a wise adaptation of part to part and of the whole to its purpose, in this case, of the created universe and the periods of time, by the Word of God” —*Hebrews in the Greek New Testament, For the English Reader*, by Kenneth S. Wuest, Professor of New Testament Greek, The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) p. 195.

Expositors usually darken counsel rather than give illumination and satisfaction to such passages. 'The worlds were framed' is not pertinent to the passage at all, for 'worlds' are not under consideration. The translators of the Revised Version corrected this in their marginal note. The original word here, from which 'worlds' is translated is *aionas*, and, as we have verified by many proofs in Chapter IV, should always be translated 'eons' or 'ages'. The verse deals with God's change in His administration of the eons as a result of Israel's refusal of the *re-offering* of the kingdom as recorded in the book of Acts....'what is being observed' now—the present 'secret administration, which has been concealed from the eons in God', and the 'church which is the body of Christ' with an allotment of celestial glory—has not come out of what was apparent, that is, the kingdom...The truth is so completely lost through faulty translation and the debris of human tradition that only by appealing to the internal evidences of the Word in its purity do we hope to establish this revelation of God in the hearts of His people.<sup>42</sup>

The translation notes in the *Emphatic Diaglott* (a work of Unitarian scholarship) similarly present the following argument:

The original word has been literally rendered, both in this place, and in Heb 1.2., as best agreeing with the argument of the writer. In fact *aioones*, properly signifies, *ages*, or *periods of time*, and as justly observed by *Wakefield*, *Sykes*, *Kneeland*, and *Improved Version*, 'there is no instance in the New Testament where more than this seems to be meant by the word,' and therefore ought to be so rendered in this passage. Faith being defined in ver. 1, as 'a basis of things hoped for, and a conviction of things unseen,' must necessarily have a connection with God's word or promise to be fulfilled at some future period of time, and therefore precludes the idea contained in ver. 3 of the Common Version, that the apostle was referring to the past creation of the *worlds*, or the material universe. To understand the works of creation does not belong to faith. Faith in this place refers to what was to be developed in future *aioones*, or ages, in conformity to God's promises, and is amply illustrated in the remaining portion of the chapter.<sup>43</sup>

In case the subject matter I am presenting seems obscure at this stage, the point is, if the reference to the "ages" in Hebrews 11:3 is orientated toward the **future**<sup>44</sup> rather than to the **past**, then this provides strong

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<sup>42</sup> Adlai Loudy, *God's Eonian Purpose*, (Santa Clarita, Concordant Publishing Concern, First edition, 1929, Second Printing, 1991) pp. 101-103.

<sup>43</sup> Adam Clarke, however, sees a reference to the original creation on the basis of the words: "the things which are seen, not being made out of the things which appear": "By *worlds*, τῶν αἰώνων, we are to understand the *material fabric of the universe*; for αἰών can have no reference here to age or any measurement of time, for he speaks of the *things which are SEEN*; *not being made out of the things which do APPEAR*; this therefore must refer to the *material creation*: and as the word is used in the *plural* number, it may comprehend, not only the earth and visible heavens, but the whole planetary system; the different worlds which, in our system at least, revolve round the sun. The apostle states that these things were *not made* out of a *pre-existent matter*; for if they were, that matter, however extended or *modified*, must *appear* in that thing into which it is compounded and modified, consequently it could not be said that the things which are *seen* are not made of the things that *appear*; and he shows us also, by these words, that the present mundane fabric was not formed or *reformed* from one anterior, as some suppose. According to Moses and the apostle we believe that God made all things out of *nothing*."

<sup>44</sup> Which makes sense in terms of the context "by faith we understand...", with faith having to do with confidence in "things not yet seen." Yet this makes it difficult to interpret "the things which are seen came to be out of things which are invisible."

evidence, in my opinion, that the “ages” of Hebrews 1:2 are as well, since both use the term *tous aiōnas*.<sup>45</sup>

One could even argue that “faith” normally has reference to that which is future—faith in a promise, faith and trust that God will carry out his pronounced purpose, in his own time. In fact, “**faith is the assurance [substance/reality] of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen**” according to the very same author (Hebrews 1:1, *NASB*). Thus, by “faith we understand the ages to have been fitted together by declaration of God” (*Rotherham*). Or as another translation puts it: “By [faith] we apprehend that the Aeons were instituted [set right] by the Divine utterance...” (Schonfield, *The Original New Testament*).

This makes the case appear quite solid. But, in point of fact, faith is not exclusively restricted in the Bible to belief and confidence in the fulfillment of future promises or events. After all, it takes “faith” on our part to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead (a past event); and similarly, it takes “faith” to believe the scriptural testimony that God created/prepared the present universe by his mighty command (Genesis 1). We were not there to witness these events. But we accept them on faith. We believe, not only in future events, but in all things the Bible speaks of which we cannot see with our physical eyes. In all things, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). And “Although you have not seen him you love him [Jesus, a figure who appeared in the past; 2000 year ago from our perspective]; even though you do not see him now yet you believe [exercise *faith, NWT*] in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy...” (1 Peter 1:8, 9).<sup>46</sup>

On behalf of the more common view that sees Hebrews 1:2 as a reference to the creation of the universe (including time and space), the present orders of things.<sup>47</sup> Deuble points out that Hebrews 1:2 says “God has ‘appointed’ His Son to be the ‘heir of all things’ and that it was ‘through him that He made the world(s).’ Here our translations are unfortunately not quite accurate and miss the author’s impact. What the author wrote was not

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<sup>45</sup> I found some translations that appear more supportive of this understanding: “By [faith] we apprehend that the Aeons were instituted by the Divine utterance, so that what is seen did not proceed from any visible causes.” — *Schonfield* “By faith we understand the ages to have been prepared by the word of God.” — *A Conservative Version* “By faith we are apprehending the eons to adjust to a declaration of God, so that what is being observed has not come out of what is appearing” — *Concordant Literal New Testament* “By faith we understand the ages to have been prepared by a word of God, for the [things] being visible not to have come from the [things] seen.” — *Analytical-Literal Translation of the New Testament of the Holy Bible, Translated by Gary F. Zeolla* “In faith we perceive to have been adjusted the ages by a word of God, in order that not out of things appearing the things being seen to have happened.” — *Emphatic Diaglott, Benjamin Wilson* “By faith we understand the ages to have been fitted together by declaration of God—to the end that not out of things appearing should that which is seen have come into existence.” — *Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible* “by faith we understand the ages to have been prepared by a saying of God, in regard to the things seen not having come out of things appearing” — *Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*

<sup>46</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” — John 20:29, *RSV*

<sup>47</sup> “Literally, ‘ages’ with all things and persons belonging to them; the universe, including all space and ages of time, and all material and spiritual existences. The *Greek* implies, He not only appointed His Son heir of all things before creation, but *He also* (better than ‘also He’) made by Him the worlds. (James Fausset Brown on Heb. 1:2) — Jamieson Fausset Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Electronic Version)

that through Jesus God made the ‘world(s),’ but ‘ages.’ We get our English word *eon* from this Greek word.”<sup>48</sup>

Deuble is correct in noting that the author of Hebrews uses the term “ages” (*aionos*: plural of *aion*) and not “worlds” (*kosmois*: plural of *kosmos*). But—as I mentioned—the *King James Version* and others are not entirely without justification in such a rendering.<sup>49</sup> For the Scripture clearly uses the term “age(s)” and “world(s)” (*kosmos*) interchangeably. In one place (1 Corinthians 1:20; 2:6; 3:19) Paul wrote:

“Where is the wise man? Where the scribe? Where the debater of this age?...Now we speak wisdom among those who are mature, but not **the wisdom of this age** [*tou aionos*] nor that of the rulers of this age, who are to come to nothing...For the **wisdom of this world** [*tou kosmou*] is foolishness with God; for it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their own cunning.’”

Yet there is further supporting evidence. *Aion* and *kosmos* appear to be equated in another context. This is made clear, I believe, when we compare two descriptions of Satan by two different people in the Scriptures. Paul called him “the god of this age (*aion*)” (2 Cor 4:4); and Jesus referred to the same one three times as “the ruler of this world (*kosmos*)” (John 12:31 14:30 16:11). These are clearly parallel statements, carrying with them the same essential connotation. But why is the wicked one described as “the god of this age”? Evidently, it is because, as John states in his first letter, “the whole world [*kosmos*] lies” in this one’s power. Since “world” and “age” can be used synonymously in Scripture, this makes it possible that the “ages” created by God through the Son was correctly understood by the *KJV* translators and appropriately rendered “worlds.”

**The key-question: Is the “the inhabited earth to come” (Heb. 2:5) equivalent to, or explanatory of, “the ages” that God made through the Son? (Heb. 1:2)”**

Whatever the case may be regarding the legitimacy of translating *aiōnas* as “worlds,” Socinians interpreters still argue that the “ages/worlds” created by God through the Son do not refer to the present world systems, but to the “world to come” (Hebrews 2:5).<sup>50</sup> So I think the question is, can “the world [lit., inhabited earth<sup>51</sup>] to come” (Heb. 2:5) be equated with “the

<sup>48</sup> Deuble, *They never told me this in church*, p. 186.

<sup>49</sup> *KJV* has “worlds.” *RSV* has “world” (singular). *TEV*: “the universe.” *NWT*: “the systems of things.”

<sup>50</sup> It should be pointed out that not all Socinian interpreters have explained Hebrews 1:2 in the same way. Anthony Buzzard argued: “There is nothing here which implies that Jesus created the heaven and earth. What is said is that the One God, who on His own testimony, as we have seen, was unaccompanied in the act of creation (Isa. 44:24), established the ages of human history with Jesus at the center of His purpose, prior to speaking through the Son only ‘in these last days.’” This is similar to those who have argued that the phrase means “on account of [the Son] God made the ages” (*Emphatic Diaglott*). This is not in agreement with Deuble who does not see the “ages” of Hebrew 1:2 as a reference to “the ages of human history.” Again, he sees them as referring to “the new Messianic order of things.”

<sup>51</sup> “It is worth noting that the word used here for ‘world’ is not *kosmos* (the world as a system) but the world of inhabitants (*oikoumene*).”<sup>51</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) p. 84. Other translations have: “Now it was not to angels that God made subject that future state of affairs of which we are speaking...” (*Schonfield*); “the impending inhabited earth, concerning which we are speaking.” “habitable world coming” (*Interlinear, J. P. Green*). “The phrase *the world to come* means “the coming inhabited

ages” (Heb. 1:2) which God created through the Son?<sup>52</sup> I’m not sure. If that is what the author of Hebrews had in mind, it may have helped for clarification purposes if he would have written, “in the last of these days God has spoken through a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he makes the age/world to come [*tō aiōni tō erchomenō*; compare Mark 10:30]” or “the coming ages” [*te mellontos aiōnos*, as in Heb. 6:5].”<sup>53</sup> Or perhaps “through whom he creates *the inhabited earth*.”<sup>54</sup> Or, in Hebrews 2:5, if he would have said “the coming ages [*te mellontos aiōnos*] which we are speaking of [*peri ēs laloumen*].” Either way, this would make the connection between 1:2 and 2:5 very clear and 2:5 could be confidently accepted as serving to clarify the meaning of 1:2.

In a reference work called *Insight on the Scriptures* (produced by the Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society), the meaning of the term “ages” (‘systems of things,’ according to NWT) is discussed. But the writer seems to regard the meaning of the term as ambiguous in both Hebrews 1:2 and Hebrews 11:3:

There are various systems of things [‘ages’], or prevailing states of affairs, that have existed or will exist. Those brought about by God through his Son are, obviously, righteous systems of things...By means of his ransom sacrifice and the new covenant that it validated, Jesus Christ was used by God to bring in a different system of things, one primarily involving the congregation of anointed Christians. (Heb 8:7-13) This marked the opening of a new epoch, characterized by the realities foreshadowed by the Law covenant. It brought in a ministry of reconciliation, intensified operations of God’s holy spirit, worship through a spiritual temple with spiritual sacrifices (1 Pe 2:5) instead of a literal temple and animal sacrifices; a relationship with God that meant a new way of life for those in the new covenant. All of these were features characterizing that system of things introduced by Christ...The plural form of *aion* is used at Ephesians 2:7 in referring to the ‘coming systems of things’...Hebrews 11:3 states: ‘By faith we perceive that the systems of things [plural of *aion*] were put in order by God’s word, so that what is beheld has come to be out of things that do not appear.’ Many consider the text at Hebrews 1:2 to be parallel in its use of the plural form of *aion*; it says that Jehovah spoke through his Son, Jesus Christ, ‘whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the systems of things.’ The particular meaning of the Greek word *aion* in these two verses has been variously understood.

One way to understand them is to view the Greek term as referring to the distinguishing characteristic features of a time period. In Hebrews chapter 11, the inspired writer is discussing how, by faith, ‘the men of old times had witness borne to them.’ (Vs 2) Then, in his succeeding words, he presents examples of faithful men in the pre-Flood era, in the patriarchal epoch, and in the period of Israel’s covenant relationship with God. During all these distinct periods, and by means of the developments caused, formed, and accomplished

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earth,” using the Greek term which describes the world of people and their civilizations.” (NET footnote). Rotherham has: “For not unto messengers hath he subjected the coming habitable earth of which we are speaking.” In a footnote Rotherham points out: “The world to come, according to the opinion of the ancient synagogue, means the renovated earth under the reign of the Messiah” (Adolph Saphir, on ‘Hebrews’).” —*Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible*

<sup>52</sup> Schonfield translates it: “By him also he instituted the Aeons.” —*The Original New Testament*

<sup>53</sup> Or the author of Hebrews could have said, “through whom [God] made the ages to come [*tois aiōsin tois eperchomenois* ‘the coming systems/orders of things.’ Interlinear translation: ‘the ages the (ones) coming upon’], as in Ephesians 2:7.

<sup>54</sup> In this case Hebrews 2:5 would seem to provide a clear-cut clarification of Hebrews 1:2.

in them, God was working out his purpose to eliminate rebellion and provide the way for reconciliation with himself on the part of deserving humans by means of successive 'systems of things.' So those men of old had to have, and did have, faith that the invisible God was indeed directing matters in an orderly manner. They believed that he was the unseen Producer of the various systems of things and that the goal they sought, 'the fulfillment of the promise,' was an absolute certainty in God's due time. In faith, they looked forward to the further outworking of God's purpose, which included the system of things produced by the new covenant based on Jesus' sacrifice.—Heb 11:39, 40; 12:1, 18-28.

Another way to understand the use of *aion* in Hebrews 1:2 and 11:3 is that it is an equivalent of the Greek term *kosmos* in the sense of the world or universe, the totality of created things including the sun, moon, stars, and the earth itself. This view is evidently supported by the statement in Hebrews 11:3 that 'what is beheld has come to be out of things that do not appear.' This verse could also be taken as a reference to the Genesis creation account, which could logically precede Paul's references to Abel (vs 4), Enoch (vss 5, 6), and Noah (vs 7). Thus, Paul may have been expanding upon his definition of faith by referring to the existence of the universe consisting of sun, moon, and stars as clear evidence that there is a Creator.—Compare Ro 1:20.<sup>55</sup>

The plural "ages" occurs several times in the letters of Paul, nearly all of which appear to refer to the present "orders of things," the existing world systems or periods of time. This may help us to understand the meaning of the "ages" spoken of at Hebrews 1:2. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

"Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery/secret, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory..."<sup>56</sup>

Later, in the same letter, Paul said:

"These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come."<sup>57</sup>

According to first Corinthians, God predestined the hidden wisdom Paul speaks of "before the ages."<sup>58</sup> This is clearly a reference to the present and past ages. And the "end of the ages (plural)" has come upon us. Are these the same "ages" God created through the Son (Heb. 1:2)?

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<sup>55</sup> *Insight on the Scriptures, Volume 2* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1988), pp. 1055-1057.

<sup>56</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:6, 7, *NASB*

<sup>57</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:11, *NAB*

<sup>58</sup> "Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints..."—Colossians 1:25, 26, *NASB*. The "word/wisdom" of God is the "mystery/secret" hidden from "past ages," a seemingly clear reference to 1 Corinthians 2:6, 7. Compare with Ephesians 3:8-10: "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which *for ages has been hidden in* God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places." —Ephesians 3:9, 10, *NASB*



And perhaps more significantly, later in the same letter to the Hebrews (9:26), the author makes the point:

“For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf. Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own; if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world. But now once for all he has appeared at **the end of the ages** [*sunteleia tōn aiōnōn*] to take away sin by his sacrifice.”<sup>59</sup>

Christ has appeared once for all at the “end of the ages” to give his life as a sacrifice. Again, are these the same “ages” God brought into existence through him? If so, the ages God created through his Son (Heb. 1:2) evidently do not refer exclusively to the future ages, the promised ages to come, as suggested by Deuble. In fact, all of these texts may support the notion that the “ages” spoken of in Hebrews 1:2 are the original “ages/orders of things” (as opposed to the new). That is, God has “made the ages” through the Son (Hebrews 1:2), yet the Son has “appeared at the *end of the ages*” to take away sin (Hebrews 9:26).<sup>60</sup>

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## Colossians 1:15, 16

“He is...the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things...”

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I have always viewed the opening statements in the letters to the Colossians and Hebrews as rock-solid texts supporting the pre-human existence of Jesus Christ. But now, after reading Greg Deuble’s discussions on these texts in his new book, I am not so sure.

(v.15) “He [the beloved Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

I have always taken these expressions in a more-or-less literal way. Jesus is (not God but) the “image” of the God who cannot be seen by human eyes; the perfect, visible representation of the unseen God. He is God’s Son, the “firstborn” *of all creation*. That is, out of all the creation, Christ, the

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<sup>59</sup> Hebrews 9:25, 26, *NAB*

<sup>60</sup> Although one might notice a difference in the Greek between “*tous aionas*” (Heb. 1:2; 11:3) and “*ton aionon*” (Heb. 9:26), they are, as Solomon Landers points out, “really the same plural word, but with grammatical case changes. In Hebrews 1:2 and 11:3, the Greek form of ‘ages’ is accusative masculine plural case, as the object of the verbs ‘(he) made’ and ‘(were) framed or fashioned.’ At Hebrews 9:26, ‘ages’ is also masculine plural, but in the Greek genitive case, in conjunction with the noun ‘consummation’ (of the ages). In each sentence, ‘ages’ is masculine plural, but the spelling of the Greek word changes according to whether ‘ages’ is affected by the action of a verb (accusative case) or is in conjunction with a noun (genitive case)” (Correspondence 8/17/06).

beloved Son of God, was the first one to be born, or the first one to come into existence.

(v.16) “For in [‘the beloved Son’] were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him.”

I have always taken verse 16 (in light of Hebrews 1:3) to mean that Christ was the one “in” or “by means of” whom God created “all things (the entire universe, the created order).” Again, not that they were created “by” God’s Son (as evangelicals often wrongly claim), but that they were created by God *through* the Son (Compare John 1:10, Hebrews 1:2; 1 Cor. 8:6).

(v.17) He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

To me this always meant, God’s Son is before all things in the terms of the sequence of time (with the obvious exception of God, the one who begat him). That is, he existed before everything else as God’s “first” born Son (demonstrating the beloved Son’s priority and preeminence in the mind, heart and purpose of God), the very one through whom “all things” came to be. “In him all things hold together.” That is, God sustains the entire universe by means of his him; or perhaps, that God had endowed his Son with the office and power of sustaining the universal creation.

However, in his work, *They never told me this in Church*, Greg Deuble suggests an entirely different approach to interpretation, one that does not see in these verses any reference to the original Genesis creation and no concept of a pre-human Son of God. If I understand him correctly, he argues that verse 13 is the key in terms of setting up the context in which these verses should be understood:

(v.13) “[God] delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, (14) in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

That is to say, everything said in the remaining verses is to be understood in the realm/context of the kingdom that Christians have been transferred into. Thus, Christ is, in the domain/realm of the kingdom, “the image of the invisible God.” He is the one Christians now look to in order to have an accurate picture and understanding of God. He is “the firstborn of all creation.” That is, Jesus is the firstborn of the *new* creation, the creation that now exists in association with the kingdom realm. But I don’t think Deuble understands the term “firstborn” literally. He interprets it to carry the connotation of “headship” or “preeminence.” “**Christ is now *the head of God’s new creation***” (Deuble p. 224). Deuble does acknowledge, “If ‘first’ in the word ‘first-born’ means only precedence in time, and if ‘creation’ means the original creation of Genesis 1, then the case for Christ’s personal preexistence is strong” (Deuble, p. 225). But he does not

believe that this meaning for 'firstborn' fits the context. Again, he believes the context favors the notion of Christ being, in effect, the firstborn of (the new) creation.

One thing I thought would help to test this was to read the chapter with this understanding in mind to see if it seemed to fit more naturally and more satisfactorily than the other way of looking at it. That is what I did, and, in my opinion, it does seem to fit. But, again, it is an interpretation. Paul did *not* say that Christ was **“the firstborn/head of the *new* creation.”** If he did, there would be no room for doubt. Paul did not say that. I would also argue that when Paul describes God's Son as the firstborn of **“all creation,”** the mind naturally thinks “all creation (all that exists, all that God created)” not “the *new* creation.” But is that what he essentially meant? I do not reject this as a valid possibility.

(v.16) **“For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him.”**

Interestingly, Deuble points out that Paul did *not* say, “for in him were created heaven and earth” but “in him were created all things *in* heaven and on earth...” whether thrones, dominions, principalities or powers, all these things were created through Christ and for Christ. So although the text does say “all things,” I think Deuble believes that the “all things” is *qualified* in its context by the reference to these *governmental* structures that have been created through and for Christ. That is, governmental structures relating to the new kingdom order.

(v.17) **“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”**

He is not before all things in terms of time, but rather, he is before of all things in the sense that he has authority over all things, and in him, all things (associated with this new order) hold together. This also makes reasonable sense, for Paul goes on to speak of things that *now exist, new things, new orders* that God has brought into existence by means of him. For Christ **“is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning [of the new creation?—*that* makes sense], the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross (through him), whether those on earth or those in heaven.”**

So one could argue that, in certain expressions made ('first born of all creation,' 'in him were all things created,' 'he is before all things'), Paul did not intend to point back to the original Genesis creation. He is concerned with the *new things* that have been effected by God through Christ; the reconciliation that takes place, the transference of believers from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God's Son, the headship of Christ over the assembly of Christians (the church), etc. Deuble quotes Kuschel who

says, “The direct context of the Colossians hymn is itself of an *eschatological kind* and represents the ‘shift of the ages” (Deuble, p. 223). Deuble summarizes the significance of this approach: “It is this new creation that I understand to be the subject of Colossians 1:15-17. If this view is correct, the personal preexistence of Christ is not at all the subject of our text, contrary to popular interpretation” (Deuble, p. 229). And he concludes: “the Colossians hymn is not making a statement about the act of creation in the past, but is rather about creation as believers are to see it now in the light of Christ’s new status as resurrected Lord.”

This is a very plausible, contextually-based and *honorable* interpretation of Colossians chapter one; and Deuble may be correct. Yet it is worth pointing out that it is actually not entirely unusual or out of character for Paul to make reference to the original (Genesis) creation when the context itself appears to be “eschatological” in character. Take careful note of Paul’s statement in Ephesians 3:8-10:

“To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been **hidden in God who created all things**; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.”

The context is clearly eschatological. It is concerned with the things of a new dispensation. To Paul “grace was given” (‘The law was given through Moses’ but ‘*grace* and truth came through Jesus Christ’; the one who ‘has appeared at the *end of the ages*,’ John 1:17; Hebrews 9:26) so that Paul could “preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ” and to “bring to light the administration of the mystery/secret which has been hidden for ages...” Of course, the revealing of these things are taking place in these last days (‘the mystery which has been hidden from the *past ages* and generations, but has *now* been manifested to his holy ones’ Colossians 1:26); yet Paul makes the point that the secret he speaks of (‘the word of God’ which he has been commissioned to make ‘fully known’ Colossians 1:25) was hidden in God “**who created all things.**” If Paul does this here, how, in light of the “eschatological” context, can we rule out the possibility—in light of the “eschatological” context of Colossians chapter one—that Paul could have described Jesus Christ as “the firstborn of all creation,” the one in whom “all things have been created,” and as the one who is “before all things,” as a proof of Christ’s priority and preeminence in God’s purposes, both in terms of time and character. Just as Paul reminds us that the sacred secret has been hidden for ages in the one “who created all things” in Ephesians chapter 2, Paul, in Colossians chapter 1, could have very well been emphasizing that all the new things that are taking place (in the church by the reconciliation) are taking place through and because of the one through whom “all things” in the universe (visible and invisible)

were made, the “firstborn of all creation (the first being God brought into existence),” the very “Son of [God’s] love” (Colossians 1:13).

I noted earlier how Deuble called attention to the fact that Paul did not say that “heaven and earth” were created in the beloved Son, but “all things *in* heaven and on earth,” viewing this as a significant distinction.<sup>61</sup> But I wonder if perhaps the expression “in him were created all things *in* heaven and on earth” is, in fact, a distinction without a difference. I wonder if it is simply an idiomatic way of Paul saying that “everything” was created in or by means of the beloved Son; and when Paul speaks of “thrones, dominions powers, authorities,” that this could have been said as a means of emphasizing that very point. In other words, “*all things* have been created through [Christ], *even* the powers and authorities; absolutely everything, visible and invisible.”<sup>62</sup> I think this is the impression the *New World Translation* gives: “by means of him all things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, the things visible<sup>63</sup> and the things invisible, *no matter whether they are* thrones or lordships or governments or authorities. All things have been created through him and for him.”

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## John 1:, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 1:2 viewed together

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It is, of course, not without reason that students of the Bible have been moved to believe that the Son of God was the very one “in” and “through” whom God brought “all things” into existence. There are four passages in particular (when considered together and in light of each other) that all appear to be referring to the same concept; namely, that God is the universal creator of all things (the primary source), whereas his Son is the one through whom God brought all things into being (the instrumental agency):

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<sup>61</sup> I thought it interesting to find one 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Bible commentator expressing awareness of and disagreement with the “Socinian” exposition of this text in his notes: “The phrase which is here used by the apostle is universal. He does not declare that he created all things in the spiritual kingdom of God, or that he arranged the events of the gospel dispensation, as Socinians suppose (see Crellius); but that everything was created by [literally ‘in’ or ‘by means of’] him. A similar form of expression occurs in John 1:3...There could not possibly be a more explicit declaration that the universe was created by [literally ‘in’] Christ, than this.” —*Barnes Notes, Ephesians to Philemon*, Albert Barnes (Grand Rapids: Baker, Original publication: 1847; Reprinted: 2005) p. 248. I agree that the “all things” (created through the beloved son) in Colossians 1:16 appears to be the same as the “all things” (created through the word) of John 1:3.

<sup>62</sup> Greg Schumacher interpreted the verse along the same lines: “I’d say in v16, at least in the English, it would be more naturally read that ‘in the Son all things were created and included in that are some examples that I [Paul] am listing to prove a point.’”

<sup>63</sup> I also noticed that Deuble did not attempt to explain what is meant by “the visible and invisible.” To me the reference to “visible” things particularly suggests the notion of “physical” things that presently exist, things we can now see with our eyes (society, the world and all things in it—the sea, the dry land, the sun, moon, stars, etc.).

John 1:3: “All things came into existence through [the *logos*], and apart from [the *logos*] not even one thing came into existence.”

John 1:10 (the thought is repeated): “He was in the world [a clear reference to Jesus], and the world came into existence through him, but the world did not know him.”

1 Corinthians 8:6: “yet for us there is one God, the Father, out of [Gk: ek] whom all things are and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist.”

Colossians 1:16: “For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him.”

“[God] has at the end of these days spoken to us by means of a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the ages/orders of things [interpreted by some translators as ‘through whom he made’ ‘the worlds’ *KJV*; ‘the whole universe’, *PME*, *NAB*, *NIV*, *TEV*; ‘everything there is’ *JB*; ‘all orders of existence’ *NEB*].”

In reference to John 1:10 “**the world came into existence through him,**” the obvious question is: If the world came into existence through the one who “was in the world” how could the one who “was in the world” not have existed before he was in the world that was created through (*dia*) him?

In his recently-released work, *They never told me this in church*, Greg Deuble explains his view of the text in this way:

When we read in John 1:10 that ‘he was in the world, and the world was made **through** him, and the world did not know him’ does Scripture indicate that after all Jesus himself created the world? Not at all if we consider the whole uniform context we have been considering. The Father is the sole origin and Creator of ‘all things.’ In contrast, Jesus is the Father’s commissioned Lord Messiah through whom God’s plan for this world is coming to completion. The whole Bible from cover to cover categorically states that God created the universe and all the ages with Jesus Christ at the centre of His eternal purpose. Jesus is the *diameter* running all the way through. And the tragedy that this verse highlights is that although Jesus the promised Messiah came to the Jews who knew God’s intention, they did not recognize him when he appeared. The Jews longed for, prayed for, yearned for the One who would come according to God’s promise and usher in this glorious hope for the world, but they were blinded by their man-made religious traditions. The Jews who craved for the promised Kingdom of God and the promised Lord Messiah who would finally unite all the world’s history under God missed it. ‘The world was made through him,’ i.e. with Christ in mind. Everything will be gathered up, summed up in him, yet even to this day our world does not see this or nor the One who in God’s purpose will bring the goal of creation to pass at his Second Coming.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Deuble, *They never told me this in church*, pp. 188, 189.

I do not dismiss this interpretation as impossible. And what Deuble states regarding Jesus Christ as the one “through whom God’s plan for this world is coming to completion” and that “God created the universe and all the ages with Jesus Christ at the centre of his eternal purpose,” this is certainly true and verifiable from a scriptural perspective. But Deuble’s exposition of John 1:10 is difficult to prove, particularly in the context of rigorous theological debate.<sup>65</sup> What I mean, simply, is that in John 1:10 John *did not say* “The world was created with Christ in mind.” When Deuble says, “‘The world was made through him,’ i.e. with Christ in mind,” there really is some difficulty (based on the language itself) in accepting that “through him” is equivalent to “with Christ in mind,” as if this is the most natural and most obvious way to understand the notion that “the world was made *through* him.”<sup>66</sup> It seems equally difficult to deny the possibility that “**the world was made through him**” really does mean that “**the world was made through him.**” That is to say, that God’s Son was the medium or instrument through whom God made everything that exists. I am also left wondering, if the world *really* was made through God’s Son, what would John have had to say to prove this to Socinian interpreters? How else could John have taught this? What words would make this clear if not the ones he already uses?

In 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul said: “for us there is one God, the Father, out of whom all things are and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist.” But it was argued by one writer:

“...the theological *ta panta* [‘all things’] might refer to the very first creation of the world; by contrast, the Christological *ta panta* refers (as is usual in Paul) to the prevailing circumstances in the present.”<sup>67</sup>

Kuschel may be correct about this. But I do not see anything in the context of 1 Cor. 8:6 itself that limits or qualifies or defines the “all things” that came “out of” God and “through” Christ. Is not Paul making a universal statement? There are many so-called gods and lords in the world; but for Christians with knowledge there is only one God, the Father, out of whom are ‘all things’ [compare: ‘God who created all things,’ Ephesians 3:9], and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things...” That is, our God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the one, true creator of “all things” (that is why he is the true God; he is not a lifeless idol, but the living creator out of whom all things came into existence), and there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the one “through” and “by means of” whom God brought everything into existence (John 1:10). I do not feel comfortable arguing that this is the definitive interpretation; but I do feel that this is a very natural and sensible

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<sup>65</sup> That is, if one were to present this view as the true interpretation of John 1:10 over against the traditional view that sees Christ as the agency through whom God created the world, it could be difficult for to accept Deuble’s conclusion because those with the opposing view could be said to be simply taking the text as it stands.

<sup>66</sup> Again, Deuble may be correct on this point. But it is important to keep in mind the very real, interpretive stumbling blocks that are present, especially from the viewpoint of one who is sincerely and open-mindedly approaching the Scriptures with the question: Did the Son of God exist before the world or not?

<sup>67</sup> Deuble quoting Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 290. (p. 188)

way to look at it, scripturally and logically. If the reference to Christ as the one “through whom all things are” applies only to the “prevailing circumstances in the present,” what signal or clue can we point to in the context that would lead us to accept this?

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## Other Relevant Scriptures...

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In his essay, *The Nature of Preexistence in the New Testament*, Anthony Buzzard observed:

There is a deafening silence about any real preexistence of Christ in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts and Peter, and the whole of the Old Testament.

But we could also say there is a “deafening silence” about Jesus as “the word” made flesh, about Jesus as “the lamb of God,” the resurrection of Lazarus, the turning of water into wine, and a whole host of other extremely significant events and claims made by Jesus in John but that appear nowhere in the other Gospels. Where is Jesus called “the way, and the truth, and the life” in Matthew, Mark and Luke? Where is he portrayed as “the word made flesh”?

Not only do they not hint at a pre-human Son of God, they contradict the idea by talking of the *origin (genesis)* of Jesus (Matt. 1:18) and his **begetting as Son** (Matt. 1:20) *in Mary’s womb*. Note that for Arians and Trinitarians, who think that Jesus was begotten in eternity long before his conception/begetting in Mary, this would be a *second* begetting. Luke knows nothing of such an idea.<sup>68</sup>

But again, if we say this, we could also say that in Jesus, “the word/*logos*” that was “with God” in the beginning “became flesh” (according to John), yet “Luke [along with Matthew and Mark] knows nothing of such an idea (simply because they make no mention of it and expresses no explicit awareness of it in their writings).” But obviously, this does not cancel out the truthfulness of such a concept. This a point I believe needs to be kept in mind, a point that may give more balance to the expressed perspective.

Unprejudiced readers will see (as acknowledged by a host of biblical experts) that the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke Acts and Peter is a human being originating at his ‘begettal’ and birth as do all other human persons. He has not preexisted. Matthew even speaks of the ‘genesis’ of Jesus in Matt. 1:18.

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<sup>68</sup> It might be worth remembering that the notion of a “second begetting” may not be entirely foreign to Scripture (though not necessarily in reference to Christ): “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” (Jesus’ words to Nicodemus; John 3:3, 7) In fact, Christians themselves *must* experience a “second begetting”: (1) physical birth (obviously), and (2) spiritual birth through the word of the Gospel.



It is understandable that Socinian interpreters would point to Matthew 1:18 as evidence of the true and only “origin/genesis” of Jesus. But this may or may not carry with it the significance often ascribed to it. Because those who affirm the (limited or eternal) “pre-human” existence of God’s Son would also affirm that Matthew 1:18 describes the origin/genesis of “Jesus.” That is, the beginning of the “man” Jesus Christ, and that the name “Jesus” itself came to be used of the Son of God for the first time when the Son was born as a man. And if the terms “firstborn of all creation” and “the beginning of the creation by God” (Colossians 1:15; Revelation 3:14) mean what they seem to mean on the surface, one could argue that the Son’s “birth/beginning” represented the very first life-giving act of God, from the perspective of universal history. This may be at least one of the reasons why the Son is described as God’s “firstborn” son, and as the “exact reproduction [charakter] of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:3, 6).

According to the *New American Bible* translation, John the Baptist spoke about Jesus in this way:

“The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.”

F. F. Bruce translated it:

“‘He who is coming after me has taken precedence over me, for he existed before me’”

This obviously strongly suggests that Jesus had a pre-human existence, since John the Baptist was born months before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Protestant Albert Barnes was dogmatic in his interpretation of this text. He argued: “This can refer to nothing but [Jesus’] preexistence.” The comments in the *Interpreter’s Bible* are similar: “Ranks before me (lit., ‘has come to be before me’) gives the true meaning. The last clause, for he was before me, must refer to the pre-existence of the Logos.”<sup>69</sup> But Greg Deuble suggests that it really comes down to “an issue of translation. The Greek may equally read...because he is first [Greek *protos*] in regard of me,’ (RV), meaning, ‘he is better than me,’ my superior, my chief...The Greek is ambiguous and ‘first’ may refer to either rank or time. ...It is my conviction that the sense is, ‘he has gone ahead of me because he is my superior” (Deuble, p. 190). The *Analytical-Literal Translation* has what might be thought of as a more neutral translation:

‘The One coming after me before me has come to be, for He was before me.’”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 8, p. 476, 477

<sup>70</sup> “This is the one of whom I said: He who comes after me has passed ahead of me because he existed before me.” — *New Jerusalem Bible* “The one who is coming after me has already superseded me, for he was before me.” — *The Four Gospels* by Charles Cutler Torrey, 1933

A modern, conservative evangelical commentary points out, in harmony with Deuble:

While the NEB interprets 1:15 in this way ('before I was born, he already was'), there are no indications that John was aware of Jesus' pre-existence as the Word. It may be that John meant only to say that Jesus 'surpassed him' because he was always greater than him (even though he was born six months later).<sup>71</sup>

Deuble believes this is the correct way to understand the text. He may be right. But I disagree with what he says about it coming down to an issue of translation. I think we need to recognize—as I already pointed out—that the underlying truth of the matter is, even if the translation/sense is established as “he existed before me,” this wouldn't really make a difference from the Socinian perspective. Again, this would really mean “he existed before me [in the mind and plan of God].” This is a point that must be appreciated by all those interested in this debate.

There are several statements in the Gospel of John made by Jesus regarding his origin that seem to imply pre-human existence. In chapter 8 Jesus told the Jews:

“Even if I do bear testimony to myself, my testimony is true, because I know where I came from and where I am going. As for you, you do not know where I came from or where I am going. You judge according to outward appearance...”<sup>72</sup>

Here, the validity of Jesus' testimony is directly linked to his origin. He can bear testimony to himself because he knows where he came from and where he is going. This moves me to think that Jesus was very aware of his heavenly origin and that, in fact, his origin (along with the knowledge and perspective he acquired there with God) gave him the confidence and authority to make the claims that he made. In other words, “In spite of the legal principle that the truth is established on the testimony of two or more witnesses, the testimony that I give on my own behalf is completely valid, because I know the truth about my origin. I lived with God in heaven, I am completely conscious of my identity, authorized by God to judge, and fully in line with the Father's will and plan—therefore I can bear testimony to myself.” Of course, this is not necessarily what Jesus had in mind. But this seems to be the sense in which (and reason why) Jesus could make this claim, if one believes in his pre-human existence.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Tyndale Commentaries, Colin G. Kruse (2003), p. 72. One translation renders it: “For he is my superior” (*Emphatic Diaglott*)

<sup>72</sup> John 8:14,

<sup>73</sup> Albert Barnes argued: “As he came from heaven; as he knew his Father's will; as he had seen the eternal world, and known the counsels of his Father, so his testimony was worthy of confidence. As they had not seen and known these things, they were not qualified to judge. An ambassador from a foreign court knows the will and purposes of the sovereign who sent him, and is competent to bear witness to it. The court to which he is sent has no way of judging but by his testimony, and he is therefore competent to testify in the case. All that can be demanded is that he give his credentials that he is appointed, and this Jesus had done both by the nature of his doctrine and his miracles.” — Barnes, *The Gospels*, p. 266.

We know now that Jesus was “going” to be exalted to heaven and seated at the right hand of God—his destiny. But where did he come from? And what was so significant about where he came from that compelled Jesus to say, “*I know where I came from but you do not know...*”?<sup>74</sup> Evidently, what Jesus had in mind concerning his origin (something the Jews were ignorant of or simply denied) is explained by Jesus in other portions of the Gospel of John (the first statement appears after in the same account):

**Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God [out of God I came forth and am here, Concordant Literal Translation]; I did not come on my own, but he sent me.’<sup>75</sup>**

**...fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was going to God**<sup>76</sup>

**I came out from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.”<sup>77</sup>**

These statements are extremely significant in terms of understanding the true origin of Jesus. It is not that Jesus was merely “commissioned” or “sent” by God as were John the Baptist and the ancient prophets. But that Jesus “came out” (*ek*)” of God (8:42; ‘came out’ *exēlthen*, John 13:3; *exēlthon ek tou patros*; ‘out I came out of the Father,’ John 16:28).

In John 16:28, Jesus said: “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.” It has been pointed out that translations like the *NIV* wrongly render the phrase: “I am *returning* to the Father.” This is a point worthy of note.<sup>78</sup> However, it can likewise be pointed out that the expression, “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father” in and of itself, leaves one with a strong impression that the one Jesus was going to was the same one he was already with before he came into the world. The word “returned” is not necessary for

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<sup>74</sup> John 7:50. As an alternative to the idea that Jesus meant that he literally came from heaven, perhaps he had in mind, “you do not know where I came from [Bethlehem] or where I am going [to the right hand of God].” The significance of him being from Bethlehem is found in the Old Testament Prophecy of Micah 5:2. Jesus knew he was the ruler, the Messiah, from Bethlehem, the fulfiller of Micah’s prophecy, but they did not. In the previous chapter, the Pharisees mistakenly concluded that Jesus was from Galilee, thereby trying to discredit his role as a true prophet/messiah figure. The text (7:51) says: “Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before and who was one of the rulers, said, ‘Our law doesn’t condemn a man unless it first hears from him and learns what he is doing, does it?’ They replied, ‘You aren’t from Galilee too, are you? Investigate carefully and you will see that no prophet comes from Galilee!’” Yet as attractive and as plausible as this alternative appears, it seems clear that Jesus had a spiritual origin in mind. Consider the context: “Jesus said in reply to them, ‘Even if I do bear testimony to myself, my testimony is true, because I know where I came from and where I am going. As for you, you do not know where I came from or where I am going. *You judge according to outward appearance...*’ (Bruce’s translation) When Jesus says that they judge according to outward appearance, this suggests that they could not discern the deeper, spiritual significance of his origin. It can also be pointed out that the other statements in the Gospel of John already cited say explicitly that Jesus “came from God” or “came out of the Father.”

<sup>75</sup> John 8:42, *NAB, Concordant Literal New Testament*

<sup>76</sup> John 13:3, *NAB*

<sup>77</sup> John 16:28, *Concordant Literal New Testament*

<sup>78</sup> Buzzard pointed out specifically: “No text says that Jesus *went back* (*upostrepho*) to God, though this idea has been wrongly imported into some modern English translations to support ‘orthodoxy.’ Such mistranslation of the Greek ‘go to the Father’ as ‘go back to the Father’ tells its own story. The translation of the Bible has been corrupted to mirror traditional, post-biblical ideas of who Jesus is.”

leaving that impression. He “came from the Father” went “into the world,” yet he was “leaving the world” and “going to the Father,” his original point of departure, or so it seems. The point is, although the text does not say “he was *returning* to God,” he still seems to clearly suggest that his departure from this world meant that he would be going to be with the one with whom he originally was with. This may not be absolutely necessary; but again, that’s what it seems like he’s saying, to me. This is true of the statement made in John 13:3 as well: “**he had come from God and was going to God.**” Again, this gives the impression that Jesus was originally with God, that he left God’s presence to come into the world, and was, at that time, returning to God. In John chapter 6 Jesus said:

“I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.”<sup>79</sup>

In his book on the Trinity, Anthony Buzzard noted that the manna, although spoken of as coming from heaven, “did not *literally* pass through the skies from God’s throne to the wilderness,” and that, similarly, we should not think that Jesus did either. But I don’t think anyone ever seriously imagined that since Jesus “came down from heaven” that this implied that he “*literally* passed through the skies.” But that Jesus entrance into the world did involve a heavenly descent which took place when he “emptied himself” and “came to be in the likeness of men.” That is, his original location in the beginning is viewed as “with/alongside God” in the heavenly abode, yet he willingly “came down from heaven,” giving up his heavenly existence, “not to do [his] will, but the will of [the one] who sent [him].” In fact, the very *reason* he came “down from heaven” was to do the will of his Father. Does that not support the idea that he really did come down from heaven, to perform a mission, to execute his Father’s will and purpose? John has the Jews’ response to Jesus’ claim that he had come “down from heaven” recorded as:

“Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”

This statement is extremely interesting. Because the Jews were, at that point, essentially asking the same question I am asking in this paper.<sup>80</sup> **How** does Jesus say “I came down from heaven?” What did he mean by that? Is this literal or is this figurative? Even if this is figurative, why did he choose to speak this way? What was the significance? Why not simply “I was sent/commissioned by God (like the prophets before me).” Why “**I have come down from heaven**”? Could this not, in fact, be one way in which John was attempting to get the idea across to his readers that we are not

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<sup>79</sup> John 6:32, 38, RSV

<sup>80</sup> This verse makes me think that John was not unaware of the question of pre-human existence. Jesus said he came down from heaven, and John records the Jews asking, in effect, “what did he mean by this? How could he say this?” This question strikes at the very heart of what this paper is all about.

dealing with a mere human (with the same kind of origin as other humans), but with a human who had a heavenly life prior to his entering the world? One could argue this. This is the impression I get from this account. That is, although the Jews did not understand, we believers and readers of John's Gospel know how the Jesus could say this, for John has already given us a revelation of Jesus' pre-human existence as the *logos* of God. The Jews, on the other hand, lacked faith and had no understanding or knowledge of his former, heavenly life. "They did not know his true origin and destiny; they could judge only 'according to the flesh'—by outward appearance (cf. John 7:24)—and so their judgment about him was misguided" (Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, p. 189).<sup>81</sup> We have the statement, "how could Jesus say 'I came down from heaven?'" Yet we (believers) know from the prologue, and we discover later from Jesus' words in John chapter 8 verse 58 and in other texts, that the Son of God existed with his Father in the heavenly realm before he became a man. I am not arguing that this is unquestionably the correct way to understand the claim made by Jesus and the response made by the Jews (as possibly illuminated by other 'pre-existence' texts), but I am arguing that this is very easily and very naturally derived from them, entirely apart from "Gnostic" or "Arian" or "traditional (orthodox or heterodox)" influences.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?"<sup>82</sup>

How did Jesus know that there were many dwelling places in his Father's house if he had never been there to observe it? Doesn't he seem to be speaking from first-hand knowledge and experience? In John 15:15 Jesus told his disciples, "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." And in John 6:45, 46, Jesus said: "Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father." These statements appear, to me, to be suggestive of "pre-human existence." All that he "heard" from the Father he "made known" to his disciples. When did Jesus "hear" from the Father? Perhaps when he was "in the bosom of the Father"? No one has "seen" the Father except the one who is "from God." When did Jesus "see" the Father? Perhaps when he was "with [Gk: *pros*; literally 'toward' some suggest 'face to face' with] God" in the beginning? Although these statements can be interpreted as not implying pre-human existence, I can't help but to think that Jesus seemed to speak with a kind of "divine self-consciousness," a "divine wisdom and awareness," if you will—as if he lived with God, had seen God literally, and knew God on a uniquely intimate basis.

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<sup>81</sup> "Jesus made two points in reply. First, he was qualified to bear testimony, whereas the Pharisees were not; and he knew both his origin and his destination, whereas they knew neither." —*NIV Study Bible*, p. 1609.

<sup>82</sup> John 14:2, *NAB*

In Revelation 3:14 Jesus is described as “**the beginning of the creation by God**”? How do Socinian interpreters understand this text? As a reference to the *new* creation?

According to Anthony Buzzard:

“...scholars rightly report that the idea of preexistence for the Messiah ‘*antecedent to his birth in Bethlehem*’ is unknown in Judaism.’ The Messiah, according to all that is predicted of him in the Old Testament belongs in his origin to the human race...”<sup>83</sup>

But there is, of course, the well-known prophetic statement from the Hebrew Scriptures:

“As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, seemingly insignificant among the clans of Judah—from you a king will emerge who will rule over Israel on my behalf, one whose origins are in the distant past [‘Whose comings forth have been from of old from the days of age-past time’ *Rotheram*; ‘his origin goes back to the distant past’ *Jerusalem Bible*; whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.’ *NRSV (ESV the same)*].”<sup>84</sup> —*New English Translation*

Socinian interpreters believe that the Messiah’s “goings forth” which go back to “the distant past” refer, not to the Messiah’s pre-human, heavenly origin or activities,<sup>85</sup> but to his *ancestral* roots. In other words, the ruler who would emerge from Bethlehem has ancient “roots”—his “bloodline” can be traced back to ancient peoples (David, Abraham, Adam). This makes sense and I believe (though I haven’t completely confirmed) that this is how the Jews have always understood this passage. This is a totally valid interpretation in my view. However, if the statements in Micah 5:2 only have reference to Christ’s ancestral roots, I wonder, what is unique about him and what is so significant about this particular text? If Micah 5:2 refers to bloodline, then couldn’t the passage apply to all Jews who trace their roots to Abraham, their ancient forefather, to all members of the tribe of Judah, and to *all members of the human race* who trace their ancestral roots to Adam, the most ancient forefather?

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## The question of Christ’s divinity and post-resurrection nature

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<sup>83</sup> Buzzard, *The Nature of Preexistence in the New Testament*

<sup>84</sup> Micah 5:2

<sup>85</sup> *NET* footnote: “9tn *Heb* “his goings out.” The term may refer to the ruler’s origins (cf. NAB, NIV, NRSV, NLT) or to his activities. 10tn *Heb* “from the past, from the days of antiquity.” Elsewhere both phrases refer to the early periods in the history of the world or of the nation of Israel. For מִקְדָּם (miqqedem, “from the past”) see Neh 12:46; Pss 74:12; 77:11; Isa 45:21; 46:10. For עוֹלָם מִיָּמֵי (mimey ’olam, “from the days of antiquity”) see Isa 63:9, 11; Amos 9:11; Mic 7:14; Mal 3:4. In Neh 12:46 and Amos 9:11 the Davidic era is in view.”

A point very often and legitimately emphasized in Socinian discourse is the fact that Jesus is a *man*: “There is one God and one mediator between God and men, *the man*, Jesus Christ.” And although I do not pretend to have all of this worked out scripturally or theologically, I very often get the impression from Scripture that Jesus is something more than a “man,” particularly since his resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God. After all, Jesus is a being who dwells at the right hand of God in heaven itself. Can a “man” (of mere flesh and blood) sit at the right hand of God Almighty in the heavenly dimension? According to the most ancient manuscript reading, John 1:8 speaks of Jesus as an “only-begotten/unique god.” Who or what is an “only-begotten/unique god”? A cosmic principle? Or a divine, *personal* being? How is this reconciled with the “manhood” of Jesus Christ? I suppose one could argue that being “in the bosom of the Father” does not demand a real or literal closeness—in the sense of being *near* or *next* to God in heaven—but metaphorically, in the sense that Christ was the one man who experienced a closeness and intimacy with the Father like no other man before. But why is he described as an only-begotten/unique “god” in association with such intimacy? Why not “*the only man* in the bosom of the Father,” or “the only human in perfect union with the Father” or the like?

There are other scriptural statements about Christ that also come across as difficult to reconcile with the idea of him being (presently) a flesh and blood human being, or “merely” such. Again, he lives in heaven (*think* about the significance of this) and is seated at the right hand of the Almighty One. Is this possible for a mere man? In one place, Jesus is described by Paul as a “life-giving spirit” in contrast with the man, Adam, who was a “living soul” (1 Corinthians 15:45). Can a “human being” be described as a “life-giving spirit”? I don’t know. True, there is one mediator between God and men, *the man*, Christ Jesus. But one could argue (from the pre-human advocate perspective) that this simply means that the one whom we once knew as a man, or who came into the world as a man, *is* the mediator, but this does not rule out that he is now a divine, spiritual being who serves as mediator and high priest in the heavenly realms. One could argue, how can a *human being* dwell with God in heaven, ruling over the entire universe with all authority and power? How can a “man” read the minds and thoughts of men (Revelation 2:23)? What about Colossians 2:9, “**the whole fullness of deity**” dwells embodied in him? If Christ has the powers and attributes of deity/divine nature/godship dwelling in him, how can we say that he is not divine? Indeed, how could a “man” sustain all things by the word of his power? (Hebrews 1:3). If Jesus is a “human” dwelling in heaven with God, does he (in all reverence) eat, drink, sleep, go to the bathroom? If not, how can he be a genuine human being? What *human* do we know that does not need to do these things, *every single day*?

The author of Hebrews describes the Son as an “exact “representation/reproduction (Gk: *character*)” of God’s *being*.” This seems

difficult to reconcile with the notion that Christ *only* existed as a man. How can a “man” be an exact *reproduction of God’s very being*? In another place in the letter to the Hebrews, the author pointed out:

*“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.”<sup>86</sup>*

When the writer says that Jesus offered up prayers and supplications “**in the days of his flesh,**” in my mind, this can only mean one of three things: Either (1) he existed in another state *prior to* the “days of this flesh” (likely, a spiritual, heavenly state of existence) (2) that, although he did not literally have a personal, pre-human existence, after he “ascended to the Father” he took on some other type of existence (remembering that he was ‘put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit’; that he is ‘a life-giving spirit’; and that he is the possessor of a ‘glorious body.’ Compare 1 Peter 3:18; 1 Corinthians 15:45; Philippians 3:21), or (3) that he had both a “pre-human” existence as well as a new, glorious, spiritual existence in heaven at the right hand of his Father as an immortal spirit being.<sup>87</sup> If Jesus only existed as a flesh and blood human being or exists now in the same condition (which he must, according to the strict definition of a ‘man’), it is difficult to understand how the author of Hebrews could speak about the significance of “the days of his flesh” as opposed to his other kind of days, as if he had another kind. Clearly, there is something significant about “the days of his flesh” as opposed to either the former or present days of his existence. And certainly, we can make reference to “the fleshly days” of no other human figure, unless that figure subsisted in some other form or type of existence, at some particular point in time.

These are the issues I am grappling with. When I express myself along the lines of “it seems this way” or “it seems like this means such and such...” I mean what I say; that it “seems” that way, to me—not “this is absolutely what this means.” I will be continuing to read the Scriptures with the question and thought in mind: Does the Bible intend to teach the pre-human existence of the Son of God? I am, of course, open to further light from reason, history, scholarship, Christian friends, and from the Scriptures. And the feelings expressed by Robert Hach are mutual (as they would be toward all my ‘Socinian’ friends) and fitting for the conclusion of this paper:

*Your view on this issue has no bearing on my regard for you as a spiritual brother and a competent scholar and a newly acquired and valued friend. I don’t consider myself (or anyone else) qualified to make authoritative pronouncements on who has ‘the truth’ and who doesn’t. We’re all students of the OT and NT writers, who were the agents of God in the prophetic, progressive revelation of the truth about God, who has left it up to us to seek his truth in the process of persuasive discourse. (The only alternative to persuasion is*

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<sup>86</sup> Hebrews 5:7, *ESV*

<sup>87</sup> Does not the fact that the Son of God was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,” and that he is “a life-giving spirit” suggest that he is an immortal spirit being with a divine nature, as opposed to a human being made of flesh and blood? (1 Peter 3:18; 1 Corinthians 15:45)



*coercion, which, as you know, has been the historical Trinitarian approach; I'm also a fan of Locke's The Reasonableness of Christianity). At the same time, I think that the pre-birth existence of the Son IN THE FORM OF the purpose and promise of God in 'the word' is vital to a clear understanding of the 'faith of Jesus,' which I believe is both the source and content of NT Christian faith. As a result, I view it as a vital subject of persuasive discourse among Unitarian Christians.*