

John and Jewish Preexistence: An Attempt to Responsibly Set the Christology of the Fourth Gospel in its Proper Historical and Theological Matrix of Thought

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Introduction

The Gospel of John has been a hotbed of arguments, disputes, and disagreements ever since it was composed some two thousand years ago. Even now, modern preachers and theologians have become accustomed to interpreting the Fourth Gospel to the exclusion of the voices represented in its Synoptic counterparts, often going so far as pitting John's christology directly against what is taught in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. More to the point, christological treatments of John's Gospel are regularly detached from the vital and necessary context of the Jewish mindset in which the author lived and breathed. The unfortunate side effect of such interpretations results in expositors preferring *their* reading of the christological texts in John over and against the other voices in the Bible. The historian Roger Haight states that this observation is not simply a modern phenomenon, noting that, "[a]fter the New Testament period, the understanding of Jesus Christ became governed by the framework and language of the Prologue of John's Gospel. The Jesus who was the subject matter of christology ceased to be the Jesus of the synoptics."¹ Is this not, in effect, a canon within the canon?

A variety of texts within John's Gospel (John 1:1; 6:62; 8:58; and 17:5) are regularly cited as proof that Jesus literally preexisted his birth. I readily admit that when these are read in a wooden and straightforward manner they indeed convey a literal state of preexistence belonging to Jesus. However, the keen interpreter has the responsibility to ask whether a literal reading is *the most appropriate way* to interact with these texts, which are written out of the mindset of a Jewish Christian author who was steeped in the cultural thoughts and expectations of his Judaic heritage.² I am convinced that once these texts are properly placed within the context of Jewish preexistence ideas and concepts, which were widely held and taught in the ancient world, then the conclusion of Jesus literally preexisting his birth becomes increasingly questionable and highly doubtful.

This essay will set forth this very context, beginning with drawing attention to the key Jewish texts in which the nature of Jewish preexistence can clearly be ascertained and observed. From

¹ Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) 247. Haight furthermore observes "a particular model of incarnational christology, involving a pre-existent Logos, developed into the controlling paradigm for all christological thinking. John's christology quickly became not one christology among others but *the controlling framework* within which mainline christology unfolded (emphasis added).

² If the title of Craig Koester's book, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), then it is of vital necessity to recognize the *symbolic* nature of the Fourth Gospel's composition and message.

there attention will be given to similarly flavored texts located within the books of the Bible so as to demonstrate that the biblical authors were conscious of and utilized such a concept of preexistence. Finally, this framework of thought will be set as the foundation upon which christological texts from the Fourth Gospel will be interpreted in an attempt to achieve a plausible reading, both historically and theologically. The intended outcome of this essay is to equip and empower the reader to confidently understand the nature of Jewish preexistence expounded in the Fourth Gospel so that they may effectively accomplish the work of evangelism and disciple-making.

1. Defining Jewish Preexistence

In order to begin fruitful dialogue on debated matters, one must first define their terms. I consider it of no small importance the need to establish, plainly and clearly, the nature of Jewish preexistence thoroughly in order that the biblical evidence is able to breathe the air of contextual data, thoughts, and concepts freely.³ In David Capes' article on "Preexistence" in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* he helpfully notes that, "The pre-existent state may be described as ideal (existence in the mind or plan of God) or actual (existence alongside and distinct from God)."⁴ This distinction, I regard, is absolutely vital. Capes' two categories of preexistence, "ideal" and "actual," adequately set the stage for the debate. We may also choose to use the categories of notional preexistence ("ideal") and literal preexistence ("actual"). Capes' observations echo those stated in Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly's work, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-Existence in the New Testament*.⁵ Hamerton-Kelly frames the debate around two options: "either in the mind of God or in heaven."⁶ This is simply another way of noting that Jewish preexistence can be understood as notional, within God's mind and purposes. Of course, one is certainly capable of arguing that something existed in heaven prior to it being revealed on earth, although we might be better off by describing this as something (or something) *previously existing*, literally, up in the heavens. One of the most prominent scholars in modern christological studies, Larry Hurtado, states that, "There is today a virtual consensus among scholars that the pre-Christian Jewish tradition provides the most important background for the idea of pre-existence in the NT."⁷ Further validation of this point comes from James Dunn,

³ It is extremely unfortunate that the majority of the standard resource dictionaries dealing with biblical studies fail to offer articles on this subject. This vacuum alone necessitates a study such as expressed in this essay.

⁴ David B. Capes, "Preexistence," in *DLNT*, 956.

⁵ *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-Existence in the New Testament*, SNTSMS 21 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ Larry Hurtado, "Pre-existence," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 743. Capes, "Preexistence," 956, offers a similar line: "because Second-Temple Judaism provides an adequate conceptual base, the view is that the background for a preexistence christology is found in Judaism."

who argues that “Jesus was a Jew and *must be understood* within the terms provided by Judaism and its sacred scriptures.”⁸

The implications are necessary to state clearly here. If Jesus preexists strictly speaking in God’s mind and plan, then his physical existence chronologically begins at the moment of his begetting in the womb of Mary.⁹ Therefore, the plans held within the mind of the creator God are a part of his foreknowledge. Regarding the Jewish understanding of foreknowledge, the article in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* is helpful:

...the term foreknowledge is an expansion of the idea of God’s “counsel” or plan, regarding it as an intelligent prearrangement, the idea of foreknowledge being assimilated to that of foreordination. The same idea is found in [1 Pet. 1:20]. Here the apostle speaks of Christ as a lamb “foreordained” by God before the foundation of the world...It has the idea of a purpose which determines the course of the Divine procedure.¹⁰

Before, however, we examine the passages within the Bible which speak of such foreknowledge, it is prudent that we first examine the data available from Jewish texts which speak of preexistence so as to determine whether it is notional or literal. It is important to be exhaustive at this juncture so as to responsibly act as historically-minded interpreters. Granted, many lay persons, pastors, and even keen students of the Bible have not had access to or special training in some (if not all) of these Jewish sources. I will attempt to define them in a manner which makes the data readily available and more easily understood.

1.1 Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud is, next to the Hebrew Bible, the most authoritative work in Judaism. It contains the Mishnah and six hundred years of rabbinical comments on the Mishnah.¹¹ Although the Mishnah was compiled around the year 200 CE, scholars are unified in saying that much of the material goes back to the second temple period, thus making it useful for New Testament studies.¹² Jacob Neusner aptly describes the contents of the Talmud as an important insight into “how intellectuals wrote down details of law, theology, and scriptural exegesis in such a way as to form

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, “Christology (NT),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:989, emphasis added. See also his comments in *Christology in the Making*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 6.

⁹ Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35; Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:5; 1 John 5:18.

¹⁰ Caspar Wistar Hodge, “Foreknow,” in *ISBE*, vol. 2, 1130.

¹¹ Gary G. Porton, “Talmud,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:310. Burton L. Visotzky, “Talmud,” in the *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 5:463-4, dates the scribal activities to the period of 70-500 CE. and the editorial period as 500-600 CE.

¹² Shaye Cohen’s comments are most helpful here: “All scholars, I think, would agree that some of the laws derive from second temple times, while others are the innovations of the rabbis of the second century CE.; that some of the laws are of “sectarian” provenance or are quintessentially rabbinic...The problem is to figure out which law belongs to which category, not an easy task.” See his *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, Library of Early Christianity, ed. Wayne A. Meeks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987) 219.

a coherent, cogent, and critical construction.”¹³ The word *Talmud* itself means “learning” or “study.”

In regard to our study on Jewish preexistence, note the following excerpts from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Pesahim* 54a:

Seven things were created before the world was made, and these are they: Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the throne of glory, the house of the sanctuary, and the name of the Messiah. Torah: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before the works of old” (Prov. 8:22). Repentance: “Before the mountains were brought forth, of even [before] you had formed the earth and the world...you turn man to destruction and say, Repent, you sons of men” (Ps. 90:2). The Garden of Eden: “And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden from aforetime” (Gen. 2:8). Gehenna: “For Tophet is ordained from old” (Isa. 30:33). The throne of glory: “Your throne is established from of old” (Ps. 93:2). The house of the sanctuary: “A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary” (Jer. 17:12). And the name of the Messiah: “His name shall endure forever and has existed before the sun” (Ps. 72:17).¹⁴

This passage contains an abundance of data for our inquiry. First of all, it depicts both material objects (a garden, Gehenna, God’s throne, the house of the sanctuary) and intangible concepts (Torah, repentance) which can be spoken of as ‘preexisting.’ One of these items is the name of the Messiah, certainly ascribing to this figure a similar measure of preexistence which, being strictly notional and conceptual. It is also important to note that the Rabbis were drawing upon texts within the Hebrew Bible in order to make such theological assertions. For them, their argument was backed up with a scripturally-rooted foundation. This Talmudic passage continues by recording the commentary of Rabbi Yosé, who words the discussion in a fascinatingly manner: “There were two things that entered into God’s mind to create on the eve of the Sabbath.” In other words, concepts *in the mind of God* denote the important objects, both tangible and intangible, which preexist notionally rather than literally.

Although it would be redundant to cite in its entirety here, it should be noted that the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Nedarim* 39b likewise states that seven things were created before the world was made (Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the throne of glory, and house of the sanctuary, and the name of the Messiah). It is almost certain that within the Talmud itself, *b. Pes.* 54a is quoting *b. Ned.* 39b directly as an authoritative source.¹⁵ This indicates that Rabbis agreed with this interpretation of notional preexistence and were using it in order to make their theological arguments.

¹³ Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005) xxiii.

¹⁴ All English translations of the Talmud are derived from Neusner’s 22 volume work (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005).

¹⁵ This would mean that the tractate *Nedarim* was written before the tractate *Perahim*.

1.2 Targum Zechariah

The targumim are translations of the Hebrew Bible, mostly into Aramaic but sometimes into Greek. Often these translations carried explanations and interpretations of the verses in question. During the second temple period when Jews mostly spoke Aramaic, the targumim on the Hebrew Bible were often read in the local synagogue.¹⁶ The Targum on Zechariah was translated by Jonathan ben Uzziel, as it is often called *Targum Jonathan*.¹⁷ According to the Talmud, Jonathan was a pupil of Rabbi Hillel,¹⁸ a famous first century BCE Jewish teacher.¹⁹ This would presumably place Jonathan's Targum within Palestine during the first century CE.

In Zech. 4:7, Yahweh declares to the prophet, "What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become a plain; and he will bring forth the top stone with shouts of grace upon it." The Targum reading on this passage, which seeks to clarify the 'top stone' mentioned, states that God "will reveal His Messiah whose name is spoken from the beginning."²⁰ This demonstrates that the Messiah's name was considered to be spoken from the beginning, thus preexisting as a *concept yet to be revealed*.

1.3 Second Baruch (Syriac)

Baruch, the scribe of the biblical prophet Jeremiah, gained such a prominent notoriety that his legacy was carried forth many years after his death in the form of a variety of pseudonymous works attributed to him. The Second Book of Baruch is fictitiously set around the events surrounding the destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE. Scholars however have concluded that this work was actually written in response to the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, likely written at the beginning of the second century.²¹ In this work, Baruch is depicted as having received revelations from God regarding the coming desolation of the temple. The intention of these apocalyptic visions was to influence the readers in their behavior and beliefs. The author therefore intends to influence his readers by allowing them to observe the visions revealed to the scribe Baruch.

In the fourth chapter of 2 *Baruch*, an interesting vision describing God's plans and purposes is spoken. The passage reads:

¹⁶ See the discussion in Philip S. Alexander, "Targum, Targumim," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:321.

¹⁷ On Jonathan being the translator of Zechariah, see *b. Meg.* 3a.

¹⁸ "The greatest among [Hillel's pupils] was Jonathan b. Uzziel" (*b. Sukk.* 28a); cf. *b. B. Bat.* 134a.

¹⁹ Although see the cautionary comments by Stephen A. Kaufman, "Targums," in the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5:472.

²⁰ *Tg. Zech.* 4:7, translation is my own.

²¹ A. F. J. Klijn suggests, "from the first or second decade of the second century" ("2 Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch: A New Translation and Introduction," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 [Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1983] 617); James Charlesworth, "30 to 50 years after the destruction of the temple by the Roman soldiers" ("Baruch, Book of 2 Syriac," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:620-1); J. Edward Wright, "the early second century CE" ("Baruch, Second Book of Syriac," in the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1:405).

And the Lord said to me: “This city will be delivered up for a time...Or do you think that this is the city of which I said, ‘On the palms of my hands I have carved you?’ It is not this building that is in your midst now; it is that which will be revealed, with me, that was already prepared from the moment I decided to create Paradise. And I showed it to Adam before he sinned. But when he transgressed the commandment, it was taken away from him—as also Paradise. After these things I showed it to my servant Abraham...And I showed it also to Moses on Mount Sinai...Behold, now it is preserved with me—as also Paradise.²²

This statement issued from God to Baruch offers a lot of information in regard to our inquiry. First of all, the physical temple in Jerusalem is not the only temple within the scope of God’s plans. There is another temple which preceded the physical building. In fact, it was *already prepared* before the creation of the Genesis Paradise. Note also how the building which was prepared was described as existing ‘with God’ from the beginning. It was revealed to Adam, Abraham, and Moses, but it is now currently *preserved with God*. This is yet another example of how an important object within God’s plans for his people preexisted in preparation with him.

1.4 Genesis Rabbah

Genesis Rabbah, also known as *Bereshit Rabbah*, is an exegetical Midrash (exposition) upon the first book of the Hebrew Bible. Written in both Aramaic and Hebrew, this document was composed around the end of the fourth century CE.²³ It contains detailed commentary on a variety of chapters and verses in Genesis, often dealing on a word by word basis. Since Genesis has quite a lot to say concerning the subject of God’s creation, this gives the author of *Genesis Rabbah* ample opportunity to comment on such subject. Upon asserting that Torah was the means through which God ordered creation, the author writes:

In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, “In the beginning God created (1:1),” ‘beginning’ referring to the Torah, as in the verse, “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way (Prov. 8:22).”²⁴

This passage speaks of the preexistence of Torah as the concept with which God ordered the Genesis creation. In attempting to convey this image, the author employs the imagery of an architect who utilizes plans and diagrams in order to accomplish his work. In this way, the Torah was in God the architect’s *plans and diagrams*, thus preexisting in that very manner. In order to justify such a position, the author cites Prov. 8:22, which speaks of a personified Wisdom figure

²² 2 Bar. 4:1-6, emphasis added.

²³ Moshe David Herr, “Genesis Rabbah,” in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1971) 400.

²⁴ *Gen. Rab.* 1.1. All of my translations come from H. Freedman, *Genesis Rabbah*, ed. by H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1939).

preexisting alongside God during creation. In other words, God wisely used the Torah as his plans and diagrams through which he ordered the cosmos. This demonstrates that Torah and Wisdom were understood as preexisting specifically as plans and purposes for God to use in creating.

The author furthermore offers comments regarding the nature of things preexisting with God. He expounds the phrase “In the beginning God created” as follows:

Six things preceded the creation of the world; some of them were actually created, while the creation of the others was already contemplated. The Torah and the throne of glory were created. The Torah, for it is written, “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, prior to his works of old” (Prov. 8:22). The throne of Glory, as it is written, “Thy throne is established of old” etc. [sic] (Ps. 93:2). The creation of the Patriarchs was contemplated, for it is written, “I saw your fathers as the first-ripe in the fig-tree at her first season” (Hos. 9:10). [The creation of] Israel was contemplated, as it is written, “Remember Thy congregation, which Thou hast purchased aforetime” (Ps. 74:2). [The creation of] the temple was contemplated, for it is written, “Thou throne of glory, on high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary” (Jer. 17:12). The name of Messiah was contemplated, for it is written, “His name exists before the sun” (Ps. 72:17).²⁵

This passage bears some resemblance with the two passages cited earlier in the Talmud (*b. Pes.* 54a; *b. Ned.* 39b). In this passage however, there is a distinction made between things which were *actually created* and things which were *previously contemplated within God’s mind*. The Torah and the throne of glory were created while the Patriarchs, the children of Israel, the temple, and the name of the Messiah were all bound up within God’s purposes and contemplated designs. The distinction recognized earlier between literal preexistence and notional preexistence fits rather well with these two categories set forth by the author of *Genesis Rabbah*. What is of valuable interest for our present inquiry is the fact that actual persons, such as the Patriarchs (presumable Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the entire congregation of Israel, and the (name of) Messiah were contemplated within God’s plans. Each of the conclusions drawn by the author have scriptural backing, chosen by him (and some are different passages than those quoted in *b. Pes.* 54a and *b. Ned.* 39b).

When the author gets around to commenting on ‘the heavens and the earth’ phrase of Gen. 1:1, he offers further exposition of his earlier treatment on preexisting plans and purposes. He begins by citing what previous Rabbis have declared upon the subject:

The Rabbis said: “Mortal man builds an edifice, and if he succeeds according to his intentions, he can widen it as the building rises; but if not, he must broaden it below and narrow it at the top. The Holy One, blessed is He, is not so, however; He built the heaven, i.e. the heaven which he originally contemplated, and the earth, viz. the earth which he originally contemplated.” R. Huna said in the name of R. Eliezer, the son of R. Jose the Galilean: “Even those whereof it is written, ‘For, behold I created new heavens’ (Isa. 65:17), have been created long ago, since the six days of Creation, as it is written, ‘For as

²⁵ *Gen. Rab.* 1.4, with some modification of the old English into modern lingo.

the new heavens...remain before Me' (Isa. 66:22): not 'new' is written here, but 'the new.'²⁶

Freedman offers his interpretation of this passage in saying that "the new heavens are already created, but only potentially, i.e. in God's thought."²⁷ This clarification, although appreciated, is hardly necessary in that we have already observed that many of the important objects in Jewish thought are contemplated in God's plans and purposes. Now here the new heavens and the new earth are described as having preexisted in God's foreknowledge. The author of *Genesis Rabbah* makes much of the definite article in Isa. 66 in his attempt to justify that *the* new heavens and *the* new earth are not simply any random heaven and earth, but the very one which currently remains before God, i.e., in his plans.

Genesis Rabbah later reasserts its interpretation that the Torah preexisted alongside God in the form of the personified Lady Wisdom located in Prov. 8. In fact, Torah preexisted the Genesis creation by two thousand years:

Surely of the Torah, which preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years, as it is written, "Then I [sc. The Torah] was by Him, as a nursling, and I was His delight day after day" (Prov. 8:30); now the day of the Lord is a thousand years, as it is said, "For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past" (Ps. 90:4). That is the meaning of 'Knowest thou this of old time?' The Torah knows what was before the creation of the world...²⁸

Again, we have affirmation that Torah was considered to have preexisted in God's plans, often being identified with the personified figure of Wisdom. Perhaps the lengthy period of years attributed to the Torah's preexistence is a reflection on its heightened value among other things which preexisted in God's purposes.

The author of *Genesis Rabbah* cites another Rabbi who offered his interpretation of when the Messiah would come. This sage, Rabbi Tanham, notes how his contemporaries declare that "the royal Messiah will not come until all the souls which [God] contemplated creating have been created."²⁹ He offers scriptural proof for his conclusion: "'the souls which I have made' (Isa. 37:16), i.e. for the sake of the souls which I have made."³⁰ This is another example of persons preexisting within God's contemplations and foreknowledge.

All in all, *Genesis Rabbah* offers an abundance of data in regard to our inquiry. It depicts a fundamental distinction between *literal preexistence* and *'contemplated' preexistence*, that is, *concepts existing in God's plans and purposes*. Many of the valuable persons and things within Judaism are described as previously existing within God's contemplations, such as the Torah, the

²⁶ *Gen. Rab.* 1.13.

²⁷ Freedman, *Genesis Rabbah*, 12.

²⁸ *Gen. Rab.* 8.2.

²⁹ *Gen. Rab.* 14.4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Patriarchs, the children of Israel, and even the name of the Messiah. The Torah itself is repeatedly used to explain the reference to the preexisting personified Lady Wisdom depicted in Prov. 8. In sum, this document is a valuable contribution to understanding the manner in which Jews understood the concept of preexistence.

1.5 Prayer of Joseph

The *Prayer of Joseph* is a pseudonymous work attributed to the patriarch Jacob, son of Isaac. Written in the first century CE, the document only survives in fragmentary form (the original language is quite difficult to discern).³¹ This makes coming to any solid conclusions about its contents a difficult task, perhaps lost forever in history. However, there is one statement within the work which bears resemblance to some of the data already observed in our study. The author puts into the mouth of Isaac the declaration that “Abraham and Isaac were created before any work.”³² Since we have already observed that the Patriarchs can be spoken as having preexisted in the Genesis creation within God’s contemplations and plans, it is likely that the same is being depicted here. Both Abraham and Isaac, considered so prominent, are already thought of as having been created before all others works. Although admittedly we should cautiously proceed with this conclusion due to the fragmentary nature of the document, on the surface it seems to be another piece of evidence pointing to Jewish conformability in *regarding famous persons as having already been created within God’s foreknowledge*.³³

1.6 Testament of Moses

Another pseudonymous work, the *Testament of Moses* (also known as the Assumption of Moses), depicts the final words of the great law-giver of Israel. Both Moses and Torah were highly venerated in Judaism, and so this author figured it would be worth sharing the testament of this great figure. This document was originally written in Greek in the first quarter of the first century CE, with some scholars claiming that some of the material contained within had a prior history in either an oral or written form.³⁴

³¹ J. Z. Smith, “Prayer of Joseph: A New Translation and Introduction,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1985) 699-700; Jessica T. Devega, “Joseph, Prayer of,” in the *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, 402.

³² *Prayer of Joseph* 1:2. Translation belongs to J. Z. Smith in his “Prayer of Joseph,” 713.

³³ This is the conclusion drawn by J.Z. Smith, who notes that the term “created before” (lit. “pre-created”) occurs only here and in late Christian texts. He also regards this example on par with preexistent wisdom, Torah, and the nation of Israel found in other Jewish materials (ibid., 713 footnote d). On the note of caution, see John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (New York: Crossroads, 1983) 218-9.

³⁴ See the discussion in Johannes Tromp, “Moses, Assumption of,” in the *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, 152-3; J. Priest, “Testament of Moses: A New Translation and Introduction,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1983) 919-21.

In the first chapter of this document, Moses speaks his final farewell to his successor Joshua, saying:

For this is what the Lord of the world has decreed. He created the world on behalf of his people, but he did not make this purpose of creation openly known from the beginning of the world so that the nations might be found guilty, indeed that they might abjectly declare themselves guilty by their own (mistaken) discussions (of creation's purpose). But He did design and devise me, who (was) prepared me from the beginning of the world, to be mediator of His covenant. Therefore, I shall speak plainly to you.³⁵

This passage speaks of Moses declaring his preexistence, claiming that he was prepared from the beginning of the world for the purpose of mediating the covenant. The manner of preexistence observed in this passage is not difficult to discern, since Moses states that God designed and devised him in preparation for the task at hand. In other words, this is a clear example of *Moses existing in God's plans and purposes*. This gives Moses the right and authority to declare the covenant charter to Joshua. Just as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, and the Messiah are spoken of as having existed within God's foreknowledge and purposes, so too could Moses be described. That is precisely what is stated in the *Testament of Moses*.

1.7 Joseph and Aseneth

The story of *Joseph and Aseneth* is an anonymous Greco-Roman romance based loosely upon the episode in Genesis 41 wherein Pharaoh grants unto Joseph an Egyptian virgin to be his wife. The work is likely the product of a Jewish writer located in Egypt sometime between 100 BCE and 135 CE.³⁶ The story describes how Joseph marries his beautiful wife who, being an Egyptian, eventually converts to 'Judaism' by forsaking her personal gods.³⁷

During the story, Joseph refuses to be kissed by Aseneth because she worships idols and eats unclean food. This causes her to weep and mourn his response. In turn, Joseph puts his hand upon her head and offers up a prayer in which he requests that God:

...number her among your people
that you have chosen before all things came into being,
and let her enter your rest
which you have prepared for your chosen ones
and live in your eternal life forever and ever.³⁸

³⁵ *T. Moses* 1:11-15. I use the translation of Priest, "Testament of Moses," 927.

³⁶ Ross S. Kraemer, "Joseph and Aseneth," in the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, 394.

³⁷ On the function of Jewish identity within the pre-Judaic setting of Joseph and Aseneth, see Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 211-2.

³⁸ *Joseph and Aseneth* 8:9. Translation credit goes to C. Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth: A New Translation and Introduction," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1985) 213, slightly modified.

In this prayer, Joseph recalls the people of God who have been chosen before the creation of all things. In other words, God has selected a people before they were born *within his choice purpose*. Furthermore, the eschatological rest (eternal life) is also spoken of here as having already been prepared by God. Both of these examples suggest that *Joseph and Aseneth* reflect Jewish notional preexistence theology.

1.8 The Manual of Discipline (1QS)

One of the first scrolls to be uncovered in the Qumran ruins is what is now designated as the Manual of Discipline (Heb. *Serekh ha Yahad*) or simply 1QS. This document is one of the most sectarian among the writings found in the various caves. Numerous fragments of this document were found in caves 4 and 5, but the most complete copy was located in the first cave. The Manual of Discipline sets forth various rules for the community, such as ritual and ceremonial rites, rituals for priests, dualistic self-representations, and even a hymn of praise to God. This particular document has been dated to around 100-75 BCE based upon the particular Hebrew script, although another copy of the text has been dated on paleographic grounds to an earlier date (between c. 125-100 BCE).

In the midst of discussion regarding how the members of the Qumran community should live, a comment is given regarding God's sovereignty and influence:

From the God of knowledge stems all there is and all there shall be.
Before they existed he made all their plans
and when they came into being
they will execute all their works in compliance with his instructions,
according to his glorious design without altering anything.³⁹

The text continues later with a lengthy hymn of humility, contrition, and reliance upon God. This hymn offers a similarly resounding statement:

By his knowledge everything shall come into being,
and all that does exist
he establishes with his calculations
and nothing is done outside of him.⁴⁰

In both examples we can observe parallel trends when compared to our previously examined texts. First of all, God possesses a personal 'knowledge' which carries with it his 'plans,' 'glorious design,' and 'calculations.' The act of creation comes about when God takes these previously made plans/calculations and brings them into being, thus making the notional into a reality. In fact,

³⁹ 1QS 3.15-16, trans. Florentino García Martínínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁴⁰ 1QS 11.11.

everything that God has brought into being has resulted from his grand design, without altering or changing his purpose. These are telltale signs of Jewish notional preexistence theology.

1.9 Summary of Jewish Preexistence Theology

I have thoroughly demonstrated that Jews frequently spoke of both people and objects as preexisting, although this preexistence is strictly within the mind and purposes of God. In other words, this preexistence is notional rather than literal. Among those persons preexisting within God's mind are the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the mediator Moses, the congregation of Israel, and even the Messiah. In regard to objects preexisting in God's plans, the temple, the throne of glory, Gehenna, the Garden of Eden, the Torah, the new heavens and the new earth, and the city of Jerusalem are all included. No one seriously considered that the persons mentioned literally possessed a pre-human existence with God in heaven, only to come to earth in some sort of incarnate state. Rather, they were so cherished and valued within the plans for Israel that God had already considered and contemplated them within his design and foreknowledge, a point made back in the 19th century by Adolph Harnack.⁴¹ It is this matrix of theological and historical framework to which we will now turn in order to responsibly examine whether we might find similarly resounding passages with the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

2. Scriptural Evidence of Jewish Notional Preexistence

If such a significant theme as God's preexisting plans contained within his foreknowledge is observed in the extra-biblical Jewish sources, then it seems logical to search for similarly sounding indicators within the pages of the Bible. In the interest of categorization, I have chosen to divide the evidence into four groups: general statements regarding God's plans, specific statements concerning objects, statements regarding people, and statements regarding the Messiah.

2.1 Preexisting Plans

It should go without saying that the creator God possesses plans for his people. The psalmist celebrates that "the counsel of Yahweh stands forever, the plans of his heart from generation to generation" (Ps. 33:11). Similarly, Prov. 19:21 contrasts the plurality of human thoughts with the assurance that "the counsel of Yahweh will stand." When the pagan king Sennacherib boasted in his arrogance against the children of Israel, God responded with his own taunt:

⁴¹ Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, trans. Neil Buchanan (New York: Dover Publications, 1900 [ET 1961]) 102-3.

Have you not heard?
Long ago I did it,
from ancient times I planned it.
Now I have brought it to pass (2 Kgs 19:25).

Note carefully the parallelism equating the accomplishment of God long ago and his planning from ancient times, demonstrating that actions within God's foreknowledge, being so sure to come to pass, can be spoken of as having *already* taken place. The fact that, in the present, God brings to pass his acts which are spoken of as having already been accomplished shows that these former plans are colored in metaphor.⁴²

The Epistle to the Ephesians offers an extended discussion of the plans and purposes of God. The letter begins with praise regarding how God has elected his people in Christ "before the foundation of the world so that we would be holy and blameless" (Eph. 1:4). Furthermore, we were chosen beforehand to be adopted as God's children "according to the kind intention of his will" (Eph. 1:5). The mystery of God's will has been made known to believers "according to His kind intention which he purposed" (Eph. 1:9). Believers have already been made a heritage within God's preordained purpose, which works all things "after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). The mission of the church, being the means through which God's wisdom is announced to the rulers and authorities is according to God's "eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:10-11). Ephesians is an excellent testimony to the clear guarantee that God possesses extensive plans and purposes which have always involved his people.

When John of Patmos peered into the apocalyptic realities depicted in the Book of Revelation, he records for his readers the lyrics of the heavenly choruses. In one such vision, twenty-four elders offer prostration unto the one seated upon the throne and boldly declare,

Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power;
for You created all things,
and because of Your will, they were,
and were created" (Rev 4:11).

This scene of worship gives glory and honor and power to God for a specific reason: he is the creator of all thing. The hymn unpacks how God went about bringing to pass the created order. God possessed a will, a desire contained within his purposes to accomplish whatever he pleases. It is for the very reason that God has his purposeful will that all things "were" (already), and then they were created. In other words, within God's desire things can be described as *already existing before they are actually creating*. This is textbook Jewish notional preexistence, as all things preexisted within God's mind before coming into a physical and tangible existence.⁴³

⁴² Stephen Hooks, "yoser," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, 429-31.

⁴³ Some of the scholars who have come to the same conclusion in regard to Rev 4:11 include R.H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920) 134; Henry Barclay

2.2 Preexisting Objects

If God created all things according to his purposeful will (Rev. 4:11) then this would certainly include objects. The Book of Acts records the speech of the martyr Stephen who recalls Israel's history. During this sermon, he makes mention of the tabernacle described to Moses, who was to make it according to the previously existing 'pattern' (Greek: *tupos* "type")⁴⁴ in heaven (Acts 7:44). The author of Hebrews likewise picks up this theme in attempt to explain how the reality of the tabernacle exists in heaven, functioning as a pattern and a shadow (Heb. 8:5). Exodus records the dialogue between God and Moses where the children of Israel are commanded to construct the sanctuary "according to all that I am going to show you, the *pattern* (Heb. *tabnit*)⁴⁵ of the tabernacle and the *pattern* of all its furniture, just so you all will make it" (Exod. 25:9).⁴⁶ After giving Moses all of the details, the description of the tabernacle sanctuary is concluded with a reminder that Moses was to see that he makes them "after the pattern" (Exod. 25:40). Philo's comments in *De Vita Moses* regarding this event are most instructive at this venture:

...it might be an imitation perceptible by the outward senses of an archetypal sketch and pattern, appreciable only by the intellect...the general form of the model was stamped upon the mind of the prophet, being accurately painted and fashioned beforehand invisibly without any materials, in species which were not apparent to the eye; and the completion of the work was made in the similitude of the model, the maker giving an accurate representation of the impression in material substances corresponding to each part of the model⁴⁷

Similarly, Num. 8:4 records how the gold lampstand took its shape "according to the pattern which Yahweh had showed Moses." It is passages like these which lead the contributors of the Talmud, the author of *Genesis Rabbah*, and the *2 Baruch* to speculate on the preexistence of the temple within God's purposes and plans, as we have already observed.

Matthew's Gospel records the words of Jesus speaking about his triumphal return in judgment and glory (Matt. 25:31-34). The Son of Man returns, sits on his throne, and begins to enact judgment upon all the nations. Those who end up on his right, deemed 'sheep,' are then told to "inherit the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world" (25:34). With this phrase, even the eschatological kingdom of God is depicted as having been prepared from the world's creation.

Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1908) 75; Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 127; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downer Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005) 125.

⁴⁴ See the helpful discussion by Leonhard Goppelt, "τύπος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8, 257-9.

⁴⁵ The same Hebrew word appears in 1 Chron. 28:11 and 28:19 to refer to an architect's plan. Thomas Dozeman considers this a 'blueprint' (*Exodus*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009] 610).

⁴⁶ "Yahweh will make it the authoritative ideal by prescribing its plan and the plan for all its furnishings and equipment" (John Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 [Waco: Word Books, 1987] 355).

⁴⁷ Philo, *De Vita Moses* 2:74-76.

This almost certainly took place within the mind of God, which conveys his eternal purpose.⁴⁸ The prepared kingdom of God pairs quite well with the preexistent locations such as Paradise and Gehenna observed in our earlier examination of the extra-biblical Jewish sources.⁴⁹

2.3 Preexisting Persons

We have already demonstrated the tendency for Jews to speculate regarding important persons as preexisting within God's mind and foreknowledge. These individuals included Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and even the Messiah (or at least his name). A remarkably comparable phenomenon can be observed within biblical literature. The psalmist finds reason to give glory to God because in his scroll "were all written the days that were ordained for me...how precious to me are all your thoughts" (Ps. 139:16-17). Here the psalmist considers that even his days were ordained within God's thoughts and purposes. The prophet Jeremiah is spoken of in similar terms. From the outset of his book, God declares to the young Judean, "before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I set you apart; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations (Jer. 1:5). When opponents would raise issue regarding the legitimacy of Jeremiah's prophetic office, his response would undoubtedly be that he was known within God's foreknowledge before he was even born.⁵⁰ Within God's plans, Jeremiah was set apart for his role as a herald unto the nations. Since Jeremiah was 'known' before he was born, this is certainly another example of Jewish notional preexistence.

Another prophet figure who also needed to argue for the validity of his calling was Paul of Tarsus. In his autobiographical section in the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul uses remarkably analogous language to the commissioning of Jeremiah: "but when God, who had set me apart from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His son in me in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles..." (Gal. 1:15-16). Paul considered his apostleship to be legitimate because he was set apart from his moment of his birth for the purpose of preaching unto the nations, deliberately imitating the call of Jeremiah. This would not be the last time Paul uses such language, for the climactic end of Romans chapter eight is one of the most powerful passages depicting Jewish preexistence theology wherein God's foreknowledge and plans are described. Note carefully the tenses of the verbs used:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to the purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His son...and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Rom. 8:28-30)

⁴⁸ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995) 743.

⁴⁹ Hagner cites *m. Abot* 5.4 as a reference, although this passage lists ten (plus) things created "on the eve of the Sabbath," that is, on the end of the sixth day of creation.

⁵⁰ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah I*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 33.

Dunn rightly remarks that at this point Paul's thought is dominated by Jewish categories, insisting further that the glorification spoken of in the past tense should not yield the idea that it is already accomplished. Rather, God's "pretemporal purpose and final glorification as the completion of that purpose."⁵¹ Within God's purposeful plan, both Jews and Gentiles were foreknown, predestined into the image of Christ, called by the gospel, justified by the faith of Jesus, and glorified in the future resurrection. The resurrected glorification, being absolutely sure of coming to pass within God's masterful plan, is spoken of here as having *already occurred!*⁵² Again, this is typical Jewish notional preexistence, wherein God's foreknowledge contains within it the blueprints for the created order, including the body of Christ.

We have already observed earlier that Eph. 1:4-10 speaks plainly of believers being foreknown, in Christ, from the beginning, according to the God's will. Another passage which resembles this train of thought is located at the beginning of the first Epistle of Peter. Writing to a group of dispersed believers across Asia Minor around the end of the first century CE, 1 Peter begins its correspondence by greeting those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, "who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood" (1 Pet. 1:1-2). Again, we can perceive an instance where the people of God existed within God's foreknowledge. This time, the reason for their existence within God's plans serves to follow the Messiah and share in the benefits of his sacrificial blood. These examples resemble the data observed earlier regarding the congregation of Israel being contemplated by God in *Genesis Rabbah* and in *Joseph and Aseneth*, thus fitting in nicely within the framework of Jewish notional preexistence.

2.4 Preexisting Messiah

Simply from a practical standpoint, there can be no reasonable objection put forward, based upon the data observed thus far, why a messianic figure couldn't be considered to have preexisted within God's plans and purposes. Other human beings, both individuals and entire groups, are spoken of as existing within God's foreknowledge. Furthermore, the name of the Messiah was considered as having preexisted according to a variety of texts. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the New Testament speaks within the same Jewish theological framework. For example, during Peter's Pentecost speech in Acts 2, Jesus is introduced as a human being who was "delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). No other equitable conclusion

⁵¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988) 481-6. He further elaborates on the subject, "This divine initiative is no sudden decision by God; his calling of Gentiles in particular was not simply occasioned by Israel's rejection; it was all part of God's purpose from the first" (494-5).

⁵² On 'glory' = the resurrected state in Pauline theology, cf. Rom. 2:7; 5:2; 1 Cor. 15:43; 2 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:27; 3:4; 1 Thes. 2:12; 2 Thes. 2:14; 1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 2:13.

can be reached by a passage like this, upon which commentators are vocally in agreement.⁵³ Jesus' betrayal and death was all known by God thousands of years before it took place.

Along similar lines, 1 Peter 1:20 speaks of Jesus having existed within God's plans and purposes from the beginning, "having been foreknown before the foundation of the world." This echoes the earlier statement made within the epistle concerning the dispersed believers also existing within God's foreknowledge in 1:2.⁵⁴ Perhaps then, 1 Pet. 1:20 is the clearest passage within the Bible depicting Jewish notional preexistence in regard to the person of the Messiah.⁵⁵

There is another passage which may speak of the death of the Messiah known by God from the foundation of the world, although the verse is grammatically ambiguous. The text in question is Rev. 13:8 which speaks of "names written in the scroll of life of the lamb who was slaughtered." This phrase is then modified with the prepositional phrase "from the foundation of the world." Is the passage saying that the *names were inscribed* upon the scroll from the foundation of the world? Or is it saying that the *lamb was slaughtered* from the foundation of the world? Commentators on Revelation struggle over this passage's meaning.⁵⁶ It should come as no surprise that those scholars who fail to appreciate the Jewish notional preexistence depicted in Rev. 4:11 likewise are unable to entertain the possibility of the same thing occurring in 13:8.⁵⁷ The most natural reading which follows the basic flow of the Greek syntax has led many to insist that it is indeed the lamb's death depicted here as preexisting in God's purposes.⁵⁸ However, the parallel with Rev. 17:8 has lead others to infer that it is indeed the names written in the scroll which preexist in 13:8.⁵⁹ In all, it seems best to regard the lamb's sacrificial slaughter as the event which has already taken place (within God's foreknowledge) before the foundation of the world. This conclusion comes from the ease associated with the grammar in the passage and the unlikelihood that the prepositional phrase would modify another clause separated by twelve Greek words. Since Revelation would have

⁵³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 31 (New Haven: Yale, 1998) 255, "it was foreseen by God...he spells out the details of that plan"; C.K. Barrett, *Acts 1-14*, International Critical Commentary, vol. 1 (London: T&T Clark, 2004) 142, "God foreknew it, decided it, and planned it"; Robert W. Wall, "The Book of Acts," in the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 66, "God must have known...in advance."

⁵⁴ This connection is recognized by most modern scholars, cf. John Elliot, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 37B (New Haven: Yale, 2001) 376; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 49 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988) 66; David L. Bartlett, "The First Letter to Peter," in the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 259.

⁵⁵ See Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 328-9 for discussion regarding how 1 Pet. 1:20 was later ignored by interpreters.

⁵⁶ Either way, the passage indicates that persons/actions preexist from the foundation of the world in God's mind.

⁵⁷ For example, Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 95-6, 252-3.

⁵⁸ Mitchel Reddish, *Revelation*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys, 2001) 255; Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 503; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 213-4; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 702; Mounce, *Revelation*, 252; George Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 168.

⁵⁹ Such as David Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 747-8; George Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 181.

originally have been heard orally rather than by its recipients, this also strongly suggests that the natural flow of grammar should be the deciding factor.⁶⁰ In sum, even the slaughter of Jesus is spoken of in Rev. 13:8 as having already taken place, certainly in no literal sense, but rather within the purposes of God.⁶¹

2.5 Summary of Biblical Expressions of Jewish Preexistent Theology

We have demonstrated that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament speak firmly within the Jewish frame of theological speculation regarding God's preexisting plans and purposes. Just as the extra-biblical Jewish sources spoke of God's plans, his people, important objects, and the coming Messiah, in like manner the biblical data expresses the very same points. This confirms the point echoed earlier in that biblical passages make sense only when they are properly and appropriately situated within their historical and theological contexts.

Now that the methodological groundwork has been laid out before us, we can confidently turn to assessing the disputed passages within John's Gospel where we detect hints of Jewish notional preexistence theology.

3. Jewish Preexistence in John's Gospel

Although some readers might desire to have more added to the list, our goal is to examine how four passages in particular (1:1; 6:62; 8:58; and 17:5) can be interpreted if we deliberately choose to read them through the lens of Jewish notional preexistence theology as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, elsewhere in the New Testament, and in a plethora of Jewish texts written before and after John's Gospel. Our goal is to suggest that this is a preferable hermeneutical move rather than ignoring the Jewish context (or more dangerously, using the lens of later Church creeds as the key interpretive device). Scholarship is in agreement that the writer of the Fourth Gospel was a Jewish Christian.⁶² Therefore, the historical and theological task at hand is to responsibly reconstruct what a late first century Jewish Christian most likely meant to convey with these four passages.⁶³ We will now examine each passage individually, assessing their merits on a case-by-case basis.

⁶⁰ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., "Revelation," in *Cornerstone Bible Commentary*, vol. 18 (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2011) 519-20.

⁶¹ Although note the fascinating syncretistic passage in Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* 52.35-53.9, "Christ came to ransom some...he voluntarily laid down his life from the very day the world came into being" (translation by Wesley Isenberg in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990) 139-60.

⁶² Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John: Introduction, Analysis, and Reference*, vol. 1. Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 132, 224, 374-5. von Wahlde discerns three Jewish Christian authors within the editorial composition of the Gospel of John.

⁶³ I am well aware that many scholars observe multiple hands at work in the final form of John's Gospel. This should not detour us from our historical task of attempting to understand the document within the framework of Jewish preexistence. On the issue of plural authorship, see Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, Anchor

3.1 Jewish Preexistence and John 1:1

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God.”

There is little doubt that the author here attempts to portray God’s word as preexisting alongside him. However, these phrases need to be further unpacked. When we examine this passage as responsibly-informed historians aware of how Jews used such terminology, what conclusions might we draw?

1. *The preexisting Word (“in the beginning”) is most likely functioning within God’s foreknowledge.* Similar statements regarding God’s plans in the beginning include the references in:
 - a. The Talmud
 - b. Targum Zechariah
 - c. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - d. *Testament of Moses*
 - e. The Qumran Manual of Discipline
 - f. Philo
 - g. Biblical passages (2 Kgs. 19:25; Ps. 139:16-17; Jer. 1:5; Matt. 25:34; Acts 2:23; Gal. 1:15-16; Eph. 1:4-11; 3:10-11; 1 Pet. 1:1-2, 20; Rev. 4:11; 13:8)
2. *The word existing “with God” most likely indicated that it was within God’s mind as a plan/concept.* This can be confirmed by these passages:
 - a. *2 Baruch* 4
 - b. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - c. *Testament of Moses.*
3. *The word is the creative and vocal expression of God’s thoughts and foreknown plans.* The act of God bringing to into existence his previously-known plans can be observed in:
 - a. The Talmud
 - b. Targum Zechariah
 - c. *2 Baruch* 4
 - d. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - e. *Prayer of Joseph*
 - f. *Testament of Moses*
 - g. The Qumran Manual of Discipline
 - h. Philo
 - i. Biblical passages (Exod. 25:9, 40; Num. 8:4; Ps. 33:11; 139:16-17; 2 Kgs. 19:25; Jer. 1:5; Matt. 25:34; Acts 2:23; 7:44; Rom. 8:28-30; Gal. 1:15-16; Eph. 1:4-11; 3:10-11; Heb. 8:5; 1 Pet. 1:1-2, 20; Rev. 4:11; 13:8)

Bible Reference Library, ed. Francis J Moloney (New York: Doubleday, 2003) 40-89; von Wahlde, *The Gospels and Letters of John*, vol. 1.

4. *In the beginning there existed God's plans and purposes, which were with him in his mind, being fully expressive of his character. These plans were brought into existence through the means of God's creative, personal, and personified word.*

3.2 Jewish Preexistence and John 6:62

“What if you see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”

In this passage, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man, a reference to the coming messianic judge in Dan. 7:13-14.⁶⁴ Taken literally, this passage sounds as if Jesus, the Son of Man, literally preexisted in heaven. If we employ our understanding of Jewish preexistence discourse toward our interpretation of John 6:62, what deductions can be inferred?

1. *Descriptions of a variety of persons were portrayed as preexisting with God within his foreknowledge. The evidence for this is abundant:*
 - a. The Talmud
 - b. Targum Zechariah
 - c. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - d. *Prayer of Joseph*
 - e. *Testament of Moses*
 - f. *Joseph and Aseneth*
 - g. Biblical passages (Ps. 139:16-17; Jer. 1:5; Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:28-30; Gal. 1:15-16; Eph. 1:4-11; 1 Pet. 1:1-2, 20; Rev. 13:8)
2. *The Messiah preexists within God's foreknowledge, waiting to be revealed at the opportune moment. This can be observed in the following texts:*
 - a. The Talmud
 - b. Targum Zechariah
 - c. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - d. Biblical references (Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8)
3. *Just as the messianic Son of Man (Dan. 7:13) existed “in heaven,” i.e., within God's foreknowledge, so too will the Son of Man ascend into the heavens after his glorious death and resurrection.*

⁶⁴ “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming, and he came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and his kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.” (Dan. 7:13-14)

3.3 Jewish Preexistence and John 8:58

“Truly truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am [he].”

This passage contains two important aspects in need of clarification. The first involves the existence of Jesus prior to the time when Abraham came into being. The second deals with his identification with the title “I am he (Gr. *ego eimi*).” The latter aspect is the easiest to explain, as John’s Gospel has already identified the title “I am he” (when used of Jesus) with the messianic vocation and position.⁶⁵ This serves to identify Jesus with the messianic role, even before Abraham. Now how are we to understand the nature of preexistence which is unambiguously attributed to Jesus in this passage? How might our understanding regarding how Jews understood God and his foreknowledge affect the meaning of this passage?

1. *Judaism often described important human figures as preexisting within his mind and foreknowledge.* This fact can be confirmed within these texts:
 - a. The Talmud
 - b. Targum Zechariah
 - c. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - d. *Prayer of Joseph*
 - e. *Testament of Moses*
 - f. *Joseph and Aseneth*
 - g. Biblical passages (Ps. 139:16-17; Jer. 1:5; Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:28-30; Gal. 1:15-16; Eph. 1:4-11; 1 Pet. 1:1-2, 20; Rev. 13:8)
2. *The Messiah (or his name) also preexisted within God’s mind.* The references demonstrating this are as follows:
 - a. The Talmud
 - b. Targum Zechariah
 - c. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - d. Biblical references (Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8)
3. *Within the theology of God’s foreknowledge, a distinction could be made between literal preexistence and notional preexistence. Therefore, it is certainly possible for John’s Gospel to attribute preexistence to Jesus without implying that he literally existed prior to Abraham.* The texts in which a distinction is made between literal and notional preexistence are:
 - a. The Talmud
 - b. *Genesis Rabbah*

⁶⁵ Cf. esp. John 4:25-26: “I know that Messiah is coming...I, who am speaking to you, am he (*ego eimi*);” 8:28: “When you lift up the Son of Man then you will know that I am he (*ego eimi*);” John A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM Press, 1985) 385-6. It should be noted that the common perception, that of attempting to identify the words of Jesus in 8:58 with Exod. 3:14 is flawed because the Greek titles are not the same. The safer route seems to be to allow the Fourth Gospel to define its terms and to recognize how he employs these terms within their lexical possibilities as outlined by their uses (4:26; 8:28).

4. *Since the Gospel of John insists on the begetting of Jesus (18:37), it seems best to conclude that John 8:58 is describing Jesus' preexistence solely within God's foreknowledge. Since the Messiah was named before the foundation of the world, the Gospel of John authoritatively declares the preexisting name to be "Jesus."*⁶⁶

3.4 Jewish Preexistence and John 17:5

"Now, Father, glorify me together with yourself with the glory which I had with you before the world was."

This passage recycles many of the themes observed thus far. It speaks of a preexisting glory which was with God before the creation of the world. Although we are now recycling our data as evidence, the most prudent explanation of this passage is as follows:

1. *The glory which was "with God" almost certainly indicates that it was within God's mind as a concept. This can be observed by these passages:*
 - a. *2 Baruch 4*
 - b. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - c. *Testament of Moses*
2. *The Messiah (or his name) was spoken of as existing within God's foreknowledge. See the following:*
 - a. *The Talmud*
 - b. *Targum Zechariah*
 - c. *Genesis Rabbah*
 - d. *Biblical references (Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8)*
3. *Since the Gospel of John also states that the believers for whom Jesus is praying in the passage at hand have already received this preexistent glory (17:22), it seems responsible to understand 17:5 as a reference to a glory in prospect, contained within God's mind.*

Conclusion

In sum, I recommend giving more emphasis to the Jewish context which speaks of the important aspects of God's plans as preexisting notionally (rather than literally) in addition to the customary way which speaks of these plans as having already come to pass. Upon doing so, the apparent

⁶⁶ Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 44.22 notes the discussion among the Rabbis concerning how much of the world to come did God reveal to Abraham. For the Gospel of John to say that "Abraham rejoiced in order that he might see my day" (8:56), this was a viable interpretive option within Jewish circles (cf. also *4 Ezra* 3:14 for much of the same).

problems of John 1:1; 6:62; 8:58; and 17:5 begin to disappear. Biblical texts were not written in a vacuum. Rather, they are linked to cultural expectation, Jewish modes of discourse, and background of thoughts. In order to properly understand ancient pieces of literature, this requires the historian to the often difficult work of reestablishing the context so that the passages are able to live and breathe as they were intended. This allows there to be continuity between the promises of the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible with his purposes bound up in God's predetermined plan from the beginning of creation. There is no need to pit John against the Synoptics (or even the Hebrew Bible for that matter).

I fully recognize that, for the average church-attender or Bible student, the scope of such a historical reconstruction might seem daunting. However, I urge the reader to fully appreciate the need to properly interpret ancient texts within their respective contexts. This requires us to 'remedy our ignorance' on the subject and calls interpreters to pay heed to the work of diligent scholars in this field. Hopefully this exercise has brought forth fruitful data which can provoke further dialogues and exchanges regarding the nature of preexistence in the Fourth Gospel (and the rest of the Bible for that matter). Upon doing so, we can expect a better yield of exegetical fruit for our labors.