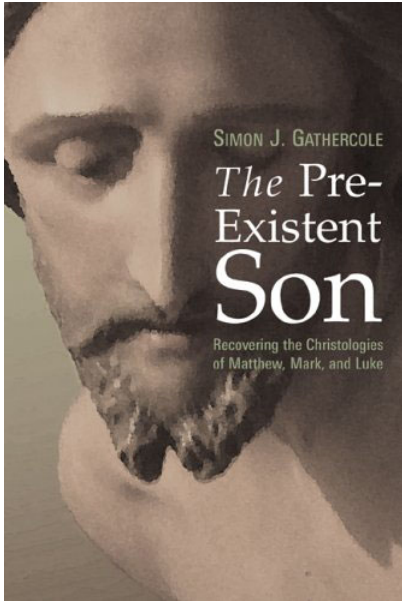


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Gathercole, Simon

The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke

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Most New Testament scholars “know” that, unlike the Christology of the Fourth Gospel, the Synoptic Gospels do not reckon with the preexistence of Jesus, the Son of God. The mantra that there is no concept of preexistence in the Synoptic Gospels has been repeated so often that it is assumed to be one of the unassailable findings of critical scholarship. The title of Simon J. Gathercole’s monograph, then, *The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, will surprise many, and it may even cause some to dismiss it out of hand. After all, “we know” that while there are many Christologies in the New Testament, there is no Christology of a preexistent Son in the Synoptic Gospels. This is certainly how I approached this volume when I received it for review. But having read Gathercole’s carefully argued thesis, I can no longer say with confidence and assurance that “I know” there is no Christology of preexistence in these writings.

Gathercole begins with a survey of recent literature on the topic of preexistence. He notes that, although there is a strong consensus in New Testament scholarship “that there is no preexistence christology in the Synoptic Gospels” (17), there are scholars who have defended the thesis of preexistence in the Synoptics, and there are others (Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado) who have argued for an exalted Christology in the

Synoptic Gospels. Gathercole's aim "is to push this line of research further by arguing that the portrait of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels is of a figure who in some way preexisted in heaven prior to his earthly ministry (16–17). Gathercole's study, then, is not concerned with the historical Jesus or with questions of tradition history or sources. His work focuses on the interpretation of the text as it now stands, and it asks how the earliest readers of this text would have understood it.

There are four stages in Gathercole's argument. In the first, entitled "Prolegomena," he marshals two arguments to show that the case for preexistence in the Synoptics is plausible even if one doubts that preexistence can be found in these writings. First, reviewing the evidence in the New Testament, Gathercole concludes that belief in the preexistence of Christ was already widespread among early Christians before the year 70. If this so, it is not improbable that the Synoptic writers were aware that other Christians believed in the preexistence of Christ. Second, Gathercole points to a series of passages that illustrate how Jesus transcends the heaven-earth and the God-creation divide as evidence that the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus as a transcendent, heavenly, divine figure. Gathercole readily acknowledges that there is no direct or explicit reference to preexistence in these passages, but they do indicate that "a heavenly christology is not a distinctively Johannine phenomenon: there are plenty of thunderbolts throughout Matthew, Mark, and Luke as well" (79).

In the second stage of his argument, Gathercole presents his core finding. Challenging "the standard view" that, whereas the "I have come" sayings in the Fourth Gospel point to Jesus' preexistence, the "I have come" sayings of the Synoptic Gospels do not, Gathercole argues that these sayings are "the strongest evidence for such a christology in the first three Gospels" (83). He develops this core argument in four steps. First, he identifies six "I have come" sayings in the Synoptic Gospels, each saying consisting of "I have come" plus a statement that summarizes why Jesus has come. For example, "Let us go elsewhere into the nearby villages, so that I may also preach there. *For this reason I have come forth*" (Mark 1:38; cf. Luke 4:43). The other sayings are Mark 2:17 (par. Matt 9:13); Matt 5:17; Luke 12:49; Matt 10:34 (par. Luke 12:51); and Matt 10:35. In addition to these, Gathercole includes two sayings in which "the Son of Man is the subject of the saying (Mark 10:45 [par Matt 20:28] and Luke 19:10) and two others in which demons ask Jesus why he has come (Mark 1:24 [par Luke 4:34] and Matt 8:29). Gathercole concludes that *prima facie* there is a strong case "for seeing preexistence implied in the Synoptic 'I have come' sayings" (86).

In the second step of his argument, Gathercole reviews the way others have construed the "I have come" sayings in the Synoptic Gospels (as the idiom of a Hellenistic prophet; as an Aramaic idiom for "I am here"; as "I have come" from Nazareth; as Jesus' coming as a

prophet of Israel; as Jesus' coming as Messiah; as statements of epiphany), and he concludes that these interpretations are wanting. This leads to the third and crucial step in the argument: that the "I have come" statement with a formula of purpose "is most closely, and most abundantly, paralleled in announcements by angels of their comings from heaven" (111). To defend this proposal, Gathercole brings forth twenty-four examples from biblical and related literature that make use of this formula. Having offered this new background for interpreting the "I have come" statements, Gathercole's fourth step is to provide a detailed exegesis of these statements in the Synoptic Gospels. Reading these statements in light of how the formula is employed in the announcements of angels coming from heaven to perform a specific task, he argues that the Synoptic sayings are best interpreted as evidence that the Gospels present Jesus and his mission in terms of preexistence. Finally, Gathercole examines a number of statements that speak of Jesus having been sent. Although these "sending" sayings do not of themselves indicate preexistence, they can now be construed as such in light of the "I have come sayings."

The third stage of Gathercole's argument explores the hypothesis that Wisdom Christology provides another way to argue for preexistence in the Synoptics. Although one might expect Gathercole to adopt this position, he does not. Rather, he maintains that reports of Wisdom Christology in the Synoptics, even in the case of Matthew's Gospel, have been greatly exaggerated. Moreover, he notes that Wisdom was not regarded in Judaism as a preexistent entity, distinct from God, but as an attribute of God and as a way of speaking of God's purpose. But Gathercole does see intimations of the preexistent Christ in Israel's history, especially in what he calls Jesus' "preincarnate longing for Israel's repentance" (219), expressed in Matt 23:37-39.

The fourth and final stage in Gathercole's argument examines the four major titles Matthew, Mark, and Luke apply to Jesus ("Christ," "Lord," "Son of Man," "Son of God"). He urges that the messianic title the *anatolē* ("dayspring") from on high (Luke 1:78-79) is an indication of preexistence; he suggests that there may be some indication of preexistence in the use of "Lord" in Mark 1:2-3 and 12:35-37; he argues for preexistence in those Son of Man sayings that are coupled with the "I have come formula"; and he highlights the added significance that preexistence gives to the Son of God title.

Gathercole's monograph is a model of cogent argumentation. Even those who disagree with him will admire the logical manner in which he develops his thesis that the "I have come" sayings evidence preexistence in the Synoptic Gospels. To be sure, this is not the explicit preexistence that dominates the narrative of the Fourth Gospel, since there is no teaching about the incarnation in the Synoptics comparable to that found in the Johannine Prologue: "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). Rather, it is an inchoate notion of preexistence that has not yet found a way to express the incarnation. In my

view, Gathercole's monograph provides sufficient evidence to open the question of preexistence in the Christologies of the Synoptic Gospels anew.