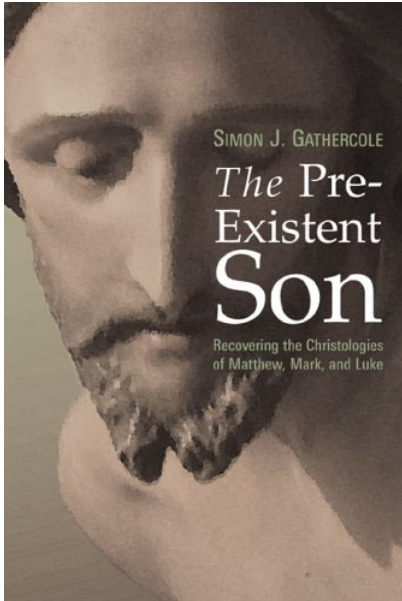


RBL 04/2007



Gathercole, Simon

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

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. Pp. xii + 344. Paper.
\$32.00. ISBN 0802829015.

James D. G. Dunn
Durham University
Durham, United Kingdom

In short order Simon Gathercole has produced another strongly argued thesis in close dialogue with a host of other scholars who have ventured into the field. His mastery of ancient sources and of languages ancient and modern is impressively displayed. And his thesis is argued with lucidity, tenacity, and a consistent desire to let the text speak for itself. His case is, briefly, that, in contrast to the dominant strain of English-language scholarship on the subject, there is substantial evidence for the view that the Synoptic Evangelists thought of Christ as preexistent: “the really controversial point to be made in this book is that *the pre-existence of Christ can be found in the Synoptic Gospels*” (1).

After a brief introductory review of previous research, the subject is introduced with two preliminary chapters. The first briefly restates the general consensus that preexistence Christology was already widespread in Christian communities well before 70 C.E., as attested by Paul and other New Testament texts (including a rather extensive treatment of Jude 5). The second reviews more extensively the evidence that Matthew, Mark, and Luke regard Jesus as already in his earthly, pre-Easter situation having a heavenly identity and as “also operating at the same time in the heavenly sphere” (47), with reference to the transfiguration narrative, texts such as Mark 13:32, Luke 10:18–20, and Matt 18:20, and episodes of Jesus forgiving sins, walking on water, and the like.

The main case is built, in part 2, on the “I have come” sayings of Jesus (chs. 3–6); these form the heart of the book (83–189). These suggest a coming from *somewhere* with a *prior intent*; that somewhere is heaven, while the prior intent is that of the preexistent Son. More detail will become clear in the critique that follows the summary overview.

Part 3 focuses on a critique of the Wisdom Christology hypothesis (ch. 8) and a detailed study of Matt 23:37 (ch. 9). The claim here is that “rumors of a full-blown Wisdom Christology in the Synoptics have in some cases been greatly exaggerated” (209), referring particularly to Matt 11:18–19, 27–30 and 23:34 (with Lukan parallels). Matthew 23:37, however, portrays Jesus “as a figure who transcends the particular generation of Israel into which he was born” (221).

Part 4 focuses on various christological titles in the Synoptics. The *anatolē* of Luke 1:78 cannot be reduced to “a merely human, Davidic Messiah” (242). Mark 1:2–3 could possibly be describing “a prehistorical scene which stands outside of the narrated time of his Gospel” (251). In Matthew’s use of Ps 78:2 (Matt 13:35), the “I” “makes best logical sense as the pre-existent Son of Man” speaking (265). In Matt 11:27 the imagery of Jesus’ presence in the heavenly council at the deliberation of the predestined divine purpose, and the talk of the Son being sent in Mark 12:6 may point in the same direction (ch. 13). A final chapter makes a few brief comments on a number of adjoining issues, including the relation of preexistence to virgin birth, Christ’s humanity, and the cross, as well as on the concept of “ideal” pre-existence.

I have already communicated directly with Simon (Dr. Gathercole) to indicate various concerns about his thesis. In particular, on his major “I have come” thesis, it seems to me that he makes too much of a distinction between a once-only mission and a lifelong ministry. This allows him to discount the well-known parallel of Josephus’ claim to speak with divine authority when prophesying Vespasian’s accession to the imperial throne: “I have come (*hēkō*) to you as a messenger of greater things” (*War* 3.400). But the parallels he then draws on for his support—angels saying “I have come”—are for the most part of the same order (once-only missions). So the more appropriate inference to draw, I think, is that the “I have come” formula expresses a sense of or claim to divine commissioning, whether the commission is short- or long-term. I am also surprised that he does not consider other parallels, in particular:

- ▶ Ps 40:7 (quoted on 174): “I have come (*hēkō*) to do your will” (as quoted by Heb 10:9); in Ps 40 the psalmist is speaking.

- ▶ John the Baptist as the “coming (*elthein*)” of Elijah (Mark 9:11–13), with allusion to Mal 3:1–2 and 4:5–6; the Baptist is clearly thought of as divinely commissioned, but does that imply that the Baptist is also preexistent?
- ▶ We also need to mention the Baptist’s expectation of *ho erchomenos* (Matt 11:3). Can we be sure that the Baptist implied or was understood to imply a heavenly rather than a divinely commissioned figure? Justin Martyr reminds us that Messiah was widely understood to be a “man born of men” (*Dial.* 49).
- ▶ Likewise, the equivalence of “I have come” with “I was sent” suggests an equivalent sense of divine commissioning such as prophets expressed.

So again the question arises whether talk of “coming” is simply a way of speaking of someone’s appearance as foretold or as divinely commissioned.

I am particularly surprised that Simon does not give consideration to the possibility, I would say likelihood, that Jesus himself at least occasionally used the form “I have come.” I know Simon does not want to become caught up in historical Jesus issues, but the issue cannot be escaped. Because, if Jesus himself did use the key phrase, then that in itself could explain why the Synoptic Evangelists use it: Jesus himself, we could then say, was the source of the usage. Moreover, if Jesus did use it, should we not ask how he would have understood the phrase or, if that is too difficult a question to deal with, how his words would have been understood by Jesus’ auditors? Here it should be noted that there is no indication in the Synoptic tradition of any of his hearers taking offense at the formulation, no one saying, “Who is this that claims to be an angelic emissary?” Such considerations cannot be ignored so completely if we are fully to investigate the implications of the Synoptic usage.

As a second large concern, I am sorry to say that I find a degree of naiveté in some of the basic conceptuality being employed. Simon declines to spell out what he means by “preexistence” but is happy to speak of Jesus preexisting “as a person,” “having actual prior existence,” “personal preexistence,” “an actually pre-existent person or being,” “a transhistorical persona” (5–6, 8, 209, 218 n. 23). In the last few pages he acknowledges that “the concept of ‘person’ (raises) another set of questions of its own” (291 n. 31), but he does not follow them up. But this is a crucial issue. What constitutes a “person”? Was the person Jesus preexistent as Jesus? If that is what is claimed, Simon needs to be up front about it. In the penultimate section of the monograph, entitled “The Nature of Preexistence,” the subject is barely touched in a mere twelve lines.

There are similar problems with the language of “identity,” borrowed from Richard Bauckham. Simon speaks quite comfortably of the “heavenly and divine contours to Christ’s identity,” of “the inclusion of Jesus within the divine identity,” of Jesus’ “close identification with Yahweh in the OT,” of the Synoptic Jesus claiming to share “the identity of God” (17, 41, 64, 76, 244). But “identity” is just as slippery a term as “person.” How is “identity” defined: in mathematical terms, where “*a equals b*” means that for *some* values of *a* and of *b*, *a* is the same as *b*, and where “*a is identical with b*” means that for *every* value of *a* and *b*, *a* is the same as *b*? Or is it to be defined in genetic or ethnic terms—are we already into a concept of “eternal generation”? Or in terms of character or personality, the Logos as the soul, “the ghost in the machine”? Or in social terms—identity defined by the differing relations of the same individual being a son, a husband, a father, a teacher, a friend, and so forth? Would Evangelists who depict Jesus as praying to God really have considered Jesus to be “identified with Yahweh”? Would Paul, for that matter, who, for all that he uses Yahweh texts of Jesus, also makes a point of speaking of “the *God* and Father of our *Lord* Jesus Christ”?

I am rather saddened here for two reasons. One is Simon’s failure to engage with a Jewish conceptuality of divine immanence that is sophisticated in its complexity and refusal to make simplistic equations. So we meet figures such as “the angel of the Lord” and the mysterious Melchizedek. In what sense is the one “identified” with Yahweh or the other preexistent? Above all we have Wisdom, whom Simon discounts as a factor, precisely because Wisdom was “not regarded in Judaism as a pre-existent entity distinct from or independent from God, ... a personification rather than a person” (209). So Jesus is to be regarded as “a pre-existent entity distinct from or independent from God,” is he? Let’s dispense with Jewish subtleties in how to conceive of the divine presence and activity in the world! Let’s press for a crudely straightforward, “simple” conceptualization of Jesus as “an actually pre-existent person or being”! The convenience of this for Simon’s thesis, of course, is that possible parallels to Jesus as incarnate, such as Simon ben Onias being depicted as the embodiment of Wisdom in Sir 50 or Sarah as representing Wisdom in Philo or the “identification” of Wisdom as Torah in ben Sirach and Baruch, can, once again, be discounted. Here I could mention also the unsatisfactoriness of Simon’s dismissal of the concept of “ideal preexistence,” yet one more attempt to reflect something of the subtlety of Jewish reflection on the purposes of God. It is hardly a sufficient reason to dismiss it because “*everything* is ideally pre-existent in the mind of God” (12, quoting Wayne Meeks). The difference, of course, is in who/what is in the mind of God and in the self-expressive energy God expends in bringing his purpose in Christ to expression within time.

The other misgiving I have is what might have to be described as a degree of irresponsibility in Simon’s pushing this line so hard, both in the rawness of his conceptualities and in his

eschewing the subtleties of both Jewish and patristic reflection on the subject. For what Simon promotes (claiming it to be the view of New Testament authors) seems to be basically a form of bi-theism. For if Jesus is preexistent as Jesus, then he preexists as the person who was encountered in Galilee in the late 20s C.E., and our conceptuality is caught into envisaging God and the preexistent Jesus as two such persons. This I believe is a far cry from the christological monotheism of the New Testament and from the subtleties of the Logos Christology that led up to the Nicene Creed. Or is it indeed the case that the sophisticated understanding of differentiation within the Godhead that it took another three centuries to conceptualize and formulate was already grasped by the Synoptic Evangelists? My fear is that Simon's too simplistic thesis will encourage the tritheistic polytheism that many Christians effectively believe to be orthodox Christian faith and will justify the criticisms of Jew and Muslim that Christianity is not monotheistic, that is, if, alternatively, the thesis does not promote the modalist heresy that Jesus was Yahweh.

As a third major concern, I confess to being very unhappy over what comes across as the rather wooden literalism of so much of the exegesis that Simon entertains or commends. This is illustrated by his readiness to entertain an appeal to what the passage in question "actually says" (as on 28) or to the "plain sense" (44). It is almost as though the distinction between "what it says" and "what it signifies/means" has been wholly forgotten. What about typology and symbol and metaphor? What about poetic speech? What about partial analogy? At one point Simon does recognize the possibility that "the author [of Hebrews] regards the OT as a kind of script for a drama" (45). But otherwise, regrettably, the exegesis often seems wiling to pander to an uninformed faith. For example:

- ▶ Matthew's description of Jesus as "Emmanuel," God with us, "should probably be understood as highlighting Jesus' identification with God in a *hard* sense" (75–76). Is that equivalent to the mathematical distinction between "equals" and "is identical with"—for all values of "Jesus" and "God" Jesus and God are one and the same? And what about the original prophecy of Isa 7:14: Was the expected child in the time of King Ahaz to be identified with God "in a *hard* sense"?
- ▶ Does "I have come" necessarily carry with it the implication that "I have come *from somewhere*"? We saw the danger of pressing an analogy too far in the metaphor of redemption. Does it require us to ask "To whom was the price paid?" That was a mistake made by medieval theology that we have learned to avoid.
- ▶ Does "the son of man came not to be served" (Mark 10:45) really carry with it the implication that the preexistent son of man had the right to be served (168)?

- ▶ Matt 23:37, “How often have I longed to gather you,” referring to Jerusalem—Simon infers that Jesus is addressing a Jerusalem that spans generations throughout Israel’s history, with the obvious corollary that the “how often” includes Jesus’ preexistent anguish for Jerusalem or, alternatively, “some kind of identification of Jesus with the Lord of Israel in the OT” (214–18).
- ▶ In the same connection Simon mentions the possibility of attributing to Jesus a “hyperbolic manner of speaking,” but then adds “This ... should of course remain a last resort” (219). Why “of course”? Was it not Jesus who is remembered as speaking of the necessity for the would-be disciple to “hate” his father and mother and wife and children (Luke 14:26) and of his coming to bring not peace but a sword, to set families against one another (Matt 10:34–36)? The thought of a rich man passing through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:23) isn’t exactly literal speech.
- ▶ I would have hoped for a more robust dismissal of the suggestion that by quoting Ps 110:1 (“The Lord said to my Lord...”) Mark (12:35–37) must have thought that God was addressing the preexistent Jesus when the words were first said. As well might we infer that Jesus was personally present with God when God said through Hosea, “Out of Egypt have I called my son” (Matt 2:15). Or that Rachel was weeping not for her own children or the generation destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 31:15) but in reality for the infants slaughtered by Herod (Matt 2:18). Or when Ps 2:7 was pronounced at the coronation of a king such as Josiah (“You are my son, today I have begotten you”) that king Josiah was really Jesus! But Simon is quite prepared to argue that Matthew’s quotation of Ps 78:2 in reference to Jesus’ parabolic teaching (“I will open my mouth in parables...”) “makes best logical sense” if we infer that the “I” is the preexistent son of man (265).
- ▶ In the same context Simon argues that “the kingdom (of God) is a preexisting reality in heaven” (263–64). But of course: where God rules is God’s kingdom; it is “the kingdom of heaven” in Matthew’s terminology. But to reify that as “a preexisting reality in heaven” is an odd line to take.
- ▶ Similarly with Luke and the words of the Benedictus, “the *Anatolē* will visit us from on high” (Luke 1:78) (238–42): Are they any less poetic than Virgil’s representation of Augustus as Apollo come to earth (*Eclogues* 4.6–10) or Horace’s representation of Augustus as Mercury descended in the guise of a man (*Odes* 1.2.41–52)? After all, in Zechariah, as Simon notes, *anatolē* is the translation of *semach*, “branch,” a standard way of referring to the hoped-for son of David. Here at least Simon recognizes that “poetic statement” is involved, although only in the penultimate paragraph of the book (296)! But what is the “plain sense” of a poetic statement? And how does this

acknowledgment square with Simon's earlier insistence that "attempts to reduce the sense to a merely human, Davidic Messiah fail particularly to explain away 'from on high' in Luke 1:78"? So a poetic understanding "reduces the sense"! A refresher course in hermeneutics seems to be called for here.

- ▶ Equally strange is the deduction that the talk of the Son of the Most High being given the throne of his father David, reigning for ever, and his kingdom having no end (Luke 1:32–33), implies the Son's "everlasting life" and "immortality" and again by further inference his preexistence (281–83). All this despite the obvious allusion to the promise to David in 2 Sam 7:12–14 that God would be a father to his son and that the throne of David's kingdom would be established "forever." So David's descendants are all "immortal"? And when the people cry, "Oh king, live for ever," they mean it literally?

To such examples of failure to allow for the richness of imagery, metaphor, and form I add a few examples of rather hasty or overstated exegesis:

- ▶ In 1 Cor 15:47's talk of "the man from heaven," he ignores the fact that the earthly precedes the heavenly and that the heavenly Adam is the resurrected Christ (26); to read "from heaven" as a reference to incarnation runs quite counter to Paul's argument.
- ▶ The discussion of the significance of Jesus' saying "Your sins are forgiven" (57–60) ignores the Qumran parallel in the Prayer of Nabonidus, where Nabonidus says "an exorcist forgave my sin" (4QprNab 242 4).
- ▶ The inference, suggested as a "strong possibility," from Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22) I find, frankly, astonishing—that God alone is good and (Simon adds) able to give commandments, and therefore because Jesus commands (not in the text) the young man to sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow him, therefore Jesus is also "giving commandments" and therefore is also "good ... in the absolute, divine sense" (74). This is special pleading with a vengeance!
- ▶ Does Peter's reaction to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord" (Luke 5:8) really warrant the conclusion that it evidences "a fundamental distinction between Jesus and sinful humanity" (75)?

I should perhaps add that the robustness of my response follows the character of our regular exchanges for many years now, which continued at the SBL Annual Meeting in Washington (November 2006), when I was on the panel reviewing his *Pre-existence* book. It is because I admire Dr. Gathercole's scholarship and his ability to mount a weighty

exegetical argument (from which I continue to learn), and because I believe it to be by such robust dialogue that discussion can progress most fruitfully (so I fully expect him to respond in the same manner), that I have offered this review.