

Did Paul think Christ was a pre-existent being?

Será que Paulo pensava que Cristo era um ser preexistente?

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Abstract. Despite the scholarly consensus according to which, to the apostle Paul, Christ was a pre-existent being, that can hardly be considered the only possible interpretation of his thought. In this article, I propose a reading of six passages from his authentic letters in light of the hypothesis of adoptionist Christology. This work puts forward two considerations: on the one hand, arguing for an incarnation Christology imposes on the text a theology that was only later developed; on the other hand, whereas the perspective of incarnation raises contradictions with the overall Pauline thought, adoptionism provides a more consistent understanding of the same. Should this hypothesis be correct, it also presents a more plausible framework for the origin and evolution of the early Christian movement.

Keywords: Apostle Paul. Jesus Christ. Ancient Christianity. Adoptionist Christology. Incarnation Christology.

Resumo. Apesar do consenso académico segundo o qual, para o apóstolo Paulo, Cristo era um ser preexistente, essa dificilmente pode ser considerada como a única interpretação do seu pensamento. Neste artigo, proponho uma leitura de seis passos das suas cartas autênticas à luz da hipótese da cristologia adocionista. Este trabalho sugere duas considerações: por um lado, defender a cristologia encarnacionista impõe ao texto uma teologia que se desenvolveu apenas mais tarde; por outro lado, enquanto a perspetiva da encarnação parece apresentar contradições com o pensamento paulino, a da adoção providencia uma compreensão coerente do mesmo. Caso esta hipótese esteja correta, ela apresenta igualmente um enquadramento mais plausível para a origem e evolução do nascente movimento cristão.

Palavras-chave: Apóstolo Paulo. Jesus Cristo. Cristianismo antigo. Cristologia adocionista. Cristologia encarnacionista.

1. Challenging the consensus

When I started investigating the origin of Christianity from an academic perspective, I was obviously aware that most scholars defended that Christ already existed before he had assumed human nature. What I was not prepare for was the extent to which that agreement was almost universal. The fact that this position was coincidental with that of most Christians nowadays struck me as highly suspicious. At the end of the day, this is the challenge of investigating a living religion. Unlike other subjects in History, the

resistance of scholars to set aside their presuppositions just seems more prevalent. In *The pursuit of history*, John Tosh argued for the social function of History as follows:

Social memory continues to be an essential means of sustaining a politically active identity. Its success is judged by how effectively it contributes to collective cohesion and how widely it is shared by members of the group. Sometimes social memory is based on consensus and inclusion, and this is often the function of explicitly national narratives. (Tosh, 2015, p. 3)

One could argue that Christianity is one of those national, or even global, narratives. However, the question we should be asking ourselves is not what hypothesis is most effective in confirming our social identity, but which one explains Pauline thought more accurately. My view is that this goal can only be achieved through a critical analysis of the relevant historical context that would allow for the evidence to speak for itself. I remember, at one point, finding myself wondering about one particular issue. In spite of the fact that the canonical Gospels show an evolution from low to high Christology, on a straightforward reading, Paul's perspective seemed to be closer to the latter than to the former. The fact that other scholars experienced a similar discomfort provided some reassurance (Ehrman, 2014, p. 251). Despite that concurrence of thought, I found Bart Ehrman's resolution to the problem, namely the hypothesis of Christ as a pre-existent angel, somewhat unsatisfactory. I hope that the explanation put forward in this study can be considered at least a possible alternative. Before presenting the argument, I must stress that it relies only on the seven letters scholars can confidently ascribe to the apostle Paul (Tabor, 2013, p. 34). If one were to include the other six in the analysis, it could significantly alter the conclusions of the hypothesis proposed herein. In addition to that, I have only included passages that are relevant from a Christological standpoint, which in my view are the following: Philippians 2:5-11, Galatians 4:4, 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, 1 Cor 10:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:9, and Romans 1:1-4. It is to the individual analysis of each of these passages that we now turn.

2. Philippians 2:5-11

When it comes to Pauline literature, no passage has been more extensively used in the defense of Christ's pre-existence than Phil 2:5-11. Besides Christology, another issue that has often been the object of contention is its literary genre. If some scholars put forward the "almost universal agreement ...that Phil 2:6-11 constitutes a signal example of a very early 'hymn' of the Christian church" (Hawthorne & Martin, 2004, pp. 530-531), others classify it as a poem (Brown, 2022, p. 62), while yet others opt for a less structurally constraining "brief encomium" (Collins, 2003, p. 367). As interesting as this discussion might be, it is ultimately tangential to the issue at hand, so I propose we focus on the examination of the nature of Christ according to Paul. It has been put forward that the "Philippian hymn" embeds a three-stage chronology: "pre-existence, incarnation, and exaltation" (Martin, 1967, p. 42). In a straightforward reading, one can easily see how an expression such as ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων (Phil 2:6) could be interpreted as existence prior to incarnation. Ralph Martin himself recognizes how instrumental this verse was in

the defense of the two natures of Christ in later Church councils (Martin, 1967, p. 106). In an expression of skepticism, other scholars leave the arena open to different lines of interpretation, suggesting that the consensus arises as a “presupposition rather than a conclusion” (Dunn, 1989, p. 114).

The argument for pre-existence is presented to us roughly in the following manner. Christ initially existed as a divine being, ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ (Phil 2:6), subsequently assumed human nature, σχήματι εὑρεθείς ὡς ἄνθρωπος (Phil 2:8), and was exalted by God as Lord, ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν (Phil 2:9). In this reading, μορφῇ θεοῦ is understood to denote ontological existence in a way equivalent to God’s. Then, in accordance with divine plan, it was necessary for Christ to become a human being in order to bear the weight of the sins of Humankind. The obedience he had shown in making himself a slave, μορφῇ δούλου λαβών (Phil 2:7), right until the ultimate sacrifice on the cross, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ (Phil 2:8), lead to the following stage of his existence, i.e., his exaltation as Lord of all, πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται (Phil 2:11).

Although possible, the above reading falls short of accounting for a number of elements. If Paul wished to argue for the pre-existence of Christ, he would surely have employed unambiguous wording. Instead, he used μορφῇ, which points to a secondary trait such as form or shape (Liddell & Scott, 1996, p. 1147), and not a primary one such as essence, being, or substance. Examples of clarity from ancient authors in similar circumstances include Plato’s assertion that οὐσία ὄντως οὐσα (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247c) is what holds the region above the heaven, and that God did not just create particular things but those that actually exist, ὄντως οὐσης (Plato, *Republic*, 597d). Moreover, Paul does not shy away from using clear language when referring to Christ’s real existence as Lord following his resurrection: he is exalted, he is given a name, everyone bows to him and proclaims his power (Phil 2:9-11). If his pre-human existence was as real as that which followed his exaltation, why wasn’t Paul explicit about it? Similarly to the analysis of μορφῇ, the idea that ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (Phil 2:7) implies prior possession of something that Christ was later deprived of is not necessarily warranted by the text. In a metaphorical reading of the passage, and I’m not alone in this approach (Martin, 1967, p. 165), one could envisage Christ merely emptying himself of the possibility of grasping equality with God, not actually abandoning a status or nature he previously had.

One perspective explored in the analysis of the “Philippian hymn” is that of Adam Christology. Some of its proponents go as far as stating that “Adam Christology provides not only a plausible context of thought for Phil. 2.6-11 (and II Cor. 8.9) but also the most plausible context of thought” (Dunn, 1989, p. 125). We can easily understand why. The apostle Paul links Adam with Christ in three different occasions. In the first one, Paul states that, whereas sin came through one man, Adam (Rom 5:12), liberation from sin will come through another man, Christ (Rom 5:15). He revisits the same analogy in *1 Corinthians* by equating Adam with death and Christ with life (1 Cor 15:20-22). If the trajectory of Humankind started with the first Adam receiving life, it will end with the last Adam (Christ) as a provider of life (1 Cor 15:45). In the same vein, scholars advanced that Christ, like Adam, having been created in the image of God and facing the same dilemma, namely to grasp or not equality with God, “reversed the decision of the first Adam” (Talbert, 1967, p. 151). Adam was made in the image of God (Genesis 2:7) and

so was Christ (Phil 2:6). However, when confronted with the possibility of being like God, whereas Adam attempted to reach it (Gn 3:5-6), Christ didn't, choosing instead to remain obedient until death on a cross (Phil 2:7-8). As a consequence, while Adam's transgression brought about his humiliation (Gn 3:19), Christ's righteousness resulted in his exaltation (Phil 2:9).

Furthermore, the Adam/Christ analogy in *1 Corinthians* provides the piece of the puzzle that turns the table in favour of adoptionist Christology. For incarnation Christology to be consistent with Pauline thought, the chronological sequence spiritual/natural/spiritual would have to be in view in terms of Christ's existence. This is difficult to reconcile with the very own words of the apostle as he declares that "the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual" (1 Cor 15:46). He could be referring to Adam as natural and Christ as spiritual, but that would not account for the fact that Christ himself is a descendant of Adam, the last Adam (1 Cor 15:45), made from the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom 1:3) and born of a woman (Gal 4:4). As Christ was natural in his earthly life, that had to be the starting point of his existence. He only became a spirit when God raised him from the dead. This transformation is also corroborated in *Romans* where we learn that he only became the "Son of God...by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4).

2. Galatians 4:4

The hypothesis laid out in the previous section for the chronology of Christ's nature (first natural existence, then spiritual existence) finds additional corroboration in the *Epistle to the Galatians*. If the beginning of Christ's existence seems to be presupposed in the previous letter, it is more explicitly addressed in this one. In Gal 4:4, Paul draws the attention of his readers to the importance of one chronological marker — τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου. Paul's expression finds echoes in other writers associated with the movement, namely the author of *Mark*, πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς (Mark 1:15), Luke, πληρωθῶσιν καιροὶ (Luke 21:24), and *Ephesians*, τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν (Eph 1:10). All these variations of the word πλήρωμα denote a completeness of time (Abbott-Smith, 1922, pp. 366-367), in other words, a moment that marks the occurrence of a specific event. Scholarly consensus indicates that Paul's argument in *Galatians* associates that moment with the beginning of a new stage in salvation history. Although I can find no reasonable argument against salvation as the broader context, why would that preclude the reading of the passage as the chronology of Christ's existence? Some categorical positions advancing that the event "relates to salvation history rather than to the personal experience of an individual" (Keener, 2019, p. 335) overlook that the two realities are not mutually exclusive but complementary. It is precisely because Christ initially came into existence as a human being, "born of a woman"¹ and facing thus "subjection shared with other mortals" (Keener, 2019, p. 336), that God, by raising him from the dead,

¹ As Paul espouses an Adam Christology, it is likely that he has deliberately used the verb form γένόμενον, from the same verb he uses for the coming into existence of Adam (Ἐγένετο in 1 Cor 15:45), to denote that Christ's chronology mirrors Adam's. As Adam did not exist prior to God's decision to create him, neither did Christ prior to being born of a woman.

inaugurated the second stage of his existence – as a spiritual being. It was only after his resurrection that the Son of God, now a spirit, was sent into the hearts of believers (Gal 4:6). And why did Christ's chronology had to develop in this fashion? Because it was necessary to materialize God's plan of saving the world from sin. The personal chronology of Jesus folds into the salvation chronology of Humankind allowing for the reconciliation of God with his creation.

Another Pauline expression requiring our attention is ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ (Gal 4:4). Scholars have argued that, in order for something to be sent, it had to exist in the first place. This understanding finds supports in *Luke*, πλουτοῦντας ἐξαπέστειλεν κενούς (Lk 1:53), and *Acts*, ἐξαπέστειλεν τοὺς πατέρας ἡμῶν (Acts 7:12). The fact that the verb ἐξαποστέλλω can be found in multiple instances with that meaning renders it a possible interpretation of Gal 4:4. However, there are other occasions, particularly pertaining to actions performed by God, where the act of sending does not necessarily entail pre-existence of what is sent. As recognized in scholarship, “when God sends wisdom or knowledge or a spirit of confusion, the pre-existence of such qualities is not in view” (Schreiner, 2010, p. 179). *Old Testament* passages such as God sending wisdom (Exodus 31:3), curses (Deuteronomy 28:20), and confusion (Isaiah 19:14) are good examples of this. Even if the verb ἐξαποστέλλω is only used in the passage in *Deuteronomy*, the meaning implied in the other two occurrences is equivalent. If Thomas Schreiner's initial argument was reasonable and supported in Scripture, the same can hardly be said of the following one: “nevertheless, the sending of the Son is distinct from God's sending wisdom or knowledge, for the latter are abstract entities and the Son is personal” (Schreiner, 2010, p. 179). In which way would the abstract/personal nature of what is being sent be relevant to its pre-existence? No evidence is provided to us in substantiation of this assertion. It has also been pointed out that:

...it is evident from this that ἐξαπέστειλεν when used of God does not tell us anything about the origin or point of departure of the one sent ... Paul's readers would most probably think simply of one sent by divine commission. (Dunn 1989, p. 39)

It was only through the benefaction bestowed upon Humankind, i.e., salvation from sin, that Christ was elevated to divine status. This is the sequence of events that emerges from a straightforward reading of Paul's epistles to the assemblies in Rome (Rom 4:25) and Corinth (1 Cor 15:3-4). This cause/effect link was not exclusive to early Christian thinking, as it was also the common understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine in the Roman Empire. The imperial cult was seen as an expression of gratitude for the *Pax Romana* (Allison, Crossan, & Levine, 2009, p. 46). It can be traced back to Octavian who “gained the title ‘Augustus’...‘exalted one’...and during his rule...presented himself as the people's savior who established...the Pax Romana, the ‘peace of Rome,’ upon all his territories” (Allison, Crossan, & Levine, 2009, p. 18). It has also been argued that Alexander the Great had been deified “because of his great deeds” (Wolfsdorf, 2020, p. 694) or “in honor of his achievements” (Bardill, 2012, p. 359).

Paul showed no reservations in speaking about Christ's natural existence as a man, and his post-resurrection spiritual existence as Lord. If he thought that Christ was also pre-existent, why would he have missed another opportunity to mention that fact? The more passages we examine the harder it becomes to explain away the silence of the apostle in that scenario. Perhaps the obvious answer is right in front of us. That Paul of Tarsus "and his readers thought simply of Jesus as the one commissioned by God as one who shared wholly in man's frailty, bondage and sin, and whose death achieved God's liberating and transforming purpose for man" (Dunn, 1989, p. 46).

3. 1. Corinthians 8:5-6

The *First Epistle to the Corinthians* provides two passages that can shed some light on our analysis of Paul's Christology, the first of which being 1 Cor 8:5-6. Unlike what some scholarship seems to suggest, we should resist the temptation of reading this passage as a stand-alone statement about the roles of God and Christ in the creation of the world. That cosmological approach to interpretation flies in the face of the context of this section of the letter, which Paul clarifies, not once, but twice. Having addressed the issue of married life (1 Cor 7:1-40), Paul introduces a new topic – food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:1). This might seem like a detail to someone looking at 1st century Greece with 21st century eyes, but is entirely consistent with the cultural framework of that time and place. Described by Strabo as a bustling trade hub (Strabo. 8.6.20), Corinth was a breeding ground for religious cults from virtually everywhere in the Eastern Mediterranean. Zeus, Poseidon, Artemis, Aphrodite, Dionysus, Apollo, and Hermes (Pausanias 2.2.1-2.2.8.) are only some of the deities whose cult was attested by Pausanias as he toured the city in the 2nd century Common Era (CE). Ensuring their benefaction and preventing their wrath required periodic sacrifices of food, a ritual of piety that was socially mandatory should the citizens wish to maintain a balanced ecosystem between heaven and earth. What is at stake in this section of the letter is the significance of consuming food dedicated to idols, and to which extend it defiles the relationship of his converts with God. In other words, should Christians eat sacrificed food or not?

Paul's argument can be summed up in the following manner. It would only be unrighteous to eat food sacrificed to idols if they were real gods. Paul rejects that claim by saying that "an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (1 Cor 8:4). Therefore, eating food sacrificed to "so-called gods" (1 Cor 8:5) has no meaning in itself. Only unknowledgeable and weak people "think of it as having been sacrificed to a god" (1 Cor 8:7). Before laying out to the Corinthians what the real knowledge is, the apostle reminds them in verse 4 what he had already mentioned in verse 1, that he is still writing in the context of food dedicated to idols. The knowledge Paul wishes the assembly of Corinth to understand is twofold:

- a) there are only two authorities governing their life as Christians, which are God and Christ;
- b) each of these authorities perform different functions in their lives (1 Cor 8:6).

Whereas one is the creator of all things, “from whom all things came” (1 Cor 8:6), and whose worship is the goal of our lives, “for whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6), the other is the Lord, who brought the meaning of these things to us, “through whom all things came” (1 Cor 8:6), and will lead us to God, “through whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6). We are immediately invited to draw the parallel with sacrificed food. Even if it was God who created food, it is Christ who assigns meaning to it. God had inaugurated a new era in salvation history by raising Christ from the dead. The beginning of the eschatological phase was triggered with Christ, the “first fruits” (1 Cor 15:23), but will be ultimately extended to all the elect upon his return from heaven. This created a new kinship in Christ that fundamentally changed the meaning of life for each of the elect. In other words, “though the believer still lives in this world, to the degree that he shares in Christ through the Spirit he has died to it, as he awaits final redemption on ‘the day of the Lord Jesus’ (1 Cor 5:5)” (Fredriksen, 2014, p. 58). As the knowledge that comes through Christ is what gives meaning to all things, and that knowledge tells us that those gods are “nothing at all in the world” (1 Cor 8:4), it is not detrimental to eat food sacrificed to them.

The second element of knowledge conveyed by Paul is no less important to his argument. According to him, God is the purpose of our life. He is the one “for whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6). But achieving the final reconciliation with God requires a mediator. That mediator is Christ, the one “through whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6). Paul is telling us that, whereas “food does not bring us near to God” (1 Cor 8:8), Christ is the agent through whom his converts will be reunited with God. The ultimate benefit accruing from the knowledge of Jesus Christ was worth losing all things (Phil 3:8). They became meaningless.

Paul Gardner rightly noticed in 1 Cor 8:5-6 Christ’s role in mediating that reconciliation with God. In his commentary, he writes that the implied meaning of the passage is that:

...it is Jesus “through whom” (δι’ οὗ) are all things and “through whom” (δι’ αὐτοῦ) we, as Christians, continue our existence and service before God so that we might arrive at the goal of our existence (“through whom [we come to God]”). (Gardner, 2018, p. 195)

This conciliatory role is first and foremost represented by his sacrifice on the cross. Through this selfless act, he opened a window of opportunity, directing believers to the path of righteousness and, ultimately, eternal life with God. By looking at these two verses under the light of soteriology instead of cosmology, Gardner seems to render them invalid in support of Christ’s pre-existence. In recognition of Hans Lietzmann’s classification of the passage as an acclamation, other scholars see it as evidence of Christ’s participation in salvation instead of creation (Murphy-O’Connor, 1978, p. 258). According to other views, though, the text points to an understanding of Christ’s function as protological (Romanov, 2015, p. 397; Collins & Harrington, 1999, p. 212). In contrast to them, Murphy-O’Connor, relying on an interpretation of the doublet of ἡμεῖς as referring to Christians, argues that the passage is soteriological. To him, “the meaning of the verse can be summarized in the following paraphrase: from God come all things which enable

us to return to him. All these things are given through Christ and in him we go to the Father” (Murphy-O’Connor, 1978, p. 265).

4. 1. Corinthians 10:1-4

As our analysis stands, it shouldn’t be controversial that one particular passage might be the object of different interpretations. Provided that all of them are properly substantiated, the conclusions should boil down to which one of them is the most probable explanation. As it turns out, 1 Cor 10:1-4 provides an emblematic example of this reasoning.

From verse 1, Paul draws the attention of the reader to the *Exodus* story highlighting two sections of the narrative he can leverage in his argumentation: the protective cloud and the crossing of the sea. Moses is mentioned as the steward of the people and God as the divine benefactor in providing food and water for the people’s sustenance. The rock is singled out as the source of water for the Israelites and the verse ends with the assertion that “that rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). Unsurprisingly, this is the section that is usually the source of contention among scholars.

If it is true that Paul sometimes uses the imperfect tense when expressing literal meaning, some examples being εὐδοκοῦμεν (1 Thessalonians 2:8), ἦν (Phil 2:26), and ἐδίωκον (Gal 1:13), he occasionally employs it when presenting an argument in allegorical terms as well. This is surely the case when he uses physical infancy as a metaphor for intellectual infancy by saying that οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς, ὅτε ἦμεν νήπιοι, ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ἦμεθα δεδουλωμένοι (Gal 4:3). He utilizes the same parallel in 1 *Corinthians* by appealing to his childhood: ὅτε ἡμὴν νήπιος, ἐλάλουν ὡς νήπιος, ἐφρόνουν ὡς νήπιος, ἐλογιζόμεν ὡς νήπιος· ὅτε γέγονα ἀνὴρ, κατήργηκα τὰ τοῦ νηπίου (1 Cor 13:11). In the same letter, the apostle also uses the physical body as an allegory for the body of Christ, i.e., the community of believers, by reminding them that εἰ δὲ ἦν τὰ πάντα ἐν μέλος, τοῦ τὸ σῶμα; νῦν δὲ πολλὰ μὲν μέλη, ἐν δὲ σῶμα (1 Cor 12:19-20). The argument here is not that, in the three examples cited, all the actions in the imperfect tense convey a metaphorical meaning. The point is that the overall argument relies on an allegory and thus, in conveying a message that should not be interpreted literally, Paul uses verb forms that would otherwise be understood in the literal sense.

As noted by scholars, 1 Cor 10:3-4 emerges as another of Paul’s allegories (Collins & Harrington, 1999, p. 245). A couple of verses earlier, Paul sets the tone for the passage with a subtle clue. Knowing full well he was addressing Greeks, he tells the community “that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea” (1 Cor 10:1). Even if in other passages he clarifies that the Christian movement is open to everyone (Gal 3:28), from an ethnicity standpoint, he draws the line between Jews and Gentiles (Rom 1:16, 1 Cor 9:20-21). If in 1 Cor 10:3-4 Paul intended to convey literal meaning, why would he start his argument with the implied assertion that Jews and Greeks had the same ancestors? Was he seriously presenting the Corinthians as being literally descendants of the Hebrews who crossed the desert from Egypt to Canaan? This line of reasoning strikes me as implausible to say the least. It is when we read the

following words of the apostle that the previous hint becomes an unequivocal metaphor. We are presented with the following sequence:

- a) “baptized into Moses” (Fee, 1987, p. 445);
- b) “ate... spiritual food”;
- c) “drank... spiritual drink” (1 Cor 10:2-4).

The parallel with the path of those in Christ is striking:

- a) “baptized into Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:3);
- b) “This is my body” (1 Cor 11:24);
- c) “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor 11:25).

What Paul is telling this community is that, as the Hebrews had been brought into the covenant with God, who provided them natural life through food and water, so have the Christians been brought into the covenant with Christ who, in turn, provides them spiritual life through his body and blood. An allusion to the baptism and the eucharist has been rightly recognized here (Fee, 1987, pp. 443-444). What is interesting to remark is that Paul continues to intertwine the paths of Hebrews and Christians. If in verse 1 he was mashing together Hebrews and Christians, he continues to do so in the subsequent verses when it comes to the nature of the food and drink. When they were in the desert, ancient Israelites were provided physical food (meat, bread) and physical drink (water), with no indication in the text that this sustenance carried any spiritual meaning. Spiritual food and spiritual drink are the underlying meaning behind the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:20) instituted among the early Christians. By claiming that the food and drink consumed by the Hebrews was also spiritual, Paul creates a symbiosis between the two groups that renders his rhetoric more persuasive. The argument he initiated with “our ancestors” (1 Cor 10:1) and developed with the Moses/food/drink parallel is concluded with the reference to the source of the spiritual drink: Christ. It would be odd for Paul to have started his argument allegorically, developed it allegorically and end it in any other way other than allegorically. And it certainly appears to be the case when Paul repeats the “spiritual” theme by connecting it to the rock from which “spiritual” water had flown. I would argue that “spiritual” is the common denominator that substantiates Paul’s metaphor from the start. Both Hebrews and Christians belong to the same “spiritual” family, who drink “spiritual” water from a “spiritual” rock, whose name is Christ. The fact that Paul considers Christ “a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45) is confirmed a few chapters later.

Scholars have noted that Paul’s words suggest a “clearly eucharistic context” (Bourke, 1961, pp. 374-375) and subsequently argued for pre-existence through the identification of Christ with Wisdom. However, Myles Bourke does not favour arguing for pre-existence from this passage, arguing that “when Paul says, ‘the rock was Christ’, he means that the pre-existent Christ was with the Israelites in the desert, and furnished them with the water which quenched their thirst. The entire passage is typological” (Bourke, 1961, pp. 374-375). A different view is offered by Gordon Fee who, excluding

a purely figurative interpretation, declares that “it seems far more likely that he [Paul] uses the verb ‘was’ to indicate the reality of Christ’s presence in the OT events” (Fee, 1987, p. 449).

The truth of the matter is that, to an ancient author, it was perfectly plausible to understand the past in light of the present. The amalgam of concepts that pervade this passage (Jews’ ancestors/Greeks’ ancestors, Moses/Christ, physical food/spiritual food, physical drink/spiritual drink, physical rock/spiritual rock, rock/Christ) can be hardly understood as presenting a literal understanding of reality. It seems more reasonable that Paul is employing another allegory similar to the ones he put forward for Adam (1 Cor 15:45) and Sarah (Gal 4:21-31). When in verse 2 Paul presents the “baptized into Moses”/“baptized into Christ” parallel, which scholar would defend the hypothesis that he meant that Christ is literally Moses? Well, if Christ isn’t literally Moses, why would he be literally the rock?

5. 2. Corinthians 8:9

It is not difficult to guess that scholars who have taken a position of incarnation Christology based on Phil 2:5-11 would have a similar reading of 2 Cor 8:9. According to this view, “being in the very nature of God” (Phil 2:6) would be equivalent to “though he was rich” (2 Cor 8:9), whereas “he made himself nothing” (Phil 2:7) would be parallel to “he became poor” (2 Cor 8:9). This view is effectively attested in scholarship as the most probable meaning intended by Paul (Guthrie, 2015, pp. 248). However, this position requires the assumption that being in the nature of God is tantamount to being a celestial being, and that making himself nothing is a metaphor for the incarnation. As I’ve argued earlier, that is not the only possible interpretation and it doesn’t strike me as the most plausible in the context of Pauline thought.

In addition to that, in 2 Cor 8:9 Paul uses a term that is difficult to fit in an incarnation Christology: grace. As pointed out by scholars, “when Paul elsewhere speaks of ‘grace’ (=‘gracious gift’, or ‘gracious act’) in connection with what Christ has done he was always thinking of his death and resurrection...nowhere else does he talk of Christ’s ‘gracious act’ as his becoming man” (Dunn, 1989, pp. 121). Why would Paul risk ambiguity on a single verse when referring to what he considered to be the most important event in history, namely Christ’s death and resurrection (1 Cor 2:2)? It seems more plausible that the apostle is just being consistent in using “grace” to refer to the same action he alluded to in his other letters.

The equivalence with God’s nature could very well have been Paul’s way of associating Christ with Adam, whereas Christ’s embrace of poverty could have been a symbolic way of conveying humility and obedience to God. It has also been put forward by scholarship that 2 Cor 8:9 is “a variation on the Adam Christology” (Dunn, 1989, p. 122). Other academics would rather highlight an important logical step, which is “that only one who shared the divine existence in eternity may be said to exercise a choice to abandon it in a lowly incarnation” (Martin, 2017, p. 363). This argument bears the same shortcoming of Guthrie’s, i.e., the presupposition that Paul’s statement should be understood in a temporal framework (pre-existence as divine being before, existence as

human being after). If Adam's Christology is in view in this verse, can the same line of reasoning be applied? The fact that Adam, as a human being, grasped equality with God did not entail that divinity was an attribute he had previously possessed. Why should it be any different with Christ?

That understanding seems even more inconsistent when confronted with the entire argument laid out by Paul in this chapter. A few verses earlier, he initiates a new topic by mentioning the generosity of the community in Macedonia in contributing to a collection to the Lord's people. In his view, the Macedonians were facing a dilemma. They could either aim at material wealth and be deprived of God's grace, or be filled with God's grace and contribute to the collection. There is nothing in this passage suggesting that the Macedonians were particularly wealthy prior to this decision. On the contrary, Paul tells us that "their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity" (2 Cor 8:2). Having the possibility of grasping the path to financial wealth, the Macedonians chose rather the path to spiritual wealth which, on the short run, entailed economic generosity towards the whole community. The apostle casts the Macedonians as having displayed the model behavior expected from the followers of Christ, and makes it clear that's what he expects the Corinthians to do as well. And who's the ultimate model embodied by the community in Macedonia? Christ. Having faced the dilemma of exalting or humbling himself, he chose the latter. His humility was eventually rewarded as God raised him from dead and made him Lord of all. Although Christ, like Adam, was already bearer of wealth ("though he was rich," "being in the very nature God"), unlike Adam, he did not grasp equality with God but sacrificed himself for us ("he became poor," "made himself nothing"). This interpretation emerges as more symmetrical when it comes to Paul's narrative, its participants and what is expected from them. In contrast with Adam, Christ humbled himself. The Macedonians followed that example, and so should the Corinthians.

6. Romans 1:1-4

The prologue of the *Epistle to the Romans* makes a good case for what Paul had in mind when it comes to the chronology of the existence of Christ. A straightforward reading of the first four verses seems to indicate the following sequence of events:

- a) Christ is foretold in scripture (Rom 1:2);
- b) Christ is born as a man (Rom 1:3);
- c) Christ is exalted as a spirit (Rom 1:4).

The first element has been rightly noted by scholars, who advanced that "it is the divine purpose for Christ which 'existed' from the beginning, not the one in whom it should be fulfilled" (Dunn, 1989, p. 122).

If the hypothesis put forward earlier for the analysis of Gal 4:4 is correct (that God sending his son is best understood as an eschatological statement rather than a chronological one), Rom 1:1-4 makes sense as an elaboration of the stages in which that eschatological plan would unfold. Moreover, it appears to be consistent with the chronology put forward by the apostle in the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* when he

addresses the topic of the two bodies. Paul unequivocally writes that “the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual” (1 Cor 15:46). Similarly to *1 Corinthians*, if Paul thought that there was a pre-natural stage to the existence of Christ, why would he have missed another opportunity to convey it? All convoluted attempts to harmonize this inconsistency become unnecessary if one opts for an economical reading of the text, according to which there were only two stages for Christ’s existence (firstly as a natural being, secondly as a spiritual being).

Scholarship also challenged the idea that Christ only became the Son of God (Rom 1:4) “after he was born from David’s offspring” (Thielman, 2018, p. 34). Frank Thielman relies essentially on a chronological reading of Rom 8:3 and Gal 4:4, which leads him to conclude that the above appointment does not preclude pre-existence (Thielman, 2018). This is indeed the prevalent view among scholars, whose understanding of Rom 1:4 is along the lines of “an appointment to an enhanced sonship with a powerful status” (Perry, n.d., p. 14). However, *1 Corinthians* seems to suggest a different reading. When Paul specifies the modality of Christ’s appointment to divine sonship he uses the expression ἐν δυνάμει (Rom 1:4). This choice of words should not be unfamiliar to us as they had already been used in the context of the resurrection. When addressing the community in Corinth, the apostle states that the resurrected body is ἐγείρεται ἐν δυνάμει (1 Cor 15:43). If in the context of *1 Corinthians*, where Paul lays out the two-stage chronology, δυνάμει is used to qualify the second stage of Christ’s existence, why would he espouse a different view when using the same attribute in Romans?

The *First Epistle to the Corinthians* can equally be used to frame the concepts of σάρκα (Rom 1:3) and πνεῦμα (Rom 1:4). When in that letter we come across the description of the natural body and the spiritual body, it’s hard not to draw the conclusion that the former has a negative connotation whereas the latter has a positive one. The body that takes chronological precedence, the one consisting of σάρκα, earns the not so flattering qualifications of perishable, dishonored, and weak (1 Cor 15:42-43). On the contrary, the transformed body, the one made of πνεῦμα, emerges out of the previous one and is described as imperishable, glorious, and powerful (1 Cor 15:42-43). We have no particular reason to assume that Paul, when writing *Romans*, had something else in mind when he utilized those two concepts. As such, when we read that Christ was born ἐκ σπέρματος Δαβὶδ κατὰ σάρκα (Rom 1:3), we naturally conclude that a negative connotation is intended. In like manner, ἐν δυνάμει κατὰ πνεῦμα (Rom 1:4) shows the virtuous nature of Jesus’ resurrected body. In light of this parallel, it is difficult to grasp Thielman’s position according to which “it is more likely... that Paul uses the phrase in a neutral way” (Thielman, 2018, p. 34).

We have then three lines of argumentation drawn from 1 Cor 15 (precedence of natural vs spiritual; ἐν δυνάμει as qualification for the resurrection; σάρκα/πνεῦμα dichotomy) that lend support to a two-stage hypothesis for the interpretation of Rom 1:1-4. Whereas we have straightforward evidence of consistency with that understanding of Paul’s thought, we have no clear evidence suggesting that he contemplated a stage of pre-existence. In sum, “the explicit assertion of Christ’s pre-existence as God’s Son from eternity seems to be post-Pauline in Christian circles” (Dunn, 2018, pp. 79-80).

7. Conclusion

Given the wealth of information emanating from the authentic letters of the apostle to the gentiles, it does not come as a surprise the contemporary interest of scholarship in Pauline studies. Despite the fact that he does not present a systematic theology in his writings, the way in which he addressed the problems that arose in his communities allows us to build a portrait of his standing on certain issues. One of them is the nature of Christ. Was he a divine being made human, or a human being made divine?

The fact that his letters were the first literature ever written about what would become the world's most popular religion is not innocent in the direction scholarship has taken throughout the centuries. In practice, this translates into the following overall approach. If nowadays the official theology of the major Christian denominations defend that Christ is a pre-existent being, surely that would show in the letters written by the first author of the original movement. This led to the normalization, even if inadvertently, of *petitio principii* as the underlying driver for the study of Pauline thought.

What this work aimed to achieve is to put forward an understating of Paul free from the reflections, and ultimately the conclusions, that later Christians reached when it comes to the nature of Christ. If Paul, like contemporary theologians, thought that Jesus Christ was a being that had always existed alongside God, it would be expected for him to be explicit about it. Well, he isn't.

Two considerations stem from that realization. The first one is that scholarship does not shy away from boldly concluding Christ's pre-existence out of, quite frankly, convoluted arguments. It is not unusual to see anachronisms and speculations being raised to the level of evidence in an effort to validate the consensus view. The second one is that Paul himself had clear occasions in his letters where Christ's existence was on topic, in which he could have unequivocally declare that he existed prior to being a man. Why didn't he do it? For a doctrine that later became a hallmark of Christian theology his silence speaks volumes. Furthermore, in at least two passages, he puts forward a view that is inconsistent with pre-existence. If the apostle held that position, would he have written that "the first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam [another man], a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45) and "the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual" (1 Cor 15:46)? Surely both these statements entail that Christ existed first as a natural being and only later as a spirit. The explanatory power of this hypothesis is not limited to the understanding of Pauline thought. By presenting an adoptionist Christology, it aligns pretty well with other Christian literature, namely the canonical Gospels. Writing roughly twenty years after the apostle Paul, the author of the *Gospel of Mark* presents Jesus as adopted by God at baptism (Mk 1:10-11). Similarly, the authors of the *Gospel of Matthew* and the *Gospel of Luke* seem to share an adoptionist view as both of them suggest that Jesus became the Son of God at conception (Matthew 1:18, Lk 1:35). We have to wait until the composition of the *Gospel of John* to see an author explicitly presenting Jesus as existing since the beginning of all things (John 1:2). When set in chronological order, Paul's epistles and the canonical Gospels show a clear evolution from low to high Christology. The progression we see in literature might have been the mere reflection of what successive generations of Christians thought about who

Jesus was. In the words of another scholar, someone who was initially “a Jewish man with an apocalyptic message” (Ehrman, 2014, p. 371) eventually came to be understood as “the very Word of God made flesh” (Ehrman, 2014, p. 371).

Hopefully, I have been able to argue not only for an economical and consistent interpretation of Pauline thought but also for a perspective that renders the understanding of the evolution of the early Christian movement more plausible. Far from settling the issue, this work intends to foster the academic debate on this topic, as I’m confident of the virtuous effect that other perspectives can bring to the discussion.

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