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# God as Creator: the quest of the prehistoric Jesus

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## Abstract

*The pre-existent Christ as agent of creation has had a profound influence on the early Christian worldview. This is reflected in the gospel according to St John, but also elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 8:6, Colossians 1:15-20, Hebrews 1:1-3). Its evaluation as a core element of the Christian creed was confirmed by the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. This doctrine of the prehistoric Jesus is problematic in the light of the scientific premise that the natural world is driven by random change and natural selection, which results in a dichotomy between the personalities of the historic and prehistoric Jesus or may sacrifice both. An alternative solution may be found in a re-appraisal of the compatibility of Biblical Theology and secular scientific theories of origin.*

## Introduction

The quest of the historical Jesus has been a popular, and at times controversial<sup>1</sup>

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1 Some of the controversial elements of the so-called “third” or latest quest for the historical Jesus are highlighted by Du Plessis, “The mystery of God and Jesus Christ – beyond agnosticism and foundationalism”, *Neotestamentica* 30.1 (1996):39-57. The quests for the historical Jesus were in part a response to allegations that Jesus was a non-historical myth. Looking back on half a century since the first appearance of his book on the historical Jesus, Schweizer concludes: “But now that *Matthew and Mark*, as they stand, give us an account of his personality and work that is comprehensible down to small details, it can be asserted that he actually does belong to Palestinian Judaism and to the period to which

research theme during the past century. Whilst there continues to be widespread agreement regarding the historicity of the person of Jesus, there is substantial disagreement as to the historical reliability of the information about the life of Christ as it has been preserved in the canonical Gospels and the early church. One of the major advantages of this quest for the historical Jesus is the abundance of contemporary literature.

Distinct from the incarnate Jesus, Christianity has also maintained the existence of a 'prehistoric Jesus', a claim that, unlike the historical Jesus (e.g. Luke 1:1-4, John 1:14, Acts 1:1-3) fully rest on divine revelation. For early Christianity Jesus was not only the Redeemer, but also the Creator of this world. This is emphasized by John and Paul, followed by early creeds of the church (cf. John 1:3, 10, 12; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16, 20; Heb. 1:2-3). Importantly, apostolic Christianity regarded this world as a cursed environment. While Christ made everything well, his good creation was since corrupted by evil, also in its ultimate form of death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 8:19-22). In the Jewish and Christian theological traditions evil and the destruction of life are closely related.<sup>2</sup> In its historical panorama (undoing the curse of Genesis 3 by recreation or regeneration), overcoming death was directly connected with God's creative power.<sup>3</sup> Both creation and recreation come together in the person of Jesus Christ: pre-existent and incarnate.

Early Christianity's proposition of a prehistoric Jesus is relevant for the question, recently posed by Mats Wahlberg (Umeå Universite, Sweden) whether any form of theodicy is possible from a Darwinian perspective at all.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary statements like: "Evolution helps theology realize that God is

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his death is assigned. The true understanding of these two Gospels, made possible by eschatology, has dealt the death-blow to the mythical Jesus. This does not mean, however, that no further attempts will be made to revive the theory." See A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the historical Jesus* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954), xiii.

- 2 "Evil in the Bible is a departure from or non-fulfillment of a created entity's telos, purpose, or health." See J.M. Moritz, "Are Viruses Evil?" *Theology and Science*, 18:4 (2020):575.
- 3 Irenaeus connects the fact that God is creator with his ability and promise to overcome death in the material world. He rejects the god of those who reduce his activity to spiritual matters like the soul of spirit, which according to Irenaeus are eternal anyway. This god is considered practically ineffective, if he exists at all, as he leaves the realm of the body and the physical world carelessly under the power of death. See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereres* V.4.1-2.
- 4 Mats Wahlberg has shown that a viable evolutionary theodicy has not yet been proposed, mainly because it involves suffering and death as part of the creation process. He has argued that a direct "Genesis style" of creation is superior from a philosophical point of view. See M. Wahlberg "Was evolution the only possible way for God to make autonomous creatures? Examination of an argument in evolutionary theodicy", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, February 2015, 77:1 (2015), pp. 37-51.

much more interested in arousing adventure in the world than in establishing impeccable design,”<sup>5</sup> May be helpful from a pragmatic perspective, but also suggest that theological and philosophical cohesiveness should no longer be aimed for when theistic evolution is adopted as a paradigm. It also proposes that the present state of the cosmos is normative for human actions and in accordance with Gods desires.

This pragmatic strategy of positively redefining of theology in terms of neo-Darwinism by employing phrases such as “arousing adventure” does not effectively change the reality of suffering behind this concept. Nor does it provide an explanation or justification for its presence, which is problematic if the goodness of God continues to be a premise. Neither does “thinking of nature in terms of promise rather than design” solve any of these underlying dilemmas.<sup>6</sup> This seems merely a shift of focus to the future in the theological wake of Moltmann.<sup>7</sup> However, does this not run the risk of merely making a teleological statement of faith which does not solve the perceived philosophical and theological incongruity? Effectively this postpones judgement on the basis of a leap of faith in the greater good that should emerge in future. But does “the greater good” justify at a personal level in the case of a God who makes individuals the temple of his Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and promises that all things work together for good for them personally (Rom 8:28)? Without clearly argued moral and theological parameters from natural or revelational sources, as traditional Christianity has this in its concepts of general and special revelation, a goal orientated explanation seems to serve as a justification of what is considered morally wrong in its theological tradition. But should a teleological reason be introduced to remove moral and spiritual obstructions for economically driven situation ethics or new forms of social Darwinism? Doesn’t this altogether ignore the central teachings of Christian theology: concept of restoration/redemption of creation and humanity through Christ? Others, like Karl Rahner in his later life, have sought to create a safe space for the spiritual by disconnecting it from the material world altogether.<sup>8</sup>

5 J.F. Haught, “Darwin and Contemporary Theology”, *Worldviews* 11, 1 (2007), p. 56.

6 J.F. Haught, “Darwin, Christianity, and the Drama of his Life”, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 66, 4 (2010), p. 716.

7 “For hope always arises out of the coming into view of the new. It perceives the latter’s approach, reaches for it in open expectation, and both internally and externally leaves behind what is old and insufficient.” Jürgen Moltmann and William R. White, “Hoping and planning: Future Anticipated Through Hope and Planned Future”, *CrossCurrents* 18.3 (1968), p. 309. Moltmann and to some degree also Pannenberg assert that the suffering and resurrection of the incarnate Jesus serve as a template for world history and eschatology.

8 Treating the material and spiritual world as two distinct realms was a popular ‘solution’ for tensions between science and faith in the 20th century. In a context of prevailing

Perhaps there is a better approach. In his confrontation with the Hegelian thinking of the 1960's, Pannenberg already pointed to the need for a comprehensive view of history.<sup>9</sup> He also suggested that solutions should be sought within the traditional doctrinal framework of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Maybe it is possible to reassess the present evolutionary mechanisms, associated with suffering and death with a fallen and cursed creation, to allow for an invasion of evil into this present world, which does no longer allow us to extrapolate from the present into the originally good creation. Building on Wahlberg's philosophical assertion that a direct "Genesis style" of creation is superior to an evolutionary theodicy, this article intends to show from a theological perspective that this is consistent with early Christian assertions on the prehistorical Jesus with regards to the moral standards of the incarnate Saviour it proclaimed.

## Methodology

The aim of this article is to show how the prehistoric and incarnate Jesus is thoroughly integral to traditional Christian theology. A gnostic separation between a creator and redeemer god was unthinkable as the two were united in the person of Jesus. I will investigate to what degree this doctrine of the pre-existent Jesus as agent of Creation is evident from the writings of apostolic Christianity and was confirmed by the early ecumenical creeds (Nicaea 325 and Constantinople 381). To establish this, we will use a text-orientated approach in accordance with the principles of classical philology. The focus will be on how these texts were understood in late antiquity by

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existentialism, Karl Rahner developed an ontological Christology. The traditional view of Christ's incarnation was only acceptable for previous civilisations which still thought mythologically. See John M. McDermott, "The Christologies of Karl Rahner", *Gregorianum* 67.1 (1986), p.110.

- 9 "Statt dieser Problematik gefragt werden, wie heute eine Konzeption der Universalgeschichte lieh ist, die im Gegensatz zu der Hegels die Endlichkeit Erfahrung und damit die Offenheit der Zukunft, des Individuellen wahr." Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Hermeneutik und Universalgeschichte", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 60.1 (1963), p.120.
- 10 According to Pannenberg the Christian notion of redemption from mortality of the human person and body should be upheld from the perspective of divine revelation in the ancient texts: "The faint ideas of such a life that we can obtain are sufficient to answer a number of objections against the intelligibility of the Christian eschatological hope. They are sufficient to rebuke the mentality that feels itself unspeakably superior to what it considers to be the religious prejudices of a past age and to reassure the faithful who are tempted to surrender prematurely the eschatological Christian tradition." Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Constructive and Critical Functions of Christian Eschatology", *The Harvard Theological Review* 77.2 (1984), p.139.

their original recipients and the early Church. In other words, their message as it was understood at the time and adopted by the Church.

As to the data, this contribution will only consider passages which make claims about Jesus' pre-incarnate life directly, not by inference. Whilst references in the four gospels to Christ's creative powers in ministry and suggestions from Messianic prophecies may serve as an indication or confirmation of his pre-existent creation involvement (see, for example, the excellent study of McDonough, 2009),<sup>11</sup> this article will focus on the positive and straightforward claims of the primary sources.

Once the role of the prehistoric Jesus as Creator is established, we will consider some of the possible theological and moral consequences: Can this doctrine of Jesus as agent of creation be preserved or pursued with integrity in post-Darwinian times? Should evolution be reconsidered in terms of a fallen world, or be preferred over an original creation mechanism? This contribution will describe and argue for the significance of some of the tensions between this doctrine of creation and the theory of theistic evolution,<sup>12</sup> arguably the

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11 McDonough, SM. *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

12 It is important to recognize that it is not the Christian doctrine which causes the perceived tensions between scientific theory and religion. Devine explains: "The conflict between religion and science is not the result of narrow-religious people interfering with the work of dedicated scientists. On the contrary, scientists have as often as not been the aggressors in the case almost from the beginning) ... We have reasons for regretting, from a scientific point of view, the habit of biologists of using their science to attack Christianity (and sometimes also to support substitute religions). For the resulting confrontations with traditional believers place enormous pressure on biologists to follow the party line, to the detriment of their ability to propose new hypotheses that may be in tension with it." See P.E. Devine, "Creation and Evolution", *Religious Studies* 32.3 (1996):334-335. Also, there is some evidence that the idea that evolution inherently is a materialist philosophy rather than a science is supported by the way it is promoted and taught in Western education; see Eugenie C. Scott, "Creationists and the Pope's Statement", *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 72.4 (1997):401-406. In the United States it is also openly associated with an anti-religious attitude, where advocates of theistic evolution often have anti-religious purposes. For instance, in his defence of the Templeton Society, Jerry Coyne writes: "Religion in the modern world may itself be a symptom of unhealthy societies. Ultimately, the best strategy to make Americans more receptive to evolution might require loosening the grip of religion on our country. This may sound not only invidious but untenable, yet data from other countries suggest that such secularism is possible and, indeed, is increasing in the United States at this moment. But weakening religion may itself require other, more profound changes: creating a society that is more just, more caring, more egalitarian. Regardless of how you feel about religion, that is surely a goal most of us can endorse." See J.A. Coyne, "Science, Religion, and Society: the Problem of Evolution in America", *Evolution* 66.8 (2012):2662.

most widespread contemporary Christian theory of origins.<sup>13</sup>

## Jesus as agent of Creation: Scripture and Nicaea

Although there is some indication in the preserved words of Jesus and elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> it is primarily the testimony of the Apostolic Church which contains a pre-existent Jesus in combination with the teaching that he was also God's agent in the creation of this world. This goes beyond the general link of creation with God's plan to send his Son into the world (Eph 1:3-14).<sup>15</sup> The quest for the prehistoric Jesus as Creator chiefly rests on four passages: the prologue to John's Gospel<sup>16</sup>; Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 8:6<sup>17</sup>,

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13 Theistic evolution has been traced to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), although Lamarck only theorized about gradual change over time *within* species, and did not propose a theory of origins. Traditionally the debate surrounding theistic evolution has concentrated on the age of the world, the universality of the flood and the creation of Adam; cf. R.S. Appleby, "Between Americanism and Modernism: John Zahm and Theistic Evolution", *Church History* 56 (1987):482; as well as a separation of Genesis 1 and 2, cf. H. Cook, "Creation and Becoming in Jacob Klapwijk's Theory of Emergence", *Philosophia Reformata*, 76.1 (2011):146. However, the deeper question that faces the development of the theory post Darwin and Mendel (Huxley's modern synthesis) is one of creation method and the integrity of the doctrine of God.

14 The pre-existence of Jesus is supposed in John 8:58: Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.' It is more explicitly present in John 17:24: "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." (NRSV) Cf. 1 John1:2.

15 See J. O'Donnell, "Faith in God the Creator", *Gregorianum* 78.2 (1997):310.

16 John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (NRSV)

17 1 Cor. 8:6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (NRSV)

Colossians 1:15-20<sup>18</sup> and Hebrews 1:1-3<sup>19</sup>.

John's prologue designates Jesus as the pre-existent Word of God (1:1 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος), who was both God and distinct from the Father (καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος). He is also presented as the exclusive agent (δι' αὐτοῦ) of all Creation (1:3 πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν). In other words, the Father used the Logos as the sole means to create this world. To the Son all of humanity owes its life and ability to participate in this reality (1:4 ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων). It is pertinent that these words are initially applied to the Creation of the world, not to Jesus' later incarnation and subsequent recreation of humankind, which John considers a continuation of this light (1:9-13). It is only in verse 5 of the prologue that John could be argued to connect this to the present (καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει), although this is unlikely as the unit of thought ends with an aorist (καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν). Jesus symbolizes the power of Light and the first Creation-word in Genesis 1:3 (וַיִּבְרָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ וְהָאֵרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹמָה וְחָשֶׁךְ הָיָה עַל-פְּנֵי-תְהוֹמָה),<sup>20</sup> which broke through in an empty wilderness<sup>21</sup> covered in darkness (וַיִּבְרָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ וְהָאֵרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹמָה וְחָשֶׁךְ הָיָה עַל-פְּנֵי-תְהוֹמָה).<sup>22</sup> This power of Light returns in the incarnation of the Word (ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν), which has revealed a glory worthy of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

The prologue of John's gospel teaches a prehistoric Jesus who was instrumental in the creation of this world and humanity in the beginning (note the similarities between Gen 1:1 and John 1:1). Jesus stands at the beginning of history as we know it. Before him there was nothing.<sup>23</sup> He is

18 Col. 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in[a] him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in[b] him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (NRSV)

19 Heb. 1:1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (NRSV)

20 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (NIV)

21 NRSV: a formless void.

22 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep. (NIV)

23 *Creatio ex nihilo* is a logical inference of the premise that everything came into being



the one who created and who recreates. This creation theme is central to the understanding of John's Gospel (recreation/regeneration by Word and Spirit, cf. 2 Cor. 5:17),<sup>24</sup> and perhaps also in the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and the Eucharist.<sup>25</sup> The apostolic Church looked on him as the Agent of Creation, as well as the One who would return humanity and this world to restoration after the fall into sin and God's curse struck this world (cf. Gen 3).

The notion of Jesus as Creation agent is continued in 1 Corinthians 8:6: "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."<sup>26</sup> The Father is presented as the source of all created things, the one responsible for Creation. Jesus is portrayed as the agent who actually created. According to St. Paul, this role is fulfilled in close connection with his being the anointed king (Χριστός) and his anticipated lordship (εἷς κύριος) over all Creation.

Perhaps the most straightforward and detailed text about Jesus' involvement

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through the Logos. See F. Lohman, "Die Bedeutung der dogmatischen Rede von der »creatio ex nihilo«, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 99.2 (2002):206. The doctrine is also found in the *Shepherd of Hermas* (Mandate 1.26.1: "First of all, believe that God is One, even He who created all things and set them in order, and brought all things from non-existence into being." (Lightfoot). Cf. T. Waldron, "... Creator of Heaven and Earth", *The Furrow* 41.6 (1990):337.

- 24 J.K. Brown summarizes the significance of creation in John's Gospel: "The creation theme in John can be seen most clearly in the following areas: (1) allusions to creation that begin the Gospel, (2) the explicit motif of life throughout, (3) allusions to Genesis 1-2 in the passion and resurrection accounts, and (4) the implications of Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week. (The last category connects to the prominent Johannine signs motif.) This cluster of features provides compelling evidence for creation's renewal as a theme of significant import in John." See "Creation's Renewal in the Gospel of John." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72.2 (2010):276. The parallel between creation out of chaos and cosmic renewal through the *chaoskampf* of the crucifixion is taken up by D. Rudman, "The Crucifixion as Chaoskampf: A New Reading of the Passion Narrative in the Synoptic Gospels", *Biblica*, 84.1 (2003):102-107. For other allusions (e.g. John 9:6; 20:22), see J. Suggit, "Jesus the gardener: the atonement in the Fourth Gospel as re-creation", *Neotestamentica* 33.1 (1999):162-164; and D. Frayer-Griggs, "Spittle, Clay, and Creation in John 9:6 and Some Dead Sea Scrolls", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132.3 (2013):659-670.
- 25 Meßner recognizes creative themes in the incarnation and the Eucharist: "Wie das Wohnungnehmen des göttlichen Geistes im Schoß Marias den neuen Menschen geschaffen hat, so schafft es in der Eucharistie die Speise der neuen Schöpfung, die Paradiesesspeise." See R. Meßner, "Die eucharistische Epiklese und die Offenbarung der neuen Schöpfung", *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 127.2/3 (2005):209.
- 26 1 Cor 8:6: ἀλλ' ἡμῖν εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν, καὶ εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι' αὐτοῦ.

in creation is Colossians 1:15-20:

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.<sup>27</sup>

The same doctrinal features present in 1 Corinthians 8:6 are also found here, but in greater detail. Jesus was pre-existent (καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων) before anything was created. Although the word κύριος is absent from this passage, Jesus' Lordship is obvious from the statement that all thrones, dominions and powers exist through and for him. Paul insists that this was the purpose from the very start. All things were created not only through him, but *for* him as well (εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται). John's important notion of Christ's restorative redemptive mission is also found here. It is the original agent of Creation who reconciles all things to God again, paving the way for a new heaven and earth.

The fourth passage relevant for the quest of the prehistoric Jesus is Hebrews 1:1-3:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.<sup>28</sup>

27 Col. 1:15-20: ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, 16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὄρατα καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι· τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται· 17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν, 18 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας· ὃς ἐστὶν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων, 19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι 20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι' αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

28 Heb. 1:1-3: Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις 2 ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ, ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων, δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας· 3 ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ, φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ, καθαρῖσμον τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς,

Again, the basic ingredients of the Colossians passage are also present here: Jesus as the image of the invisible God (cf. John 1;18),<sup>29</sup> owner and agent of Creation of the worlds (δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας),<sup>30</sup> who sustains all things, attained reconciliation between Creation and God, and has taken up a position of power at God's right hand.

The thought of the early Church on Jesus as pre-existent Son of God who was the Father's agent in the creation of the world are summarized in the text of the Nicæan Creed (325):

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth]; Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.<sup>31</sup>

The text of the creed as it was finalized by the first council of Constantinople (381) is slightly different in that it specifies "heaven and earth" among the visible and invisible things that God created:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.<sup>32</sup>

According to Nicæa-Constantinople, the relationship between God and

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29 John 1:18: No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (NIV)

30 The use of αἰῶνας probably points to all aspects, realms and dimensions of Creation, elsewhere referred to as heaven and earth (e.g. Rev. 21).

31 Some portions of the 325 text were omitted or moved in 381. Greek text: Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἓνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητὴν. Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ, τοῦτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινὸν, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο, τὰ τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα, παθόντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, καὶ ἀνεληθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς, καὶ ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς. See H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1911:29-30); J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Continuum, 2011:205-262).

32 Greek text of Constantinople: Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἓνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς, ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων. See Denzinger, "Enchiridion Symbolorum," 37-38; Kelly "Early Christian Creeds," 296-367; World Council of Churches, *Confessing the One Faith, Revised Edition: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010): xxxix.

mankind is one that is established by creation and restored by means of recreation. The World Council of Churches (*Confessing the One Faith*, 2010) commented on this as follows: “It is the divine economy that the separation and alienation of the world from God as a result of sin and evil is overcome through the reconciling work of the Son and the transfiguring presence of the Spirit. In the mystery of this *divine economy* of salvation the one God is revealed as life and love communicating himself to his creatures.”<sup>33</sup>

Otherwise “only begotten” (μονογενῆ) which Nicaea connected with the Father (ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς) “born from the Father, only begotten” was later put in close conjunction with “Son of God” and a sentence about his nature replaced by a time element “before all ages” (πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων).

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.<sup>34</sup>

As it comes to the description of Jesus’ activity in the creation of heaven and earth, Constantinople only gives a brief summary: “By whom all things were made.”<sup>35</sup> This is immediately connected to his work for the redemption and re-creation: “Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.”<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, the mother of Jesus was only introduced to the creed by the council of Constantinople, but did not feature in the initial Nicene Creed at all; but the prehistoric Christ was present from the start. Both Nicaea and Constantinople recognized a connection between the work of Christ as Creator and Redeemer of this world. It is a matter of creation and recreation, both being performed and made possible through the same agent. Jesus is the agent of the initial creation, but returns to a fallen creation. John’s Gospel in particular pays a lot of attention to this connection of creation and regeneration as the essence of Jesus’ rescue mission for a fallen world. From the New Testament passages that deal with the prehistoric Jesus, treated in this section, it is clear that they stress the profoundly personal character of his involvement in Creation.

33 World Council of Churches. “Confessing the One Faith,” 5.

34 Greek text: Καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ, τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων, φῶς ἐκ φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί·

35 Greek text: δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο·

36 Greek text: τὸν δι’ ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα.

## Prehistoric Jesus: not based on evidence, but on revelation

An obvious point, which is still easy to overlook, is that the teachings of the early Church are not based on human experience or eyewitness accounts. While it has been argued that memories of Jesus' activities on earth may have pointed the Church to accepting his role as Creator, this as such can hardly be called conclusive. It has been suggested on the basis of passages like Mark 1:40-45 and Luke 13:10-17 that many of the healings in the Synoptics present Jesus as the Creator God's agent who restores creation to its intended order. Likewise, the exorcisms would demonstrate that Jesus can control supernatural chaos and the most threatening elements of the created order (e.g. Luke 8:26-39; Mark 9:14-29).<sup>37</sup> Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-11) and giving life to the dead (John 5:28-29; 11:1-44) should be seen in the same light.<sup>38</sup> The church's memories of Jesus, therefore, according to proponents of this theory, provide decisive hints for associating him as an agent of creation.

But how persuasive is this argument? The casting out of demons and healing people is similarly also ascribed to apostles and prophets. It could be argued that whilst the garment of Jesus needed touching before healing took place, it was merely the shadow of the Apostle Peter that had to fall on people for the same to happen (Acts 5:15-16). Does that provide hints of the apostle's involvement in Creation, or indicate that creative powers were stronger in him than the Master? Certainly not. Although it should be granted that Jesus' power over circumstances in creation seems more personal than derived (e.g. Mark 4:35-41), still it remains a fact that a similar command over creation is ascribed to Moses (e.g. Exodus 7-19), and Elijah also displayed command over the heavenlies and death (1 Kgs 18:16-45, 2 Kgs 4:8-37), while the ministry of Elisha was characterized by miracles, supernatural defeat of enemy forces and even wonderworking bones (2 Kgs 13:21).

McDonough points to what he describes as "the messianic matrix" to further explain Jesus' ascribed involvement in Creation.<sup>39</sup> "To take one significant example, Jesus could 'take over' the functions of Wisdom because as the messianic king he could be presumed to be in possession of God's wisdom

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37 S.M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32.

38 McDonough, "Christ as Creator", 33-41, 229-231.

39 McDonough, "Christ as Creator", 65-66.

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to the utmost degree.”<sup>40</sup> It is McDonough’s central thesis that “early Christian teaching on Jesus’ role in creation emerged within a messianic matrix of reflection. Creation marks the beginning of his messianic dominion; he rules the world he made”.<sup>41</sup> This seems convincing, as it aligns with the central doctrine of early Christianity that Jesus was the Messiah. However, as to his involvement in creation this does not prove anything necessarily. The messianic Psalms 2 and 110 confirm Christ’s messianic rule, but do not suggest any creative abilities. Therefore, McDonough himself also allows that “Jesus and his disciples radically rethought numerous aspects of the Messiah’s work, and there is no reason that they might not have done so with respect to the Messiah’s role in creation”.<sup>42</sup> In other words, there are no solid pointers in the Old Testament that the Messiah was prehistorically involved in creating this world. Nor is it likely that it was derived from Hellenistic Jewish thinking. McDonough is right in his assessment that “the idea that Philo’s writings contributed directly to the doctrine of Jesus’ agency in creation cannot be proven”.<sup>43</sup> The idea that God created by means of speech is as old as Genesis and was widespread in the ancient near East and the specific non-personal application by Philo stands in stark contrast with the anthropomorphic application in the fourth Gospel.

This leaves us, in McDonough’s perspective, with the explanation that this idea of Jesus as pre-existent creator is largely the result of the theological creativity of Jesus and the apostles. However, had Jesus personally been the Source then it is remarkable that there are no words from Him preserved in the Gospels that teach his prehistoric involvement in Creation. While his pre-existence is inferred in his own words (John 8:58; 17:24), any logia that address his creative role in the establishment of this world are absent from the canonical Gospels.

From a traditional point of view characterized by a high regard of Scripture as Special Revelation and the authority of the early ecumenical councils, it would be preferable to ascribe the doctrine of Jesus’ pre-existent involvement in Creation to special revelation rather than inspired theological creativity of the apostles. While specific details were unknown before the times of the New Testament the doctrine makes sense in the light of available Old Testament data and provides a theologically harmonious explanation and continuity between creation and recreation/redemption. In terms of John’s

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40 McDonough, “Christ as Creator”, 5.

41 McDonough, “Christ as Creator”, 65.

42 McDonough, “Christ as Creator”, 68.

43 McDonough, “Christ as Creator”, 149.

Gospel, the information on the prehistoric Christ and his role as agent of Creation seems to be supplemented by the additional teaching of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost (John 14:26) and part of the progressive revelation that followed Jesus' ascension (cf. John 1:1 and 8:58).

## Prehistoric & historic Jesus: a clash of values?

Is it doctrinally consistent to believe in a Jesus who created by means of natural selection,<sup>44</sup> especially if the reality of this process entailed millions of years of unimaginable suffering and struggle? Is this still the Jesus of the Gospels? This question pertains not only to the prehistoric claims of the New Testament, but to its eschatology as well.<sup>45</sup> Underlying the grand scheme of creation and regeneration, is Jesus' future role as the agent of recreation (cf. Isa. 65:17, 2 Pet. 3:12-13, Rev. 21:1). *En lieu* with the first creation in Genesis, where God used breath to form word and created, redemption by means of the incarnate Word and his Spirit follows a similar pattern in the spiritual regeneration that is described in John's Gospel. Is it possible to embrace the doctrine of a Jesus-driven evolution and have legitimate expectations for a genuinely good eschaton where righteousness in terms of the Sermon on the Mount prevails and where the meek, instead of the fittest, will inherit the earth?

While the case for the prehistoric Jesus is firmly established from Scripture

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44 Natural selection is an essential component of Neo-Darwinist theory, but from the start it has been recognized to be incompatible with theistic evolution. George Jackson Mivart (1827-1900), author of *On the Genesis of Species* (1871) is considered the founding father of theistic evolution. Although he was initially a strong proponent of natural selection and a friend of both Darwin and Huxley, he gave up this concept in favour of a higher teleology or divine purpose. Natural selection, to Mivart's mind, failed to explain the initial stage in the development of useful structures. Like Alfred Russell Wallace he also believed in a non-material origin for the higher mental faculties. Cf. P.R. Sloan, "Bringing Evolution to Notre Dame: Father John Zahm, C.S.C. and Theistic Evolutionism", *The American Midland Naturalist* 161.2 (2009):192-161. Neo-Darwinism requires random mutation plus non-random cumulative natural selection. It allows for guidance by a chain of hypothetical intermediate steps, but not by teleology.

45 The New Testament expectation is a world where sin and death are no longer realities and completely banished. Neugebauer describes the early Christian expectation from Mark 12:18-27: "Ewiges Leben kann nie und nimmer Verewigung der Sünde sein. Vielmehr ist die Sünde ausgelöscht. Entschuldung und Vergebung nehmen ihr jedwede Fortwirkung. Ewiges Leben ist also nicht nur Gemeinschaft jenseits des Todes, sondern nicht weniger jenseits der Sünde. Die Sünde hat ausgespielt. Ein Comeback gibt es für sie nicht." See F. Neugebauer, "Der Gott der Lebenden und das ewige Leben", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 103.3 (2006):402.

and the early Christian creeds, this article of faith of the Church poses a significant problem in the light of contemporary science and education. Evolution is sometimes thought of as an explanation for the origin of the cosmos and this world. This is not correct; evolution in a Neo-Darwinian sense is not concerned with the origin of life but only with its development from the first life-form. Nonetheless the general concept of evolution and common descent of all life is applied to the cosmos via the Big Bang model and has become a paradigm for all forms of origin. Inherently all evolutionary 'creation' processes are random in nature and operate without any teleological framework. There is no Creator required. Overarching purposes do not exist, only short-term materialistic responses. Those who wish may, as a personal commitment of faith, suppose that there was a god who initiated these material processes. This, however, does not change the nature of these processes or the fact that they imply many millions of years of ruthless struggle for survival, with sickness and death as an eternal part of reality, even as creation mechanisms. This would reduce the concept of God to a non-necessary being, as everything would have happened just as well without him.

For Christian theology, however, there are further complications. This is most obviously at the level of propositional revelation and the nature of Scripture which has resulted in a debate between creation and evolution that dates back to at least the days of Darwin. Many books and journals have been published that address this topic. However, maintaining the early Christian belief in a prehistoric and personal Jesus as agent of creation has profound moral implications. To use the word personal in this context is important, as this indicates an unbridgeable gap with modern science. The idea of Christ as agent of Creation presupposes not only teleology, but also continuity between the prehistoric and the historic Jesus. As to the first, this is denied by the process of evolution, but applies to any personal creator, not only Jesus. While a force can be accommodated by Neo-Darwinism, a personal Creator and purposeful creation goes against the heart of the theory. Thus, while this first objection applies to any personal creator, and has been relentlessly discussed by many, the question about the prehistoric Jesus intensifies the issue of a personal creator. It also amplifies the issue of the continuity between the prehistoric and the historic Jesus. As this concerns a person, this is not a mere matter of possible discontinuity, but of integrity as well. There seems a striking difference, if not a nearly complete opposition between the values of the Jesus of the Gospels and a creation agent who uses the process of evolution in a Neo-Darwinian sense to bring about this world and humankind. Even if teleology is admitted, then the creation process



was purgatorial at best and hardly reconcilable with a good God's design of creation as originally good and Christ's redemptive mission of restoring creation to its original state. While the Darwinian process is marked by ruthless procreation, the historic Jesus insists on purity of heart and contends that the meek shall inherit the earth. Is it even possible to redefine the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount in terms of creation by means of survival of the fittest? With an original creation where adaption to circumstances is the key to survival and the values of the Master buy the holder a single ticket out of existence? If the prehistoric and historic meet in the person of Jesus, then history at a moral level seems to be reduced to a cruel cat and mouse game.

At least the Gnostics and Marcion had the freedom to ascribe the creation of an obviously evil world in terms of the Gospels to a different god, a demiurge. However, once one adopts the position of early Christianity on the prehistoric Jesus as agent of all Creation this dilemma is transferred to the person of Jesus himself. Consequently, this leaves three logical options, depending on one's level of scepticism. Either the historical Jesus needs reinterpretation (quest of the historical Jesus), or his prehistoric function as creator (theological creativity rather than historic fact, e.g. the Darwinian reinterpretation of the Old Testament by the Deutsche Christen in the 1930/40's), or the relationship between theology and science needs to be evaluated.

## Abandoning the prehistoric Jesus

1) One potential means to overcome the tension is to embrace scepticism as to the historical and factual basis of the prehistoric Jesus. While the New Testament and the early Church undeniably taught this doctrine, it should be concluded that this has become untenable in the light of post-Darwinian scientific theory. This has been most prominently recognized by Bultmann<sup>46</sup> and requires a redefinition of the historical fall as well.<sup>47</sup> Apostolic Christianity

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46 See R. Kysar, "Rudolf Bultmann's Interpretation of the Concept of Creation in John 1,3-4", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32.1 (1970):77-85.

47 Theistic evolution requires a reinterpretation of the traditional doctrine of sin entering the world by the fall of Adam and Eve. Instead it took millions of years before man became 'human'. Sin in this context is not defined as a new thing entering creation, but as an unwillingness of humankind to depart from the barbarism of the animal past. Schwager states: "Man kann deshalb was Sünde heißt, interpretieren als ein schuldhaftes Bleiben des Menschen in einer 'Natürlichkeit', die gerade dadurch unnatürlich wird, daß sie sich nicht, wie es in ihrer Anlage liegt, transzendiert. Dabei darf man nicht bloß an einen einmaligen Fall denken. Alles kann mit einem scheinbar harmlosen Abgleiten von der geschenkten Erfahrung oder mit einem gutgemeinten erneuten Herbei zwingen eines früheren Gefühles begonnen haben, das dann bald neue Gewohnheiten schuf und Folgen hatte, die weit

was well-meaning in establishing the doctrine of Jesus as pre-existing agent of creation, insisting that somehow Jesus stood at the beginning of everything as the true God, but this did not have a factual or historical basis. This has also implications for the incarnation theology, because someone who was not pre-existent cannot take on a body. While Jesus may still be referred to as 'Lord' or 'son of God', much of New Testament theology otherwise is consequently reduced to 'the myth of the incarnate god'.<sup>48</sup> The best one may propose is that if Jesus was pre-existent, he was probably not personally involved in creation at the time or perhaps only as a first mover in a deistic sense. It was in hindsight only that the early Church connected his later redemptive work to a creation that Jesus wished to evolve in a radically different way in terms of the values of the Sermon on the Mount. The ultimate product at the end of the evolutionary line would be Jesus and in that sense his involvement is still present and believers may look confident to a future where this same Jesus ultimately creates a new heaven and earth through taking the overall process of evolution in a new direction through this spiritual deflection of the cross. As Christianity emerged as the religion of the Empire following the curtailed life of an unsuccessful Jesus, likewise the world at large will eventually be redeemed by sacrifice and turning the other cheek. This solution preserves the integrity of the historic Jesus but gives up on or at least radically redefines the doctrine of the prehistoric Jesus.

## Relationship between theology and science

2) In many ways the history of Christian theology since the Enlightenment has been a redefinition of doctrine and faith. Gerhard Koch aptly calls it an "Opfergang", a process of gradually giving up on most supernatural assertions about Christ.<sup>49</sup> In this regard, 'new atheists' like Dawkins (2007)

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über den Anfang hinaus gingen." See R. Schwager, "Evolution, Erbsünde und Erlösung", *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 117.1 (1995):4-5.

48 Dalferth writes: "Glaube an Jesus Christus ist nicht notwendig Inkarnationsglaube, Christologie daher nicht notwendig Inkarnationschristologie – das ist die Grundthese der Mythos-Gruppe." See I.U. Dalferth, "Der Mythos vom inkarnierten Gott und das Thema der Christologie", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 84.3 (1987):326.

49 Koch shows how the relationship between theology and science in the last centuries has been one of surrender of faith: "Die Preisgabe des vertrauten Schemas bereitet vorerst eine arge Verlegenheit, die sich die Theologie vielleicht noch nicht tief genug eingestanden eingestanden hat. Sie hat zwar – anfänglich widerstrebend – manche Christusprädikate des Neuen Testaments und der Kirchengeschichte auf gegeben und aufgeben müssen. In diesem »Opfergang« stand indessen eines unerschütterlich fest: die unaufgebbare enge Beziehung des Christusgeschehens zu dem ewigen, überweltlichen Gott. Diesen

and Hitchens (2007), pose legitimate questions.<sup>50</sup> If there was no historical fall in any momentary sense and humankind was originally created sinful and spiritually sick, it seems cruel if not sadistic to propose a god who is going to judge humanity for the way he made them. This runs contrary to the observations of Westermann and others that “die Erzählungen der Urgeschichte praktisch ausnahmslos als Erzählungen von Schuld und Strafe bestimmt”.<sup>51</sup> Historic creation and redemption seem inseparable in biblical theology for many reasons.<sup>52</sup>

For those who do not wish to abandon the historical or the prehistoric Jesus (or both) there may be an alternative strategy to reclaim Christ as the *Pantokrator* of old. As Gerhard Kaiser suggests (1995:120): “Christus mißt uns nach seinem Maß; wir können ihn nicht nach unserem Maß messen. Wir können ihn nicht vor den Richterstuhl unserer Vernunft ziehen, sondern nur ihm nachgehen, auch denkend.” Rather than presuming discontinuity

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Gottesgedanken hat die Theologie durch alle Stürme hindurch festgehalten und an ihm sich jeweils Orientierung verschafft.” See G. Koch, “Jesus Christus – Schöpfer der Welt,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 56.1 (1959):88-89. Koch considers the link between Christ and the creation of the world crucial for the reality and relevance of the Christian faith. Only because God is greater than and in control of creation is his presence comforting and has trust in his promises any logical basis, as it shows that “daß im scheinbaren Unwetter der Geschichte die Welt unter der Verheißung des mitgehenden Gottes steht, der in Jesus Christus seine Barmherzigkeit als des menschenfreundlichen Gottes offenbart hat”; see Koch, “Jesus Christus”, 109.

- 50 Schelhas criticizes Hitchens for reducing faith to private opinion and for his view that truth should necessarily be methodologically supported by scientific inquiry. See J. Schelhas, “»Auf Penuëls Hügel« – Atheismus, der Gott und ein theologischer Diskurs: Zur christlichtheologischen Rede von Gott angesichts der Superiorität des Wissens und der Deformation des Glaubens”, *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 134.3 (2012):302-323. While it may be true that the new atheists fail to formulate a standard for ethics and caricaturize religion, as Deinhammer insists, this does not invalidate their pointing at inconsistencies in theological assertions. Cf. R. Deinhammer, R., “Über zwei Missverständnisse des »Neuen Atheismus«”, *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 134.1 (2012):63-69. That atheism is not necessarily without moral standards was already proposed by Feuerbach: “Ist das Wesen des Menschen das höchste Wesen des Menschen, so muß auch praktisch das höchste und erste Gesetz die Liebe des Menschen zum Menschen sein. Homo homini Deus est — dieß ist der oberste praktische Grundsatz — dieß der Wendepunkt der Weltgeschichte.” See L. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1841), 370.
- 51 Schmid, H.H. “Schöpfung, Gerechtigkeit und Heil: »Schöpfungstheologie« als Gesamthorizont biblischer Theologie.” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 70.1 (1973):7.
- 52 God as creator of heaven and earth is a foundational concept both in the Old and New Testament. Cf. B.E. Koziel, “Zwischen Schöpfung und Erlösung: Rekonstruktionshermeneutische Anmerkungen zu einer wieder aktuellen Grundfrage der Theologie,” *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 130.1 (2008):107-130.

between the historic Jesus and the prehistoric Jesus, or sacrificing both,<sup>53</sup> one should perhaps question the relationship between theology and the material world. Both in terms of the natural sciences and in terms of theology the prehistoric Jesus finds Himself in the realm of metaphysics and is as such out of reach of human witness or experiment. John's Gospel portrays this present cosmos as a place of darkness, where his own receive their Creator not, and where his kingdom is defined as not from this world, "al sein Reich nicht von dieser Welt, sondern von Gott, vom Schöpfer, der all dies gewährt Schöpfer, der all dies gewährt aus lauter väterlicher, göttlicher Güte und Barmherzigkeit".<sup>54</sup>

With early Christianity one should recognize that one has entered the realm of propositional revelation, involving suppositions and practical technicalities that involve an unimaginably immense reality of which we are only an infinitesimal part. Presuppositions inevitably shape one's theory of knowledge.<sup>55</sup> The central divide between those who hold to the doctrine of the Creator-God in Christ and those who hold to evolutionary theory is not their respective appreciations of the value of science or science's claims vis-à-vis the claims of Revelation. Rather, the central divide pertains to their differing presuppositions or pre-theoretical axioms (perhaps most importantly that this present world is not in its original condition but in a fallen or cursed

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53 Sacrificing both the historical Jesus and the prehistoric Jesus is logically preferred to preserving either one, because it is theologically unfeasible to separate the creation of the world from the creative work of God in the New Testament. That they are a unity is confirmed by Oda Wischmeyer: "Bei dieser neuen Schöpfung ist wieder Gott ganz und gar die Schöpfer, so wie er es bei der ersten Schöpfung war." See O. Wischmeyer, "ΦΥΣΙΣ und ΚΤΙΣΙΣ bei Paulus: Die paulinische Rede von Schöpfung und Natur", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 93.3 (1996):360.

54 M.Trowitzsch, "Die Freigabe der Welt: Der Gedanke der Schöpfungsmittlerschaft Jesu Christi bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 90.4 (1993):441.

55 The philosophy of science recognizes the suppositional elements in scientific theory. For example: Uniformitarianism is a pre-scientific assumption that the same natural laws and processes which operate in the universe today has always operated in the same way in the past. This presupposition, which itself cannot be scientifically proven, nonetheless is crucial to the validity of evolutionary theory (c.f. Robert Stern and Taras Gerya, "Earth, Evolution, Emergence and Uniformitarianism", *GSA Today* 31(1) (2021):32-33.

The nineteenth-century Presbyterian philosopher of science, R.L. Dabney, rightly accuses the positivist philosophy of wrongly holding that "all logical principles are empirical ... [seeking] to find all the sources of cognition in the senses. This common error characterized the deadly philosophy of Hume, the scheme of Auguste Comte, termed by himself positivism, and the somewhat diverse systems of Buckle, John Stuart Mill, and of Darwin and Huxley ... and consequently reach, more or less fully, the result of blank materialism." See Dabney, *Discussions, Volume III: Philosophical*. Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1980, 142-143.

state) with which they approach and interpret the scientific data as well as the Biblical claims regarding the Prehistoric Jesus. Whether there was an originally good creation as described by the Prophets and whether there will ever be one as foreshadowed in the Beatitudes is very much a matter of faith in God's revelation. As is the traditional Christian supposition of discontinuity: the doctrine of a historical fall,<sup>56</sup> which dramatically changed the character of creation and natural processes. This form of scientific agnosticism preserves both the historical and the prehistoric Jesus. Without denying the nature of the material world around us, this solution questions the relationship between the present physical world and the prehistoric Jesus. While science has the present state of this world as object, theology operates in the realm of metaphysics on the basis of propositional revelation. A solution along these lines preserves the integrity of the person of Jesus in Christian Theology.

Weighing these options, the last solution is preferable from a theological point of view, as the first implies sacrificing the historical Jesus or the prehistoric Jesus of the Christian faith. These considerations do not only concern the Jesus of prehistory and history, but also have implications for the Jesus of the future, the post-historic Saviour of eschatology.<sup>57</sup> If Jesus' making all things new is defined in terms of evolution, the contents of the Gospel are changed, and redefined in terms of a modern or postmodern worldview. Christ's claims to original creation and again "making all things new" (Rev. 21:5). This promise no longer brings the elation experienced by its early recipients, but rather trepidation in anticipation of an experience that should be more accurately described in terms of prolonged suffering than in classical concepts of creation. At best, Jesus loses his personal character and becomes a pantheistic or Hegelian force, with some justification rejected by new atheism as a god who probably does not exist and certainly does not necessarily exist as everything may be perfectly explained without his presence. The ruthless processes applied as his alleged creation methods in moving this world 'forward' can hardly be reconciled with the traits of the historic Jesus of Apostolic Christianity. Neither does this bode well for his promise of a new heaven and earth, should this reality include added

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56 A number of Jesus' healing miracles in John's Gospel amplify the connection between healing and his creative power to overcome sin and its consequences of sickness and disease, see e.g. J. Duncan and M. Derrett, "New Creation: Qumran, Paul, the Church, and Jesus", *Revue de Qumrân* 13.1 (1988):605-606.

57 Jürgen Moltmann was one of the first to consider the implications of theistic evolution for Christian eschatology. The incompatibility led him to redefine eschatology in his 'theology of hope'. Moltmann (1993:xi): "Discussions with supporters of Teilhard de Chardin's theology of evolution showed me the need for an eschatology of nature."

billions of years of suffering, death and struggle. While the New Testament positively claims “the radical renewal of creation”<sup>58</sup> as the positive outcome of God’s judgement, a theistic evolutionist eschatology reduces the definite statements in Revelation about a world without sickness or death (supported by Old Testament prophets like Isaiah), to the realms of mythology and unfounded wishful thinking.

Solution 1) finds itself at odds with the Jesus of the Gospels, solution 2) is unattractive for largely giving up on the doctrine of the prehistoric Jesus and implicitly on the Jesus of eschatology. As we have seen in our historical investigation earlier, for Apostolic Christianity the pre-existence of Jesus as agent of all Creation was an article considered central to the faith. Jesus was preached as the Creator and the Redeemer who gave up his heavenly privileges and life to regain and restore his creation.

## Conclusion: consistency required

The appraisal of the importance of the doctrine of the prehistoric Jesus is a vital quest for consistency in Christian theology. Its ultimate goal is to preserve the theological connection between creation and redemption. Contemporary theological thinking, perhaps best expressed in Moltmann’s theology of hope, suggests that human beings bear the role of rendering present through acts of anticipation the eschatological future of cosmic peace.<sup>59</sup> However, without theological and philosophical consistency, harmony between the values of the creator and his creatures, this is unlikely to materialize. Consistent theology cannot afford an eschaton that is detached from the origin, nature and purpose of this world. The latter needs to be explained, either in terms of its creator and his values or in terms of curse and evil entering this world. If early Christianity’s quest of the prehistoric Jesus as agent of creation has any relevance, then it is in its elegant solution of this dilemma between Redeemer God and the ‘evil’ nature of the present creation, from a theological perspective. The combined teaching of the pre-existent Christ and the incarnate Jesus gives meaning to the great panorama of creation, fall, redemption and restoration of the cosmos, while it also assures the individual of God’s unchanging values: the meek shall inherit the earth. This

58 See P. Decock, “The Works of God, of Christ, and of the Faithful in the Apocalypse of John”, *Neotestamentica*, 41.1 (2007), p.55.

59 See Ryan Patrick Mclaughlin, “Anticipating a Maximally Inclusive Eschaton: Jürgen Moltmann’s Potential Contribution to Animal Theology”, *Journal of Animal Ethics* 4.1 (2014), p.19.

provides protection against new forms of dualism between God and the material world, or against justifying that which in terms of tradition is morally unjustifiable, thereby overturning Christianity's values. The prehistoric Jesus therefore remains a vital doctrine which touches the heart, relevance and truth claims of Christianity.

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