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FROM MESSIAH TO
PREEXISTENT SON

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*From Messiah to Preexistent Son: Jesus' Self-Consciousness
and Early Christian Exegesis of Messianic Psalms*

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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From Messiah to Preexistent Son: Jesus' Self-Consciousness and Early Christian Exegesis of Messianic Psalms was originally published in 2005 by Mohr Siebeck in the *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* second series and has now been reprinted by Wipf & Stock as an affordable paperback (the original edition retails for €69.00 = approx. \$102.51). This is a revision of Lee's 2005 University of Aberdeen doctoral dissertation entitled "Jesus' Self Consciousness and Early Christian Exegesis of Messianic Psalms: The Foundation and the Catalyst for Pre-Existent Son Christology," which was written under the supervision of I. Howard Marshall.

Lee's thesis is that the early church's Christology of a preexistent/divine Son of God is based on their exegesis of Psalms 110:1 & 2:[6-]7 as interpreted in light of Jesus' self-understanding of himself as God's Son. In chapter 1 he sketches out the issues that are to be covered later in the book and notes the divide between those who see an early divine/preexistent Christology (Hurtado & Bauckham) and those who see this as a later development (Dunn & Casey). Lee falls into the Hurtado/Bauckham camp.

In chapter 2 Lee examines personified divine attributes by which he means "a quality, epithet, attribute, manifestation or the like of a deity which, having been subjected to a literary

personification, behaves *as though* it is a distinct (if not fully independent) divine being in its own right, but still remains within the literary realm.” (39) He differentiates this from divine hypostases by which he means “a quality, epithet, attribute, manifestation or the like of a deity, which through a process of personification, concretization, or differentiation, *has become* a distinct (if not fully independent) divine being in its own right.” (39) Lee concludes that the Wisdom, Word, and Name of God are simply personified attributes and are ways of speaking about God’s presence and activity in the world. They do not constitute divine hypostases.

In chapter 3 he looks to the speculation about exalted/principal angels and a preexistent Messiah concluding that ancient Jewish angelology “did not blur the clear line between God and created beings” (99) but rather that “their presence and action in this world expresses God’s presence and action in this world... which is to be emphasized,” (99) and that there is also no clear and coherent concept of a preexistence Messiah before Christianity therefore there is no ready-made category for which Christians could work within. This doesn’t rule out the possibility of later Christians interpreting OT texts as referring to a preexistent Messiah though.

In chapters 4 Lee examines Jesus’ self-consciousness of divine sonship by focusing on Jesus’ use of *abba* as well as his various self-revelatory statements (the parable of the wicked tenants in Mark 12:1-12 factors heavily in Lee’s argument) concluding that Jesus was aware of his unique divine sonship.

In chapter 5 Lee turns to Jesus’ self-consciousness of his divine mission and after examining the “I have come” and “I was sent” statements he concludes that Jesus was conscious of his divine mission but not of his own preexistence. In other words, when Jesus spoke of coming or being sent it was in reference to his God-given mission not his transcendent coming from heaven.

In chapters 6-7 Lee turns to the early Christian exegesis of Psalm 110:1 and 2:7, which he claims were “vital for their understanding of Jesus as pre-existent Lord and Son of God.” (202) He contends that we must recognize a gap between what Jesus claimed and what the early church believed about him and that these psalms fill this gap. Psalm 110:1 was “uniformly applied to Jesus’ resurrection as his exaltation to the right hand of God” (320) and was read as God speaking to the one whom was already Lord.

Against adoptionist readings Lee contends that the resurrection was seen as confirming the status that Jesus already had rather than conferring a new status upon him. Psalm 2:7, according to Lee, was linked with Jesus’ divine sonship and resurrection because of its connection to Psalm 2:6, which was seen as a “prophecy about Jesus’ exaltation [to the right hand of God] in the light

of a widespread pre-Christian Jewish tradition about Mt. Zion as the heavenly Jerusalem.” (278-9)

In chapter 8 Lee looks into the possibility of a pre-Pauline ‘sending’ formula (= “God sent his Son”) concluding that such a formula did exist and was derived from the early church’s understanding of Jesus as the preexistent Son of God and not from any kind of Wisdom Christology, which, contrary to the scholarly consensus is nowhere evident in Paul.

In chapter 9 Lee summarizes his earlier chapters and states his conclusion: “Thus, our study has provided a more cogent explanation of the origin and development of the early Christian understanding of Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God over against the trend in recent scholarship which emphasizes the influences of Jewish angelology on early christology.” (322)

From Messiah to Preexistent Son is an important contribution to the debates on early Christology. Lee is well versed in the primary and secondary literature on the subject and he pulls no punches when interacting with those scholars he disagrees with (e.g., Dunn or Gieschen) or stating shortcomings in the work of scholars whom he does agree with (e.g., Jeremias). The influence of his *Doktorvater* I. H. Marshall is evident throughout the book and for good reason; Marshall has done solid work in the field and drawn firm conclusions. I find Lee’s overall case to be very persuasive with only two lurking criticisms:

First, on the point of Jesus’ ἤλθον sayings (§ 5.1), I think Lee has created a false dichotomy where none need exist. He effectively demonstrates that Jesus was not using an idiomatic expression where the ἤλθον sayings mean something like “my purpose is to...” but then he denies that they show any consciousness on Jesus’ part of his preexistence, i.e., that the ἤλθον sayings reflect a transcendent coming. He understands them as being expressive of Jesus’ “self-consciousness of a God-given mission” (197), which I think is correct but see no need to favor one over the other and pit transcendence against immanence. Although Lee interacts with a paper given by Simon Gathercole on the subject Gathercole had not yet published his monograph *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, which I believe makes a strong case for understanding what he terms the “I have come + purpose formula” as evidence of preexistence (although I think he too strongly protests the possibility of *any* other reading working). One wonders if Lee’s argument would have been any different if he had Gathercole’s more sustained treatment to work with.

Second, I’m not as convinced as I’d like to be about the role that Psalm 2:6 played in the early Christian exegesis of Psalm 2:7. While it’s *possible* that these believers read Psalm 2:6 in light of

an existing Jewish tradition about Mt. Zion as the heavenly Jerusalem it's nowhere evident that they *actually* did. The verse is simply not quoted or even alluded to in the NT so to build a case on its alleged interpretation amounts to little more than an exercise in speculation no matter how conceivable.

One last criticism I have, not only of Lee's work but of a great majority of scholarly monographs in general, is untranslated quotations whether they appear in German, French, Spanish or any language other than the language that the main text is written in. I understand that PhD students are expected to have a reading comprehension of German and French and naturally their examiners will read these languages as well, but once the dissertation gets to the publishing stage placing translations of the quotations either in the footnotes or a separate appendix, if not in the main text itself, is something that should certainly be considered. But this gripe aside I appreciate the detailed bibliography and (author, ancient texts, subject) indices that round the book out. *From Messiah to Preexistent Son* deserves a wide reading and hopefully it will get one now that Wipf & Stock has made it affordable.