

The
Eternal Existence
Of the Lord Jesus Christ.

By
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John 8:58.

Jesus said unto them: Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM.

What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he? are questions of no less importance to us than they were to the Jews. Just notions of the person of our Saviour are needful to a good understanding in his gospel: and, my brethren, there is at least one season hastening upon us, when our consolation and courage will very much depend on knowing *whom* we have trusted.

The professed design of this association is, that by communion in prayer, and in the word of salvation, we may build up one another on our holy faith, and promote the life and power of godliness. I heartily wish that this noble design was more universally regarded by those of our several churches, who, in all appearance, might greatly encourage these assemblies, and that our meetings were crowned with a visible and glorious success.

As one means of promoting our union in the truth, and thereby our peace and mutual affection, I have chose to fill up my part in the present service, in reminding you of the person of our blessed Redeemer; and may the Spirit of the Lord enable us to behold his glory, that our hearts may be filled with reverence and joy!

The ignorance and prejudice of the Jews are manifest in their altercation with our Lord in that discourse which closes with the text; a concise view of which is in a manner necessary to a complete idea of the truth it contains; unto which I therefore invite your attention.

This discourse was occasioned by our Saviour's exhorting those who believed to abide in his word, and prove themselves his real disciples: in so doing, he assures them, that they should know the truth, and obtain that freedom he came to bestow, which was no other than a freedom from sin, and to the fruition of life everlasting.

On the mention of freedom, the unbelieving Jews, who boasted in the flesh, were highly offended, and return with disdain, v. 33, *We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man; how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?* – Nothing could be more false than what they assert; their fathers had been often in the hands of their enemies, and they themselves were now in subjection to the Romans, though indulged with many choice liberties. But passing this by, Jesus proceeds to the nature of that freedom he intended, and to point out their bondage to corruption; from which he intimates none but himself, the Son of the Father, could deliver them. Indeed he owns that they were Abraham's seed; but at the same time observes, that they did not his works, and that being strangers to the faith of Abraham, and his love to God, although they descended from his loins, they had no good pretence to the character of his spiritual seed, but rather by their sinful conduct, appeared to be the children of Satan. In answer to this they reply, v. 41, *We be not born of fornication; we have one father, even God.* And it must be owned, that since their captivity in Babylon, idolatry was not the reigning sin of the Jews, yet the love of God was not in them, John 5:42, as appeared by their conduct, and particularly their hatred of his Son, for it is a criterion of the children of God, that they love Jesus Christ, the only-begotten of the Father, 1 John 5:1. And accordingly our Saviour proceeds, v. 42, *If God were your Father, ye would love me, for I proceeded forth, and came from God.* This might have awakened them, but alas! they were hardened in a vain conceit of themselves, and as a further means of conviction, and to leave them without excuse, our Lord plainly tells them, *Ye are of your father the devil.* He then sharply reproves their perverse unbelief, and still insisting on his own divine character, declares, v. 51, *If any man keep my saying he shall never see death.*

The Jews had before reviled Christ with the hateful name of a *Samaritan*, and one possessed with a devil, and taking him here in a carnal sense, they break out in a kind of insolent triumph, saying, *Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets, and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying he shall never taste of death. Art thou greater than our father Abraham which is dead? And the prophets are dead: Whom makest thou thyself?* Nevertheless, Jesus abides by the testimony he had given, and asserts, that this honor he had from his Father, whom they styled

their God, but of whom they were ignorant: And with respect to Abraham, saith he, *Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad;* q.d. Abraham, in whom you boast, and whose children you would be thought, would not have treated me in the manner you do. Abraham was transported with a desire of seeing my day, and obtaining his wish in a certain, though distant prospect of the same, by the Spirit of God, he rejoiced in the view.

The Jews being yet without understanding, and apprehending that they had surely now caught him, scornfully return, *Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?* q.d. thou art but of yesterday, and as it were in thy nonage; thou art scarcely attained to years of discretion, and dost thou pretend to have seen Abraham, who hath been hundreds of years in the grave? What a strange and confident saying is this! Thou hast plainly a devil, and art not to be regarded, but deserve to be treated as an imposter.

This manner of reasoning, in objection to what our Lord had declared, seemed plausible on their carnal principles, though in fact they misrepresent his assertion; he said not that *he had seen Abraham*, but that *Abraham had seen his day*; but Jesus, to end the dispute, gives a full and final confirmation of his divine character in the text. To show, that on their own supposition he had spoken the truth, and that his acquaintance with Abraham did not depend on his existence in the flesh, he pronounces these words, *Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I AM.*

By this grand and singular declaration, Christ explains the mystery of his discourse: It confirms every thing that he had said of himself as the Son of the Father, whom he sent into the world, and the fountain of life everlasting; but on a principle which these men, and those who lean to their own understanding, cannot receive.

By the conduct of the Jews, it appears that they understood the meaning of our Lord, and perceived his intention, but being possessed with insuperable prejudice against him and the truth, they could not embrace it; they did not believe that he was what he declared himself to be; and were therefore filled with indignation and wrath, insomuch that, as in the case of Stephen, with one accord, they took up stones to cast at him, and would have certainly stoned him to death; but we are told, that *Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.*

That he hid himself behind one of the pillars, or that he was concealed in a crowd of his friends, are conjectures, in my opinion, mean and improbable, they are inconsistent with his going through the midst of the people; and the account plainly suggests, that he withdrew himself in a supernatural way, proper to a divine person only, whose nature is invisible:

As one justly observes, "He as it were wrapped up his humanity in his deity." And had not these men been amazingly hardened, the miraculous manner in which they suddenly lost him, or rather in which he escaped from their hands, would have convinced them that he must be indeed an extraordinary person, if not, *that truly this man was the Son of God.*

Thus stand introduced the words before us; and it appears that our Saviour's design in the passage, is to prove himself the Son of God, *whom the Father sent into the world, that we might live through him*, 1 John 4:9. Or as it is expressed in 5:20, that he was *the true God, and eternal life*. So then, in general, by this peculiar and striking testimony of Jesus, concerning himself, he unveils his glory, and lays open the foundation of his people's adoration and confidence to the end of the world. A passage which the enemies of the gospel have found hard to gloss over and soften, that they might mold it to their carnal conception of things, and the low conceits they entertain of the person and work of the Messiah.

Having cleared the way, and given a general view of this interesting portion of scripture, to our further improvement I shall,

I. More particularly examine the text, and endeavor to make it appear, that our Lord assumes to himself, nothing less than a nature truly, and properly divine.

II. Advance some notes on the subject. And then,

III. Attempt to stir up your hearts by way of reflection.

I. The substance of the text lies in these words, *Before Abraham was, I AM*. This report is introduced in a very earnest and solemn manner, to excite a regard and credit of the truth. Here are manifestly two persons exhibited, namely, *Abraham* and *Christ*; these are set in competition in point of antiquity, or past duration, and the latter is expressly declared to have the preference, or to be before the former was. Our business is to consider the sense of the passage, and to confirm the design of our Lord in pronouncing it; that being fully persuaded of the truth our hearts may be established in the faith of Jesus, and we may abound in hope of eternal life. The words may be fairly transposed, and the question put thus, how are we to understand our Saviour when he saith, *I AM* before *Abraham* was?

Some apply it to the decree of the Father, and give this sense, namely, That Christ was set up and appointed before *Abraham* was born in the world; and that this was in kindness revealed to that eminent patriarch. This no doubt it true, and amounts to what is asserted in v. 56. Thus the learned *Grotious* and Dr. *Hammond*; though not to the exclusion of an higher sense;

but, with submission, to be in the divine decree, in point of existence or office, antecedent to Abraham's birth, was not peculiar to Christ; the eternal decree of the Almighty hath every person and event for its object: *He worketh all things after the counsel of his own will*, Eph. 1:11. It would have been no high thing, or any cause of offence to the Jews, for our Lord to have asserted his priority to Abraham in this respect. Besides, the question is not who was first *ordained*, but who first *actually existed*.

But our principle concern is against the popular sense of those who stumble at the deity of our Lord, and who esteem him no more than a man, and whose notions of his office and work are mean in proportion. These gentlemen have recourse to a strained and trifling sense; a sense inconsistent with the scope of the place, and entirely groundless. They observe that the original expression rendered *was* in the text, signifies not barely *to be*, but *to be made* [$\gamma\iota\nu\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$] to be born, made, or to exist]. It is therefore, say they, not to be understood that Abraham merely *was*, but that he *was made*; that is, they say, made the father of many nations; as God had promised he should be. so then they turn the words thus: I AM, i.e., I am the Messiah before Abraham is made the father of many nations; and thus the Saviour is represented as intending by this solemn declaration no more than that he was manifested the Christ before Abraham, through the call of the Gentiles, become an heir of the world, and the father of all nations, according to prophecy.

In answer to this gloss on the text many things have been justly replied, and more might be added if needful. In general, it is weak, impertinent, illusive, and in a word, very unworthy the dignity of our Lord Jesus Christ. For,

1. The Gentiles were not to be called till the Messiah appeared: Then, and not till then, was the gospel to be preached in all the world, and to every creature; even when Jesus, having finished his work on the cross, was exalted with power.

2. To be before Abraham in this sense was common to every person who lived on the earth antecedent to this great event; and consequently was no less applicable to the Jews than to our Saviour himself. And,

3. Not a word is said about Abraham being the father of many nations, nor any allusion thereto throughout our Lord's discourse, so that they who urge this opinion, unnaturally and boldly intrude a subject the context has nothing to do with, in order to evade the sense of the text. Again,

4. It hath been justly observed that this is to introduce a mystical sense of Abraham, whereas nothing can be plainer than that Abraham is here spoken of in a proper or literal one. These gentlemen are not so averse to

mystery, or mystical doctrine, but that they can have recourse thereto when it answers their purpose. Besides, as hinted, as the term rendered *was* signifies to *be born*, so from the series of the discourse it is evident that the opposition lies between the *birth* of Abraham, and the *existence* of Christ. Our Lord manifestly intends nothing less than to show that he pre-existed Abraham's day. And further,

5. This sense renders our Saviour's reply to the Jews foreign and sophistical. The question is, "How Jesus, who was not yet fifty years old, could have seen Abraham, who had been in the state of the dead many hundred years." And the design of Christ is to show that this is easily accounted for, seeing he existed the Son of God in the time antecedent to that in which Abraham lived, even from the beginning, and accordingly *Novation*,* a famous elder of Rome, in his piece on the Trinity, which is highly commended, thus argues on the place, saith he, "Either Christ lied, and put a cheat on the Jews; if being from Abraham he was not before him; or he was before him, being the God of Abraham."

**[Novation lived about the middle of the third century, whose writings were much regarded, and especially his book De Trinitata, from whence the above passage is taken. – See Dr. Gill's Cause of God and Truth, vol. IV, and Dr. Whitby's paraphrase on the text, etc.]*

But surely,

6. Our Lord was in very good earnest, since he solemnly introduces the assumption, contained in these words, with a double asseveration: "*Verily, verily I say unto you.*" And finally,

7. It is clear from the conduct of the Jews that they had no suspicion that our Lord was not serious in what he declared. Had they taken him in a sophistical way, they might very justly, and they certainly would not have failed to have upbraided him as a deceiver; which would have answered their desire of proving him an imposter; but for which they would not have attempted to stone him: this they never did but under a notion of blasphemy.

Thus it appears that there is not the least shadow of a reason for the sense these men would impose on the text, and the attempt only shows the shifts unbelievers are put to, and the manifest prejudices they are under; and likewise that their hatred of the truth frequently prompts them to a violation of reason, common sense, and modesty; and while they declaim the mystery of godliness, they can run into all manner of absurdity in their opposition to the gospel, and are even sometimes guilty of presumption and falsehood.

These glosses refuted, we now proceed to a more direct and careful inspection into the words of the text; which I pray may be attended with candor, and may it yield us satisfaction and joy! *Before Abraham was I AM.* What is the meaning of these words, and what doth our Lord hereby assume to himself? We are to keep in remembrance that our text is plainly in answer to this question of the Jews; namely, how Christ, being himself not fifty years old, could have seen Abraham? and that the design of our Lord in general, is to show that this was no just objection to his acquaintance with Abraham: "Before Abraham was, made, begotten, existed,, or born, take which word you will, *I AM*, q.d. True, I am comparatively young, my birth is well known, I am not yet fifty, no, nor yet much more than thirty years old, and Abraham your father is dead, and hath laid in the grave many hundred years; so that I confess his day was far distant from mine, nevertheless, behold I am *before* him: my existence is not to be dated from my incarnation, or measured by the time I have lived in the flesh, I existed previous to my coming into the world, *before Abraham was I AM.*"

The change of the phrase is very remarkable; our Lord saith not, *I was*, but *I AM*. John the Baptist bears testimony to Christ's preexistence, and also to his being the Son of God, in these words, *He was before me*, John 1:30, 36, compared; and the same term would have sufficiently expressed our Saviour's preexistence to Abraham, and fully answered the objection of the Jews, which vanishes away on the credit of this truth, that Christ *was* before Abraham; yet, as hath been justly observed our Lord's reply would have then been defective; it would still have remained a question *how* he was before Abraham? a question the Jews might naturally ask: It was therefore the wisdom of Christ to sue a phrase which includes both; a phrase which left no room for any further queries respecting the point in debate, and at the same time gives him the glory of the only begotten of the Father, which was the grand thing to be proved in the whole of his discourse. In a word, this testimony of our Lord carries in it more than barely that he was before Abraham; this might be said of Adam, or Noah, and others. Christ evidently intends that he existed the whole time antecedent to Abraham's day, even from the beginning; which amounts to an assertion that his existence was eternal, * and answers to the divine character he assumes in his gospel.

* [Dr. Hammond himself gives this as the primary sense of the passage: His paraphrase on the words is as follows, "*I have a Being from all eternity, and so before Abraham was born, and therefore as young as you take me to be in respect of my age, I may well have seen and known Abraham.*"]

Let us carefully attend to the expressions of our Lord, and what they import, as they are circumstanced in the text. He saith, *I AM*. A short, but profound and copious sentence. Not I am the Christ; I am he that is of God, and from above; or I am the Son of God, or I am the King of Israel; these additions, as it were, cover the words, and conceal the truth they contain from the eyes of the unwary. We are to note that Christ is not speaking of his *office character*, but of his *nature* and *existence*. Now in describing of this he declares precisely and emphatically *I AM*: neither less nor more than *I AM*. The period is complete, and fully expresses the meaning of our Saviour; nor can any addition be justified. They are words which pass understanding, and which no creature on earth, or in heaven can with decency appropriate to himself; words that are without idea, or quite unintelligible in any other view than that in which Jehovah applies them, namely, to express his eternal and unchangeable nature. "A man," saith a celebrated writer [Bp. *Sherlock's Discourses*, Vol. IV, p. 14], "cannot in his mind carry the present time back to make it antecedent to the time already past." But this our Lord doth in the text; he is plainly speaking of his existence antecedent to Abraham's day, which was more than two thousand years past; yea, and of that preexistence *without limitation*, which carries us back to eternity, and can be resolved into the divine nature alone; in reference to which there is, properly speaking, neither past nor to come; but, as some have expressed it, an *eternal now*.

This sublime and comprehensive phrase was familiar to the Jews, since the time of Moses, by whom we know God revealed himself under this name, when he visited his people in Egypt: *And God said unto Moses, I AM that I AM. Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.* Exod. 3:14. "*I AM that I AM*," saith the pious and learned Mr. Ainsworth, "properly signifies, *I will be that I will be*; and implies God's eternal and unchangeable Being in himself." *

* [See Ainsworth on the place. **ישראל היה היה, משה** The future tense, which includes the past and the present, according to the idiom of the Hebrew language, some render it, "I am the same that ever I was or ever will be." See Pool's Annotations.]

Eternity and immutability seem primary ideas in the phrase, and these are inseparably connected with his al sufficiency and faithfulness

This divine sentence is exceedingly grand; and we are told that the heathens were vain enough to inscribe something like this on several of their temples, whose idols were nothing, but our Redeemer is the true and living God, the Creator of all things: *The same yesterday, today, and for every.*

Heb. 13:8. Of whom it is declared, Rev. 16:5, *O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be*. In which, and in other places, this glorious name of the immutable God is evidently applied to the Lord Jesus Christ. There is therefore the highest reason to conclude that in this declaration our Saviour assumes to himself no other, or less than essential and proper divinity.

An ingenuous writer hath some very judicious and striking remarks on the forementioned passage in Exodus, which I take leave to mention: "Our great Creator, saith he, by this revelation of himself, does in a manner exclude every thing else from a real existence, and distinguishes himself from his creatures as the *only Being* which truly and properly exists: every creature indeed hath a real existence in its kind, but that existence, which is made up of past, present, and to come, or of successive duration, is but the shadow of existence compared with the eternal God, who exists in and of himself, and by the name *I AM* assumes to himself a real, necessary, voluntary, and unchangeable existence, and thereby exhibits to the faith of his people the immutability of his counsel, and his faithfulness to his word." This may serve as a further illustration of the genuine import of this glorious name of the eternal God, which our Lord adopts to himself in the text.

Eternity, or infinite and immutable duration, no creature can fully comprehend. Our finite and impaired capacities are soon lost in the contemplation of eternal existence, nor can we form an adequate idea thereof; a pretence to the knowledge of this manner of existence is vain and absurd; but there is nothing more certain or obvious to the eye of reason than this, that as no creature could possibly make itself, a Being must have eternally existed, whose perfections are displayed in the works of creation. On this first natural and unshaken principle the Apostle argues that the heathen world stood condemned, and were quite inexcusable in their idolatry: *For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.* Rom. 1:20.

Now this eternity of the omnipotent and immutable Jehovah is abundantly revealed in his word, to encourage the hope of the faithful, Deut. 33:27, saith Moses to Israel, *The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are his everlasting arms.* Again, 1 Sam. 15:29, *The Strength, or Eternity of Israel, will not lie.* And again, Isa. 57:15, he styles himself *The high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity*, i.e., that dwelleth in himself, whose nature and existence is eternal. These, and many other scriptures, show that they who trust in God are called to converse by faith with his eternal existence and immutable nature, as a ground of their confidence.

We have seen that God made choice of these words *I AM* to express his own eternity, and that in our text they can signify nothing if they do not convey an idea of eternal existence; it is therefore unreasonable not to allow them the same sense when applied to our Saviour, unless a reason could be assigned why they should be applied unto him without any meaning at all. When our Lord saith, *before Abraham was I AM*, doth it not savour of prejudice to hesitate ascribing to him the same divine perfections assumed by God in the time of Moses by the identical expressions? And what can excuse the boldness of Christ in applying these words to himself on the occasion he did, but a participation of that divine nature this name of the Lord comprehends? They had never been used but by the immutable God, and to make himself known to the children of Israel; and if Jesus was only a man, what could tempt him to appropriate this peculiar and mysterious name of Jehovah, under which he revealed his glorious essence to his people, and thereby justly expose himself to the charge of a most daring impiety? Surely no one that hath any notion of the holiness or wisdom of our Saviour, can admit that if he was a mere creature, he would have bordered so nearly on blasphemy; or rather so notoriously blasphemed!

But as the scripture declares in so many words that the Son of God, who came from the Father, *Is the true God*, they accordingly ascribe unto our divine Immanuel all that is comprehended in these words *I AM*. John 1:1, *In the beginning was the Word*, i.e., From eternity, before any thing was made or created; agreeable to Gen. 1:1, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*. In like manner of Jesus, by whom all things were created, it is said, Col. 1:17, *He is before all things*, i.e., existed from eternity, as he must indeed if all things were made by him.

But of the eternity and immutability of our Saviour, to the passages already occasionally touched on, many others might be joined to confirm it. In 1 Tim. 1:17, he is styled *The King eternal*. And in Rev. 1:8, he saith, *I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty*.*

* [Some apprehend these words are spoken of the Father, but the like description is given of him in a preceding verse. And Jesus is the last person spoken of in the context: the words are therefore with reason taken as an ascription of the same divine essence to Christ, as was before ascribed to the Father; and surely this may be done with sobriety and truth, since he is expressly declared to be the brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of his person, Heb. 1:3.]

If any think that place refers to the Father, what less doth he himself ascribe to the Son, Heb. 1:12, *Thou art the same*. In the Psalm referred to, it literally runs, *Thou art he*, i.e., unchangeably the same, or of eternal duration; and from this immutability of nature his people are persuaded of his inviolable faithfulness, as it is written, 2 Tim. 2:13, *If we believe not, he abideth faithful; he cannot deny himself*.

So then the oracles of truth will abundantly justify our interpretation of the words in their full, proper, and peculiar sense, in which they are manifestly appropriated in the Old Testament; and in which sense they well support the character of our blessed Redeemer as the eternal and unchangeable God. and indeed it is not only evident that he is possessed of the same glorious nature assumed by the Lord in this divine name revealed unto Moses, but it appears that he was the self-same divine Person who dwelt in the bush, and sent his servant unto Pharaoh. In v. 2, he is styled the angel of the Lord, but he is likewise expressly called God, whom Moses turned aside to see. And in v. 6, he saith, *I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God*. Now the Redeemer alone sustains this character of the angel, as in Gen. 48:16. Even the messenger of the covenant, whom the Jews expected, Mal. 3:1. This divine uncreated Angel is no other than the Lord Jesus Christ, who said unto Moses, *Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you*, Exod. 3:14.

Upon the whole, what but ignorance, through an inexcusable neglect of the scriptures, or a manifest prejudice against the deity of Christ, will incline any person to consider the text in any lower or other sense, than the same words are taken in the passage of Moses, or would prevent his seeing that Jesus claims the eternity and permanent duration which belongs to the divine nature, and to him as the only begotten of the Father? And surely here is more than a *bare*, yea than a *strong* intimation of the deity of Christ. I think that the words come not behind any in the whole book of God, which testifieth of the true and proper divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ; and I hope it sufficiently appears, from what hath been said, that in this declaration he assumes nothing less than a divine nature and character.

Having minutely considered the sense and design of the text, I proceed,

II. To advance some notes on the subject: And,

Note I. We may remark that Christ Jesus existed before his incarnation. Our Lord had a Being antecedent to his conception in the womb of the virgin, or his coming into this world. This is the first and a necessary idea of the passage. In whatever sense Christ was before Abraham, who had

been ages past dead, in that sense he pre-existed his own life in the flesh, which was short of fifty years standing. This is mentioned for order sake, and is too obvious to need any proof. I therefore pass on to

Note II. The *nature* in which our Saviour pre-existed, his assumption of the flesh: This is a point of no small importance, and it appears from the text that he pre-existed in that nature which is truly and properly divine.

Was Christ before Abraham? How? Hear his own words, *Before Abraham was, I AM*. q.d. "Before Abraham was born I existed in deity; in my own ineffable manner of existence, which I have in myself from everlasting, in the same nature common to me and my Father, of whom ye say he is your God." If these words *I AM* express our Lord's eternal and divine nature, which I hope hath been proved, it is then plain that he speaks of that, and of that only, as the nature in which he pre-existed. Hence it might have been expected that no other idea of Christ's pre-existence would have taken place in the minds of them who are convinced of his proper deity, and who discern the evidence that ariseth from the text to that great article of faith; yet some have been fond of promoting an opinion that the human soul of our Redeemer pre-existed his taking flesh of the virgin; yea, and have imagined that it was the first of all created beings: and many things have been broached on that head, which will not bear the standard of truth.

It would be unprofitable to oppose the harmless opinions of any, but this notion, at least in the light in which some men would place it, appears to me of a very ill tendency; and being naturally led to the subject, I cannot but drop a few hints about it, which I hope will not be unseasonable.

That the soul of Christ was the first of all creatures is chiefly pretended from Col 1:15, where the Son of God is said to be [πρωτοτοκος] the *first born of every creature*. But that expression, however plausible it may seem, on duly attending the context, will fail of supporting this unscriptural opinion. The term may signify that Christ is the first parent, beginning, or author of every creature; as some learned men have observed; or as others suggest, it may express his right of inheritance in every creature, which no doubt results from his being the Creator of all things. I take not upon me to judge of the critical sense of the word, but it is obvious that these senses consist well together, and that both agree with the scope of the place; and whatever may be the sense of that expression, it certainly enters into the divine character of our Lord; it stands in close connection with his being styled *the Image of the invisible God*, and the Creator of *all things in heaven and in earth*; and with his being declared *before all things*; yea, and him *by whom all things consist*, verse 16 and 17. And will any assert that either of these can be justly ascribed to the human nature of Christ? Neither do they

belong to his mediatorial character, the glories of which are distinctly laid out in the verses immediately following.

I see no part of the gospel illustrated on a supposition that Christ's human soul pre-existed his appearance on earth: on the contrary, it tends to confound our ideas of his person, and to represent his taking of flesh as no more than his human spirit assuming a natural body; whereas his body and flesh are synonymous phrases, and always imply that perfect human nature he assumed when he appeared in the end of the world, of which the soul is an essential, and principal branch. If the human soul of Christ pre-existed, so did all human souls, for he was, in his human nature, in all things made like unto his brethren; but we have no such account of the creation in the testimony of God.

Some heathen philosophers indeed have attempted to account for the origin of moral evil, by supposing that God created the souls of all men at first, and that each soul sinned in its pre-existent state, and hence was condemned to the sorrows of this mortal body (*Dr. Ridgley's Body of Divinity, Vol. 1. Page 339*). But Christians have no need of this fancy to help their understanding in the introduction of sin; they are persuaded that guilt and corruption are derived from the first man Adam, their federal head, in whom we all sinned, Rom. 5:12.

But it must be acknowledged that some worthy persons, who were convinced of original sin, as laid down in the scripture, have yet pleaded for this sentiment. These gentlemen seem to apprehend that it serves to illustrate some passages in the Old Testament; which, say they, are otherwise obscure; and particularly those that mention the appearance of the Messiah in the form of a man, as in the days of Abraham; but, with submission; is it needful to exist in any essential branch of humanity, in order to such an appearance? Hath not angels, when commissioned from heaven, frequently assumed human shape? But hath angels ever partook of humanity?

Among other reasons against this imagination, it is none of the least, and what necessarily brought me into view of the subject, namely, that all pretence thereto seems entirely cut off by this reply of our Saviour to the Jews, who objected this nonage to his having seen Abraham. Had the human soul of our Saviour pre-existed the days of his flesh, here was a fair opportunity of introducing it in answer to their cavil; it was the fittest argument he could have used; nor is it reasonable to suppose that he would have had recourse to his eternity, as a divine person, if in any other nature he had existed before Abraham's day, for this his existence had been sufficient to show that he was indeed before Abraham, and also in what manner he pre-existed that eminent servant of God, whereas our Lord gives no

countenance to this opinion, but resolves his pre-existence entirely into his divine essence, or his being the great *I AM*, i.e., the everlasting and immutable *Jehovah*.

Besides, to suppose that Christ was before Abraham otherwise than in his own eternal existence in the deity, is to take off from the pertinency and force of his reply, and to reduce it below the manifest design of his discourse, which was to prove his equality with the Father, as the Jews plainly understood him; which they who propagate this notion do well to consider.

It was in the divine nature that the Son of God existed from everlasting, when he was called to and invested with the important and high office of Mediator. It was the *Word*, distinct from any idea of humanity, that was in the beginning with God, John 1:1. Nor doth the scripture anywhere intimate the existence of the Mediator otherwise than as a divine Person, till his manifestation in the flesh. And seeing he had a personal existence in the deity, any other kind of existence was needless unto his entering into the counsel of peace, and to his suretyship engagements in the covenant of redemption; yea, and if his human soul had then existed, it would have been utterly incapable of these transactions with *Jehovah*, as it is unworthy of God to imagine he took counsel with any creature in settling the plan of salvation.

Once more let it be noted, that if Christ's human soul existed previous to his appearance on earth, it must be in heaven; and in what condition can it there be supposed to exist? Not in a *suffering* one; that is incompatible with the peace and fullness of joy which the scripture declare to be in the presence of God. To assert that Christ was *glorified* in his human nature antecedent to the death of the cross is boldly to contradict the voice of the prophets, in whom the Spirit universally testified from the beginning, that the glory of Christ was to ** follow* his sufferings, 1 Pet. 1:11.

* [It is evident the glory which Christ had with the Father, before the foundation of the world, mentioned, John 17:5. Whatever it was, did not terminate in his humanity, seeing it is expressly declared that the glory of Immanuel, was to *follow* his passion; and this exactly agrees with his own account after the resurrection, Luke 24:26.]

In short our text determines the point. Our Lord's pre-existence to Abraham, and to his own incarnation, is resolved into his divine nature only; and, can any thing more clearly and entirely set aside the notion of his soul's pre-existence? But again,

Note III. That our Lord Jesus Christ pre-existed his coming in the flesh, as the anointed of the Father, and in the character of Mediator. Indeed these words *I AM*, immediately refer to the eternity of his essence, in which alone, as observed, he existed from everlasting, but one design of his asserting his eternal existence is to show that he was the Messiah before Abraham's day; and therefore, that although he was not fifty years old in the flesh, he might commune with Abraham as his God and Redeemer, which no doubt he did; and that patriarch, like Moses and the Prophets, by faith saw and rejoiced in the Messiah as the *Lord's Christ*; so that from the scope of the place, our text carries in it, that Jesus sustained the office of Mediator, and Surety of the covenant, before his incarnation. On this depended the salvation of the church till he came; indeed he came not till the fullness of time, Gal. 4:4. But he was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, and the virtue of his sacrifice extended to the transgressions of the people, under the first Testament, and even from the beginning, Rev. 13:8, Heb. 11:15, 16, compared. And according he saith, Prov. 8:23, *I was set up from everlasting.* *

* [Hence the church pleads, Isa. 63:16, "Thou O Lord or Jehovah, art *our Redeemer; thy name is from everlasting.* The words are עולם שם גאל. rendered in the margin thus; "our Redeemer from everlasting is thy name," i.e., say some, "being set up and constituted Mediator in the eternal counsel of God," to which may be added, and therefore, being revealed in prophecy, was known and believed by the faithful under these glorious characters; Jehovah the Redeemer of his people: this was his name from everlasting. – *Vide Vitringa in loc.*]

This mystery of grace hath encouraged the hope, and excited the joy of the church in all ages, and will be a source of admiration and praise to the end of the world; yea, and in eternity itself. And further,

Note IV. The faith of God's elect hath always centered in the *deity* of Christ. A divine faith must have a divine object, and they who pretend to faith, and at the same time scruple, or oppose the real divinity of our Saviour, have not the same faith which Abraham had, but would destroy its very foundation: Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, and they who obtain an experimental acquaintance with Christ will testify that, *this is the true God, and eternal life*: they freely united in this glorious confession. *We believe, and are sure that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*, 1 John 5:20, John 6:69. Nor is this to be confined to the Christian dispensation, since we see the Redeemer was known by his great name *I*

AM, to Moses and to the children of Israel, who, with the rest of the faithful in time past, trusted in him as the rock of ages; and it is declared of Abraham himself, Gen. 21:33, *That he planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of Jehovah, the Everlasting God.* In a word, Jesus himself is the "chief corner-stone," and our hope depends on his adorable person, the glory of which is his deity; and thanks be to the Father he hath abounded in his testimony to his Son Jesus Christ, of whom it is not barely said that he is the true God, *but even that in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily*, Col. 2:9. Once more,

Note V. That ignorance of our Saviour's divinity is one cause of stumbling at the mystery of the gospel. It was owing to this that the Jews could not receive our Lord and his doctrine: Had these men understood, or could they have believed that Jesus was the *I AM*, the eternal and immutable God, and no other than that same divine person who called upon Moses out of the bush, their eyes had been opened, every difficulty had then been removed, and all their prejudices vanished, they would then have taken no offence at our Lord's assuming a dispensation of freedom from sin, and eternal life to them that believed on his name; it would then have been easy for them to have conceived how he was greater, and even before Abraham and the prophets, who were dead, although he was not yet fifty years old. On a conviction of his eternal existence in the divine nature, they would have readily acquiesced in his claim in God as his Father, in that high, peculiar and divine sense, he assumed this relation, as they understood him, and in a word they would have gladly embraced him as the Messiah; but for want of this discernment and faith, they strangely misunderstood him, and put a wrong construction on whatever he said, and reject him with disdain to their ruin. And thus to this day, the great mystery of godliness, is God manifest in the flesh, and to them who receive not this mystery, the gospel will seem absurd.

This is the *pillar*, and this is the *key* of the gospel: that Jesus is *Immanuel*, God with us. On this principle alone can be resolved the Saviour's engagements with the Father in the everlasting covenant of redemption, or his voluntary and effectual obedience to the death of the cross: Indeed he was put to death in the flesh, and his humanity alone was the subject of his passion, but had he not been a person truly divine, he could neither have given himself for his church, nor laid down his life and taken it up again, in the manner he did; no creature could have sustained the weight of his dreadful sufferings, when he, "his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree"; the merit of his blood, and consequently the satisfaction he gave, and the purchase he made of his people, depends on his deity,

without which also, he could not have rose from the dead, nor was it possible for him to have become the author of eternal salvation to them that obey him.

These and other points relative to our redemption by the death of Christ are absolutely impossible, without admitting that he is the eternal and unchangeable Son of God, *who hath life in himself even as the Father hath life in himself*; which Jesus appropriates in these words **I AM**; and accordingly they who hesitate the divinity of our Lord, cannot support his proper atonement, and other articles of faith which stand in connection with this adorable truth, but entertain low conceits of the character and work of the Redeemer, and in effect, deny the whole mystery of the gospel.

These are some of the important things we are taught in this grand and mysterious passage; namely, that Christ pre-existed his own incarnation; and that this his antecedent existence is alone to be sought in his divine nature; that he thus existed from the beginning under the character of the Messiah, and in this view was the object of his people's faith, which hath ever centered in his deity: and finally, that through ignorance of this truth men stumble at the gospel, and fatally reject the only Saviour of sinners.

And now, Beloved, is Christ the *I AM*? Doth he in these words appropriate to himself the eternal and immutable essence of Godhead, and make himself equal with the Father? How astonishing the presumption of those who refuse to acknowledge, but, on the contrary with violence oppose the doctrine of his deity! To dignify Jesus as man, and ascribe to him a kind of relative deity in office, or even with the Arians, to exalt his spirit above the nature of angels, and terminate his character in a creature far higher than the highest of the thrones in the heavens, is no other than to degrade him beyond all expression. For, seeing he is truly divine, what is a creature, though exalted to the utmost of our imagination, compared with him? The disparity is infinite! When the Jews would have stoned our Saviour they assign this reason for their conduct: *For blasphemy, say they, because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God*, John 10:33. And do they less than blaspheme who make him that is the true God only a man, or at most but a creature? And is he a God, is he not jealous of his honor? Hath not the eternal Jehovah an omnipotent arm, to save or to destroy? What punishment must they be supposed liable to, who bow not before him as the Father's own Son! He himself thought it not robbery to be equal with God, and shall we not tremble at the thoughts of attempting to rob him of his glory? But again,

Is Christ the *I AM*, in whom dwelleth the fullness of the eternal Jehovah? How amazing the love, and condescending goodness of God in his coming into the world to lay down his life for our sins! From the eternity and

blessedness of the infinite Jehovah, a just argument is drawn unto the ineffable goodness and wisdom of God, in contriving an existence for finite natures: "What overflowing goodness, saith one, will appear in our Creator, who had a complete possession of existence in himself, and was blessed in the fruition of his own eternity; that he should thus raise up creatures from nothing, and make them as it were, partakers in eternity, is matter of wonder and praise." Fine is the thought! and would to God that a sense of his infinite and sovereign goodness, and adorable wisdom in bringing us into existence, more universally prevailed! If mankind was in a state of rectitude, this would be an unfailing source of admiration and love: but alas, we are fallen! Yet this moral reflection may serve to illustrate and quicken our hearts in a view of the gospel.

If the overflowing goodness of our Creator in producing us into being calls for such wonder and praise, much more doth the abounding grace of God in our salvation, by the death of his Son! This is astonishing love and good will; that, when his creatures had abused his goodness, in bestowing an existence upon them, and ruined themselves by sin, a Saviour should be provided; yea, and that the only begotten of the Father, should be sent from his bosom into the world to redeem them with his blood! Unutterable goodness and grace! that the *I AM*, God's own eternal Son, should thus stoop and be clothed with flesh, that he might become obedient to the death of the cross, to rescue transgressors from deserved and everlasting destruction! O boundless and astonishing mercy and love! This will be wonder and praise in the highest among the angels and saints in heaven for ever. Moreover,

Is Christ the *I AM*? Then let him be adored. That all men must honor the Son as they honor the Father, is an undeniable proof of his equality with him; for the essence of idolatry lies in this; namely, a doing service to any who by *nature* are no gods, Gal. 4:8. But the real divinity of Jesus justifies the worship paid to him in the church. It is decent to fall down before him. He is thy Lord, O Christian, therefore worship thou him; thou canst not prostrate thyself too low at his feet. Who art thou, and what thine existence in its best estate? Compared with thine eternal Redeemer it sinks into nothing and vanity. True, his name is *Immanuel*; there is an endearing sweetness in his person that invites thee to freedom; nor is a slavish fear becoming his service; yet consider how great he is, and ever approach him with reverence. To indulge a light frame in his presence is unworthy: in thy nearest communion with him remember that he is the *I AM*; and let thy heart be sensible of his infinite glory with whom thou art concerned. And further,

By this divine name of our Saviour each one may prove his own heart's experience. It is a criterion of faith. True believers under every

dispensation "obtain *like* precious faith," 2 Pet. 1:1. Now it appears from this reply of our Lord that before Abraham they trusted in him as the great *I AM*. And if he is indeed eternal in his nature, and essentially divine, how can it be otherwise? Men may have a notion of the divinity of Christ and be in a state of unbelief; the most substantial truths may be known only in speculation, and not reach or conquer the heart; but can any one conceive how it is possible that saving faith, which is of the operation of God, should leave its subject short of a true knowledge, or unacquainted with the principal glory of its object.

Let it be duly considered, if Christ is the Son of the living God, of the same nature with his divine Father, no doubt, unless the Christian faith is a blind fancy, it rests not short of his deity; they who are taught by the Spirit of Christ are ready to give him the glory due to his name, as the angels in heaven are commanded to do.

To conclude. Art thou, my dear reader, the happy subject of this divine faith? Fear not: with what infinite satisfaction mayest thou resign thyself, and all thy concerns, in the hands of this eternal and unchangeable Redeemer! Thrice happy man whose hope is fixed in the Lord God! Thou art safe in every vicissitude of providence. In whatever temptation, though the sea roar, and the waves of affliction run mountains high, thine anchor is sure: the eternal God is thy refuge! His everlasting arms are underneath: yea, before the last enemy thou mayest triumph and say, *The Lord liveth, and blessed be my Rock; and let the God of my salvation be exalted*. Then keep in remembrance this reverend and glorious name of thy Saviour: Let *I AM* be graven on the table of your heart.