

ST. IRENAEUS AND ROBERT W. JENSON ON JESUS IN THE TRINITY

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Robert W. Jenson is one of North America's leading theologians who is rethinking the Christian doctrine of God in the wake of a renewed interest and resurgence in trinitarian studies. Colin Gunton identified Jenson as one of several seminal thinkers credited with recovering for the church a genuine trinitarian theology as a direct challenge to the concept of the Trinity in the Western-Augustinian theological tradition.¹ Catholic archbishop and theologian J. Augustine Di Noia considers Jenson "a doctrinal theologian of formidable determination and originality"—a tribute he bestows on Jenson mainly because of the central, provocative, and creative place the Trinity occupies in his theology.² Paul D. Molnar muses that Jenson's approach to trinitarian studies is precisely what contemporary theology has been searching for as its theologians attempt to reshape the doctrine of God from the perspective of postmodernity.³

In his *magnum opus*, the two-volume *Systematic Theology*,⁴ Jenson claims that the concept of God as "impassible," that is, as entirely incapable of being acted upon or undergoing change in his essential nature, is irreconcilable with the God of biblical religion who in his triune way of existing is dynamically (not statically) related to the world he has made.⁵ In

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¹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 1–2. Throughout this paper I will refer to the Western theological tradition, represented by Augustine and his theological heirs down to the present, as "classical theology," "traditional theology," "standard theology," or "Western theology." I will use the terminology "contemporary theology" to refer to those systems of theology that seek to modify the classical view of God by merging God with history and the world.

² Douglas Farrow, David Demson, J. Augustine Di Noia, "Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: Three Responses," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1/1 (1999) 100.

³ Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2002) 68.

⁴ *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and vol. 2: *The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). This two-volume set is the culmination of nearly forty years of theological study and inquiry. All references in this study are to vol. 1.

⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 16. It seems that Jenson uses the term "passibility" to contest two senses in which "impassibility" is generally understood in theological discourse. As mentioned above, the first sense denotes God's absolute self-determination in his nature and will, which is to assert that God's being is not conditioned by anything external to himself (e.g. time). Understood in this sense, the word is closely related to the doctrine of "immutability," which denotes God's unchangeableness in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises. Second, impassibility doctrine, for some, denies that God experiences genuine emotions or passions as humans do. Rather, it is argued that the Bible speaks "anthropomorphically" of God when it says for example that he is angry or jealous or compassionate, and so on. In my opinion, the first sense in which impassibility is understood is correct, but

other words, Jenson views God and the world as correlative, suggesting that for Jenson the notion of a self-contained, ontological Trinity that is prior to and independent of the world and its processes is rejected in favor of a God who in his sovereign self-determination elects to be historical in his way of being.⁶ Jenson boldly asserts that any God-talk abstracted from our historical situation in this world has no place in theological reflection.⁷ We must disparage, he continues, all abstract theologizing about a God unrelated to time and space and alternatively interpret God's triune identity "by" and "with" the gospel events with all biblical and conceptual rigor.⁸ Moreover, the theologian must view the contemporary theological task radically as "the development of a *doctrine of God* fully controlled by the gospel story about events in time and by polemic against religion's dream of timelessness."⁹

Jenson's theology embraces the maxim that the Christian God is none other than the God identified in the narratives of Israel and her Christ. In other words, God does not exist outside or above or beyond the events of time and history. Rather, the biblical God is identified almost exhaustively with the temporally saving events of Jesus Christ, so that it can be said that we do not know the God of the Bible "apart from what happened and will happen with Jesus."¹⁰ This suggests that Jenson follows Karl Rahner's thesis that identifies the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity. In this view, God's ontological status merges with history so that God cannot be identified otherwise than with us in history. God, to say it another way, is directly, not indirectly, the object of theological reflection such that God's identity and his self-revelation in Scripture and history are exhaustively one. Jenson's whole theological argument depends on this move as he makes the point emphatically.¹¹ Carl Braaten's analysis therefore is right on the mark when in summing up this principal and programmatic aspect of Jenson's theology he writes approvingly, "we do not come closer to the real God by rising above his temporal revelation, above his humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."¹²

not the second, if it is intended to suggest that God does not exhibit real emotions. Scripture speaks frequently of God displaying genuine emotions such as joy, grief, wrath, love, and pity, although these should be understood analogically (i.e. there is similarity and dissimilarity between human and divine emotions).

⁶ Ibid. 48-49, 59, 165.

⁷ Ibid. 107.

⁸ Ibid. 13.

⁹ Robert W. Jenson, *God after God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) 62 (emphasis Jenson's).

¹⁰ Robert Jenson, *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 114.

¹¹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 59.

¹² Carl E. Braaten, "Eschatology and Missions in the Theology of Robert Jenson," in *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson* (ed. Colin E. Gunton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 304-5.

I. PRE-EXISTENCE IN JENSON'S THEOLOGY

The provocative and controversial nature of Jenson's systematic contribution to the divine temporality/possibility debate will no doubt bring to pass in Jenson's own case his prediction that "the fate of every theological system [is] to be dismembered and have its fragments banded about in an ongoing debate."¹³ One fragment of Jenson's proposal that undoubtedly invites further scrutiny and which this paper advances is Jenson's discussion of Christ's pre-existence, which Jenson refers to as "The Christological Problem" of the church's ongoing theological discourse. The "problem" may be stated directly: How does the construal of the divine life as pervious to time accommodate pre-existence dogma? Or to put the problem as Jenson formulates it, hinting at its own resolution: How does "the Son indeed [precede] his human birth without being simply unincarnate?"¹⁴

Of course, the standard teaching of Christian theology has been that Christ became incarnate precisely by entering our time-space continuum as one of us, which implies that Christ existed outside of time prior to his incarnation. To use fixed theological language, Jesus "pre-existed" as the eternal *Logos asarkos*. But this proposal is precisely what Jenson wants theology to shake off as a product of an obsolete mode of theological reflection. Jenson advocates that the concept of the *Logos's* timeless pre-existence be abandoned altogether seeing that such language is incompatible with the Gospels which narrate Jesus' life, praxis, and fate as God. Thus, Jenson's theology attempts to account for pre-existence differently than the way it has been traditionally conceived.

However, Jenson wants to make it clear that the rejection of a *Logos asarkos* does not *ipso facto* eliminate the category of pre-existence from theological discourse. Jenson would not differ greatly from Fred B. Craddock's observation that the student "who would seriously consider Jesus Christ must seriously consider the New Testament affirmations of his pre-existence."¹⁵ The prologue of John's Gospel (1:1–18), John's record of Jesus' self-understanding as pre-existing Abraham (8:58), and other NT references (e.g. Col 1:15–18; 1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:6–7; John 17:5; 2 Cor 8:9; Heb 1:2) presuppose about Jesus a mode of existence in the Trinity that preceded his human birth that is too ubiquitous to explain away. As Jenson makes the pivotal point in speaking about the incarnation, "Christ's identification as one of the Trinity and his identification as one of us are not ontologically symmetrical."¹⁶ Therefore, Jenson argues, the theological burden remains to "interpret a birth of the *Logos* as God that

¹³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 141.

¹⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *The Pre-existence of Christ in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 14.

¹⁶ Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 138.

enables and therefore must be somehow antecedent to his birth as man.”¹⁷ These statements affirm that in the scope of Jenson’s trinitarian vision the notion of pre-existence is retained as a valid Christological category that is essential to comprehending the full NT portrait of Christ. In fact, Jenson recapitulates the traditional conviction concerning Christ’s pre-existence that “as God the Son he must ontologically precede himself as Jesus the Son. In the tradition’s language, Jesus ‘pre-exists’ his human birth.”¹⁸ So far, so good. But what does Jenson mean exactly by the “pre” in “pre-exists”?

Traditional theology, as mentioned above, has understood Christ’s pre-existence in terms of a *Logos asarkos*, an unincarnate being identified with the eternal Word who became incarnate in history. The prologue of John’s Gospel (1:1–18), a decisive Christological text to say the least, certainly suggests such a two-stage movement. The “Word” (ὁ λόγος) is introduced in verses 1–3 as having always existed in trinitarian relation to God the Father (and by implication to the Holy Spirit) both in his distinction from God (καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν) and in his equality with God (καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος). A careful reading of this critical text, moreover, suggests that it is the *Logos asarkos* that is prominent in verses 1–9 and only beginning with verse 10 does John allude to a *Logos ensarkos*. In addition, John’s *logos* theology clearly establishes verse 14 as the climax of the prologue, since it is there for the first time that the *Logos asarkos* of verses 1–3 is identified explicitly and definitively with the historical Jesus: “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν).

But not so fast, says Jenson. The same Gospel that gets underway by affirming the pre-existence of the Son also specifies the identity of the speaker in John 8:58 (“Truly I say unto you, before Abraham was I am”) as the one who antedates Abraham precisely as the “aggressively incarnate” Christ.¹⁹ According to Jenson’s understanding of this passage, Jesus’ response to his Jewish opponents suggests that the *Logos* who existed from eternity was in fact already the God-man whose life is the theme of John’s gospel.²⁰ Therefore, Jenson sees John’s prologue as accenting Jesus’ humanity as the mode of his pre-existence. The *Logos* did not pre-exist other than as Jesus; he is and has always been the Christ of the Gospels.²¹ Simply put, Jenson argues for a pre-existent Jesus as opposed to a pre-existent *Logos* who *became* the incarnate Son.²² The

¹⁷ Ibid. 141.

¹⁸ Ibid. 138

¹⁹ Ibid. 139.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. Jenson interprets Phil 2:6–7, Col 1:15–18, and 1 Cor 8:6 in the same way.

²² As far as I can tell, Jenson has not moved from this position. In an article as recent as April 2011 in which Jenson revisits the concept of the *Logos asarkos*, he continues to disavow “a pre-existent” second identity of the Trinity who was ‘not yet’ the creature Jesus” (Robert

eternal Son, he says, is emphatically and drastically “Mary’s child, the hanged man of Golgotha.”²³ Therefore, John 8:58, contrary to longstanding exegesis, directly opposes the concept of a *Logos asarkos* pre-existing timelessly as the Father’s Son and establishes the fact that “[i]t is the biblical Son who is his own presupposition in God’s eternity.”²⁴ Jenson turns to St. Irenaeus of Lyons in his efforts to elucidate this matter.

II. PROBLEMS WITH JENSON’S INTERPRETATION OF IRENAEUS’S CHRISTOLOGY

Interestingly, the mainstay of Jenson’s argument for the eternal humanity of the Son, as presented in *Systematic Theology*, is not derived from the exegesis of key Christological texts. Rather, Jenson builds his case, at least in part, on his analysis of Irenaeus’s Christological formulations.²⁵ Although Jenson’s treatment of Irenaeus is relatively brief (one paragraph), the reader should not underestimate the systematic importance of Irenaeus to Jenson’s understanding of the mode of Christ’s pre-existence.²⁶ One passage in particular, quoted from *Against Heresies*, is critical to Jenson’s thesis: “The Word of God, who is the Savior of all and the ruler of heaven and of earth, *who is Jesus*, who assumed flesh and was anointed by the Father with the Spirit, *was made to be Jesus Christ*.”²⁷ Jenson interprets Irenaeus’s statement to mean that Jesus and the pre-existent Word are always—ontologically—one and the same; that the “*Logos*, whether pre-existing or walking among us, is always the person Jesus.”²⁸

Jenson, “Once more the *Logos asarkos*,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13/2 [2011] 130–33). In this article, Jenson admits to some inadequacies in his earlier proposals and seems to be experimenting with ways to correct and improve upon these; notwithstanding, Jenson is emphatic that this article is neither a retraction nor a departure from his previous conclusions about the *Logos*. The thrust of Jenson’s article seems to suggest, at least to this writer, that the notion of an eternal *Logos ensarkos* remains a challenge for Jenson to formulate cogently as a critical piece of his systematic project.

²³ Ibid. 145.

²⁴ Ibid. 141.

²⁵ Ibid. 140. I should point out that Jenson’s main argument in rejecting the notion of a *Logos asarkos* builds on Karl Barth’s groundbreaking thesis that Jesus exists in unbroken identity with the *Logos*. Although Jenson does not appropriate Barth’s insights uncritically, much of what he claims about the Son’s preexistence is predicated on Barth’s observations concerning God’s being and his eternal decision to unite himself with man in the person of Jesus Christ (ibid.). One can trace these developments in Jenson’s thought beginning with *Alpha and Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1963) and *God after God*.

²⁶ Ibid. This is clear from Jenson’s statement that either Irenaeus or Barth, the latter of whom Jenson discusses in greater detail, would suffice in making the theological point of this section of his work. Let me add that the abruptness with which Jenson treats Irenaeus is unfortunate and perhaps misleading, since it seems to suggest that his interpretation of Irenaeus ought to be clear to the reader as correct.

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.9.3, quoted in Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 140 (the emphases here are Jenson’s). As far as I can tell, Jenson incorrectly identifies this quote with 2.4.3.

²⁸ Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 140.

Douglas Farrow, to whom Jenson directs us for further clarification of Irenaeus's views on Jesus in the Trinity, is convinced that Jenson's analysis is correct.²⁹ He credits Jenson with the helpful insight that Irenaeus's Christology "works outwards from the historical Jesus, a Jew from Nazareth, as his theological and cosmological starting point."³⁰ Based on this observation Farrow concludes that "Jesus is the Logos and the Logos is Jesus. *Jesus* it is who pre-exists and post-exists, since he comes from the Father and goes to the Father."³¹ Farrow argues moreover that Irenaeus's identification of Jesus with the pre-existent Word, the second person of the Trinity, is in fact the "opening thesis" of *Against Heresies* which Irenaeus "tirelessly expound[s] throughout" contrary to the position "of the apologists before him and most of the fathers after him."³²

But is this an accurate assessment of Irenaeus or are Farrow and Jenson reading into Irenaeus's Christology their own theological convictions? In my opinion, the latter seems to be the case. Take, for instance, Farrow, who quotes Irenaeus in another place as saying that "Jesus who suffered for us, and who dwelt among us, is himself the Word of God."³³ Farrow suggests that the proper interpretation of this statement is that in reference to Jesus "there is no other Word before him or behind him or above him."³⁴ This statement rather straightforwardly rejects the traditional approach of distinguishing clearly between the pre-existent *Logos* and Jesus as the subject of the hypostatic union.

To be sure, in one sense Irenaeus's statement is to be taken as affirming the identification of the *Logos* with Jesus. This is not surprising considering the fact that Irenaeus's theological labors were directed against the Christological dualism of his Gnostic opponents, who in their complex system of intermediary beings separated "Christ from Jesus . . . the Logos from the Saviour . . . the Christ above from the Christ

²⁹ Ibid. 139, n. 74.

³⁰ Douglas Farrow, "St. Irenaeus of Lyons: The Church and the World," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1995) 340.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. Observe, particularly, n. 23. I find little support for Farrow's statement to the effect that Irenaeus was breaking rank with his theological predecessors or successors. On the contrary, Irenaeus clearly viewed himself in line with the apostolic tradition, which the apologists and the Fathers championed. One example of this is Irenaeus's statement in 3.2.2. He writes: "But, again, when we refer them [the Gnostic teachers] to that tradition which originates from the apostles, [and] which is preserved by means of successions of presbyters in the Churches, they object to tradition, saying that they themselves are wiser not merely than the presbyters, but even than the apostles, because they have discovered the unadulterated truth. . . . It comes to this, therefore, that these men do now consent neither to Scripture nor to tradition." In 4.33.8, Irenaeus states that "True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles." Statements such as these lead this writer to doubt if Irenaeus viewed himself as advocating any revolutionary theological insights as Farrow suggests.

³³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.9.3., quoted in Farrow, "St. Irenaeus" 340–41.

³⁴ Farrow, "St. Irenaeus" 340.

below.”³⁵ Irenaeus’s strategy in *Against Heresies* was to deconstruct this dualism point by point by demonstrating that there is not “another God above the Creator . . . another Monogenes . . . another Word of God . . . another Christ . . . and another Saviour”³⁶ other than Jesus Christ, the *Logos* become flesh. So at face value Farrow is correct in understanding Irenaeus as identifying the *Logos* with Jesus because this is precisely what Irenaeus’s adversaries failed to do. The heretics whom Irenaeus opposed claimed along Gnostics lines that the Christ (the *Logos*) came to indwell Jesus at his baptism but abandoned him before his suffering on the cross.³⁷ The main objective of *Against Heresies* was to establish the counterclaim that the *Logos* is identical with the human person Jesus Christ.

However, this writer is not convinced that Farrow is correct in his interpretation of Irenaeus’s Christology as positing a pre-existent God-man. For example, it is entirely misleading for Farrow to make the assertion that Irenaeus’s “divine Logos, his *Logos hegemon*, is already the *Logos ensarkos*,”³⁸ as if Irenaeus’s theology suggests the direct identification of the historical Jesus with the pre-existent Word prior to the incarnation.³⁹ What is clear in *Against Heresies* is that Irenaeus’s teaching lacks a certain explicitness concerning the manner of the Son’s eternal pre-existence. This fact is to be attributed to the obvious point that speculating about a *Logos hegemon* was not Irenaeus’s immediate concern given the dire theological circumstances that precipitated his writing *Against Heresies*. But a lack of precision on this point is not enough to justify the move to posit a pre-existent Jesus in the context of Irenaeus’s theology. This writer suspects, then, that rather than allowing Irenaeus to speak for himself, Farrow has read back into Irenaeus some of his own proclivity for theological novelty.⁴⁰

³⁵ Gerard Vallee, *A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics: Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius* (Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses, 1981) 21.

³⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.19.9. My quotations are from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

³⁷ *Ibid.* 3.16.1, 3.16.3, 3.16.5, 3.18.3.

³⁸ Farrow, “St. Irenaeus” 342.

³⁹ Irenaeus’s statement in 1.9.3 that “Jesus . . . is himself the Word of God” must be understood contextually. In the section immediately preceding this statement, Irenaeus summarizes his opponents as denying that the Word became flesh (1.9.2). In response to this heresy, Irenaeus follows with the statement to which Farrow refers. But a perusal of 1.9.3 indicates that Irenaeus clearly did not intend for his identifying Jesus with the *Logos* to be read back into God’s eternity as if to say that the eternal *Logos* was *always* Jesus. Clearly, Irenaeus’s dispute with the Gnostics was not over who the *Logos* was in eternity, but who Jesus was in time and history. The Gnostics refused to identify the *Logos* with the historical Jesus. This denial was the focus of Irenaeus’s attacks.

⁴⁰ The following quote from Farrow may help to convince the reader of this point. He writes: “I cannot pause to develop the relational or perichoretic concept of time and space, and of creaturely existence *per se*, with which Irenaeus found himself working in asserting this claim, that is something I have pointed to elsewhere.” Farrow, “St. Irenaeus” 340 (emphasis added).

Returning to Jenson, though, it must be admitted that Irenaeus's statement in 3.9.3 is troublesome to the traditional view of the pre-incarnational existence of Christ, since it seems to insinuate, as Jenson points out, that the *Logos* who "was made to be Jesus Christ" always existed as "Jesus." According to Jenson's interpretation of this peculiar passage, the pre-existent *Logos* is the historical Jesus. It is Jesus who exists prior to his own birth to Mary. Thus, whereas the Gnostic infiltrators taught that the *Logos* is *never* identified concretely with Jesus, Jenson seems to suggest that Irenaeus rightly taught that the *Logos* is *always* identified with the incarnate Savior.⁴¹ However, there are two important arguments that one can marshal against Jenson's view.

First, if this quote teaches the absolute identification of the pre-existent *Logos* with Jesus, the God-man, as Jenson asserts, it is the only text in all of *Against Heresies* that does so, thus raising concerns about the accuracy of Farrow's and Jenson's assessment that the eternal humanity of Jesus Christ is the "opening" and controlling thesis of Irenaeus's work. Having undertaken a thorough study of *Against Heresies*, this author could not find even one additional statement in Irenaeus's text that supports or confirms such a conclusion. It is true, as Farrow observes about Jenson's analysis of Irenaeus, that Irenaeus's Christology "works outward from the historical Jesus," or, we might say, it is restricted mainly to the *oikonomia*.⁴² However, I understand this state of affairs to suggest that generally speaking Irenaeus limits the focus of his study to the God-man rather than the Son's eternal pre-existence, a fact that I alluded to above. But, as far as I can detect, nowhere does Irenaeus (with the possible exception of the disputed passage above, which we will return to shortly) read the

Is not Farrow stretching matters quite a bit if he suggesting that Irenaeus was consciously ("found himself") working with a "relational or perichoretic concept of time and space"?

⁴¹ In all fairness to Farrow, I need to mention that this interpretation of Irenaeus is more indicative of Jenson. If I have understood Farrow correctly, he does not disavow totally the concept of a *Logos asarkos* in Irenaeus's writings. For example, he states that Irenaeus "knows no *Logos asarkos* in the usual sense," suggesting that there is a *Logos asarkos* to be contemplated, albeit differently than the way in which traditional theology has done so (Farrow, "St. Irenaeus" 342; emphasis added). In n. 36 on p. 343, Farrow gives further clarification of his understanding of Irenaeus on this point: "We may indeed speak of a *Logos asarkos*, i.e., of a Son or Word proper to God, who is sent from God (4.6.3) in creation and redemption; but only with the proviso that he is sent and comes in just this way, as a man." According to Farrow, in Irenaeus's thought the descent-ascend pattern of the Savior is always descriptive of Jesus (in contrast to the traditional view that the descent is that of the eternal Word who became incarnate). On page 344, n. 39, Farrow writes: "There is a twofold pre-existence of the Word corresponding to his twofold generation as divine and human (cf. 3.19.2, 4.5ff, 4.20)." See also Molnar's helpful discussion of Farrow (*Divine Freedom* 68–70). In contrast, we will see that Jenson views Irenaeus as completely rejecting the concept of a *Logos asarkos*. Therefore, the two viewpoints may be summarized as follows, of course, at some risk of oversimplification: in Farrow's case, the *Logos already* existed as Jesus; for Jenson the *Logos always* existed as Jesus.

⁴² Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (ed. Andrew Louth; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) 64.

human Jesus back into the immanent life of the Trinity. On the contrary, it is the Jesus of history—not a pre-existent Jesus—that Irenaeus seems to consistently and tirelessly identify with the *Logos*, of which 5.1.1 is typical: “For in no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless our Master, existing as the Word, had become man. For no other being had the power of revealing to us the things of the Father, except His own proper Word.”⁴³ In this reference, Irenaeus’s pre-existing heavenly being is identified specifically as the “Word proper” whose intimate, eternal communion with the Father is unparalleled in his power to declare the things of the Father to those who otherwise would be left in spiritual obscurity. This passage seems to suggest that, contrary to Farrow’s and Jenson’s observations, Irenaeus’s Christology maintained the traditional distinction between the Word proper and the man Jesus, the two being linked in Irenaeus’s thought only in the actual incarnation.⁴⁴

Similarly, in 3.18.1 Irenaeus makes the following explicit statement in defense of Christ’s pre-existence as the unincarnate (not incarnate) Word:

As it has been clearly demonstrated that the Word, who existed in the beginning with God, by whom all things were made, who was also always present with mankind, was in these last days, according to the time appointed by the Father, united to His own workmanship, inasmuch as He became a man liable to suffering, [it follows] that every objection is set aside of those who say, ‘If our Lord was born at that time, Christ had therefore no previous existence.’ For I have shown that the Son of God did not then begin to exist, being with the Father from the beginning; but when He became incarnate, and was made man, He commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam—namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God—that we might recover in Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

In this excerpt, Irenaeus affirms Christ’s “previous existence” with the Father as the eternal Son and Creator. However, there is absolutely no indication in this passage that Irenaeus envisioned Christ’s pre-existence

⁴³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.1.1. We may also cite 3.11.5: “But that wine was better which the Word made from water, on the moment, and simply for the use of those who had been called to the marriage.” Here Irenaeus identifies the Word specifically with the God-man in history (see also 1.9.2–3; 1.10.1; 1.10.6; 3.8.2; 3.9.1; 3.10.2; 3.11.2; 3.11.8; 3.12.2–4; 3.12.8–9; 3.12.13; 3.16.2; 3.16.5–8; 3.17.4; 3.18.1–3; 3.18.7; 3.19; 3.20.2; 3.21.10; 3.22.1; 3.22.3; 4.6.5; 4.20.4; 4.20.11; 4.33.7; 5.2.2; 5.14.1–2; 5.16.2; 5.18.1–3). Jenson cites several additional references from *Against Heresies* in support of his interpretation of Irenaeus; however, these follow the pattern of 5.1.1. and are therefore included in my list above. I need to point out, moreover, that two of the references that Jenson cites (2.6.1; 2.4.3) appear to be misplaced (Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 140, see nn. 75 and 76).

⁴⁴ As we pointed out earlier, Douglas Farrow, I think, acknowledges the concept of a “Word proper,” or at least comes close to doing so. Farrow posits a double begetting of the divine *Logos*: as the Word proper and then as a pre-historical Jesus. Jenson seems to have held this view at one time but dropped it later in his career.

⁴⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.1.

in terms of an already incarnate Son. On the contrary, Irenaeus appears to have upheld the traditional view that the Word, eternally existing as the second trinitarian person, became God incarnate.

As a final instance of Irenaeus's equating the *Logos* with a pre-existent being who became incarnate as opposed to a pre-existent Jesus who became incarnate, the reference in 3.18.3 to the divine *Logos* as the "impassible Christ" is quite telling. According to Irenaeus, "the impassible Christ did not descend upon Jesus, but that He Himself, because He was Jesus Christ, suffered for us; He who lay in the tomb, and rose again, who descended and ascended—the Son of God *having been made* the Son of man, as the very name itself doth declare."⁴⁶ The choice of "impassibility" language is significant in that the way in which Irenaeus uses it affirms that the divine *Logos* pre-existed as the second eternal member of the Godhead who never ceased to exist as such even subsequent to his partaking of our humanity. Irenaeus disavows the cornerstone of Gnostic teaching that Jesus was a receptacle in whom Christ came to indwell temporarily, departing before his suffering on the cross, and affirms that Jesus is incontrovertibly the Word enfleshed, the "Son of God . . . made the Son of man," the "impassible Christ" who suffered paradoxically as the human Jesus.

It seems clear from these examples that Irenaeus self-consciously and consistently identified the *Logos* with Jesus only as Jesus walked and talked and lived and ministered among those he came to save. Evidence that Irenaeus identified the *Logos* with a pre-existent Jesus, upon closer examination, is curiously lacking. Of course, this line of reasoning does not prove conclusively that Jenson's interpretation of 3.9.3 is incorrect, but it certainly makes his rendering less plausible.

Let me suggest, then, a second and more compelling reason why it is doubtful that Jenson's interpretation of Irenaeus's incarnational theology is correct. It is this author's opinion that Jenson's analysis of 3.9.3 does not deal critically with the context of Irenaeus's argument in this section of his work. To review, the quote in question runs as follows: "The Word of God, who is the Saviour of all and the ruler of heaven and of earth, *who is Jesus*, who assumed flesh and was anointed by the Father with the Spirit, *was made to be Jesus* Christ."⁴⁷ A *prima facie* reading of this text seems to suggest to some interpreters that in Irenaeus's theology the *Logos* is Jesus as a pre-existent reality. It is clear from the way Jenson underscores this text that he adopts and vigorously promotes this interpretation. According to Jenson, Irenaeus views the pre-existent Word as the already incarnate Word, who through his humiliation and anointing by the Spirit was subsequently "made to be Jesus." Thus Jenson understands Irenaeus as

⁴⁶ Ibid. 3.18.3. (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.9.2., quoted in Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 140 (emphasis added).

teaching that the *Logos* already existed as the God-man in the Trinity prior to Jesus' human conception. In other words, it was "Jesus [in eternity] . . . who . . . was made to be Jesus [in human history]."⁴⁸

As I pointed out above, the main problem with this view is that it does not take into account the context of Irenaeus's statement in 3.9.3. The disputed passage occurs within the backdrop of Irenaeus's argument in section 3.9 that Jesus, having been foretold by the prophets and about whom the Gospels give credible witness to his coming, is the same God who created heaven and earth. In developing this sequence of thought Irenaeus sets forth his exposition of Matthew's record of Jesus' baptism, the key verse stating what John the Baptist witnessed firsthand: "The Heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God, as a dove, coming upon Him: and lo a voice from heaven saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."⁴⁹ Consistent with his purpose in 3.9, Irenaeus quotes this verse as evidence of the Father's own recognition and delight in Jesus the beloved Son, to which the Spirit's descent and the Father's acclamation give ample witness to his deity.

Understandably, in setting forth his exposition of this verse, Irenaeus immediately seeks to discourage any attempt to read off the biblical record adoptionist concerns. He writes:

For Christ did not at that time descend upon Jesus, neither was Christ one and Jesus another: but the Word of God—who is Savior of all, and the ruler of heaven and earth, who is Jesus, as I have already pointed out, who did also take upon Him flesh, and was anointed by the Spirit from the Father—was made Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

Here we see Irenaeus refuting the adoptionist teaching that the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism established his identity as God's Son, which infers that Jesus was not in fact God in the flesh. Irenaeus states plainly that Christ did not descend upon Jesus at his baptism, nor were Jesus and the eternal Word (Christ) separate beings. In place of this misrepresentation of the incarnation Irenaeus strongly endorses the biblical idea that Jesus *is* the incarnated Word. In other words, Jesus is not the beloved Son of God *because of* the events of his baptism. Rather, Jesus, Irenaeus concludes, is the "Word of God . . . the ruler of heaven and earth" who became incarnate.⁵¹ Irenaeus maintained

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Matthew 3:16.

⁵⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.9.3.

⁵¹ Ibid. It is this author's opinion that the more natural reading of this passage is to view the latter half of the quote, "was made to be Jesus Christ," as modifying the main subject, "The Word of God" ("The Word of God . . . who did also take upon Him flesh, and was anointed by the Spirit from the Father—was made to be Jesus Christ?"), rather than modifying the first occurrence of "Jesus" (which is the way Jenson seems to take it). "Who is Jesus," then, would be parenthetical, as I will point out later.

that the divine Father-Son relationship, according to Matthew's gospel, was secured by Jesus' identity as the *eternal* Word made flesh.

In the section that follows, Irenaeus defends the true significance of Jesus' baptism by declaring that the Word was "made to be Jesus Christ." Because this phrase is critical to Jenson's questionable interpretation of 3.9.3, it is important that we consider it in the context in which it is found.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism, the Father is understood as endorsing Jesus as his beloved Son, of which the Spirit's descent is the key corroborating factor. Indeed, the descending of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism is what the prophets foretold would identify Jesus in terms of his public and official unveiling as Israel's promised divine/human Deliverer. This is seen by the fact that Irenaeus, in the same sentence, goes on to quote Isaiah quite extensively in this regard. He continues:

as Esaias also says, "There shall come forth a rod from the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise from his root; and the Spirit of God shall rest upon Him; the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and piety, and the Spirit of the fear of God, shall fill Him. He shall not judge according to glory, nor reprove after the manner of speech; but He shall dispense judgment to the humble man, and reprove the haughty one of the earth." And again Esaias, pointing out beforehand His unction, and the reason why he was anointed, does himself say, "The Spirit of God is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me: He hath sent Me to preach the Gospel to the lowly, to heal the broken up in heart, to proclaim liberty to the captives and sight to the blind; to announce the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance; to comfort all that mourn."⁵²

This passage explains that by stating that the Word "was made to be Jesus Christ," Irenaeus was pointing to Jesus' anointing with the Spirit by the Father as identifying Jesus as "Christ," God's anointed, the promised Messiah sent from God to save his people. In other words, what transpired in the life of the Word in terms of his assumption of human flesh and his anointing by the Spirit at the event of his baptism fully attested to Jesus' messiahship as the God-man. Clearly, then, Irenaeus's statement that the Word was "made to be Jesus Christ," has nothing to do with an eternally incarnate Son becoming incarnate in human history. For sure, Jenson attempts to link these concepts in Irenaeus's thought, but only by conveniently and perhaps cleverly overlooking the contextual concerns mentioned here.

This interpretation of Irenaeus is also confirmed by what Irenaeus writes later in 3.12.7. Using Peter as the standard-bearer of apostolic preaching, Irenaeus summarizes the content of Peter's preaching concerning the Son as follows:

⁵² Ibid.

But it is evident from Peter's words that he did indeed still retain the God who was already known to them; but he also bare witness to them that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, the Judge of the quick and dead, into whom he did also command them to be baptized for the remission of sins; and not this alone, but he witnessed that Jesus was Himself the Son of God, who also, having been anointed with the Holy Spirit, is called Jesus Christ. And He is the same being that was born of Mary, as the testimony of Peter implies.⁵³

Once again, Irenaeus connects Jesus' anointing by the Holy Spirit with his "calling," that is to say, his "office," his public inauguration as *Christos*, which title is properly identified with Jesus' messianic mission and role (see Luke 4:16–21; cf. Isa 61:1ff; see also Acts 10:36–38). Therefore, 3.9.3, as well as 3.12.7, must be construed as teaching that by virtue of Jesus' endowment with the Holy Spirit at the event of his baptism Jesus was officially ushered into the public, messianic phase of his ministry as the only begotten Son of the Father in human form. More specifically, then, in the disputed passage above the first half of the quote demonstrates the identity between Jesus and the eternal *Logos*, whereas the second half elaborates and expands on this identification by pointing out the public, inauguratory unveiling of Jesus' messianic ministry and mission in conjunction with his anointing with the Spirit.

As a final move we must examine the difficult phrase "who is Jesus" which, when read uncritically, might lead one to conclude that Irenaeus is identifying the *Logos* with a pre-existent Jesus. By identifying "who is Jesus," with "the Word" and then linking this phrase with "was made Jesus Christ," Jenson stipulates that the teaching of 3.9.3 is that a pre-existent incarnate Word in eternity became the incarnate Word in history. However, in the light of our discussion of the context of Irenaeus's statement in 3.9.3, this rendering seems implausible. The text itself suggests a better and more reasonable solution. To review, Irenaeus claims that in the incarnation "Christ did not at that time descend upon Jesus, neither was Christ one and Jesus another: but the Word of God—who is Savior of all, and the ruler of heaven and earth, who is Jesus, who assumed flesh and was anointed by the Father with the Spirit, was made to be Jesus Christ." The relative clause "who is Jesus," rather than being understood as identifying the nature of Jesus' pre-existence, is better understood as referring back to the claim that Irenaeus makes prior to 3.9.3 and generally throughout his work that the *Logos* is identified with Jesus by virtue of the incarnation.⁵⁴ This seems to suggest that "who is

⁵³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.12.7.

⁵⁴ Another possible way to view the difficult phraseology in 3.9.3 is suggested by the Lutheran theologian Gustaf Wingren. As far as I can tell, Wingren does not deal with this passage specifically; notwithstanding, his analysis of Irenaeus suggests that Irenaeus viewed Jesus as existing in the Trinity in light of God's sovereign purposes and design in a way that does not entail the total pre-incarnational inseparability of the *Logos* and Jesus. This suggests that on the level of God's sovereign purpose and plan for his creation, Irenaeus taught that

Jesus” is mentioned here parenthetically and the “who” in the immediately following clause refers not to Jesus but to “the Word of God.” If this interpretation is correct, we may see Irenaeus in 3.9.3 as being strictly concerned with the incarnate Word whose Spirit-inaugurated ministry is realized in Jesus’ earthly life and career as the fulfiller of Israel’s messianic hopes.⁵⁵ Therefore, in the light of the context of Irenaeus’s argument in 3.9.3 we must reject Jenson’s interpretation of Irenaeus as positing a pre-existent God-man in the divine life who later becomes the human (i.e. flesh and bones) Jesus in first-century Palestine.

Taken together, these arguments seem to warrant the conclusion that, as a general principle, whenever Irenaeus speaks of the Word, it is *either* John’s pre-existent *Logos* that he has in mind or Jesus as the Word made flesh in first-century Palestine, but *never* the two conflated under the single category of pre-existence. Indeed, in Irenaeus’s formulations Jesus is the eternal *Logos* but only as he walked on earth as God in the flesh. It appears then that in Irenaeus’s theology there is no pre-existent God-man to consider. Thus Farrow’s suggestion that Irenaeus’s exposition of pre-existence doctrine is at odds with the apologists and Church fathers before and after him must be rejected. And, clearly, the evidence presented above suggests that Jenson’s move to identify the pre-existent *Logos* unmitigatedly with Jesus cannot be sustained on the basis of Irenaeus’s Christological constructions.

the Word already existed as Jesus Christ before creation. But on the level of the impenetrable mystery of God’s divine being and essential nature (i.e. ontologically), Irenaeus argued that the Word existed prior to Jesus. Thus, according to Wingren, on a non-ontological level Irenaeus does identify the *Logos* with Jesus prior to the incarnation. If Wingren’s analysis of Irenaeus is correct, then the disputed passage may perhaps be understood as affirming this line of thought. However, this is clearly *not* what Jenson is doing (Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959] 3–7, 16–21, 100–3).

⁵⁵ Interestingly, in quoting Irenaeus, Jenson does not underscore “Christ” in the last phrase “*was made to be Jesus Christ*,” thus overlooking the alternative (and, I think, correct) reading of Irenaeus mentioned above. In my judgment, this is a glaring omission on Jenson’s part and a questionable use of Irenaeus to make the theological point of this section of his work.