

How was the Son “Foreknown before the Foundation of the World?”

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1 Peter 1:20 NASB

20 For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you

This passage is often cited by Unitarians in support of the idea that the Son only preexisted in the mind and plan of God, but not in reality. It is used to support the claim that “Logos” in John’s prologue refers to God’s Plan and not to the Son of God. Anthony Buzzard, who cites this verse not less than six times in his book, explains the Unitarian position.

“Most significantly, the view that Jesus existed prior to his birth only in the counsels of God is the one expressed by Peter in his first epistle. At the end of his career he has not changed the view expressed in his early speeches in Acts: ‘[Jesus] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but manifested in the last days for you.’ (1 Pet. 1:20). E. G. Selwyn notes correctly: ‘Nor are we entitled to say that [Peter] was familiar with the idea of Christ’s preexistence ... For this idea is not necessarily implied in his description of Christ as “foreknown before the foundation of the world,” since Christians also are objects of God’s foreknowledge.’

“All of the faithful were similarly ‘foreknown’ (1 Pet. 1:2), but this obviously does not mean that they preexisted. ...”¹

Note the final statement, where the word “foreknown” is said to apply both to Christ and to Christians. On this basis, Unitarians reason that if Christians only preexisted in the mind of God, but not in reality, then the same applies to Christ.

Greek Fatalism & Calvinistic Bias

Yet, Unitarians who make this argument are relying on translations and interpretations of the Scriptures that have been corrupted and improperly influenced by Augustine’s blending of Greek fatalism with Christianity. Long before Christianity made its appearance, the mythological idea of “fate” (a predetermined outcome) captivated the Greek mind.

“In Greek Mythology, the Goddess of Necessity, known as Themis, bore three daughters. Each of them possessed a name that many of us might not recognize. They were Klotho,

¹ Buzzard, Anthony F., *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 186.

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Lakhsis, and Atropos. However, we might know them better by their proper collective name: The Fates. Klotho weaved the thread of life, Lakhsis measured the length of the thread, and Atropos, with her great shears, cut this thread. It is said that they laugh at the attempts of men to cheat them, for in the end, no matter what a man does, the fates will always prevail.”²

The Greeks, and many other pagan societies, believed that man’s fate was controlled by the movement of the planets. Astrology was therefore used to foretell the future of individuals.

The earliest Christians, however, absolutely rejected the idea of fate or predetermination, and universally defended the idea of free will. Man’s destiny is set entirely by his own choices which he is free to make. Yet, thanks to the writings of Augustine, the idea of fate was introduced into Christianity and defended by slight-of hand in redefining certain key words in Scripture, and reinterpreting whole passages to teach fatalism – predeterminism. Augustine simply changed the cause of “fate” from astrology to God’s mysterious will.

Unfortunately, even many who opposed Augustine’s Christian “fatalism” unwittingly allowed some of the underlying thinking behind it. This included the idea that God “foreknew” every person who would ever be born, whether or not they would choose Him or reject Him, and then elected to save them or not to save them based on this alleged “foreknowledge.” Yet, all of this is based on applying an incorrect meaning to an important Greek word, a meaning that is actually foreign to New Testament usage.

Mr. Buzzard’s argument, and the Greek-mystical, fatalistic bias that undergirds it, wrongly assumes that the verb “foreknown” (when used of persons) means to have knowledge about someone before they actually exist in reality. And based on this alleged divine “foreknowledge,” God has predetermined their fate.

“Foreknow” προγινώσκω is a verb. **It does not mean to know someone before they exist in reality.** It is a compound of προ (pro – before, previously, formerly) and γινώσκω (to know, often used of intimate relationships, including sexual).

- When used of persons, it always refers to a former **actual relationship** with a person who existed at the time: Wisdom 6:13 LXX; Acts 26:5; Rom. 8:29; Rom. 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:20.

² <http://web.nmsu.edu/~philosophia/Fatalism.pdf>

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- When used of events, it always refers to having been forewarned: Wisdom 8:8 LXX; Wisdom 18:6 LXX; 2 Pet. 3:17.

To prove this, we need to examine some of these passages in detail.

Προγινώσκω in Acts 26:5

Exactly what προγινώσκω means when used of persons is illustrated clearly by Paul the very first time it appears in the New Testament.

Acts 26:4-5 NKJV

4 “***My manner of life from my youth***, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, ***all the Jews know***.

5 “They ***knew me from the first*** [προγινώσκω], if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Was Paul suggesting that his accusers had “foreknowledge” of Paul before he was born? Obviously Paul’s point was that “*all the Jews know*” “*my manner of life from my youth*,” and this is what he was referring to when he used the term προγινώσκω [lit. knew me previously]. They knew Paul from his youth, before he became a Christian. It describes a former **personal relationship** in his youth with his accusers. To impose a Greek mystical “foreknowledge” of Paul before he existed is absurd in this context.

Προγινώσκω in Romans 8:29

Calvinistic bias (which is really Greek, Augustinian fatalism) is imposed upon this word in the following passage. This is why it has become one of the Calvinists’ main proof-texts.

Rom. 8:28-30 NKJV

28 *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*

29 *For whom He **foreknew**, [προγινώσκω] He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.*

30 *Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*

Calvinists wrongly interpret “foreknew” προγινώσκω as meaning to know or determine before one actually exists. They thus take this passage as a general statement about what God **does** regarding all of those whom He “foreknew” – the so-called “elect.” However, this interpretation runs into a very serious grammatical problem. In Greek, when a

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timeless principle is being stated, **it is in the present tense**. Notice that all of the verbs in vs. 30 are in the past tense (aorist indicative). The aorist indicative refers to past historical events. This passage is therefore not saying what God DOES or what He WILL DO. It is saying what God DID concerning those whom He “foreknew” – those with whom God had an intimate relationship in the past, men such as Seth, Noah, Abraham, Moses, etc. Here is the correct translation of this passage.

Rom. 8:28-30 LGV

28 Now we have observed that everything works together for good for those loving God, (those being called in accord with His proposal);

*29 [and] that those whom He **knew previously** He predefined [to be] fashioned from the image of His Son, for Him to be the first-begotten among many brothers.*

30 And whom He predefined, these He also called. And whom He called, these He also justified. And whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Abraham is the perfect example of those whom Paul was referring to as examples of someone God “foreknew” (knew previously). Abraham was “called” to a walk of faith.³ Abraham was “justified” by faith.⁴ Abraham was then “glorified,”⁵ given a place of honor. This interpretation is required by the aorist tense of the verbs, each referring to historical events. These verbs cannot refer to what God is doing now generally or will do in the future. Consequently, the word προγινώσκω (foreknew), which is also aorist indicative, refers to past historical relationships with the great men of the Old Testament. Paul pointed to the historical written record about God’s working with these men in order to encourage his readers to draw an important conclusion: If God has a record of being “for” His people, no man can stand against them. It is only because of a Greek-mystical, fatalist interpretation given to προγινώσκω that this passage becomes fodder for Calvinistic ideas which are demonstrably false.

Προγινώσκω in Romans 11:2

Romans 11:2-4

*2 God has not cast away His people whom He **foreknew**. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying,*

3 “LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”?

³ Heb. 11:8

⁴ Rom. 4:2-3

⁵ Gen. 12:2-3

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4 *But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”*

5 *Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.*

Here is the correct translation:

Romans 11:2-5 LGV

2 *God did not cast off His people whom He **knew previously**. Or have you not observed what the Scripture says? In Elijah’s pleading with God concerning Israel, he says,*

3 *“Master! They have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I was left alone, and they are seeking my life!”*

4 *But what was the divine response? “I have reserved to Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”*

5 *In the same way, then, a remnant according to the choosing of grace has been established in this time also.*

Calvinists interpret προγινώσκω here also according to their presuppositions about election and so-called “foreknowledge.” However, notice that Paul offered an example of what He meant by God not casting away those whom He προγινώσκω – knew previously. Paul produced examples of God’s προγινώσκω by referring to people with whom God previously had a relationship. These were seven thousand men who refused to bow to Baal.⁶ God knew these seven thousand men previously, in times past – previous to Paul’s readers, **not previous to the existence of these seven thousand men in eternity past!** Paul’s own example proves that the Calvinist interpretation of προγινώσκω is wrong.

Προγινώσκω in 1 Peter 1:20

The last time the verb προγινώσκω appears in the Bible is in the passage used by Mr. Buzzard and other Unitarians to allege that Jesus was merely known or planned in the mind of God before creation, but did not exist as a real person. Yet, he is using the reasoning of Augustine corrupted by Greek fatalism rather than the meaning of the term as clearly demonstrated by Paul in both Acts 26:5 and Romans 11:2.

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20 *For He was **foreknown** before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you*

⁶ 1 Kings 19:18

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The correct translation is:

1 Peter 1:20 LGV

20 having been known previously, indeed even before the casting down of the world, yet made apparent in the last times for you

A second mistake by Mr. Buzzard is the assumption that “foreknown” (having been known previously) refers to God’s own knowledge or plan. But the text does not state this. Προγινώσκω is in the passive voice, so the subject is not stated only the direct object (Jesus). We should not blame Mr. Buzzard for jumping to this conclusion, since it seems to be necessitated by the clause “before the foundation of the world,” when no other persons existed to whom such “foreknowledge” could be attributed.

But once again, a poor translation is at the root of this error. The clause πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου is incorrectly translated in most English translations as “before the foundation of the world.” The correct translation is “before the casting down of the world.” The clause καταβολῆς κόσμου (casting down of the world) appears ten times in the Bible (Matt. 13:35; Matt. 25:34; Luke 11:50; John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 4:3; Heb. 9:26; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; Rev. 17:8). In every case it refers to the fall of creation and the curse due to Adam’s sin. It never refers to the creation itself.

The noun καταβολῆ literally means a “casting down” (overthrow). This noun is derived from the verb καταβαλλω, a compound of κατα (down) and βαλλω (to throw). The verb describes the action of throwing down, and the noun form describes a “throwing down” as in “an overthrow.” That this is the meaning of the verb can be shown from the LXX where it is used about 30 times, all in reference to an “overthrow,” or “casting down.” Here are a few examples:

2 Samuel 20:15 LXX

15 And they came and besieged him in Abel and Phermacha: and they raised a mound against the city and it stood close to the wall; and all the people with Joab proposed to throw down the wall.

Job 12:14 LXX

14 If he should cast down, who will build up? if he should shut up against man, who shall open?

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Isaiah 26:5 LXX

*5 who hast humbled and brought down them that dwell on high, thou shalt **cast down** strong cities, and bring them to the ground.*

The noun form is used only once in the LXX, in 2 Maccabees 2:29, where it refers to a builder tearing down an old house to build a completely new one, contrasting this to someone who is merely doing a remodel.

In the New Testament, the verb is used in 2 Cor. 4:9, “persecuted, but not forsaken; **struck down** [καταβαλλω], but not destroyed.”

The only time the noun appears in the New Testament apart from the clause καταβολῆς κόσμου (casting down of the world) is in Hebrews 11:11 where it is incorrectly rendered “conceive” in the NKJV. Here is the LGV.

Hebrews 11:11 LGV

*11 “By faith” Sarah herself received strength for **the overthrowing** [καταβολῆς] **of a seed**, and being beyond the season of childbearing, gave birth, since she deemed faithful the One promising*

The clause, “*overthrowing of a seed*,” refers to Sarah’s overthrowing Ishmael as “Abraham’s Seed” by the birth of Isaac, the child of promise. God had promised Abraham, “*In Isaac your seed will be called.*” This is explained in verses 17-18: “*By faith’ Abraham, being tested, has offered Isaac. And the one who welcomed the promises was sacrificing **the only-begotten**, about whom it was said, ‘**In Isaac your seed shall be called**’.*” That Ishmael was “cast down” as Abraham’s seed, and no longer reckoned by God to be “Abraham’s seed,” is evident by the reference to Isaac as Abraham’s “only-begotten” even though Ishmael was born to Abraham first. Paul inferred this from Genesis 22 where God told Abraham to offer up “*Your **only son**, Isaac.*”⁷ Thus, Ishmael was “overthrown” or “cast down” as Abraham’s seed (as the heir of the Abrahamic Covenant) by Sarah’s having become the mother of Isaac, the seed of promise. Consequently, the noun καταβολή does not refer to a foundation being laid, but to an overthrow, a casting down.

The sense of overthrowing or casting down a “seed” is also illustrated by the following passage:

Psalm 106:26-27 LXX

⁷ Gen. 22:2,12,16

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26 So he lifted up his hand against them, to **cast them down** [καταβαλλω] in the wilderness;

27 and to **cast down** [καταβαλλω] **their seed** [σπέρμα] among the nations, and to scatter them in the countries.

Thus, καταβολὴν σπέρματος, “the overthrowing of a seed,” is a concept found in Scripture, and in Hebrews 11 refers to Ishmael being displaced as “Abraham’s seed” by the birth of Isaac. Since the noun form is used here with the clear meaning of “casting down” or “overthrow,” the exact same noun in the clause καταβολῆς κόσμου means “casting down of the world” or “overthrow of the world,” and cannot mean “foundation of the world” as being a reference to creation.

Every other occurrence of the noun καταβολή in the New Testament is part of the clause καταβολῆς κόσμου, “casting down of the world” or “overthrow of the world.” In every single case it refers to the catastrophe that occurred when Adam sinned and the curse was placed upon the creation. In fact, this meaning is virtually required in some of these passages.

Luke 11:49-51

49 “Therefore the wisdom of God also said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,’

50 “that the blood of all the prophets which was shed **from the foundation of the world** [properly, “from the casting down of the world”] may be required of this generation,

51 “**from the blood of Abel** to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.

If this clause meant “from the foundation of the world” (creation) instead of “from the casting down of the world,” it attributes evil to the orderly creation prior to the curse which God pronounced as “very good.” Rather, the evil that Jesus was referring to was that which engulfed mankind when Adam fell into sin and was expelled from Eden. Satan was a “murderer from the beginning” because he caused Eve followed by Adam to sin, and thus condemned all of mankind to death. Cain, who murdered his brother, was simply following in Satan’s footsteps. Thus, this evil of the wicked persecuting the righteous cannot be traced back to “the foundation of the world,” but rather to “the overthrow of the world.”

That being the case, consider what 1 Peter 1:20 actually says about Jesus:

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20 having been known previously, indeed even before the casting down of the world, yet made apparent in the last times for you

As stated earlier, “having been known previously” is in the passive voice. Jesus is the direct object. The subject (who knew Him) is not stated. The clause “before the casting down of the world” refers to the creation before it was overthrown by Adam’s sin. This statement refers specifically to Adam’s former intimate relationship with the Son of God in the Garden of Eden. Adam knew, conversed with, and walked with the Son of God intimately as described in Genesis 2:15 – 3:19. These verses say that “God” was walking in the Garden of Eden, and speaking with Adam face to face. Yet, “No man has seen God at any time, the only-begotten Son ... He has made Him known.”⁸ This was the Word (Logos) who was in the beginning with God and was “God” to Adam.

To compound the error, the word μὲν in the critical clause is either omitted or moved by most English translations so that it does not do what it was intended! The Greek reads: προεγνωσμένου μὲν πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου (lit. “previously having been known, **INDEED EVEN** before the casting down of the world.”) The word μὲν is an intensive particle, meant to stress something to an extreme, beyond what would be understood without it. It follows the word that it was meant to press to this extreme, as a post-positive. Yet, the NASB and NIV omit it entirely (even though it is found in their underlying Greek text), and the NKJV and KJV move it earlier, so that its post-positive force refers to the preceding verse instead of the word προεγνωσμένου (previously having been known). The reason it is left untranslated or moved to a different position is because the translators did not make any sense of the text as Peter wrote it due to their presuppositions. However, when the verse is correctly translated, as in the LGV, it is apparent why Peter included the word μὲν exactly where he did.

1 Peter 1:20 LGV

*20 having been known previously, **indeed even** before the casting down of the world, yet made apparent in the last times for you*

The word translated “known previously” (προγινώσκω) refers to knowing someone in the past. Alone it simply indicates that the Son of God was known to people in the distant past, such as Abraham.⁹ However, the addition of the post-positive force of μὲν pushes “known previously” all the way back to, “indeed even before” the fall of Adam. Without it, “known previously” would have been understood only as known **before the present** without being specific as to how far back in time He was known. But its inclusion here

⁸ John 1:18

⁹ John 8:58

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implies something like the following: The Son of God has been known previously, before His being revealed in the last times for you, EVEN as far back as before the casting down of the world! Thus Peter’s point is that the Son of God was known personally by Adam.

That this is the correct meaning is also shown by the word φανερωθέντος translated “made apparent.” This term refers to something that had been hidden or concealed, but then made apparent or revealed.¹⁰ In this same epistle Peter also used this term for Christ’s manifestation from heaven at His second coming, after having been concealed at the Father’s right hand throughout this age.¹¹

Consequently, Peter’s point was not that Jesus existed only in the mind of God as an idea or plan prior to creation and did not become a reality until “the last times.” Rather, the one who has been known previously, indeed even the same one whom Adam knew intimately before he sinned and was exiled from Eden, this very one has been made manifest to all in these later times. Thus, rather than this passage being a proof-text for Unitarians, it overthrows Unitarianism by showing exactly the opposite. 1 Peter 1:20 when correctly translated is strong evidence for the preexistence of Christ, that the same person known to Adam as “God” became apparent as the Man Jesus Christ in “the last times for you.”

This is why John wrote, “*In the beginning was Logos, and Logos was with God, and Logos was God.*” The last statement is in reference to Logos’ relationship and interaction with Adam and mankind. He was “God” to Adam, appearing as “Elohim,” just as Genesis 2-3 states.

The earliest Christians cited 1 Peter 1:20 to prove the preexistence of Christ, as is evident from the following quote from the late first century sermon, 2 Clement.

“So, then, brethren, if we do the will of our Father God, we shall be members of the first church, the spiritual, — that which was created before sun and moon; ... So, then, let us elect to belong to the church of life, that we may be saved. I think not that ye are ignorant that the living church is the body of Christ (for the Scripture, saith, “God created man male and female;”¹² the male is Christ, the female the church,) and that the Books and the Apostles teach that the church is not of the present, but from the beginning. For it was spiritual, as was also our Jesus, and was made manifest at the end of the days in order to save us.”¹³ The church being spiritual, was made manifest

¹⁰ Cf. Mark 4:22; John 7:4; Rom. 1:19; Rom. 3:21; Rom. 16:25-26; Col. 1:26; Heb. 9:8;

¹¹ 1 Pet. 5:4 (cf. also 1 John 2:28; 1 John 3:2)

¹² Clement drew this analogy from Paul’s statements concerning the great mystery in Eph. 5:22-32.

¹³ Paraphrase of 1 Peter 1:20

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in the flesh of Christ, signifying to us that if any one of us shall preserve it in the flesh and corrupt it not, he shall receive it in the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

Again, The Shepherd of Hermas derives preexistence of Christ from 1 Pet. 1:20.

*“First of all, sir,’ I said, ‘explain this to me: What is the meaning of the rock and the gate?’ ‘This rock,’ he answered, ‘and this gate are **the Son of God.**’ ‘How, sir?’ I said; ‘the rock is old, and the gate is new.’ ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘and understand, O ignorant man. **The Son of God is older than all His creatures, so that He was a fellow-councilor with the Father in His work of creation:¹⁵ for this reason is He old.**’ ‘And why is the gate new, sir?’ I said. ‘Because,’ he answered, ‘**He became manifest in the last days¹⁶** of the dispensation: for this reason the gate was made new, that they who are to be saved by it might enter into the kingdom of God’.”¹⁷*

¹⁴ 2 Clement, ch. xiv

¹⁵ Prov. 8:22-31 LXX

¹⁶ Paraphrase of 1 Peter 1:20

¹⁷ Shepherd of Hermas, Bk. III Similitudes, IX, ch. xii