

On Preexistence in the Bible

By Kevin L. Barney

This paper is a review of and response to Chapter 3, “Persons and Pre-Mortality: The Mormon Doctrine of Preexistence,” in James Patrick Holding, *The Mormon Defenders: How Latter-day Saint Apologists Misinterpret the Bible* (self-published, 2001), at 53-61, with related endnotes at 144-45.¹ Holding by this book intends to follow in the path suggested by Carl A. Mosser and Paul L. Owen in their critique² of contemporary Evangelical polemic against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In this, I would judge the book as a success, both in maintaining a respectful tone and in not relying on previous, dated and largely answered anti-Mormon sources. My own feeling is that I do not mind someone arguing I am wrong so long as he does it respectfully and does not intentionally misrepresent my position, and this book meets both criteria. Therefore, I am willing to take the time necessary to write a response to Holding.³

If I understand it correctly, Holding’s argument is that the doctrine of a preexistence of souls cannot be proven from the Bible. If in fact that is what he means to say, then I heartily concur, and to the extent that LDS apologists have claimed biblical passages *prove* there was a preexistence, I think they go beyond the evidence. (I have not, however, reviewed the apologetic literature cited by Holding to determine whether they in fact meant to go so far in their respective treatments of the subject.) If, however, Holding imagines that he has somehow done the opposite and disproven the doctrine of a preexistence by his reading of the Bible, then I disagree with him as well. (It is not entirely clear to me from my reading of the chapter whether Holding thinks he has done this.) In my view, the Bible as a whole is essentially neutral on the question of whether the soul had a preexistence, and how one reads the various biblical passages that have some arguable relevance to the question will unavoidably be heavily influenced by one’s preexisting theology.

I suspect that what Holding means to complain about is in large measure encompassed in what Carson calls (rather wordily) “fallacies arising from omission of distanciation in the interpretative process.”⁴ This mouthful is a fancy way of saying that it is a fallacy to read one’s own theology into the text. The reason that Carson has worded it so carefully is so as to make it clear that the solution is “not to retreat into an attempted neutrality, to try to make one’s mind a *tabula rasa* so we may listen to the text

¹ For a previous review of the book in general, see Russell C. McGregor, “The Anti-Mormon Attackers,” *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1-2 (2002): 315-19.

² “Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?” *Trinity Journal* n.s. 19/2 (Fall 1998): 179-205.

³ Kevin Graham is taking the lead in collecting responses to the book. Graham, who is an LDS apologist and a personal friend of Holding’s, asked me to respond to Chapter 3 on the Preexistence. I understand that others are preparing responses to the other chapters of the book.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 128-29.

without bias.”⁵ This simply cannot be done, and as Carson rightly notes to think that it can is itself a fallacy. We must rather discern what our prejudices are, be aware of them, acknowledge them, make allowances for them, learn about our subject as broadly and deeply as possible, and do the best that we can with our fallible human faculties. This problem is exacerbated in polemical literature, a category into which both Holding’s book and this rejoinder belong, since the urge is so strong to try and score a point against one’s opponent at any cost. But allowing ourselves to engage in faulty biblical exegesis just to score cheap points against an ideological opponent is a high cost indeed.

Do Mormons sometimes misread scripture? Certainly. I see the phenomenon often enough in my local Sunday School class. I am myself a Mormon, and I know that I have misread various passages, only to come to understand them better with further effort, time, prayer and study. This experience teaches me to be somewhat tentative about what I think I can know from my own reading of the scriptures, since further light and knowledge might modify my understanding. My immediate concern, however, is whether Holding is willing to make a similar acknowledgment on behalf of Evangelical Christians. While I freely acknowledge that the Mormon reading of the passages we will discuss below is colored by an *a priori* belief in preexistence, I wonder whether Evangelicals are willing to acknowledge that their own reading of these passages is similarly (if oppositely) colored by an *a priori* assumption of soul creationism.

It may be that Holding and I will end up speaking past each other to some extent, because we make somewhat differing assumptions about the scriptures. I assume that Holding, as an Evangelical, is in some sense a biblical inerrantist; as a Mormon, I am not. I do not believe the Bible (or the scriptures as a whole) are univocal; that is, I do not think they all speak with a single, unified voice on every subject. In my view, the scriptures and the ideas they convey developed historically, were influenced by fallible human beings and were culturally conditioned by the times and circumstances in which they were written. Many Mormons share inerrantist attitudes towards scripture to a great extent, and therefore doubtless assume that the whole of scripture fully supports every doctrine of the LDS Church, including preexistence. But, as we shall see, even the modern development of the doctrine of preexistence in the restored Church of Jesus Christ did not come all at once, the result of a single revelation. It rather came about as a process, which lasted the entire length of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s ministry, and which in some ways has not been fully resolved and continues yet today, over a century and a half later. This reminds me somewhat of the naïve presentist expectation of some Saints that Jesus and the ancient prophets surely could not have drunk wine. But the Word of Wisdom is a modern revelation, not binding on prior dispensations; even in our own dispensation, many fail to appreciate that nineteenth century Church leaders did not understand that revelation in precisely the way that we do today. In my view, light and knowledge unfold incrementally, here a little and there a little, line upon line and precept upon precept.⁶

⁵ Ibid. 129.

⁶ I use this allusion to Isaiah 28:9 simply because I find it a euphonious way to make my point, not because I think Isaiah was actually talking about incremental revelation with these specific formulas in the original context of the passage.

Holding suggests that social and literary context is important to understanding the biblical passages he examines (p. 54), and I of course agree. Therefore, before turning to these passages, I believe it will be helpful to review some background material on the subject. By “preexistence,” we mean in general terms a doctrine teaching that the souls⁷ of humans had a prior existence before being born into mortal bodies. The origins of the belief in antiquity are obscure and not well known. Man from the earliest times would have had personal experience with both physical birth and physical death. Whenever and wherever man came to an understanding of possessing a soul in distinction to the physical body, the issue would arise not only of the fate of the soul after death but of the origin of the soul prior to birth. Several answers to this natural question would be possible, one of which is that the soul already existed prior to its union with the human body, having an antemortal existence in a spirit world of some kind. Given that preexistence is a rather obvious possibility to be considered, it may well be that the idea has in some cases sprouted by polygenesis in various religions, cultures and times. Whatever its pattern of development *versus* independent intuition, we know that preexistence has been a prominent idea “in Greek religion and philosophy, in Judaism, in the early Christian Church, in the religions of India, and to a very considerable extent associated with modern thought in the West.”⁸

It should be obvious enough that a concept of preexistence can only flourish where there is a belief in a soul or spirit that is able to have an existence apart from one’s physical body. And here we run into our first difficulty, because most scholars perceive the ancient Hebrews as believing that the soul (*nephesh*, often simply meaning “person”) or spirit (*ruach*, “breath”; the invisible, life-giving force) and the body did not have separate existences, but existed together only as a psychosomatic whole. According to this view, the common dualistic understanding of a body and a spirit capable of existence apart from the body derived largely from Persian and Greek influence. To the extent that this is true, it is a wrench for positing a very early belief in preexistence. We should note, however, that it would also be an issue for Evangelicals, for although they see the soul as being created by God while the fetus is *in utero*, they surely believe (as do Mormons) that the spirit will have an existence apart from the body upon death. Now, whether the scholars are correct in this monistic (i.e., that the body and soul are one and inseparable) understanding⁹ of early Old Testament views of the soul is a question largely beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁰

⁷ “Soul” is sometimes used in Mormon discourse to mean the whole man, both spirit and body (based on D&C 88:15). In this paper I use the words “soul” and “spirit” synonymously.

⁸ R. Moore, “Pre-existence,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919), 10:236.

⁹ Interestingly, this monistic understanding of the body would appear to be similar to the position held by modern Jehovah’s Witnesses that there is no eternal soul apart from the body.

¹⁰ For further information, see Ellis R. Brotzman, “Man and the Meaning of [*Nephesh*],” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (October-December 1988): 400-9; E. W. Marter, “The Hebrew Concept of ‘Soul’ in Pre-Exilic Writings,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 2 (1964): 97-108; Daniel Lys, “The Israelite Soul According to the LXX,” *Vetus*

For purposes of this paper I will simply point out that, from great antiquity, persons were indeed believed to have a continued existence apart from the body after death. We see this reflected in a handful of Hebrew references to the *rephaim*, the “shades” who dwell in Sheol, the abode of the dead, after they die, a concrete example of which is the deceased Samuel, whom the Witch of Endor consulted on behalf of Saul (1 Samuel 28). In second millennium B.C. Ugaritic texts the counterpart of the *rephaim* are dead but divinized kings and heroes. The word is used in Biblical Hebrew in two seemingly very different senses. In the first sense, it alludes to the dead dwelling in Sheol, in an existence reminiscent of the shades we encounter in the 10th book of Homer’s *Odyssey*. In the Bible the word is not limited to the elite, but apparently encompasses all the dead. We see this usage in Psalm 88:10, where *rephaim* is used in parallelism with the dead (*metim*). The same parallelism appears in Isaiah 26:14 and 19. Additional scriptural allusions to the *rephaim* are Proverbs 2:18, Job 26:5, and possibly 2 Chronicles 16:12, reading *rephaim* for *ropheim* “physicians.” A fifth-century B.C. Phoenician inscription attests that the *rephaim* are those whom the living join in dying, and a Punic-Latin bilingual text renders “the divine Rephaim” with the Latin for “the sacred shades,” that is, the (divinized) dead. Intriguingly, Isaiah 14:9 seems to retain something of the original Ugaritic usage attested at Ras Shamra, putting *rephaim* in parallel with kings:

Sheol beneath is stirred up
To meet you when you come,
It rouses the Rephaim to greet you,
It raises from their thrones
All the kings of the nations.

The word *rephaim* was more commonly used in the Hebrew Bible in the second sense, to refer to the (living) giants and mighty men. Apparently, the original concept of the *rephaim* as the deceased, divinized kings and heroes was lost over time, and the meaning of the word was bifurcated. As deceased heroes and monarchs, the *rephaim* were preserved in the understanding of *rephaim* as living giants and warriors, and as a description of the dead elites the word *rephaim* was broadened to include the dead in general.¹¹ Now, the *rephaim* seem to be somewhat less than what would ultimately become thought of as immortal human souls, and there no doubt was development in the concept over time. But the basic idea of a continuity of existence apart from the body is present from even the earliest periods of biblical history.¹²

Testamentum 16 (April 1966): 181-228; W. David Stacey, “Paul and the ‘Soul,’” *Expository Times* 66 (June 1955): 274-77.

¹¹ The information in this paragraph derives from Mark S. Smith, “Rephaim,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:676-78.

¹² See further Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 2002). Holding offers a brief but positive review of this book at <http://www.tektonics.org/shades.html>.

Bracketing for the time being the biblical evidence, which we shall consider below, the first unambiguous references to preexistence of the soul in Judaeo-Christian sources (such as the Apocrypha, Josephus, Philo, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Rabbinic literature, Gnostic Christian texts and Patristic literature) appear beginning in the Second Temple period. A sampling of some of the more important examples follows:

1. *Wisdom of Solomon*. This first century B.C. text, which exhibits platonic influence (as Holding notes), portrays Solomon as offering the following prayer: “As a child I was by nature well endowed, and a good soul fell to my lot; or rather, being good, I entered an undefiled body.” (8:19-20)¹³
2. *Josephus on the Essenes*. Josephus (first century A.D.), in a passage possibly reflecting Greek influences, reports that the Essenes, who denigrated the body, believed that “the soul is immortal and imperishable. Emanating from the finest ether, these souls become entangled, as it were, in the prison house of the body, to which they are dragged down by a sort of natural spell.” (*Jewish War*, 2.8.11)¹⁴
3. *Philo of Alexandria*. Philo (first century A.D.), who interpreted the Bible allegorically, saw in the three Hebrew terms *ruach*, *nephesh* and *neshamah* a confirmation of Plato’s tripartite view of the soul (the rational, the spiritual and the seat of desire). The rational part is preexistent and immortal. (*De Opificiis Mundi* 1:648) As a divine being, the soul aspires to be freed from its bodily fetters and to return to the heavenly spheres whence it came. Presumably Philo believed that the spirit is condemned to be imprisoned for a certain time in the body in expiation of some sin committed in its former state.¹⁵
4. *Jubilees*. This second century B.C. work portrays God as creating everything during the six days of creation, including “all of the spirits of his creatures which are in heaven and on earth.”¹⁶
5. *First Enoch*. Enoch speaks of an assembly of the holy and righteous ones in heaven under the wings of the Lord of the spirits, with the Elect (the Messiah) in their midst. (39:4-7; 40:5; 41:12).¹⁷ (First Enoch is a conglomeration of texts ranging from pre-Maccabean times to just before the Christian era; this section is perhaps early first century B.C.)

¹³ The translation is from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

¹⁴ S. Kent Brown, “Souls, Preexistence of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:161.

¹⁵ Kaufman Kohler, Isaac Broyde and Ludwig Blau, “Soul” in *JewishEncyclopedia.com* (for the url, see the bibliography). Note that against Philo the Rabbis held that the body is not the prison of the soul but, on the contrary, its medium of development and improvement.

¹⁶ O. S. Wintermute, “Jubilees,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 2:55.

¹⁷ E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:30-31.

6. *Second Enoch*. This text (perhaps first century A.D.) reflecting Jewish ideas states that “all the souls are prepared for eternity, before the composition of the earth.” (23:5)¹⁸
7. *Third Enoch*. The whole of Chapter 43 presumes the preexistence of souls.¹⁹ (This work contains old traditions going back to the Maccabean era, but the work itself dates to perhaps the fifth or sixth centuries A.D.)
8. *Testament (Assumption) of Moses*. In this first century A.D. text Moses says: “But he did design and devise me, who (was) prepared from the beginning of the world, to be the mediator of his covenant.” (1:14)²⁰
9. *Testament of Abraham*. In this work (about A.D. 100), Michael, the Lord’s commander-in-chief, tells Abraham at the end of his life that “the day has drawn near on which you are to depart from the body and once again go to the Lord.” (Rec. A 15:7)²¹
10. *Prayer of Joseph*. Origen quotes this fragment from a first century A.D. pseudepigraphal work in his Commentary on John (2:25) to support his view that John the Baptist was an angel who became incarnate to bear witness to Jesus: “I, Jacob, who is speaking to you, am also Israel, an angel of God and a ruling spirit. Abraham and Isaac were created before any work. But, I, Jacob, who men call Jacob but whose name is Israel am he who God called Israel which means, a man seeing God, because I am the firstborn of every living thing to whom God gives life.”²²
11. *4 Ezra*. Preexistence is assumed throughout this work (about A.D. 100), as in 4:33-42, a section stating that the souls who yearn for their reward must wait until all souls come to earth.²³
12. *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch*. This early second century A.D. text states “And it will happen at that time that those treasuries will be opened in which the number of the souls of the righteous were kept, and they will go out and the multitudes of the souls will appear together, in one assemblage, of one mind. And the first ones will enjoy themselves and the last ones will not be sad.” (30:2-3)²⁴
13. *Bereshith Rabba*, 8, represents God as taking counsel with the souls of the righteous before he created the earth.²⁵

¹⁸ F. I. Andersen, “2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:140.

¹⁹ P. Alexander, “3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:293-94.

²⁰ J. Priest, “Testament of Moses,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:927.

²¹ E. P. Sanders, “Testament of Abraham,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:891.

²² J. Z. Smith, “Prayer of Joseph,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:713.

²³ B. M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:531.

²⁴ A. F. J. Klijn, “2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:631.

²⁵ The representative sampling given here of rabbinic statements derives from Moore, “Pre-existence,” 234. These texts date from the Amoraic period (A.D. 220-500).

14. *Tanhuma*, 3, states that all souls which were to enter human bodies were formed during the six days of creation and were in the Garden of Eden.
15. *Hagigah*, 12b, has it that before their descent to earth the souls are kept in the seventh heaven (but *Sifre* 143b says in the storehouse).
16. *Abodah Zarah*, 5a, says that the Messiah will come when all the souls in the *guph* [i.e., the superterrestrial abode of spirits] have passed through the earthly life.
17. *Sanhedrin*, 90a, indicates it is not settled whether the soul comes to earth at the time of conception or after the embryo has taken form.
18. *Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 4, dating to perhaps the early second century A.D.: “Jesus said: The man old in his days will not hesitate to ask an infant of seven days concerning the place of life, and he will live.”²⁶ The idea is that an uncircumcised baby has retained an impression of the “place of life.”
19. *Gospel of the Egyptians*, 50:12-14, portrays Adam as a premortal great one who associated with the “holy men of the great light,” “men of the Father.”²⁷
20. *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, 50:1-24, portrays the heavenly Seth as having proposed the gathering of a council of premortal souls, then spelling out a plan “to the whole multitude of the multitudinous assembly” which was received with rejoicing by “the whole house of the Father of Truth.”²⁸
21. *Origen*. Among the early Church Fathers, the most notable proponent of the preexistence of souls was Origen (A.D. 182-251). Origen taught that the souls of man had a separate, conscious, personal existence in a previous state, and are sent to this world on account of sin, condemned to be born in a material body.²⁹ The justice of God demands that “all rational creatures [be] of one nature, and it is only on this ground that the justice of God in all his dealings with them can be defended, namely, when each contains within himself the reasons why he has been placed in this or in that rank of life.” (*De Principiis* 3.5.4)³⁰

²⁶ Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1976), 518.

²⁷ Brown, “Souls, Preexistence of,” 6:161.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Brown also reports that the *Apocryphon of James* and the *Tripartite Tractate* hint at the notion of a premortal life for at least the souls of the elect.

²⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*. For the url, see the bibliography.

³⁰ Brown, “Souls, Preexistence of,” 6:161. Although Origen made the most significant arguments in favor of preexistence, other Church Fathers also accepted the idea, including Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Pierius, John of Jerusalem, Rufinius and Nemesius. Even Augustine early in his career believed in a premortal existence, although he later changed his mind and leaned toward traduciansim, a theory we shall describe below. See Robert J. O’Connell, *The Origin of the Soul in St. Augustine’s Later Works* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 16.

Preexistence as it was understood by Origen was rejected in the opening Anathema of the Second Council of Constantinople (Fifth General Council) in A.D. 553, which was convened by the Emperor Justinian. We should perhaps mention, however, that Mormons too would reject the negative view of embodiment posited by Origen. Embodiment of preexistent souls can be seen either negatively or positively, and Mormonism sees such embodiment in positive terms, much as did the Rabbis.³¹

Looking backwards from today, there have been five main theories of the origin of the soul in Christian thought. The first is *creationism*, which is the dominant view in most traditions and the one generally favored by Evangelicals. According to this view, God creates the soul *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”) and places it in the body sometime between conception and birth (theologians differ as to precisely when). The second is *traduciansim*. In this view, the soul is generated by the parents, just as is the body; it is not created. Those who favor the theory of traduction sometimes do so as affording an easier means of explaining why we inherit a corrupt nature from Adam, since all mankind was seminally present in Adam and partook themselves of Adam’s transgression. Traduction is favored by Lutherans and by scattered theologians in other traditions. The third theory is *preexistencism*. Historically, this was a variant of creationism, but instead of the soul being created at the time of fetal development, it was created at some time in advance (usually at the creation of the world). The fourth theory is *emanationism*. This theory holds that our souls are like sparks shot off from the flame of God. Emanationism is popular in certain mystical traditions. Parley P. Pratt’s understanding of preexistence had a strongly emanationist quality to it, as we shall see. The fifth theory is *materialism*. This is similar to traduction, in that the soul is generated by the parents, but it is generated as a part of the body and does not have an existence apart from the body. Tertullian was almost a materialist and, as we have noted, Jehovah’s Witnesses take a strongly materialist view of the soul. As one can see, there are certain overlaps among these various theories.

When we turn to the development of preexistence in Mormon thought, we are fortunate to have two excellent, detailed studies, the first by Blake Ostler and the second by Charles R. Harrell.³² These two articles are rather like the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, in that they have different scopes, and there are some differences between them, but overall they are complementary and tell the same story. Given the availability of these studies, I will not rehearse the development of the idea of preexistence in Mormon thought in any detail, except to mention a few critical points.

The first point we should understand is that preexistence was a doctrine that developed over time. The earliest Mormons were Protestant converts, and they naturally brought with them their creationist assumptions about the origin of the soul. One might

³¹ In a small bit of irony, the (substantially more numerous) anti-Origenist monks in Egypt believed that God had a body, which could be seen and touched, whereas the better educated Origenists taught that God was invisible and transcendent.

³² Blake Ostler, “The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15/1 (Spring 1982): 59-78, and Charles R. Harrell, “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830-1844,” *BYU Studies* 28/2 (Spring 1988): 75-96.

see some suggestion of preexistence in the Book of Mormon, but it is unlikely that any converts did at the time. In Ether 3:15 the preexistent Christ reveals his spirit body to the brother of Jared and states that “all men were created in the beginning after mine own image.” In light of later knowledge we might see that as a clear allusion to preexistence, but Orson Pratt, one of the most astute readers of the Book of Mormon of his generation, only grasped the point in retrospect.³³ Alma 13:3 explains that priests are “called and prepared from the foundation of the world, according to the foreknowledge of God.” Note the profound intertextuality between these words and the New Testament, which describes how the elect are “afore prepared” (Romans 9:23) and “chosen...before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4) “according to the foreknowledge of God” (1 Peter 1:2). The earliest Saints almost certainly would have understood these words in the context of the debates of the time over the meaning of election. Calvinists believed that God predestined certain individuals to become believers in this life according to his own will and pleasure, whereas Arminians believed in free will and that God elects certain people because he foreknows that they will choose to be holy. For neither Calvinists nor Arminians did God’s foreknowledge presuppose an actual prior existence of those so foreordained. In 1841 Brigham Young and Willard Richards published an article entitled “Election and Reprobation” in which they understood Alma 13 in the Arminian sense of election. It is most likely that other Saints would have understood it similarly.³⁴

Even though it had been anathematized in the first millennium, preexistencism had regained a degree of respectability in the nineteenth century. John Henry Blunt opined that, although unorthodox, “there is no reason to denounce the simple doctrine of the preexistence of souls as heretical.”³⁵ The idea was popular with poets and philosophers, and Isaac Watts is reputed to have believed it.

Both Ostler and Harrell agree that the most significant early impetus to the development of Mormon thought on preexistence was the Joseph Smith Translation on the Bible, and in particular the early chapters of Genesis, known as the Book of Moses, which was completed by June of 1830. This material revealed that everything had been created twice: first, spiritually, and then temporally. This resolved the apparent contradictions in the two Genesis creation accounts in a way that had been suggested by Philo (*De Opificio Mundi* 46, 134) and was popular with some Christians.³⁶ This concept was elaborated in subsequent revelations in September 1830 (D&C 29:30-32), in March 1831 (D&C 49:17), and again a year later (D&C 77:2). Interestingly, as Harrell notes, after 1832 we find no further recorded mention by Joseph of a spiritual creation. Of course, the Doctrine & Covenants was not published until 1835, so these revelations would have circulated only in handwritten copies or verbally until that time. The first explicit reference to preexistence in print was made by W. W. Phelps, one of Joseph’s scribes, in the *Messenger and Advocate* for June, 1835: “New light is occasionally

³³ Harrell, “Doctrine of Preexistence,” 79.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 78-79.

³⁵ John Henry Blunt, *Dictionary of Doctrinal and Historical Theology* (London: Riverton, 1872), 590, as quoted in *ibid.* 76.

³⁶ Ostler, “Idea of Pre-Existence,” 75 at n. 12. For a Christian example Ostler cites Manilo Simonetti, “Alcune Osservazioni sull’ interpretazione Oregieniana di Genesi 2,7 e 3,21,” *Aevum* 36 (1972): 370-81.

bursting into our minds of the sacred scriptures, for which I am thankful. We shall by and by learn that we were with God in another world, before the foundation of the world, and had our agency.”³⁷

At the outset of his chapter, Holding quotes D&C 93:29, which was received in May 1833: “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.” Parley P. Pratt, based largely on this revelation, believed that it was not a personal spirit that quickens the body, but rather an infused portion of the divine spirit.³⁸ This was not a concept of spirit birth, which would come later, but of emanation, which differs from creation in that spirit is actually derived from God’s being or essence rather than merely being a creature of his making.

Another piece of the puzzle was provided by Joseph’s declaration in 1842 that all spirit is a form of matter. Joseph explained that “the spirit, by many, is thought to be immaterial, without substance. With this latter statement we should beg leave to differ, and state the spirit is a substance; that it is material, but that it is more pure, elastic and refined matter than the body.”³⁹

Further, in the late 1830s, based on his work with the Book of Abraham (which Holding also quotes at the beginning of his chapter), Joseph took the position that the soul is in some sense eternal; it is uncreated, and had no beginning.⁴⁰ As Harrell shows, all the Prophet’s statements on the origin of spirits from 1839 on stressed the uncreated nature of man’s spirit.⁴¹ These statements were at first understood to mean that the essential part of man, his “intelligence,” was uncreated, but that individual spirits were still the products of creation. But this interim position soon gave way to the concept of spirit birth, that, although man’s intelligence (which has been understood in different senses) is indeed uncreated, God brought our spirits into being by generation, not creation. So, to translate the doctrine into terms a conventional Christian might understand, our spirits existed prior to entering our physical bodies (as in preexistence), but they were generated, not created (as in traduction), by heavenly parents rather than earthly parents (as in emanation).

Now, there is much more to it than I have expressed in this brief synopsis, and for further detail I refer the reader to the studies of Ostler and Harrell. The LDS doctrine of preexistence is a developed form of preexistencism, but involves more than that basic idea; it involves a rejection of the creator-creature dichotomy, a rejection of creation *ex nihilo*, and a literalist understanding of divine paternalism. Each of these aspects of the doctrine could easily absorb a paper of its own; here our focus will simply be on preexistencism and the timing of the creation (or generation) of the soul.

Holding begins his review (pp. 53-54) by suggesting that it is ironic that Latter-day Saints point to ancient sources influenced by Greek thinking in support of a doctrine of preexistence, since “it is a common refrain that the modern Christian church is a Hellenistic-influenced apostasy.” (p. 54) Yes, there is a bit of an irony there, and one we can smile at. I personally do not believe that Greek philosophy in any sense *caused* the

³⁷ Harrell, “Doctrine of Preexistence,” 81.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 83-84.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 84.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 85.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 85-86.

apostasy, but that the increasing reliance on such philosophy as time progressed was more a *symptom* of the apostasy. It should be obvious enough that the mere fact the Greeks believed something does not make it wrong. In any event, Holding's presumption that preexistence was a purely Hellenistic idea is not correct. Harnack saw both Greek and natively Jewish sources underlying the concept of preexistence, an example of the latter being how Moses built the earthly tabernacle after the heavenly one he was shown in vision by God (Exodus 25:9, 40).⁴² Harnack's recitation of Jewish sources for the idea of preexistence has been elaborated upon in great detail by R. G. Hamerton-Kelly.⁴³ Joseph's notion of a spiritual creation partakes more of the Hebrew conception than of Plato's world of ideas. The positive view of embodiment in Mormon thought is actually anti-platonic, and is more in accord with rabbinic thinking, as we have noted. More important is the *way* that Joseph derived this knowledge; it did not come from philosophical reflection or syllogistic reasoning, but by revelation from God to his prophet, on the biblical model.

Next, Holding (p. 54) correctly notes that there are two possible types of preexistence: actual and ideal, a distinction we have already introduced. Actual preexistence involves things that really did preexist "independently and in their own right." Ideal preexistence involves something that is foreknown in the mind of God, which does not necessarily have an actual preexistence.⁴⁴ Ideal preexistence is not necessarily incompatible with actual; a spirit could actually preexist, for instance, yet God could foreknow in his divine wisdom that that spirit will be righteous. But ideal preexistence does *not* demand an actual preexistence of the soul; such a passage means to focus on God's own foreknowledge, quite irrespective of actual preexistence *vel non*. Distinguishing between these two ways of understanding preexistence can be difficult. If the idea captured by the English compound *fore-* can be shown to be present in the passage, it is probably an allusion to ideal preexistence, as in Alma 13. If the passage can be shown to contemplate a real existence apart from God's foreknowledge, then the preexistence contemplated is actual, as in the many examples we have cited above from extrabiblical sources. Often, no such clue is available, and in these cases one will simply apply one's preexisting understanding of the nature of preexistence to how one reads the passage.

Let us now turn to the actual scriptural passages examined by Holding:

Job 38:4

⁴² Adolph Harnack, *The History of Dogma* (New York: Dover, 1962), 320.

⁴³ R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Idea of Pre-Existence in Early Judaism, A Study in the Background of New Testament Theology* (unpublished dissertation, 1966, available from University Microfilms, Order number 66-11,546), and *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man, A Study in the Idea of Pre-Existence in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁴⁴ Note, however, that an "idea" in the mind of God was perceived to be more "real" than our human conception of an idea, and that therefore ideal preexistence entails a reality that should probably best be imagined by analogy with real things existing in the physical world as we know it. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man*, 2.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
declare, if thou hast understanding.

Holding quotes an LDS writer as stating that this verse verifies an actual preexistence, for “[T]his questioning acknowledges that Job was *somewhere*.” (p. 55). Holding counters that the passage is better read as implying that Job was *nowhere* and not yet created. He further states that this verse echoes the sarcastic comments of Eliphaz in Job: 15:7-8:

Art thou the first man that was born?
or wast thou made before the hills?
Hast thou heard the secret of God?
and dost thou restrain wisdom to thyself?

The first question we must ask ourselves is whether we can even posit the notion of a preexistence in the Old Testament at all, given common scholarly assumptions of an early monistic conception of the soul. As we have shown, however, clear evidence exists from the earliest times for a belief in something—even if we do not call it a “soul”—that could and did exist apart from the body. Further, even under conventional scholarly views, the belief in a separable spirit did develop in Old Testament times, and the process and timing of this putative development are not well understood. In this connection, the dating of the passages Holding discusses has some relevance, for, very roughly and all else being equal, the later the date of a passage, the more likely an allusion to a preexistence may be present. Holding discusses passages from Job, Ecclesiastes, Jeremiah and Zechariah. Of these only Jeremiah is clearly pre-Exilic (since 1:5 is generally considered to be among the authentic jeremianic oracles), and that just barely (i.e., it would date to the late seventh century). Although the setting for Job is in pre-Mosaic times, internal evidence suggests a date of sixth or fifth century B.C.⁴⁵ The most likely date for Ecclesiastes is third century B.C..⁴⁶ Zechariah 1-8 is contemporary with Haggai and dates to the Persian period after the Exile, but scholars have wildly varying opinions on whether Zechariah 9-14 (the portion containing chapter 12) is pre- or post-Exilic, concerning which no consensus has been achieved.⁴⁷ In any event, since for the soul not to exist after death would contravene Christian doctrine, an Evangelical presumably would object to a line of reasoning that would deny preexistence based on the presumed monistic character of the body and soul. And in fact Holding does not argue against preexistence in the Old Testament on this basis. I too believe that existence apart from the body in some sense was something believed in from at least the second millennium B.C. Therefore, although I acknowledge here a possible issue worthy of further investigation, for purposes of this paper I will simply assume that a belief in preexistence was at least conceptually possible even in pre-Exilic texts.

I would agree with Holding that there is no necessary implication in the passage that Job was *somewhere* at the dawn of creation. Neither, however, is there a necessary implication that he was *nowhere*. The focus of the passage is not on existence, but on

⁴⁵ James L. Crenshaw, “Job, Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:863-64.

⁴⁶ James L. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, Book of, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:274-75.

⁴⁷ David L. Peterson, “Zechariah, Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:1061-68.

knowledge; Yahweh's speech out of the whirlwind is designed to show how ignorant Job is of the mysteries of the universe. This theme is announced by Yahweh's opening words in Job 38:2-3 (RSV):

Who is this that darkens counsel
by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

Holding's reading that Job did not exist is certainly possible. If Job did not exist, he *absolutely* could not know anything about the creation. But this is not a necessary reading. The point is not his lack of existence, but his present lack of knowledge and understanding. Job's preexistent spirit could just as easily have been waiting in the *guph*, and the result would be the same: his utter ignorance of the creation. It should be perfectly obvious that any understanding of preexistence must posit a veil of forgetfulness when the soul enters this life, since none of us can actually remember such a state. I see no emphasis here of preexistence *vel non*, but of Job's utter ignorance of the nature of things in the face of God's greatly superior wisdom.

Turning to the comments of Eliphaz, Holding is correct to see them as sarcastic, but they do not constitute an argument against preexistence, as Holding would have it. When Eliphaz asks Job whether he was the first man who was born, he was alluding to an old Semitic myth of a Primeval Man who existed before the creation of the world,⁴⁸ as if he were one of the Titans from Hesiod's *Theogony*. In v. 7b, the wording about being "brought forth before the hills," is an allusion to personified Wisdom, who was "brought forth before the hills" according to Proverbs 8:25b. Job was not Primeval Man, nor was he Wisdom itself. In his grief, Job forgets the limitations of his present humanity, and this again relates to knowledge, not existence, as the remainder of the speech makes clear. The KJV renders v. 8a as "Hast thou heard the secret of God?" This passage would be better rendered, as in the RSV, "Have you listened in the council of God [*besod eloah*]?" The point is not that such knowledge is impossible for humans to possess, for surely the Lord's prophets have participated in his divine council. But Job was not one of them and this is therefore knowledge he did *not* possess. Job was not in a position to challenge God.

So, here I would agree with Holding that this passage does not constitute a proof of the preexistence, but I would by the same token disagree with his suggestion that it may actually be a proof of the lack of a preexistence.

Job 38:7

When the morning stars sang together,

⁴⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Bible: Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford, 1962), 627; Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), 115. This figure, known as *Adam qadman* in later traditions, eavesdropped on the Divine Council and appropriated Divine Wisdom, much as Prometheus stole fire from the gods.

and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Holding argues that the above passage is inconsistent with an assumption that Job 38:4 necessarily posits a preexistence. In his own words, “Why would God imply that Job was somewhere, but not around where or when He was laying the foundations of the earth, and then go on to say that the sons of God (supposedly preexistent men, which would include Job) *were* there and shouting for joy when He laid those foundations?” (p. 55) That is a good question. I have already acknowledged that I do not see Job 38:4 as necessarily a proof of the preexistence, so for me the point is moot.

But Holding wishes to make another point about this verse. He quotes an LDS writer as arguing that since Hebrew *ben*, “son of” (the plural as used in Job is *bene elohim*, “sons of God”), literally means “offspring,” Job is here referring to the spirits of men in pre-mortality. In response, Holding suggests that God might have more than one type of offspring, of varying natures, and he further points out that “son of” need not refer to literal, physical offspring, as in the expression “sons of the prophets.” He further states that there is no indication in Job that future men were among these sons of God that came before God.

Now, this raises the related issue of the Mormon rejection of the creator/creature dichotomy. Mormons see God and man as being of the same type, of the same species, whereas most Christians see God as being wholly other than man. Now, to a great extent, this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper, as I have not laid the groundwork to discuss it effectively. Here I will limit myself to a few key points.

First, Holding is correct that the Hebrew word for “son” is not always to be taken literally. There was a common Semitic idiom in which the “son of X” was understood to be something having the qualities of X. Therefore, the sons of the prophets were those having the qualities of being a prophet; that is, they were prophets. So, to be a “son of man” was a Semitic way of saying one was a human. This simple formula eventually took on messianic characteristics, but a common way to render the expression in the New Testament is not with the literal “Son of Man,” but rather simply as “Man,” since by Semitic reckoning a son of man is another, somewhat genericized way of saying “man.”⁴⁹ Therefore, Holding is correct in saying that the sons of God are not necessarily premortal men; the expression could mean that they are divine beings, or gods of the divine council. They are subordinate to Yahweh, but they are indeed gods or, as the concept was eventually softened, angels. On the other hand, the expression can also be quite literal, as in Deuteronomy 32:8-9, where the number of the sons of God matches the number of the nations to which they are assigned, 70, which is also more than coincidentally the number of the actual sons of El as we know it from the Ras Shamra tablets.

Now, in the immediate context of Job 38 I see no indication that the sons of God were necessarily premortal men. But the basic concept of humans as the sons of God in some contexts makes good sense. Psalm 8:5 reports that God made man “a little lower than God/the gods [*elohim*].” As we have seen, the Canaanite background to the Old Testament *rephaim* was of *post mortem* divinized kings and other elites. The Ugaritic

⁴⁹ So Pope, *Job, ad loc.*, renders “and all the gods exulted.”

king list precedes each name with the word 'l, "god."⁵⁰ Although in the Hebrew Bible the concept was broadened to include those beyond the elites, the concept of *post mortem* divinization was retained, at least in certain texts. We have already mentioned how the witch of Endor consulted Samuel on Saul's behalf; in doing so, she saw gods (*elohim*) coming out of the earth, who were the divinized dead, one of whom was Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13). And if humans can become gods in the hereafter, there may be some limited settings where they are appropriately described as sons of God, whether in this life or even in the premortal world. There are, after all, numerous passages where God describes us as his children, or where we describe God as our father. We are, then, by scriptural definition, the "sons of God," in whatever sense the relationship is intended in those passages. And in at least some of those passages the original sense was probably a literal one. We could go on at length, but the matter has already been addressed by Daniel C. Peterson near the end of his lengthy article on Psalm 82 and John 10, in a section under the caption "Humans as Sons of God," and I refer the reader to that article for further detail.⁵¹

Acts 17:28-29

For in him we live, and move, and have our being;
as certain also of your own poets have said,
For we are also his offspring.

The last line above is a quotation from the third century B.C. Stoic poet Aratus' astronomical poem, *Phaenomena* 5. Holding notes that in its original context the "him" of the passage would have been Zeus, and there is no evidence that Aratus or the Greeks generally intended a concept of divine sonship in the sense contemplated by Mormon readings. While true enough, this is quite beside the point. What is important is *Paul's* use of this passage. While he no doubt wanted to make a connection to the intellectuals on Mars' Hill, I believe he only would have used such a passage from a pagan poet (the only completely unambiguous quotation of Greek literature in the New Testament) if in his understanding it accurately represented a message he wanted to convey to the Athenians. Paul understood the message not in a Stoic but in a biblical sense; God is not only near to human beings, but, in the words of the Catholic scholar Joseph Fitzmyer, "they are kin to him." The Greek word *genos* rendered "offspring" here does indeed refer

⁵⁰ M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sanmartin, eds., *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit einschliesslich der keilalphabetischen Texte ausserhalb Ugarits, Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 24 (Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Berckes, 1976), 1:113.

⁵¹ Daniel C. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods': Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind," in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry and Andrew Hedges (Provo: FARMS, 2000, 471-594 at 542-553).

to lineal descent. Recall that Luke, who wrote this material in Acts, also recorded at the end of his genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:38 that Adam was the son of God.⁵²

Ecclesiastes 12:7

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was:
and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Holding (p. 57) says that any concept of preexistence must be read into this verse, as there is no indication as to what the condition or age of the spirit was at the time it was given. It is true that the verse does not indicate at what relative time God originally gave the spirit to man. Nevertheless, I do see here a subtle possible indication of preexistence. To me, the verb “return” (*shub*, used in both lines of the couplet) suggests a preexistence concept. In the first line, the physical body goes from dust to dust; it *returns* to its original state. In the second line, the spirit returns *to God*, which suggests that the spirit in its original state had an existence *with God* prior to being placed within the human body. True, the relative age of the spirit at the time it is placed in the body is, as Holding says, not indicated; it could be eternal, created at the time the world was made, or created but an hour before, but in any event to me the words most naturally suggest that the spirit had an existence with God prior to being placed into the body, to which existence with God the spirit returns upon death. Now, the passage is ambiguous, and it may be that, given the author’s fundamental pessimism about the human condition, he did not conceive of an afterlife at all. If this were the correct way to read the passage, it would of course not allude to a preexistence, but by the same token it would also contravene the Evangelical understanding of a post-mortal existence.

Jeremiah 1:5

Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee;
and before thou camest out of the womb I sanctified thee,
and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

Holding argues that this passage refers either to ordination during gestation in the womb or to ideal preexistence. In my view, an allusion to ordination in the womb would be possible for the second line, but not for the first. Since the two lines are parallel, I think they should be read in a consistent way, and not in contradistinction to one another. The adverbial *beterem* (“before”) is surely to be construed temporally; therefore, the Lord’s knowledge of Jeremiah was not just before birth, as in the second line, it was before the body was formed in the womb, as in the first line. To me, the most natural

⁵² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 611. Peterson, ““Ye Are Gods,”” 542-47, has an extensive discussion of this passage, to which I refer the reader.

reading of this is that it was before conception. Therefore, I reject Holding's argument of ordination in the womb.⁵³

The parallelism here is a two-edged sword. While in my view it forecloses the ordination-in-the-womb argument, it also opens the door to an ideal preexistence argument. This is because, based on the parallel verbs *qadash* ("set apart, devote, consecrate") and *nathan* ("put, set, ordain, give to be, make") in the second and third lines, the verb *yada* in the first line conveys not just the sense of "knew," but also of "chose." This nuance of the verb is also attested at Genesis 18:19 and Amos 3:7.⁵⁴ In my judgment, this passage could be referring to actual preexistence, ideal preexistence, or both, and I cannot see any surefire way to exclude one or the other possibility. Therefore, this is one of those passages where the controlling factor in how one reads it is likely to be one's preexisting theology. I read it and see actual preexistence, while Holding reads it and sees ideal preexistence; we simply have no objective basis to judge between these two ways of reading the text.

John 9:2

And his disciples asked him, saying,
Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

It is common in Mormon discourse to see the apostles' question as presupposing that a man could sin before birth, and that the verse therefore suggests a belief in actual preexistence. Holding, citing Raymond Brown's Anchor Bible commentary on John, counters that this comment relates to the rabbinic discussion over whether infants could sin while still in the womb. Holding therefore acknowledges that this is a "before birth" issue, but asserts that it is not a "before conception" or preexistence issue.

In my view, both of these positions are too starkly dogmatic about what we can know concerning the background to the question. Consider the following: (1) The question presumes that misfortune is necessarily the result of sin. (2) It further presumes that a child can be punished by God for the actions of its parents. (3) Further still, it presumes that a man can be punished for his own sins by a disability at birth, presumably in one of three ways: (a) Possibly it could be an example of ideal preexistence; that is, God could have punished him at birth for sins that God foresaw he would commit in later mortality. (b) Possibly the child could have been punished for sins committed *in utero*. This strikes us as bizarre and patently absurd, but Holding is quite correct that the Rabbis undertook discussion of such matters. In addition to the examples Holding cites, consider

⁵³ Holding cites as a parallel to womb ordination M. Gilula, "An Egyptian Parallel to Jeremia I.4-5," *Vetus Testamentum* (January 1967): 114. I have no objection in principle to a concept of womb ordination, but the first line of the Jeremiah passage differs from the Egyptian parallel and in my view excludes that reading.

⁵⁴ Cf. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), 5:468. Holding objects to the characterization of an LDS writer that God knew Jeremiah "long before" his birth, but this source makes precisely the same characterization, stating that Yahweh knew Jeremiah "long before his birth."

Song Rabbah 1:41 (when a pregnant woman worshiped in a heathen temple, the unborn child also committed idolatry).⁵⁵ (c) Possibly the child could have been punished for sins committed in a preexistent state. Inasmuch as *all* of these concepts were the subject of later rabbinic discussion (1, 2 and 3(a), (b) and (c)), it is unclear to me on what basis an LDS writer can exclude the possibility of 3(b) or Holding can exclude the possibility of 3(c). While I acknowledge that 3(a) is possible here, to me the wording of the question does not suggest an ideal preexistence concept, but is more consonant with 3(b) or (c), or both. In this instance, I believe Holding is justified in not pressing the concept of an ideal preexistence, even though it cannot be absolutely ruled out. The note to this passage in *The NIV Study Bible*, an Evangelical production, acknowledges rabbinic discussion of *both* sins in the womb *and* sins in a preexistent state.⁵⁶ Since all of the rabbinic evidence postdates the New Testament, Holding should explain why he is so sure that the background to the question includes 3(b) but not 3(c). Based on existing evidence, I do not believe that such assurance is available.

Of course, Holding can take comfort in that just because the apostles asked the question, it does not necessarily follow that the background assumptions underlying it are correct. Jesus in his response explicitly denied that disability or hardship is necessarily a punishment for sin (concept (1)), and that is the main point of the episode. One might argue that Jesus would not have allowed a mistaken background assumption to remain uncorrected. Perhaps, but I am not entirely convinced. The background assumptions here, whatever they were, are secondary to the explicit rejection of a simplistic cause-effect relationship between sin and earthly trials.

Acts 12:15

And they said unto her, Thou art mad.
But she constantly affirmed that it was even so.
Then said they, It is his angel.

Holding quotes an LDS writer as using this verse to show that angels “are none other than the spirits of Men, God’s spirit children,” and that the church “understood this truth and referred to the spirit of Peter as ‘his angel.’” (p. 58) In reply, Holding states that the Talmud records a belief in guardian angels who would assume the appearance of the person they were assigned to protect.

I agree with Holding that the allusion here is to a guardian angel, not the disembodied spirit of Peter. Even if this were Peter’s spirit, I do not see what relevance the passage would have to preexistence, because the spirit would have been *post mortem*. Whether angels can be either premortal or postmortal men is a separate question that, as I have indicated, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Romans 8:29-30 and Ephesians 1:3-4

⁵⁵ This example is given in the New English Translation, *ad loc.*, at <http://www.bible.org/netbible/index.htm>.

⁵⁶ *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), 1647.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate
to be conformed to the image of his Son,
that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.
Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called:
and whom he called, them he also justified:
and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.
According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world,
that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.

An LDS writer compares these passages to John 17:24 (“for thou lovedst me before the foundations of the world”) and concludes that “the same phrase that refers to Christ’s pre-mortal life must also refer to the pre-mortal existence of the Saints.” (p. 58) Holding argues that this interpretation must start by assuming the doctrine (actual preexistence) being argued.

In the case of the Romans passage, I would agree with Holding. The compounds “fore-“ and “pre-“ in the English verbs “foreknow” and “predestinate” (in each case Greek *pro-*) suggest to me ideal preexistence. As we have already indicated, this is not necessarily inconsistent with actual preexistence, but the focus of the passage is on God’s foreknowledge.

The Ephesians passage is more equivocal, and can simply be read either way.

A comparison of the Romans passage with 1 Peter 1:20 drives home my point that ideal preexistence is not necessarily inconsistent with actual preexistence. That verse reads as follows, referring to Jesus:

Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world,
But was manifest in these last days for you....

The verb rendered here “foreordained” is *proginosko*, which would be better rendered “foreknown,” as in the NET:

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world
but was manifested in these last times for your sake.

The use of the verb “foreknow” emphasizes the foreknowledge of God and thus suggests ideal preexistence. But in the case of Jesus, an Evangelical presumably would acknowledge (and indeed insist) that he also had an *actual* preexistence, not just an ideal one in the mind of God. Therefore, Holding must either reject my suggested exegetical principle that the concept represented by the English compound *fore-* is suggestive of ideal preexistence (in which event many of his arguments elsewhere would be blunted), or he must acknowledge my contention that ideal preexistence does not in and of itself exclude actual preexistence.

Zechariah 12:1

The burden of the word of the LORD for Israel, saith the LORD,
which stretcheth forth the heavens,
and layeth the foundation of the earth,
and formeth the spirit of man within him.

At the end of his chapter Holding cites two verses that are not used by LDS writers on the preexistence, but which he feels cut against the LDS position. The first of these is Zechariah 12:1. It is true that the verb “formeth” (*yatsar*) reflects an act of creation, not generation, but as we have indicated, that particular nuance is beyond the scope of this paper.

The critical question for the meaning of the last line is how we should understand the last Hebrew word of the verse, *beqirebbo*. Does it modify the verb (i.e., the Lord formed *within him* the spirit of man), which might be taken to suggest that God actually created the spirit spatially within man’s physical body? If so, this would be most consonant with Christian creationism and would seem inconsistent with a prior existence of that spirit apart from the body. That reading may be possible, but (particularly given the word order) I construe the expression with “the spirit of man” (*ruach adam*) (the Lord formed the spirit of man, i.e., that which is within him [or in the midst of him; his inward part]). The basic word here is *qereb*, “inward part, midst,” with the preposition *be-* “in” and the third person singular masculine pronominal suffix *-o*, “of him.” To me that word is definitional. The line says that God created the spirit of man, and then identifies or defines the spirit as that which is inside him, that is, his “inward part.” The word does not modify the act of creation; it is simply descriptive of what the spirit is and where it (normally) resides. If the underlying conception here is monistic, then the spirit *only* resides in the midst of the body; if it is not, then a preexistent existence of the spirit apart from the body is just as plausible as a *post mortem* one.

1 Corinthians 15:46

Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual,
but that which is natural;
and afterward that which is spiritual.

Holding acknowledges that this verse in context does not have any direct application to preexistence, for it is made in reference to Adam and Christ and the type of men they were. (p. 59) He suggests, however, that if Paul knew of a preexistence, it may be regarded as strange that Paul does not characterize the transition as a return to that which is spiritual. Holding suggests that, if Paul were aware of a preexistence, he does not show any indication of it in a place where it would have served his purposes well.

One must be very careful in trying to read Paul’s *ad hoc* responses to issues that had arisen in the churches as part of a systematic theology. A careless reading of Paul here could lead to all sorts of mischief. The topic here is resurrection; one could read Paul as actually denying a bodily resurrection (does he not say that first comes the natural, and afterward the spiritual?) Similarly, if one tries to understand the typology as a comment on the origin of the soul, it could be (mis)read as meaning that the spirit is

created not at birth, but only at physical death (i.e., first comes Adam, the natural, and then Christ, the spiritual; so first comes our natural, physical bodies, and then [“afterward”; i.e., at death] our spiritual bodies). But Evangelicals generally believe that the spirit is created together with the natural body and exists throughout a man’s life; it does not come into existence only “afterward,” at death.

In order to grasp what Paul is really saying here, we need to understand the Hellenistic Jewish background of the argument. Contrary to Holding’s assertion, if Paul knew of and accepted a doctrine of the preexistence of souls, this would *not* have been a natural place to articulate it. Paul’s purpose here is to defend the possibility of a bodily resurrection. He does so by transforming the beliefs of those he was addressing. Those beliefs seem to have involved a proto-Gnosticism that was common in Jewish Hellenistic thought, and was based on the old myth of the Primeval Man, which we have already mentioned. The Heavenly Man (whom we shall designate as “Anthropos”) was a spirit and existed first of all men; the first human man, Adam, was second and dwelt in a physical body, and so was denigrated. Those Paul was arguing against denied both the physicality and futurity of the resurrection, and thus its reality. Their mantra was what we see in 2 Timothy 2:18: “the resurrection is past already.” That is, they were aware of a present spiritual nature, which would be made manifest upon death. Paul, at least for the sake of argument, accepted their equation of Jesus with Anthropos, and he acknowledged the preexistence of this Anthropos, since he came from heaven. But he gives an eschatological spin to the idea, making the human Adam the *first* man and Christ the *second* Adam. When Paul calls Jesus the “spiritual” (a word that could easily be misconstrued, as we have shown), he is doing so to equate him with Anthropos. But by switching the order and making Christ the second Adam rather than the first, he is stressing that a real, physical resurrection will yet occur in the future, a path that we too will follow. Now, the idea here is more involved than I have portrayed,⁵⁷ but the basic point is that this passage simply is not meant to be a treatise on the preexistence *vel non* of the human soul, but rather a defense of bodily resurrection directed to a very specific Hellenistic world view.

Conclusion

In his conclusion (at p. 60), Holding states that

The fact that some Jews and Christians believed in preexistence as did many in the pagan world, indicates that to come up with the idea is of such simplicity that it hardly bears the weight of being called a revelation. To have “restored” a doctrine like this would have required as much “revelation” as restoring the idea that the sky is blue.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ For a detailed exposition of Paul’s argument, see Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man*, 132-44.

⁵⁸ Holding proceeds to argue against the suggestion of an LDS writer that preexistence may have been a part of an early Christian secret tradition. As this suggestion moves beyond the Bible and more fully into patristic and Gnostic sources, it is beyond the scope of the present paper.

With this statement, I simply disagree. I have already acknowledged that the bare concept could arise by polygenesis, rather than by development, which is I suppose what Holding is trying to say here. Holding is entitled to his opinion, but there are two factors he has failed to take into account. First, Joseph came to and articulated this concept not in an ideological vacuum, but in the face of overwhelming Christian assumption to the contrary, probably with little if any influence from contemporary Christian preexistencists and probably with no knowledge of the early Christian and Jewish roots of the idea. Second, as we have mentioned, Joseph did not just push back the time when the soul was created. Preexistence for him was but a piece of a larger whole, to the effect that we really are the children of God and that we really do have the potential to become like him. In my view, the Mormon concept of a preexistence is by no means a trifle and is very worthy of the designation “revelation.”

To summarize, we have given some background on the historical development of the idea of preexistence. We noted common assumptions that the early Old Testament view of the soul was monistic, but we also pointed out that the existence of the *rephaim* affirms a belief in existence apart from the body. We have surveyed some of the allusions to preexistence in extrabiblical literature. We examined the place of preexistence both in traditional Christian theology and in the development of Mormon thought.

With that background, we examined the biblical passages discussed by Holding. I believe we have demonstrated a point I already knew before we began, which is that it is not possible with our current understanding to *prove* the concept of a preexistence from the Bible alone. We have further shown that Holding’s attempts to *disprove* the concept from the Bible alone also fail. With a few exceptions I have noted where I agree with Holding’s readings, Holding has not shown that the LDS reading of these passages as relating to an actual preexistence is a “misinterpretation,” as the subtitle to his book alleges. The only misinterpretation that might be involved would be where people have claimed that the evidence is sufficient as incontrovertible proof; it is not.

As I indicated at the outset, the Bible is essentially neutral on the question of whether our souls preexisted our bodies. Evangelicals are free to read the Bible from their perspective of soul creationism (or some other theory); such a reading is reasonable. But Latter-day Saints are also free to read the Bible from their perspective of preexistence; such a reading is also reasonable. In this situation, I see the wisdom in young Joseph’s observation that “the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.” (JS-H 1:12) Given the inability of the Bible to resolve the issue, I am happy to turn to modern revelation from God to his Prophet for the further light and knowledge it provides us. I therefore accept the doctrine of a preexistence of the soul as it has been taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

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