

# JBTS

VOLUME 7 | ISSUE 2

JOURNAL OF  
BIBLICAL AND  
THEOLOGICAL  
STUDIES

A Philosophical Analysis  
of J. R. Daniel Kirk's  
*A Man Attested by God*

*by Timothy J. Pawl*

## A Philosophical Analysis of J. R. Daniel Kirk's *A Man Attested by God*

TIMOTHY J. PAWL

*Professor of Philosophy, University of St. Thomas (MN)*

**Abstract:** In his recent book, *A Man Attested by God*, J. R. Daniel Kirk argues that the Synoptic Gospels are best read through a paradigm in which Jesus is not a divine person, but rather an exalted non-preexistent human person. In what follows I set out Kirk's argumentation in a precise logical structure, then assess it from a logical and philosophical point of view. My conclusion is mixed. The logical structure of Kirk's argumentation against the Divine paradigm is good. If the texts he marshals against his early high Christology opponents are exegeted correctly—I give no assessment of Kirk's historical or exegetical work—then he has succeeded in showing that his opponents' arguments are in dire shape. On the other hand, Kirk's own argumentation in favor of the Ideal Human paradigm is itself lacking in an essential component—he does not support a necessary part of that paradigm, Christ's alleged nonpreexistence.

**Keywords:** Divine paradigm, Ideal Human Figure paradigm, Early High Christology, The Synoptic Gospels, Preexistence.

### Introduction

In his recent book, *A Man Attested by God*, J. R. Daniel Kirk argues that the Synoptic Gospels are best read through a paradigm in which Jesus is not a divine person, but rather an exalted, non-preexistent human person. Given the burgeoning recent literature arguing for a high Christology in Scripture, one can expect numerous responses that take up the historical and textual grounds that Kirk provides for his thesis.<sup>1</sup> What one might not expect, and something that many would likely find

1. See, for instance, Richard Bauckham *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity*, Edition Unstated (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Simon Gathercole *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006); Richard B. Hays *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*, reprint ed. (Baylor University Press, 2016); Larry Hurtado *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 3rd ed. (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2015); Andrew Loke *The Origin of Divine Christology*, Reprint edition (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Thomas H. McCall, *Analytic Christology and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*, 2021; and Kevin Rowe *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

helpful, is a response from a philosophical point of view, focusing on the logical justification of the premises and inferences that Kirk offers. For it could be that the history and exegesis are flawless, and yet not logically connected to the conclusion in the right sort of way so as to derive his fundamental thesis. In fact, a lack of the proper logical connectivity between premises and conclusion is precisely what I argue herein.

In what follows I first articulate the argumentative work of J. R. Daniel Kirk's *A Man Attested by God*. To do so I define some important terms—Ideal Human Figure, Ideal Human Figure paradigm, and Divine paradigm—then discuss their interrelations. Next, I assess Kirk's argumentation against a Divine paradigm of the Synoptic Gospels. Finally, I assess Kirk's argumentation for an Ideal Human Figure paradigm of those same Gospels. My conclusion is mixed. The logical structure of Kirk's argumentation against the Divine paradigm is good. If the texts he marshals against his early high Christology opponents are exegeted correctly—I give no assessment of Kirk's historical or exegetical work—then he has succeeded in showing that his opponents' arguments are in need of bolstering. On the other hand, Kirk's own argumentation in favor of the Ideal Human Figure paradigm is itself lacking—he does not support an essential component of that paradigm, Christ's alleged non-preexistence.

### **The Argumentation in General, Key Definitions, and Their Interrelations**

Kirk's goal in this book is to show that the Ideal Human Figure paradigm of the Synoptic Gospels fits the evidence in those Gospels better than the Divine paradigm that is common in the contemporary literature on those Gospels.<sup>2</sup> Proving this thesis takes on both a positive and a negative valence, which makes sense: to show that theory 1 fits the evidence better than theory 2, one good approach is both to show just how well theory 1 fits the evidence and also just how poorly theory 2 fits the evidence. In fact, Kirk lists these two projects—showing problems with the Divine paradigm and showing the justification for the Ideal Human Figure paradigm—as the two main purposes of the book.<sup>3</sup>

Before presenting his argumentation against the Divine paradigm and his argumentation for the Ideal Human Figure paradigm, we do well to get clear on what exactly each paradigm requires. Kirk presents his definition of an idealized human figure as follows:

2. J. R. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested by God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels*, Reprint edition (Eerdmans, 2018), 581.

3. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 2, compare 42.

Timothy J. Pawl: *A Philosophical Analysis of J. R. Daniel Kirk's A Man Attested by God*  
*Idealized Human Figures:*

“Non-angelic, non-preexistent human beings, of the past, present, or anticipated future, who are depicted in textual or other artifacts as playing some unique role in representing God to the rest of the created realm, or in representing some aspect of the created realm before God.”<sup>4</sup>

Kirk elaborates on what it means to be “non-preexistent” in a later footnote, where he writes, “By ‘non-preexistent’ I mean that the human in view had no heavenly existence prior to a first appearance on earth.”<sup>5</sup> The *Idealized Human Figure paradigm* is, in this context, a paradigm of interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels upon which Jesus is an idealized human figure, in the above technical sense. The *Divine paradigm*, sometimes referred to in the book as “divine Christology” or “high Christology,” is, in this context, a paradigm of interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels that “depicts Jesus approaching, or attaining to, the status of the God of Israel.”<sup>6</sup>

Concerning the interrelations between these two paradigms, Kirk says that he is not arguing that idealized human Christologies are inconsistent with divine Christologies.<sup>7</sup> And he says that idealized human figure Christologies do “not eliminate the possibility that Jesus is (being depicted as) divine.”<sup>8</sup> I find these claims perplexing, given a seemingly universally accepted premise: If something is divine, then it preexists its first appearance on earth. Suppose that Jesus is divine in the approaching-or-attaining-the-status-of-the-God-of-Israel-sense. Then, by this universally accepted premise, he is preexistent. But since preexistent, he fails to fulfill the conditions for being an idealized human figure, as such conditions require non-preexistence. Thus, if divine, then not an idealized human figure. And, of course, it goes the other way, too. If an idealized human figure, then non-preexistent (by Kirk’s definition of the term); if non-preexistent, then not divine (by the universally accepted premise); thus, if an idealized human figure, then not divine.

Given the argumentation of the preceding paragraph, understanding a text as depicting someone as both divine and an idealized human figure is understanding a text as internally inconsistent: such a figure would be represented as *both* preexistent and *not* preexistent. Perhaps internal inconsistency is an option to be left open, but I do not recall any place in the book where Kirk argues that a Gospel is internally inconsistent. Since anything logically follows from a contradiction, if the Synoptic Gospels are internally inconsistent, then the Divine paradigm logically follows

4. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 3.

5. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 45.

6. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 3.

7. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 4.

8. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 3.

from them. Given the logical implication of the Divine paradigm, such an internal inconsistency would not be dialectically useful for Kirk's first project of arguing against the textual support of the Divine paradigm. After all, if the text is inconsistent, not only does it support the Divine paradigm, it *entails* the Divine paradigm. It is better for Kirk, given his goals, not to argue for or allow an internally inconsistent reading of the Synoptic Gospels.

Having provided the relevant definitions, I now go on to discuss his two projects—the project of arguing against the Divine paradigm, then the project of arguing for his Idealized Human Figure paradigm.

### **Kirk's First Project: Arguing Against the Textual Support for the Divine Paradigm**

Kirk considers the strongest arguments for the Divine paradigm. Such arguments have a common logical form, which I will put as follows:

1. People in the relevant context only used these words or these descriptions of God.
2. The authors of the Synoptic Gospels are in the relevant contexts and used these words or these descriptions of Jesus.
3. Thus, those authors were representing Jesus as God.

The relevant context throughout most of Kirk's discussion is ancient near eastern Jewish people. That said, both Kirk and his opponents include some discussion of the Roman context, so it would be too narrow to restrict the argument to the former context exclusively. Some examples of the words or descriptions that come under discussion include the following: sharing God's rule, being worshipped, conquering hostile cosmic powers, being enthroned on God's throne, being referred to as God's son, and judging the world.

How does Kirk respond to such arguments? In each case, he accepts the second premise of his opponents' arguments. The Synoptic Gospels *do* predicate such terms of Christ. Instead, he focuses his attention on the first premise. As he says, "if there is a recurring point at which I find myself disagreeing with all of the studies in favor of divine Christology, it is in their failure to consider the vast number of analogous ways that idealized human figures are rendered in other early Jewish texts."<sup>9</sup> In other words, people in the relevant contexts *do* use those words or descriptions to describe things other than God, so Premise 1 is false. His method of justifying this denial of Premise 1 is a thorough and meticulous onslaught of counterexamples to the premise in question.

9. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 30.



Timothy J. Pawl: *A Philosophical Analysis of J. R. Daniel Kirk's A Man Attested by God*

Does the opponent say, for instance, that members of such contexts described God alone as receiving worship? Well, this seemingly inexhaustible series of texts shows that claim to be false—many relevant Jewish texts *do* present things other than God as receiving worship, and none of them were thought to have been arguing for the divinity of the worship receiver. As Kirk says, “A good part of my argument is devoted to reimagining the relationship between unique divine attributes and others who might bear them.”<sup>10</sup>

As I would formulate the discussion, I would say that Kirk denies the first premise, but accepts a revised first premise:

- 1\*. People in the relevant contexts only used these words or these descriptions of God *or God's idealized human figures*.

Such a premise, though, when combined with Premise 2, does not conclude to 3. Rather, it concludes to what we might call 3\*:

- 3\*. Thus, those authors were representing Jesus as God *or God's idealized human figure*.

Consequently, 3\* supports the Divine paradigm no more or less than it supports the Idealized Human Figure paradigm. This is good news for Kirk, since, supposing that his historical examples are correct, it shows that the best arguments in favor of the Divine paradigm support it no more than they support his view. If this were a runoff between the two paradigms, what Kirk has done is show that his opponent's best shot at arguing for the superiority of the opponent's view has, in fact, ended in a tie.

We have seen how Kirk assesses the argumentation of his opponents. How ought we to assess his argumentation in response? We can distinguish between the form of the response and the content (matter) of the response. Concerning the form, logically, it strikes me as a good one. Providing a counterexample or two to the specific instances of Premise 1 would be a good method of refuting the truth of those instances. Kirk provides not just one or two examples, but a veritable avalanche of examples. Considering the form dialectically, it puts the opponent in the unenviable position of having to respond to dozens of texts.

Concerning the content of the response, here I maintain silence. As a professional philosopher in the analytic tradition, this is not my area of expertise.<sup>11</sup> Very often sources are referred to without their history being explained, for instance, 4QFlorilegium (4Q174), 4QMessianic Apocalypse (4Q521), 11QMelchizedek (11Q13), or 4QInstruction<sup>d</sup> (4Q418), let alone many others. No shame on Kirk for not explicating the history and reception of such sources more. Every author writes for an intended audience with an expected background knowledge. He likely expected,

10. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 17.

11. For a recent edited volume from which to begin an assessment, the reader might look to Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston, eds., *Reading Mark in Context: Jesus and Second Temple Judaism*, 2018.

reasonably, that the people to pick up this 638-page highly technical tome would specialize in the relevant texts.

Be that as it may, I find myself being in a situation similar to the following analogy. It is the year 4000 and the internet is an antiquated relic of a bygone era. But every once in a while, someone unearths a preserved SanDisk Extreme Portable Hard Drive, and, sometimes, the contents include a few sources relevant to theology. There is maybe a letter from some Pope Francis, an archived Geocities page entitled “Me and My Bible in My Bedroom,” a scan of a pamphlet-with-donation-form from one Benny Hinn, and a Chick tract. Now, coming to a view concerning what twenty-first century Christians were inclined to predicate of God from these sources would be tricky, to say the least. Are they representative of the general view of twenty-first Century Christians?

We must also, in addition to considering the works themselves, consider the formation of the collection or collections of sources, as it can be skewed against representation as well. Personal libraries of theological texts can be quite idiosyncratic. If the hard drive belonged to David Bawden, the recently-deceased Kansas resident who claimed to be the Pope, the bishop of Rome, the servant of the servants of God, the supreme pontiff of the Universal Church, the chances that the library is a collection of unrepresentative texts would be not insignificant. I am neither making any claims about the relative merits of the sources Kirk cites nor saying that any of them were the first century equivalent of a Chick tract. I am merely claiming that assessing the content matter of the argument requires specialization in the texts at hand; there I defer to the specialists. Again, all this is to say that I am not here adjudicating the evidential value of these texts, and *not* to say that I *have* adjudicated their value and judged them to be wanting.

### **Kirk’s Second Project: Arguing for the Ideal Human Figure Paradigm**

Consider now the second step—the step of justifying the Ideal Human Figure paradigm as a viable paradigm for viewing the person of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Here, as a propaedeutic to our forthcoming discussion, we do well to note the requirements for justifying a hypothesis based on the evidence available.

Consider the hypothesis that *Paul, the apostle, was a bachelor*. Such a hypothesis is built out of component parts—for instance, it requires Paul to be both male and unmarried. Now, there is good biblical evidence from his own letters for both those claims. But, importantly, to build a case for the hypothesis in question, we would need to provide justification for both elements—for both the claim that he was male and the claim that he was unmarried. Lacking any evidence for his being unmarried, we would be unjustified in concluding that he was a bachelor, even if we had evidence

Timothy J. Pawl: *A Philosophical Analysis of J. R. Daniel Kirk's A Man Attested by God* that he was male. Instead, in such a (fictional) case, we should remain noncommittal about Paul's marital state.

If we were to consider the hypothesis that *Paul was a left-footed bachelor*, we would need even more evidence. Evidence that he is a bachelor would not be sufficient to justify that he was a left-footed bachelor, any more than evidence that he was male (alone) would be evidence that he was a bachelor. Equally importantly, *absence of evidence* that Paul was right-footed would not itself count in favor of the hypothesis that he was left-footed. Absence of evidence of right-footedness is not evidence of absence of right-footedness.

Analogously, to support the claim that Jesus is depicted as an ideal human figure, we would need *evidence for each bit* of the definition of an ideal human figure. We would need evidence from the texts, for instance, to show that Jesus is not an angel and not preexistent. Moreover, *a mere lack of evidence that he is preexistent would not be sufficient* to show that the idealized human figure paradigm is the right one to use, any more than a mere absence of evidence that Paul was right-footed would be evidence for the left-footed bachelor paradigm of Paul. Indeed, and importantly, given what follows, considering each purported bit of biblical evidence for Paul's right-footedness and showing it spurious would not itself be evidence that he was left-footed.

So far, I have argued that (i) justifying a paradigm requires support for each of its constitutive parts and that (ii) a mere lack of evidence for a rival paradigm is not evidence for one's favored paradigm. One might worry that this *mere lack of evidence is insufficient* condition would set the bar too high for paradigm choice. After all, think of all the things the Bible does not say about Paul but that we think we are justified in including in our interpretive paradigm of Paul. The Bible does not say that Paul lacked a hoverboard, yet we feel permitted to assume in our paradigm of Paul that he did not have access to far-future technologies.<sup>12</sup> What is the difference between the case of Paul's hoverboard and the case of Jesus's preexistence?

In reply, one difference is that our greater body of evidence includes no pro-hoverboard evidence for Paul. But our greater body of evidence *does* include preexistence evidence for Christ. As Kirk himself writes, "Divine and preexistence Christologies can be found in the New Testament, including John's Gospel, the Christ hymn of Colossians 1, and the opening salvo of Hebrews."<sup>13</sup> Thus, while the hoverboard hypothesis is outlandish, given other available evidence, the preexistence hypothesis is not.

12. Extra points for anyone who can find a passage that, when read in an ingenious way, is evidence for the claim that Paul lacked a hoverboard. Maybe the shipwreck would have gone differently with a hoverboard?

13. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 16. For more on Kirk's Divine-paradigm reading of other books of the Bible, see page 297 and 398fn120. For more on the Divine paradigm in Paul see page 572. For more on Jesus's preexistence in John, see page 577.



In fact, this general sort of reply—pointing to the larger body of evidence to show an assumption is unwarranted in paradigm choice—should sound familiar to the reader. Kirk himself makes this same move in his response to the argument that I presented as 1-3. There, as we have seen, he noted that his opponent is not justified in just presupposing that mere humans could not receive worship in the relevant context, since other texts in our larger body of evidence show that they could receive worship. Again, I am not here saying that Kirk reads that body of evidence correctly (or incorrectly). I remain silent on that point. I am merely claiming that the structure of this reply to the hoverboard objection is the same as Kirk’s arguments against the justification for the Divine paradigm. The larger evidential context does not allow one to presume in paradigm formation that worship is due to God alone. So likewise in the case of Jesus’s preexistence: we are not justified in just presupposing in our paradigm formation that Jesus is not preexistent, since other texts in our larger body of evidence show that, in the relevant context, he was seen as preexistent.

For the remainder of this discussion, I want to focus on the “non-preexistent” portion of the concept of an ideal human figure. At the end of the first chapter, which included most of the argumentation concerning what I have formalized in Argument 1-3 above, Kirk writes that two attributes that “might remain important” after his thorough discussion of the others are preexistence and participation in creation.<sup>14</sup> These two attributes remain important because the texts he has been discussing do not provide clear cases of mere humans preexisting or creating the world.<sup>15</sup>

If Kirk’s discussion of preexistence does not provide positive reasons for thinking that Jesus was not preexistent, then he will not have provided support for each constitutive part of his Ideal Human Figure paradigm. And if his discussion of preexistence amounts to a long series of arguments for why the support for rival paradigms is lacking, then it will be insufficient for justifying his own paradigm. The question to ask, then, is this: Does Kirk provide positive evidence for the non-preexistence part of his Ideal Human Figure paradigm?

14. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 176.

15. There are some relevant cases, though they are not of the right sort for providing counterexamples to the instances of Premise 1. For instance, Kirk writes of the priest Simon playing “the role of God in a dramatic scene in which God’s work is the work of creation” (Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 127). Playing a liturgical role, though, is not the same as Simon *actually* creating. For more on creatures and creation from a view opposing Kirk’s, see Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology*, chap. 3.

In answer: it seems to me that he does not. I do not have space to evaluate each of Kirk's discussions of preexistence here. Consider a brief sampling of discussions of preexistence in the book:

- Concerning the title, "Son of God," Kirk argues that it refers to suffering royalty, *not* to preexistence. Moreover, Kirk argues that the phrase "Son of God" does not connote preexistence, but rather that Christ is king of Israel. Elsewhere, he argues that the title does not indicate preexistence.<sup>16</sup>
- He argues that the temporal sequence of Mark's Jesus does not offer an indication of Jesus's preexistence.<sup>17</sup>
- He argues that Jesus's exaltation to heaven does not indicate a sort of preexistence of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>
- Kirk argues concerning the demons' treatment of Jesus in Mark that "we cannot conclude from their recognition of him that they are identifying someone whom they know from a preexistent past."<sup>19</sup>
- He argues that Simon Gathercole's claim that demonic knowledge of Jesus indicates his preexistence "loses its force" given Kirk's explication of the texts.<sup>20</sup>
- Kirk argues that the beloved son parable in Mark 12 "cannot possibly indicate a special preexistence for Jesus."<sup>21</sup>
- Kirk argues that the "abba, Father" prayer "was not an indication of preexistence or divinity."<sup>22</sup>
- Kirk argues that participation in the divine council is less compelling as evidence for preexistence, given his exegesis of the text.<sup>23</sup>
- Kirk argues that Matthew's centurion's profession of Jesus's divine sonship (Mt 27:54) is not indicative of preexistence.<sup>24</sup>
- Kirk argues that the authority to act on God's behalf, even forgiving sins, does not indicate preexistence.<sup>25</sup>

16. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 190, 202, 215, 222.

17. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 195.

18. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 196–7.

19. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 206.

20. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 207.

21. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 210.

22. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 212.

23. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 244.

24. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 256.

25. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 279.

- Kirk argues that Christ's future return in heavenly glory does not indicate preexistence.<sup>26</sup>
- Kirk argues that appeals to Daniel from Chrys Caragounis fail to show the preexistence of Jesus.<sup>27</sup>
- Kirk argues that Gathercole's argumentation again fails to show preexistence.<sup>28</sup>
- Kirk argues that the "Son of Man" texts fail at showing preexistence.<sup>29</sup>
- Kirk argues that the transfiguration is not evidence of preexistence.<sup>30</sup>
- Kirk argues that Christ's birth story is not evidence for preexistence.<sup>31</sup>
- Kirk argues that Jesus's authority over demonic spirits does not indicate preexistence.<sup>32</sup>
- Kirk argues that "there is no indication in Mark's Gospel that [Davidic Christology] suggests preexistence."<sup>33</sup>

In all these instances, the conclusion is that his opponent's views are not justified by the text in question, and not that his Ideal Human Figure paradigm *is* justified. Going back through the index to check whether I missed any relevant passages, I see seventy page numbers listed for discussions of preexistence. Moreover, the index does not include all the relevant discussions of preexistence. For instance, it does not include the discussions on pages 176, 222, or 228. Try as I might, though, I have not found a text where Kirk provides a positive argument for the non-preexistence of Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels.

My main conclusion about this section of the book is that Kirk does not sufficiently justify all the parts of his proffered paradigm, in particular, the non-preexistence part, and that many of the sections that are apparently meant to do so instead amount to arguing against the purported evidence for the Divine paradigm. As mentioned above, though, to show that one's view is right, it is insufficient to show the opponent's arguments spurious. The letter to the Romans does not support Paul's being right-footed, but we cannot conclude to Paul's being left-footed as a result. As the old slogan goes, *absence of evidence is not evidence of absence*. Showing that the authors did not depict Jesus as preexistent is insufficient to show that they were depicting him as non-preexistent—they may have been neutral, or not neutral but intending to represent neutrally, or, etc.

26. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 309, 316, 319–322.

27. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 329.

28. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 322.

29. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 342 and 356.

30. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 347.

31. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 373.

32. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 428.

33. Kirk, *Man Attested by God*, 498.

I just referenced dozens of texts in which Kirk is attempting to show that the opponent's purported justification of preexistence fails. For the sake of argument, grant that every one of these attempts succeeds. Even on that supposition, this does not speak in favor of non-preexistence by itself. Such argumentation alone is insufficient to justify the claim that Jesus was non-preexistent. Maybe the idea is that we ought to expect the Synoptic authors to discuss pre-existence explicitly if they really believed in it. It is a pretty big deal. But they do not explicitly discuss it. And so we ought to think that they did not really mean to depict Jesus as preexistent. Even so, this alone would not get us the conclusion that they *did* intend to depict him as non-preexistent. Perhaps instead the idea was that if they did not explicitly depict him as preexistent, then they were intentionally depicting him as non-preexistent. I concluded the hoverboard example with some reasoning to think that this premise is not true. But if this is the idea—if *Jesus is not depicted as preexistent, then he is intentionally depicted as non-preexistent*—it would be good to see the justification worked out for that claim.

To see the point from a different angle, reread the definition of an Ideal Human Figure above, omitting only the “non-preexistent” clause. Such a revised paradigm is noncommittal about whether Jesus was preexistent; maybe he was, maybe he was not. Call the paradigm one forms by taking the Ideal Human Figure paradigm and stripping out the claim that Jesus was non-preexistent the *Non-committal* paradigm.

*Non-committal paradigm:*

A paradigm of interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels upon which Jesus is a non-angelic human being, of the past, present, or anticipated future, who is depicted in textual or other artifacts as playing some unique role in representing God to the rest of the created realm, or in representing some aspect of the created realm before God.<sup>34</sup>

34. Does the word “rest” cause problems for the Non-committal paradigm? One might think it does, as it tacitly implies that the person in question is also part of the created realm. In response, first note that the “rest” portion of the Ideal Human Figure paradigm is not a separate attribute considered and argued for from the text. If it must be read as implying that the person in question is not divine, then it is another part of the Ideal Human Figure paradigm that goes undefended. Second, there is an attenuated sense in which one could say that Jesus is part of creation on the Divine paradigm, *not* because he, the person, is a created thing on that view, but rather in the sense that he has a created human nature. If that is enough to count, in a certain sense, as being part of creation, and so fulfill the “rest” component of the Non-committal paradigm, then the Non-committal paradigm is again consistent with both the Divine and the Ideal Human Figure paradigms. If the reader is still wary of the “rest,” then the reader can excise “the rest of” from the Non-committal paradigm, on the grounds that making it non-committal requires making it not both imply the Ideal Human Figure paradigm and preclude the Divine paradigm.

The Non-committal paradigm is entirely consistent with the Divine paradigm, as nothing in the Divine paradigm rules out Jesus's being a non-angel or his representing God to creation in a special way, and nothing in the Non-committal paradigm rules out Jesus's being divine.

It seems to me that Kirk has not provided evidence for the Ideal Human Figure paradigm over the Non-committal paradigm. But then I think he falls prey to an argument similar to his own argumentation against his opponents. Earlier I noted that if Kirk can show that the best his opponents offer does not justify the Divine paradigm over the Ideal Human Figure paradigm, then he has shown that the evidence does not support their theory over his. So much for the alleged superiority of their paradigm: the runoff ends in a tie.

The same point can be made with reference to the Ideal Human Figure paradigm and the Non-Committal paradigm—the texts Kirk supplies do not support the former over the latter. The runoff ends in a tie. Moreover, the Non-Committal paradigm is consistent with both the Ideal Human Figure paradigm and the Divine paradigm. Indeed, defenders of both paradigms will want to accept as constitutive of their own paradigms the Non-Committal paradigm. If Kirk's best arguments in favor of his Ideal Human Figure paradigm only succeed in supporting the Non-Committal paradigm, then he is in the same boat as his Divine paradigm opponents. The evidence he offers, since it is Non-Committal with respect to preexistence and non-preexistence, will no better support the Ideal Human Figure paradigm than it supports the Divine paradigm.

## **Conclusion**

In this brief article I have articulated the main argumentative goals of Kirk's book. He desires to support his Ideal Human Figure paradigm of the Synoptic Gospels while at the same time arguing against the justification of the Divine paradigm of those same Gospels. Next, I turned to assess his two main argumentative strategies. Concerning the first, his argumentation against the justification for holding the Divine paradigm, I judge the form of his argumentation to be good. Concerning its content, I left that assessment to the specialists. Concerning the second, his argumentation for the Ideal Human Figure paradigm, I noted that supporting a paradigm requires providing positive evidence for each part of it, not merely arguing that the opponent's arguments fail to justify the opponent's paradigm. I find such positive evidence to be lacking with respect to the *non-preexistent* part of the Ideal Human Figure paradigm. If such evidence is there and I missed it, I look forward to being corrected on that front.

There is a broader conclusion to draw here as well. It is a good and needful thing for practitioners of distinct fields to work together in thinking through our theology. We need specialists in the languages to help us see the meanings and contours of our theological vocabulary. We need historians to help us understand the intellectual

Timothy J. Pawl: *A Philosophical Analysis of J. R. Daniel Kirk's A Man Attested by God*

undercurrents shaping the texts and their transmission. We need scripture scholars to help us understand the Word of God. We need systematicians to help us synthesize the coherent worldview that is provided by that Word. And we need philosophers, too, to help us discern the rational interconnectedness (or lack thereof) of our beliefs and our justifications for them.<sup>35</sup>

35. I thank my copresenters at the *Christ Among the Disciplines* conference in November 2020, where I first gave this response to Kirk: Gary Burnett, Niels Henrik Gregersen, and Brittany Wilson. I especially thank Daniel Kirk for his response to the commentary and our ensuing discussion. I also thank James Arcadi and multiple anonymous referees for comments, and Jordan Wessling and Oliver Crisp for discussion.