

Jesus Christ in the New Testament: Part Two: Various Images of Jesus in the Books of the New Testament

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I. INTRODUCTION

MY PREVIOUS ESSAY ON THE HISTORICAL JESUS in the winter 1997 issue began with the famous cry of Hebrews 13:8 (“Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever!”) and proceeded to focus on the primordial “yesterday” of the historical Jesus. In the spirit of the Beatles, this present essay continues to sing of “yesterday,” but now we are moving from the yesterday of the historical Jesus during his public ministry to the yesterday of the various interpretations of Jesus by different Christian communities and authors in the first two or three generations after his death.

Sometimes the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are played off against each other as mutually exclusive ways of looking at Jesus.¹ But this is a simplistic and inaccurate dichotomy. On the one hand, the Jesus of history had devoted disciples who followed him literally, physically, at great personal sacrifice precisely because they believed in him during

1. This dichotomy may be traced back to eighteenth-century rationalist Hermann Samuel Reimarus, whose *Fragments* were published posthumously. They are available in English translation in *Reimarus: Fragments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970). This dichotomy was reflected—in very different ways—in the nineteenth century by the works of David Friedrich Strauss (see his *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977]) and Martin Kähler (see his *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964]). The great twentieth-century proponent of the dichotomy was Rudolf Bultmann (see, e.g., his *Jesus and the Word* [London: Collins/Fontana, 1934]). The dichotomy is prolonged today in much of the literature that emanates from the Jesus Seminar; see, e.g., Burton L. Mack's *A Myth of Innocence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

his public ministry. The Jesus of history was in some sense an object of faith—granted, not Christian faith—during his own lifetime. On the other hand, there is no one homogenized Christ of faith in the pages of the New Testament. There are various images and interpretations of Jesus, various christologies, in different books of the New Testament. Indeed one could speak of four different christologies in the four Gospels.²

Since I do not have space in this one essay to examine in detail all the Christs of faith the New Testament offers—the offbeat Epistle to the Hebrews would require an essay of its own—I will focus on the major ways in which Jesus was imaged in three key strata of first-century Christian tradition: in the oral tradition before Paul, in Paul's own theology, and in each of the four Gospels.

II. THE PRE-PAULINE TRADITION

Paul the Apostle wrote his epistles in the 50s of the first century, before any of the four Gospels was composed. Hence it might seem natural to start with Paul.³ Yet this is to commit the common error of supposing that all Christian theology—or even Christianity itself—began with Paul. It did not. Paul joined an already existing group of Jews for Jesus. In the 30s and 40s of the first century, this group was already developing credal formulas, liturgical texts, and hymns that described Christ's status and saving work. Thanks to form and tradition criticism, we can excavate these primitive oral formulas from Paul's epistles. Five of these formulas are especially important:

1. *1 Corinthians* 15:3-5.⁴ Not surprisingly, in the wake of Good Friday and Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus were at the heart of any Christian description of who Jesus was and what he had done for believers. One of the earliest credal formulas we can isolate is cited by Paul in

2. Among the many studies, see, e.g., Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959); Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1965); Ferdinand Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1969); Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971); James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ. The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980); M. de Jonge, *Christology in Context. The Earliest Christian Response to Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988); Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels. A Biblical Christology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995).

3. See Lucien Cerfaux, *Christ in the Theology of St. Paul* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Pauline Theology," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), 1382-1416.

4. See Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1966), 101-103; Karl Lehmann, *Auferweckt am dritten Tag nach der Schrift*, 2d ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 17-157.

1 Corinthians 15:3-5 as he disputes with some Corinthian converts who doubt the general resurrection of the dead. Paul tells us that he himself learned this creedal formula when he became a Christian in the early 30s.

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures;
and he was buried;
and he was raised on the third day according to the
Scriptures;
and he appeared to Cephas [= Simon Peter] and then to
the Twelve.

Without pressing this formula for hidden meanings, certain things are obvious. For Christian Jews of the 30s and 40s, Jesus is so totally identified with the hoped-for Messiah that the Greek form of Messiah, *christos*, "Christ," has become practically his second name. Yet, contrary to all traditional expectations, Jesus has proven his messiahship by dying a sacrificial death for our sins as prophesied, it is claimed, in the scriptures. The reality of his death was confirmed by his burial. But, then, on the third day, again in fulfillment of the scriptures—though we are not told *which* scriptures—Christ was raised from the dead (namely, by God the Father). And, just as Christ's burial confirmed the reality of his death, so his appearance to Peter, the leader of his twelve disciples, confirmed the reality of his resurrection. So did a subsequent appearance to the full circle of the Twelve, who represented the twelve tribes of Israel. The death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah thus stood at the heart of the earliest Jewish-Christian profession of faith in Jesus.

2. *Romans* 4:25.⁵ The centrality of death and resurrection is confirmed by another creedal or liturgical formula quoted by Paul in *Romans* 4:25:

[He] was handed over for our trespasses,
and raised for our justification.

Here Jesus' death is described as "being handed over" to death, with God the Father understood once again as the prime agent in the drama. Some scholars think that the image of being handed over to death refers to the suffering servant described in the prophet Isaiah (52:13-53:12), while other scholars hear an echo of the story of Abraham handing over his son Isaac to a sacrificial death (Gen. 22:1-19). What is most striking is that this primitive formula already assigns different functions to Jesus' death and resurrection. The negative reality of his death is correlated

5. See David Michael Stanley, *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1961), 171-73.

with the negative reality of our sins: he was handed over to wipe away our trespasses. The positive event of his resurrection is correlated with the positive event of our justification; that is to say, Jesus' resurrection puts us into a right relationship with God. Notice how very early on it is the resurrection of Jesus that is the saving event *par excellence*.

3. *Romans 3:24-25*.⁶ But the pre-Pauline tradition was just as capable of focusing on Jesus' death as the great saving event, as we see in a liturgical formula cited in *Romans 3:24-25*:

[We are] freely justified by the redemption [found]
in Christ Jesus,
whom God publicly displayed as the mercy seat [sprinkled]
with his own blood,
to show forth his justice by remitting previously committed
sins in the time of God's forbearance.

Our justification, our "being put right with God," is now seen as effected by Christ's death. As in 1 Corinthians 15, his death is interpreted as a sacrifice for sin. Indeed there seems to be an allusion to the great atoning sacrifice of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), when, according to the Book of Leviticus (16:1-34), the Jewish high priest would sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial victim on the golden covering of the ark of the covenant, called in Hebrew the *kapporet*, in Greek the *hilasterion*, and in a popular but hardly literal modern translation "the mercy seat." This formula proclaims that in like manner the blood of the Messiah Jesus has been sprinkled on the cross on Good Friday, the ultimate Yom Kippur, achieving definitive cleansing from all sin. This is a bold and unusual image, one that would have come naturally to mind only in the case of Jews who saw in Jesus the fulfillment of all the hopes and rituals of the Jewish scriptures. Indeed, in all these pre-Pauline creedal formulas, we should notice how thoroughly Jewish, how steeped in the language and imagery of the Old Testament, these statements are. Not surprisingly, the bold imagery of the Yom Kippur sacrifice was developed at length later on in the thoroughly Jewish document known as the Epistle to the Hebrews.

4. *Romans 1:3-4*.⁷ Jesus' death and resurrection are celebrated in an-

6. See Leon Morris, "The Meaning of *hilasterion* in *Romans 3:25*," *New Testament Studies* 2 (1955-56): 33-43; Ernst Käsemann, "Zum Verständnis von Römer 3, 24-26," *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen. Band I* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 96-100; John Reumann, "The Gospel of the Righteousness of God," *Interpretation* 20 (1966): 432-52.

7. Eduard Schweizer, "Röm 1, 3f und der Gegensatz von Fleisch und Geist vor und bei Paulus," *Neotestamentica* (Zurich/Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1963), 180-89; D. Duling, "The Promises to David and Their Entrance into Christianity—Nailing Down a Likely Hypothesis," *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973-74): 55-77.

other creedal formula quoted by Paul in Romans 1:3-4, but here the focus broadens out to include the whole of Jesus' earthly life:

- (1) [He] was born of the seed of David according to the flesh,
- (2) constituted Son of God according to a spirit of holiness
at the resurrection of the dead.

Unlike the three previous formulas, this creed connects specific descriptions or titles to specific stages of Jesus' existence. From birth on, and by virtue of his birth, Jesus was a son of David, in some sense the Davidic Messiah during his whole earthly life, not just at his death. But it was only at his resurrection from the dead, understood as a royal enthronement exalting him from earth to heaven, that Jesus became Son of God in a new spiritual plane of existence.

One should note immediately that titles like Son of David and Son of God are used in this and other formulas in a *functional*, not a *metaphysical*, sense. That is to say, they are descriptions of a function a person is performing in the history of salvation; they are not meant as definitions of the person's inner essence or nature. In fact, this is true of most of the christologies in the New Testament; they remain largely functional, since they usually describe how God acts through Jesus to achieve salvation. In the New Testament, *christology* (who Jesus is) is inextricably bound up with *soteriology* (what sort of salvation he brings and how he brings it). Occasionally, though, these formulas that tell the story of salvation in dynamic fashion do move somewhat in the direction of describing Christ's person or nature. Nevertheless, it is only in the patristic period, especially in the first four general (or "ecumenical") councils (from Nicea [325 A.D.] to Chalcedon [451 A.D.]), that these titles are used in an explicitly metaphysical or philosophical sense, focusing on abstract questions of person and nature.

5. *Philippians* 2:6-11.⁸ A slight foreshadowing of this later development can be found in at least one pre-Pauline formula, the ancient hymn Paul cites in *Philippians* 2:6-11. This hymn widens the focus of the story of Jesus in an astonishing way. The beginning of the hymn encompasses not only Christ's birth but also his preexistence in heaven, while the end of the hymn presents Christ being worshipped by all creation after his enthronement back in heaven. The hymn starts off with Christ existing "in the form of God" but deciding not to cling to equality with God. Rather Christ empties himself, taking on the form of a slave, in other words, being born as a human being. This initial humiliation is followed

8. Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi* (revised ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Aramaic Background of *Philippians* 2:6-11," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 470-83.

by the extreme humiliation of death on the cross. But God reverses this downward movement in the hymn by exalting Jesus above all creation, a creation that now acclaims Christ with the title of Lord, *kyrios*, probably understood as the unpronounceable sacred name of God, the tetragrammaton ("Yahweh").

As the German scholar Martin Hengel points out,⁹ there is something astounding here, simply from the viewpoint of the history of religions. A specific historical individual known as Jesus of Nazareth, with whom a large number of disciples and other Palestinian Jews were acquainted for a few years at the end of the 20s in the first century, was crucified publicly around the year 30. Within some ten or twenty years after his ignominious and ghastly death, some of his followers proclaimed in this hymn his preexistence and equality with God, his incarnation as man, his humiliating death, and his subsequent exaltation in heaven as Lord of the whole cosmos. There is really no precise parallel in the history of religions for such a high evaluation of a concrete historical human being one or two decades after his gruesome death.

Just as the other primitive formulas we have seen foreshadow the theology of Paul, the Synoptic Gospels, or the Epistle to the Hebrews, so this hymn from Philippians foreshadows the high christology of the Gospel of John, written toward the end of the first century. In other words, this hymn foreshadows how lofty estimations of Christ's actions could lead at times to quasi-metaphysical statements about his person. At a certain point, functional christology began to spill over into metaphysical christology, and the Philippians hymn shows us how early the spillage began.

To sum up, then, our survey of these primitive formulas: Paul and the four evangelists were all creative theologians, but they did not create out of nothing. They built on the various primitive christologies already circulating among Christian Jews in the first two decades after Jesus' crucifixion. While these formulas focused especially on Jesus' death and resurrection, at times they broadened their focus to include his earthly life, his birth, or even his preexistence.

III. THE IMAGE OF JESUS IN PAUL'S EPISTLES

Let us now turn to the specific way in which Paul the Apostle appropriated and developed these early Jewish-Christian traditions preserved in his epistles, epistles he wrote in the 50s. We have seen how these pre-Pauline traditions focused on Jesus' death and resurrection, and Paul's own personal experience only tended to reinforce this focus. As far as we

9. Martin Hengel, *The Son of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 1-2.

know, Paul had not met Jesus during the latter's public ministry, and so not surprisingly the public ministry plays no significant part in Paul's proclamation of Christ. Paul's experience of Jesus was rather an encounter with the risen Jesus (dramatized later on in St. Luke's narrative of Paul's vision of Christ on the road to Damascus). Death and resurrection were necessarily Paul's starting point, and Paul decided to make a virtue of necessity by emphasizing the shocking paradox that was the great obstacle to faith: that God had fulfilled his promises to Israel and had brought salvation to the whole world through a crucified and risen Messiah.

Paul extends this basic story into the present moment by stressing that the risen Jesus is now enthroned in heaven as Son of God and Lord of the world. All who believe in Christ receive even now the end-time gift of his Holy Spirit, who makes believers adopted children of God, coheirs with the Son, and members of God's holy people. This Spirit likewise energizes believers to undertake a mission to the whole world, Jew and gentile alike, without the traditional barriers of circumcision and the Mosaic Law. This mission is urgent, since the Son of God will soon come in glory to save believers from the destruction that threatens the rest of sinful humanity. Paul calls this coming of the Son at the end of time the *Papousia*. On the last day the Son will judge the world and will bring God's victory over sin and death, begun at Easter, to completion, when all believers are raised to eternal life.

This story of Christ, extending to the end of time, is also broadened out by Paul on the other end when he states that God sent his Son into the world—thus intimating rather than emphasizing the preexistence of the Son. But for Paul, unlike John, preexistence and incarnation are not a major part of the story. For Paul, the basic story runs from cross and resurrection through Christ's present reign and gift of the Spirit to his coming in glory to hold the last judgment.

This is not to say that Paul knew nothing of Jesus' earthly life. From stray bits of tradition Paul cites, we see that he knows that Jesus was of Davidic lineage (Rom. 1:3), that Jesus aimed his earthly mission at his fellow Jews, not at gentiles (Rom. 15:8; compare 15:15-16), that he sent out his followers on a mission (1 Cor. 9:14), that he forbade divorce (1 Cor. 7:10-11), and that he held a final supper with his disciples on the night before he died, during which he identified bread with his body and wine with the new covenant sealed by his blood (1 Cor. 11:23-25). He was then crucified and buried (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Quite probably Paul could have told much more of the story of the earthly Jesus, but that would not have served his main purpose in writing his epistles. After all, we must remember that in his epistles Paul is not giving initial instruction about Jesus to nonbelievers but rather spe-

cific and developed teaching to answer concrete problems that have arisen in his churches. In contrast, one may reasonably suppose that, when Paul started preaching Christ in a new pagan locale, he would have had to explain to prospective gentile converts who this Jew named Jesus was who wound up being crucified by the Romans and who, contrary to all appearances, was the savior these gentiles should embrace in faith.

Yet even in his initial proclamation, Paul probably made Christ's death and resurrection the center of the saving story, thus holding fast to the primitive creedal formulas he had learned. He might use various titles such as Christ, Son of God, Lord, and Savior to describe the Jesus proclaimed in this story, but ultimately it was the story that gave meaning to these titles, and not vice versa. Indeed that is true of the titles used of Jesus throughout the New Testament. It is the story of Jesus propounded by an individual author that gives content to the titles. To survey New Testament christology simply by listing and defining titles is to miss the point—the point being a whole story that moved people to believe in Jesus.

It is this story-centered nature of the Christian message that naturally resulted in the full-blown retellings of the story that we call Gospels. We will examine first the three Gospels that were composed from common sources and that narrate to some degree a common story: Mark, Matthew, and Luke, dubbed by scholars the Synoptic Gospels. We will then compare them with the very different Gospel of John.

IV. THE FOUR GOSPELS

The proclamation of Jesus' saving death and resurrection obviously retained its key position when the four Gospels came to be written in the second Christian generation. Indeed, to adapt what the German scholar Martin Kähler said of all the Gospels, one could say with some exaggeration that Mark's Gospel is a Passion Narrative with an extended introduction.¹⁰ In fact, death and resurrection form the climax of each evangelist's story. But, as the four evangelists composed their works throughout the second Christian generation, there was a natural and increasing movement backward from the climax to what led up to it. In this sense each Gospel was written backwards, from end to beginning.

Mark moves the beginning of the story of Jesus back to the baptism of the adult Jesus by John the Baptist just before the public ministry begins. Matthew and Luke both move the beginning of the story back to Jesus' virginal conception and birth. John completes this thrust by push-

10. Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus*, 80n11.

ing back to the eternal Word who became flesh in Jesus Christ. Entranced by this tendency, some scholars have tried to portray this development as a neat chronological line, the Gospels pushing back farther than Paul and each Gospel pushing back farther than the Gospel before it. But, as so often happens in history, developments tend to be messy rather than neat. They fail to follow a tidy chronological progression. While most scholars think that Mark was the earliest of the Gospels to be written, it is harder to determine the exact chronological relations among Matthew, Luke, and John. In any case, the development from low to high christology does not seem to follow a neat, progressive time line. Luke, one of the latest Gospels to be written, has at times a notably low christology. And, as we have already seen, John, with his high christology of preexistence and incarnation, does not create this view out of thin air, but rather picks up themes already present in early Christian formulas like the Philippians hymn cited by Paul.

Theological development is always more contorted than theologians would like. Instead of a neat chronological progression of christology in the first century, we would do better to adopt the position that in the beginning was the grab bag. In the explosive aftermath of Calvary and Easter, the earliest Jewish-Christian believers applied all sorts of Old Testament images, prophecies, and titles to Jesus. Some of these images and titles *we* would classify today as indicating high christology, others low. The earliest Christian Jews may not have perceived all the fine differences and distinctions we would make with two thousand years of hindsight, and they might have been surprised at the tensions or contradictions we see in the juxtaposition of high and low designations like Son of God and servant of God. For them both were true, and they were not overly concerned about how both could be true at the same time.

In the beginning was the grab bag. The books of the New Testament and indeed the patristic period tell the story of how early believers tried to sort out the grab bag in various ways. Of all the attempts in the New Testament apart from Paul, the four Gospels are the most famous and influential examples of this sorting. They posed many of the problems and provided some of the solutions with which the patristic period would have to grapple as it went about its own sorting. It is to the four images of Jesus, the four sortings in the four Gospels, that we now turn our attention.

1. Mark's Gospel was probably the first to be written, somewhere around 70 A.D. Stark, dark, laconic Mark, the Gospel of mystery, has left exegetes scratching their heads down through the ages just as it apparently left Matthew and Luke scratching their heads later on in the first century. Like a Baroque chiaroscuro painting, Mark delights in sharp, puzzling juxtapositions of light and dark, high and low, divine and hu-

man, in his portrait of Jesus. One minute Jesus cannot work miracles because of people's unbelief (6:5), the next minute he is bestriding the waves of the Sea of Galilee and asserting the divine claim "It is I!" just like God bestriding the waters of chaos in the Old Testament (vv. 45-52).

All this makes for a bewildering sense of mystery that confuses friend and foe alike in Mark's Gospel. The very first words of the Gospel assert that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, the object of Old Testament prophecy. Yet only God, the demons, and Mark's readers know that truth. For most of the Gospel, the human actors in the drama are woefully ignorant of Jesus' identity. The two parts of Mark's Gospel gradually unfold the two-fold messianic secret of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Half way through the Gospel, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter finally sees that Jesus is the Messiah—but that is all he sees: a powerful, miracle-working Messiah (8:27-30).

Jesus must immediately counter this dangerous half-truth with the other, darker side of the coin: he is also the Son of Man who must suffer, die, and rise from the dead (8:31-33). In Mark's mind only when these apparently contradictory truths are held together is the identity of Jesus understood. And so it is only after Jesus has died on the cross that paradoxically the veil of mystery is ripped away and a centurion, one of Jesus' executioners, sees the dead criminal for what he was all along (15:39): "Truly this man [that is, this condemned, tortured, crucified, dead man] was God's Son." This unbearable paradox, this contradiction of all human expectations, is nevertheless confirmed on Easter Sunday morning when Jesus' female followers find his tomb empty and are told by a mysterious young man that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead. Only now, at the end of the story, do we begin to sense what Messiah, Son of Man, and Son of God mean for Mark. Instead of neat definitions we are left with a puzzling, open-ended story that unites stark contradictions running through the ministry of Jesus and culminating in the ultimate contradiction of a crucified and risen Christ.

2. Matthew's Gospel, written somewhere between 80 and 90 A.D., is the closest of the other Gospels to Mark. In a sense one might think of Matthew as the new, improved Mark or the first interpretation of Mark. At times, though, the improvements and interpretations are massive. Matthew does not like Mark's jarring juxtapositions. While Matthew keeps Mark's christological titles, the rewritten story produces a smoother, more coherent, and a definitely higher christology. Jesus is Messiah and Son of God from the virginal conception onwards (1:18-25). Indeed, thanks to the virginal conception, Matthew dares to apply to Jesus the title Emmanuel: he is "God with us" (v. 23). As Matthew multiplies the occurrences of the key titles Son of God and Son of Man throughout his Gospel, he likewise softens or eliminates Mark's more

shocking elements. Indications of Jesus' ignorance or powerlessness are deftly omitted.

Since Matthew is addressing a local church with strong Jewish roots, he joins his high christology with a high view of God's people, the church, in other words, with a high ecclesiology. In fact, Matthew is the only Gospel in which the word "church" (*ekklesia*) appears (16:18; 18:17). For Matthew a Messiah makes sense only as the leader of a messianic people of the end time, namely, the church. One can see Matthew's high christology wedded to his high ecclesiology in the changes he makes in Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi (16:16-19), a scene he takes over from Mark. Instead of Mark's laconic "You are the Messiah," in Matthew Peter proclaims, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Only in Matthew does Jesus reply to this high christology with his own high ecclesiology: "You are Peter (the Rock), and on this rock I will build my church."

To this high christology and high ecclesiology Matthew adds a third emphasis, namely, detailed moral teaching. It is not by accident that Jesus continues his charge to Peter by giving him the keys of the kingdom so that he can bind and loose, that is to say, teach authoritatively the moral instruction he has learned from Jesus. This emphasis on moral exhortation is built into the very architecture of Matthew's Gospel, supported as it is by the five great discourses of Jesus distributed throughout the Gospel like five massive pillars holding up the structure (sermon on the mount, chaps. 5-7; missionary discourse, chap. 10; parables discourse, chap. 13; discourse on church life, chap. 18; eschatological discourse, chaps. 24-25). For Matthew Jesus is indeed Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man, but he is also very much the final, definitive teacher of God's will, the one greater than Moses. Matthew's concern to unite christology, ecclesiology, and morality is summed up perfectly at the end of his Gospel, when, in the final scene (28:16-20), the risen Jesus, coming in full power as the Son of Man, commands his followers to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that he, Jesus, has commanded. At this point Matthew's christology is high indeed, the highest of the three Synoptics.

3. Things are somewhat different with Luke, despite the fact that he used many of the same sources as Matthew and, like Matthew, probably wrote his Gospel somewhere in the 80s or 90s of the first century. However, Luke wrote for a church that was largely gentile in origin and stood in the tradition of Paul. Since Luke has to explain how an increasingly gentile Christian church emerged from a Jewish Messiah seeking to convince his fellow Jews, Luke naturally adapts and builds upon Mark in ways different from Matthew.

In Luke's mind the surprising developments after Jesus' resurrection demand such detailed explanation that Luke complements his Gospel with a new kind of work, the Acts of the Apostles. Faced with the reality that Jesus the Jewish Messiah was accepted by many gentiles while he was rejected by most Jews, Luke struggles throughout his two volumes to create a line of continuity in salvation history amid all the discontinuity. Only thus can he hope to give legitimacy to a largely gentile church as the true people of God.

To create this sense of continuity, Luke draws up a detailed outline of salvation history: the time of the Old Testament (with its promises and prophecies), the time of Jesus (the fulfiller of God's promises to Israel), and the time of the church (with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the risen Jesus, enabling a universal mission that extends the promise of salvation from Israel to all the nations).

Jesus thus belongs to the midpoint of time. As Messiah, he fulfills all the promises to Israel, as crucified and risen Lord he opens up these promises to the gentiles. While Messiah and Lord, along with Son of God and Son of Man, are key titles for Luke, his christology is perhaps the most eclectic and uneven of the four Gospels. The grab bag is most evident here. Sometimes Jesus seems to be a really nice guy, or a wise teacher, or a compassionate miracle worker, or a courageous prophet and martyr, while at other times he is clearly the Messiah, the Son of God who was virginally conceived, the Lord of all, the Savior—though Luke does not parallel Matthew in tentatively applying the title "God" to Jesus, even in the form of "God with us."

This unevenness in Luke's christology is due not to his lack of intellectual power but rather to the fact that Luke simply has other theological fish to fry, such as continuity in salvation history and the spread of the mission to the gentiles. So intent is he on his own theological agenda that he can state his purpose in great detail in the first four verses of his Gospel without even mentioning Jesus Christ (1:1-4). This is all the more startling when we remember that Luke's Gospel was probably one of the last to be written. We are reminded once again that mere chronological succession does not guarantee an ever higher christology. Still, most readers are more than willing to put up with Luke's unsystematic approach to christology for the sake of the moving portrait he paints of the merciful, compassionate, gentle Jesus, the very embodiment as well as the teacher of the typically Lucan parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son (10:25-37; 15:11-32).

4. One could hardly imagine a New Testament christology more different from Luke's than John's. From the vantage point of christology, one readily sees why Mark, Matthew, and Luke are grouped together as the Synoptic Gospels, while John stands apart as to both sources and

christology. Indeed, John's is the highest christology in the New Testament. Fittingly, in the beginning of the Gospel, the Prologue (1:1-18), we are brought back beyond the beginning of creation to eternity—to the eternal Word who, in a marvelous dialectic, is with God and is God (v. 1). That is to say, the Word exists from all eternity with God the Father and yet, in some sense, is also the one God. As if this were not complicated enough, the eternal Word, the agent of all creation, finally becomes a part of his own creation by becoming flesh (v. 14), that is, a concrete human being, Jesus Christ. With great care, though, John does not mention the name Jesus until the incarnation is announced (compare v. 14 with v. 17); Jesus is the name of the particular first-century Jew that the eternal Word has become.

It is in this concrete humanity that the Word, alias the Son, reveals God the Father to other humans (1:18). Thus, as John's christology is radically different, so too is his theory of how we are saved, his soteriology. We are saved by having the sinful darkness of our minds dispelled by the light of the truth that the Incarnate Word shines on us. "The Word became flesh ... and we saw his *glory*"—the blazing light of God's truth. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (8:32). In other words, the Word made flesh brings salvation through revelation: God's life is communicated by God's light (8:12). His truth sets us free from the dark prison-house of our willful ignorance, from the big lie of our self-sufficiency that envelops our lives and alienates us from God.

Because Jesus *is* the Word made flesh, the divine Light that has come into the darkened world, he is not to be thought of simply as the messenger, the conveyer, or the instrument of this revelation. He is himself this revelation and salvation, made fleshy and palpable for us fleshy recipients. That is why he can utter those majestic "I am" statements: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6), "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25)—I and I *alone*. There is a strong polemical tone in these claims: whatever the Old Testament said about the Mosaic Law, divine Wisdom, or the Word of God, I *am* all that, and no one else is. If you believe me, you will share in what I am. In brief, in John we have a christological implosion that creates a tremendous christological concentration. Any and every image or means of salvation collapses into the person of Jesus Christ (the christological implosion), thus creating an incredibly dense christology (the christological concentration).

This christological concentration, this dense christology of preexistence, incarnation, and salvation through revelation in no way annuls the importance of the cross at the end of the story. To be sure, the light of revelation begins to shine through the flesh of Jesus from the incarnation onwards. To be sure, that light grows ever brighter in the signs, the mira-

cles Jesus performs during his ministry (see 2:11; 11:40). But it shines out fully only when Jesus is exalted on the throne of the cross as King and is fully glorified (12:27-36; 17:1-5). Only when the light of the world is lifted high on the candelabrum of the cross can the whole world see and believe and be saved.

Now this is a highly speculative christology, woven together against the background of Old Testament statements about the Wisdom of God, against the background of Jewish-Hellenistic speculation about the Word of God, and against the background of speculation about saving knowledge circulating in Greco-Roman paganism. It might seem to be totally cut off from any concern about the historical Jesus. In fact, many questers for the historical Jesus completely ignore John's Gospel and examine only the Synoptics.

That is a mistake. Paradoxically, in the midst of John's high christology, we find many bits and pieces of primitive Jewish-Palestinian tradition going back to Jesus: for example, Jesus' close association with John the Baptist and his disciples (1:19-51); Jesus' adoption of John's practice of baptizing (3:22-4:2, with some rivalry resulting from the imitation); the very idea that Jesus' ministry lasted a couple of years, with a number of trips to Jerusalem; a more plausible chronology of the final days of Jesus' life; the view that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal, Jesus instead dying just before the Passover meal would begin (18:28; 19:14); and finally the absence of a full-blown trial of Jesus by the Jewish authorities before the Roman trial by Pilate (18:19-42). Thus, quite fittingly, the word of John's high christology is enfolded in concrete data about the historical Jesus, and modern questers ignore John's Gospel to their peril.

To be sure, the polemical emphasis in the Fourth Gospel is on the divine element. But, contrary to later gnostic interpreters, the human element is not forgotten or denigrated. Hence John's Gospel does point forward to the trinitarian and christological controversies of the patristic period. It provided controversial grist for the theological mill and yet contributed in no small way to the "orthodox" solution. In the year 451 the church Council of Chalcedon enunciated in carefully balanced, abstract philosophical formulas what John had proclaimed in a more diffuse manner within the narrative framework and functional christology of a New Testament Gospel: Jesus Christ is truly divine and truly human. More than in the other three Gospels, christology in John begins to move toward the metaphysical christology of the later patristic period.¹¹

11. See Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* (London: Mowbray, 1965); John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM, 1990); William P. Loewe, *The College Student's Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

V. CONCLUSION

I suppose the natural thing would be to conclude this essay with a stirring peroration. But the history of christology has been bedeviled by more than enough stirring and at times obfuscating rhetoric. I would prefer to conclude by repeating a warning I have sounded more than once in this essay. The theological achievement of John might tempt us to draw a neat, evolutionary, ascending line in New Testament christology: from primitive Mark, stressing Jesus' humanity, to speculative John, stressing his divinity—from low to high christology. But such a neat line would be simplistic for a number of reasons: (1) Mark is better described in terms of a stark, unexplained juxtaposition of high and low, divine and human, in Jesus. (2) Luke, a later Gospel, has in some ways the lowest—or at least the most eclectic—christology. (3) Various early hymns, such as the one in Philippians, show that elements of a high christology of preexistence and incarnation circulated in the first decades of Christianity. No, in the beginning was the grab bag. The New Testament documents sorted it out in a number of different ways, as did the patristic, medieval, and modern church. My two essays on Jesus Christ in the New Testament have simply continued the sorting and invited the reader to do the same.