

## JESUS AND THE IDENTITY OF GOD

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To address the subject of the theological significance of the earthly Jesus I take as my topic the central question of Jesus and God. The question must be approached from both sides. First, in what sense, if any, can we meaningfully use the word “god” to talk about the human Jesus, Jesus as he lived, walked, taught, healed, and died in first century Palestine? In what sense might Jesus conceivably have thought in these terms about himself? Can we, as historians, describe the way in which he might have wrestled with this question within the parameters of his own first century Jewish worldview? Second, what happens to our sense of the identity of God when we allow our long historical look at Jesus to influence what we mean by the endlessly fascinating word?<sup>1</sup>

From the earliest days of my theological education I was faced with the comment that, of course, no sane human being could think of himself as in any way “divine.” I did not know at the time what a long intellectual history of this position had or the ways in which it was part of the Enlightenment project to split the worlds of divine and human so that nothing could pass from the one to the other. As a result, the christological answer was in the last analysis contained within the premises. The stock answer from within the conservative Christianity which had nurtured me through my teens came from C.S. Lewis: Jesus was either mad, or bad, or he was “who he claimed to be.” Yes, we said, for anyone else to say such things would be either certifiably insane or at least wicked; but, since it was true in Jesus’ case, it was neither. There is a sense in which I still believe this, but it is a heavily revised sense and must be struggled for, not lightly won. There are no short-circuited arguments in the kingdom of God.

The basic assumption of the impossibility of Jesus thinking himself to be in any way “divine” was regularly backed up by a second point, which remains very influential, still being taken for granted by probably the majority of scholars, including some who think of themselves as “conservative.” No first century Jew, it is claimed, could think of himself in the way that Jesus, according to traditional readings of the NT, thought of himself. One response to this offered by implication only, since no one would dare say such a thing out loud in the post-holocaust world was that Jesus opposed first century Judaism, broke out of its constraining shackles, and was at liberty to think and say what he liked, and the same went for his followers.

The study of Jesus and the early Church, particularly of the rise of early christology, has remained under the shadow of these two denials. Most commentaries and monographs, articles and seminar papers, assume them, or at most make an almost mantra-like nod in their direction in order to seek elsewhere the origin of the strange belief in Jesus as simultaneously and fully divine and human. In particular, with the popularity of the hermeneutic of suspicion a third assumption has grown up alongside the other two, and I now regularly meet it all over the place: a high christology is really a

political power play, as you can see by looking at what happened under Constantine. Church and state settled down into their unworthy ménage, undermining the radical thrust of Jesus' original message, and as part of the package they divinized Jesus the way Emperors used to divinize themselves. The NT itself, and traditional readings thereof, thus stand condemned of compromising the pure original message. It is not only those on the extreme wing, such as Burton Mack, who believe and write this sort of thing.

Let me give three examples of the sort of position these assumptions produce, even among those who are self-confessed Christians. James Dunn, in his *Christology in the Making*<sup>2</sup> took it as axiomatic that a high christology meant a late, hellenized christology. He argued at great length that Paul, despite popular opinion, did not articulate a high christology in Philippians 2, 1 Corinthians 8, and similar well-known passages, but rather expressed an Adam-christology in which Jesus' humanity was highlighted, sometimes through the concept of Wisdom. It was only, according to Dunn, with John and Hebrews, and not consistently there either, that the move was made to say that Jesus was actually divine, and that move could only be explained as a switch away from Judaism and into Hellenism. Dunn assumed that the real incarnational theology was impossible from within Judaism, but also assumed the mainline presupposition of post-war NT scholarship that the early Christianity, including Paul, was at bottom Jewish rather than Hellenistic. Dunn was thus hailed by some as showing that Paul and the other early Christians really were thoroughly Jewish and had not compromised with Hellenism, but the cost was enormous. However, this did not seem to matter too much since incarnational theology has not been something that many NT scholars, even conservative and evangelical ones, wanted to find. As we shall see, conservative scholars were more often interested in the second coming of Jesus than the first.

The second example takes the same point and projects it back on to Jesus. In his 1980 Bampton Lectures Anthony Harvey argued that it was impossible that Jesus should have thought of himself as divine, since it was only when the gospel went out into the non-Jewish world that anybody could even think of such a thing.<sup>3</sup> Harvey, of course, was not the only person at the time to say this. Geza Vermes and others had been emphasizing it<sup>4</sup>, but Harvey said it with peculiar elegance. However, he believed that a way could still be found to an orthodox Christian affirmation, since we today discover by various routes that Jesus is worthy not only of our admiration but also of our worship. Jesus himself, however, would not have thought in this way.

This conclusion has clearly not proved satisfactory in the minds of most thinkers of the last twenty years. Book after book, at both a scholarly and popular level, on both sides of the Atlantic, has returned to the same point and made it the starting-point for a different exploration of what Jesus really said and thought. The first serious book I read on Jesus, if you can call it serious, was Hugh Schonfield's *The Passover Plot*. As you know, two or three such books are splashed around the publishing world every year. The fact that they are mutually incompatible does not deter authors and publishers from producing yet more Jesuses. Recently from one of the most famous pulpits in New England, a new book about Jesus was recommended to me on the grounds that the Jesus contained therein was opposed to capital punishment, was uninterested in sexual ethics,

and in various other ways (my summary) supported the liberal status quo. These are the books that are sold in Barnes and Noble, in Waterstones, in W. H. Smith. These are the books that people in my congregation, and perhaps yours, are likely to read. At a time when the general mood of the culture in which I live is deeply anti-Christian, ready to swallow anything, no matter how wild or wacky, as long as it is not orthodox Christianity, these are the books that feed the general cultural mood and that increase the sense that anyone who believes or practices anything like orthodox Christianity is simply living in cloud-cookoo-land. Our culture knows in its bones that Jesus could not have been like we traditionally say he was.

My third example is my good friend and colleague Marcus Borg, with whom I have discussed these issues dozens of times over the past decade. We have now collaborated on a book which sets out the main points of our dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Borg insists that he believes that Jesus is indeed the son of God, the savior of the world; but he insists equally that Jesus did not and could not have thought of himself in this way.<sup>6</sup> Borg, like a good many Jesus scholars, including major figures like Ed Sanders, simply did not think it possible that Jesus of Nazareth could have thought of himself as called to die for the sake of Israel or the world, still less that he shared an identity with Israel's God.

Recently, however, Borg has admitted, on the basis of my lengthy arguments in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, that it is after all possible to conceive of a first century Jew credibly coming to believe that he was called to die for the sins of Israel, and perhaps even of the world. Also he admits it is possible to conceive of a first century Jew credibly coming to believe that he was called to do and be what, in scripture, only YHWH, Israel's God, gets to do and to be. What is Borg's response? Simply this: such ideas are possible, but he does not accept that Jesus in fact thought this way. He does not accept such thinking because, as he says explicitly at one point, he does not like, or approve of that Jesus. Fine: now we know where we are.

### ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

It is important to begin by clarifying the question. When people ask "Was Jesus God?" they usually think they know what the word "God" means, and are asking whether we can fit Jesus into that. I regard this as deeply misleading. I can perhaps make my point clear by a personal illustration.

For seven years I was College Chaplain and Worcester College, Oxford. Each year I used to see the first year undergraduates individually for a few minutes, to welcome them to the college and make a first acquaintance. Most were happy to meet me; but many commented, often with slight embarrassment, "You won't be seeing much of me; you see, I don't believe in god."

I developed stock response: "Oh, that's interesting; which god is it you don't believe in?" This used to surprise them; they mostly regarded the word "God" as a univocal, always meaning the same thing. So they would stumble out a few phrases about the god they said they did not believe in: a being who lived up the in the sky, looking down

disapprovingly at the world, occasionally “intervening” to do miracles, sending bad people to hell while allowing good people to share his heaven. Again, I had a stock response for this very common statement of “spy-in-the-sky” theology: “Well, I’m not surprised you don’t believe in that god. I don’t believe in that god either.”

At this point the undergraduate would look startled. Then, perhaps, a faint look of recognition; it was sometimes rumored that half the college chaplains at Oxford were atheists. “No,” I would say; “I believe in the god I see revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.” What most people mean by “god” in late-modern western culture simply is not the mainstream Christian meaning.

The same is true for the meanings of “god” within postmodernity. We are starting to be more aware that many people give allegiance to “gods” and “goddesses” which are personifications of forces of nature and life. An obvious example is the earth-goddess, Gaia, revered by some within the New Age movement.<sup>7</sup> Following the long winter of secularism, in which most people gave up believing in anything “religious” or “spiritual,” the current revival of spiritualities of all sorts is an inevitable swing of the pendulum, a cultural shift in which people have been able once more to celebrate dimensions of human existence which the Enlightenment had marginalized. But one cannot assume that what people mean by “god” or “spirit,” “religion” or “spirituality” within these movements bears very much relation to Christianity. I even heard, not long ago, an Italian justifying the pornography which featured his high-profile wife on the grounds that its portrayal of sexuality was deeply “religious.” The Pope, he thought, would welcome it.

Eros has of course been well-known to students of divinities time out of mind. But only when a culture has forgotten, through long disuse, how god-language actually works could someone assume that the deeply “religious” feelings, evoking a sense of wonder and transcendence, which serious eroticism (and lots of other things) can produce, could be straightforwardly identified with anything in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Did they ever hear of paganism?

It is vital that in our generation we inquire once more: to what, or rather whom, does the word “god” truly refer? And if, as Christians, we bring together Jesus and God in some kind of identity, what sort of an answer does that provide to our question?

### “GOD” IN FIRST CENTURY JUDAISM

What did first century Jews, including Jesus and his first followers, mean by “god”? This is obviously the place to start. Their belief can be summed up in a single phrase: *creational and covenantal monotheism*.<sup>8</sup>

Some theologies, e.g., ancient Epicureanism and modern Deism, believe in a god, or gods, but think they have nothing much to do with the world in which we live. Others, like Stoicism, believe that god, or “the divine,” or “the sacred” is simply a dimension of our world, so that “god” and the world end up being pretty much the same thing. Both of

these can give birth to practical or theoretical atheism. The first can let its “god” get so far away that he disappears. This is what happened with Marx and Feuerbach in the nineteenth century, allowing the “absentee landlord” of eighteenth-century Deism to become simply an absentee. The second can get so used to various “gods” around the place that it ceases to care much about them. This is what happened with a good deal of ancient paganism in Greece and Rome, until, as Pliny wryly remarks, the arrival of Christianity stirred up pagans to a fresh devotion to their gods.<sup>9</sup>

The Jews believed in a quite different “god.” This god, YHWH, “the One Who Is,” the Sovereign One, was not simply the objectification of forces and drives within the world, but was the maker of all that exists. Several biblical books, or parts thereof, are devoted to exploring the difference between YHWH and the pagan idols: Daniel, Isaiah 40-55, and a good many Psalms spring obviously to mind. The theme is summed up in the Jewish daily prayer: “YHWH our God, YHWH is one!”<sup>10</sup>

Classic Jewish monotheism, then, believed that (a) there was one God, who created heaven and earth and who remained in close and dynamic relation with his creation; and that (b) this God had called Israel to be his special people. This twin belief, tested to the limit and beyond through Israel’s checkered career, was characteristically expressed through a particular narrative: the chosen people were also the rescued people, liberated from slavery in Egypt, marked out by the gift of Torah, established in their land, exiled because of disobedience, but promised a glorious return and final settlement. Jewish-style monotheism meant living in this story and trusting in this one true God, the God of creation and covenant, of Exodus and Return.

This God was utterly different from the pantheist’s “one god.” This is an important point to note: many, including many scholars, have blithely assumed that because Stoics and others talked about “one god” they were saying the same thing as the Jews. This God was also utterly different from the far-away ultra-transcendent gods of the Epicureans. Always active within his world, did he not feed the young ravens when they called upon him?<sup>11</sup>—he could be trusted to act more specifically on behalf of Israel. His eventual overthrow of pagan power at the political would be the revelation of his overthrow of the false gods of the nations. His vindication of his people, liberating them finally from all their oppressors, would also be the vindication of his own name and reputation. In justifying his people, he would himself be justified. In his righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, they would find their own.

This monotheism was never, in our period, an inner analysis of the being of the one God. It was always a way of saying, frequently at great risk: our God is the true God, and your gods are worthless idols. It was a way of holding on to hope. We can see the dynamic of this monotheism working its way out in the manifold crises of second-temple Judaism, with the Maccabees, Judas the Galilean, and above all the two wars of the late 60s and early 130s A.D. revealing how the creational and covenantal theology and worldview remained at work through the period and in different groups.

This God was both other than the world and continually active within it. The words “transcendent” and “immanent,” we should note, are pointers to this double belief, but do not clarify it much. Because this God is thus simultaneously other than his people and present with them, Jews of Jesus’ day had developed several ways of speaking about the activity of this God in which they attempted to hold together, because they dared not separate, these twin truths. Emboldened by deep-rooted traditions, they explored what appears to us a strange, swirling sense of a rhythm of mutual relations within the very being of the one God: a to-and-fro, a give-and-take, a command-and-obey, a sense of love poured out and love received. God’s Spirit broods over the waters, God’s Word goes forth to produce new life, God’s Law guides his people, God’s Presence or Glory dwells with them in fiery cloud, in tabernacle and temple. These four ways of speaking moved to and fro from metaphor to trembling reality-claim and back again. They enabled Jews to speak simultaneously of God’s sovereign supremacy and his intimate presence, of his unapproachable holiness and his self-giving compassionate love.

Best known of all is perhaps a fifth. God’s Wisdom is his handmaid in creation, the firstborn of his works, his chief of staff, his delight. God’s Wisdom is another way of talking about God present with his people in the checkered careers of the patriarchs and particularly in the events of the Exodus. Wisdom becomes closely aligned thereby with Torah and Shekinah.<sup>12</sup> Through the Lady Wisdom of Proverbs 1-8, the creator has fashioned everything, especially the human race. To embrace Wisdom is therefore to discover the secret of being truly human, of reflecting God’s image.<sup>13</sup>

I still find it extraordinary that nobody ever taught me all this when I was in seminary. The word “god” was a given, its meaning assumed, just at the moment when the word was going to explode in our faces. Nor can we look to Jewish scholars for help at this point, since they, by and large, have not been interested in the topic as such. So NT scholars have just assumed that, if first century Jews were monotheists, they could not in any way have anticipated trinitarian thinking. This I believe to be a huge category mistake at both ends. First, as systematic theologians would of course remind us at once, the point of trinitarian theology is precisely that it is monotheistic, not tri-theistic. Second, as I seem to be one of the only people, who keep on saying, first century Jewish monotheism was never in any case a numerical analysis of the being of the one God. Rather, as I have set out extremely briefly here, there were five ways (not to be confused with Aquinas’ five Ways!) in which second-Temple Jews could and did speak of the activity of the one God within the world, and particularly within Israel, without of course compromising their monotheism. I cannot stress too strongly that first century Judaism had at its heart what we can and must call several incarnational symbols, not least the Torah, but particularly the Temple. And, though this point has been routinely ignored by systematic theologians from the second century to the twentieth, it is precisely in terms of Torah and Temple that the earthly Jesus acted symbolically and spoke cryptically to define his mission and hint at his own self understanding.

## MONOTHEISM AND EARLY CHRISTOLOGY

Once we recognize, the “five ways” of speaking about God-at-work-in-the-world in first-century Judaism—something which, as I must stress, neither the study of the OT nor the study of the Fathers would have taught me—then it becomes obvious that the key central christological passages of the NT are all heavily dependent on precisely this way of thinking. They offer a very high, completely Jewish, and extremely early christology, something that is still routinely dismissed as impossible, both at the scholarly and the popular level.

This was not a matter, as has often been suggested, of the early Christians haphazardly grabbing at every title of honor they could think of and throwing them at Jesus in the hope that some of it might make some sense, rather like a modernist painter hurling paint at a canvas from twenty paces and then standing back to see if it said anything to him. Rather, all the evidence points to serious and disciplined theological thought on the part of the very earliest Christians. Refusing to contemplate any god other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they found themselves drawn by the Spirit to use language of Jesus, and indeed of the Spirit, which was drawn from the Jewish traditions and traditional ways of reading scripture. This language fit so well and enabled them to say so many things by way of worship, mission, proclamation, and ethics that they must have been daily encouraged to pursue the same line of thought, to turn it into hymns and layers and creedal formulae, discovering and celebrating a new dimension of something they already knew like someone who had only known melody suddenly discovering harmony.

The result of all this explosion of exciting but, as I have suggested, focused and disciplined thinking about Jesus and the Spirit is that, in effect, the NT writers offer an incipient trinitarian theology without needing to use any of the technical terms that later centuries would adopt for the same purpose. What is more, when we understand how their language works, we discover that it actually does the job considerably better than the later formulations.<sup>14</sup>

Let me put it like this, no doubt overstating the point for the sake of emphasis. Chalcedon, I think, always smelled a bit like a confidence trick, celebrating in Tertullian-like fashion the absurdity of what is believed, and gave hostages to fortune which post-Enlightenment fortune has been using well. But the NT writers, by re-using the Jewish god-language in relation to Jesus and the Spirit manage to say everything that needs to be said, and to make it look, from one point of view at least, so natural, so obvious, so coherent with the nature of God and with the full humanity of Jesus that fortune receives no hostages at all. Ironically, the Jewish setting and meaning were either misunderstood or forgotten so soon within the early Church that the fathers struggled valiantly to express the truth, but with one hand, the biblical one, tied behind their backs. We now have crowning irony after a long tradition in which orthodox theology has been “playing away from home” expressing Christian truth in non-biblical patristic and subsequent formulations, we are now told that if we wish to go back and discover what the NT meant within its own universe of discourse—in other words, the world of Second Temple Judaism—it is we who are playing away from home. And let us not be put off by the sneer that if these meanings were what God had intended us to have they would not have

been forgotten for two thousand years. Those who stand in the Reformation tradition should remember what Luther said when people tried to pull that trick on him.

My suggestion, then, is that the NT writers, despite what has been said about them again and again within post-Enlightenment biblical scholarship, can be shown to be expressing a fully, if from our viewpoint incipient, trinitarian theology, and to be doing so as a fresh and creative variation from within, not an abandonment of, their Second Temple Jewish god-view.

This rich seam of Jewish thought is the place the early Christians went quarrying for language to deal with the phenomena before them. To recapitulate: some have suggested that the impact of Jesus on the early Christians was so huge that they simply ransacked all their vocabulary of glory and splendor to find more and more honorific titles to heap on him, without much reflection on what they were doing. This does not do justice to what was actually going on. Some, conversely, have suggested that it was only when the early Church started to lose its grip on its Jewish roots and began to compromise with pagan philosophy that it could think of Jesus in the same breath as the one God. Jewish polemic has often suggested that the Trinity and the Incarnation, those great pillars of patristic theology, are sheer paganization. I shall argue against this view as well. The question can be posed thus: were the NT writers when describing Jesus losing touch with the real, historical, earthly, flesh-and-blood Jesus, and through ascribing something like “divinity” to him, were they creating a non-earthly “Christ of faith”?

Whatever we say of later Christian theology, this is certainly not true of the NT. Long before secular philosophy and its terminology was invoked to describe the inner being of the one God and the relation of this God to Jesus and to the Spirit), a vigorous and very Jewish tradition took the language and imagery of Spirit, Word, Law, Presence (and/or Glory) and Wisdom and developed them in relation to Jesus of Nazareth and the Spirit. One might think that a sixth was also explored, namely God’s Love, but for them God’s Love was already no mere personification, a figure of speech for the loving God at work, but a person, the crucified and risen Jesus. There is no time here to explore these themes in detail, but it is important to glance in outline at the way in which different writers developed these ideas.

Several of the Jewish themes I have mentioned come together in the famous Johannine prologue.<sup>15</sup> Jesus is here the Word of God. The passage as a whole is closely dependent on the Wisdom tradition, and is thereby closely linked with the Law and the Presence, or Glory, of God. “The Word became flesh, and tabernacled in our midst; we saw his glory, glory as of God’s only son.”<sup>16</sup> However much the spreading branches of Johannine theology might hang over the wall, offering fruit to the pagan world around, the roots of the tree are firmly embedded in Jewish soil.

Similar points can be made about the letter to the Hebrews. The christology of the opening verses of the letter is closely reminiscent of the portrait of Wisdom in Wisdom of Solomon chapter 7. The letter, of course, goes its own way by constructing a christology unique in the NT in terms of Jesus as both high priest and sacrifice, the ultimate reality to

which the figure of Melchizedek pointed. Convergence with the rest of early Christianity, however, is provided particularly through the development of the idea of Jesus' divine and Davidic sonship (dependent on such passages as 2 Sam 7:14<sup>17</sup>) and through Jesus' fulfillment of the prophesied destiny of the whole human race.<sup>18</sup>

John and Hebrews are usually regarded as late. What about the early material? Paul is our earliest Christian writer, and, interestingly, the earliest parts of his letters may be those which embody or reflect pre-Pauline Christian tradition.

Within that strand of material, three passages stand out.<sup>19</sup> In 1 Corinthians 8:6, within a specifically Jewish-style monotheistic argument, he adapts the Shema itself, placing Jesus within it: "For us there is one God—the Father, from whom are all things and we to him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and we through him." This is possibly the single most revolutionary christological formulation in the whole of early Christianity, staking out a high christology founded within the very citadel of Jewish monotheism.<sup>20</sup>

The same is true of Philippians 2:5-11 (often regarded as pre-Pauline, though Paul intends every word to bear weight within the wider letter). Paul this time draws on the fiercely monotheistic theology of Isaiah 40-55 to celebrate Christ's universal lordship: "At the name of Jesus", he declares, "every knee shall bow." Isaiah has YHWH defeating the pagan idols and being enthroned over them: Paul has Jesus exalted to a position of equality with "the Father" because he has done what, in Jewish tradition, only the one God can do. It is important to note here that, although Philippians 2:5-11 remains thoroughly within the Jewish world of thought, precisely from that world it confronts the pomp and pagan pretensions of Caesar. The language is reminiscent of imperial acclamation-formulae: Jesus, not Caesar, is the "servant" who is now to be hailed as "lord" and "savior." Jewish monotheistic theology with Jesus himself as its focus confronts pagan power with what is essentially a Jewish kingdom-of-God theology, which of course goes back to the earthly, human Jesus himself.

Despite its many differences with both 1 Corinthians 8 and Philippians 2, Colossians 1:15-20 belongs firmly on the same map. Its clear poetic structure reveals it to be a Wisdom poem, which explores the classic Jewish theme that the world's creator is also its redeemer and vice versa. The poem confronts the "powers of the world" with the news that their creator and lord is now revealed, made known, and worshipped as the one who has liberated his people from the grip precisely of those "powers."<sup>21</sup> But at every point of creation and redemption, as revealed by this poem, we discover, not Wisdom, but Jesus. The same point is made, by a sort of concentration of this theology into one statement, the spectacular verse in Colossians 2:9: "In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." We should not underestimate that word *somatikōs*, "bodily." Paul intends to speak, not of some disembodied theological cipher, but of the Jesus whose body was killed as the revelation of the love of God and raised to new life.<sup>22</sup>

Another passage, which is very different on the surface and very similar underneath is Galatians 4:1-11. Here Paul tells the story of the world as the story of God's freeing of

slaves and his making them his children, his heirs. As in the Exodus, the true God reveals himself as who he is, putting the idols to shame (4:8-11). But the God who has now revealed himself in this way is the God who “sends the son” (4:4) and then “sends the Spirit of the Son” (4:6). In these passages we have, within thirty years of Jesus’ death, what would later be called a very high christology. It is very early and very Jewish. The logic of the passage is that the Galatians must either learn to know the one true God in terms of Jesus and the Spirit or they will be in effect turning back to the principalities and powers to which they were formerly subject. Their choice is either incipient trinitarianism or a return to paganism.

Within these passages, and others like them (for instance, the remarkable Romans 8:3-4), Paul, like other NT writers, uses the phrase “son of God” to denote Jesus. Later Christian theologians, forgetting their Jewish roots, would of course read this as straightforwardly Nicene christology: Jesus was the second person of the Trinity. Many have assumed that this is meant by the phrase in John and Hebrews, though that assumption should probably be challenged.<sup>23</sup> Paul’s usage, though, is much subtler and offers further clues not only as to what the earliest Christians believed, but why “Son of God” in Jewish thought was used occasionally for angels, sometimes for Israel (e. g. Exod 4:22), and sometimes for the king. These latter uses (such as 2 Sam 7:14, Psa 2:7 and Ps 89:27) were influential both in sectarian Judaism (“son of God” is found as a messianic title at Qumran<sup>24</sup>) and in early Christianity. Since, the early Christians all regarded Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, the one in whom Israel’s destiny had been summed up, it is not surprising, whatever language Jesus had or had not used of himself, that they exploited this phrase—it is perhaps too formal and too redolent of the wrong way of doing NT christology to call it a “title”—which was available both in their Bible and their surrounding culture to denote Jesus and to connote his Messiahship.<sup>25</sup>

But already by Paul’s day something more was in fact going on. “Son of God” came quickly to be used as a further way, in addition to the five Jewish ways already available and exploited by the early Christians, of saying that what had happened in Jesus was the unique and personal action of the one God of Israel. It became another way of speaking about the one God present, personal, active, saving, and rescuing, while still being able to speak of the one God sovereign, creating, sustaining, sending, and remaining beyond. It was, in fact, another way of doing what neither Stoicism nor Epicureanism needed to do, and paganism in general could not do, but which Judaism offered a seemingly heaven-sent way of doing: holding together the majesty and the compassion of God, the transcendence and the immanence of God, creation and covenant, sovereignty and presence.

All this means that the phrase “son of God” taken out of context is not much help for deciding what a particular NT writer thought about Jesus. Put back in context, though, it appears as what it is: one focal point of a wide variety of arguments in which the Jewish messianic hope comes together with the Jewish expectation that YHWHY himself would be savingly present with his people. If this is not so, Paul’s usage is inexplicable. The death of God’s son can only reveal God’s love (as in, e.g., Rom 5:6-10) if the son is the

personal expression of God himself. It will hardly do to say “I love you so much that I’m going to send someone else.”

Similar exegetical points could be made from other NT writings, not least the very Jewish book of Revelation. But I have said enough to indicate, or at least point in the direction of, the remarkable phenomenon at the heart of earliest Christianity. Long before anyone talked about “nature” and “substance,” “person,” and “Trinity,” the early Christians had quietly but definitely discovered that they could say what they felt obliged to say about Jesus (and the Spirit) by telling the Jewish story of God, Israel and the world, in the Jewish language of Spirit, Word, Torah, Presence/Glory Wisdom, and now Messiah/Son. It is as though they discovered Jesus within the Jewish monotheistic categories they already had. The categories seemed to have been made for him. They fitted him like a glove. And—this being of course the point within the logic of this paper and this conference—it was the *human* Jesus, the *earthly* Jesus, that they fitted. It was not some nebulous “Christ of faith” that these writers were talking about. It was the one and only Jesus himself.

### THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTOLOGY

This raises in an acute form the question why they told the story the way they did. In the logic of this paper we now work backwards from what people said about Jesus a decade or three after his death and resurrection to what can be said about the human, earthly Jesus himself in his own time and even, dare we say, in his own mind.

At this point we need to ward off several frequent misunderstandings. I find myself not for the first time, in full agreement with Ernst Käsemann. In his famous 1953 lecture, which effectively launched the so-called “new quest,” he urged that without serious historical-Jesus study the Church and the world could re-invent Jesuses to suit their every whim.<sup>26</sup> That is the negative reason for engaging, as I believe every generation of the Church must engage, in the historical study of Jesus. Just as the Nazi theologians, Käsemann’s obvious target, had re-invented a non-Jewish Jesus so today people are inventing Jesuses who support all kinds of ideologies. And if we in the Church think we are immune from this, I would urge that we think again. Christians are alas, capable of all kinds of fantasies and anachronisms in reading the Gospels, and to pull the blanket of the canon over our heads and pretend that we are safe in our private, fideistic world is sheer self-delusion. It is demonstrably the case that where the Church has thought itself safe in its canonical world worshipping the ever-present ascended Jesus in prayer and the liturgy, it is capable of massive self-delusion and distortion.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not this reaches Docetism proper, without continuing attention to history we can pull and push the word “Jesus” this way and that and make it serve our own ends. It will not do, again, to sneer that historians always see the reflection of their own faces at the bottom of the well. Those who forswear historical Jesus study will find it impossible, ultimately, to escape seeing the reflection of their own faces in their dogmatic Christs.

But if that is the negative reason for engaging in historical Jesus study, as a kind of necessary check on fantasy and idolatry, the positive reason is so important, so exciting,

and in our generation so possible and accessible that I cannot begin to describe the frustration I experience when I find this enterprise caricatured, slighted, and dismissed with a wave of the hand. Just because Muzak and hard rock exist, that is no reason not to write great music today. The existence of kitsch does not mean that there is no such thing as great contemporary art. The existence of the Jesus Seminar does not mean that historical study of Jesus is a waste of time. If only people had read Ben Meyer's great book when it was published in 1979, twenty years of nonsense could have been avoided.<sup>28</sup>

The positive reason for studying Jesus within his historical context and using all the tools at our disposal to do so has to do with that still-neglected factor, the meaning of Israel within the purpose of God. If we are to be biblical theologians, it simply will not do to tell the story of salvation as simply creation, fall, Jesus, salvation. We desperately need to say: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, salvation. If we ask the question of how this particular human being is the instrument of salvation and do not say as our first answer, "because in him God's Israel-shaped plan to save the world came to fulfillment," then we leave a huge vacuum in our thinking (and in our reading of scripture). I believe it is because of this vacuum that people have elevated minor themes, such as the sinlessness of Jesus, to a prominence which, though not insignificant, they do not possess in the NT itself. Thus it is not enough merely to say "earthly" or to allude to Jesus' sandals, and then to proceed to construct a Christ-figure as a back-projection of a fully-formed theology. This approach is unacceptable for the same reason the approach of Crossan and others is unacceptable: they call their Jesus "Jewish" while actually constructing a Jesus out of symbolic features of the wider mediterranean world, ignoring many crucial elements of Jewish self-understanding. After all, it is precisely the cavil of the heterodox today that the Gospels themselves are the self-serving back-projections of a later, and perhaps corrupted, theology. I fail to see why we should provide such people with more ammunition than they already have.

At the human level, Jesus is like us precisely in this: he did not exist or think or feel or pray in a vacuum, but rather within a continuum, a web of socio-cultural symbolic resonances, a universe of discourse within which deeds, thoughts, and words carried layers of meaning. Orthodox Christians are frightened of letting Jesus belong to a world like this, precisely because we know that if he is like us in belonging to such a world, he will be very unlike us in that his world is not our world. We are therefore, eager to flatten his world out or to declare, it of little relevance, because we want to be able to carry him, his message, and his timeless achievement of salvation across to our world without losing anything in the process. In this eagerness we forget what the NT writers and above all Jesus himself never forgot: that salvation is of the Jews, not in some trivial sense, but in the rich sense that in order to save the world the creator God chose Abraham and said "in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed." It is precisely because Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of this promise that he is relevant in all times and places. It is precisely because he is The Jew par excellence that he is relevant to all Gentiles as well as Jews. This is the ultimately humiliating move for Gentile and Jew alike, precipitating an epistemology of humiliation whereby all may know this Jesus as the living, saving word of God, as different from us in the way that makes him the same

as us, as over against us and therefore relevant to us. God consigned all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all,<sup>29</sup> a comment that is as relevant to epistemology as it is to soteriology.

But it is not merely a NT dogma that Jesus brings the story of Israel to its climax, and so becomes the instrument of God's long-promised salvation. Israel's story is not a notion, floating two miles in the sky above the Palestine of Jesus' day. Israel's story was the real flesh-and-blood, wars-and-rumours-of-wars story of the Maccabees and the Herodians, of Judas the Galilean, Simon bar Giona, of the Jewish War, of Josephus, of a hundred kingdom movements and a hundred thousand crosses planted around Jerusalem. This was the story, the warts-and-all story, that Jesus of Nazareth brought to its god-ordained climax. If we want to know the truth of the salvation which he wrought, that is where we must look for it and not somewhere else. Otherwise, for all our impeccable orthodoxy, we might as well go back and shake hands with Rudolph Bultmann. We need to know what "kingdom of God" meant in the first century. We need to know what "son of man" meant. If we do not, we might as well substitute the word "enlightenment" for the first and the word "superman" for the second. As George Caird used to say, Christianity appeals to history, and to history it must go.

What sort of a task is this, then? It is not simply a matter of apologetics, though I do believe that proper historical Jesus study has enormous apologetic value as we are able to say that, yes, the gospel records do make sense within the world of first century Judaism, despite what the Jesus Seminar and the mass-market paperbacks tell us. Nor is this, taking up a point that Colin Gunton made, a matter of defending the Christian faith on grounds from outside of faith.<sup>30</sup> I want to affirm as strongly as I can that history is part of God's good creation and hence that historical research is part of our God-given cultural mandate. The thin, truncated, Enlightenment version of historiography, the pseudo-objective would-be neutral and presuppositionless study of the bare facts of the past, is a parody of the real thing, and woe betide us if we allow the parodies to put us off the reality. Even if this were not the case, I think we could still invoke Paul's program of taking every thought captive to obey Christ" and declare in any case that, if systematics is not performed with apologetics as its partner, it has shut itself in an ivory tower and thrown away the key. We are called to mission, including to the Enlightenment world, and we shall learn the truth as we learn how to declare it, how to give a reason to our contemporaries for the hope that is in us.

This means that, though I agree with Schleiermacher's notion of the eternal welling up from within history is not the way to find the activity of God, when it is Israel's history that we are talking about, things are rather different. This is the God given saving story of a muddled, often disobedient people who nevertheless carried within them the holy seed, the seed of promise. Let me give you an illustration. I have a houseplant in my living room, which someone gave me some years ago. I watered it, dusted its leaves, and watched it grow for two or three years. It had pleasant but undramatic green leaves. After that time, suddenly and without warning, from the center of the plant there grew a flower, tall, red, and spectacular. Nothing in the plant had prepared me for this but there it was. It belonged. That, after all, was what this plant had been all about. Apply that to

history in general, and you may end up with Schleiermacher. Apply it to the story of Israel, and you get Jesus.

I do not think we will find that the true Jesus is significantly different from the Jesus of the Gospels (as has now become literally a dogma in many critical circles), nor do I believe that we will know who the Jesus of the text of the Gospels actually was and is unless we go behind the text and find out what it actually means. You could almost say that this is not much more, basically than high-grade lexicography. Just as the Renaissance by its study of Greek enabled Erasmus and others to go behind the Vulgate and discover meanings in the NT which nobody had suspected and which proved quite revolutionary, so I believe that the explosion of study of Second Temple Judaism in our day enables us to go behind the received ways in which we have understood the words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters of the NT. We are enabled to discover meanings in our beloved Gospels, and hence meanings in our beloved Jesus, which we had never suspected and which may again prove quite revolutionary. I find myself accused by Crossan of being an “elegant fundamentalist” because the Jesus I arrive at by historical method makes sense as the Jesus of the Gospels,<sup>31</sup> and at the same time being accused of treachery by some of my friends for dabbling in the historical enterprise at all. As Käsemann himself said, this is what happens when you refuse to run with the hares or to hunt with the hounds.<sup>32</sup>

At the heart of this enterprise stands the question what Jesus thought about his own mission and identity? Did he think he was going to die for the sins of the world? Did he think he was in any sense the embodiment of Israel’s God? I cannot myself see that an orthodox christology or atonement theology can give a negative answer to either of those questions without running into serious difficulties. Can you really be God incarnate and have no idea of it? But equally I cannot think that an orthodox christology, which takes Jesus’ humanity at least as seriously as Chalcedon did, can avoid asking how Jesus could think thoughts like that precisely as a second-Temple Jew? Unless we are prepared to address the question in those terms we are simply being Apollinarian, producing a Jesus with a human body but a divine mind. And the New Testament’s own christology forbids me to suppose that such a hybrid does justice to God, to Jesus, or to salvation.

Out of all this, I have argued in various places that we can, as historians, properly reconstruct Jesus of Nazareth’s sense of vocation. We can study John the Baptist’s vocation, and Paul’s: why should we not study Jesus’? When we do so, we find that dozens and dozens of lines of inquiry converge to produce a well ordered, coherent, historically credible sense of vocation, emerging in central symbolic actions, hinted at in a hundred cryptic and teasing sayings. Jesus believed he was Israel’s Messiah, the one in whom Israel’s history was to be summed up. Jesus believed he would win the messianic victory over the real enemy and would build the true messianic temple through taking Israel’s fate upon himself and going to the cross. Jesus believed that in doing so he was not just pointing to or talking about, but was actually embodying, the return of YHWH to Zion. These, though striking and startling, emerge from the world of Second Temple Judaism like the flower growing suddenly out of the plant. They were not expected, but upon inspection this is where they belonged. All the elements of the package were

around somewhere in the culture. They are not, repeat not, a retrojection of later Christian theology, not even of later NT theology, which by and large developed in other legitimate ways. They are only credible, but they are totally credible, as the historically reconstructed mindset of Jesus himself. And they form, not the substance of later atonement and incarnational theology, but its historical starting point.

A couple of smaller points. It is often supposed that addressing this question involves psychoanalyzing Jesus. It does not. It involves doing what historians always do: inquiring after motivation, worldview, and the things that make characters in the story act as they did.

Likewise, it is often supposed that the resurrection (whatever we mean by that) somehow “proves” Jesus’ “divinity.” If this were the case, whatever we said about Jesus’ own historical life and his self-awareness during it would be ultimately irrelevant. We could still have a (risen) “Christ of faith” separated from the earthly, and perhaps non-divine, “Jesus of history.” This seems to me to short circuit the reasoning that in fact took place. Suppose one of the two brigands crucified alongside Jesus had been raised from the dead. People would have said the world was a very odd place; they would not have said that the brigand was therefore divine. No, the basic meaning of the resurrection, as Paul says in Romans 1:4, was that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. As I have argued elsewhere, this led quickly within earliest Christianity to the belief that his death was therefore not a defeat, but a victory, the conquest of the powers of evil and the liberation, the Exodus, of God’s people and, in principle, of the world. In Jesus, in other words, Israel’s God, the world’s creator, had accomplished at last the plan he had been forming ever since the covenant was forged in the first place. In Jesus God had rescued Israel from her suffering and exile. And then the final step, in Jesus God had done what, in the Bible, God had said he would do himself. He had heard the people’s cry and come to help them.

Ultimately then it is true that Jesus’ resurrection led the early Church to speak of him within the language of Jewish monotheism, but there was no easy equation. Resurrection pointed to messiahship, messiahship to the task performed on the cross, and that task to the God who had promised to accomplish it himself. From there on it was a matter of rethinking, still very Jewishly, how these things could be.

Does any of this train of thought go back to Jesus himself? I have argued that it does.<sup>33</sup> This is not the same as Jesus’ messianic vocation. It cannot be read off from the usage of any “titles” such as “son of God” or “son of man.” It is not difficult I believe, to establish that Jesus of Nazareth believed himself to be Israel’s Messiah, but this tells us nothing about whether he believed himself to be in any sense identified with Israel’s God. Lots of other people within a hundred years either side of Jesus believed themselves to be God’s anointed, and we have no reason to suppose that any of them imagined themselves to be in any sense “divine.”<sup>34</sup> No, the case for saying that Jesus thought of himself in a way which stands in continuity though not identity with what Paul and the other NT writers said about him grows out of Jesus’ basic kingdom proclamation and out of Jesus’

conviction that it was his task and role, his vocation, not only to speak of this kingdom but also to enact and embody it.

I have argued elsewhere that a central feature of Jewish expectation, and kingdom expectation at that, in Jesus' time was the hope that YHWH would return in person to Zion. Having abandoned Jerusalem at the time of the exile, his return was delayed, but he would come back at last. Within this context, someone who told cryptic stories about a king or a master who went away, left his servants with tasks to perform, and then returned to see how they were getting on must—not “might,” must point to this controlling, over-arching metanarrative. Of course, the later Church, forgetting the first century Jewish context, read such stories as though they were originally about Jesus himself going away and then returning in a “second coming.” Of course, cautious scholars noticing this, deny that Jesus would have said such things. I propose that here at the heart of Jesus' work, and at the moment of its climax, Jesus not only told stories about the king, who came back to Zion to judge and to save. He acted as though he thought the stories were coming true in what he himself was accomplishing. This is the context, at last, in which I think it best to approach the question with which this essay began.

The question of “Jesus and God” is a huge and difficult matter. Caricatures abound: Jesus who wanders round with a faraway look, listening to the music of the angels, remembering the time when he was sitting up in heaven with the other members of Trinity, having angels bring him bananas on golden dishes. (I do not wish to caricature the caricatures: but you would be surprised what devout people sometimes believe.) Equally, what passes for historical scholarship sometimes produces an equal and opposite caricature: the Jesus who wandered around totally unreflective, telling stories without perceiving how they would be heard, announcing God's kingdom, speaking of bringing it about, yet failing to ruminate on his own role within the drama. We must not, as many have done, lose our nerve, and start asking the “sort of” questions (e.g., “what sort of person would think he was divine?”) that depend for their rhetorical force on the implied assumption “within our culture.” Too many have been content with the cheap retort that anyone supposing himself to be God incarnate must be mad, and we do not think Jesus was mad. As it stands, this invites another fairly obvious retort: some of Jesus' opponents, and some even in his own family, thought he was out of his mind, and it is unlikely in the extreme that the early church made these charges up. But the question is still wrongly put. What we should be asking is: never mind what would count in our culture, how would a first century Jew have approached and thought about these matters?

There is some evidence—cryptic, difficult to interpret, but evidence none the less—that some first century Jews had already started to explore the meaning of certain texts, not least Daniel 7, which spoke of Israel's God sharing his throne with another (something expressly denied, of course, in Isaiah 42-8).<sup>35</sup> These were not simply bits of speculative theology. They belonged, as more or less everything did at that period, to the whirling world of politics and pressure groups, of agendas and ambitions, all bent on discovering how Israel's God would bring in the kingdom and how best to speed the process on its way. To say that someone would share God's throne was to say that,

through this one, Israel's God would win the great decisive victory. This is what, after all, the great Rabbi Akiba seems to have believed about bar-Kochba.

And Jesus seems to have believed it about himself. The language was deeply coded, but the symbolic action was not. He was coming to Zion, doing what YHWH had promised to do. He explained his action with riddles all pointing in the same direction. Recognize this, and you start to see it all over the place, especially in parables and actions whose other layers have preoccupied us. Why, after all, does Jesus tell a story about a yearning father in order to account for his own behavior?<sup>36</sup> It is this that also accounts for his sovereign attitude to Torah, his speaking on behalf of Wisdom, and his announcement of forgiveness of sins.<sup>37</sup> By themselves none of these would be conclusive. Even if they are allowed to stand as words and actions of Jesus, they remain cryptic. But predicate them of the same young man who is then on his way to Jerusalem to confront the powers that be with the message and the action of the kingdom of God and who tells stories as he does which are best interpreted as stories of YHWH returning to Zion, then you have reached. I believe, the deep heart of Jesus' own sense of vocation. He believed himself called to do and be what in the scriptures only Israel's God did and was.

Or suppose we approach the matter from another angle, vital and central but, remarkably enough frequently overlooked. Jesus' actions during the last week of his life focused on the Temple. Judaism had two great incarnational symbols. Temple and Torah: Jesus seems to have believed it was his vocation to upstage the one and outflank the other. Judaism spoke of the presence of her God in her midst, in the pillar of cloud and fire, in the Presence ("Shekinah") in the Temple. Jesus acted and spoke as if he thought he were a one-man counter-temple movement. So, too, Judaism believed in a God who was not only high-and-mighty, but also compassionate and caring, tending his flock like a shepherd, gathering the lambs in his arms. Jesus used just that God-image, more than once, to explain his own actions. Judaism believed that her God would triumph over the powers of evil, within Israel as well as outside. Jesus spoke of his own coming vindication, after his meeting the Beast in mortal combat. Jesus, too, used the language of the Father sending the Son. The so-called Parable of the Wicked Tenants could just as well be the Parable of the Son Sent at Last. His awareness, in faith, of the one he called Abba, Father, sustained him in his messianic vocation to Israel and enabled him to act as his Father's personal agent to her.<sup>38</sup> So we could go on. Approach the incarnation from this angle, and it is no category mistake, but the appropriate climax of creation. Wisdom, God's blueprint for humans, at last herself becomes human. The Shekinah glory turns out to have a human face.

What are we therefore saying about the earthly Jesus? In Jesus himself, I suggest we see the biblical portrait of YHWH come to life: the loving God, rolling up his sleeves (Isa 52:10) to do in person the job that no one else could do, the creator God giving new life the God who works through his created world and supremely through his human creatures, the faithful God dwelling in the midst of his people, the stern and tender God relentlessly opposed to all that destroys or distorts the good creation, and especially human beings, but recklessly loving all those in need and distress. "He shall feed his

flock like a shepherd; he shall carry the lambs in his arms; and gently lead those that are with young” (Isa 40:11). It is the OT portrait of YHWH, but it fits Jesus like a glove.

Let me be clear, also, what I am not saying. I do not think Jesus “knew he was God” in the same sense that one knows one is tired or happy, male or female. He did not sit back and say to himself “Well I never! I’m the second person of the Trinity!” Rather, “as part of his human vocation grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, he believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be.”<sup>39</sup> I commend to you this category of “vocation” as the appropriate way forward for talking about what Jesus knew and believed about himself. This Jesus is both thoroughly credible as a first century Jew and thoroughly comprehensible as the one to whom early, high, Jewish christology looked back.

### JESUS AND CHRISTOLOGY TODAY

What are the implications of all this for how we approach questions of christology today?

Two words by way of personal testimony are appropriate. First, the Jesus I have discovered through historical research is certainly not the reflection of my own face. I wish I looked more like him, but I am still struggling a lot with that. Nor is he the Jesus I expected or wanted to find when I began this work nearly twenty years ago. Studying Jesus has been the occasion for huge upheavals in my personal life, my spirituality, my theology, and my psyche. The good news is that this has been a healing, though deeply challenging and often wounding, process. Second, the Jesus I have discovered is clearly of enormous relevance to the contemporary world and Church. I know that others with very different Jesuses would say this as well, so you may find the point irrelevant. But, I continually get unsolicited letters from clergy and lay people around the world who tell me that reading what I have written about Jesus has revolutionized their ministries and their Christian discipleship. That does not mean that what I have written is all true; merely that it is not trivial or irrelevant for the life and mission of the Church.

Thinking and speaking of God and Jesus in the same breadth is not, as has often been suggested, a category mistake. Of course, if you start with the Deist god and the reductionists’ Jesus, they will never fit, but then they were designed not to. Likewise, if you start with the New Age gods-from-below, or for that matter the gods of ancient paganism, and ask what would happen if such a god were to become human, you would end up with a figure very different from the one in the gospels. But if you start with the God of the Exodus, of Isaiah, of creation and covenant, of the Psalms, and ask what that God might be like, were he to become human, you will find that he might look very much like Jesus of Nazareth, and perhaps never more so than when he dies on a Roman cross. Start with the Deist God, and your historical Jesus study will only achieve incarnational christology by sliding towards docetism. Start with the real historical earthly Jesus, and your God will come running down the road to meet you, deeply attractive, deeply

preachable, deeply challenging in his transforming embrace. That, for me, is the theological significance of the earthly Jesus.

Anyone can, of course, declare that this picture was read back by the early Church into Jesus' mind. The evidence for this is not good. The early Church did not make much use of these themes. There is, of course, some overlap, but also quite substantial discontinuity. (This, ironically, may be why this latent christology has often gone unnoticed. Scholar and pietist alike have preferred the early Church's christological formulations to Jesus' christological vocation. The pietist read them back into Jesus' mind, and the scholar declared them impossible and then argued on that basis for an unreflective or reductionist Jesus.) As with Jesus' Messiahship and his vocation to suffer and die, the key sayings remain cryptic, only coming into focus when grouped around the central symbolic actions. The early Church was not reticent about saying that Jesus was Messiah, that his death was God's saving act, and that he and his Father belonged together within the Jewish picture of the one God.

I see no reason why the contemporary Church should be reticent about this either. Using incarnational language about Jesus, and Trinitarian language about God, is of course self-involving; it entails a commitment of faith, love, trust, and obedience. But there is a difference between self-involving language and self-referring language. I do not think that when I use language like this about Jesus and God I am merely talking about the state of my own devotion. I think I am talking, self-involvingly of course, about Jesus and God.

All this leads, in conclusion, to the area which, it seems to me, is just as vital a part of the contemporary christological task as learning to speak truly about the earthly Jesus and his sense of vocation. We must learn to speak in the light of this Jesus about the identity of the one true God. I have no time or space to develop this. What follows is an attempt to summarize material that could easily turn into a whole other paper, or more.<sup>40</sup>

Western orthodoxy has for too long had an overly lofty, detached, high-and-dry, uncaring, uninvolved, and (as the feminist would say) kyriarchical view of god. It has always tended to approach the christological question by assuming this view of god and then fitting Jesus into it. Hardly surprising, the result was a docetic Jesus, which in turn generated the protest of the eighteenth century and historical scholarship since then, not least because of the social and cultural arrangements which the combination of semi-Deism and docetism generated and sustained. That combination remains powerful, not least in parts of my own communion, and it still needs a powerful challenge. My proposal is not that we understand what the word "god" means and manage somehow to fit Jesus into that. Instead, I suggest that we think historically about a young Jew, possessed of a desperately risky, indeed apparently crazy, vocation, riding into Jerusalem in tears, denouncing the Temple, and dying on a Roman cross—and that we somehow allow our meaning for the word "god" to be recentered around that point.

We could only ask the "kenotic" question in the way we normally do—did Jesus "empty himself" of some of his "divine attributes" in becoming human?—if we were

tacitly committed to a quite unbiblical view of God, a high and majestic God for whom incarnation would be a category mistake and crucifixion a scandalous nonsense. The NT, on the contrary, invites us to look at this Jesus—the earthly Jesus, the Jesus of Second Temple Judaism, the kingdom-movement man, the ambiguous double revolutionary, the parabolic teaser, the healer, the man who wept over Jerusalem and then sweated drops of blood in Gethsemane—to look at this Jesus and to say with awe and wonder and gratitude, not only “Ecce Homo,” but “Ecce Deus.”

Let me put it like this. After fifteen years of serious historical Jesus study, I still say the creed *ex animo*; but I now mean something very different by it, not least by the word “god” itself. The portrait has been redrawn. At its heart we discover a human face, surrounded by a crown of thorns. God’s purpose for Israel has been completed. Salvation is of the Jews, and from the King of the Jews it has come. God’s covenant faithfulness has been revealed in the good news of Jesus, bringing salvation for the whole cosmos.

The thing about painting portraits of God is that, if they do their job properly, they should become icons. That is, they should invite not just cool appraisal, but worship though the mind must be involved as well as the heart and soul and strength in our response to this God. That is fair enough, and I believe that this God is worthy of the fullest and richest worship that we can offer. But, as with some icons, not least the famous Rublev painting of the three men visiting Abraham, the focal point of the painting is not at the back of the painting but on the viewer. Once we have glimpsed the true portrait of God, the onus is on us to reflect it: to reflect it as a community, to reflect it as individuals. The image of the true and living God, once revealed in all its glory, is to be reflected into all the world, as was always God’s intention. The mission of the Church can be summed up in the phrase “reflected glory.” When we see, as Paul says, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, we see this not for our own benefit, but so that the glory may shine in us and through us to bring light to the world that still waits in darkness and the shadow of death.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper expands and develops chapter 10 of N. T. Wright and Marcus J. Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999). It also stands on the shoulders of *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), chapters 2-6; *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), esp. chapter 13; and sundry smaller publications, e.g., *The Crown and the Fire*, *Following Jesus*, *The Lord and his Prayer*, and *For All God’s Worth* (all published by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994 to 1997).

<sup>2</sup> James D. G. Dunn. *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Westminster Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony E. Harvey. *Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures, 1980* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 173.

<sup>4</sup> Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973); *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM, 1983); *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM, 1993).

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<sup>5</sup> Wright and Borg. *The Meaning of Jesus*.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row. 1987); *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco. 1994); *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press international, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> I have written about contemporary divinities in *Bringing the Church to the World* (Bethany Books. 1993).

<sup>8</sup> For full discussion, see my *The New Testament and the People of God*, volume 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, chapter 9.

<sup>9</sup> Pliny The Younger, *Letters*, 10.96.9f.

<sup>10</sup> Deut 6:4, The opening words of the prayer known as the: Shema. There are various other possible ways of translating the underlying Hebrew, e. g., “YHWH our God is one YHWH” or “YHWH is our God, YHWH alone.”

<sup>11</sup> Psa 147:9.

<sup>12</sup> See particularly Wisdom 10-11; Sirach 24.

<sup>13</sup> In Hebrew all five are represented by feminine nouns.

<sup>14</sup> I do not know why I should find this surprising. Perhaps it is because systematic theologians seem so much more at home with the patristic concepts and technical terms and how they work than with the biblical ones, which they have assumed to be of little value for serious constructive systematics, perhaps because of what their post-Enlightenment biblical teachers told them when they were students.

<sup>15</sup> John 1:1-18; cf. *The New Testament and the People of God*. 410-417. Klyne Snodgrass helpfully suggests to me that Exodus 33 and 34 are to be heard closely behind the Johannine text; this enriches the reading still further.

<sup>16</sup> John 1:14; cf. Sirach 24. On the comparison cf. *The New Testament and the People of God*. 413-416.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Heb 1:5.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Heb 2:5-9, cf. 1 Cor 15:27; Eph 1:22; Phil 3:21. All these passages either quote or allude to Ps 8:4-8, esp. v. 7.

<sup>19</sup> For which, see the detailed studies in *The Climax of the Covenant*, chapters 4, 5 and 6; and *What St Paul Really Said* (Oxford: Lion: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), chapter 4.

<sup>20</sup> See N. T. Wright. “One God, One Lord, One People: Incarnational Christology for a Church in a Pagan Environment,” *Ex Auditu* 7 (1991): 45-58.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Col 2:14f.

<sup>22</sup> Compare the logic of Rom 5:6-11. It is because Jesus is God’s son in a fully personal and ontological sense that his death reveals God’s love. Adoptionism would make nonsense of Paul’s whole central argument at this point.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. George B. Caird and L.D. Hurst, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 320f. This is not to say, as some have assumed, that the usage is therefore implying an adoptionist christology.

<sup>24</sup> In 4Q174. The meaning of the same phrase in 4Q246 is disputed.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. too Rom 1:3-4, where, though “son of God” means more than “Messiah,” it does not mean less.

<sup>26</sup> E. Käsemann, “The New Quest for The Historical Jesus.” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London. SCM, 1964 [1960]), 15-47.

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<sup>27</sup> That is my main answer to Luke T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979); cf. his *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, no. 17 (Allison Park, PA.: Pickwick Publications, 1989), and *Christus Faber: The Master-Builder and the House of God*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series, no. 29 (Allison Park, PA.: Pickwick Publications, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Rom 11:32

<sup>30</sup> See also Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), x.

<sup>31</sup> A point I share in principle, of course, with Albert Schweitzer. See Crossan. “What Victory? What God?,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997) 345-358.

<sup>32</sup> I am reminded of the tombstone in Tübingen of Adolf Schlatter, who similarly stood at the crossroads and was shot at from both sides. It carries a quotation from John 7:37: “If any man thirst let him come to me and drink.” The engraver, however, made a Freudian slip and put the reference as John 8.37, which of course reads “I know that you are Abraham’s children, but you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you.

<sup>33</sup> In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, chapter 13, to which the following is necessarily and obviously indebted.

<sup>34</sup> Though Eusebius and Jerome have an interesting remark about bar-Kochba supposing himself to be a luminary descended from heaven (possibly a wrong deduction from his nickname); Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History* 4.6.2; Jerome, *ad Rufinum* 3.31. See *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 627f, and note 66.

<sup>35</sup> On throne imagery and the idea of sharing God’s throne, see *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 624-629.

<sup>36</sup> For this and what follows see the close listing of material and the argument of *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 645-651.

<sup>37</sup> Neusner, in an interview following the publication of his book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus: An Intermillennial Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), declared that Jesus attitude to Torah made him want to ask: “Who do you think you are? God?”

<sup>38</sup> *Jesus and the Victory of God*. 648-50.

<sup>39</sup> *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 653.

<sup>40</sup> What follows is borrowed from my article “A Biblical Portrait of God in N. T. Wright, Keith Ward and Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Changing Face of God: Lincoln Lectures in Theology* 1996 (Lincoln Studies in Theology 2, Lincoln, UK: Lincoln Cathedral Publications, 1996) 9-29. I would like to develop these ideas in dialogue with, the proposals of Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), sometimes in agreement with him and sometimes not.