

Dimensions of Love: Christology from Pentecost to Colossae

For you utter many blasphemies, in that you seek to persuade us that this crucified man was with Moses and Aaron, and spoke to them in the pillar of the cloud; then that he became man, was crucified, and ascended up to heaven, and comes again to earth, and ought to be worshipped.¹

Christian apologist Justin Martyr placed these words into the mouth of his Jewish opponent Trypho in the second Century. Whether an accurate reflection of contemporary Jewish feeling or no, Trypho's objection vocalizes a question that has long puzzled scholars: how could monotheistic Jewish faith have given birth to the Trinitarian Christianity we know today? And how did the first Century church come to worship a 'crucified man'? This essay traces some possible answers to this dilemma, and suggests ways in which we might view the Christological question in a new light.

Christological Polyphony

The New Testament contains a chorus of Christological voices, often harmonious and occasionally dissonant.² Important among such voices are Luke/Peter in Acts 2, and Paul in Colossians 1-2. Engaging with these texts today, we listen also for the voices of the communities in which they emerged, voices of interpreters down the centuries, and voices that make up our own contemporary frame of reference; for '[r]eading is always contextual'.³ Finally there is the daunting and enticing possibility of hearing the voice of God himself in the midst of them all.

Lines of Development

¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 48:1.

² James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Enquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM, 1980), 62.

³ Brian J. Walsh & Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 18.

Mapping Christological development in the NT is problematic because there is little scholarly consensus regarding the chronology of the texts.⁴ Wright dates Colossians in the early 50s C.E.; if this is accurate, then the ideas contained in the letter surface between the events of the 30s *described* in Acts 2 and their final writing up by Luke, possibly as early as the 60s.⁵ Even allowing for Lukan reworking of Peter's sermon, it is conceivable that the text authentically preserves something of the apostles' post-resurrection conceptions of Jesus.⁶ It is then legitimate to speak of a 'development' of Christology from Pentecost to Colossae, but articulating a linear progression goes too far beyond the evidence.⁷ What we *can* say with confidence is that the NT texts are products of the same nascent Christian thought-world, of which Paul, Luke and Peter are part.⁸

Cruciform Christology

Christology is usually portrayed on a 'vertical' axis. 'Low' Christology begins with Jesus' humanity; 'high' Christology stresses his divinity. The portraits of Jesus in our two passages can certainly be contrasted in these terms. However, this carries danger of unhelpful polarization.⁹ It is also only half the story. The trajectory of the gospel is certainly *vertical* - the descent and ascent of the Saviour - but it is also *horizontal* - the broadening of salvation to the whole of creation. An adequate Christology sketches both dimensions; it looks *cruciform*. As Jesus is 'lifted up' on the cross, so he opens wide his arms of love to reach and redeem the whole of creation. The birth of the missional Church can be understood in this way too: as

⁴ Dunn, *Christology*, 61.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 12, Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 39; Victor E. Vine, "The Purpose and Date of Acts", *Expository Times* 96:45 (1984), 45-47.

⁶ C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles Vol. 1* (ICC Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 133.

⁷ Paula Fredrikson, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale, 1988), 19.

⁸ See N.T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God Vol. 1: The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 357-358.

⁹ Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2009) 16-17.

Jesus ascended 'vertically' to heaven, so he commissioned God's people to their mission 'horizontally', to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8-11). Specifically, it is this horizontal broadening from Jewish origins to Gentile inclusion that is the touchstone of Luke's work. As we shall see, this finds full expression in the Christology of Paul.

Revealing Lord

The Christology of Acts is often described as 'low', or even 'absent'.¹⁰ Peter proclaims Jesus as a 'man' wholly dependent on God (2:22); all divine activity is attributed to the Father (23; 24; 32; 36). Jesus is Spirit-giver only by the Father's bequest (33). Davidic psalms serve as proofs, not principally of Jesus' divinity, but of his identity as the human Jewish Messiah (36). However, on the evidence of the resurrection (upon which much of Peter's argument hangs) this Messiah is clearly more than a *mere* man. Peter's climactic use of '*kyrios*' (36) echoes the Joel quotation (20-21) and David's superior (34, cf. Luke 2:41-44).¹¹ Here then is perhaps an *implicitly* high Christology. But can we see the *pre-existent* Christ anywhere? Dunn baldly asserts His absence from the whole of Acts.¹² However, O'Collins argues that it makes no sense to present Jesus '*exalted*' as '*Lord*' at '*the right hand of God*' (clearly a position of cosmic power) unless in fact this elevated position were his eternal birth right.¹³ Acts 2 presents Jesus' resurrection and ascension not in some proto-adoptionist scheme, but rather as the decisive vindication of Christ's heretofore-veiled divinity.

New Israel, New Horizons

But the Christology of Acts 2 is as concerned with the horizontal as the vertical. Ethnic Jews and Gentile converts comprise Peter's audience (5-11); they

¹⁰ George W. MacRae, "Whom Heaven Must Receive Until the Time: Reflections on the Christology of Acts", *Interpretation* 27 No.2 (April 1973), p 151-165, 158, following CFD Moule.

¹¹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 179-180; cf. O'Collins, *Christology*, 137.

¹² Dunn, *Christology*, 51.

¹³ O'Collins, *Christology*, 137; also Hurtado *Lord Jesus*, 179-80.

witness the inauguration of the Church's world-wide mission with the Spirit's coming (1:8), a phenomenon Peter quickly imbues with wider significance through the Joel passage (17:21).¹⁴ The Christology of Acts 2 firstly addresses specifically the *Jewish* questions of Jesus' messianic identity, and the culpability of the Jewish people for his murder. For this reason, Acts 2 is one provocation for Fredriksen's invective against what she sees as a conspiratorial demonization of the Jews by the NT writers.¹⁵ But while Peter here accuses the Jews, he does not *condemn* them; he rather invites a prodigal Israel to a generous reconciliation (38-39). Acts 2 then, shows a *narrow-but-broadening* Christology: beginning with the Nazarene Messiah, Peter extends Jesus' saving identity to those diaspora Jews 'who link Jerusalem with the rest of the world and represent all the nations'.¹⁶ Peter's portrait of Jesus is one of the obedient servant-priest of God, now the exalted mediator of God's Spirit: essentially, Jesus is the *new Israel*. He is the first fruit of a renewed society living in perfect relation with her God, fulfilling her destiny *as a light to all nations* (Is. 49:6). That the Jews so totally missed the coming of Messiah (even to the point of crucifying him) explains perhaps why Peter's audience were so 'cut to the heart.'

Creation and Time

By the time Paul wrote Colossians, Church and Christology have clearly moved on from Pentecost. 'Vertical' developments are clear: Paul no longer finds it necessary to 'prove' Jesus' messiahship; Jesus is now synonymous with 'Christ' (1:1, 3, 7, 24). Jesus is not just an exalted 'man' - he is the 'image of the invisible God' (15), in whom resides all God's 'fullness' (19). The flow of the Christ-hymn (1:15-20) actually reverses Acts 2:22-36: where Peter's sermon argued from Jesus' Passion and resurrection to the conclusion that he is Lord and Christ, Paul *begins* with Jesus' Lordship and consummates His eternal divinity with the incarnation and atonement (1:19-20). Whispers of pre-existence in Acts are now shouted from the rooftops (1:15-18). Dunn argues that Christ's 'first-ness' is only really that of *status*; Wright,

¹⁴ Compare the provincial 'Galileans' of v7.

¹⁵ Fredericksen, *From Jesus*, 196.

¹⁶ O'Collins, *Christology*, 111.

correctly in my view, sees primacy of both time and rank.¹⁷ Whereas Peter's temporal sphere in Acts is chiefly 'this corrupt generation' (2:40), Paul extends the Christ-event both backward and forward through the structure of the hymn.¹⁸ Christ is the agent both of the original creation (1:15-16), and of the new creation of the Kingdom (1:18; cf. 1:13), past, present and future (23).¹⁹ Christ, then, is no longer simply the New Israel - he is the New Genesis as well.²⁰

Expanding Monotheism

In Col 1:19-20, Paul manages to express the 'full divinity of the man Jesus [...] without any implication that there are two Gods.'²¹ But how could he, a committed monotheist, sail so close to the wind? Context provides some clues. Paul is writing to a Gentile church, founded by a Gentile - Epaphras.²² The pregnant promise of 'light to the Gentiles' conceived in Acts has now given birth. The 'breadth' of Colossians' Christology, then, may help to explain its 'height'. That Jesus is supernatural Saviour of *all* has been borne out by the evidence of the last twenty years of Gentile missions. Peter's embrace of Gentile fellowship (though faltering, cf. Galatians 2:11-14), sealed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 10) is a pivotal moment in the broadening process we have been describing. The *experience* of the expanding Church then, legitimizes the boldness of Paul's all-encompassing Christological statements. As Jesus is *demonstrated* to be Yahweh's agent of power in the present, so it is not such a great leap of logic to suggest that Jesus has been Yahweh's agent of power since eternity. Other, related factors are at play too.

Name Above All Names

¹⁷ Dunn, *Christology*, 189-192; Wright, *Colossians*, 75.

¹⁸ Robert W. Wall, *Colossians & Philemon* (IVPNTC Downers Grove: IVP 1993), 64.

¹⁹ Wright *Colossians*, 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²² Wall, *Colossians & Philemon*, 20.

Hurtado argues that the invocation of the *name* of Jesus is a key factor in Christological development. He describes a 'cluster of phenomena' in which Jesus' name carried power, including healings and exorcisms, worship and baptism.²³ The former pair characterizes the missions of Acts. But the central role in both passages we are discussing is *worship*: witness Peter's use of the Psalms and Paul's use of the hymn in Col 1:5-10. Hurtado's reconstruction of how the Christ-hymn might have been composed has been criticized.²⁴ But he and other scholars nevertheless make the vital point that worship and religious experiences must have played a part in the drawing in of Jesus to the Jewish Godhead.²⁵ Paul's experience here is normative: on the way from the Damascus road to his prison cell, Paul discovered a 'new vision of God himself' with Jesus at the centre.²⁶ This led him to 'redefine' the archetypal Jewish doctrines of *monotheism* and *election* in a Christological light.²⁷ Here again we have development *vertically* (a new relation between God and man through the incarnate Son) and *horizontally* (Jesus-devotion springing forth as new mixed worshipping *communities* formed). But is there any *precedent* for worshipping any other than Yahweh?

Wisdom and Heresy

Multiple scholars have looked to Jewish 'quasi-divine' or intermediary beings to preface the doctrine of the pre-existent Christ. Dunn argues that the integration of Jewish Wisdom language into Paul's Christological formations is the key to the doctrine of the incarnation.²⁸ There are many interesting parallels between the Colossian hymn and the personifications of creative Wisdom in Proverbs and Sirach.²⁹ Given what we know of Paul's rhetoric in general, it seems likely that he would have no qualms about alluding to the figure of Wisdom in the service of his

²³ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 200.

²⁴ Crispin Fletcher-Louis, "A New Explanation of Christological Origins: A Review of the Work of Larry W. Hurtado", *Tyndale Bulletin* 60.2 (2009), 161-205, 188.

²⁵ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus*, 70-72; Dunn, *Christology*, 92;

²⁶ Wright, *Colossians*, 54. Also Fredrikson, *Lord Jesus*, 158.

²⁷ Wright, *Colossians*, 72.

²⁸ Dunn, *Christology*, 259.

²⁹ O'Collins, *Christology*, 33; 36-7.

comprehensive Christology (cf. Acts 17:16-32). But this alone does not seem to have enough force to explain Jesus-worship.

Hurtado notes that opposition to orthodoxy often has a key role in strengthening it.³⁰ Numerous hypotheses have been advanced concerning the supposed 'heresy' at Colossae; these range from a mere hypothetical threat, to pagan mystery cults, proto-gnosticism, or some syncretistic religion.³¹ Wright holds that if there was a heresy, it was probably a Judaizing influence, citing as evidence references to circumcision, festivals and kosher laws. Wright explains the seemingly pagan elements (angel worship, dualist asceticism, 'philosophy') as being explicable within Judaism, and part of Paul's ironic attack on Judaizers. By seeking to add something to Christ, they no better than pagans.³²

My criticism of Wright's theory is that the need to subsume the Colossian opposition into a single Judaizing force seems unnecessary. In the many-layered society of Colossae, it seems entirely reasonable that Paul has multiple pagan, Judaizing *and* political forces in view (1:16).³³ This helps explain the all-encompassing breadth of Paul's Christology. Paul, pastor that he is, cannot bear the thought of *any* external power usurping Christ in the hearts of precious Gentile converts. Paul's key point is expressed in Col 3:11, which is the climax of the letter, and the Christology: *all* tribal, religious and intellectual divisions are meaningless distractions from the limitless, ever-broadening truth that 'Christ is all and in all!' Anyone, Jew, Greek or Roman, who would seek to set borders on the loving rule of Christ has fallen for a 'hollow and deceptive philosophy' (2:8).³⁴

Conclusion: A Cruciform Mystery

Bonhoeffer made the fascinating claim that the two great Christological heresies of the early Church, docetism and Ebionitism, spring ultimately from Greek

³⁰ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus*, 76-77.

³¹ For an overview, see H Wayne House, "Doctrinal Issues in Colossians Part 1: Heresies in the Colossian Church", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (Jan-Mar 1992), 45-49.

³² Wright, 26-31.

³³ House, "Doctrinal Issues", 59; cf. Fredrikson, *From Jesus*, 9-17; 158.

³⁴ Wall, *Colossians*, 24, cf. Walsh and Keesmat, *Colossians Remixed*, 109.

philosophy and Jewish monotheism respectively.³⁵ To succumb to either is error. In this light, an orthodox view of the incarnation says, in effect, 'there is no longer Greek and Jew' (Col 3:11). The Christology of the early church begins with the Jews at Pentecost, develops through the missions of Acts, and is consummated in the mixed Gentile churches. It is a story of a movement that sought to grasp in its theology, missional practice and spirituality the breadth and depth and height and length of Christ's cruciform love. For Paul,

[t]he hostility brought to an end in Christ is first and foremost [...] not the hostility between a righteous God and the creature who has trespassed his rules, but the hostility between Jew and Gentile.³⁶

This horizontal reconciliation is fundamentally Christological: it is the 'mystery' of Christ (Col 1:26; 2:2) and the offense of the gospel.³⁷ As Paul's letter never fails to remind us, God's salvation is not in Temple or Torah, pantheon or philosophy, tribe or empire, but in Christ himself: Yahweh's incarnate wisdom and love.

³⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, Trans. J. Bowden (London: Fontana, 1971), 79-86.

³⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 218-9.

³⁷ Wall, *Colossians*, 91; Wright *Colossians*, 95-6.

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