

The Rise of Christology from Pentecost to Colossae

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Article question

Using Acts 2-3 and Colossians 1-2 as test cases, this article will explore the character of Christological development through the first generation of Christianity. This article will compare and contrast the Christology of Acts 2 to the Christology of Colossians 1-2, then ask how it is that faithful Jewish monotheists could accept Paul's conception of such a high Christology? How might the 'Colossian heresy' have contributed to the development of a higher Christology?

Introduction

What we believe about Jesus, and the story of Jesus that we tell to others, is crucial because Jesus is the centre of our faith – the Christ of Christianity – and because in western culture, Jesus is often undermined or dismissed. The question that Jesus asked Peter in Matthew 16, v15 is asked of us today: who do we say that He is?

The difference in the Jesus portrayed in Peter's speech in Acts 2 and the 'Christ hymn' of Colossians 1 indicates dramatic Christological development: from a man sent and raised from the dead by God to the image of the invisible God, in whom all things are created and reconciled. Scholars have sought to explain why and how this was possible within the context of Jewish monotheism.

This essay will assert firstly that the focus of Jewish belief on the identity of God, rather than an ontological framework of nature or essence allowed Christianity to develop from within Jewish monotheism. Secondly, it will be argued that the distinctiveness of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and Christian revelation such as that experienced by Paul, enabled the early church to see in Jesus the unexpected answer to their messianic expectations. The essay will then consider the context of the Christ hymn, arguing that as an encouragement to the Colossian church to stand firm against those questioning Jesus it is a reminder to us today of the need to know who He is and to not be swayed.

Test cases

Acts, chapter 2

Acts is believed to have been written by Luke in AD.62 and records a selected history of the early Church following Jesus' resurrection.¹ Peter's speech in chapter 2 draws on Joel, Daniel and the Psalms to justify the use of the titles Lord and Messiah in relation to Jesus by showing the scriptural precedents for Jesus fulfilling Messianic expectations.

In showing Jesus to be the Messiah the speeches in chapter 2 and chapter 10 emphasise Jesus' relationship with the Father. Jesus has been anointed by the Father (10:38), God has attested Jesus to us through wonders and signs that He did in mankind's midst (Acts 2:22-23), raised Jesus up (2:24 and 32; 10:40), exalted him to His right hand and sent the promise of the Holy Spirit (2:33).

¹ ESV study bible, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2007) 2,073

Acts 2 does not offer a developed theology of the cross such as we find in later New Testament writers,² but it is a powerful starting point. It is the first step in the exaltation of Jesus: before Jesus could ever be viewed as the image of God, it needed to be accepted that whilst he was not the Messiah the Jews expected, he was the Messiah that God had sent.

Colossians, chapter 1

Colossians, probably written by Paul prior to Acts being written, though the authorship and date have been disputed, is written to a newly founded church. In Acts 2, hearers are Peter encouraged hearers to accept Jesus as the Messiah and their Saviour. Colossians goes significantly further in prompting the audience to consider the harmony of salvation with creation, the implications of salvation as the new messianic era, what salvation means in terms of sharing in Jesus' death and resurrection and the impact of this on personal and communal living.³

Paul does this by presenting a view of Jesus that is one of the most exalted in the New Testament⁴, particularly in the Christ hymn of 1:15-20 which depicts Jesus as the agent and goal of creation.⁵ The theme of Colossians is that Christ is Lord over all creation and 'the cosmic presence of God.'⁶ The first half of the hymn shows that Christ is Lord of creation and the second parallel section that Christ is the Lord of salvation through whom all things are reconciled. Paul has built on the foundation of Jesus as Messiah and the way to salvation to claim that He is the image of the invisible God. Jesus of Nazareth is the revelation of God in human form but this is not the limit of Jesus' significance, he was involved in creation and through salvation heralds the new creation. This is a significant development which requires explanation.

Context: Jewish monotheism

Judaism at the time of the second temple was characterised by commitment to one God. Whilst Jews assimilated or appropriated other elements of their host cultures the worship of other gods was 'the final barrier that could not be crossed.'⁷ Within this context it can be difficult to see how Jesus could be worshipped as divine, however focus on the specific nature of Jewish belief in monotheism has been undertaken to show how Christianity dramatically reinterpreted it and incorporated Jesus into it.

Wisdom language

Some scholars have emphasised the application of language used for wisdom to Jesus, particularly in Colossians 1:15-20.⁸ Casey has stated that rapid Christological growth required processes that were

² Tom Wright, *Acts for everyone, part 1: Chapters 1-12*. (London: SPCK, 2008), 39

³ Tom Wright, *Creation, Power and Truth: The gospel in a world of cultural confusion*. (London: SPCK, 2013), 27

⁴ Christopher Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and his earliest followers*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001) 72

⁵ *Ibid.*, 77

⁶ James DG. Dunn, *Christology in the making: An inquiry into the origins of the doctrine of the incarnation*. (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1980) 93

⁷ Grabbe, cited in Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in earliest Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003) 30

⁸ Dunn, *Christology in the making*, 164

culturally normal⁹ and that developments in the New Testament 'significantly parallel' the development of purely Jewish figures such as Moses, or the more abstract concepts of wisdom.¹⁰

However, this parallel should not be overstated. Intermediary figures were never fully divine and wisdom, most plausibly defined as a 'way of describing Yahweh's wise creation and purpose,'¹¹ had never been attributed to a person first known separately as a man and now exalted as the image of the invisible God. Whilst Paul uses familiar language in the hymn to draw the reader in, 'ransacking the vocabulary available to them...to express as fully as possible the significance of Jesus'¹² he then turns it on its head, as he often did, to apply it to Jesus and say 'if its wisdom you want, Jesus is where you have to look.'¹³

Divine identity

Bauckham asserts that this exaltation was possible by identifying Jesus directly with the God of Israel rather than applying a category of semi-divine intermediary status.¹⁴ Jesus showed continuity with the character of God the early Church knew from the story of Israel; a covenant God of love and mercy who rescues his people. The Jews had seen God act in Israel's history, particularly the Exodus, and expected him to 'act again in the future, in a way consistent with his already known identity.'¹⁵ Jesus embodies 'as clearly as possible the character of the one God,'¹⁶ as the outreaching love of God, previously expressed most clearly in the Torah, had now been shown in the crucifixion and resurrection.

Traditionally scholars have defined Jesus in ontological or functional terms, for example O'Collins states that the focus of the New Testament on Jesus' saving work and Christ's redemptive activity is indisputably functional.¹⁷ However, Bauckham's definition of early Christology as a 'Christology of divine identity' highlights that the functions exercised by Jesus are part of who God, thus making Jesus 'intrinsic to the unique and eternal identity of God.'¹⁸ They should be seen as pointing to God rather than understood in isolation.

Jewish converts to Christianity were therefore able to view Jesus as divine because the nature of Jewish belief related to God's character (who God is), rather than the Greek ontological categories of nature and essence (what God or divinity is) which came to the fore in later Christological

⁹ Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The origins and development of New Testament Christology*. (Cambridge: Paternoster, 2008) 75

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78

¹¹ Dunn, *Christology in the making*, 174

¹² Dunn, *Christology in the making*, 196

¹³ Tom Wright, *Paul for everyone: The Prison letters*. (London: SPCK, 2012) 152

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God crucified and other studies on the New Testament's Christology of divine identity*. (Cambridge: James Clark & Co Ltd, 1991) 3

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52

¹⁶ Dunn, *Christology in the making*, 195

¹⁷ Gerald O'Collins, *A biblical, historical and systematic study of Jesus*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

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¹⁸ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, x

developments and the Nicene Creed. We must seek to re-image their universe rather than projecting our categories of meaning onto it.¹⁹

It should also be noted that Jesus' 'divine significance is characteristically expressed in terms of his relationship to the actions of the one God.'²⁰ Devotion to Jesus is binitarian, meaning that 2 distinguishable figures are worshipped in relation to one another in a way enabling worship of the additional figure to be incorporated into monotheism.

The distinctiveness of Jesus

The distinctiveness of Jesus also identified him with God. During his life Jesus was a prophet but his resurrection and ascension set him apart: He had defeated death and risen to the right hand of the Father and as such shared in the identity of God.

This meant that whilst Jesus did not meet Jewish expectations, as an eschatological prophet rather than the bringer of freedom from Roman oppression, Paul was able to argue from his life, death, resurrection and ascension that Jesus shared in the identity of God.

Revelation

In discussing historic factors we should not lose sight of the divine revelation²¹ which Hurtado attributes as the reason why the focus on Jesus assumed the proportions that it did.²² The significance of revelation is evidenced through the importance of the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and its role in the two major developments in the early Church: opening the gospel up to the Gentiles, which resulted from Peter's vision (Acts 10), and the conversion of Saul (Acts 9). The centrality of revelation should not be underestimated: the nature of Jewish monotheism allowed belief in Jesus as divine but it was the experience of the Spirit confirming the pronouncement that Jesus sits at the Father's right hand that led the disciples to 'completely reinterpret the boundaries of monotheistic structures.'²³

Colossian heresy

Discussion so far has concerned how it was possible for such Christological development to occur. In looking at the Colossian heresy we consider the question of why.

The nature of the Colossian heresy and how it threatened the church 'has occupied scholars attention for some time and no consensus has been reached.'²⁴ Historically it has been argued that the opponents were Gnostics, but an improved understanding of Gnosticism and the absence in Colossians of a polemic against the belief in the inherent evil of matter has led most scholars to discount this.²⁵ It is now argued that the opposition was probably Jewish, due to factors such as the likelihood that the church had informal contact with Jews in the city and the mention of key Jewish

¹⁹ Paula Fredricksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The origins of the New Testament Images of Christ*. (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000), xiii

²⁰ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 52

²¹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 8

²² *Ibid.*, 64

²³ Alan Spence, *Christology: A guide for the perplexed*. (London: T&T Clark, 2008) 6

²⁴ David E. Garland, *Colossians, Philemon (NIV commentary)*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 23

²⁵ ESV study bible, 2,289

identity markers such as the Sabbath.²⁶ In addition, whilst the phrase ‘worship of angels’ is more problematic it may relate to Jewish speculation about angels and the belief that the law was delivered by angels (Acts 7:53), therefore comparing strict obedience to the law to venerating angels.²⁷

Whilst the nature of the heresy is disputed, the intention of the author of Colossians is clear: at stake is ‘the position given to Jesus in the overall scheme of things.’²⁸ The letter is a reminder to the Church that Jesus is the Lord of all and there is none beside him. He cannot be equalled and nothing can be added to Him. The letter is an encouragement to the Church that their belief in Christ is well founded and should stand against those who undermine it.

Contemporary application

This reminder and encouragement is also necessary today. The ‘finality, adequacy and all sufficiency of the cosmic Christ will never go out of date’²⁹ but this needs to be re-iterated in an individualistic western culture which finds Jesus palatable as a personal deity, if at all, and not as a universal truth. An example of this is shown in the outrage by some at David Cameron’s claim that Britain is a Christian country. There is external pressure to demote Jesus from the position so emphatically set out in Colossians, to see him as ‘a curiosity of history, to be safely left behind by people who want to get on in our brave new culture.’³⁰ To combat this Christians need confidence in their beliefs to avoid being ‘overly tentative in their claims and easily shaken by challenges.’³¹

Christians also need to be wary of subtle pressure. Upholding Jesus’ centrality requires us to ask if we treat anything else as a god or if there are any areas where we do not fully trust in Jesus. Paul is fighting the ‘the low grade chronic suffering of insecurity, a slight lack of confidence, a lessening of hope that sends us chasing after every semblance of certainty that the world has to offer.’ This is relevant in a culture which tells us that happiness is attainable based on wealth, love, fame and security and so encourages us to put other things in the place of Jesus, when as Paul teaches happiness can only be found in the eternal security offered by Jesus.³²

The exact nature of the Colossian heresy is unclear because Paul’s purpose was not to explicitly state what it was and we have no other eyewitness accounts. However, we can identify the nature of the challenge today. Colossians shows that the response to those who undermine Jesus is the certainty in, and defence of, the Jesus who is Lord of all. Today we must discern where Jesus is being undermined or misunderstood and to re-iterate Jesus’ Lordship in a way that addresses the challenge.

Conclusion

²⁶ Garland, *Colossians*, 28-9

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29

²⁸ Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament*, 74

²⁹ Garland, *Colossians*. 32

³⁰ Wright, *The Prison letters*, 163

³¹ Garland, *Colossians*. 32

³² *Ibid.*, 12

'Christianity isn't simply a particular way of being religious, a system for how to be saved or a different way of holiness but is about Jesus Christ.'³³ This is what the Colossians needed to know and what we need to rediscover.³⁴ Colossians 1 challenges us to ask ourselves whether we believe and live this. The Jesus of Colossians 1 is the image of the invisible God who reconciles all things. The implications and out workings of this are what give us hope and what we should communicate to others without apology.

³³ Wright, *The Prison letters*. 150

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 150