



DIVINE CHRISTOLOGY

**WHERE IT STANDS,
WHERE IT SHOULD GO**

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A RESEARCH PAPER
FOR THE COURSE DR35630-01 PAULINE EPISTLES
ADAPTED FOR THE 2017 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
OF THE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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NOVEMBER 16, 2017

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This paper provides a review of distinctive approaches to divine Christology in New Testament studies in the last twenty-five years, along with suggestions for future research. All current debate takes place against the backdrop of the views initially espoused in 1913 by Wilhelm Bousset of the history of religions school¹ and subsequent demythologizing approaches by Rudolf Bultmann² and others in the 1940s and 50s. Since 1970, a large number of scholars have rejected such anti-supernatural approaches.

Recent Christological debate generally addresses two major issues. One of these issues seeks to determine the origins of a high Christology or “the point at which Jesus is seen as fully divine.”³ The other issue is similar but seeks to prove (or disprove) “divine Christology,” the idea that Jesus is viewed as God. These two issues (origins and full divinity) can be mixed, as several scholars closely examine both questions. The latter of these two issues (full divinity) is the primary focus of this paper, but the issue of origins needs a brief overview.

¹Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

²Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner's, 1951).

³Andrew Chester, “High Christology - Whence, When and Why?” *Early Christianity* 2 (2011), 42.

An overview of origins: the chronology of Christology

“The basic question of New Testament christology is: How did it come about that in the short space of less than twenty years the crucified Galilean Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, was elevated by his followers to a dignity which left every possible form of pagan-polytheistic apotheosis far behind?” says Martin Hengel.⁴ His work is a good example of an investigation of Christological origins, as he traces the development of Christology from the life of Jesus up through the latest writings in the New Testament canon. His investigation finds “an amazing inner consistency from the oldest Christian confession to the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel.”⁵ Further, he claims, “Christological thinking between 50 and 100 CE *was much more unified in its basic structure* than New Testament research, in part at least, has maintained.”⁶

Since Paul’s writings are commonly viewed as the earliest Christian documents, they are crucial to the chronological approach, which is often a search for Christological origins in the pre-Pauline period between Jesus’s resurrection and the first New Testament document. In 1913, Bousset viewed Paul’s view of Christ as evolutionary, i.e. one that gradually developed from a lower form in the Palestinian Christian primitive community to higher forms in second century

⁴Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 383.

⁵Ibid., 389.

⁶Ibid., 383. Italics his.

Christianity. This evolutionary view, which is still espoused in current debate, also questions the influences on Paul's Christology in the early and presumably formative period. For example, was Paul impressed by the Gentile culture's fascination with mysticism and divine figures? Did Paul think that a higher view would accelerate the progress of his mission to the Gentiles? Did his Jewish monotheist beliefs restrain him from taking a high/divine view of Christ?

In 2011, Andrew Chester assessed the current chronological debate by recent scholars. He sees four main positions. (1) High Christology is not possible in a Jewish context (due to a strong monotheism). He puts Maurice Casey and Geza Vermes in this category. (2) High Christology emerges in a Jewish context, but only gradually. He says that James Dunn is in this camp.⁷ (3) High Christology emerges in a Jewish context rapidly, a view taken by Martin Hengel. (4) High Christology is present from the start.⁸ Chester places Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado here.⁹ Chester's personal view is that Christ is portrayed as divine "very

⁷Chester's characterization of Dunn's approach may be inaccurate. Dunn says, "We should not assume that (the Son of God Christology) was a development from a low christology to a high christology ... We should not ignore the fact that *the earlier presentations of Jesus' divine sonship embody just as high a christology in their own terms as the later.*" James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 63. Italics his.

⁸Chester, "High Christology," 23–31.

⁹Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 650.

early, in distinctively Jewish terminology, and within a Jewish context.”¹⁰ He adds that there is “substantial agreement within recent discussion” on this point.¹¹

I. DIVINE CHRISTOLOGY IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

Approach #1: Divine identity = divine Christology

We now turn our attention to some of the dominant recent approaches used to substantiate the view that Christ was “divine.” In large part, these scholars are seen as repudiating the views of Bousset and those who followed in his footsteps. This first approach comes from Richard Bauckham’s 1998 work, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*,¹² in which he posits “a new proposal for understanding early Christology in its Jewish context.”¹³ Bauckham attempts to show that early Judaism had “clear and consistent” ways of characterizing God’s unique identity, which distinguished him from all other reality. He then asserts that, when New Testament perceptions of Christ are read with these Jewish ideas of God’s identity, it becomes clear that the earliest Christians included Jesus within this unique “divine identity” of God. No break with Jewish monotheism was necessary, he says, because Second Temple Judaism

¹⁰Chester, “High Christology,” 38.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 45.

¹²Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹³Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), ix. (Bauckham’s 1998 work is included in his larger 2008 book.)

was “structurally open” to early Christological monotheism. He concludes, “The earliest Christology was already the highest Christology. I call it a Christology of divine identity.”¹⁴

Phil 2:5–11 provides a good example of Bauckham’s point. Since the passage depicts Jesus as highly exalted with every earthly and heavenly knee bowing to him, Bauckham sees Paul as equating Jesus’s divine sovereignty with God’s divine sovereignty. “For Jewish monotheism, sovereignty over all things was definitive of *who God is*,” says Bauckham. “It could not be seen as delegated to a being other than God.”¹⁵ Thus, for Bauckham, divine identity equals divine Christology.

Bauckham’s approach has met with mixed reviews. For example, Douglas Campbell says that historians will be unlikely to view Bauckham’s position as sustainable.¹⁶ Adela and John Collins criticize his definitions of divinity. They agree that Paul presents a preexistent Christ who participated in creation, but “the question of course is precisely *how* and *to what degree* Christ participates in that sovereignty and activity of creation.”¹⁷ Participation in sovereignty does not

¹⁴Ibid., ix–x.

¹⁵Ibid., 197. Italics his.

¹⁶Douglas Campbell, “Foreword” to Chris Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), xiv.

¹⁷Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 213.

necessarily connote divinity, they say, noting that personified wisdom acts *as a creature* in God's activity of creation (Prov 8:22 LXX) and that "the Son of Man in the *Similitudes of Enoch* participates in God's sovereignty by sitting on the throne of God and by acting as judge in the last judgment."¹⁸ In short, while Bauckham has valid points, he occasionally forces his conclusion too rigidly, without allowing adequate flexibility at key points.

Approach #2: Messiah = divine Christology

The recent book by Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins is an example of a titular approach that also attempts to make a case for an early divine Christology. By exploring titles such as King, Son of God, Messiah, and Son of Man, their book seeks to establish that Jesus's divine status springs from the conviction that he was the Jewish Messiah.¹⁹ As such, they see the concept of his divine preexistence emerging, not initially in a Gentile context, but in a Jewish context, where messianic expectation would have been prevalent.²⁰

The authors explore Old Testament texts as well as ancient Near Eastern documents, Old Testament apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, and other sources, which, they say, support the idea of a *divine* Messiah. The roots of

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, xiv.

²⁰Ibid.

this concept spring from “the royal ideology of ancient Judah, which in turn was influenced by the Egyptian mythology of kingship.”²¹ A chapter is devoted to Paul’s Christological writings (in the undisputed seven letters), particularly those that depict Jesus as son of God and Messiah. Adela Collins says that Paul’s view of Jesus as the son of God is closely related to Jesus’s status as Messiah.²² “The contexts of Paul’s letters and his allusions to scripture make clear that ‘son of God’ and ‘messiah’ are equivalent,” she says.²³ In all of Paul’s letters, Phil 2:6–11 stands as the clearest example of Jesus being portrayed as preexistent: “The political rhetoric of the hymn suggests that the description of Christ as ‘in the form of God’ ... signifies that he is the preexistent messiah.”²⁴ The background work of the Collinses is substantial and helpful, and their basic thesis has largely been unchallenged. Yet, their conclusion that ‘Messiah equals divinity’ must be viewed as a good probability rather than a certainty.

Approach #3: Devotional activities = divine Christology

Larry Hurtado tries a different method to demonstrate that the early Christians viewed Jesus as divine. In a massive 700-page book and other monographs, he studies how early Christians expressed “devotion” to Jesus. He

²¹Ibid., xi.

²²Ibid., 122.

²³Ibid., 208.

²⁴Ibid.

argues, if they “worshipped” Jesus in the same way that God is worshipped, then Jesus was viewed as divine.²⁵ His study, while focused on this “pattern of devotional practices,” also considers how reverence for Jesus was revealed in “grand claims about his significance . . . in ways that amount to him being treated as divine.”²⁶ Hurtado’s analysis concludes that early Christians adopted a “binitarian monotheism” that was not as contradictory as it sounds.

Hurtado’s exhaustive research explores some uncharted territory, and he presents much helpful data. But his argument has occasional flaws. For example, Hurtado extensively claims that early Christians worshipped Jesus using commonly recognized “cultic” activities. Yet, the New Testament provides no evidence that common depictions of “cultic worship” in the first century²⁷ even exists for the followers of Christ. Common “worship” terminology in the New Testament is never applied to Christian gatherings or “devotional activities,” nor are these activities ever described with ritual terminology or as religious “services.” Yet, Hurtado routinely approaches them as such.

²⁵Bousset also discussed the significance of certain cultic practices of the early Christians, but not to the extent of Hurtado. See Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 129–138, 154–159, 282–349.

²⁶Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1.

²⁷The existence of a temple, animal sacrifice, and a priesthood would have been commonly understood as essential for “cultic worship.” See Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999): 218. He says, “Worship to the ancient world meant temple with its accompanying statue, altar for the sacrifice of animals and other food products, and priesthood.”

Hurtado says the reference to Paul’s thorn in the flesh and his ‘pleading with the Lord’ for relief (2 Cor 12:8–9) suggests that the Corinthians were familiar with “direct prayer-appeals to Jesus as a communally accepted feature of Christian devotional practice.”²⁸ This is an example of Hurtado pushing the evidence too far. The problem here may be anachronism, reading modern ritual practices into the first century. Further, Hurtado says the confession of “Jesus as Lord” in Rom 10:9–13 is a “clear” reference to “ritual acclamation/invocation of *Jesus* in the setting of Christian worship.”²⁹ While his overall argument is persuasive, his supporting evidence for these particular ideas is sketchy at best.

Adela Collins criticizes Hurtado’s work, saying, “A significant problem with his argument concerns what ‘worship’ and ‘devotion’ signify.”³⁰ Other scholars point to weaknesses in his “evidence of devotion.” Casey says, “This evidence is real and important, but there are points at which Hurtado exaggerates it, and accompanies it with evangelical comments where I would have hoped for analytical ones.”³¹ Casey also laments that Hurtado does not acknowledge (as Casey affirms) that Christological development changed as Christianity moved from the Jewish to the Gentile world. Casey offers an appropriate summary:

²⁸Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 140.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 142.

³⁰Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 212.

³¹Maurice Casey, “Lord Jesus Christ: A Response to Professor Hurtado,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27:1 (2004), 88.

“There is a lot of truth in what Hurtado says, but he has pushed the evidence a bit too far.”³²

Approach #4: Relationship language = divine Christology

Marshaled by Chris Tilling in 2012, this approach seeks to establish a divine Christology that is both early and high. His approach focuses specifically on the depiction of Christ in Paul’s undisputed seven letters as he attempts to tackle this basic question: Is Paul’s Christology divine?³³ His method is to analyze Paul’s statements that speak to the *relationship* between Jesus and believers. He then argues that this “relational data” mirrors Old Testament language that depicts the relationship between Yahweh and his people. These “Christ-relation” expressions are consistently evident, he says, in Paul’s goals and motivations, the communications between believers and Jesus, and the language Paul uses to describe the presence and activity of Christ. In other words, Paul expresses the relationship of Christians to Christ in the same way that Hebrew Scriptures express the relationship of Jews to Yahweh.³⁴ Therefore, he concludes, Christ was viewed as divine from “the first months of (Paul’s) life in Christ, at least if his memory is to be trusted.”³⁵

³²Ibid., 91.

³³Chris Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 2.

³⁴Ibid., 255.

³⁵Ibid., 257.

Tilling’s method brings some advantages to this current Christological debate. As Douglas Campbell notes in the book’s foreword, Tilling’s approach avoids “the shifting sands of prior general historical reconstruction,” which other scholars have pursued.³⁶ In addition, “This manner of approaching Paul’s Christology corresponds better with the phenomenon of Paul’s letters, texts written not to detail an abstract theology but rather to instruct and encourage precisely the focus of this study, the Christ-relation,” says Tilling.³⁷ In other words, Tilling asserts that his use of Paul’s writings does a better job of assessing each passage in its context.

Some criticize Bauckham and Hurtado for failure to recognize that other Jewish writings reveal that non-God beings could be worshipped, a point that exposes cracks in their theories. Yet, in those other Jewish writings, this ‘relationship language’ for these non-God beings is lacking, thus making Tilling’s approach look better. So, Tilling uses three Jewish texts to test his theory: Sirach 44–50, *Life of Adam and Eve*, and the *Similitudes of Enoch*.³⁸ Tilling thus believes he has found a distinctive feature in Paul’s writings that avoids the weaknesses of Bauckham and Hurtado and that clearly and consistently reveals that Paul viewed Christ as divine. This methodology of “Christ-relation” language *includes* the key

³⁶Campbell, in *Ibid.*, xvi.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 256.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 196–233.

points of Hurtado and Bauckham, yet without falling victim to their weaknesses, he says. In addition, Tilling asserts that the arguments of Dunn and Casey against the notion of divine Christology in Paul “are seen to crumble under the weight of data concerning the Pauline Christ-relation, Paul’s divine-Christology.”³⁹

Scholarly reviews of Tilling’s book are generally positive. Indeed, his methodology can be praised for focusing on the text of Scripture without resorting to speculations of the Christology of the pre-Pauline era. Yet, the essential nature of Tilling’s syllogistic reasoning raises some questions. His argument goes like this: A specific unique language is used to describe Christ’s relationship with the church. The same unique language is used to describe God’s relationship with Israel. However, the logical conclusion is not, “Therefore, Christ equals God,” as Tilling seems to propose, or even that “Christ is similar to God.” Rather, a more appropriate conclusion is, “Therefore, Christ’s relationship with the church is similar to God’s relationship with Israel.” This is an oversimplification, and it ignores the other non-relational ways that Christ is viewed as divine in Paul. Yet, does this Christ-relation data establish that Jesus’s divinity is *equal* to God’s divinity, or does it establish that Jesus’s divinity is *similar* to God’s divinity? If it is similar, *how similar* is it? In God’s heavenly hierarchy, are there *levels* of

³⁹Ibid., 256.

divinity or only *one* level? Is Jesus *one hundred percent* God or a *lesser* percent?⁴⁰

Is it possible to know? Is it *necessary* to know?

II. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Having identified four primary approaches to divine Christology in current scholarship, the task now turns to suggesting a way forward for the divine Christological debate. The first suggestion proposes a greater effort toward defining the terms used in the discussion. Defining terms should be a fundamental first step in any scholarly investigation, and in many cases, the scholars noted in this review have attempted to define some terms. A good first example of a needed definition is for the term ‘divine’ or ‘divinity.’ As Bauckham says, “The fundamentally important question – what, in the Jewish understanding of God, really counts as ‘divine’ – is rarely faced with clarity,” adding that “scholars tend to apply a variety of unexamined criteria for drawing the boundary between God and what is not God or between the divine and the non-divine.”⁴¹ A better definition would help to address key questions. What are the specific criteria that put Jesus over the boundary line and into the category of divinity? What criteria would disqualify an angelic being from being divine? Are there other criteria that

⁴⁰Colossians says, “For in him the *whole fullness* of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9). However, Tilling’s study disregards Colossians.

⁴¹Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 4.

would *increase* the divinity of Jesus? Are there *degrees* of divinity? Is the proposition “Jesus is divine” a different proposition than “Jesus is God”? Is it possible to be divine, yet not be on a par with Yahweh? Does divinity necessarily include authority? Is it possible to be divine without having full authority over all creation?

The term ‘monotheism’ also begs for a definition. Casey speaks of “the flexible nature of Jewish monotheism.”⁴² In what way was Jewish monotheism flexible? Are modern scholars forcing too-rigid (or too-lenient) perceptions of monotheism onto first-century Palestinian culture? In what way(s) would modern (i.e. twenty-first century, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) perceptions of monotheism differ from the monotheism of Second Temple Judaism? At what point does monotheism become ditheism? Does ditheism qualify as polytheism? Concerning Hurtado’s concept of “binitarian monotheism,” is it possible to be binitarian and monotheistic at the same time? Casey, Dunn, Fee, and others stress that Paul was an avid monotheist. Would Paul consider the modern Trinitarian doctrine to be a breach of monotheism? Does the first commandment (Exod 20:3) exclude Jesus from being viewed by Christians as God?

The second suggestion proposes a change of direction. Scholars have produced a variety of methods that attempt to identify the ways that Jesus is divine.

⁴²Casey, “Lord Jesus Christ: A Response,” 92.

The debate would benefit from a similar endeavor to identify all the Scriptural data that portray Jesus as *not* divine.⁴³ The study does not need to be a Bultmannian effort to demythologize Jesus but a way to achieve greater clarity of Paul's concept of the 'divinity' of Jesus. For example, Paul occasionally uses the term "man" (ἄνθρωπος) to refer to Jesus. See, for example, "the grace of *that one man* Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:15, 17), and "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, *the man* Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5). Such a term is never applied to God. If Jesus is God, why is Jesus referred to as ἄνθρωπος?

Similarly, the study could focus on all the ways that God and Jesus are *different*. For example, since Jesus is the Son of God, he is obviously not the Father. Since Jesus sits at the right hand of God (Rom 8:34; Col 3:1; Eph 1:20), he is obviously not seated in God's position. Since Paul says, "Christ is God's" (1 Cor 3:23), then God should probably not be considered as a possession of Christ. When Paul affirms that "the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor 11:3), it is probably true that Christ should not be viewed as the head of God. By providing an exhaustive analysis of Scriptures that depict Jesus as *unlike* God, scholars should be able to develop a clearer understanding of how the concept of divinity should be clarified or amended.

⁴³For example, Kümmel includes a brief section on the "humanness" of Jesus in Paul's writings. Werner Georg Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 165–166.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has identified four approaches to divine Christology in recent scholarship. Two of the major questions of current debate involve origins (at what *point in time* did the early church view Jesus as divine?) and divinity (did the early church view Jesus as divine?). The latter issue of divinity has been the primary focus of this paper. The current trend in scholarship is to affirm that the primitive church adopted a high view of Jesus's divinity and did so at an early stage. While these approaches have certain weaknesses, the overall trend in current scholarship is a significant shift in Christological study since the work of Wilhelm Bousset in 1913. Future research would do well to provide better definitions of key terms such as 'divinity' and 'monotheism' and to explore, in detail, the ways that Jesus is depicted in Scripture as *not divine* and the ways that he is *different* from God.

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