

Anthropomorphism & Transcendence in the New Testament

CHRISTIANITY INHERITED the Hebrew Bible from Judaism but not without difficulty. From early on an almost built-in contradiction began to emerge, with some of the early Church Fathers, especially the Alexandrian Platonists, struggling to reconcile and interpret biblical anthropomorphisms with a Platonic conception of God as a spirit, and the spirit as immaterial, ideal, and absolute. Many of these Fathers viewed biblical anthropomorphisms as incompatible with the divine majesty and mystery of God, and tried to eliminate them by allegorical interpretations. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, allowed neither human form nor human passions to describe God, the Father, pointing to biblical anthropomorphisms as simply metaphors adapted to the limitations of human understanding. To Clement God was formless and nameless and also, as Bigg observes, unknowable:

We know not what He is, only what He is not. He has absolutely no predicates, no genus, no differentia, no species. He is neither unit nor number; He has neither accident nor substance. Names denote either qualities or relations; God has neither... These are but honorable phrases which we may use, not because they really describe the Eternal, but that our understanding may have something to lean upon.¹

Thus, where the Hebrew Bible mentioned God's hands, feet, mouth, eyes, etc. or His entrance into or exit out of a tent, or indeed any other

anthropomorphic attribute or quality, these were reasoned away with the explanation that none of the expressions intended any human form, passion or likeness. To Clement, divine reverence required an allegorical meaning and interpretation to be given to biblical passages such as these. Origen was no less emphatic on the issue of anthropomorphism, stating that, "the most impious doctrines are implied by the belief that God is corporeal; and He will be thought to be divisible, material, and corruptible."² Origen's God was Mind and hence incorporeal:

Being incorporeal God is independent of the laws of Space and Time, omniscient, omnipresent, unchanging, incomprehensible. His dwelling-place is the thick darkness. 'How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.' He has in a sense no titles, and His fittest name is He That Is.³

Origen was not unaware of the fact that, "even before the corporeal coming of Christ, many passages of Scripture seem to say that God is in a corporeal place..."⁴ Through his allegorical interpretations Origen wanted to "persuade the reader in every way to hear the sacred Scripture in a more lofty and spiritual sense, when it appears to teach that God is in a place."⁵

St. Augustine, the mystical theologians especially, and many others, also insisted upon the ineffability and utter transcendence of God, the Father. However, despite the clear preference for this transcendental or Platonistic model, it was the peculiar incarnation concept of God which gradually came to supersede it and which popular orthodox Christianity has cherished down the centuries until today. In 543, Origen and his views were condemned by a synod in Constantinople and the condemnation was ratified by the Fifth General Council of 553.⁶

In the Bible, as we have it today, it is the New Testament which is distinctive to Christianity representing those books which the Church regards as expressions of its faith. The distinctively Christian understanding of God is based on the claim that God is most fully revealed through what Christians claim is His self-revelation in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. William Blake notes astutely that, "The final revelation of Christianity is, therefore, not that Jesus is

God, but that God is Jesus.”⁷ I. R. Netton confirms the point by observing that, “The *traditional* Christian theological paradigm, of course, despite much debate, was that Jesus’ ‘self-consciousness was always consciously of Himself as God.’”⁸ If the essence of Christianity is that God has revealed Himself most fully in the language and reality of a human life, it inevitably follows that the Christian understanding of God is essentially and literally corporeal and anthropomorphic. To claim that the historical human person, Jesus of Nazareth, was simultaneously God and man requires as its necessary condition that divinity is able to find self-expression and self-exposure through the “form of a man” which is what the two Greek words “morphe” and “anthropos” translate to. To show that this is really implied in the claims of historic Christianity, it is necessary to emphasize two things: first, that the New Testament documents are essentially focused on the life and works of Jesus Christ as the center of the Christian religion; and second, that the historic formulations of Christian doctrine – as set out by the early Christian Fathers, and recognized as normative by subsequent generations of Christians – teach a doctrine of salvation which makes it necessary that Christ be truly God and truly man and truly one. This popular incarnational theology is corporeal through and through, as we will be examined in this chapter.

The New Testament consists of twenty-seven books made up of the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. It is highly valued by all divisions of Christianity – Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern, Orthodox. The term New Testament stands in contrast to the term Old Testament to denote the inauguration of “a new covenant that has made the first old” (Hebrews 8:13). Christians refer to the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament because to them, it is associated with the history of the “old covenant”, made by Yahweh in the past with the Israelites in the wilderness. Christians refer to their specific portion in the present Bible as the New Testament because, they believe, they are the foundation documents of the “new covenant”, the covenant inaugurated and fulfilled by the works of Jesus, the Christ.

The central pivot of all New Testament writings is Jesus Christ. However, although crucial information about his life, teachings, death, and resurrection, are contained in the books, none of them in fact were

written by him or under his supervision. Philip Schaff notes that “...the Lord chose none of his apostles, with the single exception of Paul, from the ranks of the learned; he did not train them to literary authorship, nor gave them, throughout his earthly life, a single express command to labor in that way.”⁹ There is a consensus among biblical scholars regarding this issue, “whereas we possess documents originally written by Paul”, observes J. Jeremias, “not a single line has come down to us from Jesus’ own hand.”¹⁰ These books were the product of later generations and are commonly accepted as the earliest, classical responses to the many-faceted aspects of Christ’s life and existence. R.M. Grant observes that the New Testament

is the basic collection of the books of the Christian Church. Its contents, unlike those of the Old Testament, were produced within the span of a single century, under the auspices of disciples of Jesus or their immediate successors. The collection is unlike the Koran in that it contains not a word written by the founder of the community, though his spoken words are recorded by evangelists and apostles and reflected in almost all the documents.¹¹

As stated, the New Testament is composed of twenty-seven books written by different authors at various places, communities, and times. It consists of the four widely known Gospels (the three Synoptic Gospels – the term commonly used for Matthew, Mark, and Luke since the nineteenth century – and the Gospel of John); the Acts of the Apostles; fourteen Pauline Epistles (the Greater as well as Pastoral) i.e., Romans, Corinthians I & II, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians I & II, Timothy I & II, Titus, Philemon and Hebrews; and the seven “Catholic” (meaning “universally accepted”) Epistles i.e., the letters of James, Peter I & II, John I, II & III, Jude; and finally the book of Revelation.

The New Testament in its present shape, number, and order, was not available to the early Christians for centuries after the departure of Jesus and his disciples. Clarke comments that the New Testament writings were “written for the special needs of particular groups of people, and the idea of combining them into one authoritative volume

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was late and not in the mind of the authors. Christians, therefore, and the Christian Church might conceivably have gone on indefinitely without Christian scriptures.”¹² One of the leading factors may have been the existence of an already compiled Hebrew Bible. “Throughout the whole patristic age”, observes Kelly, “as indeed in all subsequent Christian centuries, the Old Testament was accepted as the word of God, the unimpeachable sourcebook of saving doctrine.”¹³ The compilation, collection, and identification of this particular group of writings (the canonization process) as a distinct and authoritative entity resulted from a complex development within the Christian Church. It took the Church 367 years to produce a list of writings and a canon that would contain all the present day (New Testament) canonical writings. The oldest indisputable witness to the New Testament canon is Athanasius, fourth century bishop of Alexandria, known for his role at the First Council of Nicaea. In his Easter letter of 367 he wrote:

Forasmuch as some have taken in hand, to reduce into order for themselves the books termed apocryphal, and to mix them up with the divinely inspired scriptures... it seemed good to me also... to set before you the books included in the Canon, and handed down and accredited as Divine.¹⁴

The list that follows this prologue contains the twenty-seven books of the present New Testament though not in the same order. According to Athanasius these books were, “the springs of salvation, so that he that is thirsty can fill himself with the (divine) responses in them; in these alone is the good news of the teaching of the true religion proclaimed.”¹⁵

New Testament scholars differ widely over the process of the compilation and history of the New Testament canon – authors, places, sources, dates. However, traditional or Orthodox scholars declare the New Testament to be the absolutely authentic and inspired work of the disciples, attributing almost all the New Testament writings to either the disciples or the immediate apostles. The time in which they lived is known as the apostolic age, the first century CE. For instance, R. L. Harris states: “It seems clear that the New Testament books arose in

the latter half of the first century A.D., and almost all of them were clearly known, revered, canonized, and collected well before a hundred years had passed.”¹⁶ Philip Schaff is more specific regarding the issue: “Nearly all the books of the New Testament were written between the years 50 and 70, at least twenty years after the resurrection of Christ, and the founding of the church; and the Gospel and Epistles of John still later.” He concludes that, “Hence seven and twenty books by apostles and apostolic men, [were] written under the special influence and direction of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷

Scholars following this line of thought claim that Jesus was the personal Word of God, the eternal *Logos*, and hence the ultimate authority. Further, Jesus assigned this divine authority to his twelve disciples (Matthew 10:2–5) after his resurrection (Matthew 28:19–20, Mark 16:15–16); the Church was “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20) whom Christ had promised to guide unto “all the truth” (John 16:13) by the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The apostles, like Luke and Mark, derive their authority from their masters who for their part represent the authority of Christ. Therefore, the entire collection of the New Testament is said to derive its authenticity and authority from the ultimate divine authority of Jesus Christ himself. Harris points out that: “The Lord Jesus did not, in prophecy, give us a list of the twenty-seven New Testament books. He did, however, give us a list of the inspired authors. Upon them the Church of Christ is founded, and by them the Word was written.”¹⁸ In the words of H.T. Fowler:

Jesus strove to set religion free from the tyranny of the written law, meticulously interpreted by the scribes. He left no written word, but instead, living men whom he had inspired by his own life and word to claim direct access to God as Father and to trust in the power and guidance of the Spirit.¹⁹

In short, argues Geisler, “God is the source of canonicity.”²⁰ This view of apostolic authority and New Testament authorship was common among the early Christian Fathers. For instance Irenaeus, the second century (180) bishop of what is now known as Lyons, believed

that the apostolic authority issued from the fact that the apostles were endowed with the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had promised them at the time of his resurrection. Jesus had also assigned them the responsibility to preach his word to the ends of the earth. Given these aspects, apostolic writings carried the stamp of authentic divinity in the form of Jesus as well as the Holy Spirit. Irenaeus attributed the ultimate authorship of all the four Gospels to the immediate disciples of Jesus.

It was common practice with the early Fathers to ascribe the Markan and Lucan Gospels to their respective masters, Peter and Paul, hence insinuating Mark and Luke's firsthand knowledge of the historical Jesus event and their Gospels' perfect historical accuracy. The same trend is pervasive among present day orthodox/traditional scholars. P. Schaff, R. L. Harris, B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge and N. Geisler are just a few examples. They contend that the canonicity of Mark, Luke or any other books not directly authored by the known apostles, is not dependent upon anything except that the apostles authorized and approved of them.

However, there exists a different line of approach taken by Papias, a second century bishop of Hierapolis. Though not suspicious of the intention or sincerity of Mark, he does raise some questions about the direct authority and order of the Gospel of Mark, observing that:

The elder [John] used to say, Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately all that he remembered; though he did not [record] in order that which was either said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him; but subsequently, as I said [attached himself to] Peter, who used to frame his teachings to meet the [immediate] wants [of his hearers]; and not as making a connected narrative of the Lord's discourses.²¹

It is difficult to fully accommodate these traditional claims of apostolic authorship and authority for most of the New Testament books in light of the findings of modern scholarship and what these have proven. The fact of the matter is, as Westcott notes: "The recognition of the Apostolic writings as authoritative and complete was partial and progressive."²²

Contemporary critical scholars, following form-criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism, and a historical approach to the New Testament, disagree with the traditional view of the authenticity and divine nature of New Testament writings. It is their contention that the New Testament books are not the works of the immediate disciples of Jesus, but rather writings compiled long after their lifetimes by authors mostly unknown to us. Hans Conzelmann for example states that, "the circumstances of composition (author, time, place, occasion, and any of the more specific circumstances) are not known for any of the New Testament writings other than Paul's letters."²³ These scholars further assert, that Jesus never asked his disciples to put anything in writing. After his resurrection the disciples were occupied with preaching to those around them, concerning the end of the world and the arrival of the Kingdom of God, and therefore were least interested in writing the words of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). The first Christians, states R. L. Fox,

were people of faith, not textual fundamentalists: to hear Peter or Paul was to hear a man with a conviction, not a Bible, and a new message which old texts were quoted to back up. We can take this message back to within four years of Jesus' death through the personal testimony of Paul: he 'received,' he tells the Christians in Corinth, that 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scripture, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scripture,' and he then appeared to Peter and then to others in a sequence which does not match the stories of the appearances in our Gospels.²⁴

In the words of J. D. Crossan, "Jesus left behind him thinkers not memorizers, disciples not reciters, people not parrots."²⁵

The disciples also waited the second coming, the '*Parousia*' of the risen Lord and expected his return at any moment. D. Nineham notes:

Since the early Christians thus believed themselves to be living in a comparatively short interim period before the end of the world, their energies were naturally concentrated on practical tasks, on

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bringing others to a realization of the situation and on the attempt to maintain and deepen their own relationship with the exalted Lord so that when he came to establish his kingdom finally, they would be worthy to be members of it. Consequently, they will have had little leisure, even had they had aptitude, for antiquarian research into Christ's earthly life; nor would they have thought it worthwhile, seeing that they do not look forward to any posterity who might be expected to profit from the result of it.²⁶

Moreover, the belief that the eschatological and prophetic Spirit of God was operative among them, led the first Christians to focus more on oral transmission and preaching rather than writing of the message. Even Paul, who actually did write the letters attributed to him, did so because he could not personally reach the places they were being sent to (see 1 Thessalonians 2:17, 3:10 or 1 Corinthians 4:14–21). Otherwise, he appears to have valued spoken words and personal presence over the written word.

Consequently, the word or the tradition, was orally transmitted until the second generation, when with the passage of time enthusiasm concerning Jesus' second coming cooled. When his delay caused a number of problems, the books began to be written. F. R. Crownfield remarks that even when they were compiled, "it was not with any thought that they would eventually become a part of Scripture, in supplement to the ancient Scriptures which Christians now call the Old Testament."²⁷ J. Jeremias observes that, "It was more than thirty years after his death before anyone began to write down what he [Jesus] said in an ordered sequence, and by that time his sayings had long been translated into Greek. It was inevitable that during this long period of oral transmission alterations took place in the tradition..."²⁸ During this interval new sayings came into being and were added to the old corpus. Jeremias notes:

The seven letters of Christ to the seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2–3) and other sayings of the exalted Lord handed down in the first person (e.g. Rev. 1.17–20; 16.15; 22.12 ff.) allow the conclusion that early Christian prophets addressed congregations

in words of encouragement, admonition, censure and promise, using the name of Christ in the first person. Prophetic sayings of this kind found their way into the tradition about Jesus and became fused with the words that he had spoken during his lifetime. The discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of John provide an example of this development; to a considerable degree they are homilies on sayings of Jesus composed in the first person.²⁹

In Hans Kung's opinion

the *Gospels emerged* in a process of about fifty to sixty years... The disciples at first passed on orally what he had said and done. At the same time, like any narrator, they themselves changed the emphasis, selected, clarified, interpreted, extended, in each case in the light of their own personal inclination and the needs of their hearers. There may have been from the beginning a straightforward narrative of the work, teaching and fate of Jesus. The evangelists – certainly not all directly disciples of Jesus, but witnesses of the original apostolic tradition – collected everything very much later: the stories and sayings of Jesus orally transmitted and now partly fixed in writing, not as they might have been kept in civic archives of Jerusalem or Galilee, but as were used in the religious life of the early Christians, in sermons, catechetics and worship.³⁰

Therefore the New Testament writers were not merely biographers reporting historical events in their original form. They were responding to a particular “living situation” (*Sitz im Leben*) meaning that they had an axe to grind. They were theologians of their time and had a message to share. Kung observes:

The evangelists – undoubtedly not merely collectors and transmitters, as people once thought, but absolutely original theologians with their own conception of the message – arranged the Jesus narratives and Jesus sayings according to their own plan and at their own discretion... The evangelists – themselves

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certainly...engaged in missionary work and in catechizing – arranged the traditional texts to suit the needs of their communities. They interpreted them in the light of the Easter events, expanded them and adapted them where they thought it necessary. Hence, despite all their common features, the different Gospels each acquired a different profile of the one Jesus.³¹

John Hick puts the point in a nutshell:

None of the writers was an eye-witness of the life that they depict. The Gospels are secondary and tertiary portraits dependent on oral and written traditions which had developed over a number of decades, the original first-hand memories of Jesus being variously preserved, winnowed, developed, distorted, magnified and overlaid through the interplay of many factors including the universal tendency increasingly to exalt one's leader-figure, the delight of the ancient world in the marvelous, opposition to the mainstream of Judaism from which the church had now been separated, an intensification of faith under persecution, factional polemics within different streams of the Christian community itself, and a policy of presenting events in Jesus' life as fulfillments of ancient prophecy or as exemplifying accepted religious themes.³²

Clearly, explains Hick, "the attempt to form a picture of the life that lay forty to sixty or seventy years behind the written Gospels cannot yield a great deal in the way of fully assured results."³³ Howard Kee observes that unlike our times the historians and writers of the first century, "were not interested simply in reporting events of the past, but saw their role as providing the meaning of those past events for readers in the present."³⁴ Therefore, during these sixty years or so, the Gospels were developed, in the words of Paula Fredricksen, "from oral to written; from Aramaic to Greek; from the End of time to the middle of time; from Jewish to Gentile; from Galilee and Judea to the Empire..."³⁵

Given facts and findings such as these (of oral transmission, the Easter experience, missionary zeal, and the compilation of Jesus' sayings after a period of 30 to 60 years), many modern scholars doubt the authenticity

and integrity of most of the New Testament books. According to Ernst Kasemann,

the individual sayings and stories it must be said that from their first appearance they were used in the service of the community's preaching and were indeed preserved for the very reason. It was not historical but kerygmatic interest which handed them on. From this standpoint it becomes comprehensible that this tradition, or at least the overwhelming mass of it, cannot be called authentic. Only a few words of the Sermon on the Mount and of the conflict with the Pharisees, a number of parables, and some scattered material of various kinds go back with any real degree of probability to the Jesus of history...The preaching about him has almost entirely supplanted his own preaching, as can be seen most clearly of all in the completely unhistorical Gospel of John.³⁶

John Hick claims that:

The identifiable consensus begins with a distinction between the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the post-Easter development of the church's mingled memories and interpretations of him. And it is a basic premise of modern New Testament scholarship that we have access to the former only through the latter.³⁷

G. Zuntz asserts that people of ancient times had a different attitude towards the text of an author, an attitude altogether different from that of ours in the modern age,

an attitude of mind... prevailed among Christians of all classes and all denominations. The common respect for the sacredness of the Word, with them, was not an incentive to preserve the text in its original purity. On the contrary, the strange fact has long since been observed that devotion to the founder and His apostles did not prevent the Christians of that age from interfering with their transmitted utterances. The reliance of the believers upon the continuing action of the Spirit easily led them to regard the letter

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less highly; the two appeared to be at variance, the urge to interpolate what was felt to be true was not always resisted.³⁸

Bultmann has claimed that the early Church did neither perceive nor make a distinction between the pre-Easter sayings of Jesus and the post-Easter utterances of Christian prophets which were accepted as the words of the Risen Lord and were sometimes intentionally and at other times unintentionally, retrojected into Jesus' mouth or into settings in Jesus' earthly life.³⁹ M.E. Boring has made the case that a substantial number of the early Christian prophet's sayings found their way into the Synoptic Gospels.⁴⁰ H. Boers explains:

The question of whether a particular saying was actually pronounced by Jesus is not only impossible to answer but, from the point of view of the developing Christian religion, irrelevant. What was important about Jesus for the developing Christian religion was not so much the concrete facts of his life but the impact he had made on his followers, as reflected in the tradition of his life and teachings and in the legends of his birth and childhood.⁴¹

Thus, in the opinion of scholars like Boring and Boers, a great chasm was fixed between what Jesus viewed and presented himself and the way the early church interpreted him, as Christ, Lord, or Son of God. It is possible then to perceive of these books as merely interpretations of the Christ event, they do not provide us with exact and accurate information concerning what Jesus preached about himself and what he really was. Therefore, according to H. Conzelmann, "The historical and substantive presupposition for modern research into the life of Jesus is emancipation from traditional Christological dogma on the basis of the principle of reason."⁴²

On the other hand, there are scholars who view the matter differently, and to them the early Christians were no innovators. I. H. Marshall suggests:

It is clear that the basic sayings of Jesus was *modified* both in the tradition and by the Evangelists in order to re-express its

significance for new situations; it is by no means obvious that this basic tradition was created by the early church. Similarly, it is unlikely that the stories about Jesus and the narrative setting for his teaching are [all] products of the church's *Sitz im Leben*. The fact that such material was found to be congenial for use in the church's situation is no proof it was created for this purpose.⁴³

Richard A. Burridge, who has carefully discussed the biographical genre of the Gospels by comparing it with forms of biographies from the Graeco-Roman world, argues that, "If the early church had not been interested in the person and earthly life of Jesus, it would not have produced *Bioi*, with their narrative structure and chronological framework, but discourses of the risen Christ, like the Gnostic 'gospels', instead."⁴⁴ Bilezikian maintains that "the very existence of the Gospel, and that of Matthew and Luke after Mark, bears witness to the importance attached to the historical Jesus by the early church."⁴⁵

Some of these scholars contend that Jesus used various mnemonic devices to make his teachings memorable as well as memorizable. In Jeremias and M. Black's opinion, there had been a relatively fixed Aramaic tradition from an early date behind much of Jesus' sayings, the statements attributed to Jesus by the present day Gospels, which in the case of the Synoptics Gospels, seems authentic to Jeremias:

Nevertheless, we can say in conclusion that the linguistic and stylistic evidence... shows so much faithfulness and such respect towards the tradition of the sayings of Jesus that we are justified in drawing up the following principle of method: In the synoptic tradition it is the inauthenticity, and not the authenticity, of the sayings of Jesus that must be demonstrated.⁴⁶

Many scholars do not share Jeremias's optimism. It is argued that Jesus enjoyed tremendous reverence among his early followers. Therefore his words, deeds and sayings were faithfully preserved and memorized like the Jewish Talmud. Birger Gerhardsson has discussed the issue at length, stating that:

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During the first four centuries of our era the oral Torah tradition of the Jewish rabbis grew enormously. And it was still being handed down orally. If one wonders how it was possible for such a huge body of text material to be preserved and passed on orally, one must consider the rabbis' pedagogical methods and technique employed in oral transmission.⁴⁷

He pinpointed methods like memorization, text and commentary, didactic and poetic devices, repetition, recitation and the art of writing, as instrumental in this aspect. From here he contended that "Jesus taught in parables and logia, in all probability he taught his hearers these texts... Jesus presented *meshalim* for his hearers, and the disciples were the first to memorize them, to ponder them, and to discuss together what they meant."⁴⁸ Therefore, he claims that "there is a historical justification, based on sound historical judgments, for concluding that there is an unbroken path which leads from Jesus' teaching in *meshalim* to the early church's methodical handing on of Jesus texts, a transmission carried on for *its own sake*."⁴⁹

Space does not allow for a detailed discussion of Gerhardsson's thesis, however, it may be sufficient to quote E. P. Sanders who demonstrates that

the Christian tradition – at least in Papias' generation – was not passed down and spread in the systematic manner which Gerhardsson describes as having taken place in Rabbinic Judaism. In sum, then, we see that there were probably significant differences between the Christian and Jewish method of transmission, although there may also have been significant similarities.⁵⁰

In short, to this group of scholars, the Gospel material is not inauthentic, and there is no great gulf between the historical Jesus' sayings and the post-Easter portrayal of him in the Gospels. The only difference is that Jesus proclaimed that God was about to act decisively and after his crucifixion, whereas the first century Apostolic preachings or kerygma proclaimed that God had already acted so. Therefore Jesus'

historical message is deemed to be exactly what the post Jesus Gospel materials contain. Ben Witherington concludes: "Thus, the alleged chasm between the speech event of the historical Jesus and the post-Easter speaking about Jesus probably never existed."⁵¹

From a historical perspective it may be noted that no actual proof exists of any written collection of the original Aramaic sayings of Jesus, or any notes or Gospel for that matter. E. G. Goodspeed has discussed at length the issue of the original language of the Gospels and concluded like many others that, "Certain it is that from the time Christianity really entered the Greek world it instinctively went about recording itself in writing – first letters, and then books."⁵² There is also no proof that the disciples took notes of Jesus' sayings or tried to preserve them, whether verbatim or in any other systematic way such as those employed by rabbinical Judaism. Further, E. P. Sanders has already shown that any such supposition cannot be substantiated by historical facts. Indeed the sheer existence of numerous compositions and structures of Jesus' sayings, as well as their early Greek translations, demonstrates the validity of the assertion. Martin Dibelius' *From Tradition to Gospels*, Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, and E. P. Sanders' *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* are still useful references to elaborate the point. Even the earliest forms of Christian literature, Paul's letters for instance, contain virtually nothing but a very few sayings of Jesus (as discussed later in the chapter). B. Gerhardsson recognizes that, "It is certain that Paul does not quote the earthly Jesus very often in his Epistles, nor does he discuss such material."⁵³ Historical-critical study of the New Testament points to the chronological gap that exists between the Gospel writers and Jesus' own times. Not forgetting also the spatial one, for they wrote at places where Jesus' disciples or contemporaries were virtually absent. The writers' acceptance of Jesus as Lord and his central position in their writings does not necessarily mean that their accounts regarding him are accurate. Rather these credentials only prove that they were believers and preachers with good news to share.

Having said this however, it does not seem plausible that the early Church would concoct the entire incident, for there would have to be some basis in the historical person of Jesus, and the idea of his simply

being a myth does not hold water. Proponents of the non-existence of Jesus theory, i.e. Arthur Drews, William B. Smith, and George A. Well, merely indulge in speculation, for documentary and other evidence (reliable Christian and non-Christian) suggests otherwise. Our point of contention is the precise accuracy of the accounts. The earliest Christian writers were perhaps heir to a variety of oral traditions and the latter were probably circulating in the community regarding Jesus' virgin birth, miracles, and preaching. It would appear that these traditions were selected, colored, modified and added to, in light of the so-called resurrected Jesus or Easter experience and early Church proclamations about it (kerygma). G. N. Stanton comments:

Perhaps we will never know *precisely* the influences at work in the earliest christological reflections of the church. To claim that the christological beliefs of the primitive church have not left their mark upon the gospel traditions would be to fly in the face of clear evidence to the contrary. But we may be sure that traditions about the life and character of Jesus played an important part not only in the preaching of the primitive church, but also in its christological reflection: both began with Jesus of Nazareth.⁵⁴

It must be pointed out that although the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth may have formed the beginning point for the primitive church, this does not mean that the Jesus who actually existed was identical to the church's later teachings about him. Howard C. Kee is probably right when he observes that, "What we are dealing with in the gospel tradition is not objective historical evidence that has become overlaid with the claims of Christian faith, but with the evidence that in its entirety stems from the witness of faith at various stages of development."⁵⁵

Caught in the middle of all these developments, one can attempt to locate the basic realities connected with the earthly life of Jesus despite their being overlaid with kerygmatic interpretations and mythical portrayals. Peeling off these mythical layers to determine fact from fallacy, or misconception, is possible by a New Testament scholar, well versed in the cultural context of these writings as well as first century Jewish and Hellenistic thought. Whereas scholars in the past, typically

the period between 1910–1970, would contend that we know virtually nothing about the historical Jesus, this kind of trend has presently given way to a more positive approach. E. P. Sanders observes that “in recent decades we have grown more confident.”⁵⁶ Sanders claims that now “There are no substantial doubts about the general course of Jesus’ life: when and where he lived, approximately when and where he died, and the sort of thing he did during his public activity.”⁵⁷ Many modern scholars like John Hick, James Dunn, N.T. Wright and J. L. Houlden would agree with most parts of this description.

This does not mean however that a consensus exists among New Testament scholars as to how and where to situate Jesus in the first century Jewish context. Paul Badham explains:

This does not mean that modern scholarship endorses every aspect of the traditional picture of Jesus. Historical and literary criticism constantly reminds us of the inevitable limits of our knowledge as we look back over long centuries. But whereas an earlier generation of scholars tended to say that unless we know something for certain we should not claim to know it at all, the modern view recognizes that uncertainty is present in all historical reconstructions of the past and need be no bar to reasonable confidence in what seems the most probable interpretation of what lies behind the narrative.⁵⁸

John Hick reminds us:

Scholars have listed such generally agreed points as that Jesus was a Galilean Jew, son of a woman called Mary; that he was baptized by John the Baptist; that he preached and healed and exorcized; that he called disciples and spoke of there being twelve; that he largely confined his activity to Israel; that he was crucified outside Jerusalem by the Roman authorities; and that after his death his followers continued as an identifiable movement. Beyond this an unavoidable element of conjectural interpretation goes into our mental pictures of Jesus.⁵⁹

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This tells us how limited our knowledge about the historical Jesus actually is. It should seem apparent by now that kerygmatic interpretations of the Christ-event are at the very foundation of the Gospels. This orientation, states Hans Kung,

and peculiar character of the Gospels do not merely render impossible a biography of Jesus. They make any dispassionate, historical interpretation of the texts more difficult. Of course no serious scholar assumes today, as people did at the beginning of Gospel criticism, that the disciples deliberately falsified the story of Jesus. They did not arbitrarily invent his deeds and words. They were simply convinced that they now knew better than in Jesus' lifetime who he really was and what he really signified. Hence they had no hesitation in following the custom of the time and placing everything that had to be said in regard to him under his personal authority: both by putting certain sayings into his mouth and by shaping certain stories in the light of his image as a whole.⁶⁰

J. D. Crossan stresses:

The Gospels are neither histories nor biographies even within the ancient tolerances for those genres. They are what they were eventually called, Gospels or good newses, and thereby comes a double warning. "Good" is always such within some individual's or community's opinion or interpretation. And "news" is not a word we usually pluralize again as "newses".⁶¹

H. Riesenfeld's arguments concerning the rigid formulation and careful memorization of early Christian traditions, analogous to the Jewish method of that time, do not seem convincing in light of the long period of mere oral transmission which prevailed and the freedom with which material was handled by the earliest Christian community. Stephen Neill observes:

No one is likely to deny that a tradition which is being handed on by word of mouth will undergo modification. This is bound to happen, unless the tradition has been rigidly formulated, and has

been learned by heart with careful safeguards against the intrusion of error. Most of us would, I think, be inclined to agree that, in the story of the coin in the fish's mouth, and of Peter walking on the water in Matthew 14, an element of imaginative enlargement has at some point or other been added to the original tradition. Again, the variation of the forms in which sayings of Jesus appear, as between one Gospel and another, suggests that there was freedom of interpretation, even in this most sacred area of the tradition, which did not demand exact verbal fidelity.⁶²

Neill continues:

But there is a vast difference between recognition of this kind of flexibility, of this creative working of the community on existing traditions, and the idea that the community simply invented and read back into the life of Jesus things that he had never done, and words that he had never said. When carried to its extreme, this method suggests that the anonymous community had far greater creative power than the Jesus of Nazareth, faith in whom had called the community into being.⁶³

Moreover, theological interests have always played a vital role in the transmission of Christian texts. The first century of transmission is no exception as Helmut Koester observes:

The problems for the reconstruction of the textual history of the canonical Gospels in the first century of transmission are immense.... Textual critics of classical texts know that the first century of their transmission is the period in which the most serious corruptions occurred. Textual critics of the New Testament writings have been surprisingly naive in this respect.⁶⁴

Origen, in the second century, had to undertake a great deal of textual criticism. Bigg observes that:

He devoted much time and labor to the text of the New Testament, which was already disfigured by corruptions, 'some arising

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from the carelessness of scribes, some from the evil licence of emendation, some from arbitrary omissions or interpolations.' Already the records were perverted in numberless passages...⁶⁵

In the opinion of R. L. Fox, "A critical history of Christian thought could not possibly begin to have been written until after 1500 because of forgeries by Christians themselves. The same danger besets the New Testament."⁶⁶

If we examine these comments in light of the crucial differences that exist between *The Revised Version* of the Bible and the *King James Version* over several theologically important passages such as, 1 John 5:7–8, it becomes evident that theological interests caused several insertions to be introduced into the text of the New Testament after it had been canonized, or declared the Divine Scripture and the Word of God. Fox rightly observes that, "There is a thin and difficult line between a saying (perhaps largely authentic) which Christians inserted into an existing Gospel and those sayings which a Gospeller ascribed implausibly to Jesus himself."⁶⁷ If this is the case with the text after its having been declared the Word of God, and note despite the severe warnings of punishment given at the end of the Canon for tampering with it (see Revelation 22:18–19: "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book"), then what are we supposed to make of the oral traditions and their text in the first century when these were not even taken as Holy Scripture?

Interestingly, in the first century Christian Church the terms, 'Holy Scriptures', 'Divine Oracles' or the 'Holy Word' were implied for the Old Testament only. The words of Jesus were notably prefaced with the expressions, "the words of our Lord Jesus" or "the Lord saith". An example of this tendency among first century Christians can be seen in the so-called first Epistle of Clement of Rome. Scholars have shown that the epistle, or letter, is an authentic Church of Rome document dating to around 96 CE which fact brings us even closer to the world of the New Testament and its cultural and theological settings. Of significance is that in the Epistle the writer always alludes to the Old Testament

writings as the Holy Scriptures but, as Grant observes, “never refers to the New Testament writings as scripture.”⁶⁸ Fox summarizes the situation in the following words:

This anonymous letter twice refers directly to ‘words of the Lord Jesus’, but neither reference is an exact quotation of a saying found in any one of our Gospels. The author is also unaware of any written New Testament and restrained in his use of scripture. He urged Corinth to consult its epistle from the ‘blessed apostle Paul’ and apparently alluded elsewhere to other Pauline epistles, as if he already knew them in a collection. He certainly knew our Epistle to the Hebrews, though not its anonymous author. However when he mentioned Paul’s Romans 1:29, he continued with a quotation from Psalm 50, introduced by the phrase ‘For the scripture says...’ It seems that Paul’s epistles were not quite the same as scripture in his mind: it is striking that he quotes clusters of sayings from Jesus only twice, whereas he referred over a hundred times to verses in Hebrew scripture. Christianity, for this author, is certainly not yet a ‘religion of the book’ with its own closed body of texts.⁶⁹

Geisler and Nix disagree with such a depiction of the Epistle asserting that, “This contains several quotations from the New Testament, including the synoptic gospels. His citations are more precise than those attributed to Barnabas, but they still lack modern precision.”⁷⁰ What Geisler and Nix recognize by “lack of modern precision” is exactly the point raised by the scholars of “form criticism”, who classify biblical passages and textual units by their literary styles and attempt to trace them back to their possible historical contexts and periods. Concerning the issue of precision, John Ferguson observes even about Clement of Alexandria (Christian theologian c.150) that, “He turns next to New Testament and can still startle us by throwing in a phrase from Homer in the middle of his scriptural citations.”⁷¹

The earliest Christian writings are that of St. Paul as Bornkamm and others have shown. Bornkamm states:

All the letters, without exception, were composed towards the end of his career and within a relatively short span of time. They cover

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a period of no more than six or seven years when he worked as a missionary before being taken prisoner on his last visit to Jerusalem (ca. A.D. 56–57), after which he probably died a martyr's death in Rome in the early sixties, during the reign of Nero.⁷²

A. Schweitzer comments that for these letters “we have to place a period of about twelve years, which are probably the years A.D. 52–64, but possibly from 50–62, if not still earlier.”⁷³ Modern scholarship agrees with dating genuine Pauline letters to the years between 49–62 CE as T. G. A. Baker has shown.

It is interesting to note that Paul is quite silent in his writings about the historical settings which seem to be fundamental to the whole gospel narrative of Jesus' life and does not quote from Jesus except once. H. Anderson rightly points out that “if Paul were our only source, we would know nothing of Jesus' parables, the Sermon on the Mount, or the Lord's prayer.”⁷⁴ According to Victor P. Furnish:

It is striking, however, how little use the apostle actually makes of Jesus' teachings. For example, he invokes none of the parables which later on were given such prominence in the Synoptic Gospels. Moreover, he has very little to say about the Reign of God, even though that is a fundamental theme in both the sayings and parable traditions. True, not all of Paul's letters have survived, and we have no transcripts of his actual preaching. Yet the sources we do have probably give us an accurate picture... Paul focuses his attention neither on the teachings of Jesus nor on Jesus' Palestinian ministry. His attention is focused, rather, on Jesus the crucified Messiah and the risen Lord.⁷⁵

John Hick observes that “Paul fits Jesus into his own theology with little regard to the historical figure.”⁷⁶

Burridge, on the other hand, argues that, “Because Paul says little about the person of Jesus in his epistles does not necessarily mean that he was not interested in his earthly ministry; it might be because he is writing epistles and not *Bioi*.”⁷⁷ It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss and review the evidence as to how far the Gospels could be

treated as *Bioi* (ancient biographies). Whatever the case, the issues discussed highlight the fact that the parables, sayings of Jesus, and the Gospels, were neither transmitted in a rigid, organized or systematic method nor written or accepted as Holy Scripture in the Christian circles of the middle first century. This complete silence on the part of Paul, observes Grasser, “is an unexplained riddle.”⁷⁸ According to Francois Bovon:

We must learn to consider the gospels of the New Testament canon, in the form in which they existed before 180 C.E., in the same light in which we consider the apocrypha. At this earlier time the gospels were what the apocrypha never ceased to be. Like the apocrypha, the gospels of the New Testament were not yet canonical; they did not circulate together [for example, only Luke and John are present in Papyrus 45], and when they did, they did not always appear in the same sequence [for example, the order Matthew, John, Luke, Mark in Codex Bezae].⁷⁹

The Gospel’s composition and collection was not the end of the oral tradition of Jesus’ sayings. The oral tradition can be traced until well into the second century, in the Apostolic Fathers, and perhaps in Justin, who of course was well aware of the Gospels and in fact used them in his writings. M. Wiles states:

For a long time, even after many of the New Testament writings had been written, the method of oral transmission continued to be regarded as the basic way in which the substance of the Christian Gospel was to be learned and passed on. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor in the first half of the second century, is not unrepresentative of his age in preferring to the written record of books a living and abiding voice, a continuous chain of remembered teaching which could be traced back to ‘the commandments given by the Lord to faith, and reaching us from the Truth himself’. The overall picture to be found in the writings of Justin Martyr and the other apologists contemporary with him is fundamentally similar; their conception of Christianity is the

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teaching of Jesus spreading its way around the world through the medium of the preaching first of the apostles and then of those who came after them.⁸⁰

Papias of Hierapolis (c. 130–140), who has been credited with being the author of *Exposition of the Lord's Oracles* which survives in fragments only, states what is thought to be a classical example of the continued exaltation of oral tradition: "I did not think that I could get so much from the contents of books as from the utterances of the living and abiding voice."⁸¹ In short,

the general illiteracy of the first Christians, the expectation of an imminent parousia, and the high regard for Spirit-inspired prophetic utterance together ensured that the first generation of Christians would be itinerant, charismatic-type prophetic figures rather than scholarly authors of written works. Their social circumstances and their activity mutually served to prevent their producing written works.⁸²

When the Gospel literature started to be compiled, it was perhaps Mark who took the initiative. In fact, observes Burridge, "out of 661 verses in Mark's gospel, around 90 per cent occur in Matthew too, and about half are also in Luke."⁸³ The old hypothesis that Mark made use of Matthew and Luke was challenged by Lachmann in 1835 in an article entitled "De Ordine Narrationum in Evangeliiis Synoptics" [The Order of the Narration of Events in the Synoptic Gospels]. Hermann Weisse (1801–1866) furthered it by two acutely penetrating remarks i.e., the fuller account of various events in Mark than that in Matthew and Luke, and Mark's addition of vivid touches. He further observed that Matthew and Luke must have made use of another written collection of Jesus' sayings from which much of the material common between them was derived. Here in Weisse one can see the embryonic stage of the 'Two-Source' theory of the composition of the Gospels which by the end of the century dominated the field of New Testament studies. B. H. Streeter (1874–1937) developed a "Four-document" theory of the origins of the Gospels asserting:

It is assumed that a hypothesis which reduces the number of sources to a minimum is more scientific... But a plurality of sources is historically more probable. In particular, if Mark is the old Roman Gospel, it is antecedently to be expected that the other Gospels conserve the specific traditions of Jerusalem, Caesarea and Antioch.⁸⁴

By the end of the century the priority of Mark and of the “Two-source” theory was looked upon as the assured result of the historical-critical approach to New Testament study, and any attempt to replace it with alternate views was vehemently opposed and scholarly rebuked by known authorities in the field. By 1919 Martin Dibelius could write that “the two-source theory is better able than any other to explain the synoptic problem.”⁸⁵ Burridge observes that “the current consensus among gospel scholars about the complex overlapping between the gospels is that Mark wrote first; Matthew and Luke used Mark and another source, ‘Q’, plus their own material; and that John was written independently of the other three, probably last of all.”⁸⁶ Mark is said to have been written shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem between the years 65 and 75 CE as Baker contends, or by the end of the seventies as Crossan argues; Matthew around 90 CE and Luke as early as the nineties, most probably 85 CE (both after the destruction). By comparison with the Synoptics, the Gospel of John, observes Hans Kung, “has a completely different character in both the literary and theological sense... Undoubtedly too it was the last Gospel to be written (as David Friedrich Strauss discovered early in the nineteenth century). It could have been written about the year 100.”⁸⁷ The earliest extant fragment, argues Crossan, “of John is dated to about 125 C.E.”⁸⁸

In addition to the late compilation of the Gospels we also have the case that when Christian literature started to be compiled, it was not only the books later regarded as canonical that were in circulation or accepted as authoritative but others too. Luke’s beginning verse pinpoints the situation:

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among

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us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)

In other words quite a few other gospels were also in circulation, the Gospel of the Hebrews for instance (which, according to Jerome, some called “the true Matthew”), the Gospel According to the Egyptians, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of the Ebionites, and others. Helmut Koester summarizes the situation: “the number of gospels in circulation must have been much larger, at least a good dozen of which we at least have some pieces, and everybody could and did rewrite, edit, revise, and combine, however he saw fit.”⁸⁹ Some of these Gospels were frequently quoted by the early fathers, like Clement and Papias, and were later declared Apocryphal or unlawful. Fox observes that, “At the turn of the century, the Christian intellectual Clement of Alexandria still cited the Gospel of the Egyptians and interpreted a saying of Jesus from it, although he knew very well that it was not one of four.”⁹⁰

On the whole, then, it can be stated that during the first half of the second century, the four Gospels of the present New Testament as well as other Christian literature like Paul’s epistles were extant, but the idea of a close canon or New Testament was not present. No doubt the traces of the idea of a Christian Scripture steadily became clearer during this period and the presuppositions of the formation of the canon can be evaluated. But the crystal clear idea of the Christian canon was not the work of orthodoxy but a reaction and response to the pressure of heretics (like Marcion), Montanists and Gnostics and their heretical teachings. As B. M. Metzger observes: “Various external circumstances assisted in the process of canonization of the New Testament books. The emergence of heretical sects having their own sacred books made it imperative for the church to determine the limits of the canon.”⁹¹

The great majority of New Testament scholars, especially since the last century (after publication of the works of D. de Bruyne and A. von

Harnack), have postulated that Marcion was responsible for creating the canon. In his book *Antitheses*, Marcion contrasted his own ethical dualism (discussed in chapter 2) as based on New Testaments texts, with other New Testament texts and with passages from the Old Testament. He rejected the Old Testament altogether and set up a list of writings to be recognized as Scripture by his followers. It was comprised of a form of the Gospel of Luke and 10 of the Pauline Epistles (excluding the three Pastoral Epistles). The mainstream Church could not accept this short canon and in reaction was forced to define more carefully the list of books that it recognized as Divine Scriptures.

J. N. D. Kelly, on the other hand, disagrees with Harnack and others by observing that the Church already had its own roughly defined collection of books which it was beginning to treat as scriptures by the time of Marcion. Therefore the claim that Marcion was the originator of the Catholic canon is “an extravagant point of view.” Kelly however fails to prove the point of the Church’s own initiative in canonizing the Christian books with the exclusion of many others. Moreover, he himself recognizes the fact that

if the idea of a specifically Christian canon was deeply rooted in the Church’s own convictions and practice, Marcion played an important part in the practical emergence of one. What none of the great ecclesiastical centers, so far as we know, had done, and what his initiative seems to have provoked them to do, was to delimit their lists of authorized Christian books in a public, official way. The influence of Montanism...worked in the same direction.⁹²

Furthermore, the Montanist controversy of the “Spirit” was another factor in narrowing down the list of divine writings. In the early Christian congregations the Spirit had been accorded a central role. When the Montanists tried to exploit this belief in the Spirit to rationalize some of their extravagant assertions, the Church emphasized the authority of the written Word (the Scriptures) to counter them.

A decisive element in the canonization process of the New Testament came in the second century during conflict with another group known as the ‘Gnostics’. This group claimed to have a special knowledge of

what Jesus had really taught, alleging that ordinary Christian teachings were little more than what Jesus and the disciples had taught publicly, but that their knowledge consisted of what Jesus had taught his close associates in private. To refute their claims and occult teachings, the Church focused on the sacred writings and their apostolic authority.

The first list which has come down to us from the Church is what is known as the “Muratorian” fragment, first published by Milanese scholar L. A. Muratori (1672–1750) in 1740. Previously thought of as a second century western text this is nowadays thought to represent a fourth-century eastern text. From this and other ancient manuscripts like the Codex Alexandrinus, the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus, it becomes manifest that until the third and fourth century, the limits of the canon were regarded by all as fluid. These old manuscripts included in their New Testament certain works such as Hermas’ “The Shepherd” and the “Epistle of Barnabas” (no more a part of the present New Testament), while omitting other canonical ones like the Epistles of James, the Epistles of Peter and Hebrews. Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 340) an important witness to the state of the canon in the various Christian communities of his era, classified extant Christian writings into three categories: (1) *Homologoumena* or “agreed upon” – this referred to the universally accepted books which were the four Gospels, Acts, a fourteen-item Pauline corpus, 1 Peter, 1 John, and “if it seems correct,” Revelation; (2) *Antilegomena* or “the disputed” – referring to books whose canonicity was disputed. Under this he lists five of the seven Catholic Epistles i.e. Epistle of James, Jude, second Epistle of Peter and the second and third Epistles of John. These were accepted by the majority and rejected by a minority. A subset of the “disputed” ones was not accepted by the majority and these were the Acts of Paul, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Letter of Barnabas, the Didache and “if it seems correct” Revelation; (3) *The Atopa Pante Kai Dusebe* or “the altogether absurd and impious works”.⁹³ Most of the apocryphal gospels are listed under this category. It was Athanasius’s Easter letter of 367 that settled the discussion of the internal limits of the New Testament canon within the eastern church, yet not with absolute success. In the fourth century Hebrews was generally accepted in the East and rejected in the West. The Apocalypse was generally accepted in the West and rejected in the East.

The canon in the West was closed in the fifth century under the influence of St. Augustine and Jerome. For the Greek church in the East the question was settled by Constantine. He ordered Eusebius to prepare 50 copies of the Scriptures to be used in the new capital. In this way the 27 New Testament books included in these copies obtained a semi-official recognition. The Syrian church still had some reservations about 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, and Revelation. The fifth-century Syrian Jacobite manuscript Peshitta contained only 22 books. In the sixth and seventh century the influence of the Vulgate (4th century Latin version of the bible) and Constantinople prevailed and all 27 books of the New Testament were recognized by the church. The western Syrian Bible of the sixth and seventh century, the Philoxenian and Harklian versions, contained the same 27 books accepted in the East as well as in the West, though the eastern Syrian Church observes Metzger, “having lost contact with the rest of Christendom, continued much longer to hold to the shorter canon.”⁹⁴

Though the issue of the New Testament canon was settled in the fifth century, Eusebius’s distinction between the *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* did not disappear completely from the Church. During the Middle Ages, Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles, except 1 Peter and 1 John, were still the subject of some controversy. Luther, for instance, severely censured Hebrews, Jude, 2 Peter and called James “a straw epistle”. He relegated some other canonical books to second place. In spite of these differences, all the Catholic as well as Protestant New Testament copies contain all 27 canonical writings.

It is important to note Kelly’s observation that:

The main point to be observed is that the fixation of the finally agreed list of books, and of the order in which they were to be arranged, was the result of a very gradual process...By gradual stages, however, the Church both in East and West arrived at a common mind as to its sacred books. The first official document which prescribes the twenty-seven books of our New Testament as alone canonical is Athanasius’s Easter Letter for the year 367, but the process was not everywhere complete until at least a century and a half later.⁹⁵

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Now when we read the New Testament as a book what we are in fact reading, as R. L. Fox puts it, is “a list of books which some of the Christian’s bishops approved and asserted more than three hundred years after Jesus’s death...Three centuries are a very long time: do these late listings really create a unity with such an authority that it directs our understanding?”⁹⁶ Obviously, it would be implausible to cite the protection, guidance and comforting work of the Holy Spirit to the exclusion of human beings with all their human limitations behind the very letters of the New Testament books. In Fox’s view:

Even an atheist can see the difference between one of the turgid or most sectarian alternative Gospels and one of the recognized four: as for the others, even early Christians who respected our four could quote sayings from some of the other Gospels too. As for the rest of the New Testament, it was never agreed definitively, unless the entire Syriac, Ethiopic and Greek Orthodox Churches are disqualified from a share in the Holy Spirit, along with the bulk of those Christians who wrote in Greek throughout the first seven centuries of Church history and made such subtle contributions to Christian theology.⁹⁷

Therefore, the only solid conclusion one can reach is that the authors, compilers, and canonizers were after all simple human beings. In addition, it is pertinent to note as S. Neill does that, “Whatever view we may hold of the inspiration of the New Testament, we are bound to admit that it has been immune from none of the chances, the perils, and the corruptions which have assailed all other manuscript traditions of similar length.”⁹⁸ He further argues:

In regard to the text of almost all ancient authors this is certain that none of them presents what the author himself can possibly have written...We cannot rule out the possibility that the same may be true of the New Testament, and that in certain passages, which are likely to be very few, nothing but the inspired guesswork will take us back to the original.⁹⁹

Just the expressions ‘Canonical writings’ or ‘Canon of Scriptures,’ in the words of Matthew Arnold,

recall a time when degrees of value were still felt, and all parts of the Bible did not stand on the same footing, and were not taken equally. There was a time when books were read as part of the Bible which are no Bible now; there was a time when books which are in every Bible now, were by many disallowed as genuine parts of the Bible... And so far from their finally getting where they now are after a thorough trial of their claims, and with indisputable propriety, they got placed there by the force of circumstances, by chance or by routine, rather than on their merits.¹⁰⁰

It is also not the case that once the Canon was established nobody had any problems with it. Rather, “the whole discussion died out, not because the matter was sifted and settled and a perfect Canon of Scripture deliberately formed; it died out as medieval ignorance deepened, and because there was no longer knowledge or criticism enough left in the world to keep such a discussion alive.”¹⁰¹

Since the eighteenth century onward however, this discussion has once again ignited, though its emphasis and tone is a little different.

THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN STANDPOINT

Christians are divided on the issue of their Scripture’s origin and authority. Some, particularly in certain Evangelical traditions, enthusiastically advocate the infallibility, inerrancy and verbal inspiration of the Bible. Their logic is palpable. If God the Omniscient, the Omnipresent, the Omnipotent, is regarded as author of the scriptural text, then it follows that the text should be entirely free of any mistakes and errors, whether in content or form. If however, Scripture is found to contain errors, whether by the unintentional or indiscernible will of its authors or not, we are left with a critical problem, for God’s power and perfection does not allow for errors to exist in His written work.

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According to B. B. Warfield, a staunch exponent of Scriptural Inerrancy, the scriptures are, “not as man’s report to us of what God says, but as the very Word of God itself, spoken by God himself through human lips and pens.”¹⁰² He further argues that each word of the text is “at one and the same time the consciously self-chosen word of the writer and the divinely-inspired word of the Spirit.”¹⁰³ To affirm the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, in 1978 an International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy was held in the USA, and its roughly 300 attendees formulated what is known as “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy”, viewing biblical Scripture as wholly inerrant: “Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teachings, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives.”¹⁰⁴ G. L. Archer is more specific when he states that, “We must therefore conclude that any event or fact related in Scripture – whether it pertains to doctrine, science, or history – is to be accepted by the Christian as totally reliable and trustworthy, no matter what modern scientists or philosophers may think of it.”¹⁰⁵

Such Evangelists, often called Fundamentalists, also hold the view that biblical Scripture should be understood literally. O. B. Greene, for instance, argues that, “Jesus dies a literal death. He was buried – not figuratively or spiritually, but literally, in a literal tomb. And He literally rose again – bodily, as He had declared He would and it had been prophesied.”¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, although a literal reading of biblical Scripture is often emphasized, it is not always followed through, meaning that there is a common tendency to interpret the text in a way to fit a presupposed scheme, theology or eschatology, sometimes leading to full-scale exegetical exploitation.

Furthermore, we also have the matter that biblical Scripture would need to be accepted in its totality to avoid doubt being cast on its authority as well as absolute truthfulness in issues fundamental to the Christian faith. If Paul, as Francis Schaeffer argues, “is wrong in this factual statement about Eve’s coming from Adam [1 Corinthians 11:8], there is no reason to have certainty in the authority of any New Testament factual statement, including the factual statement that Christ

rose physically from the dead.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore any criticism of scriptural text or belief in a limited or “virtual” inerrancy would be appalling, for it would not only negate the Scripture’s self-testimony, but appear to cast doubt on the pivotal doctrine of the Christian faith and the perfect knowledge and authority of Jesus. J. I. Packer observes that “Christ does not judge Scripture; He obeys it and fulfills it. By word and deed He endorses the authority of the whole of it. Certainly, He is the final authority for Christians; that is precisely why Christians are bound to acknowledge the authority of Scripture. Christ teaches them to do so.”¹⁰⁸

Christian fundamentalists thereby prove the inerrancy and plenary inspiration of the Scripture by appealing to the character of its witnesses, contending that Jesus and his apostles maintained the doctrine of biblical sufficiency and inerrancy, therefore it must be so. They are not isolated in this, for Church history and tradition is also witness to this line of thought. According to Gaussens:

With the single exception of Theodore of Mopsuestia...it has been found impossible to produce, in the long course of the first eight centuries of Christianity, a single doctor who has disowned the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, unless it be in the bosom of the most violent heresies that have tormented the Christian Church.¹⁰⁹

The point is supported by J. N. D. Kelly’s observation that:

It goes without saying that the fathers envisaged the whole of the Bible as inspired. It was not a collection of disparate segments, some of divine origin and others of merely human fabrication. Irenaeus, for example, is not surprised at its frequent obscurity, ‘seeing it is spiritual in its entirety’; while Gregory of Nyssa understands St. Paul to imply that everything contained in Scripture is the deliverance of the Holy Spirit. Even Theodore of Mopsuestia, who distinguished between the special inspiration of the prophets and the inferior grace of ‘prudence’ granted to Solomon, was not really an exception, for he was satisfied that all

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the authors of both the Testaments wrote under the influence of one and the same Spirit. Origen, indeed, and Gregory of Nazianzus after him, could perceive the activity of wisdom in the most trifling verbal minutiae, even in the solecisms, of the sacred books.

Kelly further notes:

This attitude was fairly widespread, and although some of the fathers elaborated it more than others, their general view was that Scripture was not only exempt from error but contained nothing that was superfluous. ‘There is not one jot or tittle’, declared Origen, ‘written in the Bible which does not accomplish its special work for those capable of using it.’ In similar vein Jerome stated that ‘in the divine Scriptures every word, syllable, accent and point is packed with meaning’; those who slighted the commonplace contents of *Philemon* were simply failing, through ignorance, to appreciate the power and wisdom they concealed. According to Chrysostom, even the chronological figures and the catalogues of names included in Scripture have their profound value; and he devoted two homilies to the salutations in *Romans 16* in the hope of convincing his auditors that treasures of wisdom lie hid in every word spoken by the Spirit.¹¹⁰

Kelly concludes that with the exception of Augustine and Theodore, “The majority were content to accept the fact of the inspiration of the sacred writers, without examining further the manner or the degree of its impact upon them.”¹¹¹

However such a claim may be anachronistic, for according to Canon Charles Smyth, “nobody really believed in the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures until the geologists began to question it in the nineteenth century.”¹¹² The Scriptures are not the infallible and inerrant Word of God, containing absolute truth about everything in the world. They are records of God’s revelation and good for Christian faith. Long before modern times St. Augustine commented, “We do not read in the Gospel of the Lord’s having said: I send you a Comforter to teach you about the course of the sun and moon. What he sought to produce was

Christians, not astronomers.”¹¹³ Augustine further analyzed the prophetic vision into three principal categories: corporal, spiritual and intellectual.¹¹⁴ Writing about the scriptural depiction of the paradise of Eden, St. Augustine observed,

a number of interpreters give a symbolic meaning to the whole of that paradise, in which dwelt the first parents of mankind, according to the truthful narrative of holy Scripture. They give a spiritual reference to those fruit-bearing trees, and the others, turning them into symbols of virtues and moral qualities. They take it for granted that those were not visible and material objects, but were thus described in speech or writing to stand for spiritual and moral truths.¹¹⁵

Augustine approves this line of approach to the Scriptures by arguing that, “This is the kind of thing that can be said by way of allegorical interpretation of paradise; and there may be other more valuable lines of interpretation. There is no prohibition against such exegesis, provided that we also believe in the truth of the story as a faithful record of historical fact.”¹¹⁶ Christian history is replete with allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures as seen in the previous chapter.

Modern Christian responses to biblical Scripture have taken so many forms that space does not allow us to dwell on them. However, one of the most frequently discussed responses is that of Rudolf Bultmann. To Bultmann the New Testament cosmology is “essentially mythical in character.”¹¹⁷ Its world view and the event of ‘redemption’ which is the subject of its preaching is obsolete. A “blind acceptance of the New Testament mythology would be arbitrary, and to press for its acceptance as an article of faith would be to reduce faith to works.”¹¹⁸ Modern man’s knowledge and mastery of the world has advanced to such a degree that he is no longer interested in this pre-scientific and mythical eschatology, “Man’s knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world – in fact there is no one who does.”¹¹⁹ If Christians want to save the truth and message of the New Testament, “the only

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way is to demythologize it.”¹²⁰ The New Testament itself invites such a revolutionary process, “the principal demand for the criticism of mythology comes from a curious contradiction which runs right through the New Testament.”¹²¹

The demythologization of the Scriptures can be achieved only through “an existentialist interpretation” of the New Testament. Bultmann and his school have given a great deal of thought to hermeneutics and scriptural interpretation. They believe that the Christian Gospel is the proclamation of something God has done once and for all in the early decades of our era. That *kerygma*, as Bultmann calls it, of the New Testament can be made fully intelligible and acceptable today once interpreted by appropriate hermeneutic techniques apart from mythology. This *kerygma* will offer “man an understanding of himself which will challenge him to a genuine existential decision.”¹²²

Scholars following the existential approach do not view the Bible as the Word of God but view biblical Scripture as a unique place where the believer encounters the Word of God. To them only Christ is the Word of God and the Scriptures are perceived as fallible, finite and a human witness/response to Christ. The Scriptures become the Word of God only because God uses them to reveal Himself. The spoken word, states Brunner, “is an indirect revelation when it bears witness to the real revelation: Jesus Christ, the personal self-manifestation of God, Emmanuel.”¹²³ Therefore, the

Scriptures – first of all the testimony of the Apostle to Christ – is the “crib wherein Christ lieth” (Luther). It is a “word” inspired by the Spirit of God; yet at the same time it is a human message; its “human character” means that it is colored by the frailty and imperfection of all that is human.¹²⁴

This is all very well but leaves unanswered the biggest question: how in the world is anyone to know the true “Word of God” when the sole source of information for that Word, that is the Scripture, is imperfect and unauthentic to begin with? Further, how could the Holy Spirit or Divine Providence preserve and guard the text and truths of certain

parts of the Scripture whilst letting others be disfigured by imperfect human beings?

Continuing on with subtleties such as these, for Paul Tillich the Scripture is less revelation than a record of revelation; revelation takes place in a dialectical encounter between God and man. The Scriptural text is the report of such an encounter:

The Bible is a document of the divine self-manifestation and of the way in which human beings have received it...The basic error of fundamentalism is that it overlooks the contribution of the receptive side in revelatory situation and consequently identifies one individual and conditioned form of receiving the divine with the divine itself.¹²⁵

This throws up yet other questions not answered, what are the other forms and ways of receiving the divine and how authentic and objective are they? Would they not lead us to sheer subjectivity? What would be the methods and tools of verifying the authenticity and rationality of such forms or claims?

Liberal Christians seem to answer many of these questions by not believing in the literal doctrine of a divine dictation of the Scriptures. For them the Scriptures are an outstanding expression of man's hopes, aspirations and fears. The authors of these so-called 'sacred' books were mere human beings whose thought patterns were influenced and conditioned by their cultural limitations. This approach paves the way for liberals to possibly disagree with biblical authors, should in their opinion modern times and understandings demand it, even in religious matters. D. Nineham, for instance, argues that as soon as

we look closely at individual New Testament writers and the way they articulate their feelings and their understanding of the new situation, the element of variety and strangeness become much more apparent, and it becomes clear that the variety derives from the fact that the writers have come from a variety of backgrounds, each with its own mythology and terminology, each dominated by its distinctive religious outlook, fears and aspirations.¹²⁶

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So these scribes were not infallible stenographers putting into writing whatever God dictated to them or whatever the Spirit inspired them. They were “at best honest, but simple-minded and ill-educated, primitives”,¹²⁷ who were trying to make some sense out of the unusual event of Christ. Their account of Christ’s event is not the inerrant Word of God but is “precisely history and story – history embedded in a context of interpretative story.”¹²⁸ The “story” was not critically examined in the previous generations because, as states C. S. Lewis, the Middle Ages were “the ages of authority”, and he goes on,

if their culture is regarded as a response to environment, then the element in that environment to which it responded more vigorously were manuscript. Every writer if he possibly can, bases himself on an earlier writer, follows an auctour: preferably a Latin one. This is one of the things that differentiates that period...from our modern civilization.¹²⁹

To tell the same story is the “embarrassment of the modern scholar”¹³⁰ because it lacks “consistency appropriate to unified dogmatic theory.”¹³¹ Therefore, Dennis Nineham advises Christians to approach the Scriptures

in an altogether more relaxed spirit, not anxiously asking ‘what has it to say to me immediately?’, but distancing it, allowing fully for its ‘pastness’, accepting it without anxiety as an ancient story about God and the world, told by people who regarded the world as a phenomenon of at most some five thousand year’s duration and believed in God’s constant saving interventions in its affairs from creation day to Doomsday.¹³²

It is no more a ‘sacred’ book and Christians should not feel guilty about it. Fr. Thomas Williams writes:

The discarding of the old bottle and the provision of the new has been interpreted by some Christians as a denial that there is any wine at all. That is because they have imagined that God can be

contained within the limits of a definition as though wireless waves were identical with a certain type of receiving set.¹³³

The question is worth repeating, if the wireless waves are not fully transmitted and authentically communicated through the receiving set, what else is there to authentically inform us and appropriately convey to us the nature and function of the waves and how could we benefit from such a source of communication? Discarding the old bottle is quite different from discarding the only bottle available.

In short, according to Nineham, "Liturgists, quite as much as dogmatic theologians, need to free themselves from what has rightly been called 'the curse of the canon'."¹³⁴

Richard Swinburne's approach is quite interesting. He agrees with many that we cannot take the Bible literally, commenting:

Of course if we are misguided enough to interpret the Bible in terms of the 'original meaning' of the text, that original meaning is often false: there is scientific, historical, moral, and theological falsity in the Bible, if it is so interpreted. This evident fact led many liberal-minded theologians of the twentieth century to cease to talk of the Bible being 'true', but to speak rather of it being 'useful' or 'insightful' if read in accord with some rule or other of interpretation; and there have evolved as many ways of interpreting as there have been theologians to do the interpreting. And saying this sort of thing about the Bible hardly gives it special status – the same could be said of any great work of literature. A general fog settled over 'hermeneutics'.¹³⁵

However, he further argues:

And yet the rules are there, sanctified by centuries of use by those who claimed in accord with Christian tradition that the Bible was 'true'. If we wish to take seriously claims for the truth of the Bible, we must understand it in the way that both philosophical rules for interpreting other texts, and so many of those who interpreted the Bible or laid down the rules for doing so in previous centuries,

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suggest; and that includes their admission that it contains deeper truths which future generations wiser than themselves might detect by using their rules.¹³⁶

Swinburne, I think, is quite aware of the limitations of these centuries-old rules of interpretation and can appreciate the problems involved in applying and following those rules without further elaborations and modifications.

Any modification less than a frank confession of the fact that the writers of these books were imperfect, primitive human beings, trying to understand and interpret the multi-faceted Christ event to the best of their ability, probably would not work in our times. It goes without saying that such a response and interpretation face the limitations of their writers and cannot be equated with or labeled as the inerrant Word of God Himself. The existence of this variety of writers and interpretations are the main source of the contradictory nature of the Christological doctrines.

Christology: Corporealism & Anthropomorphism

Jesus historically existed among the Jewish people, respected their Scripture, thought of himself as a fulfillment of their law, struggled with the Jewish religious hierarchy and claimed to be sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. There may have been features distinctive to Jesus' understanding of God and His transcendence, but the concept as a whole would probably not be at odds with Judaic understanding of the Deity. The earliest Christians would perforce have obviously inherited the themes of divine transcendence and monotheism from the developed Judaism around them, meaning that the unity, uniqueness and sublimity of the Creator God must have been the indisputable premise of the original Church's faith tradition. One can deduce from available historical data that the Church has used the same transcendental monotheistic premise against the polytheists, Gnostic emanationists and Marcionite dualists to refute their monotheistic violations.

Like Clement of Alexandria, many of the Church Fathers insisted that the Hebrew Bible's anthropomorphic expressions be understood and taken metaphorically. So, for instance, Saint Basil of Caesarea

(330–379) interpreted God turning “His face” as God leaving one alone in difficulties, Gregory of Nazianzus interpreted God’s “face” as His oversight, Theodoret as His benevolence and restoration of freedom, and John of Damascus as His display and self-revelation through countless works.

The New Testament in contrast contains very few anthropomorphic expressions. It does refer to the finger of God (Luke 11:20), mouth of God (Matthew 4:4), sight of God (Luke 16:15), earth being the footstool of God (Matthew 5:35) etc., and almost all of these expressions can be interpreted metaphorically. Despite this, many church fathers held a corporeal and anthropomorphic concept of the Deity. Bigg notes that, “In the view of the *Homilies*, the Valentinians, Melito..., Tertullian *Adv. Praxeam* 7, God is corporeal. Even Irenaeus finds the image of God in the body of man... Anthropomorphism lingered on long in the East.”¹³⁷ Two centuries after Clement, St. Augustine was still wrestling with the strong anthropomorphic and corporeal tendency seemingly entrenched among Christians as well as the Church itself. Christians, R. J. Teske observed, “think of God in a human form and suppose that he is such.”¹³⁸

This is in addition to the fact that the New Testament is not centered on God Almighty. It is Christocentric. BurrIDGE has shown by manual analysis of the four Gospels that God the Almighty/Father occupies a sum total of just 2.5% of the Gospels while the rest of the Gospels are concerned with Jesus in various capacities i.e. his person, teachings, his disciples, his recipients, his dialogue with Jewish leaders etc. (Mark gives only a 0.2% place to the verbs whose subject is God/Father in his Gospel, with Matthew 0.6%, Luke 1.1% and John 0.6%).¹³⁹ Charles Gore pointed to this fact a long time ago observing that “Christianity is faith in a certain person Jesus Christ, and by faith in Him is meant such unreserved self-committal as is only possible, because faith in Jesus is understood to be faith in God, and union with Jesus union with God.”¹⁴⁰

There is, then, a tremendous concentration on one man, Jesus of Nazareth. He is described in different terms, concepts and ways. He is addressed as the Son of man, Son of God, the Word, the Prophet, the Messiah, the Kyrios or Lord and perhaps even as God. According to S. C. Guthrie:

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All the doctrines of the Christian faith are related to Christ as spokes to the hub of a wheel. We could not talk about who God is, how we know Him, what He is like and what He wants with us, without talking about the revelation of himself, His will and work in Christ...Everything else Christians believe stands or falls with what they believe about Jesus.¹⁴¹

Had there been no concentration on Jesus' person, or had the New Testament been systematic or uniform with regard to the nature of the above descriptions, there might perhaps have been no need for critical study or discussion of anthropomorphism in the New Testament. But as it is, the New Testament writers are so obsessed with the Christ event that they seem to reflect upon every other thing, even God, through this mirror. There is a merger of divinity and humanity in the person of the historical Jesus, so much so that to traditional Christians Jesus is at once a complete God and a complete human being. This incarnation, the diffusion of divinity and humanity in a feeble human being, is the climax of divine corporealism and anthropomorphic realism. Moreover, there exists such a diversity of descriptions with regard to Jesus that it is extremely difficult to render him into one uniform, universally agreed upon figure or concept. Therefore, Christology, or the significance of Jesus and his relationship with God Almighty, will form the basic area of our study of anthropomorphism in the New Testament.

There are many Christologies in the New Testament. The fundamental issue in connection with the transcendence of God and anthropomorphism is the Christology of the person i.e. the doctrine of Christ's person and divinity. Modern scholarship is more widely divided on the issue of Christ's divinity as well as interpretations of the person of Jesus, than Christians of past generations. Almost all of the old christological issues and trends, often declared heresies by the Church teachings, could virtually be traced, finding boisterous expressions in many modern Christological discussions and debates. Many of the old Christological heresies are virtually incorporated into contemporary Christian thought without much hesitation or blame.

It has been customary for Christians until the late nineteenth century to believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Church as well as the

general Christian population (as discussed later in the chapter) have always contended that Jesus proclaimed himself to be the Son of God, the second person of a divine Trinity, who lived a completely mortal (yet sinless) life amongst humanity. In this God in Christ, traditional incarnational theology, we reach the apex of an anthropomorphic and corporeal conception of the deity. If God becomes incarnate as flesh in the person of Christ, eating, drinking, sleeping, feeling grieved and eventually being crucified, then in this physical embodiment we have the strongest case for the reality of divine corporeality in its purest sense. The main problem with traditional Christianity throughout the centuries has been how to maintain the transcendence of God and at the same time attain salvation through the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ as God. This is an awkward paradox from which there is no escape. Reason defies it.

Astonishingly, even in this day and age, there are scholars who maintain that although Jesus was divine and in fact conscious of his identity, nevertheless this incarnation somehow does not lead to the fact of polytheism or divine corporeality. This would seem to be at variance with human reason. The proofs given for Jesus' divinity concern reference to four aspects: what Jesus said, what he did, what others said about him, and what others did about him. Many modern evangelists try to prove Jesus' absolute divinity through the Gospels' "I am" statements, such as John 8:57 and Mark 14:62 corroborated by Matthew 26 and Luke 22. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is tried for blasphemy having been accused by his enemies (Mark 14:53-65; Matthew 26:57-68; Luke 22:63-71). Caiaphas, the Jewish High Priest, demands Jesus to identify himself (Matthew 9:2-6; Mark 2:7; Luke 5:21). Responding to Caiaphas' question, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus reportedly answers: "I am; and you shall see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). The Evangelists contend that Jesus, in response to the High Priest's inquiry, used the divine *I am* statement of Exodus 3:14:

Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to

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you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:13–14)

Wayne Grudem argues that the

Jewish leaders recognized at once that he was not speaking in riddles or uttering nonsense; when he said, “I am,” he was repeating the very words God used when he identified himself to Moses as “I AM *who* I AM” ... When the Jews heard this unusual, emphatic, solemn statement, they knew that he was claiming to be God.¹⁴²

Thus modern evangelists attempt to draw parallels between the Old Testament’s use of the divine “I AM” statements and its use in the Gospel of John to insinuate that John by these parallels was declaring Jesus’ divinity. For instance, Richard Bauckham contends:

This [I am] sentence occurs as a divine declaration of unique identity seven times in the Hebrew Bible. ... It is certainly not accidental that, whereas in the Hebrew Bible there are seven occurrences of *ni hu* [the Hebrew version of “I am”] and two of the emphatic variation ‘*anoki anoki hu*’, in John there are seven absolute ‘I am’ sayings, with the seventh repeated twice for the sake of an emphatic climax.¹⁴³

It is also postulated by these evangelists that in using the title “Son of Man”, and by claiming to come on the clouds of heavens and sit on the right hand of God, Jesus was in reality claiming that he was the God of Moses and Abraham. According to Bowman and Komoszewski, “it was one thing *to enter* God’s presence and yet another *to sit* in it. But *to sit at God’s right side* was another matter altogether. In the religious and cultural milieu of Jesus’ day, to claim to sit at God’s right hand was tantamount to claiming equality with God.”¹⁴⁴ To Darrel Bock, Jesus’ claim was “worse, in the leadership’s view, than claiming the right to be able to walk into the Holy of Holies in the temple and live there!”¹⁴⁵

According to the evangelists, these phrases and expressions were quite known to the first century Jewish community as the epithets of divinity, which is why Jesus was accused of blasphemy and ordered to be killed.

They also assert that to prove his divinity, Jesus prophesized that he would die on the cross and then be resurrected on the third day. Therefore, claim evangelists, resurrection itself is the direct proof of Jesus' divinity. For instance, Gary Habermas and Michael Licona¹⁴⁶ argue that Jesus was crucified in public. His disciples believed that he rose from the dead and appeared to them. Paul believed that Jesus was resurrected and appeared to him. Jesus' own skeptic brother James believed that Jesus appeared to him. Finally the tomb was empty when the disciples visited it. Habermas states that the "disciples were sure that Jesus' person had impinged on their visual field. This is what Paul claimed. Peter agreed. So did Jesus' brother James. Further, the tomb was no longer occupied by his body. As a result, they were changed forever."¹⁴⁷

Hence evangelists regard the resurrection as an authenticated historical fact proving that Jesus was God and aware of his divine identity. R. E. Brown states that, "Jesus knew his own identity which involved a unique relationship to God that we call the divinity of the Son. Christians of later period were able to formulate Jesus' identity as "true God and true man,"....The idea that he was divine I find in most Gospel pages..."¹⁴⁸ Ben Witherington III, fully agrees with Brown's thesis. He writes:

Material in the Synoptics hints that Jesus had a transcendent self-image amounting to more than a unique awareness of the Divine. If, however, one means by divine awareness something that suggests either that Jesus saw himself as the whole or exclusive representation of the Godhead or that he considered himself in a way that amounted to the rejection of the central tenet of Judaism, (i.e., monotheism), then the answer must be no. Jesus clearly prayed to a God he called *abba*, which excludes the idea that Jesus thought he was *abba*. Jesus' affirmation of monotheism seems clear (e.g., Mark 10:17-18; Matthew 23:9).¹⁴⁹

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He concludes affirming that

the seeds of later christological development are found in the relationships, deeds, and words of Jesus, and that in these three ways Jesus indirectly expressed some of his self-understanding. In short, he may have been mysterious and elusive at times, but this was because he intended to tease his listeners into thought and ultimately into a response of faith or trust.¹⁵⁰

D. M. Baillie goes further arguing:

Indeed it seems alien to the New Testament writers, in all the varieties of their Christology, not only to say that Jesus *became* divine, but even to say He was or is divine. That is not how they would have put it, because in the world of the New Testament, even though it is written in Greek, the word God is a proper name, and no one could be divine except God Himself. Therefore it is more congenial to Christian theology to say that Jesus is God (with the further refinements of meaning provided by the doctrine of the Trinity) than to speak of Him as divine; and certainly it will not say that He became divine.¹⁵¹

The arguments used by evangelists as evidence of Jesus' divinity are both frivolous and precarious. Firstly, the four Gospels do not agree upon the exact words uttered by Jesus in response to the High Priest's inquiry. Matthew reports: "Jesus said to him, 'You have said so'" (Matthew 26:64); Mark reports: "And Jesus said, 'I am...'" (Mark 14:62); Luke reports: "And he said to them, 'You say that I am'..." (Luke 22:67-72); and the Gospel of John gives a very different portrayal of the dialogue between Jesus and the High Priest! In fact, no question is asked about Jesus' Messianic role and no mention of the statement "I am" exists (John 18:20-22).

Hence, what this illustrates is that aside from Mark, the affirmative statement, "I am", does not occur in Jesus' dialogue with Caiaphas, and furthermore is either missing in the other three Gospels, or paraphrased as "you have said so" or "you say that I am." Evangelists have placed

an awful lot of faith on this very common and simple verbal sentence drawing conclusions of immense consequence. For, dangerously ignoring the fact that it does not exist in three of the Gospels and that the word “am” in “I am” is nothing more than a verb of existence, they have built their very case for Jesus’ divinity upon it.

Furthermore, in the Gospel of Mark the phrase does not denote Jesus’ pure divinity (as claimed) in terms of his being exactly God or even like God. The question asked of Jesus was whether he considered himself to be Christ, the Son of the Blessed One, and his reported response was “I am”. The most that anyone can prove or deduce from this “I am” statement is that Jesus affirmed his Messianic role, or close affinity with God, by it and nothing more. So to derive a divinity for Christ equal to that of God Himself, with no basis in the Gospel, and a two-word statement only, is not only astonishingly faulty reasoning but too far-fetched for belief.

In addition, there was no reason for Jesus to speak in riddles – with mysterious terms such as “I am” – throwing clarity to the winds, especially given the weight of what was at stake, the all important question of who to worship. He could have openly said, “I am Yahweh or Elohim, the God of Moses, David and Daniel. Worship me alone.” Jesus was quite emphatic in asserting his mortal nature, his weaknesses, his dependence upon God and his subordination to Him, critical because trinitarianism denies this very obvious subordination. Given Jesus’ clear assertions why on earth would he resort to a jumble of exotic statements, more resonant of Greek philosophical practice, to express something as significant as his supposed divinity?

The “I am” statement is a translation of the Greek phrase *ego eimi*. Significantly, this phrase is used many times in the New Testament for individuals other than Jesus. For instance, in Luke 1:19 the angel Gabriel uses *ego eimi*; in John 9:9, the blind man cured by Jesus uses the same “I am” phrase; in Act 10:21 Peter uses *ego eimi*, and so on. In other words mere usage of the phrase *ego eimi* does not qualify the one making it to be designated the equal of, or the great God Yahweh, the “I Am” of Exodus 3:14. In actual fact Jesus uses the phrase at least 27 times in the Bible without anyone attaching any significance to it and yet in only one instance do the Jews reportedly attempt to stone him

for it, meaning that if the “I am” phrase was considered that blasphemous, surely Jesus would have been stoned a lot earlier. In John 8:12, 18, 24, 28, we have Jesus using *ego eimi* in front of the Pharisees. John 18 reports that soldiers of the chief priests and Pharisees went looking for Jesus in the Garden. Jesus asked them “Whom do you seek?” They replied, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he” (translation of *ego eimi* in John 18:4–5). The same soldiers and Pharisees were in attendance when Caiaphas and the Jewish council sought witnesses against Jesus to punish him for blasphemy. Again, if the phrase “I am” was considered to mean equality with God, and therefore ultimate blasphemy, surely Jesus’ use of it would have been enough to convict him, and the High Priest would not have needed to look for false witnesses. His soldiers would have sufficed as evidence for Jesus’ use of it. The fact is that the phrase simply means what it says it means at face value “I am the one” or “I am he” and the circular attempts of modern evangelists to convert it into something of far greater significance, having some tremendous esoteric meaning, is preposterous. The claim of godhood is momentous and could never be based on such a weak foundation.

There are other assertions which claim to prove the Divinity of Christ, one of these being that Jesus provided one proof – that he would die at the hands of the Jews and rise from the dead. This however is not substantiated by the gospel text. Jesus never claimed to die at the hands of the Jews *to prove his divinity*. It’s a fallacious piece of reasoning and presupposes nothing – dying at the hands of anyone, and supposedly the Jews does not make one automatically God, and even were we to accept the assertion, it would not prove that Jesus was God Almighty. Jesus was not the first to be crucified historically and even on the day of the crucifixion there were others who were reportedly crucified with him.

In the same vein, Jesus’ purported resurrection does not in itself prove him to be God Almighty and this is also not something unique to him. In fact biblical reports indicate that numerous other individuals were also either lifted up alive to heaven or resurrected after death. For instance, 2 King 2:11 reports that Elijah was raised up to heaven in front of the eyewitness Elisha. Genesis 5:24 reports that Enoch was

raised up by God and that he walked with God. In contrast, there are no eyewitnesses for Jesus' resurrection. The alleged testimony given by Paul is of little historical value as Paul did not see Jesus' resurrection but claimed to see the light. Further, the reports of Jesus' appearances are inconsistent. How many times did Jesus return to the world after his death? Why is his second coming awaited so excitedly when he has already appeared several times after his crucifixion and supposed resurrection? Of note is also the fact that there no confirmations of his resurrection exist from any independent source of his time. The passage attributed to Josephus is a known interpolation. There is no other mention of Jesus in any historical document except later in the second century. Pliny's mention of Christians in his letter of c. 112 CE, deals with their illegal gatherings and not with Jesus' crucifixion. Additionally, it was God the Father who supposedly raised Jesus from the dead as Acts 2:24; Romans 6:4; I Corinthians 6:14; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:20 make crystal clear. Many evangelists quote John 10:17-18 to insinuate that Jesus himself participated in his own resurrection: "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." Commenting on both the statement and its interpretation a) logic dictates that a person who is dead cannot by his own powers resurrect himself, for he cannot be dead and alive at the same time. b) Jesus' absolutely clear statement that "I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father" (John 10:18) proves that his resurrection, even if accepted as a genuine historical fact, is a result of the Father's divinity and not the Son's.

The gospel crucifixion narratives bring us to the real question at hand, in terms of the subject of this book, and that is the corporeality of God in the New Testament. For these narratives impose limitations on God that only human beings are subject to. Did God die on the cross? Was it God who suffered the pangs of death or the human being on it? If God was truly dying on the cross then which God other than himself was he calling to? Was he calling upon himself when he cried out at being forsaken, "Eloi, Eloi, O My God, O My God" or was he

calling to another God? How many Gods are out there? Was God nailed down on the cross, beaten and spat at? Was it God who cried, sought help and was buried by human hands? Are these limitations appropriate to the Majesty of God? Is it even plausible that the infinite could be finite and infinite at the same time, everlasting yet dead? The whole issue is at variance with human reason.

Textually, there exist numerous non-trivial discrepancies and inconsistencies within the crucifixion and resurrection narratives of the four Gospels. For instance (italics mine) Matthew reports that “... *toward the dawn* of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre” (28:1). Mark reports: “... Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices... they went to the tomb *when the sun had risen*” (16:1–2). Luke reports: “...*at early dawn*, they went to the tomb...” (24:1); John reports: “... Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, *while it was still dark*...” (20:1). There is a great deal of difference between early dawn and when the sun has risen. When the Sun rises there is no darkness, as John reports.

Matthew mentions that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher. Mark reports that Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome visited the tomb. Luke mentions Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them (24:10). John mentions Mary Magdalene only. Moreover, Matthew states that “an angel of the Lord descended from heaven” (28:2). Mark reports: “And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe” (16:5), but Luke (24:4) and John (20:12) write of two angels. Matthew reports that after the earthquake the angel rolled back the stone (28:1). The other three Gospels report that by the time the women had reached the graveyard, the stone was already rolled back. The Synoptic account reports that Mary was reminded by the angel of Jesus’ words about the resurrection, and she informed the disciples regarding the resurrection. John’s Mary is distraught and thinks that Jesus’ body has been stolen (20:2–4). Here the disciples mention no empty tomb.

The reports of Jesus’ appearances are also conflicting in Matthew 28:8–9, Mark 16:9, Luke 24:9 and John 20:18. To believe Jesus to be

God or God to be Jesus it would appear is to base one's entire faith on a monumental claim which has little to recommend it aside from a few shaky texts of a contradictory nature and certain supposed incidents of questionable historicity. The rest is convoluted, to the point of absurd interpretation. Once again, the whole issue is at variance with human reason and deeply lacks coherence.

There are other facts that cannot be dismissed, downplayed, or simply ignored. For instance, ironically, Jesus never uses the word "God" for himself. Oft quoted passages as evidence such as John 1:1; 1:18; 20:28; Roman 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8 and 2 Peter 1:1 are translated by various scholars in different ways and in no way or form attribute the word "God" to Jesus, neither by Jesus himself nor by any of the New Testament writers. So the claims of evangelists such as Wayne Grudem that there are "at least these seven clear passages in the New Testament that explicitly refer to Jesus as God"¹⁵² are incorrect, for these passages are not "clear", fail to stand up to scrutiny, and are not accepted by the majority of New Testament scholars.

In fact with regards to Christ's divinity, "clear passages" is precisely what we do not have. It is valid to ask why Jesus or John did not speak plainly, choosing to hide behind riddles such as the "I AM" statements or Daniel's "Son of Man" phrase, to state Christ's divinity. This is out of character, for Jesus is quite emphatic in the Bible, and the gospel writers were crystal clear in depicting his great devotion to and sheer dependence on God (as an obedient servant and not as some sort of synthesis with Him), worshipping God, praying to Him, claiming to be sent by Him and even calling upon God for help at the most difficult juncture of his life. Hence given this and to reiterate why would Jesus resort to a smoke screen statement such as "I AM" to express his divinity? The primary question of Christ's divinity has not been answered or substantiated by evangelists, neither from scripture nor from their own strange reasoning process. Yet, ironically, it would seem that they hold all the cards when it comes to knowledge about Jesus for they claim to know more about him than what he seemingly knew about himself. The truth is that whatever one thinks one has learnt, this does not mean that one has learnt a true representation of this great man and prophet. A world of difference lies between actual biblical tenet and perceived notions based on opinion and faulty premise.

There are other scholars who although believing Jesus to be divine, God the Son, do recognize the fact that he did not explicitly proclaim his divinity. For instance Archbishop Michael Ramsey writes that, "Jesus did not claim deity for himself."¹⁵³ C. F. D. Moule observes that, "Any case for a "high" Christology that depended on the authenticity of the alleged claims of Jesus about himself, especially in the Fourth Gospel, would indeed be precarious."¹⁵⁴ James Dunn and even staunch upholders of traditional Christology like Brian Hebblethwaite and David Brown, have acknowledged the same theorizing that Jesus was not aware of his divine identity. Hebblethwaite states that, "it is no longer possible to defend the divinity of Jesus by reference to the claims of Jesus."¹⁵⁵ Brown recognizes that it is "impossible to base any claim for Christ's divinity on his consciousness..."¹⁵⁶

On the other hand, some of these same scholars argue that Jesus was implicitly aware of his divine identity, and that he revealed this to his disciples by means of extraordinary actions such as his forgiveness of sins and radical approach to the Mosaic Law. C. F. D. Moule, Gerald O' Collins, James Dunn are good examples of this trend.

There are also other traditional scholars who use the concept of the "Christ-event" to justify the proper divinity of Jesus despite the fact that he did not proclaim it for himself. This elusive concept of kerygma and the Christ-event seems to have appeared first in R. Bultmann's existential interpretations of the New Testament myth, and has been widely utilized by scholars like John Knox. Knox argues that, "The Church is the distinctive Christian reality... And so I say again, the Incarnation originally took place, not within the limits of an individual's individual existence, but in the new communal reality, in principle co-extensive with mankind, of which he was the creative center."¹⁵⁷

J. N. D. Kelly does not accept the idea that Jesus was aware of his divine identity. He sees a gulf between Jesus and the later Christian claims of his divinity. On the other hand, he insists upon essential continuity between later trinitarian christological developments and the initial New Testament as well as the Church's christology. In his words:

The Trinitarianism of the New Testament is rarely explicit; but the frequency with which the triadic schema recurs ... suggests that this pattern was implicit in Christian theology from the start. If

these gaps are filled in, however, we are entitled to assume with some confidence that what we have before us, at any rate in rough outline, is the doctrinal deposit, or the pattern of sound words, which was expounded in the apostolic Church since its inauguration and which constituted its distinctive message.¹⁵⁸

It is strange to assume that the first generation of Christians is considered better equipped to understand Jesus than Jesus himself. In similar fashion modern day fundamentalists seem to be claiming their better aptitude to understand what Jesus must have been than the first Christians. Such interpretations only serve to substantiate the claims that Christianity consists of later responses to Jesus and not necessarily what he preached about God or about his person. John Hick rightly observes that “this kind of thinking, in which Christianity is no longer centered upon the person of Jesus but now upon the church, has moved a long way from the traditional belief that Jesus, the historical individual, was himself God the Son incarnate.”¹⁵⁹ He argues that the

‘soft’ divinity, expressed in the ‘son of God’ metaphor, eventually developed into the ‘hard’ metaphysical claim that Jesus was God the Son, second person of a divine Trinity, incarnate. But to use the ‘Christ-event’ concept to validate this development involves arbitrarily stretching that highly flexible ‘event’ at least as far as the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), and preferably to include the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE).¹⁶⁰

Thus Kelly and other scholars’ line of approach insinuates that somehow the Church knew better than the man himself, meaning that they understood the true nature of Jesus whilst he lived ignorant of it. But, how in the world could Christ’s followers be privy to such tremendous and significant knowledge yet he know nothing of it? This is pure speculation and defies logic. After careful discussion of other trends such as the Holy Spirit guiding the church to these theological developments, or the cosmic Christ or risen Lord, Hick concludes that

none of these ways can relieve upholders of Jesus’ deification of the task of justifying that momentous move. Such justification

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involves showing both that the process by which the deification came about is one that we can regard as valid, and that the resulting doctrine is in itself coherent and credible.¹⁶¹

Contrary to what has been observed with regards to the traditional view, many liberal scholars do not accept the theme of Jesus' divinity in its strict sense, maintaining that Jesus was not divine in the sense just discussed. They point to the fact that he neither claimed, nor was conscious of, the divinity of his person. Harnack, the Ritschlian historian of dogma, for instance roundly rejects notions of Christ's divinity and in this classical statement contends that, "The Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not with the Son. This is no paradox, nor, on the other hand, is it "rationalism," but the simple expression of the actual fact as the evangelists give it."¹⁶² In other words, the Gospel is not about doctrines concerning Jesus but about the reality of God the Father, and obedience and worship to him. To Harnack, Jesus

desired no other belief in his person and no other attachment to it than is contained in the keeping of his commandment. Even in the fourth Gospel, in which Jesus' person often seems to be raised above the contents of the Gospel, the idea is still clearly formulated: "If ye love me, keep my commandments." To lay down any "doctrine" about his person and his dignity independently of the Gospel was, then, quite outside his sphere of ideas. In the second place, he described the Lord of heaven and earth as his God and his Father; as the Greater, and as Him who is alone good. He is certain that everything which he has and everything which he is to accomplish comes from this Father. He prays to Him; he subjects himself to His will; he struggles hard to find out what it is and to fulfill it. Aim, strength, understanding, the issue, and the hard *must*, all come from the Father. This is what the Gospels say, and it cannot be turned and twisted. This feeling, praying, working, struggling, and suffering individual is a man who in the face of his God also associates himself with other men.¹⁶³

It had been customary to suggest, as discussed, that Jesus did not disclose his true identity and message to the disciples because of their limitations. A. S. Peake for instance writes:

It was far better that Jesus should lead them through intimate familiarity with Him, through watching His actions and listening to His words to form their own judgment of Him, rather than by premature disclosure to force the truth upon them before they were ready for it, and when they would inevitably have misunderstood it.¹⁶⁴

To contend that Jesus intended his true message to be partially hidden or to be understood in the light of his death and resurrection, states Harnack,

is desperate supposition. No! his message is simpler than the churches would like to think it; simpler, but for that very reason sterner and endowed with a greater claim to universality. A man cannot evade it by the subterfuge of saying that as he can make nothing of this "Christology" the message is not for him. Jesus directed men's attention to great questions; he promised them God's grace and mercy; he required them to decide whether they would have God or Mammon, an eternal or an earthly life, the soul or the body, humility or self-righteousness, love or selfishness, the truth or a lie.¹⁶⁵

In short, Jesus did not hide anything but proclaimed a straight forward message, leading people to God by his actions, statements and even through his sufferings. He had no other creed other than the simple one of "do the will of God". "How great a departure from what he thought and enjoined is involved in putting a Christological creed in the forefront of the Gospel, and in teaching that before a man can approach it he must learn to think rightly about Christ. This is putting the cart before the horse."¹⁶⁶

Harnack argues that this radical departure from Jesus' Gospel took place during the process of the Hellenization of the Gospel. It took place when Christianity entered the Greek world and became detached from

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the mother soil of Judaism. To Harnack, the apostle Paul was the chief agent of this transition. Paul perverted the Gospel of Jesus by giving new directions to it:

Even in John we read: "If ye love me, keep my commandments." But the way in which Paul defined the theory of religion, the danger can certainly arise and did arise. No long period elapsed before it was taught in the Church that the all-important thing is to know how the person of Jesus was constituted, what sort of physical nature he had, and so on. Paul himself is far removed from this position, – "Whoso calleth Christ Lord speaketh by the Holy Ghost," – but the way he ordered his religious conceptions, as the outcome of his speculative ideas, unmistakably exercised an influence in a wrong direction.¹⁶⁷

This perversion replaced God with Jesus and the message with the messenger. In the true Gospel of Jesus all things were directed towards worship of the One God and to keeping His commandments as embodied by his law and morality. The Pauline message redirected this focus towards the person of Jesus and salvation through him. What might have been a mystical twist in the beginning lead Christianity to a totally wrong direction. Harnack concludes observing:

...it is a perverse proceeding to make Christology the fundamental substance of the Gospel is shown by Christ's teaching, which is everywhere directed to the all-important point, and summarily confronts every man with his God.¹⁶⁸

Following Harnack's lead, John Hick contends that Jesus' own cultural milieu and his first disciples' religious and historical background would not have allowed them to believe in a feeble man's divinity. Hick observes that "it is extremely unlikely that Jesus thought of himself, or that his first disciples thought of him, as God incarnate."¹⁶⁹ He stresses:

If one has already accepted a form of orthodox christology one can reasonably interpret some of Jesus' words and actions, as

presented by the Gospel writers, as implicitly supporting that belief. But it seems clear that one cannot justifiably arrive at the belief simply from the New Testament evidence as this has thus far been analyzed and interpreted by the scholarly community.¹⁷⁰

Hick roundly rejects the notion that somehow Jesus directly or indirectly led his disciples to believe that he was the divine Logos in human flesh or acting in a dual capacity both as a complete God and a complete man. Many of the Gospel's Christological titles such as the son of man, son of God, or Lord were originally not loaded with divine implications, but were rather common place innocent titles meant to denote reverence and spiritual exaltation. Hick contends that

it seems pretty clear that Jesus did not present himself as being God incarnate. He did not present himself as the second person of a divine trinity leading a human life. If in his lifetime he was called "son of God," as is entirely possible, it would be in the metaphorical sense that was familiar in the ancient world. In this sense, kings, emperors, pharaohs, wise men, and charismatic religious leaders were freely called sons of God, meaning that they were close to God, in the spirit of God, that they were servants and instruments of God. The ancient Hebrew kings were regularly enthroned as son of God in this metaphorical sense.¹⁷¹

It is easy to claim but hard to prove that a man who lived a very human life and who was human in every sense of the term – in that he had a natural birth (that is through the womb of a woman albeit virgin) and natural human limitations, ate, drank, grew in knowledge and wisdom, worshipped God, prayed to Him for guidance and help etc. – was at the same time the all powerful, Almighty God of the Universe. To Hick "it would require earth-shaking miracles, overturning the whole established secular world-view, to cause a historical individual to be regarded as being also God."¹⁷²

Hick claims a kind of broad consensus among contemporary New Testament scholars to the effect that the historical Jesus never made any claims to divinity in the sense that later Christians made for him. Indeed,

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Jesus in no way or form thought of himself as God Almighty or as the son of God incarnate:

Divine incarnation, in the sense in which Christian theology has used the idea, requires that an eternally pre-existent element of Godhead, God the Son or the divine Logos, became incarnate as a human being. But it is *extremely* unlikely that the historical Jesus thought of himself in any such way. Indeed he would probably have rejected the idea as blasphemous; one of the sayings attributed to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10. 18).¹⁷³

Jesus' own understanding of himself could not have been anything other than as an eschatological prophet sent to the lost sheep of Israel. As such he confined his mission to a specific geographical area, focused upon the reformation of Jewish religious institutions and resisted the relentless onslaught of Roman hegemony and exploitation. The *raison d'être* of Jesus' great existence, his true message, however became replaced with his person as the messenger, when Christianity entered the Graeco-Roman world, becoming heavily influenced by its systems and institutions. Hick notes that Jesus was simply

fulfilling the unique role of the final prophet, come to proclaim a New Age, the divine kingdom that God was shortly to inaugurate on earth...to endure in the pluralistic world of the Roman empire and eventually to become its dominant structure of meaning: Jesus the eschatological prophet was transformed within Christian thought into God the Son come down from heaven to live a human life and save us by his atoning death.¹⁷⁴

This message of salvation was a lot easier to digest than the austere one of salvation through hard work and discipline, following the commandments and working towards the rectification of political, economic and social injustices. It demanded less sacrifices, involved less struggles against the establishment, and was relatively acceptable to the Roman elite. Consequently it became the popular form of Christianity.

The fundamental role played by Paul in giving altogether new directions to Jesus' message has been emphasized by many nineteenth century biblical scholars such as Wellhausen. The core of the influential "Tubingen hypothesis" (a school of German Protestant theology that noted contradictions among the different gospels) was that Christianity owed far more to Paul than to Jesus. F. C. Baur, the founder of the "Tubingen School", argued that, "The history of the development of Christianity dates of course from the departure of Jesus from the world. But in Paul this history has a new beginning; from this point we are able to trace it not only in its external features, but also in its inner connection."¹⁷⁵ Paul had neither met with the historical Jesus, nor learned anything direct from him. His conversion narratives are quite legendary and inconsistent. His contact with the original disciples was minimal and at times hostile. Baur observed that "from the time of his conversion the apostle Paul went his own independent way, and avoided intentionally and on principle all contact with the older apostles."¹⁷⁶ Therefore it was the apostle Paul, concluded Baur, "in whom Gentile Christianity found in the course of these same movements, of which the proto-martyr Stephen is the center, its true herald, and logical founder and expositor."¹⁷⁷

This influenced the famous nihilist scholar Nietzsche to observe first in his *The Dawn of Day* that

the ship of Christianity threw overboard no inconsiderable part of its Jewish ballast, that it was able to sail into the waters of the heathen and actually did do so: this is due to the history of one single man, this apostle who was so greatly troubled in mind and so worthy of pity, but who was also very disagreeable to himself and to others.¹⁷⁸

Then in his *The Antichrist* Nietzsche claimed that Paul was the great falsifier, disevangelist, forger out of hatred, the very opposite of a bringer of glad tidings:

Paul is the incarnation of a type which is the reverse of that of the Saviour; he is the genius in hatred, in the standpoint of hatred, and

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in the relentless logic of hatred. And alas what did this dysevangelist not sacrifice to his hatred! Above all the Saviour himself: he nailed him to *his cross*. Christ's life, his example, his doctrine and death, the sense and the right of the gospel – not a vestige of all this was left, once this forger, prompted by his hatred, had understood it only that which could serve his purpose.¹⁷⁹

He claimed that:

The very word “Christianity” is a misunderstanding, – truth to tell, there never was more than one Christian, and he died on the Cross. The “gospel” *died* on the Cross. That which thenceforward was called “gospel” was the reverse of that “gospel” that Christ had lived: it was “evil tiding,” a *dysevangel*.¹⁸⁰

G. Bernard Shaw argued that:

Paul succeeded in stealing the image of Christ crucified for the figure-head of his Salvationist vessel, with its Adam posing as the natural man, its doctrine of original sin, and its damnation avoidable only by faith in the sacrifice of the cross. In fact, no sooner had Jesus knocked over the dragon of superstition than Paul boldly set it on legs again in the name of Jesus.¹⁸¹

He concluded that, “Now it is evident that two religions having such contrary effects on mankind should not be confused as they are under a common name. There is not one word of Pauline Christianity in the characteristic utterances of Jesus.”¹⁸² In fact, “There has really never been a more monstrous imposition perpetrated than the imposition of the limitations of Paul's soul upon the soul of Jesus.”¹⁸³ De Lagard, the champion of a “German religion” and “national church” traced the ironic development of Christianity back to the fact that “a man with no call whatsoever [Paul] attained to influence in the church.”¹⁸⁴

This negative attitude towards the apostle Paul is nothing new. Certain third century anonymous treatises such as “A False Proselyte”, “Messenger of Satan” or “Persecutor of Faith” are enough to show the

sense of negativity harbored by some Jewish-Christian opponents of Paul. G. Bornkamm has demonstrated that

even in his own lifetime his opponents considered him as apostle without legitimation and a perverter of the Christian Gospel. In the subsequent history of the early church, too, there were two very different judgments. For a considerable period he continued to be sternly rejected by Jewish Christians as antagonistic to Peter and James the brother of the Lord; in these circles people did not even stop short of ranking him with Simon Magus, the chief of heretics (Pseudo-Clementine)...Even when, as in Acts, he was hailed as a great missionary or, as in the Pastorals, an attempt was made to preserve his teaching, and when in other parts of early Christian literature voices were raised in his honor, the lines along which theology evolved were different from his.¹⁸⁵

Since the last century, polemics against the apostle have been observed in the writings of many critical Protestant researchers who, pointing to the wide gulf that existed between the historical Jesus and the Pauline post Easter Lord Jesus Christ, maintain that the Jesus of history must be understood in a Jewish monotheistic context. Further, the original Jesus message was changed into a religion of redemption, a strange mixture of some Judaic thought patterns amalgamated with Oriental polytheistic myths and views as mainly assimilated and transmitted by the Hellenistic mystery religions. These conclusions led many scholars to the oft-repeated slogan: "Back to the historical Jesus" or "Jesus, not Paul".

After the Second World War "Jesus, not Paul" became a virtual slogan in debates held between Christians and Jews. This transition enabled many educated Jews to claim Jesus as their own, whilst laying the blame for the gulf that existed between first and second century Judaism and orthodox Christianity at the doorstep of Paul. Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith*,¹⁸⁶ Leo Baeck's *Romantic Religion*¹⁸⁷ and H. J. Schoeps' *Paul, The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*¹⁸⁸ are examples of this trend. These scholars have argued that Paul was simultaneously a Jew and a Hellenist but that his

Jewish and Hellenistic identities were transformed by his Christian experience, explaining why he looks so different to Jewish and Hellenistic thought patterns in his epistles.

With the rise of the academic discipline of “comparative religion” or “the history of religions”, emphasis was laid upon the religious experience of Paul instead of his theology. Certain parallels were observed between the language of Paul and that of the mystery cults and also between the sacramental practices in his churches and the rituals of the mysteries. Adolf Deissmann’s illustration of caches of papyrus documents existing at the time of earliest Christianity has shown that Paul was not that much of a theologian as much as he was rather a representative of popular piety. Equally important was the discovery or recovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other early Christian and Jewish *apocalypses*, a number of books advocating the end of the present world and giving a mythological description of the messianic age or the kingdom of God at hand. Albert Schweitzer seized upon this framework of apocalyptic ideology to interpret Paul arguing that:

Instead of the untenable notion that Paul had combined eschatological and Hellenistic ways of thinking we must now consider either a purely eschatological or a purely Hellenistic explanation of his teaching. I take the former alternative throughout. It assumes the complete agreement of the teaching of Paul with that of Jesus. The Hellenization of Christianity does not come in with Paul, but only after him.¹⁸⁹

In this way Schweitzer breaks with the tradition of Reitzenstein, Bousset, Baur, Harnack and others who gave either Hellenistic or Jewish-Hellenistic interpretations to Paul. He contends that

the conviction that through the death and resurrection of Jesus the proximate coming of the Messianic Kingdom with Jesus as its ruler was assured. It was this elementary teaching which formed the burden of the discourse when he journeyed as a missionary from place to place. To it he constantly recurs in his Letters. With this therefore, the exposition of Paulinism must logically begin.¹⁹⁰

It was R. Bultmann's view of Paul which dominated the discipline in the 1950s and 1960s. Bultmann asserted that:

The mythology of the New Testament is in essence that of Jewish apocalyptic and the Gnostic redemption myths. A common feature of them both is their basic dualism, according to which the present world and its human inhabitants are under the control of demoniac, satanic powers, and stand in need of redemption.¹⁹¹

Man alone cannot achieve redemption. "At the very point where man can do nothing, God steps in and acts – indeed he has acted already – on man's behalf."¹⁹² This is what Paul's mysticism has emphasized:

The Pauline catalogue of the fruits of the Spirit ("love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, temperance", Gal. 5. 22) shows how faith, by detaching man from the world, makes him capable of fellowship in community. Now that he is delivered from anxiety and from the frustration which comes from clinging to the tangible realities of the visible world, man is free to enjoy fellowship with others.¹⁹³

J. K. Riches observes that Bultmann's view of Paul was attractive as:

Paul emerges not as the purveyor of arcane, pre-scientific myths, but as the father of a rich tradition of spirituality, including among its representatives Augustine (353–430), Luther, Pascal (1623–1662) and Kierkegaard, which charts and illumines the inwardness of men's and women's existence under God.¹⁹⁴

Bultmann tried to give a Pauline reading of John to show that both were the apostles of a Christian inwardness (spirituality) that was effected by the kerygma or preaching of Christ, the Word. Though E. Kasemann, E. P. Sanders and others have differed with him over a number of issues their appraisals of Paul are quite favorable like those of Bultmann.

Regardless of these conjectures however, it is well to note that to be the herald of such a dramatic shift in emphasis, replacing God with the

person of Jesus Christ no less, even the mystical as opposed to theological Paul was either directly misleading or being misunderstood by later generations. The Jesus of the Gospels, especially the Synoptic Gospels, is far removed from the Jesus of the Pauline epistles. The Gospel Jesus is a law observant Jewish reformer who focuses upon the twin principles of loving God and loving one's neighbor. He is a solace to the less fortunate, down trodden and oppressed people of his society. Unjust oppressors, usurpers, and the wealthy have no place in his kingdom. His world is divided into two main categories: good and evil. The good and the righteous, are not under the influence of Satan, but the people of God, children of the Most High. Salvation is contingent upon following the commandments of God and doing good deeds. When we come to the Pauline corpus however, a different man is depicted and the entire focus of his message changes with emphasis being placed instead on salvation through grace and redemption. The Pauline world is also classified into two categories: the redeemed and the condemned. The world is under the influence of Satan and destined to destruction except for those who believe in Christ, the risen Lord, and attain redemption through his atoning death. Pauline epistles introduce concepts such as original sin, salvation through grace and redemption, predestination and the supra-terrestrial spiritual existence of Jesus. Thus the Jesus of the Gospels is a very different figure to the one portrayed by Paul, including his spiritual community and powers. Even the Jesus who preaches through Paul's supposed sermons in Acts is very different to the one depicted in his epistles. This fact has led some New Testament scholars to theorize that the Acts of Paul is a later invention. Whether one accepts Paul as a cunning perverter or a sincere mystic, a creative follower of the essential teachings of Jesus or an introducer of Hellenistic or Gnostic inventions into Christianity, his role remains significant without doubt, for he was one of the determining factors if not the architect of the radical change which so alienated classical Christianity from the historical Jesus. The New Testament is the sole source of Christian understandings concerning Jesus and his mission, yet almost two thirds of it consists importantly of Pauline epistles as well as his supposed disciple Luke's Gospel and the Acts. The early church, especially in the gentile world, was heavily influenced by

the Pauline faction, as was predominantly also it is worth noting, the most influential Church at Rome, which was significant in defining orthodoxy and then directing the later theological developments within Orthodox Christianity. This explains the reason why orthodoxy and Pauline Christianity are in fact two sides of the same coin, a reality which has led many modern New Testament scholars to disagree with the nineteenth century liberal interpretation and portrayal of Paul; the latter maintaining there clearly exists a sharp distinction and wide gap between the teachings of Jesus and those of Paul with the former failing to see it.

Scholars like J. G. Machen argue that Jesus' intimate friends and original disciples did not regard Paul as an innovator. They did not see Paul's emphasis upon the person of Christ and his insistence upon emancipation from the yoke of law as perversions from the original message of Jesus. This being the essence of the original Gospel message. Machen contends that if the Gospels are "trustworthy, then it will probably be admitted that Paul was a true disciple of Jesus. For the Gospels, taken as a whole, present a Jesus like in essential to that divine Lord who was sum and substance of the life of Paul."¹⁹⁵ We have already discussed the difficulties involved in accepting the Gospels as trustworthy and historically authentic documents giving us an accurate picture of the historical Jesus, as well as Paul's strange silence concerning the historical settings peculiar to the Gospel material. As discussed the idea of the Gospels portraying Jesus as divine and God in the traditional sense is again debatable. Any subjective reading of the Gospels, that is through the lense of divinity with preconceived notions and presuppositions concerning the divine, will yield passages that might support the Pauline understanding of Jesus as Lord. Any objective study of the Gospels however may oppose it. So discussion can be both subjective and objective meaning that the appraisal of Paul rests upon it would seem the inclination and disposition of the appraiser, dictated by one's taste and standpoint with regards to the Gospels and one's understanding of Paul's theology. All depends largely upon how one approaches the Gospel materials and how one interprets them – not an easy task!

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The positive appraisal of Paul owes its success partly to the failures and disappointments faced by modern scholars in the field of study concerning the “Historical Jesus.” Initially the “Rediscovery of the Historical Jesus” movement gathered great momentum, lasting for quite some time before eventually conceding defeat baffled by a jungle of diverse interpretations and conflicting portraits of Jesus. The remarks of Professor R. H. Lightfoot, British representative of Form Criticism, are a classical reflection of the outcome:

It seems, then, that the form of the earthly no less of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us....And perhaps the more we ponder the matter, the more clearly we shall understand the reason for it, and therefore shall not wish it otherwise. For probably we are as little prepared for the one as for the other.¹⁹⁶

The reason, to quote Edwyn Bevan, could be that:

As a figure calculated to inspire men to heroic acts of self-sacrifice, it may be doubted whether the figure of Jesus, if detached from what Christians have believed about Him, is adequate. There are sayings which bid men give up everything for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake, but His own life, unless what Christians have believed is true, does not offer any single example of self-sacrifice....There is the Cross. Yes, but apart from the belief of the Church, it must be exceedingly doubtful whether Jesus incurred the suffering of the Cross voluntarily, with prevision of the destiny to which His action was leading.¹⁹⁷

Aside from the New Testament (which itself is a result of Kerygma and not of history) we have no independent source detailing an account of the historical Jesus. The gospels are not the biographies of Jesus in the strict sense of the term, and were neither authorized by him nor cover the entire span of his life. Indeed, they barely deal with a few weeks of his presumed activity and this mostly in legendary and mythical form. Neither do the gospels present a systematic, objective, progressive or developmental account of Jesus' life. They are highly selective, follow a loose chronological framework, and focus resolutely

on the theological significance and moralizing anthology of Jesus' supposed sayings and purported deeds. The gospel writers are faith driven preachers with an axe to grind and not dispassionate compilers of Jesus' biography. The gospel of John makes this fact abundantly clear (20:30-31). So, the gospels are neither historical biographies nor reliable narrations of the incidents they report. What they are is good news which is precisely what the word "gospel" means. So, according to Karl Barth,

it is impossible from the study of the Gospels (which were never meant for such a purpose) to discover what Jesus was like as a human personality; and because, even if we could discover it, the result would be disappointing to those who expected to find a revelation there, since only a 'divine incognito', a veiling of God, was present in the human life of Jesus.¹⁹⁸

Consequently, the attempts made to discover the historical Jesus and his message came to almost nothing. Christian scholarship resorted back to the Jesus of theology and interpreted the Christ statements of the New Testament through this lense. Martin Kahler stood at the beginning of the new movement; he brought to German Protestant theology the recognition that

the Christian faith is related to Jesus of Nazareth as he was preached in the apostolic proclamation as the crucified and the risen one. The message of the apostles is the proclamation of a *kerygma* for which they have been commissioned by the appearances of the risen one....The reminiscences of the Jesus of history were preserved, shaped and interpreted within the framework of the proclamation of the risen one and this interpretation is the right and legitimate one for the Christian faith. The pendulum has now swung in the opposite direction: whereas the slogan used to be 'the pure Jesus of history', it is now 'the pure Christ of faith'.¹⁹⁹

Bultmann adopted Kahler's approach and took it to its natural height. We have already seen in this chapter how Bultmann used the

“Christ myth” of the New Testament to formulate a Christian self-understanding by means of “existential interpretation”. His existential approach effectively bracketed off the problematic historical Jesus from that of Christian theology and the latter was made an independent field completely divorced from the historical endeavors. The earthly Jesus was declared as identical to the exalted risen Lord and the Christian faith was assessed as the merger of the two constituent elements: the earthly and the heavenly.

This position is quite paradoxical and in a sense contradictory. It does not resolve the question of how much Christianity (in its traditional garb) is a human product and how much the religion manifestly preached by Jesus himself, or how much it is based on later Christian responses to the Jesus event. Either way the question of gospel authenticity and logical proof still remain, throwing into doubt the viability of any information contained therein. It is quite a herculean task to construct an entire faith based upon the premise of a feeble man being God and, in large part, the flimsy and subjective foundations of the Easter death and resurrection experience. Jesus was resurrected by God, as many other biblical figures had been raised in the presence of eyewitnesses (note as mentioned earlier there are no eyewitnesses for Jesus’ resurrection). Jesus’ resurrection and later appearances are not sufficient grounds to make the case that he was God or the second person of divinity. So what Christians believe and what actually took place in terms of the historical as opposed to theological Christ may be poles apart. However, despite its limitations, this approach has been adopted by a majority of English theologians, as H. Conzelmann observes:

They thus reserve for themselves the possibility of drawing a continuous line from Jesus’ understanding of himself to the faith of the community. Easter is no way ignored, but the content of the Easter faith, and with it the basic christological terms and titles, is traced back to Jesus’ own teaching. The theology of the community appears as the working out of the legacy of the Risen Christ on the basis of his appearance....²⁰⁰

The entire Jesus event is therefore interpreted in light of his supposed incarnation and resurrection. Is this human imposition? Many English theologians have focused largely upon the Nicene and Chalcedonian interpretations of the Jesus event especially as understood by their original authors, the ancient Church Fathers. It is sufficient in this regard to quote A. M. Ramsey who observes that, "The theology of the Apostles sprang ... not from their own theorizing, but from certain historical events which led them to beliefs far removed from their own preconceived notions. The most significant of the events was the Resurrection."²⁰¹ Therefore, to Ramsey:

The Resurrection is the true starting-place for the study of the making and meaning of the New Testament Jesus Christ had, it is true, taught and done great things: but He did not allow the disciples to rest in these things. He led them on to paradox, perplexity and darkness; and there he left them.... But His Resurrection threw its own light backwards upon the death and the ministry that went before; it illuminated the paradoxes and disclosed the unity of His words and deeds. As Scott Holland said: "In the resurrection it was not only the Lord who was raised from the dead. His life on earth rose with Him; it was lifted up into its real light."²⁰²

Therefore Ramsey and other English theologians understand Jesus of Galilee in light of the climax of Calvary, Easter and Pentecost. They argue that all the New Testament records were made by those writers who had already acknowledged Jesus as the risen Lord, God incarnate. Therefore any understanding of Jesus other than in terms of his incarnation and resurrection is regarded as going against the original intent of the New Testament. Yet whose intent are we discussing here? The disciples' or Jesus'? The question of explaining how the disciples would know Jesus better than Jesus himself remains unanswered. It is misguided religious intent and a desperate endeavor to build Christianity upon the foundations of the perplexity and confusion of the disciples rather than the true teachings of Jesus himself.

With this swinging of the pendulum in the other direction, views about Paul were also modified to a significant extent, as discussed

earlier. Even a contemporary German scholar like Hans Kung is able to argue that

only blindness to what Jesus himself willed, lived and suffered to the very roots or to what Paul urged with elemental force, in Jewish-hellenistic terminology, moved – like Jesus – by the prospect of the imminent end of all things: only blindness to all this can conceal the fact that the call “Back to Jesus” runs right through the Pauline letters and frustrates all attempts to turn the message into Jewish or Hellenistic ideology.²⁰³

Paul, according to Kung, spiritualized Jesus Christ. “It is not a question of another Jesus Christ but of a fundamentally changed relationship with him.”²⁰⁴

Even amidst these changed circumstances and positive views of Paul the old and central theme of liberal theology can still be seen echoing in many modern scholars. Meaning that the theme of the wide gulf that exists between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of dogma is still being played out. The blame is now shifted from Paul to the later Church Fathers and Councils. For instance, K. Armstrong writes: “There has been much speculation about the exact nature of Jesus’ mission. Very few of his actual words seem to have been recorded in the Gospels, and much of their material has been affected by later developments in the churches that were founded by St. Paul after his death.”²⁰⁵ To Armstrong Paul was too Jewish to call Jesus God. It was Paul’s subjective and mystical experience that in a way forced Paul to describe Jesus in terms that were applied by some of his contemporaries to describe a god or a heavenly figure. Paul never called Jesus “God”. He instead called him “the Son of God” in its reverential Jewish sense. Paul

certainly did not believe that Jesus had been the incarnation of God Himself: he had simply possessed God’s “powers” and “Spirit,” which manifested God’s activity on earth and were not to be identified with the inaccessible divine essence. Not surprisingly, in the Gentile world the new Christians did not always retain the sense of these subtle distinctions, so that eventually a

man who had stressed his weak, mortal humanity was believed to have been divine.²⁰⁶

Armstrong further argues:

After his [Jesus] death, his followers decided that Jesus had been divine. This did not happen immediately... the doctrine that Jesus had been God in human form was not finalized until the fourth century. The development of Christian belief in the Incarnation was a gradual, complex process. Jesus himself certainly never claimed to be God.²⁰⁷

R. A. Norris gives a somewhat similar account of the situation:

It may well be the case that the earliest Christology simply proclaimed Jesus as the human being who had been marked out by the resurrection as the coming Messiah, that is, as the one through whom God would finally set things right. In such a Christology, the title "Son of God" would have referred not to any quality of divinity but to the fact that Jesus was called and set apart for a certain function in God's purposes. In fact, however, this way of understanding Jesus was generally supplanted as Christianity spread among Greek-speaking peoples in the Mediterranean world.²⁰⁸

Therefore, it is safe to argue that discussions regarding Paul, his mysticism, and theology, and also the role of the first Christians and evangelists in determining the direction of Christianity, all have undergone several changes in course in the past century. But the fundamental questions regarding the role of the historical Jesus in the outcome, of the significance of Paul and the Church in steering the later theological developments, and the relationship of later christological dogmas with the original message of Jesus, all remain by and large unanswered and so unresolved.

The dilemma of Christian thought is in essence that it wants to exalt Jesus to a level of pure divinity equal to God Almighty and to secure

salvation through his redeeming death whilst, the Jesus of history and the Gospels dodges any such endeavor. In addition, Christian scholars and theologians want to maintain a transcendental monotheistic conception of God yet this is antithetical to the doctrines of incarnation and trinity. The entire history of Christian thought has been one of a tense struggle between these two contradictory tendencies. Of significance is the fact that the Jesus of history and the Gospels can survive the demise of incarnation and triune notions of his divinity whilst the Jesus of theology is doomed without them. Historical Christianity has paid a high price for establishing a metaphysical / romantic relationship with the Jesus of dogma – mostly at the expense of suspending logic and freedom. Logic and reason dictate that the historical Jesus was too much of a human being to serve as the atoning factor for humanity's sins and the Christ of faith and tradition too lofty a figure to be comprehended or explained by convoluted or simplistic logic and scriptural passages. Indeed, the Church has only been able to maintain the artifice of a Christ of faith theology by recourse to some extremely, if not extraordinary, artificial methods, self-contradictory presuppositions, and illogical inferences. The fundamental questions concerning the relationship of the historical Jesus with regards to the Logos, with God Almighty and the nature of Godhead, remain the same and will forever shadow the faith unless dealt with. Whenever efforts have been made to answer these questions however, the answers suggested have not been to the satisfaction of a great majority of the scholars in the field. None can deny the difficulties, doubts, and uncertainties involved in the issue, and whilst by no means have all the questions been answered with certainty, modern research has at least afforded us a better understanding and appreciation of the difficulties involved.

In addition, there are numerous developments in modern thought concerning Christology and Jesus' divinity which, to Albert C. Knudson, "make inevitable a revision of the traditional Christology. They call for a more historical, a more empirical, a more anthropocentric, a more ethical, a more personalistic approach to the problem. This is evident from the history of Christological thought during the past century."²⁰⁹ Knudson summarizes the specific changes in the main three areas. Firstly, that Jesus was human not only in that he possessed a

human soul, spirit and body, but in the sense that his personal ego and center was human. "This does not exclude his divinity, but it does mean the relinquishment of traditional theory that the human nature of Jesus was impersonal and that the ego or personal center of his being was constituted by the eternal Logos."²¹⁰ This can be seen even in the works of conservative theologians such as D. M. Baillie and careful ones like Mackintosh. The fifth century Cyril of Alexandria's familiar phrase, "the impersonal humanity of Christ" looks like 'Docetism' to Baillie and he recognizes that "few theologians now would defend the phrase or would hesitate to speak of Jesus as a man, a human person."²¹¹ According to H. R. Mackintosh: "If we are not to trust our intuitive perception that the Christ we read of in the Gospels is an individual man, it is hard to say what perception could be trusted."²¹²

Secondly, Jesus was unique in his sheer dependence upon the divine will and in his endowment with the Divine Spirit and not due to the complete union or fusion of the divine and human nature within him. Thirdly,

divinity is to be ascribed to Jesus, not because he made this claim for himself, nor because he was possessed of omniscience and omnipotence, but because of his unique consciousness of oneness with God and because of his creative and redemptive agency in the founding of the kingdom of God.²¹³

N. T. Wright does not "think that Jesus thought he was identified with the being that most people in our culture think is denoted by the word *god*."²¹⁴ To Wright high Christology is a form of docetism. Western orthodoxy at large and modern evangelicalism in particular has had too "long an overly lofty and detached view of God."²¹⁵ To Wright it is not the nature or divinity but the vocation that makes Jesus divine. He concludes saying that, "After twenty years of serious historical-Jesus study I still say the Christian creeds *ex animo*, but I now mean something very different by them, not least by the word *God* itself. The portrait has been redrawn."²¹⁶ How different is this approach from traditional claims that Charles Gore represented a few years ago, arguing that, "If we wish to account for the unique position which Jesus

Christ has held in religion it is only necessary to examine the claim which he is represented to have made for Himself in the earliest records which we possess.”²¹⁷

With these significant changes, and with especially the new emphasis on the humanity of Jesus many limitations came to be placed on his divine nature. The divinity of Jesus, according to many modern scholars, is grounded in the divine will rather than the divine nature, and in many modern works is explained as a heightened human experience rather than a divine consciousness alien to normal humanity. Jesus’ divinity, in other words, was not his own self-consciousness about himself but rather a later development within the Church. It was the creative conception of the Church about what Jesus was and should have meant to his followers and to the world. The Church has retrospectively projected onto the historical Jesus the nature of his spiritual and moral significance, as it has regarded this, and affirmed with Paul and others that God was incarnated in him. Alfred Loisy once ironically remarked that, “Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, but it was the Church that came.”²¹⁸ This unique interpretation of the person of Jesus might have been relevant to a society where Neo Platonism and other Greek philosophies were a commonplace. These interpretations have become obsolete in modern societies and must be revised with the contention that these traditional Christological ideas are “obsolete even before we begin to revise them. A cobbler will no doubt be able to mend my shoes before I realize that there is anything wrong with them, but that does not mean to say that I cannot realize that they are letting the water in, even before I take them to him for repair.”²¹⁹

Moreover, the ancient Greek and Christian understanding of the term “*persona*” or “personality” has undergone significant changes in modern times. Karl Barth, for instance, disagrees with Boethius’ (sixth century) classical definition that continued to be influential in the Middle Ages: “*naturae rationalis individua substantia*” which really means an individual rational being. Quoting Aquinas’ consciousness of the difficulties involved in the definition, Barth goes on to show how the modern concept of personality adds the attributes of “*self-consciousness*”. The traditional doctrine of trinity (three Persons) or the Social Trinity would then be tantamount to tritheism as it would mean

three distinct individuals and centers of consciousness, three self-conscious personal beings. Therefore Barth suggests dropping the term “three Persons” asserting:

The ancient concept of Person, which is the only one in question here, had today become obsolete....Wherever ancient dogmatics, or Catholic dogmatics even today, speaks of “Person”, we prefer to call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in God the three individual modes of existence of the one God, consisting in their mutual relationship.²²⁰

Such an understanding of the term person and explanation of the concept of Trinity utterly demolishes the traditional Christian doctrine of the person of Christ and places significant limitations upon Jesus’ divinity in the traditional sense. The popular traditional interpretations of Trinity would be tantamount to tritheism rather than monotheism. This is why Barth insists that, “It is to the one single essence of God, which is not to be tripled by the doctrine of the Trinity, but emphatically to be recognized in its unity, that there also belongs what we call today the “personality” of God.”²²¹

On the other hand Clement C. J. Webb does not see any radical change in the usage of the term “person” in modern times:

The general history of the word Person with its derivatives in philosophical terminology may be said to have moved throughout on lines determined for it by the process whose result is summed up in the Boethian definition of *persona*. Within these lines there has been a continual oscillation... of independent and fundamentally unchangeable individuality, or the thought of social relationship and voluntary activity, suggested by the Latin word *persona*, has been uppermost.²²²

Webb notes three specific aspects of the term “personality” and labels them “as *incommunicability*, *self-consciousness*, and *will* respectively.”²²³ He argues that the Orthodox Church spoke of personality in God rather than the personality of God. It conceived of

God as comprising a unity of three personalities and not one personality. Consequently, to Webb the Divine Personality should be conceived as analogous to the collective personality of a state or nation. This is different from Barth's view and close to the Cappadocian fathers' analogy of three distinctive individual men alongside each other. This "ultra Cappadocian" movement, as Baillie names it, in modern Trinitarian thought has been influential in Anglican circles. Leonard Hodgson's *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, and F. D. Maurice are good examples of this influence. The central theme of this school is the "social" interpretation of the Trinity, and phrases such as "the social life of the Blessed Trinity" are frequently observed amongst its writers. The main contrast between Barthian interpretations and this school is that Barth speaks of one Person in three modes of existence while the other prefers to speak of three independent Persons in a kind of social unity. This "internal constitutive unity", as Hodgson says, or the unity in glory, as Moltmann argues, allows the possibility of three separate persons, i.e. centers of consciousness, but unites them in love.²²⁴ On the other hand, Karl Rahner prefers "Sabellian Modalism" to what he calls the "vulgar tritheism" of Social Trinities. Gerald O'Collins and Mario Farrugia observe that "the inner life of the Trinity is so mysterious that any analogy will almost certainly run the risk of some error. It is better to edge towards a modalism that preserves monotheism than fall into vulgar tritheism."²²⁵

The fact of the matter is that like ancient Christian Fathers, as we shall shortly see, none of these schools and conservative theological approaches seem able to solve the central problem of Christian theology, and the one from which we started: the relationship of Jesus Christ's person with the transcendent, indivisible, impassable, unique, eternal and One God. These may be good speculative works, or guesses, but are definitely not satisfactory solutions. Whether one accepts the ultra Cappadocian movement's social Trinity or Barth's union Trinity one is still left unable to detach the Trinity from corporealism and concrete anthropomorphism. The incarnation of God in the human figure of Christ, whether in one mode of His existence or through one person of His Godhead, are crystal clear cases of corporealism. The difficulty lies in the insistence that traditional Christianity almost always

places upon the person of Christ as being divine, the Second Person of the Trinity, and equal in all respects to God whilst simultaneously claiming Jesus' humanity as being equal in almost all respects (excepting sin) with mankind. This position is paradoxical, contradictory and defies logic. A fundamental tenet of Christianity, it nevertheless has little, if any, appeal to modern rational thought and as such is intelligible to modern man who scrutinizes particulars with rigorous criteria. Many modern Christian scholars and theologians do not seem ready to deny or denounce traditional claims but are yet at a loss as to how to prove their validity or even reasonability to the contemporary mind. Forced to resort to circular argument, they make claims without logically substantiating them and in doing so repeating, in many cases, opinions either discussed in early centuries or discarded as heretical. In neither case can the charges of anthropomorphism, corporealism and, in certain cases tritheism, be denied.

The source of this paradox is the New Testament. To understand the difficulties involved we need to study the New Testament Christological statements and how their themes were developed by the Church Fathers.

Christology and the New Testament

The central question "What think ye of Christ?" has been answered in a number of different ways by New Testament writers. He is referred to as a prophet: "And King Herod heard of him...and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead... Others said, that it is Elias. And others said, that it is the prophet, or one of the prophets" (Mark 6:14-15). Matthew clearly names Jesus as the prophet: "And when he was to come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, who is this? And the multitude said, this is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee" (Matthew 20:10-11, see also Acts 3:22, 7:37). In view of passages like these many scholars maintain that Jesus was a Jewish prophet, "a first-century apocalyptic prophet who expected the imminent end of his" (world).²²⁶ Like Amos and Hosea, Jesus struggled to reform the Jewish religion and its tradition; he engaged with contemporary Judaism and its leaders, leveled fierce attacks against the Temple authorities and their selfish exploitation, and railed against the scribes and the Pharisees.

And like the Israelite prophets before him he suffered the consequences, his fate being sealed at the hands of the Roman authorities. It was only after his death that some of his enthusiastic followers exalted him, acclaiming the prophet of Galilee to be the Messiah, the Son of God and God's Anointed One. Shirley Jackson Case argues that Jesus was a prophet of God who

lived in a relation to God that was essentially a mystical experience. But it was not the type of mysticism that evaporated in an orgy of emotions... On the contrary, the divine seizure was for the sake of increasing righteousness in the world and contributing to human welfare. Its end was to be the establishment of the Kingdom.²²⁷

Morton Scott Enslin argues that Jesus as the Prophet of Galilee fits very well into the grand scheme of the Gospels:

As soon as this view of Jesus – a prophet sent from God – is recognized as the understanding of his first followers, who accepted wholeheartedly his own claim, many other elements in the gospel pages fall into place. There is a constant reference to his possession of a spirit which has come upon him and possessed him... the point of significance is that there would seem no attempt by anyone to deny that in the strictest and most literal sense of the word he was “inspired” by a spirit not his own.²²⁸

So Jesus who was originally a prophet, was raised and exalted to God's right hand. Joachim Jeremias observes that the

unanimous verdict on him was that he was a prophet. There was a constant echo to this effect among the people (Mark 6.15 par.; 8.28 par.; Matt. 21.11, 46; Luke 7.16; John 4.19; 6.14; 7.40, 52; 9.17) and even – though coupled with skepticism – in Pharisaic circles (Luke 7.39; Mark 8.11 par.). According to Luke 24.19, Jesus' disciples, too, saw him as a prophet. Finally, it was as a false prophet that Jesus was arrested and accused. This is clear from the account of the mockery under Jewish confinement.²²⁹

He further argues that, "The tradition in which Jesus appears as a prophet and bearer of the spirit must be an old one, as it cannot be traced back to the early church. Where possible, the earliest church avoided 'prophet' as a christological title, because it felt it to be inadequate."²³⁰

Geza Vermes maintains that Jesus was aware of his role as a prophet. Vermes argues that it was "not merely because of any dogmatic inadequacy, that the title ceased altogether to be applied to Jesus".²³¹ One of the reasons according to Vermes being that

from the middle of the first century AD to the end of the first revolt these self-proclaimed wonder-workers found a ready following among the simple victims of the revolutionary activities of the Zealots. But as the promises remained unfulfilled and the miracles failed to materialize, and as the sarcasm and antipathy of their political opponents stripped the pretenders of their repute, the term 'prophet' applied to an individual between the years AD 50 and 70 not surprisingly acquired distinctly pejorative overtones in the bourgeois and aristocratic idiom of Pharisees and Sadducees.²³²

Vermes quotes many New Testament verses like Mark 6:15, 8:28, 14:65, Matthew 16:14, 21:11, 21:46, 26:68, Luke 7:39, 9:8, 9:19, 13:33, 24:19 etc. to conclude that, "No expert would deny that [the] Gospels portray Jesus as wearing the mantle of a prophet".²³³ He further argues that according to many sayings reported in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus "not only thought of himself as a prophet, but also described to his prophetic destiny every unpleasantness that was to happen to him."²³⁴ To Vermes,

the belief professed by his contemporaries that Jesus was a charismatic prophet rings so authentic, especially in the light of Honi-Hanina cycle of traditions, that the correct historical question is not whether such an undogmatic Galilean concept was in vogue, but rather how, and under what influence, it was ever given an eschatological twist.²³⁵

The emphasis on the prophetic nature of Jesus' mission has increasingly been the focus of recent works, especially by scholars who study and locate Jesus against his Jewish background. M. Hengel, G. Theissen, G. Vermes, Bruce Chilton, E. P. Sanders and John Hick are just a few examples. E. P. Sanders, for instance, contends that certain unassailable facts about Jesus' life and mission locate him firmly within Jewish restoration eschatology. The fact that he was baptized by John the Baptist, was a Galilean preacher and healer who confined his activity to Israel, and engaged in controversy about the temple, called twelve disciples, and aroused substantial opposition among the Jewish people, all of these facts place him in the context of Jewish hopes for the restoration of the nation of Israel. Therefore, Sanders concludes, "Jesus saw himself as God's last messenger before the establishment of the kingdom."²³⁶ John Hick contends that "Jesus' intense God-consciousness was of course inevitably structured in terms of the religious ideas of his own culture. The basic concept with which to understand his own existence in relation to God was that of prophet."²³⁷

The depiction of Jesus as a prophet is in line with many New Testament statements as well as Jewish prophetic history. Jesus was sent by God to reform the lost sheep of Israel and to proclaim the Kingdom of God. This portrayal of Jesus saves Christianity from the countless challenges of tritheism, corporealism and anthropomorphism constantly besieging it. It also provides humanity with a true model of socio-political reformation and spirituality. Yet for all that, the majority of conservative Christian scholars disagree with this description of Jesus. For instance, Charles Gore, a conservative Bishop who edited *Lux Mundi* in 1890, argued that "to represent our Lord only as a good man conscious of a message from God, like one of the Prophets or John the Baptist, is to do violence not to one Gospel only or to single passages in various Gospels, but to the general tenour of the Gospels as a whole."²³⁸

Others like H. Conzelmann, O. Cullmann, F. Hahn and R. H. Fuller have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of this title and seem to agree as to its inadequacy, while V. Taylor has qualified it as christologically "abortive".²³⁹

In conclusion, it is pertinent to quote Grillmeier who rightly observes:

The designation of Jesus as 'prophet' was only short-lived; it had a reference to Deut. 18.15, 18 and served to explain Jesus' mission to Jewish audiences (Acts 3.22; 7.37; John 6.14; 7.40). And even if the Fathers are right later in emphasizing that the transcendence of Christ is something more than a heightened prophetic office, this title nevertheless embraces his mission as revealer of the Father and teacher of men.²⁴⁰

Angel Christology

As early as the Synoptic Gospels, Christ is depicted as an angelic prince. "Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38; also Matthew 13:41 ff; Mark 13:26 ff, 1:13; Luke 22:43; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). Grillmeier remarks:

One of the attempts of the primitive Christian period to express the transcendence of Christ is the so-called 'angel-christology' or the designation *Christos angelos*. It is so significant that attempts have been made to prove that it was the original christology, at least in Jewish-Christian circles. Jesus, it is held, was understood as an angel in the strict sense i.e. as a heavenly creature sent by God into the world. With the condemnation of Arianism this legitimate and original conception was stamped as heresy. It had to give place to the strict doctrine of two natures.²⁴¹

M. Werner argues that the oft-quoted title Son of Man would be best interpreted if we assume "that this Messiah belonged to the (highest) celestial realm of the angels. This view is expressly confirmed by the sources."²⁴² He further argues that Paul's usage of the title *Kyrios* does not negate the fact. In Late Judaism and primitive Christianity the angels were invoked as *Kyrios*. Werner notes:

The history of the Primitive Christian doctrine of Christ as a high angelic being pursued its way in the post-apostolic period through successive stages. At first the very view gradually subsided of its

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own accord and became problematical. Then, already profoundly shaken within, it had to endure finally a decisive assault during the Arian dispute of the fourth century. In this conflict it was bitterly attacked by the representatives of the new doctrine of Christ, which had emerged in the interval, and at last it was proscribed and suppressed as erroneous doctrine.²⁴³

Grillmeier observes that, “We may point out the over-estimation of the *Christo angelos* idea, but within limits it is not to be denied as a historical fact. The sources testify that Christ was given the name ‘angel’ right up until the fourth century.”²⁴⁴

Messianic Christology

Long before Jesus’ advent the Jews had been expecting the Messiah. Jesus was given this title. He is the Christ, the Messiah, “And he saith unto them, but whom say ye that I am? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ. And he charged them that they should tell no man of him” (Mark 8:29–30). In Matthew 16:16–18 Jesus is said to have approved the title:

He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In a reply to the chief priest and the scribes, Luke (22:67–69) reports Jesus to have said: “Art thou the Christ? Tell us. And he said unto them, If I tell you, you will not believe: And if I also ask you, you will not answer me, nor let me go. Hereafter shall the Son of man sit on the right hand of the power of God.” It is only in Mark 14:61–62 that Jesus is reported by the evangelist to have confessed being the Christ. “Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see The Son of

Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.”

The early Church extensively focused upon the Messianic role of Jesus and insisted that Jesus was conscious of his Messianic identity. However, it is baffling to notice that there is only one instance in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus seemingly affirms that he is the expected Messiah. But, the one passage that confirms his Messianic identity (Mark 14:53–65) is of a dubious nature. B. Harvie Branscomb has shown its doubtful historical dependableness.²⁴⁵ The evil spirits are portrayed as recognizing him as the Messiah. The healed ones declared him so. The disciples wished to proclaim him the Messiah but Jesus repeatedly demanded silence about this role until his resurrection. (Mark 9:9). Gunther Bornkamm is astonished by this fact:

For this is the truly amazing thing, that there is in fact not a single certain proof of Jesus’ claiming for himself one of the Messianic titles which tradition has ascribed to him... nowhere does this seem to be of any importance either in his preaching of the coming of the kingdom of God, or in his endeavour to make God’s will a reality to us now...²⁴⁶

The New Testament scholars differ as to whether Jesus used the title “Christ or Messiah” or whether this was placed in his mouth by later writers. Many scholars such as Branscomb, conclude that Jesus considered himself a prophet and never made any claims about his Messianic identity. His followers identified him as the Messiah after the belief in his resurrection had been established. This explains the reason for the “Messianic Secret” of the Gospel of Mark. There was nothing about the Messianic role in the original tradition. It was later assumed that Jesus somehow had imposed a degree of silence upon the original disciples so as not to disclose his Messianic secret to the public. W. Wrede’s famous work *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*²⁴⁷ is a classical example of this approach. Prior to Wrede’s analysis it was thought that Jesus’ command to silence, as reported by Mark, was an integral part of the historical Jesus and was meant to circumvent high political expectations of his Messiahship and a gradual revelation of his

identity. Wrede's study changed those perspectives altogether. He connected this secret motif to another element in Mark's Gospel, the so-called "parable theory". This trend maintained that Jesus intended his teachings to be imported only to a handful of inner circle followers and hidden from the multitudes of lay people. Mark 1:35, 3:13 depicted Jesus as fleeing the crowd, Mark 1:29, 7:17, 9:28, 10:10, 13:3-4 portray him healing and teaching only a small band of close followers. Likewise his disciples had many difficulties in understanding his parables and teachings. To Wrede all these were part of the secrecy motives. The earliest Christians, in view of Jesus' humble earthly life, thought that he did not become the Messiah until his resurrection. The Easter experience exalted the heavenly Jesus. Gradually it became a tradition that in reality he had been the Messiah already during his life. This belief resulted in the secrecy motif to eliminate the tension between the reality that Jesus became Messiah only after his death and the notion that he was already so during his earthly life. The secrecy motif was the creation of the later evangelical circles. Martine Dibelius proposed an "apologetic" interpretation of the Messianic secrecy. He argued that Mark introduced this motif to explain the historical failures and lack of universal recognition of Jesus during his lifetime as expected of the Messiah. Many modern scholars are not convinced by the secrecy theory in its entirety. They contend that if it was an official stance or Mark's original intent then why would Jesus' command to silence be ignored later in the Gospel of Mark as reported by Mark 1:45 and 7:36. Therefore H. N. Roskam asserts that, "Wrede may have given the Messianic Secret in Mark's Gospel too wide a scope."²⁴⁸

Although some aspects of the "Messianic Secret" motif of Mark's theory has been questioned by a number of scholars, the ultimate results and conclusions drawn from that motif are still being followed by many liberal scholars. For instance Roskam maintains that Jesus' injunctions to silence as reported by Mark indicate that "Jesus had no ambition to assume political power: Mark's Jesus has no intentions to make the people believe that he will re-establish a free and independent Israel, nor does he have any ambition to mobilize the masses in preparation for a revolt."²⁴⁹ This is very different from the traditional understanding of the Messianic role. Frances Young contends that

we do not have the evidence available now to speculate realistically about Jesus' so-called Messianic consciousness. (If we were to try and read between the lines we might even speculate that Jesus regarded personal claims as a Satanic temptation.) Of course it remains true that the church's christological preaching must have some continuity with, and basis in, the mission of Jesus, but its content need not be, and probably was not, identical.²⁵⁰

Bultmann contends that Jesus did not think of himself as the Messiah.²⁵¹ Bornkamm argues that "Jesus' history was originally a non-Messianic history, which was portrayed in the light of the Messianic faith of the Church only after Easter."²⁵² He further argues that, "we must not allow ourselves to be misled by the fact that the Gospels themselves contain many passages which are clearly Messianic. These should be regarded first of all as the Credo of the believers, and as the theology of the early Church."²⁵³

The Christian tradition is replete with the claims that Jesus was the Messiah and was conscious of his Messianic identity. Gospels are quoted extensively to substantiate the claim that Jesus was the Messiah and sooner or later confessed himself to be so. This modern analysis of the Messianic Secret levels an extremely serious blow to the tenet of Christology as well as to the Gospels. The Messianic Christology is not the high Christology of divine incarnation. Genuine Messianic expectations were prevalent during the pre and post Jesus era. What Christology can be trusted if the Messianic Christology was not the original understanding of Jesus himself? What truth can there be in the Gospels if they depict Jesus as the Messiah when Jesus did not consider himself to be so? Is Christianity a tradition of Jesus or a religion about Jesus? How far is it actually Jesus and his message and how far is it human imposition or interference? Do the actions, sayings and approvals of Jesus constitute the core of the Christian message or is the Christian faith an accumulation of later Church reactions and interpretations of what Jesus was or should have been? Were the later Church authorities more qualified to understand Jesus than Jesus himself? How can we assign divine propriety to the later Church understandings of Jesus and his earthly life?

Many scholars contend that the historical Jesus did not fit into the image of the Messiah as depicted by the Old Testament. Jesus is not the son of David as claimed in the Gospels. His mother's genealogy does not connect him to David through Solomon. Joseph the Carpenter was his foster father and not his biological one. There is no mention in the Old Testament that the Messiah would be born to a virgin. The Hebrew term in Isaiah is "*alma*" which means a "young woman" and not a "virgin" as mistranslated by many Christian translators. According to Jeremiah 33:18 the Messiah is to build the Temple in Jerusalem. In contrast to this Jesus came when the Temple was still in existence. Jesus did not establish the religious laws of the land as predicted by Jeremiah 33:15. Additionally, the historical Jesus was a suffering figure while the Messiah was supposedly a triumphant one. The Messiah was supposed to bring the exiled to their homeland as Isaiah 11:11-12, Jeremiah 23:8, 30:3 and Hosea 3:4-5 manifestly indicate. Nothing of this sort took place during Jesus' life. Many traditional Christian scholars contend that Jesus will accomplish these predictions in his second coming. However, this poses the question as to whether Jesus was a Messiah during his first coming or whether he will become a Messiah in his second coming?

Ben Witherington III, on the other hand, argues that close scrutiny reveals that there is "no unified messianic secret motif in Mark."²⁵⁴ He contends that in Mark 5:19-20 Jesus tells the man possessed by the devil to, "Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee..." Verse 20 makes it clear that the man did "publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him." There also occurs a sort of publicity theme in some of the healing stories such as Mark 2:12; 3:3 ff. In addition, there is also the "more puzzling issue of why Mark records the disobedience to Jesus' command to silence in 1:25-28, 43-45, and 7:36-3 if he was really trying to impose a messianic secrecy motif on his material. Are we to think Mark is simply a bad editor of his source material despite considerable evidence to the contrary?"²⁵⁵ Hoskyns and Davey observe that, "The Christology lies behind the aphorisms, not ahead of them; this means that at no point is the literary or historical critic able to detect in any stratum of the synoptic materiel that a Christological interpretation has been imposed upon an un-Christological history."²⁵⁶ P. Stuhlmacher contends:

The so-called Messianic secret is not simply ... a post-Easter theological construction, and in general it had nothing to do with the attempt after easter to hide the fact that Jesus' life had proceeded unmessianically and beginning at easter had first been put in the light of Messianism. It is a question much more of a characteristic of the work of Jesus himself.²⁵⁷

Ben Witherington concludes that "Jesus saw himself as the Messiah – the *Jewish mashiach*."²⁵⁸

It is easy to claim but hard to prove that Jesus fulfilled expectations of the Jewish Messiah. The Gospels records are so overlaid with later theology and beliefs that absolute certainty about anything is impossible. One fact is certain however, that the Jesus of history does not fit into the image of the Jewish Messiah in its entirety. The convoluted and elaborate Gospel attempts of modern evangelists to impose such an image upon the earthly Jesus are unconvincing and artificial. In the name of the spiritual Kingdom of God and of moral anthology, exotic meanings are imposed upon the simple and innocent texts of the Old and New Testaments, to derive meanings which these texts never intended and do not carry if taken at face value. Whilst these spiritual contortions may satisfy those who already believe, they are inadequate to convince the skeptical or to change historical realities.

The Son of Man Christology

Jesus' most favorite and frequently used title, as the evangelists report, is the Son of Man. The great significance of this Christological title is manifest from the fact that according to the Gospels it is the only designation Jesus has reportedly applied to himself. "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works" (Matthew 16:27). "Jesus said unto them, the Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: and they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again" (Matthew 17:22–23). The Son of Man passages occur so frequently in the Gospels that to enumerate them all is unnecessary, suffice it to say that they occur 69 times in the first three Gospels alone and

over 80 times in the Gospels as a whole; see for instance Matthew 12:8, 26:64; Mark 8:38, 13:26, 14:62; Luke 22:69.

New Testament scholars differ over the origin, meanings and significance of the title. An overwhelming majority of biblical scholars look for its origins and significance in Judaic apocalyptic literature. H. E. Todt's *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition* is a typical example of this approach.²⁵⁹ The heading of the first chapter of this book reads: "The transcendent sovereignty of the Son of Man in Jewish apocalyptic literature." 1 Enoch 37-71 (the Similitudes), Daniel 7, and 4 Ezra 13 are the passages frequently quoted in connection with the meanings and implications of this title.

Scholars also differ as to whether Jesus used the title for himself or whether it was put into his mouth by the church. P. Vielhauer, for instance, argues that the term "the Son of Man" was originally used as a title for Jesus by the early Palestinian communities. It signified a supernatural, apocalyptic figure. It was not Jesus but the early Christians who used this term to designate Jesus. If "Jesus used it himself at all, it was only... with reference to a figure other than himself."²⁶⁰ Bultmann and Bornkamm contend that Jesus did speak of the "Son of man or *bar enasha*" but his usage of the term was different from its later usages. Actually he was referring to someone other than himself.²⁶¹ Reference has been made above all to Luke 12.8, "Also I say unto you, Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God." Bornkamm argues that,

although the historical Jesus spoke most definitely of the coming Son of man and judge of the world in the sense of the contemporary apocalyptic hope, and did so with the amazing certainty that the decisions made here with regard to his person and message would be confirmed at the last judgment, nevertheless he did not give himself the title Son of man. Also we can hardly assume that the earthly Jesus saw himself as destined to be the heavenly judge of the world.²⁶²

Jeremias, on the other hand, states that "when Jesus speaks in the third person he makes a distinction not between two different figures,

but between his present and the future state of exaltation.”²⁶³ Wilhelm Bousset notes:

In all our considerations we have no wish to deny the possibility that an individual Son of Man saying could have come from the lips of Jesus. But one cannot escape the impression that in the majority of these sayings we have before us the product of the theology of the early Church. That is the sure starting point for our work.²⁶⁴

Todt quotes Matthew 12:32 and Luke 12:10 to show the developing theology of the early church.²⁶⁵ R. H. Fuller calls attention to a fundamental change of emphasis in the Christological outlook which has taken place between the stage of development represented by Acts 3:20–21 and Acts 2:36. He attributes this theological development to “the delay of the parousia, and the increasing experience of the Spirit’s working in the church.”²⁶⁶ Fuller further observes:

Jesus had declared that his own eschatological word and deed would be vindicated by the Son of Man at the end. Now his word and deed has received preliminary yet uncertain vindication by the act of God in the resurrection. The earliest church expressed this newborn conviction by identifying Jesus with the Son of man who was to come.²⁶⁷

Norman Perrin goes further by observing that “Jesus had not referred to the Son of Man at all; all the Son of Man sayings stemmed from the early church.”²⁶⁸ He concludes that “every single Son of Man saying is a product of the theologizing of the early church.”²⁶⁹ J. Hick notes:

There was the image of the son of man of Danielic prophecy, who was to come again in clouds of glory, and there was the image of the Messiah. However, it does not seem very probable that Jesus applied either of these images, or any other titles, to himself; rather, other people came to apply them to him.²⁷⁰

The New Testament

Branscomb observes: "I conclude, therefore, that the series of ideas which viewed Jesus as the Son of Man to come in glory on the clouds of heaven, with the holy angels, was the theological achievement of the Palestinian Church." He further observes that

it never appears in the Gospels in the mouths of the disciples, probably for the following reason: It was known that this view of Jesus was not entertained by the disciples during Jesus' lifetime. In the tradition this fact took the form of the oft-repeated thought that the disciples did not understand until later what Jesus was endeavoring to teach them.²⁷¹

Acceptance of this approach has significant implications upon our understanding of Christology.

Among all the Christological titles it is the Son of Man which is traced directly back to the Jesus of history. No other title, such as Son of God, Son of David, Christ, Lord etc., holds a modicum of the secure place in the early stratum of Christianity as does the Son of Man designation. Yet if this Son of Man title as well as Christology are a later Church invention then what are we left with in Christology in terms of relating to the nature, person and role of Christ? R. Augstein candidly begs the question: "If Jesus was neither the Messiah nor the son of man nor the son of God, and if he did not even think he was any of those, what is left? ...what good could his death do?"²⁷²

Professor J. W. Bowker of the University of Lancaster, emphasizes on the other hand, that Jesus used this term as an alternative for the first pronoun "I" or "me" or to denote himself as a frail mortal. K. Armstrong observes that "the original Aramaic phrase (*bar nasha*) simply stressed the weakness and mortality of the human condition. If this is so, Jesus seems to have gone out of his way to emphasize that he was a frail human being who would one day suffer and die."²⁷³ J. D. Crossan argues that

if Jesus spoke about a son of man, his audience would not have taken the expression in either a titular or a circumlocutionary sense but, following normal and expected usage, in either a generic

(everyone) or an indefinite (anyone) sense. He is talking, they would presume, about human beings, making claims or statements about humanity. An unchauvinistic English translation would be "the human one".²⁷⁴

This would entail that the designation Son of Man was merely a human one, not loaded with any divine or heavenly meanings but simply a reflection of the humble origins and feeble human nature of Jesus.

Such interpretation of this lofty title is too modest for some New Testament scholars, who maintain that Jesus used this term for himself in light of, and identifying himself with, the well-known Danielic Son of Man of the Old Testament and apocalyptic literature. C. F. D. Moule, for instance, states that the title Son of man "seems to have come through virtually unmodified from Jesus himself."²⁷⁵ He further states that, "there is a strong case (or it seems to me) for the view that the phrase belonged originally among Jesus' own words as a reference to the vindicated human figure of Dan. 7 and as a symbol for the ultimate vindication of obedience to God's design."²⁷⁶ J. Jeremias, Ben Witherington III and de Jonge also agree that the origin of this designation goes back to Jesus himself. The scholars who follow this trend differ widely over the true meanings of Daniel 7. Their views can be summarized into three main categories: (1) The figure mentioned in the Danielic vision refers to one or more angels. J. J. Collins persuasively argues this view.²⁷⁷ (2) It stands for Israel, or at least for a faithful Israel, for those who endure persecution. To Casey it is a symbol of Israel's triumph.²⁷⁸ (3) *Bar enash* does not represent Israel as much as it represents an individual figure who would represent Israel in the presence of Almighty God. This is the sense conveyed in the Similitude as well as in Daniel 7. B. Lindars states that the "figure of the Similitude, variously termed, as we have seen, the Righteous One, the Chosen One, or "that Son of man," is a leader of the righteous and chosen ones, i.e., the faithful Jews. Consequently he must be seen as a representative figure, embodying the expectation of the Jews that their righteousness before God will be vindicated, their enemies will be liquidated, and they will reign with God....It would be a mistake to suggest that he is in some way a corporate figure, i.e., identical with the faithful Jews. But he

represents their aspirations and expectations, and so is the head of them as a group....”²⁷⁹ What is true of the Similitudes is true of Daniel 7.

Hence, many scholars conclude that Jesus used the term “the Son of Man” for himself in conformity with the messianic figure envisioned in Daniel 7:13–14. B. Witherington observes:

The proper matrix in which to interpret the Son of man material, that which provides the clues as to how Jesus himself viewed the material, is Dan. 7:13–14 and probably also the *Similitude of Enoch*. The evidence seems sufficient to conclude that because Jesus *bar enasha* implies a certain form of messianic self-understanding on his part, although it does not take the form of the popular Davidic expectation. Indeed, Mark 14:62 suggests that Jesus corrected such an interpretation of himself by referring to the Danielic Son of man. Only when he comes upon the clouds will he assume the role of world judge and, indeed, judge of the people of God.²⁸⁰

C. K. Barret believes that “the title Son of Man...does more than any other to cement the unity of the Gospel tradition. We have seen that in the background of this expression both suffering and glory play their part.”²⁸¹ De Jonge concludes:

There seems to be no reason to deny that Jesus himself did claim a particular authority, there and then and in the future; thought of himself in terms of suffering and vindication; and expressed this in the term “the Son of Man” – covertly referring to the destiny of the “one like a son of man” in Daniel.²⁸²

Even those scholars who disagree that the title originated with Jesus himself do agree with the thesis that its usage in the Gospels was meant to convey the aforementioned apocalyptic Danielic sense. N. Perrin, for instance writes,

the evangelist Mark is a major figure in the creative use of Son of Man traditions in the New Testament period. To him we owe the

general picture we have from the Gospels that “Son of Man” is Jesus’ favorite self-designation and that Jesus used it to teach his disciples to understand both the true nature of his messiahship as including suffering and glory, and the true nature of Christian discipleship as the way to glory through suffering.²⁸³

There is one major difference between the approaches of evangelists, such as Ben Witherington, and the understanding of academicians such as Norman Perrin. Where academicians stop at the apocalyptic prophet-hood of Jesus, evangelists throw caution to the winds and make a huge jump, from the apocalyptic Son of Man to the divine nature and supra terrestrial being of Jesus. Their contention is that in using the Danielic Son of Man imagery Jesus was infact claiming to be God in the full sense of the term, that is, possessing everlasting dominion over his kingdom which would not pass away, and having all people, nations and men of every language serve him, a service due only to God Almighty. Thus for evangelists, Jesus by the Son of Man designation (Daniel 4:3) and the imagery of his coming on the clouds of heaven, enumerates all the characteristics of Yahweh.

Worth noting is the fact that all the Son of Man sayings in the New Testament occur in the third person, while in Revelation 1–3 we have the use of the first person for Jesus. This continuous use of the third person by Jesus indicates that these sayings were not meant “as him”, that is Jesus, being the Son of Man but rather “about” the Son of Man. As it is too unnatural to view Jesus as continuously speaking about himself in the third person it would appear that the early Church retrojected its own understanding of Jesus as the Son of Man onto the lips of Jesus. We see an example of this early use of the third person in Acts 7:56 when Stephen sees the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God. Marcan sayings do not suggest that Jesus believed that he would become the Son of Man. The future sayings all refer to “coming” and not “becoming”. It is quite possible that Jesus spoke of another individual as the future Son of Man but that later Church traditions identified Jesus himself to be that designation.

Assuming that Jesus is referring to a supra-terrestrial transcendent being, the apocalyptic “Son of Man” of Daniel 7:13, who has everlasting dominion over his own kingdom etc. then how can it be claimed

that he was referring to himself in this figure given that these rights and predicates did not materialize in his own earthly life, which was one of suffering. The apocalyptic Son of Man is exclusively a triumphant figure while the earthly Jesus is a rejected one, and although some of the Son of Man sayings which depict a suffering figure could seem to refer to Jesus, these sayings do not refer to the Messianic figure mentioned in Daniel 7:13. Rather, the Son of Man seems least likely to refer to Jesus where it may seem to refer to the Daniel 7:13 figure. Further, any attempt to harmonize the two with recourse to a difference between Jesus' present and future role theory, between a suffering and a triumphant figure, etc. holds no water for no kingdom was given to Jesus, as promised in Daniel 7:13, in spite of evangelistic claims that it would take place in the life span of Jesus' disciples (Matthew 16:27–28; Mark 8:38, 9:1).

Daniel 7:13 is a political text probably referring to the Jewish Messiah, a fact made abundantly clear in Daniel 7:16–18:

I came near to one of those who stood by, and asked him the truth of all this. So he told me, and made known to me the interpretation of the things. These great beasts, which are four, are four kings, which shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the most High shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, for ever and ever.

It is the *holy ones* and not *a holy one* who will *possess the kingdom*. Jews have always understood this text to point to a political Messiah who will establish the kingdom for the community, the holy ones of Daniel. They also argue that none of these Messianic prophecies were ever fulfilled by Jesus. It seems that evangelists read too much into the text which in itself is historically questionable. Not many biblical scholars accept the Book of Daniel as an authentic compilation of the historical Daniel.

Additionally, there is no sense of pre-existence or godhead implied in the Son of Man sayings even if their authenticity is granted. All that these sayings could possibly refer to is the future Messianic role of the Son of Man and not a pre-existent being like God existing before His

earthly manifestation. The Son of Man is “given” the dominion so does not own the dominion. What is the status of the Son of Man before receiving the dominion? Can the giver of the dominion and the recipient of the favor be equals? What was Jesus’ status before becoming the Son of Man or the Messiah? Even an inspired prophet would be able to see into the future or could be aware of God’s plans for the future. Indeed, there is no notion of deity or godhead in these Messianic sayings. Moreover, the Son of Man is commonly used in rabbinic literature to denote a frail and mortal human being. The title is void of any absolute divine tone.

Our prime interest in the title lies in the fact that in classical Christian theology, as will be discussed later, the Son of Man has often been contrasted with the other significant title accorded to Christ, the Son of God, to designate a dogma “true God–true Man” crucial for our study of anthropomorphism and corporealism. For the time being it is sufficient to quote Morton S. Enslin who notes:

The term “Son of man,” whether Jesus did or did not employ it for himself, indicated a supernatural figure of cosmic importance, an angel far removed from common clay, and quite apart from “flesh and blood.” Thus for preachers to persist in using the term as an antithesis to “Son of God”: “He was both ‘Son of God’ and ‘Son of man’,” is unqualifiedly wrong and misleading. The term did not connote participation in the common lot of men, either by humble birth or amazing condescension. It was a unique and – to adopt a modern phrase – an “altogether other” figure. There were many “sons of God”; there was, could be, but *one* “Son of man.”²⁸⁴

The Son of God Christology

The Gospels frequently call Jesus the Son of God. It is such a pervasive designation in the Gospels as well as in subsequent Christian thought and dogma that its simple utterance alone somehow ushers in the notion of divinity. The Gospel of Mark starts with this highly significant title, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). In fact, few passages in the Gospels put this title into the mouth

of Jesus himself: (Mark 13:32; Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22). In large part it is either the Spirit of God (Matthew 3:16–17; Mark 1:11) or a voice from the clouds (Matthew 17:5; Luke 9:35) or unclean spirits (Mark 1:23–24, 3:11, 5:7) or the high priest (Matthew 26:63) or the Centurion (Mark 15:39) who address Jesus with this title. It is in Matthew 16:15–17 where Jesus reportedly seems to have approved this title, “He saith unto them, but whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my father which is in heaven.” In John 10:36 Jesus is reported to have used the title for himself when he says to the Jews, “Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?” (See also Matthew 26:63–64; Mark 14:61–62; Luke 22:70; John 5:25, 11:4).

On the other hand Jesus is reported to have used the title “My Father” more frequently. For instance Matthew 11:27 reads, “All things are delivered unto me of my father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him” (see also Mark 13:32). In Matthew 26 Jesus prays two times with the words “O my Father” (Matthew 26:39–42) and in Mark 14:36 he addresses God with the most intimate word “*Abba*”.

The title, Son of God, in mainstream Christianity, is used to denote Jesus’ divinity as the Second Person of the Trinity. It is maintained that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God for he did not have a human father. Consequently he is declared perfect God and perfect man. Wayne Grudem argues that the title Son of God “*when applied to Christ* strongly affirms his deity as the eternal Son in the Trinity, one equal to God the Father in all his attributes.”²⁸⁵ Another acceptable view is that the Synoptic Gospels use this title for Jesus to denote his intimacy and closeness to God Almighty.

It is the Gospel of John that gives this title its theological climax. John declares the Son to be the Pre-existent Word, Lamb of God, the only begotten Son of God (John 1:1–18). Martin Luther, commenting on the beginning verses of John, observes that:

From the very beginning the evangelist teaches and documents most convincingly the sublime article of our holy Christian faith according to which we believe and confess one true, almighty, and eternal God. But he states expressly the three distinct Persons dwell in that same single divine essence, namely God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father begets the Son from eternity, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, etc. Therefore there are three distinct Persons, equal in glory and majesty; yet there is only one divine essence.²⁸⁶

He further illustrates the birth of the Son of God:

As a human son derives his flesh, blood, and being from his father, so the Son of God, born of the Father, received his divine essence and nature from the Father from eternity. But this illustration, as well as any other, is far from adequate; it fails to portray fully the impartation of the divine majesty. The Father bestows His entire divine nature on the Son. But [a] human father cannot impart his entire nature to his son; he can give only a part of it. This is where the analogy breaks down.²⁸⁷

Thus, the thinking goes that the Son became flesh to mediate and redeem humanity from its sinful nature. The Gospel of John makes this point very clear: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). According to the Gospel of John, the Son of God is God in his self-revelation.

The Epistle of Hebrews 1:1–10 makes the point even clearer:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1–3)

Many conservative theologians contend that in Hebrews this title is used to equate Jesus with God or to point to his absolute deity and participation in God. “But about the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom’” (Hebrews 1:8). This interpretation of the Son of God quickly dominated early Christian thought with reference to Jesus and it is this Christology which permeated early Christian literature. Jesus’ deification became more imminent in the minds of early Christians as they heard stories of his resurrection. The risen Lord somehow conveyed to them the knowledge which could not have been revealed by “flesh and blood” (Matthew 16:17) and they felt obliged to proclaim it to everyone that Jesus was the only Son of God. “Jesus is the ‘Son of God’” is therefore certainly one of the most ancient cradle statements of the early Church.

The phrase “son of God” however was also current in Greek as well as Jewish traditions though with a wide range of implications. It was applied both to human and superhuman beings. Grant observes that:

We are so accustomed to the traditional language of the Christian Church that we think it is perfectly natural to find Jesus called “Son of God” and “Son of Man” in the early Christian books, and to have these titles explained as referring to his divine nature (Son of God) and his human nature (Son of Man). These titles are not as simple as they look. In the Jewish literature of the first century, the title “Son of God” is actually used of human beings. A fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls speaks of the Messiah, a man chosen by God, as “Son of God”; and in the apocalyptic book of Enoch there is a supernatural, heavenly figure who is called “Son of Man.”²⁸⁸

The title son of God was *metaphorically* used for kings, pharaohs, religious leaders, emperors, wise men and many other leading figures who were thought to be in the spirit of God or close to God. The designation was used to highlight their servitude to God and in no way or form insinuated their participation in the divinity or Godhead. The ancient Hebrew kings were anointed in this metaphorical sense as the

instruments of God's plan on earth and called sons of God. Likewise in Exodus 4:22 Israel is mentioned as the son of God, "Israel is my Son, My first born." In Psalms 2:7 David says that, "The Lord had said unto me, 'Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.'" In 1 Chronicles 22:10 Solomon is told to be the Son of God. Even in the New Testament the title is used for human beings other than Jesus. Luke 3:38 ends the genealogy of Jesus by writing "...son of Adam, which was the son of God." Matthew 5:44 declares those who love their enemies and 5:9 declares the peacemakers as the children of God. Moreover Jesus is shown to have used phrases like "My Father", "Your Father" and "Our Father" frequently. Grant observes that examples like these should "warn us against thinking that we can have some kind of "instant understanding" of what the titles assigned to Jesus by the early church really meant. They are more strange and complicated than we assume they are."²⁸⁹

Now, in the historical person of Jesus, these variety of implications were woven together to create a mysterious and awe inspiring figure. The Jesus figure then became a crystallization of the multiple elements already in existence.

When we turn to the Gospels we see a variety of Son of God sayings as already alluded to. The New Testament scholars differ widely over the construction, authenticity, historicity and meanings of these statements. There are two passages in the Synoptic Gospels which attribute the title directly to Jesus himself. These are Mark 13:32 and Matthew 11:27 with the same in Luke 10:22. Geza Vermes and C. K. Barret have discussed these passages at length reaching the conclusion that "on the basis of his surviving teachings, it turns out that it is impossible to prove, and unwise to suppose, that Jesus defined himself as the *son of God*."²⁹⁰ Vermes also shows that Messiah statements such as "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16) are not meant to express divinity. They

simply expressed the symbolism inherent in Psalm 2:7: 'You are *my son*, today I have begotten you.' No significance should in consequence be ascribed to it beyond that of divine appointment and adoption...It must follow that if...Jesus declined the status of

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Messiah, he must also have rejected the title, ‘Messiah *son of God*’.²⁹¹

Scholars like B. M. F. van Iersel, C. K. Barret, H. Conzelmann and Geza Vermes are convinced that Jesus never alluded to himself as *son of God* let alone *the Son of God* of the Christian tradition. Bultmann and Ferdinand Hahn expound how the title evolved in the early Christian community. For instance, Bultmann has suggested three stages in the evolution of this concept. The first and initial stage took place in the Palestinian community where Jesus was described as the King Messiah and given the ancient formula of royal divine adoption. The second took place in the Gentile Hellenistic Church where the Jewish concept of son of God was metamorphosed to denote Jesus’ nature rather than his office or mission. The third stage, the half divine, half man classical mythology of kings and emperors was brought into play to highlight the redemptive acts of Jesus. The result was the Jesus of incarnation, the God Man Savior of the world.

But there is a distinctive element in Jesus’ use of the term “*Abba*”. It is a very intimate, personal and unusual term for a Jew of the first century CE to use. Michael Goulder observes, “Although there are a number of examples in Jewish literature of rabbis and other holy men being spoken of as God’s sons, there is no serious parallel for the use of *Abba* in address to God, the term being normal for a human child to his father.”²⁹² Many New Testament scholars have diligently researched the term and concluded its extraordinary significance in connection with Jesus’ close affinity with God. Hans Kung notes:

Hitherto only one explanation has been found: *abba* – like our “Daddy” – is originally a child’s word, used however in Jesus’ time also as a form [of] address to their father by grown-up sons and daughters and as an expression of politeness generally to older persons deserving of respect. But to use this not particularly manly expression of tenderness, drawn from the child’s vocabulary, this commonplace term of politeness, to use this as a form of addressing God, must have struck Jesus’ contemporaries as irreverent and offensively familiar, very much as if we were to address God today as “Dad.”²⁹³

Some scholars argue that the frequent use of this term by the historical Jesus makes Jesus' exclusive sonship a reality. No Jewish contemporary of Jesus would dare to use the term *Abba* in the prayer language of Judaism. Jeremias maintains that:

All this confronts us with a fact of fundamental importance. *We do not have a single example* of God being addressed as '*Abba*' in Judaism, but Jesus *always* addressed God in this way in his prayers. The only exception is the cry from the cross (Mark 15:34 par. Matt. 27:46), and the reason for that is its character as a quotation.²⁹⁴

Oscar Cullmann and others argue that the use of the title "the Son of God" for Jesus by others and Jesus' own use of intimate terms like my Father and *Abba*, "point to Christ's coming from the Father and his deity but not in the sense of later discussions about 'substance' and 'natures'."²⁹⁵ Grillmeier sees in this title germs of the later Christological developments. He sees in it a unique relationship of the Son who is the mediator between God and his elects and God the Father. It denotes more than a prophet, a king or an obedient servant. He observes that the "Son of God" is a title

which, while affording a special insight into the primitive church's understanding of Jesus (cf. Mark 1:1, 11, 9:7, 14:61; Luke 1:35, 22:70; Matt. 2:15, 14:33, 16:16, 27:40, 43), nevertheless has its basis in the unique consciousness of divine Sonship in Jesus himself. The consciousness (Mark 12:6, 13:32, 14:6), together with Jesus' claim to be the only saving way to the Father (Matt. 11:25-27), is the decisive starting point not only for the confessions of primitive Christianity and the early church, but also for the christology which developed from them and led up to Chalcedon.²⁹⁶

It seems that Cullmann and others have taken this title and the term *Abba* to its extent. Although it denotes intimacy and propinquity, *Abba* does not symbolize Jesus' exclusive divine sonship or ontological

proximity to God. Furthermore, there are instances of its use in the ancient Jewish Hasidic piety tradition. Geza Vermes has shown that *Abba* was part of the Hasidic piety tradition²⁹⁷ as the Talmud clearly states:

Hanan ha-Nehba was the son of the daughter of Honi the Circle-Drawer. When the world was in need of rain the Rabbis would send to him school children and they would take hold of the hem of his garment and say to him, Father, Father, give us rain. Thereupon he would plead with the Holy One, Blessed be He, [thus], Master of the Universe, do it for the sake of these who are unable to distinguish between the Father who gives rain and the father who does not.²⁹⁸

The term used for God and for the Rabbi is the same *Abba*. Vermes finds interesting corroboration between this Talmudic use of the term *Abba* and its employment in Matthew 23:9 where Jesus has reportedly said, “Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven.”

Therefore, deriving a divinity for Jesus equal with God Almighty, based upon titles such as the Son of God or *Abba* is unwarranted. The wide ontological gulf between God and the son of God cannot be bridged by mere suppositions. Vermes comments that none of the Synoptic Gospels have tried to mitigate or eliminate this wide gulf:

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to contend that the identification of a contemporary historical figure with God would have been inconceivable to a first-century AD Palestinian Jew. It could certainly not have been expressed in public, in the presence of men conditioned by centuries of biblical monotheistic religion.²⁹⁹

Even Paul who was quite comfortable with the Greco Roman worldview, could not and would not eliminate these boundaries. The theologizing writer of the Gospel of John shied away from this full merger of God into the so-called Son of God. Some of the New Testament epistles which seemingly blur this gap, never exceed the

“notion of exalted Lord and revelation incarnate.”³⁰⁰ This hesitation disappeared only when the Gospels were Hellenized to attract the Roman population. This is why Jeremias warns that

the fact that the address ‘Abba expresses a consciousness of sonship should not mislead us into ascribing to Jesus himself in detail the ‘Son of God’ Christology, e.g. the idea of pre-existence, which developed very early in the primitive church. This over interpretation of the address ‘Abba is prohibited by the everyday sound of the word.³⁰¹

Later Christian creeds and doctrines all the way to the Council of Chalcedon were not inspired by the language or teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, nor even by Paul, the Diaspora Jew. They were and are the product of Gentile Christianity’s interpretations of the Gospels adapted to satisfy the pagan Hellenistic mentality quite alien to Jesus and his surroundings.

Kyrios Christology

Paul’s favorite title and a central Christological concept is *Kyrios* a Greek word meaning God, Lord, master (Romans 1:3, 7, 5:1–11, 10:9, 16:24; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10). Paul, as discussed earlier, introduced the idea of pre-existence and the worship of Christ as *Kyrios*. Even though the notion of pre-existence is more supposed and less taught, Paul girds it to a concept of universal salvation and provides it with a broader historical and spiritual framework. The title ‘*Kyrios*’ had been common amongst Judaic as well as Greek circles to denote reverence, lordship, mastership, ownership and authority. Paul seemingly gave it a theological twist by broadening and deepening its implications and adapting it to the Hellenistic worldview. Consequently his use of the word became unique in the sense that it contained more than just the postulate of lordship or exaltation. In the later New Testament books it clearly took a definite form and absolute use, meaning “the Lord”, “for he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (Revelation 17:14).

In the Synoptic Gospels the title is used for Jesus, as well as by Jesus for himself but without any absolute tone. Passages like Mark 11:3, Matthew 7:21, even John 13:13, can be interpreted as meaning “teacher” or “master”. The designation Rabbi, Master or Lord Jesus and the title ‘*Kyrios*’ received its full or absolute meaning only in Pauline Christology and only after Jesus’ supposed death, resurrection and exaltation. “But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him” (1 Corinthians 8:6). “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36, see also Acts 2:13–14). The pre-existent Word who was with God before the creation is now exalted to the right hand of God “to be a Prince and Saviour...” (Acts 5:31, see also Acts 7:55–56). The designation *Kyrios* or Lord, argues Cullmann,

expresses as does no other thought that Christ is exalted to God’s right hand, glorified and now intercedes for men before the Father. In designating Jesus as the *Kyrios* the first Christians declared that he is not only a part of divine Heilsgeschichte in the past, nor just the object of future hope, but a living reality in the present – so alive that he can enter into fellowship with us now, so alive that the believer prays to him, and the Church appeals to him in worship, to bring their prayers before God the Father and make them effective.³⁰²

Jesus’ being a living reality, an object of worship, and his cosmic lordship, are the aspects which give this title such a vitality and significance not equally present in the other titles discussed earlier. This makes it the center and base of other Christological developments. The early Christians worshipped Jesus saying, “Come Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20) and could credit to him all the passages and hence works and attributes which the Old Testament attributes to God the Father. For instance, Isaiah 45:23 is quoted by Paul in Philippians 2:10 in the following words: “That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, the glory of

God the Father.” Commenting on this C. F. D. Moule states:

At least, it represents Paul himself, or, at earliest, a pre-Pauline formula; and it boldly transfers to Jesus a great monotheistic passage from Isa. 45:23, in which God is represented as declaring that he must have no rivals: it is now to *Kyrios Iesous Christos* that every knee shall bow, and it is he whom every tongue shall confess. Professor M. Black is inclined to think that the same passage is intended in the name of the Lord Jesus even in Rom. 14:11. Certainly in Heb. 1:10ff. (though this may, of course, be later), a great, monotheistic passage in Ps. 102, manifestly intended in the original to be addressed to God the Creator, is boldly assumed to be addressed to Christ.³⁰³

The designation *Kyrios* served as the springboard for all the other high Christologies. Thus it was used in early hymns, worship formulas and Church services. Most of the New Testament’s highest Christological affirmations and formulation owe their origins and substance to this title. Hans Kung notes:

This is a Christocentrism working out to the advantage of man, based on and culminating in a theocentrism: “God through Jesus Christ” – “through Jesus Christ to God.” As the Holy Spirit came to be inserted in such binitarian formulas – as the one in whom God and Jesus Christ are present and active both in the individual and the community – they were turned by Paul at this early stage into trinitarian formulas, the basis for the later development of the doctrine of the Trinity, of the triune God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.³⁰⁴

The Epistle of Philippians 2:5–11, especially verses 5 & 6, is extremely significant regarding this discussion: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.” O. C. Quick argues that “St. Paul here affirms that Christ was originally that is, before he was born on earth, “in the form of God”....The Christ therefore was from the beginning a divine person.”³⁰⁵ He further argues that

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whereas before his self-humiliation Christ had the *nature* of Godhead, in the exaltation which followed the humiliation he received also the *name* of Godhead, so that all may worship him as they worship the Father. That St. Paul did definitely, if one may be allowed the expression, rank Jesus with God, is abundantly clear from evidence which extends all through his epistles.³⁰⁶

Modern Evangelists contend that the word *Kyrios* was used to translate the name of the Lord almost 6,814 times in the Greek Old Testament. Therefore any Greek speaking reader of the Greek Old Testament would have instantaneously recognized the fact that the use of *Kyrios* for Jesus meant nothing short of Jesus' divinity as the creator of the universe. Therefore, Paul and others had pinpointed the same fact by implying *Kyrios* to describe Jesus. This radical trend has dominated traditional Christianity since then. To popular Christianity Jesus is nothing short of God Almighty, the Omnipotent and Omniscient creator of all. Therefore we can conclude that the title *Kyrios* is the most significant among all the other Christological titles for our study of anthropomorphism and corporealism, for it eliminated all boundaries between God and man. By allowing itself to be the vehicle of transportation (divine qualities and attributes of Yahweh to the Jesus of history), the *Kyrios* managed to bring the transcendent God of developed Judaism to the spatio-temporal existence of man. It provided God with a historical context and sacrificed Him and His transcendence to assure man's salvation. This was too much of a sacrifice and Paul the Jew could not have done it. This is why many New Testament scholars do not subscribe to the aforementioned and sketched traditional interpretations of the title *Kyrios* and its context within some very early Christian hymns. For instance, K. Armstrong, argues that the earlier mentioned

hymn seems to reflect a belief among the first Christians that Jesus had enjoyed some kind of prior existence "with God" before becoming a man in the act of "self-emptying" (*kenosis*) by which, like a *bodhisattva*, he had decided to share the suffering of the human condition. Paul was too Jewish to accept the idea of Christ existing as a second divine being beside YHWH from all eternity.

The hymn shows that after his exaltation he is still distinct from and inferior to God, who raises him and confers the title *Kyrios* upon him. He cannot assume it himself but is given this title only “to the glory of God the Father.”³⁰⁷

Armstrong further stresses:

Paul never called Jesus “God”. He called him “the Son of God” in its Jewish sense: he had simply possessed God’s “powers” and “Spirit,” which manifested God’s activity on earth and were not to be identified with the inaccessible divine essence. Not surprisingly, in the Gentile world the new Christians did not always retain the sense of these subtle distinctions, so that eventually a man who had stressed his weak, mortal humanity was believed to have been divine.³⁰⁸

Long before Armstrong, A. Harnack emphasized the same point:

Under the influence of the Messianic dogmas, and led by the impression which Christ made, Paul became the author of the speculative idea that not only was God in Christ, but that Christ himself was possessed of a peculiar nature of a heavenly kind. With the Jews, this was not a notion that necessarily shattered the framework of the Messianic idea; but with the Greeks it inevitably set an entirely new theory in motion. Christ’s *appearance* in itself, the entrance of a divine being into the world, came of necessity to rank as the chief fact, as itself *the real redemption*. Paul did not, indeed, himself look upon it in this light; for him the crucial facts are the death on the cross and the resurrection, and he regards Christ’s entrance into the world from an ethical point of view and as an example for us to follow: “For our sake he became poor”; he humbled himself and renounced the world. But this state of things could not last.³⁰⁹

How could this radical change of direction and perspective have possibly occurred in the minds of the early Christians who after all had

inherited the Jewish Bible from Jesus, containing passages that leave no room for any partner, equal, or rival for God. There was, as is commonly held, “no sign of any difference between their (Christians) ideas of God and the ideas of their countrymen. They too worshipped the one and only God, creator and ruler of the world, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob....”³¹⁰ Why then do some of the New Testament books attribute the creation and universal cosmic lordship, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience and eternity of God to Jesus? And why do Christians worship and pray to him with absolute terms like *Kyrios*?

In his classic work *Kyrios Christo*, Bousset and following him R. Bultmann in his *Theology of the New Testament*, maintained that this radical change was an outcome of the cultic veneration which had existed. When Jesus, the Rabbi or Master, became the object of cultic veneration titles assigned to him like Lord changed into absolute tones of glory, power and authority, and he became “the one Lord”. This radical change took place when Christianity moved from Palestine to Antioch, from the Jewish to the Hellenistic environment. Christ worship first begins here and the titles attributed to Jesus became used in an ever more absolute sense in the early Christian writings that belong to this environment. Following this thesis McGiffert argues that, “In passing from Jews to Gentiles the faith of the original disciples was thus transformed and instead of a Jewish Messianic sect there came into existence a new religion, one of the many religions of personal salvation in the Roman Empire.”³¹¹

Others, like Cullmann and Moule for instance, disagree with this thesis. Cullmann argues that it was not the Hellenistic Church of Antioch which initially implied the term *Kyrios*, but the very earliest original Church in Jerusalem. He discusses at length the philology of the ancient Aramaic prayer *Maranatha* which occurs in various New Testament passages like 1 Corinthians 22–24 and concludes that the Aramaic word ‘*Mar*’ “Lord” constitutes the clue that determines how the Hellenistic word *Kyrios* became applied to Jesus in its absolute sense:

The non-Christian use of the *Kyrios* name in the Hellenistic world, its relation to emperor worship, and above all its use as the name

of God in Septuagint – all this certainly contributed to making *Kyrios* an actual *title* for Christ. But this development would not have been possible had not the original Church already called upon Christ as the Lord. Bouisset is right in saying that the *Kyrios* title goes back to the experience of the Church's worship; but it is the experience of worship in the *original* Church.³¹²

Moule maintains the same when he argues:

I am not for a moment denying that developed language about cosmic dimensions might be the fruit of long speculation and cogitation; but I am inclined to believe that a good case could be made for the ingredients for such conclusions being present immediately in the experience of the risen Christ.³¹³

F.V. Filson emphasizes that “from the first days of the Apostolic Church an explicit and high Christology was an integral part of its message, and that this Christology was basically no Hellenistic product, but had its chief ties with the Old Testament and found expression in the earliest Apostolic preaching.”³¹⁴

Filson and others fail to prove the point from the Old Testament itself. It seems likely that the process of treating Jesus as a Deity equal to God in attributes and works was the result of non-Judaic influences external to the environment of Jesus himself and his immediate disciples as is clear from Harnack and others. It is not the Old Testament but adaptation to the mythological concepts prevalent in the Hellenistic milieu that makes Paul use this title in the absolute tones he did.

Logos or Theos Christology

This Christology is found only in the Gospel of John. The beginning and end chapter of John's Gospel contain references to Jesus which are traditionally translated as “God”. This designation is highly critical for our study of anthropomorphism because if Jesus is adorned with all the majestic attributes of God (divinity, eternity, absolute cosmic Lordship), and is considered equal with God, worshipped and finally designated with the actual title ‘God’, then it becomes impossible to say that the

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New Testament concept of the deity/Jesus is not anthropomorphic. Jesus never called himself God, nor did the first three evangelists, authors of the Synoptic Gospels. It is, as Cullmann observes, “the Gospel of John and Hebrews (that) provide the clearest and least ambiguous evidence of the attribution of *Oeos* to Jesus.”³¹⁵ In John 1:1 it is stated: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was God.*” In John 20 we have:

And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, *My Lord and my God.* (John 20:26–28)

To this designation, that is the absolute title ‘God’, the fourth evangelist presents Jesus as not responding negatively. Rather Jesus seems to have approved it when he is quoted to have said: “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29). If therefore, according to Cullmann, the

whole Gospel culminates in this confession, and, on the other hand, the author writes in the first verse of the first chapter, “And the Logos was God”, then there can be no doubt that for him all the other titles for Jesus which are prominent in his work (‘Son of Man’, ‘Son of God’, ‘Lord’, and in the prologue, ‘Logos’) ultimately point toward this final expression of his Christological faith.³¹⁶

Following Harnack’s lead, scholars such as Bart Ehrman maintain that the theos Christology was not original to the Gospel of John. It was interpolated into it either by a later author or the original author/authors after an earlier edition of the book had already been published. They contend that the highly poetic style of John 1:1 is

missing in the rest of the Gospel. Jesus is never called the “Word” elsewhere in the Gospel. Ehrman concludes that “this opening passage came from a different source than the rest of the account...”³¹⁷

There are additionally problems with the translation. The popular translation “and the Word was God” is disputed by many leading translators. For instance James Moffat, Hugh J. Schonfield and Edgar Goodspeed translate the phrase as “and the Word was divine.” There also exist multiple other translations and interpretations such as “the Word was a god”, and “godlike sort was the Logos” and “so the Word was divine.” The source of the problem lies in the original Greek manuscripts of the Gospels, which importantly are all in upper case script, that is in capital letters only, meaning that for instance there is no distinction, and no way to distinguish, between “God” and “god”. The original word used in the manuscript is *theos* and cannot have the definite article in accordance with grammatical rules. Furthermore, the word God had a broader application and could refer to generally people of rank, leadership and authority. John 10:35 for instance uses it for human rulers as “gods”. Origen of Alexandria, third century Church Father and a specialist in Greek grammar, noticed the difference by stating that John uses “the article, when the name of God refers to the uncreated cause of all things, and omits it when the Logos is named God... The true God, then, is The God.”³¹⁸ The Greek term used is “*ho theos*” and not just “*theos*”, *ho* meaning ‘the’ and *theos* meaning ‘god’. This observation alludes to the fact that when the anarthrous (meaning occurring without an article) noun “*theos*” is applied to the Word it is not a definite but an indefinite noun.

These grammatical challenges are quite often used to manipulate meanings and to substantiate specific theological positions. Hence mainstream Christianity prefers the popular rendition as it vindicates its own “Jesus is God” theology. Opposing groups favor the other translations to prove Jesus’ subordination to God the Father. Even some evangelical scholars such as Murry J. Harris, who otherwise support the Johanian *theos* Christology, do not deny the fact that “from the point of view of grammar alone, [QEOS HN HO LOGOS] could be rendered “the Word was a god...””³¹⁹ After a detailed study of *theos* in the Septuagint, extra biblical literature and the New Testament,

Harris argues that the main reason *theos* in John 1:1 is anarthrous is that it emphasizes nature rather than personal identity. Had John written “*ho theos*”, that is with a definite article, it would have eliminated the distinction between the person of God the Father and the person of God the Son. John uses the qualitative rather than the definite article to avoid “Modalism”. This explanation is sufficient to show how theological rather than grammatical reasons come into play when translating John 1:1.

The other important term, the Greek word *Logos*, on the other hand, carries multiple and varying meanings. In addition to the popular translation “Word” it can also mean thought, speech, reason, principle, logic, meaning, account etc. It also has varying connotations in different time periods and fields of religious and philosophical studies. Middle Platonism was the prevalent philosophical worldview of the pre and post Jesus era. Neoplatonism succeeded it down the centuries to the Reformation period. The emanation theory of Platonism was used by transcendental Jews like Philo of Alexandria to protect the perfect God’s absolute transcendence and purity beyond this material existence, an existence marked by evil and immorality. Philo contended that the pure God had brought this defective cosmos into being not because of a direct act of creation but through a pure act of intellectual will. The result of this pure intellectual will was *Logos, the Word*. The material cosmos was brought forth through the intermediary agency of the Logos and other Intellects, the Logos here comparable to Plato’s World Soul. The One and the Infinite source of existence was not, and is not, equal to derivative and secondary existences such as the Logos. One can easily see this ideology at work in the early Church Fathers’ treatment of Jesus as the Logos. For instance Origen states:

God on the one hand is Very God (Autotheos, God of Himself); and so the Saviour says in His prayer to the Father, John 17:3 That they may know You the only true God; but that all beyond the Very God is made God by participation in His divinity, and is not to be called simply God (with the article), but rather God (without article). And thus the first-born of all creation, who is the first to be with God, and to attract to Himself divinity, is a being of more

exalted rank than the other gods beside Him, of whom God is the God, as it is written, The God of gods, the Lord, has spoken and called the earth. It was by the offices of the first-born that they became gods, for He drew from God in generous measure that they should be made gods, and He communicated it to them according to His own bounty. The true God, then, is The God, and those who are formed after Him are gods, images, as it were, of Him the prototype. But the archetypal image, again, of all these images is the Word of God, who was in the beginning, and who by being with God is at all times God, not possessing that of Himself, but by His being with the Father, and not continuing to be God, if we should think of this, except by remaining always in uninterrupted contemplation of the depths of the Father.³²⁰

How different is this monistic divinity to the mainstream popular concept of Jesus' hard divinity?

It seems that once the Church had decided that Jesus was God, especially in light of the Easter experience, the *theos* of John, which might have been used by John just as a communicative tool, was loaded with the absolute tones of *ho theos*. The transition highlights the historical fact that the high Christology and hard divinity of Jesus was not the original idea of Jesus or his immediate disciples, but rather owes its origins and substance to the later Christian understandings of Jesus in light of the Easter experience. Its later absolute overtures and gambits being purely theologically motivated.

Like the Prologue, there are numerous issues with John 20:28. Mainstream Christianity has always used this climactic confession of Thomas ("And Thomas answered and said unto him, *My Lord and my God*") as the supreme Christological pronouncement of faith in Jesus as Lord and God. Many scholars such as C. K. Barrett have also observed that the Gospel of John culminates in the Confession of Thomas:

With this confession the evangelist has bracketed the entire gospel between two affirmations that Jesus is God (cf. 1:1...). John's Christology, for all of its explorations of various motifs, stands

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finally on the radical claim that Jesus is none other than the divine ultimate reality...Jesus is to be fully identified with God.³²¹

Cyril of Alexandria long ago contended that John in the confession used the definitive article *o* (the) before the words Lord and God (*o Kyrios mou kai o Theos mou*), which gives to the statement a characteristic of absoluteness. James F. McGrath has argued that “it seems certain that the risen Christ is called ‘God’ in 20.28; that Jesus is understood as the incarnation of the Logos who is God is also clear.”³²²

Despite this broader consensus, opinions seem to diverge over the true meanings and implications of this absolute designation. Mainstream Christianity subscribes to the idea that this designation is meant to denote Jesus’ unqualified categorical hard divinity, that is his being God the Father, as the title My God and My Lord is clearly used for God Almighty in the Old Testament. Some non-traditional scholars contend that this designation was applied to Jesus in a broader sense current in contemporary Judaism. John who did not equate God with Logos in the Prologue could not have then obliterated all distinctions between God and Logos at the end of his Gospel. Scholars like Meeks, Lierman and McGrath quote evidence from Jewish sources for the belief

that Moses was exalted to the position of ‘God’ and ‘king’, and that Adam, as the image of God, was regarded as functioning as God’s agent and thus ‘as God’ over the earth... It is interesting to note that, in the only instance where John hints that the application of the designation ‘God’ to Christ may have been an issue (10.33–5), an appeal is made to this broader use of the term ‘God’.³²³

John 10:33–35 states:

“We are not stoning you for any of these,” replied the Jews, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’? If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken.”

Meek quotes Exodus 7:1: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet.'" From passages such as Exodus 7:1 and Midrash Deuteronomy Rab. 11:4, Meeks concludes that in the Jewish traditions of the first century BC, Moses was described as somehow imbued with the fiery substance of God and divinity.³²⁴ After a detailed analysis of a late second century BC Jewish book, *The Exagoge of Ezekiel the Tragedian*, John Lierman concludes that "it would indeed be difficult to resist the implication that Moses has indeed been deified."³²⁵ They conclude that John 20:28 designated Jesus with the title God in this broader Jewish sense.

Bart Ehrman, on the other hand, insinuates that the absolute article *ho* (the) does not exist in the fifth century codex Bezae and other earlier church manuscripts.³²⁶ This means that Thomas did not address Jesus with an absolute divine tone but called him "My divine lord". Long ago Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.350–428), the Bishop of Mopsuestia, understood this verse as directed to God the Father and not to Jesus. Following this lead some modern Christians especially the Jehovah's Witnesses argue that Thomas' words are nothing but exclamations of surprise "My God!" or "My Lord!" They are expressions of disbelief and outbursts of surprise rather than affirmations of Jesus' hard divinity as God Almighty. Additionally, the God designation never occurs in any of the Synoptic Gospels. Thomas the doubter is not a recognized disciple either. Even in the Gospel of John this designation is used for the risen lord, the heavenly Christ and not for the earthly Jesus.

Outside the Johannine corpus it is only Hebrews that unequivocally applies the title 'God' to Jesus. However, Hebrews 1:6–8, like the earlier passages discussed, has been translated in more than one way, and one of its translations reads:

And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire." But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom." (Hebrews 1:6–8).

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Luther derives a true Godhead for Jesus from these verses stating:

Although we read that the angels were worshipped by Moses, by Lot and Abraham, and by Joshua and other prophets...yet nowhere do we read that angels worshipped any angel or man. Therefore there is firm proof that the man Christ is true God, because it is recorded that He is worshipped by the angels, not only by some but by every one of them.³²⁷

In sum, material which was neither authored nor authorized by the historical Jesus, was implied to conclude his absolute divinity, and this process was gradual like the canonization process itself. The Church had decided that Jesus was divine in light of the heavenly Jesus' Easter experience and carefully selected those Gospels and other material which were thought to support the Church's various positions. The otherwise mutually exclusive Christologies of Jesus as a prophet, angel, Messiah and Lord, were metamorphosed to describe a human being with divine attributes and qualities, and ultimately godhead. Hence humanity and divinity became somehow merged in the historical human figure of Jesus of Nazareth, crystallizing into the ultimate climax and supreme illustration of anthropomorphism and corporealism. In this development, the Pauline and Johannine corpus proved to be handy, providing the context, terminology and conceptual framework for the later Christians to take the hazardous leap of identifying Christ with God. Meaning that it was perhaps due to the influence of Pauline and Johannine Christology that the Apostolic Fathers felt no hesitation to confess Jesus' divinity and deity. For instance Ignatius had no misgivings in calling Jesus "God" although not in the absolute sense of God the Creator, his argument being that, "There is only one physician of flesh and of spirit, generate and ungenerate, God in man."³²⁸

It seems clear from the preceding discussion that some New Testament books, especially if understood in the light of later theological developments, probably exalted Jesus Christ to the status of actual divinity, making him in certain passages, equal to God. Though various interpretations are given to these passages, the derivation of the later Christological claims of absolute divinity (such as that of the Father in

all respects) is questionable, especially given the existence of explicitly monotheistic passages in the New Testament which cannot be ignored. For instance, there are several passages, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels, that emphasize the Transcendent God's absolute unity and uniqueness (see Mark 12:29-32). In fact, it is both the Pauline and Johannine passages which can be treated as having led to some of the later claims concerning the absolute divinity of Christ, aided by the artificial efforts of the interpreter. There are furthermore, other passages that point to Jesus' subordination to God the Father and his adoption at baptism (Luke 6:12, 10:22; Matthew 19:17, 11:27; John 7:29-33, for adoption see Matthew 3:16-17; Luke 3:22). Pelikan observes that the aforementioned "divinity" passages along with the "subordination or adoption" passages, when studied in light of the four sets of Old Testament passages, ultimately speak of "Christ as divine". The four sets of Old Testament passages being:

Passages of adoption, which, by identifying a point in time at which he became divine, implied that the status of God was conferred on the man Jesus Christ at his baptism or at his resurrection; passages of identity, which, by speaking of Yahweh as "the Lord," posited a simple identification of Christ with God; passages of distinction, which, by speaking of one "Lord" and of another "Lord," drew some difference between them; and passages of derivation, which, by referring to the Father as "the greater" or using such titles as angel, Spirit, Logos, and Son, suggested that he "came from" God and was in some sense less than God.³²⁹

It must be noted that none of the aforementioned passages prove the absolute divinity of Jesus as believed by a great many traditional Christians. Derivative, finite or subordination divinity is not the same as absolute divinity. Additionally whilst these passages could be interpreted as giving a divine status to Jesus, nevertheless they leave a number of important issues unresolved regarding Jesus' relationship with God and with human beings, as will be seen in this chapter.

CHURCH FATHERS AND LATER
DEVELOPMENTS

The early Church had no hesitation, or misgivings, in assigning to Jesus full-scale divinity, equating Jesus with God, including the designation of absolute divine titles, actions, attributes and functions; and this ascription of divinity did not cause many problems as long as the faith remained confined to Christians interested solely in the salvation. It was God and God alone, and nobody less than He, who could have brought salvation to a humanity engulfed in sin. And this is the implication we get from reading the oldest surviving sermon of the Christian Church after the New Testament writings: “Brethren, we ought so to think of Jesus Christ as of God, as of the judge of living and dead. And we ought not to belittle our salvation; for when we belittle him, we expect also to receive little.”³³⁰

Problems surfaced when the Church had to face the external world having to prove to it the significance and wisdom of Christian teachings. For the one whom Christians had called God was also one who had lived a fully human life, having been born, lived for around thirty years, eaten, drunk, suffered and been relentlessly crucified, all realities which the Church itself had witnessed. The Alexandrian pagan philosopher Celsus’ observations identified the problem accurately:

Everyone saw his suffering, but only a disciple and a half crazed woman saw him risen. His followers then made a God of him, like Antinous... The idea of the coming down of God is senseless. Why did God come down for justification of all things? Does not this make God changeable?³³¹

The pagan Celsus vehemently attacked the Christian concept of the Deity and dubbed it as thoroughly corporeal and anthropomorphic. He concluded that

Christianity is not merely a religious revolution with profound social and political consequences; it is essentially hostile to all positive human values. The Christians say... ‘Do not ask questions,

only believe'. They say, 'Wisdom is foolishness with God'... they will flee to the last refuge of the intellectually destitute, 'Anything is possible to God'.³³²

Clement and Origen's statements regarding the difficulties of biblical anthropomorphisms and their insistence upon the utter transcendence of God, as discussed above, were responses to such penetrating attacks. In the words of Grillmeier:

The hour had come for the birth of speculative theology, of theological reflection, of *theologie savante*. The confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the *novum* of Christian faith... demanded of Christian theology a twofold demonstration, first that it was compatible with Jewish monotheism, and secondly that it was different from pagan polytheism.³³³

There was pressure from within too. In the first place this confusion called forth some of the earliest doctrinal controversies in the Church and then forced the Church to become more precise. The inner pressure demanded logical defense and intelligible explanations of the contradictory positions especially to avert the fierce attacks of both the Jews and pagans. Within early Christianity, voices declaring ideas such as "his suffering was but a make believe" were raised by Marcion, Ptolemy and the Gnostics. Marcion, for instance, absolutely denied Jesus' humanity. His Jesus was too lofty to be confined within the prison of the flesh. This was clear "Docetism" (a belief that states that Jesus only *seemed* to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not die).

The Church while trying to defend Christ's humanity could not itself escape from the very problem it was trying to solve, the problem of 'Docetism'. The Church itself had been emphasizing the divinity of Jesus to such a degree that the demarcation line between his humanity and divinity had become prematurely blurred. Church Father Clement of Alexandria, according to Bigg, was "near to the confines of Docetism".³³⁴ The more the Church emphasized the absolute divinity of Christ using the God concept the more difficult it became to prove

that Jesus of Nazareth was also the Son of God and of the same substance of God. The Church had no escape from mild Docetism and Moltmann confesses as much, “a mild docetism runs through the christology of the ancient church.”³³⁵

Christianity, to prove its intellectual worth and avert the cerebral attacks of paganism, Greek philosophy and Judaism, had no choice but to be a little more precise in its teachings with regards to the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Christ. It was difficult for both non-Christian Jews and pagans simultaneously to understand the assertions of strict monotheism on the one hand and the divinity of Jesus Christ including his suffering and crucifixion as God on the other. Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr, Theophilus, Tatian, Aristides and Athenagoras responded to this rather embarrassing situation with philosophical suppositions to vindicate the truth of Christianity, trying to draw a rather clear line between God and Jesus using the then available philosophical concepts.

Justin, the most renowned of them, for instance insisted that though Jesus had come from God he was not identical with God. “The ineffable Father and Lord of all,” he says, “neither comes anywhere nor walks nor sleeps nor rises up, but remains in his own place wherever that may be, quick to behold, quick to hear, not with eyes or ears but with indescribable power.” Justine’s God was a transcendent being who could have not come into contact with the utilitarian sphere of man and things. To Justin, it seemed altogether absurd that such a transcendent God could be born of a woman, eat, drink and eventually be mercilessly crucified. However, strict belief in God’s transcendence did not stop Justin from thinking of Jesus as divine, and to defend Christ’s relationship with God he made use of the then current Christian phraseology calling Jesus the Son of God, Logos and also the Angel. Indeed according to him, Christ was worthy of these titles on account of his wisdom, virgin birth and because he was God’s first begotten Logos: “Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee.” Jesus, the Son of God, was not like other men. He was generated in a very special way. As a fire is kindled by fire or as a light is produced from the light of the Sun, Jesus was God born of God. He was divine but not in the original sense. His divinity was derivative. In the words of Norris, Jesus’ divinity

was derivative, and for that reason inferior to the one God.... In Justin's system there truly was, in the last resort, only one ultimate God. The Logos represented a slightly lower level of divinity, something between the pure divinity of God and the nondivinity of creatures. Justin had made sense of the incarnational picture of Jesus by adopting a hierarchical picture of the world-order in which the Logos stands as a kind of bumper state between God and the world, and it is this fact that makes Justin's Christology problematic.³³⁶

He was a pre-existent Logos, God's agent in creation, through whom all creatures were created. Therefore, he could be called Lord and worshipped as divine but in terms of being of second rank. As Justin in one of his confessions put it:

Thus we are not atheists, since we worship the creator of this universe...and that we with good reason honour Him Who has taught us these things and was born for this purpose, Jesus Christ, Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate...having learned that He is the Son of the true God and holding Him in the second rank, and the prophetic Spirit third in order, we shall proceed to demonstrate.³³⁷

Justin could not have convinced his Jewish counterparts with this kind of hierarchical interpretation of the Godhead and derivative nature of divinity. Monotheism stood in his way as an insurmountable hurdle. So he adopted another approach, to try and prove that the Jewish Scriptures had borne witness to two Gods: first the transcendent, supreme, unbegotten, ingenerate God, the ineffable Father, who never appeared on the earth; and second, the God of theophanies, who came down to earth on several occasions and finally became incarnate in Christ. In his Dialogue with the Jewish Trypho, he argued the matter at length:

I will give you, my friends, another testimony from the Scriptures that as a beginning before all creatures God begat from himself a

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certain rational power which is called by the Holy Spirit now Glory of the Lord, again Wisdom, again Angel, again God, again Lord, and Logos. Also he called himself Captain of the host when he appeared to Jesus the Son of Nave in the form of a man. For he can be called by all these names since he serves the Father's will and was begotten of the Father by will.³³⁸

And

when my God says 'God went up from Abraham,' or 'the Lord spake unto Moses,' and 'the Lord came down to see the tower which the sons of men had built,'... you must not imagine that the unbegotten God himself came down or went up anywhere.... Therefore not Abraham nor Isaac nor Jacob nor any other man saw the Father and ineffable Lord of all and of Christ himself as well, but they saw him who according to his will was at once God, his Son, and the angel who ministered to his will, and who it pleased him should be born man by the Virgin; who also was fire when he spake with Moses from the bush.³³⁹

As the passage quoted indicates, to Justin Christ was the Logos, the divine reason, the second God of the Old Testament theophanies, begotten before the creation of the world, who became incarnate in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. Justin also called the Logos the servant, the angel, the apostle. Grillmeier observes:

In calling the Logos the servant, the apostle, the angel of the absolutely transcendent Father, Justin gives him a diminished transcendence, even if he does not make him a creature. He compares the Logos with Herms, the Logos-interpreter of Zeus... There is a *deus inferior* subordinate to the *theos hypsistos*.³⁴⁰

Other apologists such as Tatian and Hippolytus followed Justin in his ideas of God's transcendence, ineffability, immutability and otherness while maintaining his Logos Christology.

J. N. D. Kelly underlines the two most important points that were common among all the Apologists:

(a) that for all of them the description ‘God the Father’ connoted, not the first Person of the Holy Trinity, but the one Godhead considered as author of whatever exists; and (b) that they all, Athenagoras included, dated the generation of the Logos, and His eligibility for the title ‘Son’, not from His origination within the being of the Godhead, but from His emission or putting forth for the purposes of creation, revelation and redemption. Unless these points are firmly grasped, and their significance appreciated, a completely distorted view of the Apologists’ theology is liable to result.³⁴¹

The Apologists clearly portrayed the Logos as required for the work of creation in subordination to God the Father. They also manifestly limited the Logos as compared to God Himself to safeguard the indispensable idea of monotheism. There were residuals of Middle Platonism in this Logos interpretation of the Apologists. The Logos was understood in relation to the cosmos and the world to stress God’s absolute transcendence, invisibility and unknowableness. Almighty God was too transcendent to directly deal with men and the world. The Logos, a product of God’s creative will, was a subordinate mediator, a derivative god. The idea of subordination was fortified by the close linking of the creation of the world with the procession of the Logos and then by the scheme of salvation or man’s redemption through his intermediate agency.

Church Fathers like Tertullian (160–220) and Origen (185–254) clearly maintained the Apologists’ position in regards to Christ’s relationship with God. Tertullian, accepting Justin’s mediatorial idea of the Logos, differentiated between God and Jesus, the Word, by arguing that “by him who is invisible, we must understand the Father in the fullness of his majesty, while we recognize the Son as visible by reason of dispensation of his derived existence.”³⁴² Tertullian in his treatise *Against Praxeas* explained that the Logos first existed in God as his Reason and then was “made a second” to God, or “uttered” as the Word through whom all things were made. In Tertullian we see a crystal clear line of demarcation between God the Father and the Logos, emphasizing the mediatorial and secondary character of the Logos and

his “derivation and portion”, to use his terms, from the father’s divine substance. He observes that, “With regard to him (the Logos), we are taught he is derived from God and begotten by derivation so that he is Son of God and called God because of the unity of substance.”³⁴³

God’s transcendence and *monarchia* is preserved as the Son uses the powers and rule given to him by the Father. The Son will return this to the Father when the world comes to an end. The Father is the guarantee of the *monarchia*, the Son comes in at second place whilst the Spirit is assigned third place. Tertullian’s trinity is not metaphysical but economic or dynamic in nature. Only the Father remains the eternal transcendent God while the other two entities proceed from the *unitas substantiae* because they have a task to fulfill. His concept of unity is also not mathematical. There is no subdivision within the Godhead. Rather, it is more philosophical, more organic, as there is a constructive integration within the Godhead of the will and the persons. It is Tertullian who introduced the concept of ‘person’ in Christology. He argued that the triune God was one in substance and different in person: “You have two (Father-Son), one commanding a thing to be made, another making it. But how you must understand “another” I have already professed, in the sense of person, not of substance.”³⁴⁴

Origen also emphasized the derivative, intermediary and secondary role of Jesus. He equated the procession of the Logos from the Father with the procession of the will from the mind. The act of will neither cuts anything from the mind nor causes division within it. Origen differed from Justin and Tertullian in saying that the Logos was the eternal self-expression of God and was of the same substance as God: “The Father did not beget the Son once for all, and let him go after he was begotten but he is always begetting him.”³⁴⁵ Origen’s idea of the eternal generation of the Logos did not mean that he had made the Logos equal with God. In his treatise *Against Celsus* he clearly differentiated between the Logos and God by making the Logos subordinate to God and thereby declaring him in some sense less than God and a “second God”. McGiffert commenting on Origen’s Logos Christology observes that there exists a marked subordinationism in Origen because he was “always more interested in the subordination of the Son to the Father than his oneness with him.”³⁴⁶ All in all,

Origen's Trinitarian scheme is thoroughly Platonistic Subordinationism. Kelly observes:

The unity between Father and Son corresponds to that between light and its brightness, water and the steam which rises from it. Different in form, both share the same essential nature; and if, in the strictest sense, the Father alone is God, that is not because the Son is not also God or does not possess the Godhead, but because, as Son, He possesses it by participation or derivatively.³⁴⁷

Bigg observes that:

We shall however wrong Origen, if we attempt to derive his subordinationism from metaphysical considerations. It is purely Scriptural, and rests wholly and entirely upon the words of Jesus, 'My Father is greater than I', 'That they may know Thee the only true God', 'None is Good save One'.³⁴⁸

The Logos then is of secondary rank and merits secondary honor. This being the case, Origen does not permit the worship of any generate being such as Christ, but only sanctions worship of God the Father to Whom even Christ prayed. The prayers offered to Christ are meant to be conveyed to the Father through the intermediary agency of Christ. God transcends both Christ and the Spirit as they transcend the realm of inferior beings. The Son and Spirit are God as related to creatures but

from the viewpoint of the ineffable Godhead He is the first in the chain of emanations. This conception of a descending hierarchy, itself the product of his Platonizing background, is epitomized in the statement that, whereas the Father's action extends to all reality, the Son's is limited to rational beings, and the Spirit's to those who are being sanctified.³⁴⁹

Irenaeus (202) and Clement of Alexandria (150–215) were perhaps more traditionalists than philosophers. They did not look for intellectual interpretations to denote the relationship between the

Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, preferring instead to rely on traditional terminology over philosophical concepts. On multiple occasions they widely differed to the Apologists with regards to their understanding of the Logos Christology, and for both, the Logos who had become incarnate in Jesus Christ, was no less than God himself. In his famous treatise *Against Heresies* Irenaeus argued that the Logos existed eternally with God; did not begin to be God's Son at any particular point in history; and that the salvation and redemption of a sinful humanity could not have been attained except through God in the flesh humbling himself to the point of death. Lord Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, adopted human conditions so that humanity might become what he himself was. "How can they be saved unless it be God who wrought out their salvation on earth? And how shall man be changed into God unless God has been changed into man?"³⁵⁰ In other words the Son of God was made Son of Man so that humans could become sons of God. This guaranteed man's immortality like that of the Logos so that the "corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruption and the mortal by immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:53-54).

For Irenaeus to think of the Logos in derivative terms and to subordinate him to God or to think of him as another being as the Apologists did, was detrimental to his saving work and hence impossible. He identified the Logos or the Son with the Father completely. "For the Father is the invisible of the Son, but the Son is the visible of the Father."³⁵¹ In short the Logos is God but God revealed and not God unapproachable, inaccessible and apart from the world.

Clement of Alexandria, like Irenaeus, was a moralist rather than a systematic theologian. He adopted an almost identical course in determining Jesus' relationship with God. In his view Jesus was neither derived nor a secondary or subordinate divine being to God, rather he was fully divine, God in his own right. In the tenth chapter of his *Protrepticus* Clement calls Jesus "the truly most manifest God."³⁵² Bigg observes that "Clement's mode of statement is such as to involve necessarily the Unity, Equality, and Eternity of the First and Second Persons. It has been asserted, that he hardly leaves sufficient room for a true distinction of Hypostasis."³⁵³ Like his predecessors – such as Justin – Clement transfers the peculiar and absolute divine titles

referring to God in the Bible, to the Son, by implying the Old Testament passages for the Son. Consequently Clement's Logos, the Second Person of divinity, is equally God Almighty as is his God the Father Almighty. Like Irenaeus he designates the Logos as God in revelation. Additionally, Clement insists that somehow Jesus' "Flesh was not wholly like ours..." Scholars differ as to whether or not Clement believed in Jesus' human soul but they do not differ over the fact that to Clement Jesus alone was both God and man. On the other hand, some contemporary theologians strive hard to depict him as an early Christian intellectual thinker who insisted upon the sheer transcendence of the Deity by allegorically interpreting the Hebrew Bible's anthropomorphic passages. Yet how could Clement possibly be considered a hero of the Christian transcendental God Paradigm when he himself was among the early traditionalists who obliterated the true boundaries between man and God? Although Clement maintained a kind of graded hierarchy within the Godhead, a common feature of the Platonic conception, nevertheless his union of the three persons was apparently so complete that it obscured the distinction between them. Call it what you will, whether a lack of adequate vocabulary or a spiritualizing tendency, what is clearly apparent is that Clement's divine Logos is so dominant in the person of the historical Jesus that Jesus' human soul or nature is effectively eliminated or at least inactivated. Not only does this definitely border on Docetism but also on Modalism.

We conclude this part of the discussion by noting that until the second century CE, both the Christian God Paradigm in general and the doctrine of Christ's Person were not fixed views but rather flexible, fluid and confusing concepts. The ideas of subordination, and the derivative and secondary rank of Christ, were common among thoughtful Christians such as Justin and Origin. However, traditionalists as well as the orthodox Church, if we can possibly use this term for purposes of convenience, inclined more towards the Unity, Equality and Eternity of Christ, and that on a par with God the Father. The latter was not without its inherent confusions and problems, and was moreover a form of possible Docetism. As such those holding this view were accused of corporealism, anthropomorphism, as well as irrationalism by their opponents, such as the pagan Greek philosopher Celsus.

The Monarchians

From the start, the belief that Christ was a god was common among many Christians, especially the Gentiles. There were many who felt it degrading to assign to Jesus a secondary or subordinate position and thought it deeply offensive to place another God alongside with or over him assuming that this would diminish their salvation. So, they contended that Jesus was the same and only God who had created the universe and that he had become flesh to die for their sins. There exist traces of such tendencies among Christians during Justin's times and he makes explicit references to groups such as these in his *Apology*. Writing in the early third century Hippolytus of Rome observed, "Cleomenes and his followers declare that he (Christ) is the God and Father of the universe."³⁵⁴ They were later called "Modalist Monarchians".

J. N. D. Kelly summarizes 'Modalistic Monarchianism' well as follows:

This was a fairly widespread, popular trend of thought which could reckon on, at any rate, a measure of sympathy in official circles; and the driving-force behind it was the twofold conviction, passionately held, of the oneness of God and the full deity of Christ. What forced it into the open was the mounting suspicion that the former of these truths was being endangered by the new Logos doctrine and by the efforts of theologians to represent the Godhead as having revealed Itself in the economy as tri-personal. Any suggestion that the Word or Son was other than, or a distinct Person from, the Father seemed to the modalists (we recall that the ancient view that 'Father' signified the Godhead Itself was still prevalent) to lead inescapably to blasphemy of two Gods.³⁵⁵

It was Praxeas (c. 210) and then Noetus, both of Asia Minor, who gave this belief a regular theological touch around c. 200. They argued that the whole of God was present in Jesus. It was Sabellius (c. 215) who became the most vocal and important theologian of the movement. Their position was quite simple. There is no God but the one creator and sustainer of the world as stated in the Scriptures. Christ was God.

Then he is that creator whom people call Father. They made use of passages of Identity such as “I and the Father are one” and stressed the absolute likeness and identity of Jesus with God. Hippolytus quotes them as saying,

there exists one and same Being, called Father and Son, not one derived from the other, but himself from himself, nominally called Father and Son according to changing of times; and that this One is that appeared [to the patriarchs], and submitted to birth from a virgin, and conversed as man among men. On account of his birth that has taken place he confessed himself to be the Son to those who saw him, while to those who could receive it he did not hide the fact that he was the Father.³⁵⁶

Epiphanius quotes Sabellians as saying: “Do we have one God or three?”³⁵⁷ If God is One, then the words of Isaiah 44:6 applied also to Christ: “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; beside me there is no God.”

It is hard to verify details concerning the exact position and terminology of Sabellius. Most of the surviving documents date to over a century later. It seems that Sabellians, as they were called, were interested in monotheism. They accused orthodox Christians, as Tertullian reports, of polytheism, “they accuse us of preaching two and three Gods while they claim that they are worshippers of one God.”³⁵⁸ As a result, Tertullian gave them the name “Monarchians” which has clung to them to this day. Historically they are called the ‘Modalist Monarchians’.

This extreme position as well as preciseness with regards to Jesus’ relationship with God may have been an offshoot of orthodox teachings and underlying ambiguity. As Harnack notes, “many facts observed in reference to the earliest bodies of Monarchians that come clearly before us, seem to prove that they bore features which must be characterized as pre-Catholic, but not un-Catholic.”³⁵⁹ Worshipping Jesus with absolute titles like Lord and explicitly calling him God could have led anybody to eradicate the distinction between Jesus and God. We are

told that phrases such as “God is born,” “the suffering God,” or “the dead God” were so widespread among Christians that even Tertullian, for all his hostility to the Modalist Monarchians, could not escape using them. The main difference between the two parties is that of precision and systematization. The Modalist Monarchians systematized the popular Christian belief in Christ in a clear and precise manner. It was a bold step towards giving a precise theological color to the rather ambiguous Christian devotional language. The Church could not accept it because of its dangerous implications. It was nothing but naive corporealism and patripassianism. Though it safeguarded Jesus’ deity as well as monotheism, the objective for which the Church had been aspiring, the Church could not approve of it in such bold terms because of its subtle implications. Linwood Urban observes: “If the whole of God is present in the historic Jesus, the *transcendence* of God is nullified. The Pre-Nicene solution asserts that there is part of God which is not incarnate, and so allows for God to transcend his presence in Jesus.”³⁶⁰

In his work *Against Praxeas* Tertullian explains the reason arguing:

How is it that the omnipotent, invisible God, whom no man hath seen or can see, who inhabiteth light inaccessible...how is it, I say, that the Most High should have walked at evening in paradise seeking Adam,...unless these things were an image and a type and an allegory? These things indeed could not have been believed even of the Son of God, had they not been written; perhaps they could have not been believed of the Father even had they been written. For these persons bring him down into Mary’s womb, place him at Pilot’s tribunal, and shut him in the tomb of Joseph. Hence their error becomes evident....Thus they believe that it was always one God, the Father, who did the things which were really done through the Son.³⁶¹

Tertullian’s passage is enough to pinpoint the underlying theological complexities. The anthropomorphic and corporeal passages of the Old Testament had played an important role towards the triune interpretation of divinity. God was also known to be transcendent for

Greek philosophy would have made mockery of an anthropomorphic or any other conception of God as rudimentary or paganistic. The secondary, derivative divine being of the Platonism scheme was initially helpful to preserve God's absolute transcendence and to avoid accusations of being pagan. On the other hand, this kind of notion of divinity was not adequate for the purposes of salvation. Common believers preferring their own salvation over and beyond God's transcendence sacrificed Him at the altar of their sins. This tension is intrinsic to the entire history of Christology, as will be seen in forthcoming discussions.

Given that God's transcendence and ineffability was at stake, the defenders of orthodoxy, except Zephyrinus, the Bishop of Rome, condemned this group of Monarchians as heretics. Then formally, in the sixth-century Synod of Braga, orthodoxy decreed that:

If anyone does not confess that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are three persons of one essence and virtue and power, as the catholic apostolic church teaches, but says that [they are] a single and solitary person, in such a way that the Father is the same as the Son and this One is also the Paraclete Spirit, as Sabellius and Priscillian have said, let him be anathema.³⁶²

In order to preserve God's transcendence and stability, observes Urban, "Trinitarians were ready to give up the divine simplicity. Trinitarians assert that, although God is one and simple in most respects, there are some in which he is Triune."³⁶³ The Monarchian anthropomorphic position has continued to surface even after its condemnation, for throughout Christian history "men have been frequently condemned for denying the deity of Christ but rarely for denying the distinction between the Father and the Son. To deny the former has generally seemed unchristian; to deny the latter only unintelligent."³⁶⁴ In spite of strong opposition, Modalism, or the crystal clear anthropomorphic concept of God, remained widespread, especially among the simpleminded and ordinary Christians. It was shared, as observes McGiffert, "by the majority of the common people and was in harmony with the dominant piety of the age. "What harm

am I doing in glorifying Christ?” was the question of Noetus and in it he voiced the sentiment of multitudes.”³⁶⁵

Dynamic Monarchianism

Meanwhile, another kind of Monarchianism became current both in the East and the West, and it took the question of Jesus’ relationship with God to the other extreme. In the West, Theodotus (c. 190), a leather-worker, taught that Jesus was a man. Jesus was born of a virgin as a result of God’s special decree through the agency of the Holy Spirit. His virgin birth did not make him a god or a divine being. God tested his piety for a period of Jesus’ earthly life and then let the Holy Ghost descend upon him at the time of baptism. God had a purpose for him and equipped him for that vocation. Jesus became the Christ at the time of his baptism and as a result of his vocation and not due to his heavenly nature or divinity. Additionally, Jesus excelled all humanity in virtues and became an authority over them. His adoption in no way or form diluted his humanity or made him God. He always remained an obedient servant of God. Theodotus was afterwards characterized as the founder of the God-denying revolt, adoptionism. The adoptionists made use of the biblical monotheistic passages, the Gospel passages of distinction and subordination, and finally the crystal clear Gospel passages that emphasize Jesus’ feeble humanity and earthly nature. They were also able to strike a balance between the transcendence of God and human salvation through Christ’s redeeming death. Their solution was not adequate for the Orthodoxy though. Such an understanding of Jesus, observes Urban, “preserved the simplicity of God, but at the price of unfaithfulness to the tradition.”³⁶⁶

In the East this movement was significantly revived under the leadership of Paul of Samosata, the Bishop of Antioch, the capital of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra’s kingdom. Bishop Paul enjoyed authority almost like a viceroy and used his political influence to expound his theological views concerning Christ. He observed that Jesus did not have an essential divine nature. His nature was pure human as he was a man from beneath and not from above having divine substance. Jesus had a normal human birth and grew into knowledge and wisdom. The Logos of God inspired him from above and dwelt in him as an inner

man. Jesus did neither lose his humanity nor his human nature. It always remained the dominant nature in Jesus. It was polished, civilized and guided by the Logos. The union of the Logos and Jesus was not a union of substance or merger or diffusion of natures but rather that of will and quality. Mary neither bore nor delivered the divine Logos, but the human Jesus, just as other humans. Moreover, Jesus the man was anointed at baptism with the Spirit from above and not the Logos. Jesus was special in the sense that he lived under the constant divine grace of a very special degree. His uniqueness lay in his union of disposition and will and not in the unity of his substance or nature with God. As Jesus advanced in the manifestation of goodness and submission to the will of God, he became the

Redeemer and Savior of the human race, and at the same time entered into an eternally indissoluble union with God, because his love can never cease. Now he has obtained from God, as the reward of his love, the name which is above every name; God has committed to him the Judgment, and invested him with divine dignity, so that now we can call him "God" [born] of the virgin.³⁶⁷

Likewise we are allowed to talk of his preexistence in connection with his goodness and in the sense of the prior degree of God. It is clear that bishop Paul did not believe in the divine nature of Jesus. On the other hand, in addition to his adoptionism, he sought to prove that the assumption that Jesus had the divine nature or was by nature the Son of God was detrimental to monotheism as it led to duality in the Godhead. He became God but somehow, as says, Paul Tillich, "he had to deserve to become God."³⁶⁸ Bishop Paul banished from divine service all Church psalms that expressed in any sense the essential divinity of Christ. Consequently, Paul was condemned at a Synod of Antioch held in 268, two earlier synods having failed to take action in the matter. He was declared as heretical because he denied Jesus' pre-existence and his unity of substance with God or in other words his proper divinity.

Though both types of Monarchianisms were condemned as heretical, in different ways they challenged and pushed the orthodoxy to look into the immense difficulties involved in their understanding of the

transcendence and unity of God and attempts to clarify it in intelligible terms. The orthodox Fathers insisted upon their concept of the relative unity of God by holding on to their Logos Christology. By the end of the third century Logos Christology had become generally accepted in all parts of the Church and found its place in most of the creeds framed in that period, especially in the East.

Arianism

Though the official Logos Christology, or belief in the divine nature of Jesus, disposed of the divine-human doctrine of Dynamic Monarchianism, the doctrine did not pass without leaving a trace. Lucian and Arius were inspired by the interpretations and logic of Bishop Paul. Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria, was a man of mark. He brought the debate regarding Christ's nature and his relationship to God, to the public and caused vehement excitement. Dorothy Sayers has neatly paraphrased the impact of Arius' views:

“If you want the logos doctrine, I can serve it hot and hot:
God beget him and before he was begotten he was not.”³⁶⁹

Arius maintained that God is one both in substance and in person. He is the only eternal and unoriginated being. The Logos, the pre-existent being, is merely a creature. There was a time when he was not and then was created by the Father out of nothing. What is true of the filial relationship is true of Jesus the Son and God the Father. The Father existed before the Son. The Son Jesus was created by the Father from a substance which was non-existent prior to Jesus' creation. Arius, observes Norris,

was a firm believer not only in the unity of God but also in a doctrine of divine transcendence which saw God's way of being as inconsistent with that of the created order. Logically enough, therefore, his doctrine of the Logos was so formulated as to express two convictions: first, that the Logos cannot be God in the proper sense; second, that the Logos performs an essential mediatorial role in the relation of God to [the] world. He taught,

accordingly, that the Logos belongs to the created order but at the same time that he is quite superior creature, ranking above all others because he was brought into being by God “before the ages” to act as the agent of God in creation.³⁷⁰

Arius used scriptural evidence such as John 14:28 where Jesus categorically states that the Father is “greater than I” and John 17:20–26 where Jesus encouraged the disciples to become “one as we are one.” Arius contended that the disciples could not have been one with God or Jesus in terms of embodying the divine nature or substance, but in will. Likewise, the unity of the Son with the Father was that of will and not of divinity or substance. Additionally 1 Corinthians 8:5–6 was quoted to differentiate between God and Christ. In Arius’ words:

The Father alone is God, and the Son is so called only in a lower and improper sense. He is not the essence of the Father, but a creature essentially like other creatures...or unique among them. His uniqueness may imply high prerogatives, but no creature can be a Son of God in the primary sense of full divinity.³⁷¹

Arius, states Hilaire Belloc, “was willing to grant our Lord every kind of honour and majesty short of the full nature of the Godhead...He was granted one might say (paradoxically) all the divine attributes – except divinity.”³⁷²

God is perfect but the Son of God advances in wisdom and knowledge and hence is changeable. The Son can be called Logos but is to be sharply distinguished from the eternal impersonal logos or reason of God. The essence of the Son is identical neither with that of God nor with that of human beings. The Son, who became incarnate in Jesus, is the first of all creatures and hence higher in order than any other being whether angels or men. Jesus did not have a human soul. “The soul of Christ was the Logos; only his body was human. As a consequence all that he did and suffered was done and suffered by the Logos.”³⁷³ Because of what he did during his earthly life, maintaining unswerving devotion to the divine will, the Son was given glory and lordship and would even be called “God” and worshipped. But to

identify him with God's essence is to commit blasphemy. "So stark a monotheism", observes Pelikan, "implied an equally uncompromising view of divine transcendence."³⁷⁴ Arius then was, we can conclude with Bright, "speaking of Him as, after all, only the eldest and highest of creatures; not denying to him the title of God, but by limitations and glosses abating its real power."³⁷⁵ In spite of the fact that Arius had a high view of Jesus' humanity so much so that he denied his human nature and emphasized a mild incarnation even allowing him the title "God", his position was rejected by the Church because he denied Jesus' full divinity. The Church felt that Arius had at once affirmed and then nullified both the divinity and humanity of Christ. H. M. Gwatkin argues that Arius' "doctrine was a mass of presumptuous theorizing, supported by alternate scraps of obsolete traditionalism and uncritical text-mongering, on the other it was a lifeless system of unspiritual pride and hard unlovingness."³⁷⁶ T. E. Pollard argues that Arius transformed the "living God of the Bible" into the "absolute of the philosophical schools."³⁷⁷

This "half-god", to use Tillich's term, theology of Arius was rejected by the champions of the orthodox Logos Christology and finally defeated as heresy. Harnack notes that

the defeated party had right on its side, but had not succeeded in making its Christology agree with its conception of the object and result of the Christian religion. This was the very reason of its defeat. A religion which promised its adherents that their nature would be rendered divine, could only be satisfied by a redeemer who in his own person had deified human nature.³⁷⁸

This inherent tension between the transcendental views of Godhead and redemption through the sacrificial death of God was the source of both parties' concerns. The Arians somehow preferred the transcendence of God over their own divinization and presumed redemption. The official party could live with this tension and make sense of it by artificial bandages and irrational presuppositions. That is what was achieved by Athanasius in the Council of Nicea – arguing against Arius and his doctrine of the distinct Christ – and the Logos Christology was

rendered victorious over its opponents once and for all. In 325 CE Emperor Constantine convened and presided over the Council of Nicaea in order to develop a statement of faith to unify the church. The Nicene Creed was written, declaring that “the Father and the Son are of the same substance” (*homoousios*). And “when the Logos Christology obtained a complete victory, the traditional view of the Supreme deity as one person, and, along with this, every thought of the real and complete human personality of the Redeemer was condemned as being intolerable in the Church.”³⁷⁹ Even though Arius was condemned as an arch heretic and treated as such for centuries, his sincere concerns for Christianity and his genuine insights into scriptural passages and monotheistic transcendental history could not be denied.

New estimates of Arius’ contributions to Christological discussions have been made by modern scholars. Out of these new reconstructions a different picture of Arius is evolving. Francis Young, for instance, comments that “Arius was not himself the arch-heretic of tradition, nor even much of an inquirer; rather he was a reactionary, a rather literal-minded conservative who appealed to scripture and tradition as the basis of his faith.”³⁸⁰ Many of the earlier Alexandrians had also held most of the views propagated by Arius. His transcendental conception of God had close affinities with Athenagoras and his subordinationism belonged to the Origenist tradition. He was not as much interested to demote the Son as much as to exalt the Father. Further, Lucian of Antioch, a canonized Saint of the Catholic Church, held Christological views very similar to Arius, the main difference being that earlier Christian leaders had not resorted to the use of vicious witch hunters like Athanasius. Arius’ Trinitarian scheme was as hierarchical as that of Origen. Athanasius’ accusation was that Arius had brought the Logos down from heights of lofty divinity to the level of creatures whilst Arius had constantly emphasized that the transcendence of God had been compromised by the attribution of physical processes to Him such as generation and emanation. In reality Arius had done nothing new aside from synchronizing and systematizing earlier transcendental concerns in an open and coherent form. Moreover, he had forced the orthodoxy out of their comfort zone to make them face realities they were neither pleased nor ready to encounter.

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The reaction of the orthodoxy was proportionately damaging. They accused Arius of violating Scripture yet failed to notice they had done the same. Further, they were forced to adopt the non-scriptural, and utterly philosophical as well as paradoxical term, *homoousios* (of the same substance) to exclude Arius' views. We may conclude with F. Young that:

Indeed, the popularity of his biblical solution to the tension between monotheism and faith in Christ is beyond dispute; and there is no reason to doubt Arius' sincerity or genuine Christian intention. Though his opponents attributed his popularity to deception, it is more likely that it was a response to one who was enthusiastic in his pursuit of [the] true meaning of the Christian confession.³⁸¹

Traditional Christianity has been evading real and searching questions regarding its notions of transcendental monotheism and its understanding of the person of Christ. In the name of mysteries and paradoxes, it has long confused many rationally oriented believers. Arius brought these genuine concerns into the public sphere and in doing so echoed the anxieties of the masses. This was the real source of his popularity. He might still have many followers today, even among contemporary Christian believers, laypersons and the clergy alike. C. S. Lewis speaks of Arianism as "one of those 'sensible' synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen."³⁸² In short, Arius was one of those adventurous yet cultivated souls who had tried to locate and find a solution to the unsolved problem of Christ's relationship with Almighty God using precise exposition and clarity of thought; factors which to the Church, would destroy the 'mystery' of incarnation. This mystery was maintained by the Council of Nicea, explored next in a little more detail.

The Council of Nicea

The Arian controversy caused division in the Church. It was feared by the Emperor that this rift would split the Roman Empire whose favored

religion was Christianity. In June of 325 CE Emperor Constantine summoned the general assembly of bishops from all parts of the empire to meet at Nicea (present-day Iznik in Turkey). There are extant several lists of the bishops who responded to the Emperor's call. The first of the five lists printed by C. H. Turner contains different countings: the first, 218 names; the second, 210; the third, 223; the fourth, 221; and the fifth, 195 names. A Syriac list gives 220 names and two Latin lists given by Mansi give 227 and 204 names. Constantine's own letter to the Alexandrian Church leaders speaks of more than 300 bishops while Athanasius, the stalwart opponent of the Arian controversy, writing soon after 350 CE, fixes the figure at 318, the number generally accepted in the eastern as well as the western Church.

As mentioned, St. Athanasius was the most prominent figure in the Arian controversy. He spent over forty years of his life defending the equality of Jesus Christ with God Almighty against the half god theology of the Christian Arians and the Jesus-is-not-God notions of the non-Christians. St. Athanasius has been highly regarded by the early Church as the Father of Orthodoxy. Frances Young gives a different view of the Saint observing that, "The enhanced role of Athanasius at Nicaea is one feature of the 'legend of Athanasius' which rapidly developed. This 'good tradition' has affected all the main sources, for Athanasius' own apologetic works were a primary source for the historians."³⁸³ She further argues that:

Alongside this 'good tradition' however, there are traces of a less favourable estimate of Athanasius current among his contemporaries. Certainly he must have been a politician capable of subtle maneuvers; the first seems to have been in his own election, which was definitely contested, may have been illegal, and looks as though it was enforced. There seems to have been a pitiless streak in his character – that he resorted to violence to achieve his own ends is implied by a good deal of evidence.³⁸⁴

As a comprehensive discussion of the person is beyond the scope of this study, we will restrict ourselves to exploring only his Christology.

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For Athanasius the central objective of the Christian religion was “Redemption” and he subordinated every other thing to this objective. Archibald Robertson finds Athanasius’ greatness in this all-pervasive view of Christ’s redemption:

Athanasius was not a systematic theologian; that is, he produced no many-sided theology like that of Origen or Augustine. He had no interest in theological speculation, none of the instincts of a schoolman or philosopher. His theological greatness lies in his firm grasp of soteriological principles, in his resolute subordination of every thing else, even the formula *homoousia* [identical in nature, consubstantial], to the central fact of Redemption, and to what the fact implied as to the Person of the Redeemer.³⁸⁵

According to Athanasius ‘Salvation’ or ‘Redemption’ demands incarnation, “the salvation was possible only on one condition, namely, that the Son of God was made in Jesus so that we might become God.” In his *De Incarnatione et Contra Arianos* he discussed the matter at length:

For in speaking of the appearance of the Savior amongst us, we must need speak also of the origin of men, that you may know that the reason of his coming down was because of us, and that our transgression called forth the loving-kindness of the Word, that the Lord should both make haste to help us and appear among men. For of his becoming incarnate we were the object, and for our salvation he dealt so lovingly as to appear and be born even in a human body. Thus, then, God was made man, and willed that he should abide in incorruption...³⁸⁶

Hence the

Son of God became the Son of man in order that the sons of men, the sons of Adam, might be made sons of God. The Word, who was begotten of the Father in Heaven in an ineffable, inexplicable, incomprehensible and eternal manner, came to this earth to be

born in time of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in order that they who were born of earth might be born again of God, in Heaven.³⁸⁷

The Son does not have any beginning; eternally the Father had the Son, “the beginning of the Son is the Father, and as the Father is without beginning therefore the Son as the Father’s...is without beginning as well.”³⁸⁸ It seems that Athanasius was not much concerned with the philosophical implications of what he was saying. He was just a preacher. His concept of the Son’s origin in the Father does imply the Son’s beginning and in a way subordination which he emphatically denied. Athanasius presumed more and rationalized less. He assumed that the Son was of the same substance of the Father and was exactly like the Father. The Father was the light and the Son was His brightness.

Jesus, then, is the Logos, the Son of God from eternity, uncreated, ungenerated, of the very nature and substance of the Father. McGiffert notes that it was

not necessary according to Athanasius that Christ should be personally identical with God, that he and God should be the same individual, but it was necessary that he and God should be of one substance or essence. To be equal with God or at one with him in will and purpose was not enough. He must actually possess the very nature of God himself.³⁸⁹

It is interesting to note here that Athanasius like all the other Fathers insisted upon the ineffable, invisible nature of God the Father. To him God was not apprehensible to anybody in His ontological or expressive nature but apprehensible only in his works and manifestation through Christ.

This idea of Christ being God and that in the Son we have the Father was not new or original with Athanasius. He was sincerely following the age old tradition of Orthodoxy. Athanasius did differ, however, with Origen and the Apologists in completely denying subordination, adoptionism, and any significant distinction between the Son and the Father. In doing so, he landed in Modalism and was accused of Sabellianism by his opponents. It is difficult to defend Athanasius of

this accusation. If in the Son we have the full and proper Godhead, the true and proper nature and substance of God, and in the Virgin Mary the “Mother of God” then what in the world could be more corporeal and anthropomorphic (Sabellianism) than this conception of the deity? F. Young observes:

On many occasions, Athanasius’s exegesis is virtually docetic and seems to us forced and unnatural. All is subordinated to the purpose of showing that the Logos in himself had all the attributes of divinity, e.g. impassability, omniscience, etc. The texts implying weakness or ignorance he explains as merely referring to the incarnation-situation. At one point, Athanasius even goes so far as to say... he imitated our characteristics.³⁹⁰

Seemingly Athanasius maintained that Jesus had withheld his divine omniscience and acted as if he were a man due to our human limitations. This Docetic tendency encouraged him to describe Jesus in terms which clearly limited his humanity. It was faith and salvation which led Athanasius to this point in asserting Christ’s proper and complete divinity but he, as Harnack puts it, “in making use of these presuppositions in order to express his faith in the Godhead of Christ, *i.e.*, in the essential unity of the Godhead in itself with the Godhead manifested in Christ, fell into an abyss of contradictions.”³⁹¹ It simply was, to use Harnack’s term, “an absurdity”. But:

Athanasius put up with absurdity; without knowing it he made a still greater sacrifice to his faith – the historical Christ. It was at such a price that he saved the religious conviction that Christianity is the religion of perfect fellowship with God, from being displaced by a doctrine which possessed many lofty qualities, but which had no understanding of the inner essence of religion, which sought in religion nothing but “instruction,” and finally found satisfaction in an empty dialectic.³⁹²

Such a lengthy discussion of Athanasius’ Christology is justified by the impact it had on later generations. Indeed the history of Christian

dogma following Athanasius is the history of his concept of faith in a God-man. The posterity followed him in defining Christianity as a faith centered around the redemptive works of Jesus, the God-man, and both eastern and western Christianity have loyally stuck to the broader framework of Athanasius' Christology even though small differences have been introduced here and there.

Appraisals of Athanasius vary, and in the same vein evaluations of the theological outcome of the Council are also divergent. Traditional scholars frequently portray a rosy picture of the Council and present it as the natural culmination of Apostolic Christianity. For instance Bright contends that over three hundred learned bishops did the following,

after a thoughtful survey of the subject, in harmony with the Churchly spirit, and in fidelity to transmitted belief and worship, the great Creed was written out, and doubtless read aloud in full Council, in the Emperor's presence, apparently by Hermogenes, afterwards bishop of Cappadocian Caesarea.³⁹³

Bright's account of the Council is very traditional. The real situation however was a lot more complex, more political, personal and confusing than the staid "thoughtful" or theological event Bright would have us believe took place. Its theological impact upon posterity is however undeniable.

In the Council the creed originally presented by Eusebius of Caesarea, a supporter of the Logos Christology and a foe of every form of Sabellianism, was accepted with certain additions. The will of the Emperor was the decisive factor. Constantine was not so much interested in establishing the truth of theology as he was in political harmony and power. In pursuit of this he was willing to accommodate any creed or theological position which ensured political stability and tolerance. Kelly is correct in observing that there is thus "a sense in which it is unrealistic to speak of the theology of the council."³⁹⁴ Constantine was so influential that R. L. Fox could write of him that, "Among his other innovations, it was Constantine who first mastered the art of holding, and corrupting, an international conference."³⁹⁵ Constantine himself, his relationship to Christianity and his conversion,

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are controversial subjects to this day. It is tempting to agree with Kelly that

the status of the Nicene creed was very different in the generation or so following the council from what we many have been brought up to believe. One is perhaps tempted to sympathize with the somewhat radical solution of the problem provided by that school of historians which treat the Nicene symbol as purely political formula representative of no strain of thought in the Church but imposed on the various wrangling groups as a badge of union.³⁹⁶

It was neither the Holy Spirit nor the ecumenical synod of three hundred or so bishops who steered the Council proceedings. It was the emperor and his iron fist rule. This was the decisive factor, though lip service and occasional reverence was shown to them.

Unfortunately, later traditional Christianity gave a great deal of significance and authority to the Council's decisions and terms whose religious nature seemed more inclined to political fervor and to combat Arianism than anything else. The Nicene Creed begins:

We believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things both visible and invisible: And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Begotten of the Father, Only-begotten, *That is, from the Essence of the Father*, God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God, Begotten, not made, *of one essence with the Father*; by whom all things, both in heaven and earth, were made; Who for us men and for our salvation came down, and was incarnate, and became man, suffered, and rose again the third day; ascended into heavens; cometh to judge the quick and dead. And in the Holy Spirit.³⁹⁷

Then it goes on to say:

But those who say, once He was not, and – before He was begotten, He was not, and – He came into existence out of what was not,' or – That the Son of God was a different "hypostasis"

or “ousia” or – that He was made,’ or – is (was) changeable or mutable are anathematized by the Catholic and Apostolic Church of God.³⁹⁸

The central phrase of this fundamental Christian confession is *homoousios* meaning of one substance with the Father. Though obviously a theological term, it was not exactly an adequate theological solution. It was a layman’s solution to pin down a pure and stark divinity for Christ without much precision, explanation and rationality. It neither preserved the boundaries between the transcendent God and Christ by an emanative scheme of a hierarchal emanative Trinity, as affected by the early Platonist Fathers, nor kept the mystery of its secret locked in its box. Rather, it brought the redemptive Monarchian scheme into the public sphere and in confidently touted clear terms. Consequently it was accused of being Sabellianism along with its defenders, Athanasius and Marcellus.

Disputing it vigorously Arians argued that such an analogy and identity was absolutely inappropriate to the relationship between God and the Logos, putting forward three reasons to substantiate their position: (1) God the Father was self-existent, unoriginated, eternal while the Son was produced by the Father. Therefore the Father and the Son could not be fully equal. (2) The Father was neither begotten nor was begettable while the Son was begotten and begettable. (3) The Father had begotten the Son, the God, while the Son had not begotten another Son. How could the unoriginated Father and the originated Son be equal? Arian reasoning was logical, rational and systematic. That of the traditional Apostolic Fathers such as Athanasius on the other hand was illogical and confusing, and their answers moreover, self-contradictory. Their doctrine made the Son both unbegotten and begotten, unbegotten as part of the whole of Deity, yet begotten of the Father as a relationship within the Trinity. Harnack rightly argues that there is “in fact, no philosophy in existence possessed of formulae which could present in an intelligible shape the propositions of Athanasius.”³⁹⁹ The same can be said of subsequent Christian Trinitarian thought at large.

The Council decided to favor the unintelligible, self-contradictory doctrine of Christology at the expense of clear precision and logic. All

bishops present subscribed to this formula with the exception of two, Theonas of Marmarika and Secundus of Ptolemais, alongside Arius. Arians were condemned and called “Porphyrrians”, and their works ordered to be burned because, in the words of Julius of Rome, “For theirs was no ordinary offense, nor had they sinned against man, but against our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of the Living God.”⁴⁰⁰ The Emperor gave his final approval asserting that, “what satisfied the three hundred bishops is nothing else than the judgment of God, but most of all where Holy Spirit being present in the thought of men such as these and so ripe in years, made known the Divine will.”⁴⁰¹ A majority of modern traditional Christian scholars view these historical dogmatic developments as an illustration of “how the Holy Spirit brings about a gradual increase in the Church’s actual consciousness of the mysteries revealed by Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰² A. Harnack, on the other hand, views them as an outcome of a lack of understanding and education:

As regards the composition of the Council, the view expressed by the Macedonian Sabinus of Heraclea (Socr. 1. 8), that the majority of the bishops were uneducated, is confirmed by the astonishing results. The general acceptance of the resolution come to by the Council is intelligible only if we presuppose that the question in dispute was above most of the bishops.⁴⁰³

Whatever the composition of the Council, the impact it had and the high position its creed and confession enjoys to this day in traditional Christianity is overwhelming. It is called “the greatest of all Synods” and is generally described with great praise and lofty terms:

The Council of Nicaea is what it is to us quite apart from all doubtful or apocryphal traditions: it holds a pre-eminent place of honour, because it established for all ages of the Church that august and inestimable confession, which may be to unbelief, or to anti-dogmatic spirit, a mere stumbling block, a mere incubus, because it is looked at *ab extra*, in a temper which cannot sympathize with the faith which it enshrines, or the adoration which it stimulates; but to those who genuinely and definitely

believe in the true divinity of the Redeemer, the doctrine of Nicaea, in the expanded form which Christendom has adopted, is prime treasure of their religious life, the expression of a faith coherent in itself, and capable of overcoming the world in the power of the Incarnation who is the “Co-essential,” that is, as St. Athanasius was careful to explain it, the “real” Son of God.⁴⁰⁴

Surprisingly, theological coherence is absent from the Christological solutions and creeds adopted by the Council. It seems that lofty aspirations and gracious ideas were the intended goals, as well as the elimination of competition, with the truth of scripture paying homage to the needs of the State, rather than the achievement of a coherent theology. The outcome of this great compromise in effect created and entrenched the Jesus of today and one wonders whether or not it did service or disservice to the Christian God paradigm. If disservice then theological truth had been thoughtlessly sacrificed in the interests of unity, and the price paid a terrible one, leaving the Church and Christianity in an appalling state of affairs. To claim a pure, hard-core divinity for the Son, forgetting the true essence and transcendence of God the Father and ignoring the terrible inconsistencies of this approach is mind-boggling. This approach looked upon the Father not as the Father but as the Father of the Son, Jesus Christ. The ethical gospel of Jesus was completely lost in the metaphysical contortions of the Trinity giving rise to the labyrinthine discussions of the divine substance and persons which have endlessly followed, tragically to the detriment of the Church and the loss of souls. Fairbairn rightly laments that the

Church, when it thought of the Father, thought more of the First Person in relation to the Second than of God in relation to man; when it thought of the Son, it thought more of the Second Person in relation to the First than of humanity in relation to God.... The Nicene theology failed here because it interpreted God and articulated its doctrine in the terms of the schools rather than in the terms of the consciousness of Christ.⁴⁰⁵

He concludes observing:

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The division of the Persons within Godhead had as its necessary result the division of God from man, and the exaltation of miraculous and unethetical agencies as the means of bridging over the gulf. The inadequacy in these cardinal respects of the Nicene theology would be inexplicable were we to regard it as a creation of supernatural wisdom or the result of special Divine enlightenment; but it is altogether normal when conceived as a stage in the development of Christian thought.⁴⁰⁶

The Aftermath of the Nicene Council

Christianity had entered the halls of power but the political authority achieved was no real solution to the unresolved theological complexities which dogged it. These profound theological convolutions continued haunting the Church leadership as well as the common believers.

It is obvious that a clear doctrine of the "Trinity" is incorporated in the Nicene Creed even though only one indefinite statement is made with regards to the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. The deity of Christ (the central problem for our study of anthropomorphism in Christianity) was fully conserved and rendered immune to the theological as well as philosophical criticism that had previously discredited Modalism. All avenues leading to the Godhead of Christ, the Savior, and impulses leading to his exaltation to the highest possible place and worship, that of God Himself, were given free play without his worshippers being convicted of polytheism, obscurantism or anthropomorphism. No such emphasis was laid upon the equal divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed's newly added Holy Spirit clause was left vague and ambiguous.

On the other hand, as the Creed was carried in the Council under pressure of Constantine against the inclinations of a great majority of the bishops in attendance, it did not settle the theological dispute concerning the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The nature of Jesus had been decided but the Council failed to elaborate upon the role or nature of the Holy Spirit, the supposed equal and eternal member of the divine Trinity. The Council in reality provided political or diplomatic solutions to the inherent theological problems. The Council's arbitrary decisions

temporarily succeeded in passifying prevailing conflicting emotions and interpretations without much long-term theological impact or satisfaction. The original claims that the Council's decisions were directed by the Providence of the Holy Spirit were soon exposed and proven wrong. It needed only a change of mind in Constantine himself (in 336), especially on his death in 337, to change the so-called Holy Spirit stamped Council decisions and exposition of the divine will. This turned everything upside down. The Saints of the Council were turned into culprits by the imperial decree and the culprits were made into Saints. Arias along with his previously regarded heretical views was honored and Athanasius exiled. Jerome's words are not wholly exaggeration when he writes, "the whole world groaned in astonishment to find itself Arian."⁴⁰⁷ It was once again imperial power first in the figure of Valentinian (364) and then Theodosius (380) which came to the rescue of the Nicene Creed with some alterations and additions at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed reads:

We believe in one God Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, who was begotten of the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from True God, begotten not made, of one substance with the father, through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin, and was made man, and was crucified on our behalf under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father, and cometh again with glory to judge quick and dead, of whose kingdom there shall not be an end; and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the life-giver, who proceedeth from the Father, who with Father and Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. We confess one baptism for remission of sins; we accept a resurrection of the dead and the life of age to come.⁴⁰⁸

This Creed whose origination at the Council of Constantinople is questioned by F. J. A. Hort and A. Harnack as well as by established scholars like Eduard Schwartz, Badcock and Kelly was dispersed everywhere throughout the East and the West in the sixth century under the name of the Nicene Creed. The Creed represents more nearly the position of the Cappadocians than that of the Athanasians. It represents the *homoiousionoi*, who accepted *homoiousios* (meaning “similar”) but not *homoousios*. This explains why it omits the words “from the same substance (*homoousios*) of the Father” which was the most important phrase to Athanasius. Though more moderate than the earlier original Creed, it aims at achieving the same goal, the proper divinity and deity of Jesus Christ, hence conserving the results achieved at the Nicene Council.

It is worth mentioning at this point that the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great (330–379), Gregory of Nazianzuz (329–389) and Basil’s brother, Gregory of Nyssa (329–394), were all known for their adherence to the Trinitarian formula. Although they agreed completely with Athanasius in attributing a real and proper divinity to Jesus Christ, accepting him as being from the same substance and nature as the Father, they disagreed with him with regard to the question of persons. According to Athanasius, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were the same being living in a threefold relationship. As a man can be a father, a son and a brother, the being of God can be the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. The Cappadocians disagreed. They contended that the Father, the Son and the Spirit were three equally alike beings, insisting on their unity, but were also independent persons. This is what Basil described when he discussed the matter at length:

Many, not distinguishing in theology the common substance from the hypostases, fall into the same fancies and imagine that it make no difference whether substance (*ousis*) or hypostasis be spoken of. Whence it has pleased some to admit without examination that if one substance then also one hypostasis should be affirmed. And on the other hand those who accept three hypostases think themselves compelled to confess an equal number of substances. I have therefore, that you may not fall into a similar error, written

you a brief discourse concerning the matter. This then, to put it briefly, is the meaning of the word: Some nouns which are used to cover many and various objects have a more general sense like man.... When we imply this word we designate the common nature... not some particular man to whom the name especially belongs. For Peter is no more man than Andrew or John or James. Hence, as the word embraces all that are included under the same name, there is need of some mark of distinction by which we may recognize not man in general but Peter or John. There are other nouns which stand for a particular object and denote not the one nature but a separate thing having nothing in common, so far as its individuality goes, with others of the same kind, like Paul or Timothy.... Thus when two or more are taken together, such as Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, and inquiry is made concerning their substance, we do not use one word for the substance of Paul, another for that of Silvanus, and other for that of Timothy.... If then you transfer to theology the distinction you have drawn in human affairs between substance and hypostasis you will not go wrong.⁴⁰⁹

Gregory of Nazianzus explained the formula using the following example:

What was Adam? A creature of God. What, then, was Eve? A fragment of the creature. And what was Seth? The begotten of both. Does it, then, seem to you that creature and fragment and begotten are the same being? Of course it does not. But were not these persons consubstantial? Of course they were. Well, then, here it is an acknowledged fact that different persons may have the same substance.⁴¹⁰

He further argues:

For the Father is not Son, and yet this is not due to either deficiency or subjection of essence; but the very fact of being unbegotten or begotten, or proceeding, has given the name of Father to the first,

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of the Son to the second, and to the third, him of whom we are speaking, of the Holy Ghost, that the distinction of three persons may be preserved in the one nature and dignity of the Godhead. For neither is the Son Father, for the Father is one, but he is what the Father is; nor is the Spirit Son because he is of God, for the only-begotten is one, but he is what the Son is. The three are one in Godhead, and the one three in properties; so that neither is the unity a Sabellian one, nor does the Trinity countenance the present evil distinction.⁴¹¹

Gregory of Nyssa gives the example of gold observing that “there may be many golden staters, but gold is one, so we may be confronted with many who individually share in human nature, such as Peter, James, and John, yet the “man” [the human nature] in them is one.”⁴¹² There is a complete operational harmony between these three distinct Persons:

We do not learn that the Father does something on his own, in which the Son does not co-operate. Or again, that the Son acts on his own without the Spirit. Rather does every operation which extends from God to creation and is designated according to our differing conceptions of it have its origin in the Father, proceed through the Son, and reach its completion by the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that the word for the operation is not divided among the persons involved. For the action of each in any matter is not separate and individualized. But whatever occurs, whether in reference to God’s providence for us or to the government and constitution of the universe, occurs through the three Persons, and is not three separate things.⁴¹³

He distinguishes between Persons on the basis of causality:

the only way by which we distinguish one Person from the other, by believing, that is, that one is the cause and the other depends on the cause. Again, we recognize another distinction with regard to that which depends on the cause. There is that which depends

on the first cause and that which is derived from what immediately depends on the first cause. Thus the attribute of being only-begotten without doubt remains with the Son, and we do not question that the Spirit is derived from the Father.⁴¹⁴

How the uncaused first cause and that which is caused or derived from the Father can be considered the same, equal in all properties and respects, is a valid question not satisfactorily answered by any of the Cappadocians. The Father did not grow in knowledge and wisdom, as did the Son. The Father did not pray to the Son, as did the Son to the Father. The Father never stated that the Son was greater than He, as did the Son. The Father never suffered death nor cried out to the Son from the cross for the Son's help, as did the Son, etc. It requires no intelligence to grasp this, and the Gospels are crystal clear about these facts. The Cappadocians needed rationale to substantiate their claims of the absolute equality of the Son with the Father. What they ended up with however, were mere suppositions and sheer presumptions, forcing them to hide behind a smoke screen of mystery phraseology, both unintelligible and woolly.

This Cappadocian Trinitarian analogy is one of the two chief types of analogy that has been used throughout the course of Christian history to explain notions of the Trinity. The Cappadocians begin with a consideration of three persons, as we have just seen, while Augustinian analogy emphasizes a co-equal Trinity by distinguishing the persons in terms of their internal relations within a person (e.g., memory, will, and intelligence or love, the lover – *amans* – and the object loved, *quod amatur*). Both are unsatisfactory and contain several flaws. The former, for instance, could lead to tritheism while the latter could lead to Sabellianism or Unitarianism. Francis Young rightly remarks concerning Gregory of Nyssa's analogy that, "No matter how much he protests their common eternity, common activity and common will, it is difficult to call a theology based on such a definition of their common nature, monotheistic."⁴¹⁵ Others like Harnack, F. Loofs, F. W. Green etc., have observed that this Cappadocian position was really a kind of Homoean view, or to use Harnack's words, "the community of substance in the sense of likeness (or equality) of substance, not in that

of unity of substance.”⁴¹⁶ To E. R. Hardy this observation is misleading and far from fair: “The *ousia* in the Godhead is identical in each Person: the common humanity in men is only *generic*.”⁴¹⁷

Hardy’s explanation is attractive but seems a little forced and artificial. The Cappadocians seem to have used the terms in their generic forms without much specifications. It would be too much to say that the Cappadocian Fathers intended tritheism but it seems quite fair to observe that their distinction between three Persons of the Trinity and their usage of the analogy of Peter, James, and John could easily lead to tritheism, as was observed even during their own life time. Our present understanding of the human person leaves very little room to doubt the validity of this objection. Undoubtedly to the Cappadocians, as to almost all Fathers, God is incomprehensible, ineffable, one and infinite. It is also true that Basil and others roundly denied any suffering by, or human weakness in, the Godhead itself. On the other hand, it is equally true that the understanding of God the Cappadocians aspired to and propagated by their writings did not and cannot remove them from a number of problems and confusions which have been found in almost all the orthodox Fathers, such as the relationship of Christ to God. Grillmeier correctly notes that the “Cappadocians have seen something, but neither their path nor their goal is stated clearly. As a result, the solution of christological problems is made much more difficult, as will be evident in the case of Nestorius.”⁴¹⁸

Gregory of Nazianzuz in opposition to Gregory of Nyssa takes over Origen’s notion of the soul as mediator between Godhead and flesh. He clearly uses the orthodox problematic terminology and also declares Christ’s divine nature to be dominant over his inferior human nature. “In this the stronger part (sc. the Godhead) prevailed in order that I too might be made God so far as he is made man.”⁴¹⁹ Yet, if his human nature became God, then any claim of denial of suffering and weaknesses in the Godhead loses ground. This is in fact pure corporicism and faces the very same problems which beset the solutions propagated by the Church Fathers before them. It also brings us to the heart of the issue. How could the suffering Son be equal to the non-suffering Father if their substance and divinity are said to be the same? Consequently like their predecessors, the Cappadocians sought refuge

in unexplainable “mystery” terminology, a convenient sanctuary when under scrutiny of logic. In the end, their dogmatic theology fell by the wayside and collapsed in mystery, however some of their bold phrases remained to haunt them with the labels of Sabellianism or Modalism. Gregory’s famous simile of the absorption of the flesh in the Godhead ‘like a drop of vinegar in the sea’ is just one such example.

Though the Cappadocian’s Trinitarian formula of the divinity – one substance in three persons (*personae*), or three independent realities – is called “the scientific” formula, it failed to provide any intelligible solution to the problem it was formulated to solve, i.e. the nature of the historical Jesus and his relationship to God. The words used to distinguish the persons in the eternal trinity are, as observes Tillich, “empty.” “And what do such words mean? They are words without content, because there is no perception of any kind which can confirm their meaning.”⁴²⁰ The formula may not lead to Docetism, Sabellianism, or the Modalism of Athanasius, but it could lead to something more disastrous, namely “tritheism”.

It will be apparent by now that the orthodox Fathers insisted upon the true, perfect, full divinity and Godhead of Jesus Christ. They aspired to maintain two mutually contradictory principles i.e., the transcendence and ineffability of God in the figure of God the Father, and the full incarnation of God in the human figure of Christ. All the explanations given to elucidate this, whether as modes, or persons, or any other interpretation, betray unquestionable corporealism and anthropomorphism. It is impossible to maintain that a human being who lived a true, historical and full human life was in fact the full incarnation of God and then aspire to avoid or deny charges of corporealism and anthropomorphism. This becomes even more evident when we turn to discussions concerning the will and nature of the person of Jesus Christ which were at the center of later controversies.

THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST

It was, and always has been, the Christian desire to attain redemption that has led the Christian faith to proclaim and maintain the deity of

Jesus Christ. From the earlier Fathers to the Council of Constantinople a common thread or concern has woven Christian doctrine together, and this has been the need to safeguard the proper divinity of Christ along with attempts to maintain the transcendence of God. At the same time, there has always remained the question of Christ's humanity. It was impossible to deny this humanity for according to the Gospels, Jesus had been a historical reality. Once the Church, over various gradual attempts, had finally arrived at the conclusion that Jesus was God and fully divine, they were faced with the issue of how to in some way reconcile this divine / human unity, to strike a balance between and interpret the relationship. The difficulty of regarding Christ as both divine and simultaneously human led some to Docetism and others to Adoptionism. The recognition of an absolute, pure divinity for Jesus made the problem more acute and insistent. Just a few decades after the Council of Nicea the pendulum swung completely in the other direction. Focus now was no longer on the pre-existence of the Son or the relationship of God the Son to the Father, but rather the relation of God to man in the person of the historical Jesus. The God incarnate formula of the Council was considered too metaphysical to be an intelligible part of real human history. If Jesus was indeed God incarnate then what was his real nature, human or divine? Human history had no parallel to explain this incarnational paradigm so how to understand it in logical human terms?

It was Apollinarius (d. 390), bishop of Laodicea and a close friend of Athanasius, who proposed a somewhat rational solution to this complex problem. Apollinarius made a subtle and rigorous attempt to propound a formula of Christ's nature and internal formulations of relationships within Christ's Person. He took the long accepted Alexandrian Christology of the Word-flesh to its logical limits. As mentioned earlier, to Athanasius and the Nicene Creed the absolute divinity of Christ was considered essential to ensure redemption, and it was strongly held that only the true Son of God could reveal God to man. Adhering to this Word-flesh Christology, Apollinarius argued that this act of redemption could not be possible without the deification of the man Jesus Christ. Therefore, he contended that Jesus had only one theo-anthropic or divine-human nature. At the point of incarnation the

Logos, a divine spirit or mind, was united with the human body and soul of Christ to become thence onwards the active personal element in Jesus' being while relegating the human element, comprised of the body and soul, to a secondary or passive level. The frankly acknowledged presupposition of this argument is that the divine Word was substituted for the normal human soul in Christ. Apollinarius believed that if the divine was separated from the human in Christ, salvation would be imperiled so he emphasized the deity of Christ and the unity of his person through a merger of the human with the Logos making the human element glorified. How he reasoned could humans be baptized in Jesus' name and be redeemed by his atoning death if he were just an ordinary man?

In his confession Apollinarius summarized this theme: "We declare that the Logos of God became man for the purpose of our salvation, so that we might receive the likeness of the heavenly One and be made God after the likeness of the true Son of God according to nature and the Son of man according to flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ."⁴²¹ In this process of complete fusion or union the human, historical Jesus, and his humanity, was replaced by divinity and completely transformed by the divine Logos. Apollinarius used to delight in speaking of Christ as "God incarnate", "flesh-bearing God", or "God born of a woman". He concluded saying:

One and the same is the body and the God, of whom it is the body, not that the flesh has been changed into that which is incorporeal, but that it has a property which is from us..., in accordance with the generation from the Virgin, and that which is above us..., in accordance with the mixture or union with God the Logos.⁴²²

He affirmed that Christ's flesh was "divine flesh" or "the flesh of God" and was the proper object of worship. It was virtually a clear Docetic tendency implying that Christ was not a real man but only appeared as a man. This was a culmination of the all out corporeal tendency which had all along been a part of Church thinking but often concealed. It meant that Christ in his incarnation had retained his divine soul, nature or *ousia*, and had not adopted a human rational soul or

nature. It was because of this denial of a human rational soul in Christ that Apollinaris had to deny the two natures and two persons in Christ. Kelly recognizes that, “The brilliance and thoroughgoing logic of Apollinaris’ synthesis are undeniable.”⁴²³

Apollinarian thought or “Monophysitism” as it was later called, was another expression of Monarchianism. Pelikan observes that Apollinaris was expressing a common opinion when he spoke of “innumerable teachings supplied everywhere throughout the divine Scripture, all of them together bearing witness to the apostolic and ecclesiastical faith.”⁴²⁴ In Harnack’s words, Apollinaris

merely completed the work of Athanasius inasmuch as he added to it the Christology which was demanded by the Homousia of the Logos. They both made a supreme sacrifice to their faith in that they took from the complicated and contradictory tradition regarding Christ those elements only which were in harmony with the belief that He was the Redeemer from sin and death.⁴²⁵

But it was widely felt that Apollinaris had safeguarded the divinity of Jesus on account of his humanity. The Cappadocian Fathers, the two Gregories and other churchmen, opposed him by criticizing that his Christology failed to meet the essential condition of salvation and atonement, i.e. the unity of the human rational soul, the seat of sin, with the Logos. In his famous phrase Gregory Nazianzen argued that, “What has not been assumed cannot be restored; it is what is united with God that is saved.”⁴²⁶ Apollinaris was condemned as heretical at the second council of Constantinople in 381.

On the other hand, the representatives of the Antiochian school challenged ‘Monophysitism’ or Apollinarianism with their scientific Christological dogma. In general, the Antiochian’s interest in Jesus was more ethical than redemptive. They viewed in him a perfect ethical and moral example. Jesus could have not been a perfect ethical model had he not been a complete human being with free will and a genuine human personality. The Antiochian school, argues Kelly, “deserves credit for bringing back the historical Jesus.”⁴²⁷ Diodorus of Tarsus and then Theodore of Mopsuestia, like Paul of Samosata, advocated a moral

union ‘unity of grace and will’ rather than unity of substance and nature. Their Christology conformed to the “Word-man” scheme rather than the Alexandrian “Word-flesh” scheme.

Theodore emphasized the perfect humanity of Christ: “A complete man, in his nature, is Christ, consisting of a rational soul and human flesh; complete is the human person; complete also the person of the divinity in him. It is wrong to call one of them impersonal.”⁴²⁸ Opposing Monophysitism, he argued: “One should not say that the Logos became flesh but one should say “He took on humanity.””⁴²⁹ To conform his views to that of the Logos Christology and Nicene doctrine of Christ’s proper divinity, he had no choice but to assert Christ’s two natures: one of a complete human, the other complete divine, each with a full personality and all qualities and faculties that go therewith. None of these persons or natures mixed with the other: “The Logos dwelt in man but did not become man; the human was associated and united with the divine but was not deified.”⁴³⁰ Their association and closeness was essential for salvation but not so close as to render it irrelevant to man as man or to involve the unchangeable, immutable Logos in the suffering of the cross. In Theodore’s formula,

the Godhead was separated from the one who was suffering in the trial of death, because it was impossible for him to taste the trial of death if [the Godhead] were not cautiously remote from him, but also near enough to do the needful and necessary things for the [human] nature that was assumed by it.⁴³¹

He further argued that while the scripture distinguishes the natures, it at the same time stresses the unity between them. Therefore, he contended, “we point to difference of natures, but to unity of Person” or in other words “the two natures are, through their connection, apprehended to be one reality.”⁴³²

As we see, Theodore emphatically denies the transformation or transmutation of the Logos into flesh. He also held that the divine nature did not change the human nature. Jesus, having human nature, by grace and free will could follow the divine nature. Therefore, one could say that Mary gave birth to God. This clearly was a metaphorical rather than substance designation.

Theodore's opponents rejected this theory as leading to a "monster with two heads", a being with two personal centers and a combination of two sons.⁴³³ Theodore denied this as mere accusation but, to McGiffert, "to all intents and purpose he was doing so."⁴³⁴ Cyril of Alexandria singled him out for attack and since the Fifth General Council of Constantinople in 533 he has been labeled as a Nestorian before Nestorius. Modern scholarship vindicates him of this accusation as Kelly observes:

In modern times, especially since the rediscovery of the relatively innocuous *Catechetical Homilies*, there has been a decided reaction against this verdict. It has been emphasized, for example, that he was deeply concerned, so far as his categories of thought allowed, to establish the oneness of subject in the God-man....He can write, for example, 'Thus there results neither any confusion of the natures nor any untenable division of the Person; for our account of the natures must remain unfocused, and the Person must be recognized as indivisible'; and again, 'We display a distinction of natures, but unity of Person'. For these and similar reasons the traditional estimate has been replaced by a more appreciative one which views him primarily as a theologian who championed the reality of the Lord's manhood against Apollinarianism and strove to do justice to His human experience.⁴³⁵

F. Young observes that, "If Theodore stresses the duality, it is because for him the unity is obvious."⁴³⁶

Theodore's is another reflection of the contradictory nature of the New Testament writings. On the one hand they emphasize transcendental monotheism, and Jesus' feeble humanity and subordination to God Almighty, whilst on other occasions they seemingly attribute a kind of divine status to Jesus especially in the Pauline and Johannine writings. The traditionalists bent on attaining salvation through the redemptive death of Jesus and their own union with divinity have inclined towards the Johannine interpretations and pushed them to their limits. The rational believers have always been worried about the danger this approach poses to transcendental monotheism and ethical piety.

Christianity is the name and product of these antithetical and diametrically opposed tendencies as well as concerns. Many innocent and sincere believers have had to pay for the contradictory nature of their scriptural writings. Nestorius is a good example of this theological nightmare.

The controversy regarding the person of Christ came to a head on collision in the fifth century when Nestorius, a younger member of the Antiochian school, became bishop of Constantinople (428). He protested against the tendency very common among the masses, especially among the monks in the neighborhood of the capital, to exalt the Virgin Mary as “Mother of God” or *theotokos*.

God cannot have a mother, he argued, and no creature could have engendered the Godhead; Mary bore a man, the vehicle of divinity but not God. The Godhead cannot have been carried for nine months in a woman’s womb, or have been wrapped in baby-clothes, or have suffered, died and been buried.⁴³⁷

H. Chadwick notes that, “Nothing caused so much scandal as a remark of Nestorius that ‘God is not a baby two or three months old.’”⁴³⁸ Nestorius held that she should either be called ‘mother of the man Jesus’ or ‘mother of Christ’. His objection was to the transference of human attributes to the divine Logos. He emphatically denied that the Logos participated in the sufferings of the human nature of Christ.

Nestorius believed that Jesus had two natures. He maintained that before the union of the man and the Logos in Jesus, the man was a person distinct from the Logos. Then “He who is the similitude of God has taken the person of the flesh.”⁴³⁹ After the union these two separate persons retained their identity: “There the persons exist not without ousia, nor here again does the ousia exist without the person, nor also the nature without person, nor yet the person without ousia.”⁴⁴⁰ His watchword was that, “I hold the natures apart, but unite the worship”.⁴⁴¹ He, following Theodore of Mopsuestia in his two nature Christology, held that, “When we distinguish the natures, we say that the nature of the Divine Logos is complete that His person also is complete...[likewise we say] that man’s nature is complete and his

person also is complete. But when we consider the union, we say there is one person only”.⁴⁴² Nestorius argued that after incarnation there resulted a new person, namely the person of Jesus, of which the Logos and man were two component parts. He believed that for true redemption, the second Adam must have been a real man. Kelly comments:

It was all-important in his eyes that the impassability of ‘the God’ should be preserved, and that ‘the man’ for his part should retain his spontaneity and freedom of action. Hence, though speaking on occasion of a ‘union’..., the term he preferred was ‘conjunction’..., which seem to avoid all suspicion of a confusion or mixing of the natures.⁴⁴³

To Nestorius it was a “perfect”, “exact” and “continuous” union. Unlike the Alexandrian Christological view that upheld “hypostatic or natural” union, his view of union was “voluntary”. By this he meant “the drawing together of the divine and human by gracious condescension on the one hand, and love and obedience on the other. As a result of their mutual adhesion, Christ was a single being, with a single will and intelligence, inseparable and indivisible.”⁴⁴⁴ Addressing Cyril of Alexandria he states: “I said and affirmed that the union is in the one person of the Messiah... but thou [actest] in the reverse way, because thou wishest that in the two natures God the Word should be the person of the union.”⁴⁴⁵ Nestorius was anathematized by the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople (533) for his supposed heresy of the two natures and two persons concept.

Cyril in his letter of 430, which was used as one of the sources in the Council, had already written 12 anathemas which were specifically pointed towards Nestorius. The main three points directed to Nestorius were:

(1) If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore the holy Virgin is *theotokos* – for she bore in the flesh the Word of God became flesh – let him be anathema. (2) If anyone does not confess that the Word of God the Father was

united by hypostases to the flesh and is one Christ with his own flesh, that is, the same both God and man together, let him be anathema. (3) If any one divides the hypostases in the one Christ after his union, joining them only by conjunction in dignity, or authority or power, and not rather by coming together in a union by nature, let him be anathema.⁴⁴⁶

Cyril's position emphasized a physical or a metaphysical unity of the divine and human nature in Christ. It paid lip service to human nature and considered the incarnate nature of God as the real one in the historical Jesus. His formula, "out of two natures, one" left no room to doubt that the Logos God had assumed humanity. Hence, it can be said that 'God is born', that 'God suffered', if only it be added, 'according to the flesh'. He also insisted that, "Since the holy Virgin gave birth after the flesh to God who was united by *hypostasis* with flesh, therefore we say that she is *theotokos*..."⁴⁴⁷ Cyril championed the popular theological position and won the wide support of the masses. This was a victory of the worship of Mary as the mother of God quite widespread in Christian circles of his time. Cyril used his popularity and political clout to mercilessly suppress all opposition to his position. He not only deified the human Jesus but also brought God to the womb of the very human Mary thus obliterating all possibilities, confusions and mysteries, so far vaguely maintained by the Church, between the transcendent God and the human Jesus. It was not his theology or spiritualism but his skill at political maneuvering that won him support against an otherwise more spiritual and sincere Nestorius. In Campenhausen's view Cyril, "was not greatly concerned with the truth; outwardly, however, he continued to play the part of the anxious, thoughtful leader who refuses to take action for reasons of purely personal spite, leaving the first steps to his best friends and go-between."⁴⁴⁸ It was due to Cyril's efforts and political genius that Nestorius was made guilty of heresy and deposed in the general Council of Ephesus (431) but, the final settlement was reached at the Council of Chalcedon.

It was views about the person of Jesus held by Theodore and which were at bottom not much different from the orthodox Fathers which

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caused Nestorius to suffer the stigma of heresy. Some modern scholars like J. F. Bathune-Baker, F. Loofs and M. V. Anastos have tried to rehabilitate Nestorius' orthodoxy. Anastos, for instance, observes:

If Nestorius and Cyril could have been compelled to discuss their differences calmly and to define their terms with precision, under the supervision of a strict and impartial arbiter who could have kept them under control until they had explained themselves clearly, there is little doubt that they would have found themselves in substantial agreement theologically, though separated *toto caelo* as far as their respective archiepiscopal sees was concerned.⁴⁴⁹

Kelly notes that, "When we try to assess the character of Nestorius's teaching, one thing which is absolutely clear is that he was not a Nestorian in the classic sense of the word."⁴⁵⁰ Grillmeier observes that "we can recognize just as clearly that he need not have been condemned had attention been paid to his care for tradition and to the new problem which he posed, despite his speculative 'impotence' (G. L. Prestige) to solve it."⁴⁵¹ F. Young writes:

Nestorius was the victim. He has become the symbol of one type of christological position taken to extremes. And for that he suffered. He could legitimately complain that his condemnation had been unfair: Cyril had plotted his downfall; Cyril chaired the synod; Cyril was his accuser and his judge; Cyril represented Pope and Emperor. Cyril was everything! Nestorius had no chance of a hearing. There can be few who would defend the proceedings at Ephesus.⁴⁵²

P. Tillich remarks: "If we say that Nestorius became a heretic, we could say that he was the most innocent of all heretics. Actually he was a victim of the struggle between Byzantium and Alexandria."⁴⁵³

When looked at from the perspective of our study, it becomes evident that traditional Christianity for the sake of salvation and redemption, has always intended to crucify God and has denied all efforts to make the cruxifixion the suffering of a mere human being.

This is crystal clear corporealism and could not have been maintained on the basis of speculative theology or any logical effort alone. It required the backing of the state, and exploitive and political power to suppress all rational and curious inquiries, made available to several traditional Logos-flesh theologians. Further, this act of blaspheming God, to use Nestorius' term, could not have been done by the Holy Spirit as always claimed by so-called Orthodoxy but rather by the political powers of secular and at times pagan emperors.

In conclusion it is worth quoting the following famous passage from Nestorius, who wrote:

It is my earnest desire that even by anathematizing me they may escape from blaspheming God [and that those who so escape may confess God, holy, almighty and immortal, and not change the image of the incorruptible God for the image of corruptible man, and mingle heathenism with Christianity... but that Christ may be confessed to be in truth and in nature God and Man, being by nature immortal and impassable as God, and mortal and passable by nature as Man – not God in both natures, nor again Man in both natures. The goal of my earnest wish is that God may be blessed on earth as in heaven]; but for Nestorius, let him be anathema; only let men speak of God as I pray for them that they may speak. For I am with those who are for God, and not with those who are against God, who with an outward show of religion reproach God and cause him to cease from being God.⁴⁵⁴

The words of Nestorius speak for themselves. How in the world can anyone who considers Mary to be the mother of God, and as such accepts that the Logos God spent nine months in the womb of a woman, grew like a baby, harbored complete human needs, and died on the cross, deny accusations of heathenism? This is the true challenge and struggle of popular Christianity. F. Young pays homage to Nestorius in the following words:

It was a great Christian who wrote those words. There have been many who were prepared to die as martyrs for what they believed

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to be the truth, but Nestorius was prepared to live cursed and consigned to oblivion, as long as God was not dishonored... In tribulation he showed a greater generosity of spirit than many who have received the name saint rather than heretic.⁴⁵⁵

The Council of Chalcedon

The decisions of the general Council of Ephesus did not settle the issue of the person of Christ. Just fifteen years after the agreement patched up in 433, quarrel broke out again in 448 when Eutyches, Archimandrite of a monastery in the neighborhood of Constantinople, vehemently opposed Nestorianism or the Antiochian party's "inspired man" Christology in favor of Cyrillianism or the Alexandrian God-man Christology. It is hard to determine Eutyches' original doctrine due to lack of proper historical documentation. It is clear though that he maintained the absolute unity and merger of the divine nature into the human nature of Jesus at his birth. He vehemently repudiated the two natures tenet in the incarnate Son and declared them non-scriptural. Although he never claimed that Jesus' flesh was from heaven, he nevertheless refused to accept that it was consubstantial with humanity. Flavian, successor to Proclus, condemned him as Apollinarian. Many modern historians argue that Eutyches was not a theologian but a confused thinker obsessed with salvation through Christ. To guarantee salvation he ended up upsetting the tenuous balance required in connection with Christology. R. V. Sellers argues that

if we are to understand Eutyches aright, we must not think of him as the instructed theologian, prepared to discuss the doctrine of the Incarnation. Rather does he appear as the simple monk who, having renounced the world, had also renounced all theological inquiry, and considered that it behoved him obediently to follow what had been said by the orthodox Fathers, since these were the experts in matters concerning the faith.⁴⁵⁶

Eutyches however, appealed his condemnation. Dioscorus of Alexandria accused Flavian of requiring a test of orthodoxy other than the Nicene Creed. The Emperor Theodosius II summoned a council to

meet at Ephesus in August of 449 to decide the matter. Pope Leo of Rome declined to participate in person but dispatched on June 13, 449 his famous Dogmatic Letter, or *Tome*, to Flavian, and clearly condemned the ‘One Nature after the Union’ doctrine of Eutyches. Leo stated in his letter that the properties of each nature and substance were combined together to form one person, “the distinctness of both natures and substance is preserved, and both meet in one Person...”⁴⁵⁷ He wrote that

when Eutyches, on being questioned in our examination of him, answered, “I confess that our Lord was of two natures before the union, but after the union I confess one nature,” I am astonished that so absurd and perverse a profession as this of his was not rebuked by a censure on the part of any of his judges, and that an utterance extremely foolish and extremely blasphemous was passed over....⁴⁵⁸

He also directly attacked the reluctance Eutyches had shown in accepting Christ’s consubstantiality with humans. He concluded that denying Jesus’ body and flesh the human element was tantamount to denying his bodily sufferings.

This letter was carefully phrased to shun Nestorianism on the one hand and Eutychianism on the other. But Nestorius, writes Chadwick, “reading the Tome in his lonely exile, felt that the truth had been vindicated at last, and that he could die in peace.”⁴⁵⁹ Leo’s *Tome* was never read to the synod. Under imperial power Eutyches was immediately rehabilitated and his orthodoxy vindicated. The confession of two natures was anathematized. The letter of Leo, which was suppressed in this so-called “Robber Synod” or “Latrocinium” (Brigandage) of Ephesus, was approved at Chalcedon. In fact the letter became decisive for the outcome at Chalcedon. The opportunity for this was provided by the death of Theodosius on July 28, 450. Marcian succeeded to the throne and cemented his position by marrying the late emperor’s sister Plucheria. Marcian and Plucheria both were sympathizers of the Two Nature doctrine. The Pope persuaded them to summon the council to annul the theological work of the Robber Synod. Originally planned

for Nicaea, the council was transferred to Chalcedon. The proceedings of this important Council opened on October 8, 451.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council, which was actually the most largely attended synod of antiquity, solemnly approved the Nicene Creed as the standard of orthodoxy, canonized Cyril's two letters and Leo's *Tome*, and finally, under imperial pressure, approved the following formula:

Following the Holy Fathers we all with one consent teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in deity and perfect in humanity, God truly and man truly, of a reasonable soul and body, of one substance with the Father in his deity, and of one substance with us in his humanity, in all things like unto us without sin; begotten before the ages of the Father in his deity, in the last days for us and for our salvation born of Mary the Virgin, the mother of God, in his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of the natures being by no means taken away because of the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one hypostasis, not divided or separated into two persons but one and the same Son and only begotten God Logos, Lord Jesus Christ; as from the beginning the prophets and the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us concerning him, and the creed of the Fathers handed down to us.⁴⁶⁰

By this formula the Council asserted against Nestorianism the unipersonality of Christ and asserted against Eutychianism Christ's possession of two natures, divine and human, each perfect and unchanged. As mentioned earlier, the victory was political rather than theological. Grillmeier observes that, "It was only under constant pressure from the emperor Marcian that the Fathers of Chalcedon agreed to draw up a new formula of belief."⁴⁶¹ Kelly notes, "the imperial commissioners, in their desire to avoid a split, had to exert considerable pressure before agreement could be reached."⁴⁶² W. A.

Wigram writes that the Council

failed to command respect, because it was imposed for political reasons, by a government that, as was too often the case, was making a fetish of uniformity. The verdict was, and was felt to be, a "government job," and not a free decision of the fathers of the Church. Had Theodosius lived longer, the Council would not have been held at all, and its decision was given, as things were, largely through the votes of Bishops who had gone with Dioscurus at Ephesus, and who shifted round readily to the opposite side, as soon as it was clear what line the Emperor was going to take.⁴⁶³

He further observes that

in large districts, the Council was rejected at once, and in none, save only in Rome, was there any enthusiasm for its doctrine. For more than a century, however, the antagonism felt for it was admitted to be that of a party in the Church, and not that of a separatist body. The word "heretic" was not applied to those who rejected Chalcedon, even by the Bishops who persecuted them. They were called "Distinguisher," or one may say "Non-conformists."⁴⁶⁴

The critics of Chalcedon like Timothy (surnamed Aelurus, 477) and Philoxenus, on the other hand, honestly believed that "in their ignorance the so-called Fathers who had assembled to define the faith 'had ordained nothing other than that the impure doctrines of Nestorius should be received and preached in all the Churches of God.'"⁴⁶⁵ To them the Council "so separates, and personalizes, what is divine and what is human in Christ that the hypostatic union is dissolved, and its place taken by a mere conjunction of the divine Logos and a Man."⁴⁶⁶ Likening themselves to the tribe of Judah they parted company with the orthodoxy: "For how could they, who alone were worthy of the title 'orthodox', offer obedience to a Council which had caused Israel to sin? Nay, a curse lay upon that Council, and upon all who agreed with it, for ever."⁴⁶⁷ Therefore, with the passage of time the old theological

controversies surfaced again and again. Monophysites once again asserted their old claim of Jesus having one nature and one theanthropic will or monothelitism. Orthodoxy opposed this trend and in 680 at the third council of Constantinople (the sixth ecumenical council) was able to get its doctrine of 'dyothelitism' approved. By this doctrine the idea that Christ had two wills, one divine and one human, was officialized and has remained the orthodox position ever since, both in the East and the West.

At Chalcedon and later at Constantinople the human element of the picture of Christ was saved. Grillmeier contends that:

If the person of Christ is the highest mode of conjunction between God and man, God and the world, the Chalcedonian 'without confusion' and 'without separation' show the right mean between monism and dualism, the two extremes between which the history of christology also swings. The Chalcedonian unity of person in the distinction of the natures provides the dogmatic basis for the preservation of the divine transcendence, which must always be a feature of the Christian concept of God. But it also shows possibility of a complete immanence of God in our history, an immanence on which the biblical doctrine of the economy of salvation rests.⁴⁶⁸

The Chalcedonian formula had attempted to solve a long standing Christological problem but in no way, shape or form did it provide logical or intelligible categories to satisfactorily answer the questions of Jesus' person or inner relational difficulties. In point of fact it was more presumed than explained that Christ was at once a complete God and a complete man. What type of man he was when he did not have the sinful nature was neither addressed nor resolved. His humanity was neither a complete humanity like that of ordinary human beings, nor his divinity like that of the Father. The whole thing was in fact a hodgepodge of presumptuous confusion rather than rational theology. Commenting on the significance of Chalcedon Paul Tillich writes:

To understand the steps in the christological doctrine, always keep in mind two pictures: (1) The being with two heads, God and man,

where there is no unity; (2) The being in which one head has disappeared, but also humanity has disappeared. The one remaining head is the head of the Logos, of God himself, so that when Jesus acts, it is not the unity of something divine and something human, but it is the Logos who is acting. Thus all the struggles, all the uncertainties, the despair and loneliness, which the Gospels present, were only seemingly experienced by Jesus, but not really. They are inconsequential. This was the danger in the Eastern Development. The fact that this danger was overcome is due to the decision of Chalcedon.⁴⁶⁹

The figure of two heads with no unity is as strange as both the other discourses mentioned by Tillich. It is more unintelligible and exposed to more subtle questions and curiosities than even the Docetic or Monarchian positions. It is impossible to logically determine the demarcation line between God and Man while insisting upon their unity, as the traditional dogma asserts. For instance, who determines when God in Jesus is acting and when the man in Jesus is steering his actions? There is neither proper guidance nor any specific formula given by the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit has been so often suppressed or evaded by emperors and Church politicians alike that claims of his abstract providence are of no real meaning in this regard. Is the figure dying on the cross the human Jesus or Jesus as God? If God then which God other than himself was he crying out to? If the figure dying was Jesus the man, then salvation is not complete. The Chalcedonian formula is full of theological contradictions.

Nevertheless despite its inherent weaknesses the Chalcedonian concept of a unified being with two heads or natures (human and divine) has remained the official doctrine of Christian Orthodoxy to the present times. The contemporary theologian E. Brunner writes:

The Jesus Christ shown to us in the Scriptures accredits Himself to us as the God-Man. One who meets Him with that openness to truth which the Bible calls "faith", meets in Him One who, in the unity of His Person, is both true God and true Man. It would be good for the Church to be content with this, and not wish to know

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more than they can know, or more than we need, if we are to trust Him and obey Him as we should.⁴⁷⁰

If you can't resolve the problem, simply accept it at face value. This is faith at the expense of human logic and intellectual precision.

It is pertinent to mention that the Council of Chalcedon was a kind of victory of Antiochene theology over the Alexandrian Logos theology. Although it addressed the old unresolved issue, and finally drew a line between God the Son and Jesus the human by emphasizing Christ's humanity, in reality it did not, and could not, resolve the issue at all. The historical human Jesus, was declared to have two distinct natures, both perfect human and perfect divine, unified in one theanthropic person the Logos, the Son of God. Moreover he was unlike ordinary human beings because he was sinlessness. Brunner rightly expresses the implications

when we agree with the verdict "He is a man like ourselves", we are also obliged to come to the exactly opposite view and say: He is *not* a man like ourselves....We know of no other man in whose life sin plays no part, whose life is pure and unstained, reflecting the holy love of God; who therefore, without hypocrisy or self-assertion could come forth to meet man as One coming from God.⁴⁷¹

The contradiction is mind-boggling! Jesus is a man but not like men. Furthermore, this fully man and fully God doctrine of one Person and two natures as understood in traditional circles, leads us in reality back to the old Alexandrian Cyrillian Christology and does not help much in an understanding of the humanity of Christ. Mascall's view of the person or human knowledge of Christ suffices to elaborate the point:

In Christ, however, the person is really distinct from the human nature; the nature with which the Person is really identical is not the human but the divine, and in this it shares in the omniscience which is the inalienable possession of Godhead. Is it therefore unreasonable to suppose that the contents of Christ's human mind

will include not only that experimental knowledge which is acquired by him in the course of his development from infancy to manhood in a way substantially the same as, though immeasurably more consistent and unimpeded than, the way in which we acquire ours, but also an infused knowledge which is directly communicated to his human nature from the divine Person who is its subject, and which is a participation in the divine omniscience and is limited only by the receptive capacity of human nature as such?⁴⁷²

Now, if the person of Christ consists of two natures, two wills, but in reality is identical with the divine nature and knowledge rather than the human nature, then one is fully justified in querying as Maurice Wiles does as to how genuine this humanity is and “How genuinely human is so qualified a human will?”⁴⁷³ Moreover, this doctrine of the absolute unity of the person and two natures, or unipersonality, faces a number of other crucial challenges. Most are logically obvious. For instance, who is actually doing the speaking and to whom? The narratives of Jesus praying to God, calling upon him with words such as “My God, My God” etc. make no sense. Is he appealing to himself? Even if we accept that it was Jesus’ human nature that was engaged in acts of prayer such as these, was it the Person of Jesus calling the Person of Christ? Surely the idea of one calling out to the other indicates at the very least a split in the unified personality? As a unity both would have the power to alleviate the suffering so why cry out in agony? Further, being unified surely the Godhead would have also suffered the agonies of Crucifixion. At which point we have to ask ourselves who actually died on the Cross? If it is claimed that the human element of Christ suffered on the Cross, then how in the world can salvation, redemption, and atonement be achieved, for the divine element would have to be present, the *raison d’être* for the whole Christological myth and for which it has been brought into existence?

The world has yet to see a theologian or a philosopher who can resolve these contradictions and explain in intelligible terms the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ’s person. Brunner contends that, “The aim of this doctrine is not that it may solve the mystery of Jesus. We know that when we confess Him as God-Man, and must so confess

Him, we are saying something which goes far beyond anything we can understand.”⁴⁷⁴ W. Bright, after strongly defending the outcome of the Council of Chalcedon, finally admits, “After all, if Christ is believed in as One, yet as both truly God and truly Man – however little we can comprehend the relation thus created – that belief is all that the Chalcedonian terminology implies: to hold it is to be at one with the Fourth Council.”⁴⁷⁵ J. S. Whale reaches the same conclusion:

Of course, an explanation of Christ’s person must always be beyond our reach if by ‘explain’ we mean ‘put into a class’. Jesus is inexplicable just because he cannot be put into a class. His uniqueness constitutes the problem to be explained. It is impossible to describe him without becoming entangled in paradoxes. The great merit of Creeds is that they left the paradox as such.⁴⁷⁶

The illogical, the impossible, the contradictory cannot be justified in the name of paradox, this is an insult to human intelligence; Faith is the exposition of Truth, and must be substantiated by facts, it cannot create them. To hide behind the smoke screens of mystery, blind faith, mysticism, spirituality and/or the Spirit’s providence etc. is to make nonsense of scripture and simply create awe for that which pays homage to a primitive, superstitious mentality. Furthermore, it is the prerogative of faith that it is made available to all and not just a select few, able to understand the intellectual contortions of mystery based doctrines. In reality, the history of the Trinitarian dogma is so saturated with political intrigue, the overriding needs of the State, exploitative elements moving through the corridors of power and so on, that actual scripture seems to have paid second fiddle to political expediency. And the monolithic impress of the doctrine has existed for so long that the whole is now taken for granted. The fact of the matter is that in the Trinity we have either the exposition of illogical truth or, what dare not be comprehended, heresy and theological scandal of the greatest magnitude. There is no inbetween. We conclude here with the remarks of McGiffert:

The problem is metaphysical and purely speculative. Except by those interested to trace the formation of the particular dogmas involved, the whole Trinitarian and Christological development

might be dismissed as unworthy of notice were it not for the profound religious difference that underlay it....⁴⁷⁷

Contemporary Christian Standpoint

Throughout history Christian dogma has continuously wrestled over the varying concepts and pictures that have emerged of Jesus down the centuries. As this chapter has discussed and illustrated, the origin of these differences can easily be traced back to the differing and mostly contradicting accounts of Christ as presented by the authors of the New Testament books, especially the four Gospels. Crossan rightly notes that if one reads

those four texts vertically, as it were, from start to finish and one after another, you get generally persuasive impression of unity, harmony, and agreement. But if you read them horizontally, focusing on this or that unit and comparing it across two, three, or four versions, it is disagreement rather than agreement that strikes one most forcibly. By even the middle of the second century, pagan opponents, like Celsus, and Christian apologists, like Justin, Tatian and Marcion were well aware of those discrepancies, even if only between, say, Matthew and Luke.⁴⁷⁸

The Church has over the centuries been selective when it comes to scripture, using only those documents validating its own theological position and credentials. In other words, the documents chosen were mainly those which allowed the Church to prove what it wanted to have proven. Yet ironically, even these carefully selected documents contain no one single uniform picture of the person around whom the entire material is supposed to revolve. Following the New Testament, Christianity has always grappled with the question of Jesus' identity, forever trying to understand who he really is and what he represented. D. Cupitt rightly observes that, "More than any other religion Christianity has revolved obsessively around one particular man: it has loved him, worshipped him, mediated upon him, portrayed him, and sought to imitate him – but he slips away."⁴⁷⁹ There is no single preached Christ:

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An immense variety of ideals of character have been based upon the example of Jesus: an historical man who lived only one life has been made the exemplar of a great range of different forms of life. Jesus has been declared to be a model for hermits, peasants, gentlemen, revolutionaries, pacifists, feudal lords, soldiers and others. If we restrict attention to the religious life of men in the Latin West alone, the diversity is great among the ideals of Benedict, Francis, Bruno, and Ignatius Loyola.⁴⁸⁰

Even contemporary scholarship is polarized over which picture or image of Jesus is to be accepted as authentic. In a presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association at Georgetown University on 6 August 1986, Daniel J. Harrington categorized this variety into seven different images of Jesus currently prevailing in contemporary scholarship. We have Jesus the political revolutionary (S. G. F. Brandon), the magician (Morton Smith), Galilean charismatic (Geza Vermes), Galilean rabbi (Bruce Chilton), Hillelite or proto-Pharisee or an essene (Harvey Falk), and eschatological prophet (E. P. Sanders). To Crossan this “stunning diversity is an academic embarrassment.”⁴⁸¹

This “embarrassing” diversity of pictures, ideals, concepts and interpretations of Jesus Christ has led some to conclude that “everyone who writes a life of Jesus sees his own face at the bottom of a deep well.”⁴⁸² To compound matters there exists only a very limited number of reliable narrations concerning Jesus, which even if combined fail to give us access to the man himself. One is left with no choice but to conclude with R. H. Lightfoot that, “the form of the earthly no less than of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us.”⁴⁸³

This perhaps is the reason that Christians throughout their history have not been able to universally agree upon one single, logical and uniform doctrine concerning the person of Christ and have always remained perplexed by Christology. Almost all New Testament books as well as the subsequent history of dogma are witness to this fact. The same too is exactly the situation with regards to contemporary Christian thought. On the other hand, a great majority of Christians, while differing over ideas of Christ’s person and relationship with God, seem to agree upon the idea of his cross and the significance of his redemptive work. In other words, the concept of ‘Incarnation’ is so pervasive in

most contemporary Christian circles and in Christian tradition as a whole, that Christianity is often described as an incarnational faith. If there is any difference, and there are many as mentioned earlier, it is only because of the different understandings of ‘incarnation’ that prevail.

The Traditional Orthodox Standpoint

The Orthodox follow the theology of the Church Fathers as enshrined in the Creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon, which, in sum, fully recognized an entire and proper divinity/Godhead for Christ, his co-existentiality and equality with the Father, and a two nature unified-in-one-Person personality for his being, as well as belief in the redemption. Orthodox understanding of the doctrine of incarnation is that God’s incarnation took place in the particular individual Jesus of Nazareth.

This is the old ‘Modalistic Monarchianism’ theology which claimed that the trinity was of three modes, of God manifesting Himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, outlined earlier. It has been hugely influential, at work at the bottom of orthodox theology in the past and still prevalent in orthodox circles today. In fact, as McGiffert observes, “the orthodox Christology was built not on the life of the historic figure Jesus Christ, as reflected in the gospels, but on a theory of redemption framed in large part independently of him and translated into the terms of prevailing philosophy of the age.”⁴⁸⁴ Throughout our discussion of the development of Christology we have seen that for the sake of salvation, Christ has always been deified, worshipped, and exalted to the level of complete equality and eternity with God. His humanity, though asserted superficially, has only been paid lip service by the orthodoxy. “It is true”, writes Paul Badham, “that all orthodox writers pay lip service to Christ’s humanity and describe him as “consubstantial with us” in his human nature. But all meaning seems evacuated from these claims when Christ is denied any human individuality or subjectivity.”⁴⁸⁵ In addition, certain Fathers such as Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa, as well as certain ordinary Christian believers have been deified through Jesus the Christ. It may not be inappropriate to quote Harnack here who remarks:

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There is an old story of a man who was in a condition of ignorance, dirt, and wretchedness and who was one day told by God that he might wish for anything he liked and that his wish would be granted. And he began to wish for more and more and to get higher and higher, and he got all he wanted. At last he got presumptuous and wished he might become like God Himself, when at once he was back again in his dirt and wretchedness. The history of religion is such a story; but it is in the history of the religion of Greeks and Easterns that it came true in the strictest sense....They became Christians and desired perfect knowledge and a supra-moral life. Finally they wished even in this world to be as God in knowledge, bliss, and life, and then they fell down, not all at once, but with a fall that could not be stopped, to the lowest stage in ignorance, dirt, and barbarity.⁴⁸⁶

The notion of incarnation in its developed sense, as we have discussed, is not clearly spelled out in the New Testament. "Incarnation", observes Maurice Wiles, "in its full and proper sense, is not something directly presented in scripture. It is a construction built on the variegated evidence to be found there."⁴⁸⁷ But to ensure salvation, the Greek and Alexandrian Fathers made it the sole theme of their understanding of the person of Christ from the divergent New Testament pictures of him. They brought the person of the transcendent God *of* the universe *into* the universe itself, in the material world of flesh and body and crucified him on the cross. And though they have always denied doing this, crucifying God, in reality this is exactly what they have done and intended to do for the sake of salvation. St. Gregory Nazaianzus was honest enough to admit this plainly: "We needed an incarnate God, a God put to death that we might live."⁴⁸⁸ Salvation would not have been possible if the entity crucified was not God. Athanasius also said this clearly when he confessed that the body crucified was God's body: "The Word bore the weakness of the flesh as His own, for it was His own flesh, and the flesh was serviceable to the working of the Godhead, for it was in the Godhead, it was God's body."⁴⁸⁹ Whether one accepts this analogically or metaphorically, the language is too corporeal and anthropomorphic. Therefore, as Tillich

notes, "Salvation is the problem of Christology."⁴⁹⁰ If according to their own definition Jesus the historical human being was a unified God-Man Person, one in substance with God, whose flesh was God's own flesh, and who was co-eternal, pre-existent, a proper God, Omnipotent, Omniscient, sinless, the Lord of Glory and Majesty, the worshipped and adored one, in whom the One divine Person was at work, then whatever method orthodox Christianity adopts to stop the divine from being seen as crucified, is in vain for according to their own witness it was the body of God, Jesus Christ who was crucified. Some of them had the courage to assert this. Others tried to hide it behind the garb, or to use Paul Badham's term, the "smoke-screen"⁴⁹¹ of paradox and mystery. According to Dorothy Sayers, "All this was not very creditable to us, even if He was (as many people thought and think) only a harmless crazy preacher. But if the Church is right about Him, it was more discreditable still; for the man we hanged was God Almighty."⁴⁹²

Incarnation in the literal sense of salvation does not in any way solve the problem of Jesus' relationship to God. The whole issue becomes submerged in contradiction and paradox whichever way one tries to interpret it. Moreover, its terminology as well as development owes a great deal to Greek philosophy and imperial politics. John Hick is right in insisting that:

There are strong reasons then for seeing the patristic development and interpretation of incarnational belief, not as gradual dawning of the truth inspired by the Holy Spirit, but as historically determined development which led to the blind alley of paradox, illogicality and docetism. It is not satisfactory to assert that nevertheless it was in the providence of God that philosophical system was available and made possible the resultant true formulations. Appeals to providence are too easily invalidated by subsequent history.⁴⁹³

Moreover, whatever the intention, the incarnational language itself is so anthropomorphic, corporeal and mythological, that one can easily conclude with Richard Jeffery, who in reference to Christ's crucifixion notes, "If God had been there, he would not have let them do it."⁴⁹⁴ On

the other hand, the real problem is that the traditional Christian religion or in the words of Whale, “the whole of Christian religion rests on the fact that God was there.”⁴⁹⁵

Once ‘Incarnation’ was declared as the central doctrine of Christianity, observes Harnack, “The one God, whom the people have never understood, threatened to disappear, even in the views of refined theologians....”⁴⁹⁶ If in Jesus the fullness of God is incarnate then Jesus without hesitation can be worshipped independently of God the Father. This is exactly what happened. Jesus was invoked directly in the Liturgy, distinctly from God the Father, by the so-called Orthodox opponents of Arianism. There is no reason then to deny the fact that incarnation in the Christian traditional sense does lead some believers to naive polytheism. This has been the case with a great majority of Christian believers, the Christianity, to use Harnack’s term, of “second rank”:

There existed in Christendom,...from the end of the second century, a kind of subsidiary religion, one of the second rank, as was subterranean, different among different peoples, but every where alike in its crass superstition, naive doketism, dualism, and polytheism. Whenever religions change, it is as if mountains open. Among the great magic snakes, golden dragons and crystal spirits of the human soul, which ascend to the light, there come forth all sorts of hideous reptiles and a host of rats and mice....There probably never was an age in which Christendom was free from this “Christianity”, just as there never will be one in which it shall have been overcome.⁴⁹⁷

And let us not forget that Jesus Christ, God incarnate, was also the son of Mary; and this incarnation and relationship led to the early Church Fathers’ usage of terms like ‘the Bearer of God’, ‘*Theotoka* or Mother of God’ to describe it, which in turn promoted the worship of Mary, a mere human being. Nestorius cried in vain to Cyril and to the Church in general, “Do not make the Virgin into a goddess.” It was an outrageous innovation. But, as Don Cupitt notes, “It brings out an odd feature of Christianity, its mutability and the speed with which

innovations come to be vested with religious solemnity to such an extent that anyone who questions them [is] *himself* regarded as the dangerous innovator and heretic.”⁴⁹⁸ Nestorius was declared a heretic and Mary was exalted above all creatures, above Cherubim and Seraphim, elevated no less to a position at the right hand of the Son. The reason, clear from the statement of John of Damascus, is that the “name ‘Bearer of God’ represents the whole mystery of the Incarnation. The Holy Spirit purified Mary with a view to the conception.”⁴⁹⁹ Not surprisingly, she was worshipped, called upon in prayers for support and venerated through Christian iconography. Images of her abounded and were worshipped. Commenting on this development Harnack points out:

Pictures of Christ, Mary and the saints, had been already worshipped from the fifth (fourth) century with greetings, prostration, a renewal of ancient pagan practices. In the naive and confident conviction that Christians no longer ran any risk of idolatry, the Church not only tolerated, but promoted, the entrance of paganism. It was certainly the intention to worship the divine in the material; for the incarnation of deity had deified nature (ousia).⁵⁰⁰

In addition to these problems, the doctrine of Incarnation taken literally could lead to God’s depiction in concrete corporeal human images. Don Cupitt correctly explains:

If it is the case that in the incarnation God himself has permanently assumed human nature, and can legitimately be depicted as God in human form, then eventually the ultimate mystery of deity will be conceived anthropomorphically, and the pagan notion of a deity as a superhuman person with gender will be restored. In due course this happened, aided by the traditional Father-Son imagery.⁵⁰¹

In the East the Church showed reservation on this matter permitting only the depiction of the Deity in human form different from the human form of Christ such as i.e. the standard iconography of scenes like the

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Baptism, where a hand emerges from the cloud to release the dove upon Jesus' head. After the sixteenth century, under the influence of the West, images of God appeared in the East also. The West has been less conservative in this regard. Anthropomorphic images of God became very common in the West after about 1100.⁵⁰² Don Cupitt is correct to protest against these developments:

It is my contention that the doctrine of Christ as God's divine Son has here humanized deity to an intolerable degree. The strangeness of it is seldom noticed even to this day. A sensitive theologian like Austin Farrer can dwell eloquently upon a medieval icon of the Trinity, and a philosopher as gifted as Wittgenstein can discuss Michelangelo's painting of God in the Sistene Chapel, and in neither case is it noticed there *could* be people to whom such pagan anthropomorphism is abhorrent, because it signifies a 'decline of religion' in the only sense that really matters, namely, a serious corruption of faith in God.⁵⁰³

In view of what has been said, it becomes evident that the traditional Christian concept of deity is anthropomorphic and corporeal, especially in terms of the language that has been used throughout Christian history to describe these concepts. Further, it is not only paradoxical, it is contradictory. It does not solve the problem of Jesus' relationship with God, the problem for which it was invented, neither does it explain or achieve salvation. D. Sayers writes: "What are we to make of that? ...if He was God and nothing else, His immortality means nothing to us; if He was man and no more, his death is no more important than yours or mine."⁵⁰⁴ It is also notoriously difficult to understand the two natures (simultaneously true human and true God) in one person doctrine and the mode of union between them. The whole is little more than mere speculation and conjecture, having very little impact on the practical understanding of the person of Jesus, or God for that matter. They render, observes Sayers, "The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole thing incomprehensible. Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult – nothing to do with daily life or ethics."⁵⁰⁵ These kinds of contradictions or mysteries, hard

though it is to imagine, might have been of some sense in their time, that is the era of the early Church Fathers in the light of Platonism, Stoicism, Neo-Platonism, or other trends, schools or philosophies in fashion, but look strange, and intellectually childish if not foolish today. Our present day knowledge and thought patterns make it impossible for anyone to understand literally the doctrine of "Incarnation" without landing into crude anthropomorphism and polytheism, especially the crucifixion part. "That God should play the tyrant over man is a dismal story of unrelieved oppression; that man should play the tyrant over man is the usual dreary record of human futility; but that man should play the tyrant over God and find Him a better man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed."⁵⁰⁶

These difficulties are recognized by a number of modern Christian theologians. R. Bultmann, for instance, discussing the traditional doctrine of 'atonement' and 'salvation' argues:

How can the guilt of one man be expiated by the death of another who is sinless – if indeed one may speak of a sinless man at all? What primitive notions of guilt and righteousness does this imply? And what primitive idea of God? The rational of sacrifice in general may of course throw some light on the theory of atonement, but even so, what a primitive mythology it is, that a divine Being should become incarnate, and atone for the sins of men through his own blood!...Moreover, if the Christ who died such a death was the pre-existent Son of God, what could death mean to him? Obviously very little, if he knew that he would rise again in three days.⁵⁰⁷

Becoming more emphatic with regards to salvation theory, and describing the doctrine of God-man as Gnostic, he continues stating that

gnostic influence suggests that this Christ who died and rose again, was not a mere human being but a God-man....It is only with effort that modern man can think himself back into such an intellectual atmosphere, and even then he could never accept it himself, because it regards man's essential being as nature and redemption as a process of nature.

He further argues that

as for the pre-existence of Christ, with its corollary of man's translation into a celestial realm of light, and the clothing of the human personality in heavenly robes and a spiritual body – all this is not only irrational but utterly meaningless. Why should salvation take this particular form?⁵⁰⁸

He declares this a 'myth' and calls upon the Church to reinterpret this myth in the light of modern knowledge and Kerygma. Though "Little we know of his life and personality" claims Bultmann, "we know enough of his *message* to make for ourselves a consistent picture."⁵⁰⁹ Without understanding the New Testament mythology in the light of Kerygma the Christian message would be unintelligible to modern man. "The danger both for theological scholarship and for the Church is that this uncritical resuscitation of the New Testament mythology may make the Gospel message unintelligible to the modern world."⁵¹⁰ Paula Fredriksen asserts:

After the introduction of Galileo's map of the universe, the technological advances of the Scientific Revolution, and the social and cultural revolutions that followed in its wake, modern culture no longer looks to Plato. More current systems of thought – anthropology, psychology, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, existentialism, evolutionary science, medicine – now provide the meaningful constructs that in turn effect theological ideas of personhood. Modern Christianity, in consequence, must search for new ways to express its ancient faith in Jesus Christ as true God and true man.⁵¹¹

It is John Hick, whose revolutionary and controversial book *The Myth of God Incarnate*, has taken great strides in the direction of recognition and then reconstruction of the incarnation issue. In this work Hick attempts to bring the old theological controversies back to the Christian intelligentsia, theologians and philosophers, with a view to making Jesus intelligible and acceptable to people of the modern

world. He starts his article "Jesus and the World Religions" with a recognition of the problem stating:

If we start from where we are, as Christians of our own day, we begin amidst the confusion and uncertainty which assail us when we try to speak about Jesus, the historical individual who lived in Galilee in the first third of the first century of the Christian era. For New Testament scholarship has shown how fragmentary and ambiguous are data available to us as we try to look back across nineteen and a half centuries, and at the same time how large and how variable is the contribution of the imagination to our 'pictures' of Jesus. In one sense it is true to say that he has been worshipped by millions; and yet in another sense, in terms of subjective 'intentionality', a number of different beings, describable in partly similar and partly different ways, have been worshipped under the name of Jesus or under the title of Christ.⁵¹²

Hick believes that the traditional or 'Incarnational' interpretation of Jesus is mostly the work of the Greco-Roman world which produced this unique Christ-Figure to meet its spiritual needs. Here in this strange environment, he argues, the Christian theology "made the very significant transition from 'Son of God' to 'God the Son', the Second Person of Trinity."⁵¹³ In his *God and the Universe of Faiths* he observes:

What seems to have happened during the hundred years or so following Jesus' death was that the language of divine sonship floated loose from the original ground of Jewish thought and developed a new meaning as it took root in Graeco-Roman culture....Thus the meaning of the Christ-event was first expressed by saying that Jesus was a Messiah, to whom in the Old Testament God has said, 'Thou art my beloved Son'; and then this divine sonship was later understood as his being of one substance with God the Father.⁵¹⁴

The Christian understanding of Jesus might have been quite different had it expanded eastward. Hence incarnational theology is not part and parcel of Christian revelatory history but a progressive and evolutionary

cultural development. The Church used the context and intellectual categories of the existing Hellenistic culture to define and interpret the Jesus event. As it is historically and culturally bound, Christianity has been and will keep on changing further to remain relevant to the societies of its existence. Consequently adherence to any specific doctrine and imposition of any dogma as intrinsically Christian will impede Christianity's ongoing development and relevance. Insistence upon incarnational theology has already rendered Christianity irrelevant to modern man. According to Hick:

The Christian's faith in the deity of Christ is an interpretation of a human life and personality as being more than human, as being continuous with the life of God. This interpretation both involves and transcends an ethical valuation of his personality. The deity of Christ was mediated first through his moral character.⁵¹⁵

Jesus' deity was neither part of his own consciousness nor intended by his disciples in a metaphysical sense. How could the early disciples, whose background was Jewish, ontologically equate Jesus with God? They used the spiritual terms of their times to express Jesus' closeness to God:

it seems pretty clear that Jesus did not present himself as being God incarnate. He did not present himself as the second person of a divine trinity leading a human life. If in his lifetime he was called "son of God," as is entirely possible, it would be in the metaphorical sense that was familiar in the ancient world.⁵¹⁶

This spiritual experience of the disciples and their mystical expressions were later twisted theologically to focus on the person of Christ and his incarnation rather than on his message. To Hick, the problem lies in the Church Fathers' literal interpretation of the New Testament's metaphorical as well as mythological language concerning Christ:

[The] fateful development that created what was to become orthodox Christian belief for many centuries occurred when this

poetry hardened into prose and the metaphorical son of God, with a small s, was transmuted into the metaphysical God the Son, with a capital S. The philosophers then developed the explanatory theory that Jesus had two complete natures, one human and the other divine, and that in his divine nature he was of the same substance as God the Father, while [in] his human nature he was of the same substance as humanity.⁵¹⁷

He contends that this traditional two-nature Christology of Nicea and Chalcedon was a literal understanding of Incarnation:

If we distinguish between, on one hand, a literal statement (whether it be empirical or metaphysical), and on the other hand metaphorical, poetic, symbolic and mythological statements, the Nicene formula was undoubtedly intended to be understood literally. It asserts that Jesus was literally (not mere metaphorically) divine and also literally (and not mere metaphorically) man. As divine he was not analogous to God, or poetically-speaking God, or as-if God; he was, actually and literally God-incarnate. And again, as human he was really, truly and literally a man.⁵¹⁸

The Church made the transition from the metaphorical to the literal in an effort to intensify the religious experience. The exercise backfired. It deprived the faith of all meaning and content:

orthodoxy has never been able to give this idea any content. It remains a form of words without assignable meaning. For to say, without explanation, that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was also God is as devoid of meaning as to say that this circle drawn with a pencil on paper is also a square. Such a locution has to be given semantic content: and in the case of the language of incarnation every content thus far suggested has had to be repudiated.⁵¹⁹

The problem with traditional Christian belief is that it is irrational and contradictory to the core. It uses impossible and mutually antithetical categories to explain the logic and rationality of its dogmas. According to V. A. Harvey, “in contrast to all other texts, it sets aside

our present critically interpreted experience when it comes to interpreting the New Testament. It assumes that in this case alone what our critically interpreted experience tells us is “impossible” is not only possible but probable and certain.”⁵²⁰

According to Hick’s understanding, the doctrine of ‘Incarnation’ is a mythological idea and literally not true at all. No Christian should be asked to accept the outmoded theological and philosophical theories of the third and fourth centuries. Like every other myth, incarnation was introduced to “evoke an attitude.” The real significance of Jesus does not lie in his divinity or incarnation but in his example and model. It is through his model that humanity can find God in their lives. Jesus to Hick is the “sufficient model of true humanity in a perfect relationship to God.”⁵²¹

Unfortunately, the view of Jesus, or Christology, which looks upon him as the perfect “example”, and thereby draws a clear-cut line between God and Jesus, saving Christianity from crude anthropomorphism and the shadow of paganism, and making Christian faith in line with and meaningful to other universal faith groups, is rejected for it does not comply with the set rules of traditional Christianity. As Brunner observes:

The view of Jesus as the perfect Ideal of ethical or religious truth would then correspond to one part of the Christian creed, namely, the statement that Jesus is not only a true man, but that He is *the* true Man. But the exceptional position assigned to Jesus – an absolute and not a relative one – which is implied in the Christian doctrine of Real Humanity of Jesus, presupposes that Jesus, True Man, the Sinless One, could only be True Man because He was more than man; because He was also-God.⁵²²

The ‘Traditionalists’ reject this interpretation because in this solution “the Person of Jesus has no constitutive significance.”⁵²³

Traditional Christianity wants to have God. But how is this possible? Paul Tillich answers, “Because of the incarnation, for in the incarnation God became something which we can have, whom we can see, with whom we can talk etc.”⁵²⁴

CONCLUSION

Throughout history Christians have been trying to make sense of God, accepting anthropomorphic images of Him, yet disagreeing as to what these mean, whilst at the same time trying to save the transcendent God from corporeality and anthropomorphism. However, their desire for salvation has very often resulted in the opposite, a view of God as an anthropomorphous triune-person entity, based not only on weak and unconvincing arguments at an exegetical level, but also preconceived bias, absorption of Greek philosophy and faith in corporeal gods, and political accommodation. How much is this notion of a corporeal triune-God the Bible's and/or Jesus' teaching and how much the result of supplemental additions by the Church Fathers of later centuries?

Regardless of the weight of various Church council decrees, complex exegeses, and emperor approval, this confusing version of God was not entirely to the satisfaction of everyone. Not surprisingly, and according to Karen Armstrong, it was probably among one of the key factors that led to the crystal clear Islamic version of transcendence and monotheism (as enshrined in the Qur'an) to

spread with astonishing rapidity throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Many of its enthusiastic converts in these lands (where Hellenism was not at home ground) turned with relief from Greek Trinitarianism, which expressed the mystery of God in an idiom that was alien to them, and adopted a more Semitic notion of the divine reality.⁵²⁵

NOTES

¹ Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria*, pp.92–93.

² Greer, *Origen*, p.127.

³ Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria*, p.195.

⁴ Greer, *Origen*, p.127.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.128.

⁶ See *ibid.*, p.30.

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- ¹¹ Grant, *The Formation of The New Testament*, p.8.
- ¹² C. P. S. Clarke, *Short History of The Christian Church* (London: Longman, 1966), p.28.
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- ³⁰ Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, E. Quinn, trans. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976), p.152.
- ³¹ Ibid., pp.151-52.
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