



The Roots of Christology: Jesus as the Object of Prayer, Devotion and Worship and the Source of Divine Blessing

Sentence

Mt. 3:16-17: And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased."

Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Shine within our hearts, loving Master, the pure light of your divine knowledge and open the eyes of our minds that we may comprehend the message of your Gospel. Instill in us, also reverence for your blessed commandments, so that having conquered sinful desires, we may pursue a spiritual life, thinking and doing all those things that are pleasing to You. For You, Christ our God, are the light of our souls and bodies, and to You we give glory together with Your Father, who is without beginning and your all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

--Divine Liturgy of St. Basil

Opening Questions:

- (1) Why bother discussing the question of Jesus' divinity or his relation to God? Why is this even a relevant question? What (if anything) depends upon this?
- (2) What would be gained (or lost) if Jesus was (or was not) divine? Why make such a big deal about this?

Plan for Class Discussion:

Assuming we can make out a case for seeing this as a relevant question that merits discussion, perhaps we might set up the discussion in the following way:

- My understanding is that Christology is not systematically addressed in the New Testament survey, so it may be that much of the information we cover today will be something you are seeing for the first time.
 - To make this material seem less overwhelming, in the first half of the class, we simply survey the different types of material in the New Testament that deal with how and why early Christians saw Jesus as being divine.
 - In the second half of the class, we will look very briefly at how
 - Jesus' divinity came to be called into question in the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century;

- how twentieth century biblical scholarship has tried to respond to Enlightenment questions by showing that early Christian claims for Jesus' divinity were the (reasoned/reasonable) products of historical development.
- how Hurtado's book fits into this contemporary, post-Enlightenment discussion.

Conceptual Background in NT for Claiming Jesus to Be Divine

I. Jewish Monotheism

1. One God only is to be recognized and worshipped (Dt. 6:3-4)

2. This continues to be confessed in the apostolic proclamation and practice, but the latter also describes who this one God is and what this one God does by coordinating the three names Father, Son and (Holy) Spirit., e.g.

- Mt. 28:19-20a ("Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the *Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"),
- Mt. 3:16-17 (quoted at the beginning of this handout) and
- Gal. 4:6 ("Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out '*Abba, Father.*'").

The devotion and worship of the early Church therefore had three closely related foci, namely

- God the Father Almighty,
- Jesus the Lord and Savior, and the
- Holy Spirit that was poured out after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Since the early Church developed out of a Jewish background and its earliest adherents were committed Jews, one must explain how it was possible people who were rigorously committed to

- the exclusive worship of one God could have come to
- address worship to three entities with distinct names and functions.

II. Jesus as Son and Lord

A. YHWH as Father and Jesus as Son:

1. The OT deals with the sayings and acts of YHWH who makes covenants with his people. Although something is said in the OT about YHWH's Word and Spirit, the focus there is primarily on YHWH himself.

2. Jesus addresses this YHWH as "Father" and says that this YHWH/Father is the one who sent him, has raised him from the dead and now pours out the Spirit on believers.

3. This YHWH/Father is both the author of the plan of salvation and the goal of the plan of salvation; through Jesus we come to the Father and receive an eternal life which consists of knowing and having access to the Father and honoring Him.

The Father of whom Jesus speaks is therefore not some new, distant figure whose existence and character have been hidden from view. He is the same YHWH who has constantly been revealing himself and his character for centuries in his ongoing transactions with his people. What is new is that Jesus is closely identified with the Father and is the unique and necessary means of access to this Father.

This identification of YHWH the Old Testament God with the Father of Jesus Christ does have one important consequence: Because of the OT practice of referring to YHWH as "our God/your God/etc.", when the term "God" appears in the NT it ordinarily refers to YHWH, the Father of Jesus Christ.

As we will see in a minute, this is not intended to exclude the Word and Spirit from the divine life; it is intended only to express the continuity in God's self-revelation and show that YHWH, the God who makes a covenant with Israel in the OT, is identical with the one Jesus calls "Father"

B. Jesus as the Lord (fleshes out and develops God's identification with Jesus):

1. YHWH acts and saves through the mediation of Jesus; in Jesus, YHWH enters completely into the poverty, weakness, trials, temptations and sufferings of human life, all with a view to helping those who are weak and afflicted

2. Identification of YHWH with Jesus

Heb. YHWH ---->Greek *kurios* (3 meanings: mister, lord, Lord=YHWH):

The early church speaks of Jesus in same terms that are used to speak of YHWH in OT; cf. 1 Cor. 12:3: only the person who has received the Spirit is able to confess that Jesus is Lord (*kurios*)--not mister, not a lord, but the Lord=YHWH. Here Jesus is given a *title* that belongs to YHWH in the OT.

Even more remarkable is the fact that *certain functions (i.e. characteristic actions) and attributes (i.e. essential properties) that belong exclusively to YHWH in the OT are transferred to Jesus in the NT:*

Functions Belonging Exclusively to Yahweh in the OT Are Ascribed to Jesus in the NT

Jesus Has the Authority to Forgive Sins

Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins (Mt. 9:6; *Mk. 2:10; Lk. 5:24; cf. Ps. 65:2-3) and also declares that individuals' sins against God have been remitted (Mt. 9:2; *Mk. 2:5; Lk. 5:20; 7:48).

- This idea is also implicit in his eating meals (table fellowship) with those who have transgressed God's laws by an immoral lifestyle or sinful profession (Lk. 15:1-2).
- *Since sins are offences against God, it is God alone who can forgive them* (a point recognized by Jesus' Jewish opponents: Mk. 2:7; Lk. 7:49).

- Compare also Acts 5:31: “God exalted him [Jesus] to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and *forgiveness of sins* to Israel.”

Jesus as the Object of Saving Faith Alongside God and On Par With God

Jn. 14:1: “Believe in (ΠΙΣΤΕΥΕΤΕ ΕΙΣ) God; believe also in (ΠΙΣΤΕΥΕΤΕ ΕΙΣ) me.”

- Same construction used to posit God and Jesus as objects of faith, without further distinction.
 - This is probably connected with the idea that Jesus is the exclusive means by which the invisible Father can be known (Mt. 11:27; Jn. 1:18).
- Compare also Acts 10:43 and 16:31; 1 Cor. 1:2; note that in the latter passage, as in Rom. 10:12-13, an OT text [Joel 2:32] about Yahweh, “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” is transferred to Jesus.
 - It is also interesting that in 1 Thess. 1:10, it is the Son who will save believers from the coming wrath; Heb 5:9 similarly affirms that after suffering, Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.)

Old Testament Quotations About Yahweh Transferred to Jesus

- See, for example, Heb. 1:6 “Let all the angels of God worship him” where the praise accorded by the sons (=angels) of God (Dt. 32:43; Ps. 97:7 LXX) is transferred from Yahweh to Christ.
- See also the comment above in “Jesus as the Object of Worship” about Ps. 8:2 being transferred from Yahweh to Jesus in Mt. 21:16 and in “Jesus as the Object of Saving Faith alongside God and On Par With God,” about 1 Cor. 1:2; Rom. 10:12-13. (Compare also Is. 44:6/Rev. 1:17; Ps. 102:25 LXX/Heb. 1:10; Ps. 68:18/Eph. 4:8.)

Jesus Has the Authority to Raise and Give Life to the Dead Prior to Judgment

- Jn. 5:21: “the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it”
- Jn. 5:28-29: “ time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his [the Son’s] voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”
- Jn. 6:40: “I will raise him up at the last day”
- Jn. 5:22,27: authority to judge all people

Jesus Has the Authority to Render Final Judgment upon All People, With Eternal Reward and Punishment Following

- Dt. 1:17: “judgment belongs to God” but in NT all are judged through and by the Son; Jesus “ is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42; cf. Mt. 7:22-23; 16:27; Jn. 5:22-23,27; Acts 17:31; 2 Cor. 5:10)
- Mt. 25:31-46: Son of Man presides over and executes the final judgment
 - cf. Mt. 28:18: All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me by the Father; see also Mt. 24:30; Mk. 8:38; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Thess. 1:7-10.

- Those condemned by the Son will be banished from God's presence and punished (2 Thess. 1:8-9; Mt. 7:43; 25:41)

III. The Worship of Christ: The Binitarian Character of Worship in the NT

A. The need for a narrow definition of "worship."

(1) The various senses in which "worship" is used should be noted. Those of us who were married according to the Anglican Prayer Book rite made this promise to our wives at the betrothal/giving of the ring:

"With this ring I thee wed,
With my body I thee worship,
and with all my worldly goods I thee endow:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

- Now "worship" can mean nothing more than respectful honor; though one's wife may have no excellent qualities, no deification is implied.
- (2) Although the words for worship in Greek (particularly προσκυνέω [*proskuneo*]) can also have a certain range of meanings (all the way from "honor" to the adoration of a deity), these words "tend to be used with greater frequency in connection with reverence directed toward a figure that is treated as a deity" (Larry Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, p. 65).

- *Context is critically important here: When we see these words used in conjunction with a pattern of devotional practices related to the corporate worship of the primitive Christian community (e.g. prayer to Jesus and worship of Jesus closely joined with and parallel to worship of God), we can see that the reverence given to Jesus in earliest Christianity is more than just respectful honor.*

B. **In worship Jesus is named together with God and defines who God is**

(1) In the OT the God who is worshipped is defined as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6; Mk. 12:26).

- After the resurrection God is subsequently defined as "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:3)

(2) Jesus is so closely associated with God and plays such a crucial role in defining who God is and how God enters into a saving relationship with people that **prayer is characteristically offered to God through Jesus** (cf. Rom. 1:8) or **in Jesus' name** (e.g. Jn. 16:23-24).

(3) Paul often begins his letters with a **prayer to Jesus, addressing and invoking God and Jesus together** (1 Thess. 3:11-13; 2 Thess. 2:16-17; 3:5). (Compare also the "grace and peace" introductions to Paul's letters, which invoke God and Jesus, in Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:3, Gal. 1:3; Phil. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2.)

- (a) Since Paul's letters were intended to be read when the church was assembled for worship, it is probable that this pattern of addressing and invoking God and Jesus together was a pattern familiar in the worship of the early Christian communities to whom Paul was writing.

(4) **Jesus is held to be the source of grace and blessing** (Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 16:23; Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; 1 Thess. 5:28; 2 Thess. 3:18).

(a) Jesus is therefore invoked in benedictions.

See, for example, 1 Thess. 3:11-12: “Now *may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, clear the way* for us to come to you: and *the Lord [sc. Jesus] make you to increase and abound in love one toward another...*”

Note **the action here is traced to a common source (God and Jesus) without differentiation or distinction.**

- Compare also 2 Cor. 13:13, where Jesus is mentioned as a source of grace alongside the Father and the Spirit: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

(5) **Jesus Is Held to Hear and Answer Prayer**

- It is clear from the earliest Christian records that the primitive Christian community addressed prayers to Jesus (Acts 1:24; 7:59; 9:10-17; 2 Cor. 12:8. Note especially Acts 7:59-60, where Stephen, being stoned to death, cries, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit...Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.”).
 - This is most explicit in the later books of the NT; e.g. in Jn. 14:13-14, Jesus claims that prayer in his name will be heard and answered.
 - The addressing of prayers to Jesus would also seem to imply that Jesus is able to hear and respond to the prayers offered by believers at different times and in different locations, not being subject to constraints of time or space.

(6) **Jesus as the Object of Worship**

- There is a hint of this already in Mt. 21:16, Jesus defends the praise that is given to him by children upon his entry into Jerusalem by referring to Ps. 8:2, which speaks of children praising *God*.
- Note also that in the NT Jesus is the object of doxologies (expressions of praise which ascribe glory to God). For example:
 - 2 Peter 3:18: “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and for ever. Amen.” (Compare also Rev. 1:5b-6 and most probably Rom. 9:5 and 2 Tim. 4:18.)
 - Most explicitly in the later books of the NT, e.g. Thomas’ adoration of Jesus in Jn. 20:28: “My Lord and my God”

IV. "Son of God From Eternity": Pre-Existence and Logos Christology in the New Testament--Toward More Explicit Claims for Jesus' Divinity

Attributes Belonging Exclusively to Yahweh in the OT Are Ascribed to Jesus in the NT

Jesus Identified With God’s Pre-Existent Wisdom, Through Whom All Things Were Made

- Jn. 1:1: The Word is already present when time begins and is the means through which all created things came to be
- Col. 1:16: “all things have been created through him and for him”
- Jn. 8:58: “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”
- Heb. 1:2: “But in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”

Compare also the assertions of full divinity in

- Col. 2:9: “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” and
- Phil. 2:6: who [Christ], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.”)

Q. Is the Title “God” Applied to Jesus Christ in the NT?

A. Yes, in several instances (mostly in passages that may have a liturgical background)

(1) The most likely punctuation/translation of **Rom. 9:5** includes the application of the words “who is God over all” to Jesus.

(2) The most likely rendering of **Heb. 1:8a** involves the Son being addressed as God (quoting Ps. 45:6), which coheres well with the context, since in Heb. 1:6 the Son is contrasted with the angels and said to be the object of their worship and adoration (see 1:6b).

(3) In **Jn. 1:1**, Jesus is identified with the Word (cf. Jn. 1:14,18) and it is said that the Word was with God and the Word was God.

Exegetical Note:

- It has occasionally been objected (mostly by Jehovah’s Witnesses) that in the phrase “the Word was God,” the word for God (*theos*) does not have a definite article (*ho*=[roughly] “the”).
- It is therefore urged that one should translate the passage either
 - (a) “the Word was divine” or
 - (b) “the Word was a god.”

Both of these suggestions are erroneous.

- In the case of (a), the word for “divine” in Greek is never the noun *theos* but the adjective *theios* (see Acts 17:29; 2 Peter 1:3-4).
- The suggested translation in (b) “the Word was a god” is incompatible with the monotheism asserted by both Jews and the earliest Christians and should therefore evoke suspicion.
 - In any case, in New Testament Greek the noun *theos* is used indiscriminately with or without the definite article to refer to a definite object (God); in fact in the prologue to John’s Gospel, v. 1 is the only verse in which the definite article appears (contrast vv. 6,12,13,18).
 - Furthermore, in context the omission of the definite article makes perfect sense because *theos* is a predicate (cf. Colwell’s rule: “definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article”).

- Adding the definite article to *theos* would also mean that the subject and predicate could not be clearly distinguished (since both had the article). The reader would therefore be inclined to take *theos* as the subject and translate “God was the Word,” which would actually invert the thought John is trying to convey.

The omission of the definite article suits John’s broader purpose.

- John is not claiming that the Word was the God—i.e. the whole of the divine life (all that there is of God)—but that the Word was God—i.e. was identified with God and belonged to the divine life.

(4) In **Jn. 1:18**, the most plausible translation, involves applying the title “the only-begotten God” to Jesus Christ.

(5) In **Jn. 20:28**, Thomas addresses Jesus as “my Lord and my God” and for this Thomas is not rebuked but praised as having come to right belief (v. 29), the kind of belief that John hopes to evoke by writing his Gospel (vv. 30-31).

(6) In **Titus 2:13** and **2 Pet. 1:1**, it is probable that one should translate “our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ”

From (1)-(6) above, it is clear that Jesus was addressed as God over a wide geographical region from within twenty years after the resurrection to the end of the first century.

(Justin Martyr and the Apologists on Logos Christology and the contrast between the indwelling word (*logos endiathetos*) and the expressed word (*logos prophorikos*).)

Post-Enlightenment Biblical Scholarship and the Divinity of Christ: A Quick Look at Why Hurtado’s Methodology is Interesting

So, if in the New Testament literature, there is evidence of a commitment to Jesus’ identification with God and the ascription to Jesus of functions and activities uniquely belonging to God, isn’t the question closed?

According to the Enlightenment, no, there are still more questions to be asked.

- The Enlightenment noted that the way we normally live our lives depends upon repeated, regular occurrences in the natural world (the “laws of nature”).
- Anything contrary to this would be out of the ordinary and would require extensive proof.
 - Unless extraordinary evidence could be provided, we should discount all claims for supernatural events as simply evidence of pre-modern, superstitious attitudes.
 - The burden of proof is therefore *against* the New Testament account of Jesus as miracle-worker/divine agent.
 - This account of Jesus as miracle-worker/divine agent, it is claimed must have arisen *much later*, after Jesus’ own time, as something *invented by the early church*, which was composed of superstitious, credulous, pre-modern people.

- What critical biblical scholarship needs to do, then, is to
 - go *behind* and *beyond the biblical text*
 - to *reconstruct what actually happened* and determine what Jesus was actually like, before the early church changed the story, due to popular Hellenistic influence (Greek assumptions about deities coming down to earth, plus Greek Platonic philosophy).
 - Cf. the history of religions school (*religionsgeschichtliche Schule*)
 - Reitzenstein
 - Wilhelm Bousset *Kyrios Christos* (1913), with extensive Hegelian influence

Possible responses:

- (1) The idea of God entering into a historical human agent was not something invented by Paul/early church, but was already previously held by
 - a. some type(s) of later Second Temple Judaism (Hengel, Dunn)
 - b. first-century proto-Rabbinic Judaism (Neusner)
 - c. early Christian material before Paul that was incorporated into Paul's writings (cf. Ralph Martin on Phil. 2:5-11)
- (2) title Christology
 - a. Oscar Cullman *The Christology of the New Testament* (1957; ET 1959)
- (3) functional Christology
 - a. 1960's-early 1980's (especially in UK)
 - i. J.D.G. Dunn's *Christology in the Making* (1980) influenced by this to a certain extent
 - b. Jesus related to God through certain functions he performs as God's agent
 - i. early low (even adoptionist) Christology → later higher Christology

Hurtado:

- (1) *Devotion to Christ* (as risen from the dead and exalted to heavenly rule, so that the only right response was adoration) can be traced back to the earliest Christian communities and it is a kind of devotion given elsewhere only to God (which is remarkable given the rigorous monotheism evident in contemporary Judaism and earliest Christianity).
- (2) Paul and the earliest Christians seem to be *unaware of the tension between rigorous monotheism and this devotion to Christ* (see e.g. the beginning of Colossians, where Christ is pre-eminent, yet claims for angels or other powers are criticized). Jesus is more than a created being who is the special agent of God (as angels and patriarchs are in some intertestamental literature). Instead, Jesus is distinguished as the Lord, a kind of extension of God's own life that is his principal agency toward the created world (see pp. 48-49). What distinguishes Jesus is that, unlike the angel/patriarch, he is the recipient of corporate worship and the object of prayer.
- (3) Earliest Christian worship as a place where the experience of the risen Christ and the commemoration of his acts of power leads naturally to a more explicit

development of high Christological language (expressing his identification with Yahweh/the Father).

For Hurtado, then, corporate worship is not something that follows along a bit later after some other separate cause (Hellenism, Jewish veneration for the martyrs, or some other pre-existing features of social/cultural situation) creates devotion to Jesus. Instead, the corporate worship of the earliest Christians is the context and cause (through powerful revelatory experiences of the risen Lord) that causes the development of devotion to Jesus (cf. p. 184) and this pattern of worship must therefore be carefully investigated. Religious experiences are therefore not just ways of legitimizing some pre-existing belief/situation or responding to deprivation or psychological stress by hallucinatory imagination. Religious experiences are instead supernatural realities and are able to generate new beliefs and practices that may be different from and opposed to prior expectations.