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0521803489 - John's Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in
Johannine Christology

James F. McGrath

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Part 1

INTRODUCTION

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**INTRODUCTION: THE DEVELOPMENT
OF JOHANNINE CHRISTOLOGY**

In recent times an area which has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention is the development of Christian doctrine, and in particular Christology. *That* Christology – whether in New Testament times or in the subsequent centuries – has undergone changes and developments of some sort, appears to be beyond question.¹ However, the question of *how* and/or *why* doctrine develops has not been answered with any similar degree of consensus. This lack of consensus is perhaps nowhere more clearly visible than in the case of the Fourth Gospel. In the numerous recent attempts to trace the history of the ‘Johannine community’, appeals have been made by different scholars to the influence of diverse individuals, groups, cultures and ideas, each trying to explain thereby the link between the earliest traditions about Jesus and the distinctive portrait of him found in the Fourth Gospel. In the present work we will not be attempting to write a history of the Christian community or communities within which the Gospel took shape. We shall nonetheless seek insights from the realm of sociology in order to provide an explanatory mechanism for understanding the process of christological development evidenced in the final product we know as the Gospel according to John. This Gospel appears not only to have deep roots in early Jewish Christianity, but also to have been written by and/or for Christians who were in continuing dialogue with non-Christian Judaism. How this Gospel and the beliefs it expresses can have sprung from Jewish roots, and yet at the same time have become an issue of conflict between Christians and non-Christian Jews, is the perplexing riddle which the present work hopes to help solve.² But before we can attempt to do this, we must

¹ Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making. An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, London: SCM, 1989, p.xii, who calls the fact of development in the New Testament period an ‘unassailable observation’.

² To argue here the case that the primary dialogue partners of the author of the

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review representatives of the major previous treatments of and approaches to this issue, and the methods used therein.

Previous approaches

In contemporary scholarship a number of different approaches have been taken to the question of *why* Christology developed and, more specifically, why the Fourth Gospel presents a Christology that is so distinctive. Although all attempts to categorize the views of others risk oversimplification, it is nonetheless necessary to distinguish between and categorize different approaches if we are to evaluate them briefly and effectively. We may thus for convenience group the different perspectives we shall be examining here into the following categories:

- (1) *History of Religions approaches*: These generally argue that the Gospel of John is different from earlier writings primarily because of an influx of Gentiles and/or Samaritans into the church. These new converts brought with them their own backgrounds and worldviews, which led to the character of the church's Christology taking on a different form, one which more closely resembles Gentile or Samaritan beliefs than those of earlier Jewish Christians.³
- (2) *Organic development*: These approaches consider that the Gospel of John simply draws out the logical implications of what was already implicit in earlier beliefs. This is not to say that there is no development, but simply that the development does not represent a departure from the

Fourth Gospel are non-Christian Jews would excessively lengthen the introduction to this book. The key evidence is surveyed, albeit briefly, in the first part of chapter 2. It is felt that the arguments and evidences surveyed throughout the present work will adequately sustain this initial hypothesis.

³ So e.g. Michael Goulder, 'The Two Roots of the Christian Myth', in John Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, London: SCM, 1977, pp. 64–86; Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979, pp. 34–58; Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God. The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology. The Edward Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham, 1985–86*, Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1991. Brown's name sits uncomfortably among these other examples; even though the stimulus to development he proposed is similar to that proposed by others in the 'History of Religions' category, Brown nonetheless sought to do justice to the continuity between earlier and later stages (cf., e.g., Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, pp. 109, 140, 150).

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original content and character of early Jewish-Christian Christology. It is rather the drawing out of the implications which naturally follow from these earlier beliefs, implications which, in a sense, someone was bound to draw out sooner or later.⁴

- (3) *Individual creativity*: These approaches suggest that the distinctive Johannine developments are the product of a particular individual, presumably a Christian leader of some description, who reinterpreted earlier christological traditions in light of his own distinctive viewpoint, imagination and personality. The distinctive Johannine Christology thus represents above all else the unique insight of a particular individual.⁵
- (4) *Sociological approaches*: These regard the distinctive Johannine Christology as the product of a particular social setting. Some upholders of this type of perspective emphasize that development takes place as earlier traditions are applied to new contexts and issues.⁶ The approach that we shall be adopting in the present study falls into this final category, although without excluding certain important insights offered by other approaches.

⁴ So e.g. C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 2–4; I. Howard Marshall, 'The Development of Christology in the Early Church', *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967), 77–93; R. T. France, *Matthew – Evangelist and Teacher*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1989, pp. 316–17; 'Development in New Testament Christology', in William R. Farmer (ed.), *Crisis in Christology. Essays in Quest of Resolution*, Livonia, MN: Dove, 1995, pp. 63–82.

⁵ So e.g. John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, London: SCM, 1985, pp. 296–300; Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989, pp. 104–5, 134.

⁶ So e.g. Wayne A. Meeks, 'The Divine Agent and His Counterfeit in Philo and the Fourth Gospel', in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1976, pp. 43–67; 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', in John Ashton (ed.), *The Interpretation of John*, Philadelphia: Fortress/ London: SPCK, 1986, pp. 141–73; Jerome H. Neyrey, *Christ is Community: The Christologies of the New Testament*, Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985; *An Ideology of Revolt. John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988; James F. McGrath, 'Change in Christology: New Testament Models and the Contemporary Task', *ITQ* 63/1 (1998), 42, 49; also Robert Kysar, 'Pursuing the Paradoxes of Johannine Thought: Conceptual Tensions in John 6. A Redaction-Critical Proposal', in Dennis E. Groh and Robert Jewett (eds.), *The Living Text: Essays in Honor of Ernest W. Saunders*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985, pp. 190, 200, 203; Martinus C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus*, Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996, pp. 112–17, 311, who take a similar approach to the one adopted here but without the explicit use of sociological models.

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These categories are simply heuristic, and it would be quite possible to distinguish the views of various scholars along other lines. There is also potential for overlap, as some scholars seek to utilize more than one of the approaches just mentioned. For our purposes, however, this categorization will be adequate as representing the principal types of explanation offered concerning the stimuli to the development of Johannine Christology, and so we may now turn to an evaluation of the work and results of key recent advocates of each.

History of Religions approaches

The earliest proponents of the History of Religions approach argued that Christology underwent a major transformation when it moved from the world of Palestinian Judaism (which was believed to be a purer form of Judaism) to that of the Hellenistic Judaism of the Diaspora, which was subject to the influences of paganism. Such a view has been rendered untenable by the realization that the traditional distinction between 'Judaism' and 'Hellenism' does not accurately represent the situation in the period we are studying. As the work of Martin Hengel in particular has clearly demonstrated, all Judaism during this period was 'Hellenistic Judaism', inasmuch as there was no Judaism which was not part of the Hellenistic world and influenced in some way by its thought and culture.⁷

The realization that all Judaism, including that found in Palestine and even that of the Pharisees, was influenced by Hellenism in some way or other has been accompanied by an awareness of the diversity which existed in Judaism in and around New Testament times. This diversity is such that Jacob Neusner has even felt it necessary to speak of 'Judaisms' in the plural.⁸ Of course, the traditional proponents of History of Religions models of develop-

⁷ Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism. Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, London: SCM, 1974; *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, London: SCM, 1989. See also Bartlett, John R., *Jews in the Hellenistic World. Josephus, Aristeeas, The Sibylline Oracles, Eupolemus* (CCWJCW, 1), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 7–8; James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Judaism and Christianity and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, London: SCM, 1991, pp. 9–10; John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora. From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996, pp. 83–91.

⁸ Jacob Neusner, *Judaic Law from Jesus to the Mishnah. A Systematic Reply to Professor E. P. Sanders*, Atlanta: Scholars, 1993, pp. 1–2. See also Dunn, *Partings*, pp. 18, 285 n.1, and the objections of Barclay, *Jews*, pp. 400–1.

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ment were aware of this diversity, which they attributed to the differences between the 'purer' Judaism of Palestine and the Judaism of the Diaspora, which had been influenced by Hellenism. But it is precisely this type of distinction that has been proved untenable. The view that the rabbis or Pharisees were the upholders of an orthodox form of Judaism, which was defended from Hellenistic influence in their synagogues, can no longer be maintained. There was simply no generally recognized orthodox Judaism in this period. Nor was there any non-Hellenized Judaism: even the Pharisees show signs of having been influenced by Hellenism.⁹ The conclusion which Hengel has reached must be emphasized: given that Palestinian Judaism can be accurately described as Hellenistic Judaism, having been subject to the influence of Greek culture for more than three hundred years, the term 'Hellenistic' no longer makes any meaningful distinction within the history of religions as applied to earliest Christianity.¹⁰ Many works which in earlier times were assumed, because of the evidences of Hellenistic influence upon them, to derive from the Diaspora, may in fact have originated in Palestine.¹¹

Yet while this makes certain older views untenable, it may still be possible for scholars who wish to argue for a History of Religions model of development to find ways of expressing that there were genuine differences between Jews on the one hand and other inhabitants of the Hellenistic world on the other, without this implying a return to the old, outmoded 'Judaism vs. Hellenism' schema. A possible way forward is hinted at in a recent article by Jonathan Goldstein. He draws a parallel between the situation of Jews in Greek or Roman-ruled Palestine and that of Indian Muslims in British-ruled India. While the members of the Aligarh movement in colonial India would never have considered converting to Christianity, nonetheless the movement's members actively sought to become 'gentlemen in the English mould' in all other respects. Thus in the same way that their Islamic faith was not felt to exclude many forms of 'Anglicizing', so also the Torah was not considered by many Jews to exclude the acceptance of various aspects of Hellenistic culture.¹² The Jews had a different

⁹ Hengel, *Hellenization*, pp. 51–2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–8.

¹² Jonathan A. Goldstein, 'Jewish Acceptance and Rejection of Hellenism', in E. P. Sanders, A. I. Baumgarten and Alan Mendelson (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Self-*

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religion from that of most of their neighbours, and also had a different culture. Both of these inseparable aspects of Jewish life were influenced by Hellenism, but that does not imply that Jewish religion and culture became identical with that of other peoples in the Hellenistic era, any more than Greek influence led Roman culture, for example, to cease to be distinguishable from that of the Greeks. To return to the analogy which Goldstein draws with India under British rule, Indian culture was clearly influenced by British culture, but few if any would question that it was and is still possible to continue to speak meaningfully of 'Indian culture' and 'British culture'. The edges will have been somewhat blurry, and there will have been individual Indians who so wholly adopted British ways that they might appear to have been 'more British than the British themselves'. But on the whole, it would appear that the distinction between different cultures and religious traditions, and thus between 'Jewish' and 'non-Jewish', remains valid, provided it is used carefully and with the important qualifications which have just been discussed.¹³

Having clarified this point, we may define more clearly what a valid History of Religions model might look like. A contemporary form of this type of approach could focus on what important differences existed between Jews and other races and religions of the Hellenistic world, and in particular on the important difference between the monotheistic Jews and their generally polytheistic neighbours.¹⁴ The basic argument of History of Religions models of christological development tends to follow something along

Definition. Volume 2: Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period, London: SCM, 1981, p.66.

¹³ For a helpful approach which avoids defining a religion in monolithic terms cf. J. Z. Smith, 'Fences and Neighbours: Some Contours of Early Judaism', in William Scott Green (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism. Volume II* (BJS, 9), Chico, CA: Scholars, 1980, pp. 1–25. For the issue of religious and cultural adaptation see further Barclay, *Jews*, pp. 87–91.

¹⁴ Even the definition of monotheism is not without its difficulties. See the useful discussion in Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (WUNT 2, 70), Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995, pp. 15–21; also Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord. Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, London: SCM, 1988, pp. 17–39; 'What Do We Mean by "First-Century Jewish Monotheism"?' in Eugene M. Lovering, Jr. (ed.), *SBL 1993 Seminar Papers*, Atlanta: Scholars, 1993, pp. 348–68; Paul A. Rainbow, 'Jewish Monotheism as the Matrix for New Testament Christology: A Review Article', *NovT* 33/1 (1991), 78–91; Dunn, *Partings*, pp. 19–21. See also Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, p.264; Barclay, *Jews*, pp. 99–100, 312–13. See further our discussion in n.70 and n.71 below and in ch.3.

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these lines: in contrast with Jews, Gentiles accepted and worshipped more than one god; Jesus was regarded as divine and worshipped; therefore, the concept of Jesus' divinity is a product of Gentile influence on Christianity rather than a natural growth out of the (very Jewish) message of Jesus.¹⁵ To argue this way, in light of our discussion above, is not incoherent, although we shall see reasons below for ultimately rejecting this solution to the problem of the development of Johannine Christology.

Gentile influence on Johannine Christology¹⁶

We may now consider the views of those who maintain that John's distinctive Christology took its present form under the influence of Gentiles who had joined the community. The most recent exponent of this view is Maurice Casey, whose perspective is representative of this approach to the problem of christological development. Casey's basic argument is that those Christians who came to view Jesus as divine did so under the influence of Gentile thought, to which they were susceptible because the Judaism of which they were a part had already gone some way towards assimilating to Gentile ways.¹⁷ Casey is aware of the problem of Jewish diversity, and compares the issue in relation to New Testament times to the issue in modern times of 'Who is a Jew?'¹⁸ Yet he stresses that in order to reach some sort of conclusion, a concept of orthodoxy is necessary, and this he finds in the Torah-observant Judaism of the Pharisees and Essenes.¹⁹ Casey also suggests eight features as distinctively Jewish, so that if someone has all eight he is clearly Jewish, and if none he is clearly a Gentile. These are ethnicity, Scripture, monotheism, circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary laws, purity laws and major festivals. Among these ethnicity is at times an overriding factor, so that someone may be perceived as Jewish even if the other factors are lacking, or conversely as a Gentile even though all the other factors are present.²⁰

¹⁵ So e.g. Casey, *Jewish Prophet*, pp. 23–38. See also Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, New York: Scribners, 1965, pp. 232–3, who nonetheless seeks to emphasize the underlying continuity in spite of these influences.

¹⁶ What follows repeats many of the arguments found in the present author's 'Johannine Christianity – Jewish Christianity?', *Koinonia Journal* 8/1 (1996), 1–20.

¹⁷ Casey, *Jewish Prophet*, pp. 33–4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14. See also Barclay, *Jews*, pp. 402–13.

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Casey's work is helpful inasmuch as it sets out clearly the presuppositions and methodology that are used by many who argue along these lines. Yet it will probably already be obvious from our discussion in the previous section that Casey's argument is open to severe criticism at a number of key points. To begin with, Casey is working with a concept of orthodoxy that is anachronistic and therefore inappropriate for the period in question. The Pharisees did not have the authority to define what was and was not legitimately considered Judaism in New Testament times. During this period there were simply no universally recognized leaders in a position to define Judaism in this way.²¹ It is true that the Pharisees considered their interpretation of Judaism to be the correct one and the most faithful to Israel's Scriptures and traditions, but this is also true of the Qumran community, and was presumably equally true of all of the other Jewish parties. The situation in Israel/Judaism during this period has been compared to the situation in a multi-party state such as the US or Great Britain. In such a situation, there are a number of groups, each of whom would like to be in a position of authority and enforce its understanding of the way life in the nation should be lived. Nonetheless, no one party represents the whole population, so that even the party in power cannot legitimately claim to be 'the only truly American/British party'.²²

It will be helpful to contrast Casey's view with that of Neusner, who emphasizes that the features usually used to define a social entity (such as a common country, language or culture) were not shared by all Jews. He thus considers that, from a purely secular perspective, the portrait of the Jews as a unified entity 'Israel' is 'a pious fantasy'.²³ It may of course be possible to find common

²¹ Cf. David E. Aune, 'Orthodoxy in First Century Judaism? A Response to N. J. McLelney', *JSJ* 7/1 (1976), 1–10; Lester L. Grabbe, 'Orthodoxy in First Century Judaism. What Are the Issues?', *JSJ* 8/2 (1977), 149–53; Luke Timothy Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic', *JBL* 108 (1989), 426–8; Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament. An Appraisal*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990, p.91; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE*, London: SCM/ Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992, pp. 388–404; Philip S. Alexander, "'The Partings of the Ways" from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism', in James D. G. Dunn (ed.), *Jews and Christians. The Partings of the Ways A. D. 70 to 135* (WUNT 2, 66), Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1992, pp. 3, 21; Barclay, *Jews*, p.85.

²² Cf. Alan F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children. Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, p.59. See also Grabbe, 'Orthodoxy', 151–2.

²³ Neusner, *Judaic Law*, p.2; see further his discussion on pp. 50, 62.

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denominators, just as Dunn has attempted to do by speaking of 'four pillars of ancient Judaism'.²⁴ These he defines as monotheism, election of Israel, covenant (focused in Torah) and the Temple. Yet the difficulty is that, precisely as a set of lowest common denominators, these points appear not to have been the central emphases or distinguishing features in the various Jewish groups of this period.²⁵ We cannot, on the basis of the texts available to us from this period, say that there was universal agreement on precisely what monotheism meant in practice, on the place of the Gentiles, on how the Torah was to be interpreted and applied, or on the validity of the present Temple.²⁶ It thus becomes impossible to speak of a Jewish 'orthodoxy' in this period, and thus the question 'Who was a Jew?' becomes as difficult to answer as its modern analogue, 'Who is a Jew?'

This point leads us to another key element of Casey's argument. In his view, it is precisely because the Johannine Christians had lost their Jewish self-identity that they were able to develop a Christology in which Jesus was considered divine.²⁷ He regards the

²⁴ Dunn, *Partings*, pp. 18–36. Neusner expresses his essential agreement with Dunn's assessment in *Judaic Law*, pp. 52–3. See also Neil J. McLelney, 'Orthodoxy in Judaism of the First Christian Century: Replies to David E. Aune and Lester L. Grabbe', *JSJ* 9/1 (1978), 84–7.

²⁵ Neusner, *Judaic Law*, p. 53. See also Barclay, *Jews*, p. 402.

²⁶ Cf. Aune, 'Orthodoxy', 6–7; Johnson, 'Anti-Jewish Slander', 426–8. There was also wide diversity of practice concerning the observance of purity laws (cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law. Studies in Mark and Galatians*, London: SPCK, 1990, pp. 140–7). Thus the explanation concerning water pots for purification (John 2.6; Casey, *Jewish Prophet*, pp. 28–9) need not imply more than that there was at least one 'God-fearer' or non-observant Jew present among John's intended readership. That many Jews observed purity laws even in the Diaspora is clear enough (cf. E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah. Five Studies*, London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990, pp. 258–71; *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, pp. 223–4), but nonetheless there were clearly also some who felt that such observance was unnecessary, particularly when there was no occasion for regular contact with the Temple (cf. Philo, *Mig.* 89–93). Likewise, the explanation of terms like 'rabbi' need not imply anything more than the presence of Jews whose first and perhaps only language was Greek. On the epigraphic evidence, which suggests that most Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews used a translation such as (νομο)διδάσκαλος rather than the transliterated 'rabbi', see E. Lohse, 'ῥαββί', *TDNT* VI, pp. 961–5; Shaye J. D. Cohen, 'Epigraphical Rabbis', *JQR* n.s. 72 (1981), 1–17. See also J. Louis Martyn, 'A Gentile Mission That Replaced an Earlier Jewish Mission?', in R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (eds.), *Exploring the Gospel of John. In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996, pp. 126–7; Richard Bauckham, 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?', in R. Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians. Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, p. 24.

²⁷ Casey, *Jewish Prophet*, p. 27.