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INTRODUCING THE THEORIES AND APPROACHES CONCERNING THE ORIGIN OF DIVINE CHRISTOLOGY

1.1 Significance of the Question

Jesus of Nazareth is one of the most significant and controversial figures of human civilization (Pelikan 1985; Bennett 2001), and billions of people throughout history have regarded him as divine. But where did this astonishing idea come from? How did a human Jewish preacher come to be regarded as God? Throughout the centuries, there has been intense debate concerning this fascinating question, and in recent years the debate has been fuelled by new arguments and hypotheses. Although a large number of books have already been written on this important topic, and many of them contain valuable insights from which I have learned much, nevertheless their proposals are beset with various problems. These problems include a failure to engage comprehensively with alternative hypotheses, a failure to address adequately the evidence of widespread agreement among the earliest Christians concerning the divinity of Christ and a failure to consider issues related to whether Jesus' intention was falsified.

This book offers a new contribution by addressing these and other issues using transdisciplinary tools. It proposes that Jesus was regarded as truly divine in earliest Christianity because its leaders thought that God demanded them to do so through the following way: A sizeable group of them perceived that Jesus claimed and showed himself to be truly divine, and they thought that God vindicated this claim by raising Jesus from the dead.

As will be explained in the rest of this book, the term 'earliest Christianity' distinguishes my proposal from those (e.g. James Dunn's Later Unfolding Theory and Maurice Casey's Later Evolutionary Theory) which fail to recognize the strength of the evidences for earliest highest Christology. The term 'truly divine' highlights the need to distinguish between different uses of the word 'divine' in early Christianity. 'God's demand' offers a corrective to those

proposals (the Early Evolutionary Theory by Wilhelm Bousset, Rudolf Bultmann, etc.) which neglect the Jewish Theocentric emphasis of earliest Christianity as pointed out by Larry Hurtado (2003), while 'sizeable group' avoids the pitfall concerning the subjectivity of the Religious Experience Theory proposed by Hurtado (see Chapter 5). 'Perceived' takes into account the earliest Christians' reflection and interpretation of their experiences, and avoids the pitfall of naive realism. The combination of the perception of Jesus' claims and resurrection avoids the weaknesses of those proposals (e.g. Hurtado's theory and Ehrman's Resurrection and Ascension Theory) which, while recognizing the importance of the earliest Christians' belief in Jesus' resurrection, neglect the importance of the earliest Christians' understanding of Jesus as the supreme communicator of God's will.

Although proposals involving the claims of Jesus have been suggested by others, they have not engaged adequately with alternative hypotheses or with the more recent arguments by Ehrman (2014) and others. This book will remedy these deficiencies and show that, contrary to the views of many scholars, such a proposal is defensible against various objections. In addition to providing a critique of various alternative scholarly attempts to address this important topic, I shall also synthesize their strengths while avoiding their weaknesses, thus providing a more holistic response compared to what is currently available in the literature. For example, I shall show that, while Dunn insightfully observes that there is never any hint that the traditionalist Jewish Christians found any cause for criticisms in Paul's Christology (Dunn 2008, 579–580), his proposal that the full recognition of Jesus' divinity occurred later fail to address adequately the evidences of highest Christology present within Paul's epistles as Hurtado et al. have argued. On the other hand, Hurtado's proposal (2003; 2005), while carefully taking into account these evidences, fails to explain Dunn's observation satisfactorily. My proposal synthesizes the evidences Hurtado cited as well as Dunn's observation by arguing that, being *Christ*ians, the more traditionalist Jewish Christians would all have agreed that what *Christ* indicated was what 'God' demanded.

I shall approach the origin of divine Christology as a phenomenon of history subject to the methods of historical enquiry. As such, it would involve a consideration of factors such as the religious, social and cultural background of the earliest Christians, their understanding of sacred texts, their religious experiences, their interactions

with surrounding cultures and the challenges that they faced. It would include an examination of the earliest Christian texts to discern the convictions of their authors concerning the divine status of Christ and how widely their convictions were held among the earliest Christian communities, as well as the construction of hypotheses that attempt to make sense of the evidences. Although this book is primarily a historical-critical study, it also incorporates insights from philosophy, theology and comparative religion. In particular, it defends the appropriateness and demonstrates the merits of utilizing philosophical distinctions (e.g. between ontology and function) and Trinitarian concepts for explaining early Christology, and it incorporates the perspective of comparative religion by examining cases of deification in other contexts. By using tools from various disciplines, this book contributes to bridging the divide between biblical, theological and religious studies, and it demonstrates how a transdisciplinary approach can be useful for biblical scholars and historians studying the New Testament and Christian origins.

1.2 Introducing Various Types of Theories Concerning the Origin of Divine Christology

I shall first introduce various theories concerning the origin of divine Christology.[1]

The first group of theories (which I shall call Evolutionary Theories) proposes that divine Christology was not the view of the primitive Palestinian Christian community; rather, the 'deification' of Jesus occurred as a significant development resulting from the changing nature of the Christian movement across the first century.[2] Noteworthy proponents of such theories include scholars of

[1] Only a brief sketch of these proposals will be given here to show the broad outline of the options available for approaching the question. A detailed evaluation of these proposals will be found in the later sections. For a useful summary of different proposals, see Hurtado (2005, 15–27), although it should be noted that my classification of these proposals differs from Hurtado's, as will be explained below.

[2] Hurtado calls it 'Evolutionary Development' (2005, 15–16). The problem with Hurtado's classification is that he includes the view of James Dunn under this category (2005, 19–20), but Dunn explicitly denies the label 'evolutionary' for his view. Dunn (1994) sees his own view rather as an 'unfolding'. While scholars like Bousset and Casey would call such development a 'deviation' from the faith of the primitive Palestinian Christian community, Dunn would deny this. C. F. D. Moule (1977, 3) influentially defined an evolutionary model of christological origins (as against a merely developmental one) as involving the progressive 'accretion of … alien factors that were not inherent from the beginning'.

the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* ('history-of-religion school') of the early twentieth century, a group of scholars at Göttingen that included Wilhelm Bousset, Albert Eichhorn, Hermann Gunkel, Wilhelm Heitmüller and Johannes Weiss. The most influential work that came out of this *Schule* was Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* (Bousset 1970; 1st German edition 1913). Bousset proposed that fairly early in the history of the Christian movement, the Gentile Christians, influenced by their pagan Hellenistic traditions, were led to give divine honours to Jesus. Bousset argued that the application of the title *kyrios* ('Lord') to Jesus originated from Gentile churches outside Palestine, and their faith in turn shaped the beliefs of the apostle Paul, through whom the reverence to Jesus spread widely. This deviated from the faith of the primitive Palestinian Jewish community, whose monotheistic heritage precluded such a high Christology and who regarded Jesus as a merely human messianic figure. As Christianity moved away from its Jewish roots, the increased Gentilization of the Christian church in the first century subsequently caused the deviation to prevail. Although challenged from early on by some scholars (e.g. Rawlinson 1926, who argues that Bousset's theory has difficulty explaining the *maranatha* invocation in 1 Cor. 16:22, and Machen 1930), Bousset's work had tremendous influence on subsequent generations of scholars, including Rudolf Bultmann, Ferdinand Hahn (1969), Reginald Fuller (1965) and Hendrikus Boers (1970). I shall call their proposals 'Early Evolutionary Theories'.

Another view postulates that the highest form of divine Christology began after Paul, towards the end of the first century. This view is held by scholars such as Maurice Casey and James Dunn, though they differ significantly in details.[3]

Like Bousset, Casey (1991; 1996; 1999) proposes that the deification of Jesus was caused by pagan Hellenistic influence, mediated through the gradually increasing numbers of Gentile Christians who were not sensitive to Jewish monotheism. However, unlike Bousset, Casey locates the full deification of Jesus much later, sometime around AD 80 when the Gospel of John was written. Thus Casey's view can be called Later Evolutionary Theory.

Like Casey, Dunn (1980; 1998; 2003; 2008; 2010) proposes that the full recognition of Jesus as divine occurred much later, during the last two decades of the first century when the Gospel of John was

[3] For Dunn's criticism of Casey, which serves to differentiate their views, see Dunn (1994).

written. Unlike Casey and Bousset, however, Dunn sees this development not as a result of pagan influence, but as a natural unfolding, a Christian extension of trends within Second Temple Jewish monotheism itself. These involved speculations about various figures portrayed as God's principal agents. I shall refer to Dunn's proposal as the Later Unfolding Theory. (As explained in later chapters, Ehrman's Resurrection and Ascension Theory combines aspects of Evolutionary Theory and Later Unfolding Theory. DeConick's Theological Deduction Theory proposes that the full recognition of Jesus as divine was not present in the primitive Palestinian Christian community, but was present in Paul's writings as a result of theological deduction involving Jewish ideas, hence her view can be regarded as Early Unfolding Theory.)

The last group of theories can be called 'Explosion Theories' (one might also call this 'the Big-Bang theory of Christology'!).[4] This proposes that highest Christology *was* the view of the primitive Palestinian Christian community. The recognition of Jesus as truly divine was not a significant development from the views of the primitive Palestinian Christian community; rather, it 'exploded' right at the beginning of Christianity. The proponents of the Explosion view would say that the highest Christology of the later New Testament writings (e.g. Gospel of John) and the creedal formulations of the early church fathers, with their explicit affirmations of the pre-existence and ontological divinity of Christ, are not so much a development in essence but a development in understanding and explication of what was already essentially there at the beginning of the Christian movement. As Bauckham (2008a, x) memorably puts it, 'The earliest Christology was already the highest Christology.'

Many proponents of this group of theories have been labelled together as 'the New *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*' (Hurtado 2003, 11), and they include such eminent scholars as Richard Bauckham, Larry Hurtado, N. T. Wright and the late Martin Hengel. Hengel (1974; 1976; 1995) and Hurtado (2003, 13–24) in particular have offered extensive criticisms of Bousset in numerous publications since the 1970s, and they and others have argued that highest Christology can be accounted for within a Jewish rather than Gentile context, such as by appealing to the Jewish concept of divine agency. The view of the 'New *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*' has been criticized as well

[4] The metaphor of explosion is taken from Hurtado (2005, 25). I thank Gray Kocher-Lindgren for suggesting the metaphor of 'Big Bang'.

as defended in recent literature, and it seems to be the emerging consensus among scholars. As New Testament scholar Andrew Chester observes, 'whereas for much of the twentieth century the dominant view was that high Christology represented something that emerged relatively late and under Gentile or pagan influence, more recently it has been seen as coming about at an early stage and within a Jewish setting' (Chester 2011, 22).[5] Nevertheless, there are disagreements among the proponents of 'Explosion Theories' concerning the cause of this explosion. It is noteworthy, however, that some of them have traced the origin of divine Christology back to Jesus himself (see Chapter 7).

1.3 Introducing the Issue of Jesus' Self-Understanding

Jesus' self-understanding has traditionally been regarded as the root of the claim of his authority. This is most evidently portrayed by the 'I AM' sayings of John's Gospel. After the criticisms of F. C. Baur (1792–1860) and D. F. Strauss (1808–1874), however, many argue that this Gospel can no longer be accepted uncritically as a source of authentic words of the historical Jesus (Pannenberg 1968, 327).[6] Subsequently, Wrede (1971; 1st German edition 1901) and others criticized the presupposition that the earlier Gospels recorded historical events uninfluenced by theological interests. These criticisms cast doubts on the traditional view that Jesus regarded himself as truly divine. Over the centuries, various 'Quests for the Historical Jesus' (for survey, see Theissen and Merz 1998; Powell 1999; Dunn and McKnight eds. 2005) have yielded a wide range of alternative views concerning Jesus' self-understanding, such as

- a 'Liberal Jesus' (Ritschl 1900; 1st German edition 1882)
- a religious fanatic (Renan 1924; 1st French edition 1896)
- a Jewish teacher (Klausner 1989; 1st Hebrew edition 1925)
- a Hasid (Jewish holy man) (Vermès 1984, 1993, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2008)
- a religious mystic (Borg 1991, 2006; Chilton 2000)
- a nonviolent social revolutionary (Horsley 1993)

[5] Chester himself argues that Second Temple Judaism's themes of messianic hope, intermediary figures and visionary traditions of human transformation are important for the origin of early Christian Christology.

[6] The historicity and distinctive nature of John's Gospel continue to be debated; compare, for example, Casey (1996) with Keener (2003).

- someone comparable to a Cynic philosopher (Mack 1988; Crossan 1991)
- a Jewish apocalyptic prophet (Weiss 1971; 1st German edition 1892; Schweitzer 1968; 1st German edition 1906; Sanders 1985; 1993; Allison 1998; Ehrman 1999; 2014).

The traditional view, however, has continued to be defended by various scholars, such as N. T. Wright and Darrell Bock in recent years (see Chapter 7).

In their assessment of the debate, modern scholars are aware that various portrayals of Jesus are also found outside the New Testament (Van Voorst 2000), such as in the 'Gnostic' writings (Franzmann 1996), the Arabic writings (Khalidi 2001) and the Jewish Talmud (Schäfer 2007). However, the accounts in Arabic writers and the Jewish Talmud are late and should be treated with great caution. Additionally, many scholars have argued that the contents of the Gnostic gospels indicate that their authors made use of earlier traditions which can be found in the four Gospels and adapted these in accordance with their Gnostic philosophy, and that the four Gospels have greater historical reliability compared to the Gnostic gospels (Jenkins 2001; Gaventa and Hays 2008, 10–15; Hill 2010). Nevertheless, the process of sifting through the four Gospels to determine which sayings or deeds attributed to Jesus can be traced back to the Jesus of history, and whether they provide any indication of his implicit or explicit claims, is fraught with difficulties.

To address these difficulties, historians have devised various criteria for determining authenticity, such as the criterion of multiple attestation, the criterion of embarrassment and the criterion of dissimilarity (Harvey 1982; Meier 1991–2009, vol.1; Porter 2000). However, various limitations or fallacies beset these criteria and/or their applications (Keith and Le Donne 2012). For example, the criterion of dissimilarity, which claims that an authentic tradition of Jesus must be dissimilar to both Judaism and the teachings of the early Christians, has been widely regarded as fundamentally flawed in principle. As Harvey (1982) argues in response to the prevalent scepticism following the Second Quest for the Historical Jesus, the culture in which Jesus lived must have imposed certain 'constraints' on him, and he would have had to take into account these constraints in order to communicate to his audience. Contrary to the criterion of dissimilarity, it is far more plausible that an influential historical person should be in some ways indebted to his context (in the case

of Jesus, the first-century Jewish context) and that he should have impact on his followers (the earliest Christians). Hence, other scholars have defended the criterion of 'double plausibility', i.e. of context (Jesus and Second Temple Judaism) and consequence (Jesus and Early Christians) (Theissen and Winter 2002).

Regardless of the difficulties, historical Jesus scholars are widely agreed that we can know at least the following eight 'almost indisputable facts' about Jesus' life which are listed in Sanders (1985; 1993):

(1) Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.
(2) Jesus was a Galilean who preached and healed.
(3) Jesus called disciples and spoke of twelve of them.
(4) Jesus confined his activity to Israel.
(5) Jesus engaged in a controversy about the temple.
(6) Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem by the Roman authorities.
(7) After his death, Jesus' followers continued as an identifiable movement.
(8) At least some Jews persecuted at least some members of the new movement.

The self-understanding of Jesus is not in the list. Some have wondered whether it is possible to accurately discern Jesus' self-understanding or anyone else's for that matter. In reply, Wright argues that looking at Jesus' self-understanding is

> a process neither of psychoanalysis, nor of romantic fiction, but of history. History seeks, among other things, to answer the question: why did this character act in this way? And among the characteristic answers such questions receive is: he believed, at the core of his being, that it was his duty, his destiny, his vocation, to do so. The study of people's belief about their own vocation has not been made sufficiently explicit. (Wright 2002, 53; see also Grindheim 2011)

Wright makes a good point. Nevertheless, there are disputes concerning whether certain acts of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels (e.g. forgiving the paralytic in Mark 2:1–12) are relevant in the sense of implying a claim to divinity (see discussion in Chapter 7). Others have mentioned the difficulty of excluding the possibility that the early Christians who produced the Gospels adapted the tradition of Jesus' sayings to suit their own high view of Jesus as well as their own situations (Neyrey 1985; Tuckett 2001, 202–203). Additionally, the

issue of bias highlighted by Martin Kähler at the end of the nineteenth century presents a challenge which is emphasized by contemporary postmodernist thinkers. Kähler argues that, unlike other figures of the past, Jesus has in every age exerted too powerful an influence on all sorts of people and still makes too strong a claim on everyone. Thus, we cannot have an unbiased historical record of him, nor an unbiased historian assessing the record, and therefore the historical-critical project is completely undermined (Kähler 1964, 92–95; 1st German edition 1892). Likewise, Albert Schweitzer's highly influential *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which brought a halt to the First Quest, argued against the notion of objectivity of historians writing on Jesus, claiming that they merely produced diverse portraits of Jesus which fitted their own diverse presupposed beliefs (Schweitzer 1968; 1st German edition 1906).

1.4 The Approach of This Book

In this book, I shall utilize an approach that seeks to overcome the above-mentioned difficulties. Taking seriously the criterion of 'double plausibility' proposed by Theissen and Winter (2002) and focusing on the question of what could have caused the early Christians to be biased towards affirming a high view of Jesus in the first place, I shall argue that my proposal mentioned at the beginning of this chapter[7] can be justified on the basis of evidences concerning the earliest Christians' beliefs which are found in their documents. There have been other scholars (e.g. Manson 1961; Witherington 1990; Swinburne 1994; 2003; 2010; Hengel 1995; 2006; 2007; Wright 1996, 2002, 2003, 2013; McDonough 2009) who have also argued for a connection between an early high Christology and the claims of the historical Jesus. However, none of their studies have so far interacted adequately with alternative hypotheses such as that offered by Hurtado,[8] as well as the more recent arguments by Peppard (2011) and Ehrman (2014). By comprehensively engaging with alternative

[7] That is, Jesus was widely regarded as truly divine in earliest Christianity because its leaders thought that it was God's demand which was known through the following way: A sizeable group of them perceived that Jesus claimed and showed himself to be truly divine, and they thought that God vindicated this claim by raising Jesus from the dead.

[8] While Wright has engaged Hurtado in his more recent writing (see Wright 2013), he seems not to have dealt adequately with Hurtado's hypothesis that the earliest Christians' conviction of Jesus' divinity was formed through an interaction with powerful 'revelatory' experiences. See, for example, the response in Hurtado (2014c).

hypotheses and these more recent arguments, this book avoids these weaknesses.

In reply to Kähler, Schweitzer and the postmodernists, one can concede that there might not have been any unbiased historical record of Jesus written by completely neutral observers and that the authors of the New Testament documents could have been biased in favour of affirming his deity alongside his humanity. Nevertheless, the question that needs to be asked is what could have caused the bias of these authors (if they had any) in the first place. As will be argued in the rest of this book, the most probable cause for such bias (if any) and belief in his divinity is that the first disciples perceived that Jesus regarded himself as truly divine and they believed that he was resurrected as a vindication of his claims. Regarding the argument concerning the bias of historians, it is indeed unavoidable that all interpretations of who Jesus was are, by their very nature, interpretations from a particular perspective (Torrance 2001, 217). This is consistent with an epistemological position known as critical realism. Critical realism affirms the existence of a real world independent of the knower (realism). At the same time, it acknowledges that the only access we have to this reality is through the human mind involving reflection, interpretation of information through a grid of psychological states such as expectations, memories and beliefs, and the expression and accommodation of that reality with tools such as mathematical formulae or mental models (hence critical) (Wright 1992b, 32–44; A. McGrath 2001–2003, vol.2, ch.10). With respect to the critical process of knowing, Little insightfully observes that

> There is no fundamental difficulty in reconciling the idea of a researcher with one set of religious values, who nonetheless carefully traces out the religious values of a historical actor possessing radically different values. This research can be done badly, of course; but there is no inherent epistemic barrier that makes it impossible for the researcher to examine the body of statements, behaviors, and contemporary cultural institutions corresponding to the other, and to come to a justified representation of the other … The set of epistemic values that we impart to scientists and historians include the value of intellectual discipline and a willingness to subject their hypotheses to the test of uncomfortable facts. Once again, review of the history of science and historical