

HOMAGE TO THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND EARLY CHRISTIAN DEVOTION

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ABSTRACT

What continuity or discontinuity is there between the remarkable devotion to Jesus as divine figure in earliest Christianity and the sorts of homage/reverence that was given to the earthly Jesus? The intra-canonical Gospels exhibit notable differences in the ways that they portray the homage given to Jesus in his ministry, particularly in the language that they prefer. Matthew is distinctive in a programmatic portrayal of the homage given to Jesus by various figures as 'worship'. Collectively, however, the Gospels confirm that the worship of Jesus in 'post-Easter' Christian circles represents a significant development beyond the sorts of homage given to Jesus during his ministry.

Key Words: historical Jesus, worship of Jesus, homage to Jesus.

In previous publications, I have spent a good deal of effort on historical inquiry into the devotional practice of earliest Christianity, focusing on the 'binitarian' shape of earliest Christian devotion in which Jesus figures with God as recipient of worship.¹ Joining in a line of researchers that goes back to the early *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (history of religions school), I

1. Most recently, L.W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Among my relevant previous publications, see, esp., 'The Binitarian Shape of Early Christian Worship', in C.C. Newman, J.R. Davila and G.S. Lewis (eds.), *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (JSJSup, 63; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), pp. 187-213; *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), esp. pp. 63-97; and, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2nd edn, 1998; Philadelphia: Fortress Press [1st edn] 1988). In the following paragraphs I summarize results presented and defended more fully in these publications.

have focused on questions about the nature and origins of Christian devotion in the first two centuries after Jesus (although, with a number of more recent scholars, I have been led to revise heavily the influential analysis that emerged from the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*).² In this essay, I wish to turn to the question of what historical connection, if any, there may have been between this 'post-Easter' devotional pattern and the 'historical Jesus'. More precisely, how is the extraordinary reverence that was accorded to Jesus as the 'Lord' so quickly in the earliest Christian decades related to the respectful attitudes and gestures toward Jesus that characterized the period of Jesus' ministry, prior to his execution and the eruption of the conviction that God had vindicated him and exalted him to heavenly glory? To address this question, we must first determine what we can say, and with what warrants, about the kinds of reverence that might have been accorded to the 'historical' Jesus.

1. Definitions

But, before we proceed to the data that I will focus on in this discussion, in the interests of clarity and avoiding misunderstanding, it may be helpful to define a few important terms, and to say just a bit more about early Christian reverence of Jesus in the early decades after his ministry.

First, I use the term 'devotion' as a *portmanteau* collective term for the honorific beliefs and reverential actions that express the religious stance of early Christians toward God and Jesus. More frequently, scholars have focused on the 'Christology' of this or that text or early Christian leader/-writer, the beliefs about Jesus (e.g. his redemptive death, resurrection, pre-existence) and the linguistic terms (e.g. the well-known christological 'titles') and conceptual categories involved. I regard 'Christology' in this sense as a sub-set of phenomena expressive of the religious 'devotion' of early Christians, the other key sub-set of phenomena being their 'devotional practices'.

Among the devotional practices of earliest Christian circles reflected in extant sources were such things as invoking Jesus' name in healing and exorcism (e.g. Acts 3.6; 16.18), baptism (e.g. Acts 2.38), and in other actions

2. The classic expression of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* on devotion to Jesus was, of course, Wilhelm Bousset's influential volume, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (FRLANT, 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913, 1921). The English translation in 1970 both indicated and furthered the continuing influence of his study: *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (trans. J.E. Steely; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970).

intended to execute divine power (e.g. the judgment of the man accused of incestuous union in 1 Cor. 5.3-5).³ In these and other actions that I have discussed elsewhere, we have a remarkable feature of early Christian devotional practice, which was that Jesus was apparently given the sort of place that was otherwise reserved for God alone.⁴ That is, Jesus was treated as a recipient of 'cultic' reverence that was given in the setting of corporate worship, this reverence of Jesus comprising a central characteristic of early Christian corporate worship practice. Also among the constellation of specific devotional actions involved were songs/hymns concerning Jesus (and in some cases sung to him) that formed a characteristic feature of early Christian corporate worship, the well-known passages commonly thought to be 'christological hymns' and, thus, the earliest extant artefacts of this particular practice.⁵

Towards a full appreciation of the historical significance of this devotion to Jesus, it is important to remember that earliest Christians, both Jewish and gentile believers, seem characteristically to have practiced a rather strict 'monotheistic' worship, rejecting all the deities of the wider religious environment as bogus and even demonic forces unworthy of reverence (e.g. 1 Cor. 10.14-22), and worshipping only the one God of the Jewish scriptures as the 'living and true God' (1 Thess. 1.9-10). In this stance, they were affirming for themselves the well-known exclusivist monotheism of Roman-era Jewish tradition, and, of course, were significantly marking themselves off in matters of worship from the more inclusive attitudes and practices of

3. In 1 Cor. 5.4, whether the phrase 'in the name of the/our Lord Jesus' is taken as referring to Paul's personal judgment about the matter or to the gathering of the Corinthian congregation, the phrase clearly links ritual use of Jesus' name with the exercise of spiritual power that Paul calls for here. See, e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 206-208. On the ritual use of Jesus' name, the classic study is Wilhelm Heitmüller, *'Im Namen Jesu': Eine sprach-und-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Neuen Testament, speziell zur alchristlichen Taufe* (FRLANT, 1.2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903). See also Adelheid Ruck-Schröder, *Der Name Gottes und der Name Jesu: Eine neutestamentliche Studie* (WMANT, 80; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener-Verlag, 1999); and Lars Hartman, *'Into the Name of the Lord Jesus': Baptism in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997).

4. Again, I refer readers to the publications listed in n. 1 for further discussion of the evidence concerning the specific actions that manifest the treatment of Jesus as recipient of devotion: (1) the place of Jesus in early Christian prayer, (2) cultic invocation of Jesus and confession of him/his name, (3) baptism in his name, (4) the 'Lord's Supper', (5) hymns sung about and to Jesus, and (6) prophecy given in his name and as his 'voice'.

5. See, esp., Martin Hengel, 'The Song about Christ in Earliest Worship', in *idem, Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), pp. 227-93.

the Roman world.⁶ This exclusivist behaviour of earliest Christian circles makes all the more striking the programmatic inclusion of the glorified Jesus as recipient of corporate liturgical praise and appeal along with God, and, indeed, as the unique figure through whom the one God now was validly to be worshipped.

This programmatic inclusion of Jesus as recipient of such reverence gave to early Christian devotional practice what I have termed a 'binitarian shape,' in which corporate liturgical reverence was directed to God and to (or through) Jesus. Furthermore, in so far as the place of Jesus in early Christian devotional practice was (a) unparalleled in comparison to the ways that 'divine agent' figures were treated in devout Jewish circles of the day, and (b) was analogous only to the kind of devotion otherwise reserved for God, it is appropriate to refer to early Christian 'worship' of Jesus along with God.

To be sure, in the early Christian sources that reflect and affirm this worship pattern (which include our earliest extant Christian writings that take us back to devotional practice of the first couple of decades), Jesus is presented as entitled to such reverence precisely because God ('the Father') has exalted him to unique glory and status as the 'Lord' (e.g. Phil. 2.9-11). Consequently, cultic acclamation of Jesus as 'Lord' and exalted 'Son' redounds also to the glory of God. Indeed, to refuse to give such honour to Jesus is to fail to honour God aright (Jn 5.23). That is, although remarkable and even unparalleled, the worship of Jesus in earliest Christianity was practiced, not as in any way detracting from the worship of God 'the Father,' but instead as the distinctively Christian way of offering worship to the one true God. The exalted Jesus was worshipped as the 'image' of God who reflects God's glory, the 'Son' of God who uniquely represents and executes God's will, and the 'Lord' who has been exalted to a unique status that is defined solely with reference to God (e.g. 'at God's right hand'). Nevertheless, to repeat a point for emphasis, although Jesus is defined with reference to, and revered as unique agent of, God 'the Father', the constellation of devotional actions that characterized early Christian practice is justifiably described as reflecting the 'worship' of Jesus in the cultic sense of that word.

In so far as the preceding summary-discussion is essentially correct, major historical questions are obvious.⁷ In particular, how are we to account

6. Robert M. Grant, *The Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986); Larry W. Hurtado, 'First Century Jewish Monotheism', *JSNT* 71 (1998), pp. 3-26.

7. The phenomena to which I point, and the dates of the texts in which they are reflected, are hardly in dispute. Because J.D.G. Dunn and Maurice Casey see Jesus reach-

for Christian circles of the first few decades, which were either in or shaped by the rather strictly monotheistic ethos of Roman-era Jewish religious tradition, so quickly and so strikingly affirming this binitarian devotional pattern? More specifically, how are we to account for Jesus becoming the recipient of the sort of devotion that is attested from our earliest extant Christian writings onward? One of the important aims in my own research on this matter has been to identify historical forces and factors that might account for this development. One of the factors/forces that I invoke is the ministry of Jesus, particularly his polarizing impact. It is not possible here to go further into that discussion.⁸ Instead, as indicated already, in the present essay I wish to explore a cognate question about how much the 'post-Easter' devotion to Jesus was either continuous or discontinuous with phenomena of the 'historical' Jesus.

2. *Reverence for Jesus in the Gospels*

Any reader of the intra-canonical Gospels will note that they frequently portray people making reverential/respectful gestures toward Jesus.⁹ But, as

ing fully divine status in early Christianity only toward the end of the first century (both emphasizing Johannine Christianity as the setting, though they invoke conflicting explanations), they demur from characterizing the reverence given to Jesus as 'worship' prior to those later decades, although they grant that it amounts to a notable development. I have indicated why I do not find their views persuasive in Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, Chapter 1, and I cannot linger over this dispute here.

8. I have identified four major forces/factors that interacted in driving and shaping earliest Christian devotion as a novel variant-form ('mutation') in Jewish monotheism: (1) Jewish religious tradition, especially its exclusivist monotheistic commitment and the role of figures portrayed as God's 'principal agent'; (2) the effects of Jesus' ministry, most importantly the polarization of opinion about him reflected in the following that he collected and the mortal opposition that he generated; (3) religious experiences taken by recipients as revelatory; and (4) interaction with the larger religious environment. For discussion, see esp. Chapter 1 of Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*.

9. I focus here on the four intra-canonical Gospels for several reasons. First, with most scholars, I take these texts to be earlier than the extra-canonical gospels. The latter (e.g. *Gospel of Thomas*) may well draw upon some *Jesus-tradition* as early as that reflected in the intra-canonical Gospels, but as *literary products* I judge them to be later. Secondly, the literary relationships of the intra-canonical Gospels (in whatever scheme of priority and dependence) along with their commonalities and individual emphases show that these texts reflect a certain diversity of first-century Christians who nevertheless also shared a considerable amount of tradition and beliefs. Finally, for various reasons (including their early usage and emergence as preferred accounts of Jesus), the intra-canonical Gospels seem to reflect Christian circles that were concerned with narrative traditions about Jesus. Consequently, it is more appropriate to test the

with many other things that these Gospels narrate, the question is what we are to make of these scenes as evidence of the actual behaviour of people in relationship to the historical Jesus. That is, prior to the question of what continuity there may have been between any reverential gestures toward the historical Jesus and the devotional practice of earliest Christianity there is the question of what sort(s) of gesture(s) of respect or homage people might have offered to Jesus in the time of his ministry. As a first step toward answering this question, let us take careful note of the terms used in the Gospels to describe the gestures of those whom the narratives portray as giving Jesus homage.

a. The Gospels' Language of Homage

There are six expressions to consider, some of them used in combination: προσκυνέω, πίπτω, προσπίπτω, προσπίπτω τᾷς γόνασιν, γονυπετέω, and τίθημι τὰ γόνατα. We can also note the use of these expressions in other New Testament writings, which will help us form a better sense of what they connoted in first-century Christian usage.¹⁰ The first thing to note is that they all describe the same or very similar physical gestures of falling down before someone (on the knees or fully prostrate). Moreover, it is important to observe that all of these terms fit within the vocabulary of homage and respect of the time, and they describe the actual gestures widely used in various traditional cultures to express homage, respect, and reverence toward a figure deemed one's superior (whether human or divine), and/or any figure from whom one seeks an important favour or benefit in a circumstance of great need.¹¹

The term γονυπετέω (to 'fall on the knees/fall down before') is used only a few times in the Matthew and Mark, and nowhere else in the New Testament.¹² In Matthew it describes the gesture of the man who begs Jesus to deliver his afflicted son (17.14); and it appears in the Markan account of the man who approaches Jesus to ask about how to inherit eternal life (10.17). Also, in the textually uncertain Mk 1.40, some witnesses

relationship between their devotional practice and the descriptions of reverence/homage given to Jesus in the intra-canonical accounts.

10. Though not used in the Gospels to describe homage to Jesus, the expression κάπτω γόνυ/τὰ γόνατα also appears in the cultic vocabulary in other first-century Christian texts (Rom. 11.4; 14.11; Eph. 3.14), including also Phil. 2.10, where it forms part of the description of universal homage and acclamation of Jesus as κύριος (πᾶν γόνυ κάμψῃ...καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογῆσεται).

11. Note, e.g., the following entries in *EDNT*: E. Palzkill, 'πίπτω', 3.90-91; J.M. Nützel, 'προσκυνέω', 3.173-75; *idem*, 'γόνυ', 1.257-58 (all with further bibliography).

12. Also, the word is not used in the LXX.

attribute this action to the leper who asks Jesus to heal him. Finally, Matthew uses the term in his description of the abusive mockery of Jesus by Pilate's soldiers (27.29), in preference to Mark's portrayal of them as *τιθέντες τὰ γόνατα προσεκύνουν αὐτῷ* ('kneeling down to him', 15.19), illustrative of relevant terminological variations among the Evangelists to which I return below. In Lk. 5.8, we have a somewhat synonymous expression used to describe Peter's posture in beseeching Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish (*προσέπεσεν τοῖς γόνασιν*, 'he fell to his knees').

In fact, both *πίπτω* and the compound-form *προσπίπτω* mean 'to fall' and are used several times to describe reverential gestures toward Jesus in Mark and Luke, the two verb-forms seeming to function almost interchangeably. Thus, the variant expressions *πίπτω/προσπίπτω αὐτῷ* ('fall down to/before him') and *πίπτω/προσπίπτω πρὸς/παρὰ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ* ('fall at his feet') describe the gestures made by demoniacs (in Mk 3.11/Lk. 8.28) and others who seek some favour from Jesus or wish to show respect (the healed woman of Mk 5.33/Lk. 8.47, the Syrophenician woman of Mk 7.25, and Jairus Mk 5.22/Lk. 8.41). The expression *πίπτω ἐπὶ πρόσωπον* (to 'fall upon [one's] face') appears in the description of the leper's supplication of Jesus in Lk. 5.12; and in Lk. 17.16 we have the rather pleonastic description of the Samaritan leper's gesture of gratitude to Jesus for his healing, *ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον παρὰ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ εὐχαριστῶν αὐτῷ* ('he fell on his face at his feet, thanking him'). In Mt. 17.6, the disciples 'fell on their faces' (*ἔπεσαν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῶν*) at Jesus' transfiguration, but here it is not entirely clear whether this posture is reverence for Jesus or simply part of their frightened response to the divine voice from heaven in 17.5. The one Johannine usage of *πίπτω* to describe reverence to Jesus is in 11.32, where the grieving Mary falls at Jesus' feet (*ἔπεσεν αὐτοῦ πρὸς τοὺς πόδας*).

As indicated earlier, these expressions all refer to the sort of reverential gestures that were deemed appropriate in that ancient near-eastern culture; and the gestures do not necessarily signal that the person to whom such homage is offered is treated as divine. To be sure, prostration and falling to one's knees can also feature in supplication to gods. For example, in Lk. 22.41, Jesus goes to his knees to pray in Gethsemane (*θεῖς τὰ γόνατα*; cf. *ἔπιπτεν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς*, 'he fell down on the ground', Mk 14.35; *ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ*, 'he fell down on his face', Mt. 26.39). In addition, we have several uses of forms of *τίθημι τὰ γόνατα* ('kneel down') in Acts to describe the posture adopted for supplicative prayer (7.60; 9.40; 20.36; 21.5). Note also the description of the imploring postures (using either *πίπτω* or *προσπίπτω*) taken by the Philippian jailor toward Paul and Silas in Acts 16.29, and by the indebted servant in Mt. 18.29. We have a different use of the expression in Acts 5.10, where it describes Ananias' wife collapsing and

dying upon having been confronted with the financial deception in which she was a party with her husband.

The most important term, however, with the most interesting variation in usage among the Evangelists, is προσκυνέω ('make obeisance, do reverence to, worship').¹³ In the LXX and the New Testament this verb, too, can be used to designate the reverence given, for example, by servants to their masters (Mt. 18.26), or by others who demonstrate by the gesture the superiority of another person (e.g. Gen. 27.29; 37.10; 49.8; Acts 10.25). More characteristically, however, in the LXX (e.g. Exod. 20.5; Deut. 4.19; Josh. 23.19) and also in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor. 14.5; Mt. 4.9-10; Lk. 4.7-8), it is used to refer to the gesture of reverence given to a deity and intended specifically to register what we mean by the term 'worship'.¹⁴ Indeed, an interesting feature of Jewish and early Christian usage is the absolute form of προσκυνέω (i.e. without an accusative or dative noun as object) as the designation of what is involved in 'worship' (e.g. 1 Sam. 1.13; Jn 4.20; 12.20; Acts 8.27; 24.11).

The importance of the term is reflected in the pattern of its usages in the New Testament, which are concentrated heavily in Matthew, John, and Revelation. It appears with particular frequency in passages about worship of divine beings. In the Johannine account of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman about the proper place and mode of valid worship, forms of προσκυνέω are used consistently (eight times in 4.20-24, plus the cognate noun προσκυνηταί, 'worshippers' in 4.23). The largest number of uses is in Revelation (twenty-four), indicative of the major emphasis of this writing on contrasting worship of the true God with the invalid worship of the 'Beast' and its image.¹⁵

13. Note especially the thoroughgoing study by Johannes Horst, *Proskynein: Zur Anbetung im Urchristentum nach ihrer religionsgeschichtlichen Eigenart* (NTF, 3.2; Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1932), who discusses both philological data and visual representations of the action. More summary treatments appear in *TDNT*, VI, pp. 758-66 (H. Greeven); and *EDNT*, III, pp. 173-75 (J.M. Nützell).

14. According to Greeven (*TDNT*, VI, p. 760 n. 23), of the 171 instances of הִתְחַנֵּן (hithpalel form of חָנַן) in the Hebrew Bible, 164 are translated by προσκυνέω in the LXX. Moreover, προσκυνέω is used almost exclusively to render this expression in the LXX.

15. Even in Revelation, however, we see an instance where προσκυνέω represents homage rightly given to human figures in 3.9, where Jesus promises that he will cause those of 'the synagogue of Satan' to come and give obeisance before the Philadelphian Christians (προσκυνήσουσιν ἐνώπιον τῶν ποδῶν σου), who are thereby acknowledged as those whom Jesus loves. The phrasing is similar to that used in Rev. 15.4 to describe the homage to be given to God by all nations. It is arguable, however, that in Rev. 3.9 the homage given to the elect constitutes indirectly worship of God, the vindicated elect manifesting the future triumph of God and Christ over those who now oppose them. Moreover, Jesus' promise in Rev. 3.9 echoes Old Testament passages

b. Προσκυνέω in the Gospels

It is especially interesting, therefore, to take account of the use of this term in the Gospels. The first thing to note is the variation in frequency of usage: twice in Mark, three times in Luke (in two passages), eight times in John (in three passages), and thirteen times in Matthew (in nine distinguishable passages). Clearly, 'Matthew' had a special fondness for the word, and it will be important, therefore, to inquire why. But, as we shall see, for all four of the Evangelists there seems to be a special connotation of the term when it is used to refer to the reverence given to Jesus by figures in their narratives.

Other than in the temptation narrative (Lk. 4.1-13), where Satan urges Jesus to worship him, and Jesus refuses by citing the command in Deut. 6.13 to worship the Lord God only (Lk. 4.7-8), Luke's only other use of προσκυνέω is in 22.52, where he portrays Jesus' disciples worshipping the risen Jesus (προσκυνήσαντες αὐτόν) and then joyfully returning to Jerusalem. As noted earlier, Luke elsewhere uses other terms that do not have the same association with the worship of deities to describe the respectful postures of people who come to Jesus in supplication or thankfully: πίπτω ἐπὶ πρόσωπον/παρὰ τοὺς πόδας, 5.12; 8.41; 17.16; προσπίπτω αὐτῷ, 8.28, 47; προσπίπτω ταῖς γόνασιν, 5.8. That is, the only Lukan use of the term προσκυνέω to describe reverence given to Jesus is with reference to the *risen* Jesus, in the narratives of the appearances of the resurrected Jesus that are so commonly recognized as intended to prefigure the worship of early Christian circles. Luke, thus, somewhat carefully 'periodizes' reverence given to Jesus, distinguishing between the period of Jesus' ministry and the 'post-Easter' period in the language that he uses to portray people's actions.

The one case where John uses προσκυνέω with Jesus as the recipient is in 9.38, where, upon Jesus' identification of himself as the one who healed him, the former blind man declares 'I believe, Lord', and bows in reverence. Like the Lukan narrative of the appearances of the risen Jesus, this story in John 9 is also commonly recognized as metaphorical of the readers for whom the Evangelist wrote.¹⁶ Here, the healing of the blind man is anticipative of

where God promises Israel such obeisance from foreigners (e.g. Isa. 49.23; 60.14). Elsewhere in Revelation, however, the term refers to the direct worship of God and the 'Lamb' (4.10; 5.14; 7.11; 11.1, 16; 14.7; 15.4; 19.4, 10; 22.9) or its unholy opposite, worship of demons (9.20), the Dragon (13.4), and the Beast and its image (13.4, 8, 12, 15; 14.9, 11; 16.2; 19.20; 20.4). This strong usage of the verb is also reflected in the two passages where the seer mistakenly starts to offer worship to the angel who accompanies the visions but is forbidden from doing so by the angel, who urges the seer to 'worship God' instead (19.10; 22.8-9).

16. E.g., J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), pp. 24-62.

the illumination of all those who recognize Jesus' unique significance and reverence him with the same honour that they give to God 'the Father' (5.23). That is, the readers were to see their own rescue from the darkness of ignorance and unbelief in the account of the healing of the man born blind; and in his dramatic gesture of adoring reverence they were sure to recognize their own devotional practice registered. In short, John, too, portrays Jesus receiving divine-like honour only once, in this deliberately-styled story that was particularly shaped to connect to the religious stance of the readers.

The two uses of προσκυνέω in Mark likewise appear to be selective and significant. But they also reflect Mark's penchant for irony.¹⁷ The extent and detailed nature of the account of the man possessed by a multitude of demons in Mk 5.1-20 indicates the narrative importance of this story of Jesus triumphing over spiritual forces in dramatic fashion.¹⁸ It is, therefore, noteworthy that this account features one of the two Markan uses of προσκυνέω (5.6). Having seen Jesus, the demonized man rushes to him, reverencing him with the physical gesture of approach to a deity (προσεκύνησεν αὐτῷ); and the collective demonic voice acclaims Jesus as 'Son of the most high God', entreating him not to torment them. It is almost incapable that readers were intended to see in this dramatic scene a transparent anticipation of their own deliverance from evil, and in the uncanny recognition of Jesus' true status a prefiguring and confirmation of their own confessional claim and their devotional practice. I submit that in this respect the Markan story in 5.1-20 functions similarly to the Johannine account of the man born blind, and that this selective use of προσκυνέω is, like the use in John 9, a deliberate anachronism by the Evangelist.

But in this account of the demonized man we probably have a distinctively Markan note of irony too. As is well known, over against the misconstrual of Jesus' significance by his enemies and disciples, Mark has the demons alone confess correctly his transcendent status (e.g. 1.24, 34; 3.11). Similarly in the account of the man possessed by the Legion of evil in 5.1-20, the longest and most detailed of all the Markan exorcism stories, Mark uses προσκυνέω to portray the demonic powers as *worshipping* Jesus, in an intensification of this ironic Markan motif of demonic recognition of him.

The other Markan scene where προσκυνέω appears is of a different type, but I propose that this use, too, was a deliberate editorial move by the Evangelist. In 15.17-19, Mark gives a detailed account of how Pilate's

17. Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext* (SNTSMS, 72; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

18. Earl S. Johnson, 'Mark 5.1-20: The Other Side', *IBS* 20 (1998), pp. 50-74, has shown the likely references in the story to Roman religious and political power.

soldiers ridiculed and abused Jesus, the purple clothing, the thorny crown, the taunting acclamation, and the gestures of reverence all clearly a mockery of a ritual of coronation of Jesus as 'king of the Jews' (the importance of the title in the Markan passion narrative indicated by its repeated use: 15.2, 9, 12, 18, 26). The final, and probably climactic, description of their mockery of Jesus has the soldiers kneeling and reverencing him (καὶ τιθέντες τὰ γόνατα προσεκύνουν αὐτῷ, 15.19).

In considering this use of προσκυνέω, it is important to note that the whole of the Markan account of Jesus' trial before Pilate and the subsequent crucifixion has been shown to be richly ironical.¹⁹ So, Mark's Christian readers were probably expected to see the soldiers' cynical reverence of Jesus as their unwitting expression of Jesus' true status as Messiah and Son of God. Though intended by the soldiers as cruel taunting, their gesture of worship in fact correctly accords with what the readers know to be the right response to Jesus' true significance. In the use of προσκυνέω here, Mark portrays the soldiers as ignorantly acting out the valid worshipful reverence of Jesus that characterized the devotional practice of those for whom the text was originally written.

In sum, except for the few passages quickly noted here, where the Evangelists seem to use deliberately the more cultically 'loaded' term προσκυνέω, Mark, Luke, and John all prefer to describe the reverential actions of people toward Jesus in less intensive language that was used to denote the bodily gestures used in ancient near eastern culture to supplicate for an important favour, or to give thanks for one. In the main, the kind of reverence that they portray as given to Jesus seems perfectly plausible as phenomena of the 'historical Jesus'. Although Mark, Luke and John likely intended these gestures of homage as broadly serving their aim to present Jesus favourably, they do not programmatically read back into the ministry of Jesus the devotional stance of the 'post-Easter' circles of Christians, except for the particular instances noted. I propose, however, that these Evangelists do selectively use the particular instances discussed here to prefigure and 'echo' more obviously the devotional stance and practice of their Christian readers, and that this is signalled for readers in the use of the term προσκυνέω, with its more frequent connotation of heightened reverence given to a divine being.

c. *The Worship of Jesus in Matthew*

When we come to Matthew, however, there is a very different verbal pattern.²⁰ But I submit further that Matthew's distinguishable use of lan-

19. Donald Juel, *Messiah and Temple* (SBLDS, 31; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

20. This has been noted by previous scholars, e.g., Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (NTL; Phila-

guage in scenes where people give homage to Jesus both confirms our observations about the other Evangelists and also signals his own very distinguishable editorial intention. As noted already, the term προσκυνέω is a recurrent feature of Matthew's narrative vocabulary, with thirteen uses, a frequency exceeded only by the twenty-four uses in Revelation among the New Testament writings.²¹ Moreover, ten of these Matthean uses describe homage offered to Jesus, which makes it Matthew's favourite word to designate the reverence given to Jesus by people.²² Of these ten uses, eight are in scenes where the earthly Jesus is given reverence (the remaining two uses in scenes where disciples reverence the risen Jesus, 28.9, 17).

Matthew's preference for προσκυνέω to characterize reverence given to Jesus is most clearly seen in his handling of incidents narrated also by the other Evangelists. Whereas Mark describes the leper of 1.40-45 as beseeching Jesus (παρακαλῶν) and (depending on one's decision about the textual variant here) perhaps kneeling (γονυπετῶν), and Luke (5.12) has the man fall on his face (πεσὼν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον), Matthew prefers προσκυνέω to characterize the leper's reverence (8.2). Whereas in Mk 5.22-23, Jairus falls at Jesus' feet (πίπτει πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ), and Luke (8.41) uses a similar expression (πεσὼν παρὰ τοὺς πόδας Ἰησοῦ), Matthew again prefers the stronger term, προσεκύνει (9.18). In Mk 7.25, the Syro-phoenician woman likewise falls at Jesus' feet (προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ), whereas in Mt. 15.25 προσεκύνει designates the woman's reverential gesture. This pattern of preference for προσκυνέω with its strong associations with cultic worship suggests that Matthew has chosen to make these scenes all function as foreshadowings of the exalted reverence of Jesus familiar to his Christian readers in their collective worship.²³

delphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 229-30; and Horst, *Proskynein*, pp. 204-37.

21. Cf. the total number of uses in other New Testament writings: Mark (2), Luke (3, of which two refer to worship of God), John (10, all but one of which refer to the worship of God), Acts (4, three of which designate worship of God), 1 Corinthians (1), Hebrews (2).

22. The three remaining uses of προσκυνέω are in Mt. 4.9-10, where Satan tempts Jesus to give him reverence and Jesus recites the command to worship God alone, and 18.26, where the indebted servant of the parable dramatically begs his master for mercy. Bornkamm, Barth and Held propose that in this last instance the use of προσκυνέω signals that readers are to understand the parable allegorically, the master in the parable read as God (*Tradition and Interpretation*, p. 229 n. 3). This may be so, or the passage may simply be the one case where the author uses the verb in its wider possible meaning.

23. Note also the insertion of gestures of reverence in the Matthean account of the transfiguration (ἔπεσαν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῶν, Mt. 17.6; cf. Mk 9.8; Lk. 9.36), and the story of the demoniac boy that follows (γονυπετῶν αὐτόν, 17.14; cf. Mk 9.17; Lk. 9.38).

This conviction that Matthew's use of προσκυνέω is selective and intentional is confirmed by noting that he omits the word from the two places where it was used in Mark (assuming, with most scholars, that Mark served 'Matthew' as his principal narrative source and precedent). In place of Mark's use of προσκυνέω in 5.6, Matthew prefers the more bland description of the two demoniacs in his version of the story as 'meeting' Jesus (ὕπηγτησαν αὐτῷ, Mt. 8.28; cf. Lk. 8.28, προσέπεσεν αὐτῷ, 'fell down to him'). Likewise, in place of προσκυνέω in the Markan description of the mockery of Jesus by Pilate's soldiers (15.19) noted earlier, Matthew describes them simply as kneeling before Jesus (γονυπετήσαντες ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ, 27.29).

The net effect of Matthew's numerous omissions and insertions of προσκυνέω in cases where Jesus is the recipient of homage is a consistent pattern. It is not simply a matter of preference of one somewhat synonymous word for others. The word προσκυνέω is reserved by Matthew for the reverence of Jesus given by disciples and those who are presented as sincerely intending to give him homage. As Bornkamm, Barth and Held concluded from their analysis of scenes where Jesus is the recipient of the gesture in Matthew, προσκυνέω is used 'only in the sense of genuine worship of Jesus'.²⁴

But surely the most blatant of such differences between incidents in Matthew and the other Evangelists is in the accounts of the story of Jesus walking to the disciples on the waves in Mk 6.45-52 and Mt. 14.22-33 (a story also recounted in Jn 6.16-21). In keeping with the dominant view of the Gospels today, I propose that each account reflects the editorial emphases of the respective Evangelist. Whereas in Mk 6.52 the disciples' response is uncomprehending astonishment described with allusions backward and forward to other Markan scenes concerning 'the loaves' of the two bread miracles, in Mt. 14.33 the disciples offer Jesus adoring reverence (προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ) and acclaim him as Son of God, the key confessional title for Matthew.²⁵

As previous scholarship has noted, one of Matthew's concerns in his use of miracle stories in general, and this story in particular, was to move the intended readers to regard Jesus as ready and able to respond to their

24. Bornkamm, Barth and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation*, p. 229. I agree with them, against Horst (*Proskynein*, pp. 217-18), who claimed that in Mt. 8.2; 9.18; and 15.25, προσκυνέω registers something less exalted than in 2.11; 14.33; 28.9, 17.

25. On the importance of the confession of Jesus' divine sonship in Matthew, see, e.g., Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). The allusions in Mk 6.52 are to Mk 8.14-21 in particular, where Jesus quizzes the disciples about the numbers of baskets of leftovers of the feeding miracles in Mk 6.35-44; 8.1-9.

own petitions for the exercise of his mighty power on their behalf.²⁶ In Matthew, the readers are to identify with the two stories of Jesus and the disciples in the boat (8.23-27; 14.22-33), seeing Jesus 'the helper of his disciples in their trouble' as encouragement for their own situation. Especially in the second sea story, 14.22-33, it is clear that, instead of a narrative merely about a past miracle, Matthew 'lays before the eyes of the [Christian] congregation her present possibility of meeting with the miracle-working Lord'.²⁷ Both the Christian confession that Matthew ascribes to the disciples and his characterization of their reverence with the verb προσκυνέω combine to make the scene in 14.33 'an image of the congregation of the risen Lord'.²⁸

So, whereas Mark used the term προσκυνέω solely in two ironic scenes where Jesus is revered by demons and his tormentors, and Luke uses the term solely to characterize the reverence given to the risen Jesus, Matthew repeatedly employs προσκυνέω to describe the homage given by disciples and supplicants (and by them alone) to the earthly Jesus. But, in this programmatic use of the verb, 'Matthew' was not simply slipping accidentally into anachronism. Instead, whether used to portray the 'adoring petition' of supplicants (8.2; 9.18; 15.25; 20.20) or the worshipful acclamation by the Magi (2.2-11) and disciples (14.33), προσκυνέω manifests the Evangelist's aim to make these accounts 'accessible to the believing congregation', the characteristic setting in which the original readers themselves would have revered the risen Jesus as Lord.²⁹

3. Reverence of the Historical Jesus and Early Christian Devotion

To return now to the core question that prompts this study, what can we conclude about the relationship of early Christian devotional practice and the homage that was probably given to the historical Jesus?

To state something that hardly requires argumentation, in the setting of first-century Jewish Palestinian society, the profound commitment to the exclusive worship of the one God, and an equally profound antipathy toward deification of humans, make it most improbable that either his followers or those Jews who approached him for help offered what they would have intended as 'worship' of him as divine. Though gentiles may

26. See, esp., Bornkamm, Barth and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation*, pp. 265-70, 'The Lord and his Congregation in the Miracle Stories'.

27. Bornkamm, Barth and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation*, p. 265.

28. Bornkamm, Barth and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation*, p. 266.

29. Bornkamm, Barth and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation*, p. 229.

have been more comfortable with reverencing human figures as divine, any who might have offered such reverence to Jesus in supplicating him for his healing and exorcistic powers would have been regarded as misguided. To be sure, in that cultural setting, it would have been fully appropriate to make reverential gestures toward someone regarded as a respected teacher or a source of desperately-needed help. But the far more intense devotion to Jesus that characterized early Christian circles so amazingly early was not simply the continuation of the pattern of homage given to the historical Jesus, and it cannot be accounted for adequately by reference to Jesus' ministry.³⁰

The 'binitarian' pattern of devotion that we see already taken for granted in Paul's letters and affirmed throughout the New Testament initially amounted to a major, and apparently novel, 'mutation' in, or variant form of, Jewish monotheistic practice. Among first-century Christian circles, in spite of the rapid acceptance of the view that Jesus rightly shares in divine glory and status, such a conviction represented a further, major development beyond the impact of the earthly ministry of Jesus. Just as it is inaccurate to restrict the belief that the risen Jesus shares in divine glory to circles of a supposedly distinctive 'Christ cult' (*à la* Bousset and others subsequently in his train), so it would be simplistic to see this exalted a view of Jesus as having arisen in the time of his earthly ministry.

What we have seen in this study is that the collective evidence of the intra-canonical Gospels, which provide us our best access to early narrative traditions, in fact reinforces this position. Each in his own way, the Evangelists all distinguish between the level of recognition of Jesus' status that characterized the time of his ministry and that which came to be expressed in the post-Easter period. In Mark this distinction is perhaps thematized most forcefully, all human characters in this account portrayed as woefully failing to perceive Jesus' true significance and calling, and the term *προσκυνέω* used only in ironic descriptions of acclamation of Jesus.³¹ As in

30. Cf. R.T. France, 'The Worship of Jesus: A Neglected Factor in Christological Debate?', in H.H. Rowdon (ed.), *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), pp. 17-36.

31. I include the centurion of 15.39. I take the statement of the centurion to be another instance of Markan irony, the *words* of this executioner expressing what the readers know to be Jesus' true significance, whatever sense Mark intended us to attribute to the centurion as a character in the scene. See my discussion in L.W. Hurtado, *Mark: New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), p. 269. Cf. Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 129-33, who takes the centurion's statement as indicative that he functions as 'the first human being in Mark's story truly to penetrate the secret of Jesus' identity' (p. 133). But the Markan narrative here functions more to excite

Mark, so also in Luke the homage offered to Jesus by his disciples and those who supplicate him is described in language expressive of the sorts of reverence for a social superior deemed appropriate in Jesus' cultural setting. Only after Jesus' resurrection does Luke portray the reverence given by Jesus' disciples as validly what seems to be 'worship'. Even in John, with its more blatant presentation of Jesus' person from the standpoint of 'post-Easter' faith, except for the paradigmatic story of the healing of the blind man in ch. 9, the Evangelist does not generally read back into his account the Christian devotional practice of the time for which he wrote.

In Matthew, however, we see a clear programmatic effort to heighten the homage given by people to the earthly Jesus. Granted, in Mt. 28.18 it is the risen Jesus who claims to have been given 'all authority in heaven and upon earth', which shows that Matthew, too, operated with a certain distinction between the earthly and the resurrected Jesus. Nevertheless, this Evangelist rather consistently portrays Jesus' disciples and those who approached him for favours as offering him reverence that was almost certainly to be seen by readers as prefiguring their own 'post-Easter' devotional practice. This is particularly obvious in Matthew's repeated use of προσκυνέω, over against the language preferred by the other Evangelists. In the scenes where 'Matthew' uses this term we have what can only be taken as his deliberate editorial efforts. But, to reiterate the point, Matthew's aim was not simple historical distortion. Instead, this Evangelist sought to encourage his Christian readers to identify themselves with these scenes, his heightening of descriptions of people's reverence of Jesus intended to enhance this engagement with them.

But therefore, of course, we should not mistake these scenes as evidence of direct continuity between the homage that people gave to the historical Jesus and the worship of post-Easter Christian circles. The latter represents a notable development beyond the time of Jesus' ministry, and this development can be accounted for historically only by invoking additional factors, including powerful experiences of new 'revelation' that helped to generate the remarkable 'binitarian pattern' of devotion characteristic of earliest Christianity and the unprecedented association of Jesus with God that was so central in its beliefs.³²

knowing readers than to accredit the centurion.

32. Larry W. Hurtado, 'Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the New Testament', *JR* 80 (2000), pp. 183-205.

